To Bear is to Conquer Our Fate

by Shem

Summary

The day after the Netherfield Ball, a simple walk through the countryside has wide reaching consequences for Mr Darcy and a certain young lady from Longbourn.

Notes

This work was originally published on the Derbyshire Writers Guild in 2007. The story was written in installments not as a complete work. No editing or changes have been made to the text since.

The title is a quote by Thomas Campbell

There are elements of non-consent in the prologue, they are mild in description and the theme of non-consent/rape is not a sustained feature of the work, which is why I have not used the archive warning, however readers should be aware.
Miss Catherine Bennet ran the stick idly on the ground after her.

It was of course just like Lydia to go into Meryton the day after the Ball without telling anyone.

Maria Lucas had come to call and Lydia had promptly whisked her off into the village to see if Wickham had returned from town.

She had paid no mind to the fact that this meant her sister would not be able to walk into town.

Lizzy would have walked into Meryton with her, if only to get away from the attentions of Mr Collins, but that gentleman’s sudden assertion he would not mind a walk had scotched that plan.

Jane was needed by Lizzy, of course.

Kitty tried hard not to begrudge her sister that protection, but she did.

For no one would walk into the village with her if they would not. Mary refused to go anywhere that would involve speaking to officers, or more correctly, watching other young ladies speaking to officers.

It was not proper to go out alone, but this was Kitty’s home; she knew every path into Meryton and the village of Longbourn. She recognized every face – well apart from those few and far between strangers. They rarely were gratified by visits from gypsies, so there could be no real harm in venturing abroad alone.

If she did not, then Lydia would spend the entire morning hearing all the gossip from the ball and would tease Kitty with it mercilessly.

Kitty had reached the pretty river that ran at the bottom of a dip in the land, and where a little grove of trees made everything very pleasant. Perhaps it might be best called a creek, but Kitty had never really learnt the difference.

Looking along the path, Kitty smiled. Perhaps it had been a good thing that Lydia had left her at home. For standing on the path was Mr Wickham. Kitty quickly dropped the stick, not wishing to appear childish before him.

He was not wearing his regimentals, the ones that made him look so dashing, but a blue superfine coat and breeches. The change in his attire had not dampened his smile.

“Miss Catherine!”

“Mr Wickham! We had not hoped to see you so soon.”

“My business in London was swiftly concluded.”

“Then it is a pity you were not able to come to the ball, I know many – Lizzy especially – lamented your absence.” Kitty tried to sound arch.

Mr Wickham smiled at that. Kitty wondered if Lizzy and he had some understanding, after all Lizzy was quite in love with him! And who would not be; a handsome soldier!
“I am flattered that anyone would have missed me.”

“Of course you were missed, Mr Wickham.” Coming closer, Kitty noticed Mr Wickham was looking tired, with heavy lidded eyes, and he was leaning on his cane, not just as an affectation but as if it were holding him up. “Mr Wickham, I do hope you did not rush back to Meryton, sacrificing your health. No one wishes to see you ill.”

Mr Wickham merely smiled.

Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy swished his cane out in front of him, as he took his customary early morning walk.

He had walked beyond the confines of Netherfield Park, partly because he needed a long walk to revive him after the ball, and partly because he did not wish to spend any more time than strictly necessary with Miss Bingley.

Darcy had not entirely managed to avoid her, having to listen to her comments on how well he looked. Darcy did not think his attire, a blue coat and breeches, deserved such comments, but he had long abandoned attempting to understand Caroline’s stratagems.

The ball had not, as far as Darcy could tell, passed off as badly as it could have. However, that was not to say it was a pleasant evening. The worst case Darcy had imagined occurring was Bingley proposing in the middle of the dance floor. As that had not happened, the event could hardly be termed bad. Yet, this was of little comfort to Darcy.

It had also confirmed for him that he was acting correctly in his decision to follow Bingley to town.

Bingley had left early that morning and it had taken Darcy and the Bingley sisters only the work of a moment to decide that tomorrow they would remove to London.

There Bingley could be easily convinced of the unworthiness of the Bennets as potential family.

Darcy comforted himself that he would be saving Miss Bennet from an uncomfortable situation. She would not know how to say ‘no’, if indeed she wished to say ‘no’. She may be one of the many young ladies who would be satisfied with a handsome, kind, young man; one of those ladies whose hearts could barely be touched. Not because it did not exist, Darcy had seen enough of those types of ladies to know the difference, but merely because Jane Bennet liked everyone equally and consequently felt no particular passion.

Bingley, too, liked everyone; they were alike in that regard, but Bingley formed passions for people and expressed them. If his enthusiasm for Miss Bennet was to end in a marriage, Darcy could not be certain that his ardour would pall into a regard that Miss Bennet could return. If it did not, his friend would be hurt when he discovered she did not feel for him what he felt for her.

Yet, if he was honest with himself, his removal to London was not going to be entirely for the goal of protecting his friend. It would be prudent to remove himself from the society of Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who had just one too many charms. He was sensible of feeling more for her than he ought, but he was also sensible of his position in society.

It was, surely, not impossible for him to form similar feelings for some young lady, as yet unknown, although strictly speaking he had not felt such feelings for anyone else outside his salad days. But it was almost certain he would at some point find another young lady, who occupied a
better position in society, who would understand his needs.

It was also important to remove himself from Wickham’s society.

He had breathed a sigh of relief, one he had not known he had held, when he realized that Wickham had absented himself from Netherfield. While he was sure his self-control would have prevented a scene, he could not be entirely certain since he wished he had punished Wickham when he had the chance and the prospect of doing so whatever the circumstances may have proved too tempting.

He felt a pang at leaving without at least giving someone a hint of Wickham’s true character. But from what he could see, there were very few fathers and mothers in Meryton who would regard Wickham as an eligible parti. Mrs Bennet would lament that such a charming man had no fortune, but she would simply turn her mind to some other equally charming man with a fortune. If she would do such a thing then Darcy saw little danger in other parents succumbing to Wickham’s dangerous appeal.

For Wickham’s part, Darcy could see no young lady in Meryton with the requisite charms.
Wickham would merely flirt with them.

Many of the young ladies seemed designed to flirt, so that would hardly harm them.

&&^^&&

Mrs Amelia Long shook the umbrella into the verges of the path. She was sure she had seen something moving. But apparently she was mistaken; she should have brought her spectacles instead of her umbrella. She had been convinced that it was to rain, after all it had rained almost incessantly before the ball!

Mrs Long was paying her usual visits for a Wednesday. Mrs Long scheduled her visits very strictly, making the most of her week. If there was one thing she hated it was missing a visit. It meant missing gossip and there was hardly enough of it – the juicy kind, that is – as it was.

She usually brought one of her nieces with her, but they were still laid up after the ball.

When Mrs Long had been a girl, she would have been ashamed to have been abed the morning the day after a ball. The morning after was when one attempted to discover all those things one actually missed due to being too busy causing gossip for others.

For instance, Mrs Long had known that the haughty Mr Darcy had deigned to dance with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, but she had not known the particulars; all the little looks, the snippets of conversation that others had overheard! In turn she had been able to fill in the blanks for those who missed what had caused Miss Lydia Bennet to be running through the ballroom with a soldier’s sword.

Of course there was not just the ball to discuss; there was Mr Bingley’s trip to London. Mrs Goulding said it was just a business trip, but everyone else was convinced that Mr Bingley was going to London simply so he could return to Netherfield with a ring. Opinion was divided over whether it would be some heirloom given to him by his mother, and whether one generation merited the word ‘heirloom’ or whether he would purchase a ring new.

Also how did Mr Bingley ascertain Miss Bennet’s ring size? In Mrs Long’s experience men in love found nothing a serious obstacle.

These musings got Mrs Long to the top of the gully. Looking from this spot there was a pretty view down to the creek. What she saw made her give a little scream.
“Are you sure you are not ill, Mr Wickham?” Kitty did not like to tell him that he was not, up close, looking as handsome as he usually did. But she weighed this against being the one to rush to his aid. Lydia would be so very jealous.

“I have never felt better in my life,” he responded.

Kitty stepped closer to him and rapidly stepped back. She could smell a most peculiar smell. It smelt like her father’s good port, but far stronger than the usual smell that wafted out of the library.

All of a sudden Mr Wickham did not look as if he was smiling as she thought he had been.

“Well, my sister will wonder what became of me if I do not hasten…”

“Wait,” Mr Wickham shot out a hand and caught her arm.

Kitty suddenly felt panicked. Gentlemen were supposed to flirt with words, not actually …it was up to the lady to tease a gentleman by hitting his arm or playing, as Lydia often did, with their tassels.

For all her flirting she had rarely been in company with a man alone but she was sure such interactions were not supposed to happen in this way.

Wickham stepped closer to her, far too close for propriety, and Kitty attempted to back away, but her flight was impeded by his hand and by a tree.

Darcy was half way down the gully, heading towards quite a picturesque scene when he heard a cry from a woman. Turning his head whence the cry came, from the top of the gully, he could see no one for the trees.

He stepped forward to look and saw a distressing sight: a tryst taking place by the river. The gentleman, his back to Darcy and the gully, had the girl pressed up against the tree.

Darcy resolved to ensure Bingley (and himself) never again set foot into this place and made to leave when he realized if this was indeed a tryst the lady was hardly enjoying it.

She was making a spirited attempt to kick the gentlemen.

Suddenly, something swung into focus. It was Wickham.

Darcy strode towards the couple, cane in hand.

“Wickham!”

Wickham turned, looking, as Darcy had seen him many times before in college, as though he had imbibed too much.

He snarled, and Darcy took great pleasure in knocking Wickham over with his cane.

He sprawled, inelegantly on the dirt and sneered up at Darcy, “Spoiling my fun Darcy? Pity you didn’t entirely spoil the fun I had, in Ramsgate, with – “

It was inconceivable that this was not a reference to Georgiana, and Darcy reacted again with his
“Coward, Darcy?” said Wickham stumbling as he regained his feet.

“A dog deserves to be whipped with my cane,” replied Darcy. Wickham did not reply but merely limped away.

Darcy turned to the lady, and was shocked to discover it was a Miss Bennet. The fourth daughter – Catherine, he believed it was.

She did not seem to have suffered and permanent harm, although her dress was in disarray and her bonnet lay on the ground. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

Darcy attempted to reason her into some awareness, and tried to coax her to walk with him away from the creek.

She succeeded in walking a couple of steps before fainting into Darcy’s arms.

&&^&&

Mrs Long had thought it was a tryst too, until she had seen the girl’s panicked figure. She could not make out the faces from this distance, but she could make out the man’s predatory stance; cane, blue coat, top hat and breeches and the girl’s frightened one; muslin gown, pelisse and bonnet.

Then he had pounced and Mrs Long had shrieked.

They had not heard her cry out, so she hurried off down the path that led to the river bank.

It meant she lost sight of them; moments when anything could happen! But there was no other way down to the water.

These sorts of things did not happen in a respectable neighbourhood! She had never heard of such a thing! It was the stuff of fiction.

Of course young men and young women often met, for nefarious purposes, before they were married, but that was for mutual pleasure. Although it was possible for a young lady to agree to meet with a young man and then become alarmed by his ardour. Perhaps that was what had occurred in his situation.

It made Mrs Long feel much better to think of it in this way; otherwise they had an out and out villain in their midst! Who could it be?

Mrs Long turned the corner and made to wave her umbrella at the villain. Of course there was always the prospect that he would simply assault her as well! So Mrs Long decided to call for help very loudly, knowing that the local tenant farmers often came to sit by the river on their breaks.

The sight around the corner made her cut off one of her cries sharply.

There, in his blue coat, top hat, breeches, cane discarded by his feet, was the villain, with his victim fainted in his arms.

“Mr Darcy!” she gasped.

&&^&&
Mrs Long had succeeded in capturing the attention of both Darcy and a group of men who emerged from the trees on the other riverbank.

But Darcy didn’t notice that they had company, and laid Miss Bennet on the ground before speaking to Mrs Long.

“Mrs Long, some assistance?”

Mrs Long looked shocked. Darcy supposed she was shocked that he would render any assistance at all. He was not entirely unaware of what the residents of this part of the country thought of him. Whatever they thought, he was not an unchivalrous man! To leave a young lady in Miss Bennet’s condition was repugnant to him, as it would be to any other gentleman, no matter the lady’s station in life.

“Some assistance, you wish for me to assist you?”

Darcy was very close to snapping at Mrs Long; did the woman see anyone else? But then he realised some men had forded the stream. Naturally, they would be of more use than Mrs Long who seemed on the verge of fainting.

“Mr Thomas, quickly take up Miss Catherine!” said Mrs Long imperiously.

Darcy handed the swarthy man Miss Bennet’s bonnet who hoisted Miss Bennet up into his arms as though she did not weigh more than a feather. He was surprised when Mrs Long addressed him again.

“Do not touch her, you villain!”

Darcy had thought Mrs Long had some measure of breeding that would have prevented her from being so openly impolite. It was gratifying that the farm hands were also surprised at her behaviour. Darcy had wondered if his words about the confined and unvarying nature of country society had been too harsh. But the idea of being cooped up in close proximity to Mrs Long for any length of time put paid to those thoughts!

“This villain, who thinks himself so far above his company…”

“Enough, madam!” Darcy’s temper was sorely tried. Simply out for a walk, he had managed to become embroiled in another one of Wickham’s intrigues and while he had managed to stop it before any material damage had occurred…it should not have happened. Darcy’s blood was also boiling from Wickham’s insinuation that Georgiana had been in a similar situation. Wickham clearly meant to imply that his sister, unlike Miss Bennet, had enjoyed and welcomed Wickham’s attentions. What irked him more was that Wickham was not incorrect; after all he could be charming when he wished to be and Georgiana was so innocent that it would have not taken much to convince herself she was in love, and that such things were right in such a situation.

Feeling less in control of his temper than he had in months, Darcy decided there was nothing more likely that to snap that control than listening to the ramblings of Mrs Long!

With a curt, “Tell Mr Bennet I shall call upon him to ensure his daughter’s health.” Darcy picked up his cane, abandoned as he had caught, Miss Bennet and strode away.

It was, not that he knew it at the time, to be the worst decision of his life.
He strode back to Netherfield in a fine temper and called for his horse. His quarry however was not in Meryton. The boarding house where Wickham kept his rooms claimed that he had not returned from London. However the owner helpfully told him that Mr Wickham was being met at the inn of the next town, where the stage stopped, by Mr Denny.

The stage was apparently not due in for another hour; it was clear Wickham had found some other way back to Meryton. No doubt eager to get back to seducing the young ladies of the town! After Wickham’s actions of the morning Darcy had a strong feeling that inquiries with any tradesman’s daughters would bring to light a host of other iniquities Wickham had committed in his short time in Meryton.

It was probably a good thing he did not find Wickham as Darcy was not sure what he had intended to do to him.

Although he now had more of an idea what the villain could have told Miss Elizabeth. He had known whatever it was would be lies, but now he knew it would be poisonous lies of the highest order. He wished he could be sure that his sister had been left out of Wickham’s tales, but after Wickham’s behaviour today he did not have that guarantee.

Darcy could not help but think of Bingley dining again with the officers; he had declined due to a reluctance to meet with Mr Wickham. But from Bingley’s report the talk at the tables had not been improved by Wickham’s presence. An all male affair, especially with soldiers, was likely to lead to ribald conversation, but apparently Wickham and his friends had gone so far as to toast to various ladies. It had made Bingley particularly uncomfortable to hear the Bennet sisters’ names toasted so rapturously. Only the middle and eldest sisters were apparently ignored; Darcy doubted any of the officers would find any attraction in Miss Mary and he could not conceive of even Bingley simply ignoring Miss Bennet’s name being brought up in such a fashion. Darcy had not even attended the evening and he was disgusted at the mere thought of a group of drunken soldiers toasting the charms of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

But who knew when Wickham would, in a drunken state, or simply an ill-humour bandy his sister’s name about?

Darcy shook his head and mounted his horse to ride to Longbourn.

Darcy frowned at the looks the Longbourn servants gave him as he crossed the threshold. He supposed he was spoiled with his servants, who were all exceptional people. They would not demean themselves by staring at a guest. It seemed impossible to him that any servant worth their ilk would allow themselves to betray even the slightest curiosity in their master’s guests. In fact, it was poor breeding in anybody to do so!

The youngest Miss Bennet was standing in the hall, and if Darcy read her facial expression correctly, she was looking at him with interest. Her look confused him since he doubted he was of any interest to Lydia Bennet. He did not even think he had seen her looking at him more than once! That sort of disinterest, impressed him in a well-bred woman, but he could not be impressed with her youthful disregard for fortune. It was not true disinterest but merely that she had not learnt to regard fortune, all she cared for was a handsome soldier who would flirt uncontrollably with her. That was not something to admire.

Darcy handed his hat and gloves to the butler, he vacillated over whether to do so, after all it was not to be a long visit but he decided that Mr Bennet did deserve more details of Mr Wickham’s character.
“Could you inform Mr Bennet I should like a word with him?”

The butler bowed and left the room, hopefully to fetch Mr Bennet.

Darcy’s voice apparently caused Mary Bennet to drift into hall but this was merely to lead her younger sister away. She spoke in hushed tones and Darcy only caught the words ‘avert your eyes’ which seemed even too evangelical for the staid Bennet sister.

There seemed, to Darcy, an abnormally long wait until someone came to show him the way to Mr Bennet. Even if he had stepped foot in the house before, it would have been the height of discourtesy to simply wander through the place in search of its master. Yet another reason to praise his servants when he returned to London; Darcy was certain that they would never leave a visitor unattended for so long or if such a wait was unavoidable they would have seen to the visitor’s comfort far more promptly.

A creak made Darcy look up to see the two eldest Miss Bennets standing on the stair. He did not know what the eldest looked like as he only had eyes for her sister. She had a look of such reproach in her eyes that for a moment Darcy thought it might be hatred. What had Wickham been telling her?

The butler returned and Darcy tore his eyes away from her pleasing figure and fine eyes, despite their expression.

Mr Bennet arrived from somewhere in the depths of the house and silently opened the door to his study. Darcy attempted not to roll his eyes as he realised it directly opened onto the hall. He could have easily been left to wait in there, rather than to stand in the middle of the hall for everyone to gawk at!

“Mr Bennet, I trust your daughter has suffered no lasting harm?” said Darcy once the door closed.

Mr Bennet had his back turned and Darcy saw him tense before turning around.

“You can ask me that?” he sounded angry, which of course he had every right to be.

“I understand this is a trying time, but no material – “ Darcy stopped and realised. Miss Bennet was no doubt too indisposed to have told her father what had occurred and Mrs Long had seen very little. Mr Bennet was no doubt in the dark as to the whole proceedings, merely having been told that his daughter had been found collapsed by the river. It would be best for all concerned perhaps if Wickham was left out of the tale. Wickham would hardly mention such an event, not even Wickham was that stupid.

“Your daughter fainted, Mr Bennet. I am sure some rest will do her good. She was fortunate to do so while I was nearby, although I am sure Mrs Long would have come upon her even if I had not been walking.” Darcy was sure Miss Bennet would affirm something similar. He felt no qualms about lying to Mr Bennet. There was no possibility of a lasting harm, and he would not wish marriage with Mr Wickham on even the silliest girl in the country. He did not doubt that after this experience Miss Catherine would ensure never to be alone with another man until she was married. Darcy still needed to ensure that Wickham was not unleashed on any other unsuspecting girls; however for Miss Bennet the experience would probably have done more good than harm! It would cure her of flirting or being too openly trusting.

“Fainted?”
“Yes, fainted.”

Mr Bennet had a peculiar expression on his face. “You would not know the cause of her illness?” His tone was harsher than Darcy would have associated with the man.

“No, I am not aware of it.”

“Did you touch my daughter?”

Darcy was thrown by this question; “I suppose I did – “

Mr Bennet looked disgusted and Darcy felt suddenly very like he had when the ice had cracked while he had ice-skated as a child.

Darcy opened his mouth, but the door opened and Mrs Bennet entered.

“Has the villain confessed? My poor daughter. My poor innocent daughter.”

Darcy blinked. “Villain?” They could surely not have thought that he had done anything improper?

“Villain! Attack my daughter and dare to show your face in this house!” Mr Bennet sounded angry.

“Oh and now Mr Bennet shall have to fight a duel and what shall become of us!”

Darcy definitely felt all at sea. “Calm yourself, madam, sir, you are labouring under a misapprehension.”

“Are we?” said Mr Bennet.

“Yes, I will admit I did not tell you the truth just now, I thought it would be best – “

“Best!? I see how it will be!” shrieked Mrs Bennet before scurrying away. Darcy gave a sigh of relief, now he could speak rationally to the father.

“I thought it would be best if it was not spoken of, but Mr Wickham was frightening your daughter. As I was to say before, she took no material hurt. I made sure of that.”

“Should I be grateful?”

Darcy blinked.

“Should I be grateful that you are such a villain as to come into my home and speak such lies when you were seen!”

“I beg your pardon. Seen?”

“Seen. Mrs Long saw you.”

“Your daughter fainted into my arms,” said Darcy. He could not understand why Mr Bennet was so alarmed at the fact that Mrs Long had seen Darcy carrying his daughter. Of course it was not a usual or indeed desirable situation, but it was certainly better than letting Miss Catherine fall to the ground.

“Before! With your hands and… I laughed at the gossip that you were so far above your company and thought that you were just like any other proud young man. But now? You think that wealth –
“Sir! I did not touch your daughter. I do not pretend to know what Mrs Long thought she saw.”

The door flew open again and Mrs Bennet returned, this time with the subject of the conversation. Darcy had not thought Miss Catherine would be so composed. She looked pale but she was not in hysterics.

“Tell your father, Kitty! Tell him!”

Darcy looked at Mrs Bennet sharply and then at her daughter. Surely she had not told her mother that he… The compromising position, as Miss Catherine had found herself in that morning, did have the threat of marriage, but even she would not think it was acceptable to swap his name for Wickham’s, for all that he was a better prospect!?

“You have not said that it was I, when you know it was Wickham?” he thundered.

“I will not have you speaking to my daughter in such a fashion,” said Mr Bennet.

Miss Catherine did not raise her eyes, which had lowered as soon as Darcy had raised his voice.

“No, I did not. I – it was not – I had fainted but it was Mr – Wickham who … not – “ the girl stuttered this out before fleeing the room.

Mrs Bennet glared at him. He had not thought her capable of such a look. “You see, Mr Bennet, he has terrified her into speaking such untruths, but you shall not escape! You shall be made to marry her!”

“Sir, I protest my innocence. Your daughter has said – “

Mr Bennet waved his hand at his wife, it was not successful and he had to physically hurry her from the room. “You swear on your character, which my eldest daughters tell me was in some question before this incident, that it was Mr Wickham who assaulted my daughter?”

“I swear on my character, on my honour, on anything you wish me to swear upon,” said Darcy. “I assure you that there is no stain upon my character. I will not swear it is impeccable, no young man has no indiscretions; but nothing that – “

“Mr Wickham has told Lizzy of heinous crimes towards himself. She told me of them after Mrs Long, babbling of your iniquitous behaviour, brought, via Mr Thomas, an insensible Kitty home.”

“May I inquire as to the charges Mr Wickham has brought against me?”

Mr Bennet nodded and gave Darcy the details.

“I refute them utterly. I can only lay before you all of my dealings with Mr Wickham.”

And so Darcy did, relating all of his dealings including those of the morning, although he created for himself a vague female relation dependant upon him in order to explain Wickham’s behaviour to his sister. He did not wish to have Mr Bennet, or anyone, think ill of his sister, but he must be told the circumstances if not the whole truth.

Mr Bennet had sat down, tiredly, in a chair. “My problem, Mr Darcy, is that if you are capable of attacking innocent females, you are also capable of making up such lies, even those that involve close relations.”
“I am not lying. You can appeal to my cousin for the truth.”

“I have another problem, even if I do believe you.”

Darcy frowned. He was not stupid; he had a fair idea what Mr Bennet was going to say… he just did not wish to voice it aloud.

“Even if I do believe you, Mrs Long and a number of farmers have left my house under the impression that you – I assume due to some similarity in attire and looks? – I cannot say it. I believe, despite such a short acquaintance, you understand Mrs Long’s inability to keep such things to herself. I have little expectation that the farmers would not speak of it, not to mention the little reliance I have on my servants. Of course they would not see it as gossiping, it would merely be telling their daughter at the Lodge or the Park…”

Darcy closed his eyes and turned away.

“My daughter has been compromised. Utterly and completely. Someone must marry her.”

&&^^&&
Marriage

Kitty slammed the door behind her. She did not mean to slam it; it just flew out of her shaking fingers.

She sat on the bed and tried to think.

It was actually quite hard.

She had been walking and then…and then….and then…

It seemed all moments of blurriness connected by moments of extreme clarity.

Wickham stepping towards her; seeing another man – who looked so similar – whom she knew now to be Mr Darcy; being at home lying on her bed with people talking in high pitched tones around her; her mother ushering her into the study demanding she tell her father; Mr Darcy yelling…

It was supposed to have been a nice walk into Meryton, see the officers, look at some hideous cloth…

But somehow it had all flown out of her grasp and she did not know when.

She did not even know how it came to be that everyone was talking in shocked tones about Mr Darcy. Surely Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy who detested each other would not be in league together?

Perhaps she should have read more of the novels that Lydia had ordered from the circulating library! How upset Mary will be when she realises all this could have been averted if I had read more novels, thought Kitty.

For if she had read more novels she might have seen that Wickham and Mr Darcy were really confederates!

Kitty shook her head. No, that was preposterous for she was sure she remembered Wickham’s cruel tone and Mr Darcy thrashing him with the cane.

Rising from the bed, Kitty went to look out the window and watched as Mr Darcy stormed out of the house and practically flung himself onto his horse. That was odd. But any thought of what could have upset Mr Darcy so flew out of her mind when someone knocked on the door. It was Jane.

“Kitty, can I get you anything? Did you need to talk?” Jane spoke quietly and in a tone that suggested she expected Kitty to be distraught.

Kitty shook her head, unable to speak, hoping that her sister would just leave her alone.

Jane, always the most sensitive of her sisters, must have realised her desire and had closed the door so quietly that Kitty was not even aware Jane had left until she looked away from the window.

Kitty tried to think, but all that kept flashing into her brain was how repulsive Wickham was and how could she have ever thought him handsome.
He had touched her. She remembered that now and shuddered.

But it was over. No one had seen them, had they?

Well apart from Mr Darcy.

Perhaps that was what Mr Darcy was angry about? The fact he could not tell anyone how shamefully she had behaved?

After all she must have done something for Wickham to treat her like that!

She, who had previously desired men’s attention! Just the night before at the ball she had run around the ball chasing officers!

Wickham would not be welcome in this house, she was certain of it. So she would not have to see him again. Only… surely Lydia or Lizzy would not convince Papa…?

Kitty knew she didn’t want to see him, or Mr Darcy, ever again.

But it did no good to dwell on it.

It seemed easier to go to bed and curl up with one of the novels lying around her room, than to think about things that she could not change.

&&^^&&

Things did indeed feel better in the morning.

Lydia had not come in the night and Kitty wondered briefly where she had slept. It was a rarity not to be woken up by Lydia selfishly making as much noise as possible or in reverse having to be as quiet as a mouse as to not wake her up.

Breakfast in bed at Longbourn was unheard of unless you were Mrs Bennet. Kitty had tried many times to get one of the maids to bring her up a tray and it always ended in Hill giving her a stern lecture about responsibility and laziness. What responsibility had to do with breakfast in bed, Kitty could never work out.

So it was with some surprise that a knock on the door was revealed to be Hill herself bringing Kitty a tray of her favourite breakfast foods.

Hill fussed over her a bit before leaving her alone. The leaving her alone might have been precipitated by Kitty suddenly jerking and almost knocking over the whole tray when Hill’s arm brushed her own. Kitty expected a sharp retort but instead she got a glance of pity and Hill bustling out of the room.

After a good night’s sleep Kitty felt more refreshed and less scatterbrained. No, she felt more herself.

&&^^&&

She was not surprised that her father wanted to see as soon as she felt able, but she was surprised by his actions. Instead of lecturing her, or even making fun of her; both of which her father was entirely capable of doing and had done so in the past; he looked searchingly at her.

Then he moved to look at her more closely and Kitty found herself wishing to back away, when he put his hands on her shoulders and said “My darling girl.”
He then embraced her.

Kitty tried not to stare into his waistcoat, wondering why he was treating her so well, when surely her actions had brought shame onto the family?

She had never listened to her elder sister’s strictures on propriety and now look what had happened.

Her father dropped his arms awkwardly. “Kitty, do you feel like you can tell me what happened yesterday?”

Kitty swallowed. “No one would go into town with me, so I went alone.”

Mr Bennet nodded.

“I saw Mr Wickham by the river bank and he – “ Kitty stopped. “I do not…I am not sure…Mr Darcy was there.”

“Kitty, you do not mention Mrs Long?”

“Lord, what does Mrs Long have to do with it?” Kitty felt exasperated. She knew, now, what she had done was wrong, why was her father making her relive it? She was sure it was because he was about to lecture her severely and tell her she should not be let out of his sight forever more. He had threatened that recently when hearing of her, Lydia and Mrs Forster’s exploits with some of the officers. She had never thought he would actually ever carry through with such a plan.

Mrs Bennet would have raised too much of a fuss! But she was sure even her mother could not pass off what happened the day before as youthful high spirits.

“Mrs Long witnessed the event.”

“Oh,” said Kitty.

“She claims it was Mr Darcy who – “ Mr Bennet broke off, not knowing how to finish the sentence delicately.

“No, he was there but…” Kitty frowned. “He was very angry and seemed to take some delight in hitting Mr Wickham. Is this why he came here yesterday?”

“Yes. Mrs Long it seems has told many people her version of events.”

“Oh,” there seemed not much more to say.

“I shall have to go into Meryton, but I shall speak to you on my return.” Her father handed her a book and smiled rather wanly at her.

Kitty flicked through the book. Shakespeare’s plays. Her father must be worried if he had left her alone in his library with his books!

If Mrs Long had seen something, or made up something to make herself look interesting then Kitty did not know how it was to be forgot.

It would be like Miss Smith and Reginald Bower. Mrs Long had seen them kissing in one of Old Mr Bower’s orchards, and she had told Lady Lucas who had told Mrs Bennet who had told Mrs
Phillips who had told Mr Phillips who had told Old Mr Bower.

The consequence was Reginald Bower had been given a commission, and Miss Smith had been labelled a fortune hunter and had her reputation quite ruined.

Of course most of the town had saved their whispering and pointed stares for the Bowers; after all it was not gentlemanly to abandon a female in such circumstances.

This disapproval of Mr Bower’s actions had not, however, stopped the ostracism of Miss Smith.

Mary, for instance, had managed to censure everyone’s actions equally, though saying that Miss Smith’s virtue was priceless and she had been the most to blame for losing it.

Kitty had looked on the affair with amusement, after all Reginald Bower was quite hook nosed!

But it did not seem quite so amusing now.

She wondered if not being a willing participant meant you would still be outcast?

Or would Mr Wickham marry her?

Perhaps yesterday had been an aberration? He had been drunk and so overcome with her charms…

Kitty looked at herself in the mirror and sighed. No, that was just stupid. He may have been drunk and any young lady would have done.

After all, she did not have any charms that some other young lady of the village did not have in spades!

Kitty had liked Mr Wickham; but even she could see the inconsistency between his public behaviour and his private one!

No, she hoped she would not have to marry Mr Wickham! He most likely would not be prevailed upon to marry her, so she would have to …

Kitty did not know what she would have to do; in novels the young lady ended up in a convent but she was not Catholic and she did not think England had convents.

Miss Smith had ended up retiring to Harrowgate. Kitty regarded that as a fate worse than…well perhaps not death, but certainly marriage to Wickham.

It might not be so bad being married. She would have as much freedom as Mrs Forster, and certainly would be able to lord it over Lydia!

Though one would have to see Mr Wickham every day and that was enough to have her shuddering again.

Kitty picked up Shakespeare again and tried to read it. It was impossible. She had never much cared for reading! She doubted that the events of yesterday would have any effect on that!

She wondered at her mother not speaking with her.

Mrs Bennet had been one of those fussing over her when she had awoken, and of course she had barged into her room and dragged her down to speak with Mr Darcy, but apart from that she had
not come near her.

This she found all very strange. Perhaps it was because Mr Collins was in the house and she feared the events would affect Mr Collins’ offering for one of them?

Of course she could go and speak to her mother, but Mrs Bennet, while entering into all of her youngest girls’ whims, and desires was not likely to make her feel any better about this.

Several hours later, and several pages into Hamlet, Kitty was very glad she had not spoken to her mother.

Mr Bennet returned looking grave.

What alarmed Kitty more was he was followed by Mr Darcy who was looking thunderous.

“Papa?”

“I have never in all my days met a more…duplicitous….conniving…evil man.”

Kitty had never heard her father speak so.

“Was on the stage-coach the entire time! Of course Mr Denny can vouch for my whereabouts and here is Lt. Parks who happened to be on the coach with me all the way from London!”

Kitty stepped backwards. Her father was rambling.

Mr Darcy was looking at him with some concern as well.

“Papa?”

“There is nothing for it; my daughter’s reputation must be saved! After all for all I know, Mr Wickham could have been on that coach!”

Kitty suddenly realised there was a whole conversation happening, in which she had no say, or no part, she could not even hear the conversation.

“Sir,” said Mr Darcy curtly.

It was only one word but suddenly Kitty realised what was happening or what was going to happen. Her father was about to say that she would marry Mr Darcy.

“No!” she said forcibly, watching as the two men turned to her. Suddenly her next line which would have been “I would rather die!” died on her tongue.

Mr Darcy then began to speak to her father of arrangements and Kitty blinked. Was she not even to be asked? Was her outburst to be ignored? Were the words not even to be spoken aloud?

It seemed that they were not, for Mr Darcy after telling, not asking, but telling both her father and herself that they were not to speak of the whole affair beyond announcing an engagement left the room and the house.

Kitty felt betrayed. She would rather go to Harrowgate and face drinking the waters all day as the companion to some lady’s pug than marry Mr Darcy. And that was saying something.
Darcy looked intently at the brandy snifter that was currently occupying a prime position on his desk. The idea of drinking until it was empty appealed to him but also conjured feelings of strong repulsion.

His father, though a good man, had often succumbed to the lure of a good brandy when Lady Anne had passed away. Darcy had found him once unconscious in his study chair. He had not been more than fifteen and had found it difficult to assist his father to his bedchamber.

All he had thought of was the importance that no one see his father in such an undignified state. The image of George Darcy, the master of Pemberley and his father, was not to be tarnished by this unknown wretch of a man. It had dismayed him to realize, when returning to the study to clear away the mess, that Old Wickham was there before him. He was not sure what hurt more, that his father had indulged more than once, or that the steward knew and had not done or said anything.

Of course, Darcy realized later in life that it was not weakness in his father to mourn his loss nor was it wrong of Old Wickham to shelter his friend and master. To mourn the loss of a wife, a loving wife and mother, by removing all knowledge of the present, was acceptable, and it had not lasted long.

To contemplate doing the same because one had gained a wife – that was true weakness. Darcy pushed the snifter to the corner of the desk and sighed.

This room had been his father’s before him, and his father’s father before him, and so on; not for time immemorial, though it had seemed so to Darcy when his father had talked to him, as a small boy, of the Darcy lineage.

He remembered his mother dressed in her finery standing near the fireplace, looking coyly over one shoulder at his father, laughing at some joke Darcy could not remember, no doubt because he could not understand it at the time. Later, when they had both gone, Darcy remembered kneeling before the same fireplace and telling Georgiana that everything would be all right because she still had him. Of course, he had come close to breaking that promise, leaving her alone and defenceless in Ramsgate.

Then, he had hoped, he would meet a beautiful intelligent woman who would be able to guide Georgiana through the perils of being a lady of fortune. She would stand near the fireplace, and look coyly over one shoulder at him. It had been a fantasy but he had enjoyed it at the time.

It seemed fitting that the room was the place he’d come to terms with the fact he’d never have a marriage equal to his parents. Nor would he have a marriage equal to that of his peers.

And a room where he could indulge in some wallowing after reflecting upon the reactions of his closest family and friends. It had been a difficult task informing those who needed to be informed of his impending marriage. Darcy had never shied away from difficult tasks; that was true cowardice, but in this instance it had taken all of his courage to summon his friends and family.

To say his uncle was less than pleased would have been an understatement. Darcy had wondered if he should dissemble over the circumstances of his hasty engagement but had realised that if he was to garner any support from his family his uncle at least needed nothing but the bald, honest, and painful truth. The whole story, not just those immediate events in Hertfordshire.
“How could this be, Darcy?”

Darcy grimaced. His uncle had seated himself behind the desk. It was his house, yet he felt an interloper forced to pace in penitence before Lord Matlock.

“How could I be so foolish?”

“I would put it in stronger words, but there are ladies in the house,” replied his uncle. Georgiana was showing Lady Matlock her latest drawings and talking excitedly of receiving a new sister. Darcy had not told her the truth.

“I should have seen – “ Darcy stopped. He had always prided himself in not chastising himself unnecessarily. Of course, this did not include matters of family, but in all else he felt no desire to punish himself for things that could not be helped. Despite regretting his comments about Elizabeth Bennet, once he had been in her company longer, he saw no point in thinking about the matter further. Watching Bingley fret over every perceived and actual societal misstep, particularly when they concerned young ladies, had further removed the desire. No, Darcy could not have seen what the Bennets were, or what they were likely to entangle him in.

“Yes, you should have,” Lord Matlock was blunt. “Your father paid for him to attend his college. Spoke well of him to his friends! I knew you did not care for him, but that is of little consequence. Richard cares little for Harold!”

Darcy turned, “You are speaking of Wickham?”

Lord Matlock rolled his eyes, “Of whom else would I be speaking? You failed to do your duty! To your family, to your sister and to yourself!”

“Yes, it was my responsibility and I dealt with the situation as I saw fit. There was no need to expose Georgiana to ridicule and censure!”

“It need not have happened! I am the head of this family – “

“Excuse me uncle, but you are not the head of mine and – “

“I misspoke. I apologise. But you must see the consequences of your actions!”

Darcy shook his head. “You think I do not see the consequences of my actions? I must live with this – “

When his uncle did not speak, Darcy sat on the edge of the desk. It meant he had to face away from his uncle, but he did not trust himself to look at anyone.

“I must live with this; Georgiana must live with this and my family must live with this. Believe me, uncle, I know of my responsibility and I know how much this rests on my inability to see Wickham for what he truly was.”

“And of your future wife?”

Darcy turned to look at his uncle.

“She must live with this, too.”

&&^^&&

As painful as his interview with his uncle had been, his conversation with Bingley was more so.
Bingley had bounded into the study.

“Darcy, I cannot tell you how pleasant it is to see you. Although whatever made you come up to London? I shall be home – how pleasing it is to have a home – in several days.”

Darcy had offered Bingley a drink and a seat, Bingley had accepted the former and rejected the latter, happily walking about the room.

“How did you leave my sisters and Mr. Hurst?”

“Very well,” said Darcy, trying to think of an acceptable way to broach the subject of his engagement. He had not decided whether it would be wise to divulge the truth to Bingley.

“And all our acquaintance, are they all well?” If it was anyone but Jane Bennet that Bingley was not so subtly hinting at discovering any information about, Darcy would have smiled at his friend’s complete openness, even when he was convinced he was employing the most complete subterfuge.

“Yes, they are all well.”

“Excellent! Or should I say Capital!”

But Darcy was not in the mood to join Bingley in this Mertyon joke.

“Bingley, I have something of importance to say to you.”

Bingley seemed not to hear him, instead commenting on the painting over the mantle.

“Bingley, I wish you would attend to me – “

“I know what you are going to say, Darcy. You consider Jane Bennet a lovely girl, but not the type of young lady I should marry. You will then point out the number of times I have tumbled in and out of love. You will then comment on every wrong doing – both actual and perceived – that the Bennet family has carried out in your presence, and even those not in your presence. All in all you will attempt to convince me that Jane Bennet is not worthy of my love. And nothing shall do that, Darcy.”

“Not even the fact she does not return your love?”

This, as Darcy had suspected it would, deflated Bingley.

“Not even the fact that her pleasing smiles are no more than she gives anyone else, that any attention she gives you stems from her politeness and her duty to her mother. A mother, who like many mothers before her, though they were not as transparent, feels it your duty to marry one of her daughters and will stop at nothing, not even if it makes her daughter miserable, to see it happen.”

Bingley turned to him with the most painful expression. “Is this true, Darcy?”

Darcy toyed with saying yes. It was after all what he had intended to tell Bingley, and it was the truth.

But for now, Darcy merely shrugged. “That is not why I asked you to come, Bingley.”

Bingley did not respond, but it was clear from his stance he was thinking, Then why did you?
So after pouring himself another drink, Darcy told Bingley of his impending marriage. It did occur to him, that after silencing both Miss and Mr Bennet, even to their own family, to the truth, that it was rather hypocritical of him to be revealing all (or intending to reveal all) to so many people.

But Darcy had every faith in the necessity of what he was doing. Not that he told Bingley the entire tale. He edited Georgiana out; he could not expect Bingley to turn his attention to Georgiana if he knew of his sister’s misstep. He had to rely on Bingley’s previous knowledge of Darcy’s dislike of Wickham’s character.

Bingley was silent.

“Speak, man!” said Darcy, sounding to his ears curiously like his friend.

“I do not know what to say,” Bingley looked agitated.

“We have been friends for many years, you could say nothing that could offend me,” said Darcy, rather generously because he was easily offended. He knew that was one of his faults.

“The Bennet family thinks you a villain. If they do not, the village thinks you a villain”

Darcy did not respond. He could not refute that remark.

“I do not mean to be selfish, but you have ruined my chances with the one woman I – “

It was uncharacteristic of Bingley, which perhaps spoke of his sincere depth of feeling for Miss Bennet. Darcy had hoped to split the couple irrevocably, but he wished with all his heart that it had not been at the expense of his own future.

“Forgive me, Darcy. I did not mean – “

“No, you meant it, and you are quite correct, as things stand I cannot see how Jane Bennet – assuming she does not, as I believe, know the truth – could countenance even a friendship with – “

“The truth must be known!”

“No.”

“Darcy, you cannot believe that it would be best to have all of Hertfordshire, including the Misses Bennet, believing you the worst kind of villain!”

“I would rather them think that, then the truth, that I am a -.”

“A gentleman!”

“No, Bingley, I would be regarded as a laughing stock. As it is, the majority think me merely as over amorous and perhaps unwise to meet my beloved in such a secluded spot.”

“The Bennet sisters do not think that –“

“No. Do not ask me to explain it to you, Bingley. I could not have – “

“I do not think I will ever understand you, Darcy,” replied Bingley, “But I will stand up for you.”

“I beg you not to speak the truth – “ Darcy spoke hastily.

“I meant at your wedding. If you wish for me to remain silent on other matters I will.”
“Thank you.”

It was not to be thought that Colonel Fitzwilliam, upon hearing of Darcy’s engagement (from the newspaper, or from his father) would respect Darcy’s privacy. Or respect the fact Darcy clearly had many things to attend to. His attorneys had been in and out of the house – and in and out of Cheapside where a Mr Gardiner was attending to the Mr Bennet’s arrangements. Darcy had been relieved that Mr Gardiner was a respectable city gentleman, although from the looks Mr Gardiner had given him, he could not say he had been given the same appraisal in return. It had left a bitter taste in his mouth, but it was of his own doing. All of it.

“I had no notion, that you were in love, Darcy. I thought you found the countryside quite below your touch!”

Darcy for moment was confused by Fitzwilliam’s tone.

Fitzwilliam took pity on him.

“I should have shot Wickham when I had the chance.”

“I am being justly punished for my peaceableness.”

“And Wickham remains unpunished.”

“He will have to face his crimes.” Darcy said this with more hope that he could actually lay claim to.

“What is she like?”

Darcy was flummoxed at his cousin’s change in conversation.

“Who?”

“Your bride?” Fitzwilliam sounded as if Darcy’s question had been one of the stupidest he had heard.

It was quite typical of Fitzwilliam, or possibly of soldiers; if there was nothing to be done, there was nothing to be done. If there was something to be done, it was done. If the latter then Fitzwilliam would have been pressing Darcy into action; as it was, it was the former. Thus as far as Fitzwilliam could see the only solution was to press forward and make the best of it.

Darcy wished, at times, he had the Colonel’s temperament. Darcy was far too prone to wallowing. Not the type of wallowing that had all the ladies aflutter over the heroes in their circulating library novels. Darcy’s temperament meant that he merely mulled, continuously, over everything. No one but his closest acquaintance could identify this mood, but it was as destructive as constantly drinking brandy and refusing to rise from one’s bed. Darcy’s nature was such that prolonged thinking either brought an epiphany over his behaviour, or, more than likely, made him convinced he was correct in placing the blame elsewhere.

“Darcy?”

This shook him out of his reverie. What was Miss Bennet like? His first uncharitable thought was stupid.

“Young,” was instead his response.
Fitzwilliam merely raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know, passably pretty,” though certainly not handsome enough to tempt him,” coughs a lot; I cannot say,“

“Will she be a good companion for Georgiana?” His cousin clearly realised that attempting to bring Darcy into a positive frame of mind regarding his future wife was a futile task.

“I am sure she will be a lively companion.” Darcy did not dare express his true sentiment that he feared she would be a harming influence. He did not want his sister running about a ball room sabre drawn. But he knew Fitzwilliam. He would not leave until he thought he had bullied his cousin into thinking better of the situation than he had when he had arrived.

&&^^&&

Darcy was jerked from these reminiscences when a knock sounded at his study door. His butler did not wait for an answer, instead entering the room in his calm way.

“Dinner, I believe, is served, sir. Mrs Darcy is sitting in the parlour.”

Darcy just looked at him.

“I understand that she is expecting to be escorted to the table?”

He nodded curtly at the servant and waited until he left the room to curse; mildly, but a curse nonetheless. To have to be reminded of such a basic civility by his butler!

He stoked the fire before leaving the room. “You must conquer this, Darcy, you must!”

&&^^&&
Kitty looked into the ornate mirror. It was far more decorated than any mirror that hung anywhere in Longbourn.

Sally, her maid,(Kitty felt occasionally like pinching herself whenever she thought of the fact she had maids) had told her it had been purchased by the late Lady Anne Fitzwilliam, Mr Darcy’s mother.

Kitty was not sure she wanted to be in a dead woman’s room, although she might have had a dead woman’s room at Longbourn and never known it.

Sally was fussing in one corner of the room, attempting to brush some imaginary piece of lint off whichever dress she thought Kitty should wear that day. The fact that someone was exclusively fussing over her, brought a smile to Kitty’s face. Not much had over the last weeks.

The Darcys’ Townhouse was, as far as Kitty could see, cavernous, and populated by an army. Longbourn had not lacked servants, as Mrs Bennet failed to see why she should go without comfort, despite then also bewailing her daughter’s lack of fortune.

At the time Kitty had not seen the discrepancy, but she had seen the accounts for this particular household, and while she was sure the country was cheaper, it seemed a great deal of money was needed to support any household!

While Longbourn may not have needed all its servants, the Darcy townhouse did! She had almost expected to find loitering maids with nothing to do, but they appeared to be busy every second of the day. Kitty felt almost underfoot! With so many of them buzzing about like bees, Kitty found (having no experience in organising a household, beyond being able to ring the bell for tea) that the only thing she could do was attempt to learn their names.

She expected she was lucky Mrs Wilson seemed to take pity on her and explained things slowly and surely. Mrs Wilson was a jolly fat woman, who had apparently known Mr Darcy since he was a boy; she had been a maid at Pemberley, until her marriage had seen her promoted to London, along with her elder sister who was now housekeeper at that grand estate.

The only flaw in Mrs Wilson was the assumption that Kitty would be pleased and gratified by a great number of stories about her husband’s childhood. Kitty sat through these feigning as much interest as she could. Not that that was difficult, it was exceedingly hard to picture Mr Darcy doing anything like half the misdeeds and adventures his housekeeper attributed to him.

Husband. Kitty really needed to come to terms with that word. She had almost been caught last night attempting to say it into the mirror. Have you met my husband…

Though who she would introduce Mr Darcy to she did not know. She had not seen anyone, apart from her army of servants, since the wedding. She had at least expected Georgiana to be at the townhouse. Her new sister had not travelled down to Longbourn for the wedding, but had written her a letter brimming with her delight, so much so that it was obvious that she had no idea about the true circumstances surrounding her brother’s wedding.

It was strange, Kitty thought, that she could talk of Georgiana, but still Mr Darcy was Mr Darcy. She could never call him by his given name of course, as it was hideous.

“Mrs Darcy?”
Kitty was startled out of her thoughts.

“I have brushed off the morning dress,” Sally held it out in order to allow Kitty to inspect it.

“It’s lovely,” Again, thought Kitty, one of the only pleasures marriage afforded her – a set of new dresses. Made of course in Meryton, as it was a hasty marriage; Kitty was not as disappointed as Lydia that she did not get to go to town to make up her trousseau.

Kitty slowly walked down the stairs into the foyer. She had not come down to breakfast – another benefit of marriage– perhaps, she might be forced to concede that there were many benefits, even in a loveless marriage.

She had come down to breakfast once or twice the week before, her first week in the house, and Mr Darcy had made himself absent, so if he was not going to concern himself, then Kitty might as well sleep later and drink chocolate in bed.

The bowl left for calling cards was empty; Kitty should have realised it would be, it was far too early for calling. She had not known half the names of people leaving their cards. The other half she knew by reputation. None of the names of people that she did know in London, her uncle’s acquaintance who had on occasion visited Longbourn, had left their cards. To Kitty the amount of cards seemed endless, but Mrs Wilson had reassured her that the minute number of cards was merely because London was so empty at this time of year. It had not even occurred to her that she should worry over the number of cards left her.

All this made Kitty think, as she returned upstairs, of her uncle and aunt, and that perhaps visiting them would enliven her days. So she retired to the parlour after calling for her carriage at the appropriate time. Carriage – another reason marriage was not so distasteful.

She understood why they had not ventured out; after all a bride and groom were expected to want some time together, although Kitty suspected the groom should not be absent so frequently. Unless he was playing hide and seek?

The image of Mr Darcy hiding under some piece of furniture seemed so utterly ridiculous that Kitty could not help but laugh. Of course the moment she did so the door opened admitting Robert, one of their footmen, and another gentleman.

“Mrs Darcy, Lord Matlock to see you.”

Any amusement still left died on Kitty’s lips. She did a brief curtsey. She had rarely received visitors by herself, at home – no - she should call this her home not Longbourn. ! Any that did come to Longbourn while she was the only one downstairs were such close friends that they did not stand on any ceremony.

She did not think Mr Darcy’s uncle would be at all appreciative of being treated like Maria Lucas. (Since Maria was often treated like an extra maid; she was so unassuming that Lydia and Kitty felt no compunction in ordering her about.)

“Robert, if you could see to some refreshment?” Tea would solve anything. Even if Kitty detested the stuff, belatedly she realised that Mr Darcy must be somewhere in the house. “And can you inform Mr Darcy his uncle is here?”

Then she realised if Lord Matlock had wanted to see Mr Darcy, he would have been shown to his study. Kitty bit her lip and tried not to blush. It was so awkward, did she invite him to sit? When
no doubt he felt more at home than her, he had more right to feel at home than her.

But she invited him to sit anyway.

“I trust you are well, Mrs Darcy?”

“Very well thank you,” Kitty wanted to tell him to call her Kitty, but could one ask an earl that?

“Your trip from Hertfordshire was not too taxing?”

“No, it was very pleasant,” At home Kitty could have excused herself from these type of tedious pleasantries. But here, she was mistress, although this had not stopped her mother from handing such matters to Jane, once Jane turned sixteen.

“You are finding the household to your satisfaction?”

“Indeed, it is very comfortable.”

This could possibly go on forever. After all there were almost a hundred things Kitty could think of that one could make polite conversation with. She decided to take control of the situation.

“The weather is very fine.”

The Earl looked at her, “Indeed.”

They were interrupted by the tea tray. The next moments of conversation were surrounding tea, or port, and offering the biscuits.

“I believe London’s roads are most satisfactory,” Kitty thought it was probably the most inane thing she had ever uttered also perhaps the rudest, because she felt as if he had come to judge her. She knew what everyone must think of her. Her behaviour had been disgraceful and had caused the ruin of a – detestable, but honourable – young man. Kitty wanted to slither away, but there was nothing for it. She was not Jane who would wilt until pity was taken; she was not Lizzy who would be outwardly impudent and directly ask the Earl if he had made up his mind about her, she was not Mary who would not care about the Earl’s opinion, only God’s, and she was not Lydia who would find it all a good joke and not care a jot if anyone thought ill of her.

The corners of the Earl’s mouth twitched. “You have had extensive experience of our roads?”

“Just the ones we came over from Hertfordshire. You see, I have never been to London before.”

“And yet you find our roads more satisfactory.”

“Indeed. Is that not what one is supposed to say?”

The Earl appeared to regard her more keenly. “If one is trying to be insipid.”

Kitty had to look away for a moment, stung by his comments, “You have found me out. I am terribly insipid.”

The Earl said nothing.

“I believe if I said everything in my head, you would think worse of me, so I shall confine my remarks to the weather and the roads.”

“We are family, Mrs Darcy.”
“Not by my choice,” Kitty felt a lump appear in her throat and willed it down. She had been so good. It had after all been her fault. “Not by yours either,” she added, convinced that would be Lord Matlock’s next words.

“And yet, here we are,” he replied pleasantly.

“I cannot promise not to embarrass you,” said Kitty.

The Earl frowned, “In what way would you be embarrassing?” His tone was sharp.

Kitty blushed, turning away to hide those tears that threatened to fall, she had meant that she was likely to say the wrong thing, use the wrong fork, stumble in her dance steps, but Lord Matlock’s tone sounded as if he thought her confessing to something much graver.

“Forgive me, I misheard your words,” the Earl looked more sympathetic. “I came on an errand, my wife would have come except she is nursing a head cold; Georgiana wishes to meet her new sister…”

“Oh whenever she would like,” said Kitty, not even realising she was speaking over the top of him. She had always imagined life without her sisters as heaven, but it was unbearably lonely.

The Earl smiled, “You are happy to have a new sister.”

“I am tired of my old ones!”

“I believe you have four sisters?”

“All far more accomplished than me; I do not sing, I do not paint, and I do not play the piano. I believe Georgiana does all three?”

“Yes, very proficiently. There is no problem in getting her to practice.”

“Far more biddable than me; I preferred to trim bonnets.”

“Your governess did not mind?”

“We had no governesses or tutors.”

“You are opposed to them?”

Kitty thought about it; if she had someone in her youth, though she was hardly old now, telling her what to do and forcing her to practice Mozart’s sonatas, she would have hardly thanked them for it. Even now, when she wondered if she should have been taught the feminine arts, so that she didn’t feel so wretchedly inadequate, she did not think she would like someone telling her what to do. Which, she reflected, was more than likely the definition of husband, although hers would have to shout very loud from whichever cupboard he had hidden himself in.

“I do not think I should’ve liked to be told what to do,”

“Of course, you understand that your children – “ The Earl paused tactfully.

Kitty blanched. She had not even thought of children. She was rescued from having to answer by Mr Darcy’s timely entrance.

“Uncle,” Mr Darcy reaching to shake his uncle’s hand.

“It is good to see you, my boy,” said Lord Matlock rising to meet his nephew’s hand. “Your wife
and I were just discussing Georgiana’s return; it appears they are equally as anxious to meet each other.”

“Indeed,” Mr Darcy turned to nod at Kitty.

Kitty thought rolling her eyes at this might reverse the apparently good opinion she had started to summon in Lord Matlock.

Mr Darcy had not entirely been able to avoid her; dinner time was one such occasion where they spoke of the weather, of household matters, who had left cards, and on one memorable occasion, the night before to be precise, when he had run out of things to say before the last plates had been removed, read to her from the newspaper.

She had commented that she had read most of that paper, for what else was she to do all day, household tasks did not take all day and sitting in bed drinking chocolate all day grew surprisingly boring. She had said it merely to see what he would next do. He had merely asked if she had read the ‘to let’ sections of the paper, and on her demurring had read them to her.

It had put Kitty greatly in mind of her mother; she could see Mama presiding over their small morning room, commenting on the attics in Purvis Lodge. It had been all she could do to keep her countenance. She did not think she had been entirely successful since Mr Darcy had ceased his reading and looked at her. Kitty also did not think her comment that the pudding was rather ticklish had entirely convinced him either.

She was tempted to discomfort him and ask him, now that he had appeared, if he would ask his uncle’s advice over the many properties he had commented on the worth of the night before.

Her daydreaming had meant she had lost the thread of the conversation occurring between Mr Darcy and his uncle. She could only ascertain they were still speaking of Georgiana, and how pleasant it would be (on Darcy’s side) to regain her and how unpleasant (on the Matlocks’) to lose her.

They appeared to expect her to make some comment.

“I’m sure Georgiana will be a great comfort to me on my visits.”

“Georgiana is not out,” said Mr Darcy blandly.

Kitty had not conceived of this. After all, she had been out for years! She could not imagine why any young lady who did not have the obstacles of older sisters would not be out as soon as possible. No wonder Georgiana had plenty of time to practice her accomplishments. Poor Georgiana, to have no fun at all!

Then it struck Kitty that if Georgiana was not out, and Mr Darcy did not seem inclined to allow her to accompany Kitty on her return calls, then who would go with her? The idea of having to visit even one of these unknown ladies on her own… she was sure to say something stupid.

“Then you will be accompanying me on my visits?” asked Kitty, not sure whether she would be relieved by the answer yes. The idea of society matrons and Mr Darcy sitting there glowering – she doubted he’d do any better in ‘his own sphere of company’ than in hers – filled her with dread.

Apparently the idea of social calls filled him with dread if the look on his face was anything to go by.

Lord Matlock chuckled at his nephew’s distress. “Do not wish to take tea with the ladies?”
Mr Darcy straightened in his chair, “Of course I will accompany – “

Kitty supposed this was the point she was supposed to put him out of his misery, disclaim that she needed his presence, but she was not inclined to do anything of the sort.

“Never fear, Mrs Darcy, my wife when feeling better wishes very much to make your acquaintance and I am sure she will be happy to accompany you – into the breech as it were.”

Kitty was not so sure she would be; Kitty was only a country miss who had entrapped her nephew. While the Earl appeared to have thawed, or at least decided to retreat into affable politeness, his wife could very well be coldly polite.

Kitty had watched various matrons in Meryton’s circle behave in this fashion; it was unpleasant to watch, and when involved, as she often was when the young ladies attempted such punishments of their unruly friends, equally unpleasant. Kitty was not the type to be coldly polite to anyone, and shrunk when rebuffed. It was how Lydia convinced her to do so many things; Kitty feared being ignored.

Except she could hardly refuse any offer of support now.

She could take her aunt, but would that be one of those embarrassing things the Earl had hinted at earlier?

Kitty decided it must be, when she saw Mr Darcy’s face after Robert had announced the carriage.

“I am visiting my aunt, in Cheapside,” replied Kitty to the unvoiced, but still asked question. Mr Darcy’s face after this announcement confirmed it to her.

But there was nothing for it but to politely take her leave.

&&^^&&
From Paper to Ash

It was only to be expected. The only thing that had surprised Darcy was the fact that his aunt had only written, not flown up - possibly with broomstick in hand, although this was something Darcy only thought privately, in his head, when no one else was around – to London the minute she had read his letter.

Darcy had not wished to inform his Aunt Catherine of his engagement, but it was his duty to write to his relations. Unlike his Aunt and Uncle Matlock, Lady Catherine was not to be privy to the details surrounding his engagement. Darcy had no faith in Lady Catherine’s understanding of what it meant to be a gentleman. Although Darcy could imagine that some of her suggestions would invariably be true. The gossip of Hertfordshire would have tainted him, but not ruined him. It would have scarcely affected his ability to contract a suitable alliance, though Darcy was not sure he would have liked a wife who was capable of ignoring misdeeds against another young lady. For it would have been villainy to leave any young lady of decent birth open to the kind of treatment Miss Bennet would have received.

But his Aunt had not been able to make these arguments, for she was under the impression that Darcy had merely formed a hasty alliance. That was enough to anger Lady Catherine, and yet there had been silence from Kent.

Darcy had half wondered if this silence meant that Lady Catherine would burst into the church at Longbourn at the moment the clergyman asked whether there was any just cause impeding matrimony. He was relieved that she had not, despite the fact it would have been a novel way to delay his marriage. But Darcy did not agree with delaying unpleasantness any more than he agreed with refusing to make difficult decisions.

The silence continued through the first weeks, until a letter arrived. It was not penned by Lady Catherine, though it was ostensibly from her. The hand was not that of his cousin, nor that of Mrs Jennings (both hands he knew quite well); it took him a while to sift through the obsequious opening to realise it was Mr Collins.

Darcy had thought that the Bennet’s cousin was a particularly foolish sort of man; that is when he had thought of Mr Collins at all. The only time he had paid any sort of attention was when he was causing a scene on the dance floor with Miss Elizabeth, and it had been some chivalrous – Darcy could not own to any other thoughts or feelings, not now! – prompting that had lead him to rescue her from that being the only dance of the night. She would be the object of some speculation after he had stood up with her, and it was better that form of speculation than the kind Mr Collins had exposed her to.

His idea of the baseness of the gossip of the country was confirmed by Sir William Lucas’s comments on the assumption that Jane Bennet would soon exchange her name for Bingley.

On reading his aunt’s dictated letter, he could not merely confine this ill-opinion of others to the country. His aunt was the daughter of an Earl and her remarks were the height of ill-breeding and impropriety.

No matter what he thought; anyone else speaking of his wife in this way was unacceptable. Not to mention, if he was being entirely fair, the majority of Lady Catherine’s accusations were entirely unfounded. The vitriol directed at him was less ill-placed.

Darcy did not even intend to do the letter the dignity of finishing it, instead consigning it to the fire. He did not think he would even pen a reply; although on second thought that might truly cure
his aunt’s ‘spasms’ and bring her to town.

He was about to write his cutting reply when he caught a scribbled postscript. It was difficult to make out and, while still in Mr Collins’s hand, was clearly not dictated by his aunt.

As far as Darcy could make out, Mr Collins was attempting to appease him at the same time as carrying out Lady Catherine’s wishes. Darcy despised those who attempted to hedge their bets. However, amongst the comments that Mr Collins did not wish to offend, was a line that seemed to imply Mr Collins had written a similar letter to his wife.

Darcy threw the letter down on his desk, before striding into the corridor.

“Robert!”

“Yes sir?”

“Have you taken Mrs Darcy’s letters to her?”

Robert nodded an affirmative. Darcy dismissed him back to his post, and then took off up the stairs.

Mrs Darcy. Darcy would never get used to that; he certainly did not think of her in his head like that, but he could hardly call her Catherine in front of the servants. Georgiana seemed to be having no trouble calling her Kitty.

He hoped that Georgiana was practicing her pianoforte so he could have a conversation with Catherine. God knew what his Aunt had felt acceptable to put in a letter to her.

He should have realised Lady Catherine would be an obstacle to removing any scandal attached to his marriage. Of course it could not be removed entirely (after all it did look as though he had acted imprudently, but acting imprudently was not scandalous, not in the way the truth would be) but he had every proof and conviction that the whole incident had been turned most romantically on its head by the denizens of Meryton. He should be pleased; after all it was more likely that jealousy should have raised its head at the elevation of one of their own young ladies to such a position. However, he supposed country pride had won out.

Georgiana was playing the pianoforte when he opened the parlour door. She looked up and smiled at him. He had not seen her smile quite so fully at him in some time; he did have to concede that company her own age was something she sorely needed. Although he wished he could have been more selective about that company.

Mrs Annesley also looked up at his entrance.

Catherine did not; she appeared engrossed in a letter.

Usually when he came to listen to Georgiana, he chose a remote seat and remained silent, commenting only when necessary. He left the conversation to the ladies, particularly Mrs Annesley, who was good at pleasantry.

Mrs Annesley had assumed that her services would be no longer required, and seemed surprised when Darcy had insisted that both his sister and his wife would benefit from Mrs Annesley’s continued companionship.

But this time, he chose to sit on the same sofa as Catherine; they were far enough from the pianoforte and Mrs Annesley that they were unlikely to be overheard.
“May I?” From this distance he could tell that it was certainly Mr Collins’ handwriting.

Catherine looked up at his inquiry – which was for politeness’ sake nothing more, after all he had a perfect right to read her correspondence. She looked annoyed but said nothing.

He wondered at Mr Collins being able to even put pen to paper in such a fashion to a woman.

“I do not even understand half the words,” said Catherine. Darcy thought he could detect a certain tightness to her tone. He wondered why he was surprised, of course she would be upset by such comments.

“He has misspelled a great deal of them,” replied Darcy before folding the letter.

“Has someone written?” said Georgiana.

Darcy tried not to cringe; protecting Georgiana was his aim, but how to do so without unnecessarily suppressing her natural curiosity? He had worked so hard to attempt to encourage her out of her shyness.

“My cousin, wishing me well,” said Catherine quietly.

“Oh may I read it?”

“It was not as enthusiastic as yours, and I am afraid it is full of bible verses. Mr Collins is rector for Lady Catherine.”

“Oh,” Darcy could hear the enthusiasm die in Georgiana’s tone. “Well, perhaps you can read me an edited version.”

“Of course, later.”

Mrs Annesley chose that moment to scold Georgiana for neglecting her music, so Georgiana returned to that task.

Darcy turned to his wife, “I beg you will not take Lady Catherine’s words seriously. Lady Matlock’s behaviour can only convince you that not all my family - “

“Lady Matlock is most kind,” however Darcy thought that her comment was not sincere. Which Darcy felt was unfair; it was hardly Lady Matlock’s fault that Catherine was unused to the kind of refined elegance that characterised ladies of his Aunt Matlock’s ilk. She probably felt that Lady Matlock did not like her, simply because Lady Matlock did not gossip with her, or look favourably on young ladies exhibiting themselves on the dance floor with officer’s sabres.

With a nod to Mrs Annesley and a smile at his sister, he exited the room with the letter.

&&^^&&

He burnt the letters and wrote a caustic letter to Lady Catherine.

This caustic letter had the effect of causing Fitzwilliam to knock on his front door. Darcy had been from home on business. He had only known of Fitzwilliam’s presence upon returning.

Fitzwilliam was charming Georgiana in the parlour, as he always did. Darcy had always reprimanded him for it; it would do no good for Georgiana to fall in love with her cousin!

It was not only Georgiana Fitzwilliam was charming. He was telling some bounder of a story to an enrapt audience of three ladies.
“Darcy, I was just about to tell the ladies of that time we took out that prime new stallion – “

“Fitzwilliam,” said Darcy warningly.

“Oh do tell us, Richard, I was too young to remember.”

“I could not possibly, Darcy would disapprove of it,” laughed his cousin.

Georgiana pouted and Darcy was torn between disliking such an action in his sister and happy to see Georgiana in high spirits.

“I assure you, you are not missing out on any great tale,” said Darcy, pouring himself a glass of wine.

“You are not interested, Mrs Darcy?” said the Colonel, and Darcy had to hide his feelings at those words tripping from his cousin’s tongue.

Catherine smiled, “I believe I know the story.”

“Really? I cannot imagine that Darcy would tell you such a tale,” Fitzwilliam looked amazed, which reflected how Darcy felt.

“No,” replied Catherine.

“Then who did?”

“A lady never tells,” she replied simply.

Darcy used the excuse of turning to put his glass down, to hide the expression on his face, which he had no doubt would leave no one in doubt of his own feelings. When he turned back, the Colonel had fixed him with a particular look that Darcy recognised; it was the face Fitzwilliam showed before he was about to do something to tease his cousin. Darcy doubted anyone else would recognise it.

“You see that expression, Mrs Darcy? Your husband does not believe you know a thing.”

Darcy fixed a hard stare on Fitzwilliam, who merely looked blandly back.

“Well, I can say that I would feel safer knowing a physician was on hand, if Mr Darcy was to ride out…” said Catherine, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

Fitzwilliam laughed; “You do know! I expect it was Mrs Wilson! Darcy you should inform her only to tell tales of your childhood that reflect well on you!”

Darcy merely asked if his cousin would join him in his study.

&&^&&

“She is pleasant enough,” said Fitzwilliam, lounging on the sofa. “Do not look at me like that, Darcy.”

“I cannot believe you thought that was a – “

“Really, Darcy, if this is how you behave I do not wonder – “ The Colonel stopped. “You are supposed to have had a love match. Behaving like this…”
Darcy closed his eyes and tried to ignore his cousin. It was true, but he was incapable of acting warmly or even wanting to act warmly.

“Your mother is having a dinner, I believe.”

“Yes. Of course rather thin of company, but my mother believes it necessary to show good-will.”

Darcy nursed his drink.

“So am I to take from your silence that you will be there?” The Colonel didn’t expect an answer, instead he moved onto the motivation for his visit: a demand to know exactly what Darcy had written to Aunt Catherine to provoke the sort of letter that his father had received that morning.

&&^&^&

It occurred to Darcy as he handed Catherine into the carriage that this was one of the few occasions he had been alone with his wife. He had not even been in the carriage from Longbourn, he had elected to ride. Even in the uncomfortably cold weather.

“I have had a letter from home.”

Catherine appeared to require conversation, which made Darcy think of Elizabeth and then wish he had not.

“Indeed, I hope your parents are well.”

“Mama is never well.”

Darcy blinked, Mrs Bennet did not look as though she had been unwell to him. His confusion must have shown on his face.

“Her nerves, they prevent her from most things. Since they seem to always happen whenever something Mama dislikes occurs, I am thinking I should develop a set.”

“I beg you wouldn’t,” said Darcy stiffly. That was all he needed.

“I was only funning.”

“But your family are well?”

“Yes, they all seem well. Mama wrote particularly to ask about Mr Bingley. She wondered at him returning to London. After all there was no need – in her mind. And it is not as if we have seen him.”

“I have seen him at my club,”

“Then why does he not call? I could tell him all about Jane.”

Darcy cringed. “Why do you think he wants to know about Jane?”

“Because he is in love with her.”

“What do you know of it?” It was perhaps a trifle too harsh, but Bingley was a messy situation. The wedding had proved Bingley right; both the elder Miss Bennets who were not aware of the true situation – perhaps the only secret ever kept in that household – had been remarkably cool towards Bingley. Clearly Darcy’s sins had rubbed off upon him. Darcy had no doubt that it was Mrs Bennet who had written to inquire of Bingley, not her eldest.
His sharp remark seemed to have silenced his wife, and they continued in silence until they reached the Matlock’s residence.

As they were not seated together at dinner, Darcy could both at once breathe easy and hold his breath, for she was seated next to two young men and it would be fatal to him if she flirted with either of them.

He tried to keep an eye upon her, without looking as if he was watching her like a hawk. There was the uncomfortable feeling that always occurred when one was under observation. And Darcy knew that both of them were under intense scrutiny. Catherine perhaps less so, because all of the ladies here would have met her under the aegis of Aunt Matlock and morning calls.

It was painful, after dinner, to be the subject of raillery. He disliked it normally and it was intolerable to hear the assumptions made in these circumstances. The only positive was that clearly no one had even thought of the fact Darcy might have been forced to marry.

Darcy stared at the port bottle and tried to make conversation, and could only hope when the gentlemen rejoined the ladies that he would be pulled in so many directions that he would not have to play the devoted husband, as so many of these gentlemen clearly thought he wanted to.

&&^^&&
“Pemberley! I cannot wait,” said Georgiana as she helped fold the clothes. “Except for the carriage ride.”

Kitty looked up from the dresser.

“I am afraid long journeys make me quite ill.”

Kitty smiled. She had never been on a longer carriage journey than Hertfordshire to London and that had not made her sick, so she could only presume that she would not become ill on the journey to Pemberley.

Georgiana seemed to require no response from her new sister and continued on in her happy thoughts.

Mr Darcy had warned Kitty of his sister’s reserved nature. It appeared to Kitty to be more of a warning to her not to upset Georgiana than a warning not to take Georgiana’s slights to heart.

Not that there were any. Apparently all Georgiana needed was company – or family.

Kitty noticed that Georgiana almost folded in on herself during the few visits to the Darcy townhouse that had occurred. Kitty had wished she could have folded in upon herself. It was obvious they had come to gawk. At least the majority of them confined themselves to subtle remarks. Remarks Kitty was sure she would not have even caught, if she had not been brought up listening to conversations between Mrs Long, Lady Lucas, Aunt Phillips and her own Mama.

While Mama was rarely subtle, and Mrs Phillips even less so, the other two ladies had a way with their words and since Lydia was often monopolising the attentions of the younger ladies, sometimes Kitty had the chance to properly observe. Not that it had done her much good; she had little idea of what to say to such remarks, and merely wished she was back at Longbourn where she could flee to the gardens and not have to greet any visitors that she did not wish to.

It had only been marginally better in Lady Matlock’s company. No one dared even imply anything in her company, but that Lady was coldly polite. It was clear she thought her nephew a fool and his new wife something rather worse. Every expression on her face showed that she expected Kitty to do something farouche or, worse, say something scandalous.

Kitty had not trusted herself to not accidentally say something inappropriate so she had confined her remarks to the weather and other such trivial and tedious subjects – and had not made them numerous.

Lady Matlock’s dinner had been worse. At the visits there were only one or two people to look her over; after dinner Kitty had felt as if she was the latest circus freak. This had not abated when she had had to disclaim any accomplishments.

Her only comfort was that if the ladies of society thought her some grasping country miss, they thought Mr Darcy should be locked up in Bedlam for being taken in by it.

At least now she would be at Pemberley away from the prying eyes, perhaps there she would feel more herself. Although how this was to be achieved when Caroline Bingley and Mrs Hurst were to be of their party.

It was apparently a long standing invitation to the Bingley family, to join the Darcy family at
Pemberley during the winter. There was also a standing invitation to join them during the summer, so Kitty could only assume it was a standing invitation to sponge all year round. Although it was hardly Bingley’s fault he was no longer so welcome at his own home.

Kitty was not so blind as to have not seen the cooling towards Mr Bingley in wake of the whole series of events Kitty would rather not think upon. But Jane could not be so hard hearted for long; after all it was not even Mr Bingley’s fault. Not that it was Mr Darcy’s but Jane could hardly know that.

Kitty had wished to tell her the truth, for she did not want to cause her sister pain, but she had feared Mr Darcy’s reaction. Perhaps she could now write a letter to her, since Mr Darcy seemed disinclined to offer an invitation to any of her sisters to accompany them anywhere. Particularly Jane.

However he had shown himself capable of reading and taking her personal mail – Kitty had been looking forward to burning Collins’ letter herself! So it might not be wise to pen such a letter to Jane.

Kitty was pulled out of her reverie by Georgiana calling her name.

“I’m sorry. I was miles away.”

“I was just saying that I hope some entertainment will be put on – it must be because everyone will want to see you! And William might let me go – do you not think?”

“I thought you did not like crowds?” said Kitty.

“Oh no, but I have known everyone surrounding Pemberley all my life and they would only be country hops!”

It was at this point Kitty caught on to Georgiana’s full meaning. “But there will hardly be anyone in the country…”

“Don’t be silly! We have so many neighbours and they will all be in the country for the sport! And because of the weather! Of course we are so close to Matlock and then there are the – “

Kitty turned away to compose herself in front of the mirror.

She was hardly escaping then.

&&^^&&

The journey had been uneventful in the sense that the carriage had not overset itself, nor had the weather turned the roads into an impenetrable messs.

However it had been interminable. Kitty would have traded a hundred similar journeys shut in a carriage with all of her sisters and her mother for one such journey with Caroline Bingley and Mrs Hurst. They had fawned over Georgiana and had been less than subtle in their remarks to Kitty. Their mistake had been thinking that Georgiana felt the same way as them; it had only been some miles into the journey that Georgiana had begun to look distressed.

After ascertaining that Georgiana was not ill, Kitty could only surmise she did not like the sharp acidic comments flying around in the carriage. Kitty had not defended herself because how could she do so? Their comments were not necessarily undeserved, and she had no doubt that Mr Darcy would make some cutting comment to her regarding her ill manners if she pointed out any of the Bingley sisters’ failings. For she had no doubt Miss Bingley would run and tell tales.
Miss Bingley reminded her strongly of Lydia in that way. Kitty just hoped that she was not as persistent as Lydia in achieving her goals; otherwise Kitty might find herself pushed down a flight of stairs.

Kitty had done her best to reassure Georgiana and had even taken the step of informing Mr Darcy at one of the inns that if he did not want his sister heartily sick he would tell Bingley to control his sisters better. This had earned Kitty some looks from the sisters the next day, who clearly thought ill of tittle-tattle when it was not them running for support.

But they were at Pemberley now.

Kitty thought she would get lost in such a place. It was finer than any place she had ever seen. And she was supposed to be mistress of it all? It seemed ridiculous.

If Kitty had thought of marriage (and what girl had not?) her dreams had never taken her to such a place as this. All the wealth and servants it possessed, yes, but in her dreams she was never expected to do anything about them – they ran themselves. In her dreams her place was assured and taken for granted. There was no surprise in the servant’s eyes as she was handed down from the carriage. No speculating look or sly whispers.

Although this had only occurred on the first sight of her; after that everyone was nothing but courteous and efficient but those first moments had impressed on Kitty just how much everyone was judging her.

Her only ally appeared to her to be Sally, who seemed very devoted.

“Mrs Darcy.”

Kitty turned to see Mr Bingley had entered the small sitting room.

“Kitty, please.”

Bingley smiled, “Kitty. Are you lost or merely exploring?”

“Exploring,” said Kitty, who thought it sounded better than hiding.

“I remember the first time Darcy brought me here, I was so utterly lost, that I wandered around in circles for what seemed like days, and I did not ask a single servant for directions for I felt above foolish.”

Kitty laughed. Bingley was still the easy, open affable man she had, known, albeit barely, since he had little eyes for anyone but Jane.

“Well, I cannot ask anyone for directions either, but I shall employ you as my guide!”

“Darcy could not show you?”

Kitty turned away to examine one of the tables, “I believe he has much business.”

The open conversation seemed suddenly utterly closed. It was perhaps this slight chill in the air that gave Kitty the confidence to ask about Jane.

A multitude of expressions passed across his face, so many of them that Kitty had no doubt he loved her sister.
“I am very sorry, Mr Bingley.”

“Charles,” said Bingley softly.

“I am very sorry, Charles.”

He looked sincerely at her, “You have nothing to apologise for. I just wish – “

“I shall write to Jane and tell her the truth, though why she thinks any less of you –“

“I do not blame her, she is an angel. She must have been utterly hurt by the idea that I could keep such villainous company.”

Kitty privately thought it just showed a lack of resolve in Jane to seek out what she wanted despite what everyone might think. She had to at least be gaining support from Mama who was probably bemoaning Bingley’s loss nightly.

“And you must not write. I know Darcy does not want the story to be known and I cannot encourage you – “

Kitty smiled. It was very like Bingley to think of her before thinking of himself.

“Perhaps I shall invite Jane to visit?”

Bingley turned away, “I cannot expect her to remain so constant for such a time – “

“Then go back to Netherfield. “

“My sisters – “

Kitty was close to rolling her eyes. Jane and Bingley were well suited.

Anything she would have said in response to this could not be said as Mr Darcy entered the room. He looked sharply between Bingley’s forlorn expression and Kitty’s own, and did not seem to be convinced by Kitty’s lame exclamation about the delightful view from the room.

&&^&&

Kitty clearly was so reduced to boredom that she was counting how many times she brushed her hair. She was close to a hundred, yet her hair did not suddenly glow, like Hill had tried to convince her when as a little girl Kitty refused to brush her hair. Instead it seemed to wish to fly away.

There was a knock on the door and Kitty assumed it was Sarah bringing her the shawl she requested. It was not. It was Mr Darcy.

Kitty stared at him. She supposed it was rude but it was rather surprising.

“I wish to speak to you.”

Kitty bit back the retort of ‘well obviously.’

“I require you to stop tormenting Bingley with what cannot be.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” and Kitty did not. If he was speaking of Jane there was no reason why it could not be.
“Do not be obstinate; you know exactly what I am talking about. Bingley will be happy with another choice.”

Kitty wondered if it was particularly bad manners to throw something at her husband.

Her day had been far from pleasant; it had turned out Mr Darcy had come to inform her, when he had interrupted her and Bingley, that his cousin Lord Snitterton had come to pay a visit.

It had not been a pleasant visit. Lord Snitterton was a wiry gentleman who strongly resembled a weasel and his mother (though of course Lady Matlock did not look like any member of the rodent family). His conversation was unpleasant and rude. He seemed to have no compunction in interrogating her and when Mr Darcy had been called away to attend something or other, no compunction in informing her he found her a fortune hunter and that it was his duty to rescue his cousin from her clutches.

Kitty had stared at him and wondered if too many novels had rotted his mind completely away.

His complete open hostility was so surprising, she had grown slightly accustomed to the cold civility, that Kitty had been dumbfounded. Also dumbfounded had been Lord Snitterton’s companion – a Sir John McDonald who clearly thought his friend had taken leave of his senses and had told him so.

Sir John had then attempted to steer the conversation into safer waters, despite Lord Snitterton rebuffing his rebukes and desires for him to apologise to her.

Kitty had spent the rest of the visit, which saw the return of Mr Darcy and the other denizens of Pemberley finally joining them, resolutely looking at Sir John. She could not be held responsible for anything that might happen if she looked at her husband’s cousin.

Sir John at least was very well to look at, being a tall gentlemen of resolutely good looks, and very easy to listen to, having a slight Scottish accent.

And now, after she had behaved so impeccably, did Mr Darcy dare come to her room – which he had not done since their first night of marriage – and tell her to behave! It was outside of enough!

“I shall take your silence as acquiescence,” said Mr Darcy.

Kitty wanted to tell him to assume no such thing, but what could she do? She had never been one for open confrontation; she invariably lost fights with her sisters and could only cry and flounce away.

She could cry here, but not flounce. Well she guessed that she could. She could flounce away over the grounds and fall into a ditch and die and then he would be sorry. Except he would not be sorry, and her last act on earth would be to turn into her mother.

So she stayed silent and indulged herself by throwing her hairbrush at the door as he closed it behind him.

&&^^&&
“Darcy, “ said Miss Bingley in a cooing tone, clearly feeling his marriage allowed her to be more free with his name, “Georgiana was just telling me of your favourite picnic spot, do you not think we should ride there today?”;

Darcy stared at her, at the beginning of February? Granted the weather was particularly mild but no one in their right mind could think a picnic was a sensible idea.

“Caroline, a picnic in February?” said Bingley from the other end of the breakfast table where he was sitting with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Sir John McDonald who had ridden over from Matlock, in Darcy’s opinion, obscenely early in the morning. But one must make allowances for soldiers and Scotsmen, to whom the hardships of a Derbyshire morning must be merely a slight discomfort.

“Oh, I did not mean picnic, merely that we could ride out to that spot; I do wish to see the view.”

Darcy wondered if this was her attempt at looking like a hardy adventurous woman, or more likely a stratagem to ensure she was alone with the gentlemen. After all, Louisa would not hinder her plans, Darcy was hardly likely to allow Georgiana to ride in his weather, and Catherine did not apparently ride at all.

“I would have thought we’d be having some sport today,” said Mr Hurst in an annoyed tone.

“Fie, Mr Hurst. You cannot be thinking of your sport all the time,” trilled Miss Bingley, “You must entertain the ladies some of the time!”

Mr Hurst snorted.

For not the first time Darcy wondered in horror if he was going to devolve into some creature like Mr Hurst.

“Mrs Darcy, do you not think it an excellent idea,” asked Miss Bingley.

Darcy detested Miss Bingley’s tone. Miss Bingley had always reminded him of angles – her looks, her deportment, her mind, her speech. She had no understanding of the idea that sharpness did not attract. She used the basest of arts to insinuate her superiority when anyone would understand that true superiority did not need advertising. Her attempts were not even full of wit, something that in Darcy’s eyes excused blatant impudence.

The sad part was that Miss Bingley did not even realise her faults. He remembered a conversation of faults that he had had at Netherfield; he had owned to his there, not that Miss Elizabeth had thought him truthful. She had wanted to laugh at him and had been vexed when she could not.

Miss Bingley had cut off that conversation, clearly not relishing anything that she could not be a part of because of the meanness of her mind. Darcy wished he could think better of his friend’s family, but it appeared he was condemned to think ill of others’ families.

He was distracted from his thoughts by Catherine’s response to Miss Bingley’s question.

He expected her to merely look blankly at Miss Bingley, but instead she appeared to be smiling quite widely.

“I think it an excellent idea; anything that gets you out of the house, Miss Bingley, and into the fresh air will always find favour with me.”
Miss Bingley frowned, and Darcy tried not to smile. He should not. No one should be rude to one’s guests after all, even if one of those guests was Miss Bingley. After all Miss Bingley was a tremendous support to Georgiana and had always been so, even if Catherine disagreed with him on that point. Although Darcy was sure that the demand to bring the sisters back into line had been intended to improve her situation, not Georgiana’s.

“It is a pity that more of us cannot ride,” amended Catherine.

“Indeed, you cannot ride I understand?”

“Very poorly.”

Miss Bingley smiled, “Tell me, Mrs Darcy what can you do?”

Darcy was only thankful that Georgiana was not at the table, having chosen to breakfast in her room. Bingley was staring in a horrified fashion at his sister, and most of the table looking extremely discomforted (apart from Mr Hurst, whose concentration was never going to be cleaved from his meal). Even Mrs Hurst looked shocked at her sister.

Catherine merely stood up and left the room.

Darcy thought the best solution was for him to do likewise. He was left in the untenable position of having nothing to say, even though he would have liked to have responded to the arch look Miss Bingley gave him as he stood.

&&^^&&

Darcy put his hands on his desk and his head in his hands. It was particularly childish of him but he stayed there until he heard the door opening and closing.

He risked looking up. The Colonel was standing on the other side of the desk looking angry.

“What? I am in no mood to hear one of your sermons, Fitzwilliam.”

“I do not care what you want, Darcy!”

“That is patently obvious, I am afraid I have business to attend to – “

“Indeed you do. Your behaviour was disgraceful.”

“Are you in need of spectacles?”

“Excuse me?”

“I did not think that I looked anything like Miss Bingley. Her behaviour was disgraceful.”

“Only, because she thinks you will permit it! And you certainly proved her correct. I did not think you had a partiality for Miss Bingley!”

Darcy attempted not to betray how sickened he was by that comment. His dearest friend was a friend beyond price, but that would never mean he enjoyed Miss Bingley’s attention or ill-bred remarks.

“What would you have me do? Sling her from the house? A pretty sight that would make.”

“Well I would enjoy seeing it,” replied Fitzwilliam. “But cannot you see your disinterest and
behaviour make it easy for anyone to sneer at your wife? Is that not what a husband should do? Offer protection to his wife and family?”

“You are saying I am a failure?” Darcy took offence. He was dealing with this whole sordid manner in the best way possible. The only way possible. He could have fled Hertfordshire with little visible stain on his reputation, society would have barely regarded it. Whether Darcy could have lived with himself is another matter. It was his fault, after all, that Wickham was on the loose and able to prey on young ladies.

Although that was less important now; his cousin had taken it upon himself to write letters couched in the most vague of terms to Wickham’s superior officers. Now they knew where he was, he had slithered away to who knew where after his attempted seduction of Georgiana, they could do so. Darcy was sure that Colonel Forster was keeping an eye on Wickham, although whether it would be successful or not who knew.

He realised Fitzwilliam had not spoken.

“Well?”

“You know I think it is pointless to engage in a matter and only see it half way through.”

“But how can I? This is not what I wished for myself. An ignorant – “ Darcy stopped.

He ran his fingers through his hair.

The Colonel didn’t speak, just looked at Darcy.

“I know,” said Darcy in response to the Colonel’s unspoken reprimand.

Fitzwilliam merely helped himself to a drink.

“I wish I could sling Miss Bingley out of the house, but it is good to have her around for Georgiana.”

This made the Colonel laugh, as if he had not heard a more amusing joke. “You do realise Georgiana is terrified of Miss Bingley? Now she is approaching herself again – “ the reference to Wickham was not even needed – “I would even say she disliked Miss Bingley, if Georgiana could be said to dislike anyone.”


Fitzwilliam snorted.” Yes, because it is your wife making snide references. Really, Darcy, I think if I were her, I would have said a great deal on the subject. Is that why you hold her in such dislike? Anything you’ve said on young ladies the last – oh I cannot say – decade, has not made me think you would dislike a mouse. Were you hoping for a fiery bride?”

Darcy rolled his eyes: a fiery bride? He would dislike that above all things. He detested above all things those people who felt it necessary to needle and poke and contradict, to laugh and find all manner of things gay when they should be serious. A tiny part of Darcy’s mind pointed out his attraction to Elizabeth Bennet; he suppressed it, labelling it mere curiosity, and perhaps some attention to her fine eyes. He found it was easier than expected to push her to one side in his mind; after all it would not have been a lasting attraction. The Bennet family were not of his sphere; Elizabeth no matter how pert, could not have met his requirements. Though these musings were ridiculous given the outcome.

“Darcy?”
Darcy shook his head, “You claim to know I dislike being bullied about, and yet here you are.”

“I am your elder, and your cousin, it is my right,” smirked the Colonel. If he had been in his regimentals he was sure that he would have pointed to his rankings.

“Of course, and I am glad for your intervention. It was timely. I shall attempt to correct my behaviour.”

“You could start, since you feel unable to confront Miss Bingley, with speaking to Harold.”

“Harold?” Darcy’s forehead creased on hearing of his eldest cousin.

Lord Snitterton and Darcy had never been close, even though there were not many years separating Snitterton and Fitzwilliam, and he and Fitzwilliam were as close as could be.

“He has ambitions, any taint on our family would spoil those ambitions. Sadly, you are not far enough removed to have a hasty marriage as far as Harold is concerned. He suspects Kitty anyway.”

Darcy wondered when Catherine had become that ridiculous name in his cousin’s speech.

“Subjects her of what?”

“Fortune hunting – from what Sir John has told me, it seems he is convinced that she will cause a scandal.”

“No scandal has erupted from my marriage. Idle talk and gossip but not scandal,” said Darcy firmly.

“I think he was foreseeing the future.”

Darcy could only flippantly respond to this, because it was not only Snitterton who held that fear, not that he could own that to Fitzwilliam who was always the champion of young ladies.

“Yes and my behaviour has probably convinced him I may do something rash like run off with an opera dancer just as he has attempted to finagle himself some high position.”

The colonel laughed, “I should not doubt it; he is a weaselly little ferret. He is well aware of how my father has chosen to deal with the situation, yet he still acts as he did.”

“What do you mean as he did?”

“I believe, again I only have my information from Sir John, that he spoke directly to Kitty.”

“And said?”

“I do not believe Sir John chose to repeat it.”

Darcy stared off, out of the window. He wondered how his cousin, Fitzwilliam, should be so affable, when he, Darcy, found himself awkward in public places; how Fitzwilliam’s sense of understanding of his place in society could bring no offence, when the same thing in Darcy seemed to only lead to errors in judgement – such as insulting a woman at a public dance, or leaving his wife open to mistreatment. But after he had finished comparing himself unfavourably to his cousin, he could console himself that the gap between his behaviour and the Viscount of Snitterton was cavernous. Darcy detested Snitterton for much the same reasons he had looked down upon Mr Collins. Snitterton, too, ran whichever way the wind was blowing.
“How is it that he and Sir John are acquaintances?”

Darcy only knew Sir John peripherally, although he knew that both his cousins had known him for years. Sir John had a Scottish estate, although he had an English mother who had died in his infancy, whose family had insisted her son be educated in England. He was undoubtedly a gentleman. The only stain upon his reputation was clearly his friendship with Snitterton.

“I believe they knew each other in Cambridge, much like you and Bingley, although I flatter myself that his continued acquaintance is more to do with my esteemed father’s and my company, and also the prospect of free living.”

Darcy had almost become annoyed at the footman who stood in his front hallway, to allow guests in and out, when he informed his master that Mrs Darcy had taken a walk.

Darcy put on his greatcoat and hat, fetched his cane and went in search of her.

It was not particularly how he wished to spent his afternoon; walking about in the cold attempting to find an angry girl. He could not see how she could not be angry, or at the very least upset.

He had no doubt that her sister, Miss Elizabeth, would have been and would have said something arch and cutting back to Miss Bingley, which would have made the situation even more uncomfortable. Miss Bennet would have merely absorbed it, possibly taken it to heart.

It discomforted Darcy to think he was not sure how his wife would have taken the altercation at the table. But he had not thought of her much prior to his marriage. It was much easier to separate Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, and the mother. The three younger girls were just some meld of impropriety. Though he suspected the youngest had had a great hand in Catherine’s behaviour because Fitzwilliam was not incorrect. There was some irony that his prediction, as he told Mr Bennet an edited version of the events by the river, that the incident would prove to teach her a lesson. After all there had been nothing objectionable in her behaviour, apart from a wilful moment or two, since their engagement.

Even that he could forgive. He knew, deep in his heart, he was not fulfilling his obligations properly. Although he could wish his obligations did not mean he had to scour his own gardens in such a cold wind.

There was always the possibility that Catherine had wandered away from the extensive gardens attached to the house, and into the grounds. Since the park was more than ten miles round it was far too much ground to cover on his own.

He was loath to call out a search party, that would be publicly admitting to too much marital discord, but after almost three quarters of an hour, Darcy was coming to the opinion that he might have to.

Of course it could be that Catherine had returned to the house without his noticing. But he could see Mrs Reynolds at the windows every now and then, looking worried, and occasionally Mrs Annesley peered out over the grounds looking equally somber. Of course he could not have expected that the scene at the breakfast table would not have spread to either of these two formidable ladies.

He was about to return to the house and ask his footman to gather the outdoor staff, when he noticed that although he was crossing a garden he had looked into before, from this angle he could see better into the brick alcove that ostensibly was a vantage point from which to admire the
garden, but was really used by those who wanted privacy, most notably couples.

Sitting in it was Catherine.

She had not appeared to have even put on her pelisse. Darcy felt relieved that she hadn’t wandered away, and annoyed that she had lead him on such a merry dance.

However any thought of reprimanding her flew from his head when he realised she had been sitting out here in the cold, and her countenance showed it. She looked quite ill.

“Come inside,” it was less an order and more a request, but Darcy did not know if she could tell that.

She nodded, standing and walking back towards the house.

Darcy followed her, and noticed her steps falter. He grasped her hand in order to slip in into the crook of her arm. Yet he was shocked by how cold her hand was, and it was at this point he remembered the one thing that had made her distinct from her sisters. She was the delicate one. Not delicate to the extreme that was his cousin, Miss de Bourgh, but certainly more so than her sisters.

Darcy examined her face, and with alarm he noted she looked drawn, not just cold.

As far as he could tell it was imperative that he return her to the house as quickly as possible. So without asking for permission, or more accurately without warning, he picked her up into his arms.

&&^^&&
Kitty tried to glare the doctor, Mr Holmes, out of the room. She had never been subjected to such a rigorous examination by a doctor before. Not that he was disrespectful, it was just that the apothecary from Meryton tended to listen to Mrs Bennet’s opinion and then agree with it. The few times he did enter the chamber to examine the sick sister he would merely look over his spectacles.

Kitty could only assume the difference in methodology was that Mr Jones did not consider that Mrs Bennet would feel the loss of one daughter very keenly, and perhaps consider it a blessing, whereas the life of a Mrs Darcy was probably worth some purchase. Although Kitty could think of more than one person who would probably be more than happy to see her go into a decline and die.

Finally Mr Holmes left the room, without pronouncing his findings. Almost the second the door shut behind the good doctor, it opened again and Georgiana entered the room.

“Kitty, are you feeling most unwell?”

Kitty was feeling a great deal warmer, so she was no longer shivering, “No, I am not feeling the least bit unwell.”

“Whyever did you go out without a pelisse? Why did you go out at all?”

Kitty wondered if she should pretend a sudden bout of absent-mindedness. Instead she decided to tell the truth. “Because Caroline Bingley is a spiteful, obnoxious, vile shrew and I would not spend another moment in the same house as her.”

Georgiana gaped.

“And I as I do not have the ability to turn her from the house…”

Georgiana frowned at this, from her newly taken position at the end of the bed. “Kitty, you are the mistress of Pemberley, nothing can be done here that you should dislike!”

Kitty was tempted to say it would be most embarrassing if she ordered Miss Bingley from the house, and Mr Darcy went to fetch Miss Bingley back and made her apologise to the wretched witch. So she merely smiled.

“Would you like me to find your maid, so she can make you more comfortable?”

Kitty nodded her assent. Sally had fusssed over her when she had been brought to her chamber, and it had reminded Kitty a little of Hill, except Sally was younger and not as gruff in her ministrations. Homesickness had over taken her at this point, and she had indulged in a hearty bout of tears.

It was strange how a crying fit could make her feel more herself than she had done in months.

She had had time to think about things outdoors. Away from the hustle and the bustle of the household and the constant feeling that she was inadequate and that she did not belong.

She might not belong, in the sense of not being of the aristocracy. But she had done nothing, nothing to offend anyone.

As for her inadequacy! Kitty had thought of Georgiana and she appeared to know about as much
about running a household and other such wifely duties as Kitty did! Miss Bingley seemed similarly unconcerned with such things as charitable activities and visiting the villagers.

Yet the focus was on her! The fact she stumbled over what to say to the rector’s wife was frowned upon, when Georgiana had sat mute and Miss Bingley had sniffed. Of course she understood she was the lady of the house but she could not be given some understanding? Of course not because of who she was! Why was everything always her fault? Why did Mama always give Lydia everything that was hers?

She had accepted that her situation was of her own making, although Wickham had a hearty hand to play. She recognised Mr Darcy was the victim, but in an awful situation for them all, why was she being treated like some hideous leper?

Lizzy had often remonstrated with both her and Lydia about their behaviour. Mama had always supported them, and Papa merely ignored them, but her eldest sisters, no, they were always, to Kitty’s mind, carping on about this, that and the other.

Kitty had not seen the sense of half of their strictures – until Wickham – and still did not see the sense of the other half. Frivolity and laughter were not sins!

Completely alone and fearful of treading outside of some complicated system of propriety that had been completely absent from dealings in Mertyon and its surrounds, but seemed to come into play about five miles from London, she had tried so hard. Not that it was particularly trying simply to remain silent and agreeable!

And still she was insulted.

Her thoughts were turned from this upon the entrance of Sally and a tray.

“I have brought you some broth.”

Kitty turned up her nose. She had never liked broth.

“You must eat it, ma’am. I should not like you to become ill.”

“I feel fine,” Kitty insisted.

“The doctor says you must stay in bed for some days,” said Sally, looking at her doubtfully.

“He didn’t say anything of the sort to me!” replied Kitty. The broth looked better than what was served at Longbourn, but she didn’t think the displacement of several hundred miles was likely to change its essence.

“Mr Darcy told me that is what he said,” said Sally mildly.

*Of course*, thought Kitty. He probably told Mr Holmes to prescribe bed rest.

Sally seemed eager to say something, so Kitty asked her if there was anything she wanted to say.

“Oh no, ma’am.”

But it was clear that she did.

Perhaps this was what set her apart from the young ladies men like Mr Darcy were supposed to marry. The fact she and her maid had struck up – not a friendship – but at least a rapport.

Sally told her about her family, and Kitty told Sally about hers. Talking about the Bennet family...
caused contortions on Mr Darcy’s face, not to mention his aversion to discussing Jane, so Kitty had just ceased to do so in company.

Not that she had much news to tell; only Mama had written to her and Mama’s news was much better in person, where you could ask other people to fill in the gaps. Or give a truer account.

With Sally, Kitty could speak of the past as well.

Though she was careful not to disclose too much; even Kitty understood the merits of keeping a distance between herself and her servants. Mama had never understood it, and was then confused when everyone in the village knew her business. After all, Mrs Bennet wanted to know everyone else’s business; that did not mean that everyone should know hers!

“I just think it’s terribly romantic,” said Sally as she tidied up the dresser.

Kitty did not understand her at first. Was she talking of some below stairs romance? Above stairs it could only be Miss Bingley (Georgiana would be utterly transparent) - was that the reason the Colonel, his Lordship and Sir John were riding over more than was apparently the norm? If one of them had a tendre for Miss Bingley she hoped it was Lord Snitterton. They deserved one another. Although the knowledge that her son was to marry a daughter in trade might very well send Lady Matlock into an apoplexy, this did not seem ill-deserved to Kitty.

“What is romantic, Sally?”

“Being carried up the stairs! I mean, you read about it in novels!”

Kitty was surprised that Sally read novels; she did not suppose it was the norm amongst lady’s maids, but Sally had been an orphan and raised by a rector before his passing had sent her into service at Pemberley.

“Although, I hope you do not mind me saying this, I am not sure if it counts if it’s your husband.”

Kitty had to giggle at this. No, it most certainly did not count! Kitty had been surprised that Mr Darcy had stooped so low as to deign to carry his wife up the stairs.

Although it probably stemmed from less concern for her health and more concern for how long he would have to stand outside accompanying her back to the house, if she tottered along on her own.

&&^^&&

Kitty wondered if it was a sign of an impending trip to Bedlam that she was contemplating counting the number of diamonds made out of the pattern on her shawl.

She had had no objections to remaining in bed for the rest of the day after her ‘adventure’, nor to remaining in bed the next day.

It meant she did not have to see Miss Bingley, and it meant she did not have to do anything. She could have a pleasant conversation with Georgiana, and be cosseted by Mrs Annesley, look through all the fashion magazines and re-read Mrs Bennet’s letter.

However, today she had nothing to do.

She had broached the subject of getting out of bed with Sally and had strongly been rebuffed; after all, apparently Mrs Annesley was feeling unwell and was still abed! It had taken all her cajoling powers to convince Sally that she would be quite well, moving into her adjoining sitting room to
sit by the fire, properly wrapped of course.

Kitty had attempted not to gasp the first time she had stepped into what was to be her room (or should she say rooms) – another dead woman’s room but she could forgive that – for it was luxurious. One might be willing to put up with a great deal to occupy these chambers. In fact, apparently one did have to put up with a great deal!

Yet, there was little to do. Kitty detested embroidery or fringing. She liked making hats, but apparently the mistress of Pemberley did not make her own hats.

She had requested Georgiana to run down to the library and find her a novel – a sign of how bored she was. Kitty was not a great reader.

But that had been what seemed like hours ago. Georgiana had probably been intercepted by Miss Bingley or Mrs Hurst.

There was a knock at the door; Georgiana peered in.

“Come in, Georgiana!” said Kitty, wondering why she was just hovering in the doorway.

“Will you allow Sir John to come in?”

Kitty was not sure what Mr Darcy would say about it, but there could be no harm. She was married – she could not be ruined twice! – and she was hardly undressed. Even if she was just in her nightgown, she had a dressing gown and a shawl on top of that. What’s more, Georgiana would not leave them.

“Of course.”

Georgiana opened the door more fully to reveal Sir John.

Sir John bowed. “Mrs Darcy, I do hope you forgive this intrusion.”

“Not at all, Sir John, do come in.”

Sir John stepped into the room. Kitty could not help reminding herself how handsome he was. He was particularly resplendent in his blue jacket and fawn pantaloons.

“I hope you are feeling better?”

“Very much so.”

“I was in the library when Miss Darcy came to fetch you a novel and I remembered how fatiguing it is to read when you are ill, so I have come to volunteer my services.”

“Sir?”

“To read to you. If you should not think it an imposition.”

Kitty smiled. “It is very kind of you to think of me. I am surprised, however, to see you here so many days in a row! I should think you had taken up residence! Not that I mind, you understand.”

A brilliant smile crossed Sir John’s face. It was an entrancing smile, and it had been quite some time since Kitty had seen someone quite that open about their feelings. Even Colonel Fitzwilliam had some of his cousin’s reserve about his face. “Your husband has extended an invitation to remain at Pemberley now that Lord Matlock and Lady Matlock have removed themselves to a house party in Devon. Three bachelors in one house is never an attractive option.”
“I expect Mr Hurst would have fled happily to Matlock if he had been invited. I suspect nothing but sport would be his idea of heaven,” laughed Kitty.

“Well it is not mine. Particularly when the sport is so trifling!”

“Fie! Mr Hurst shot a hat yesterday I am told, isn’t that the sort of tale men like after a day of shooting? I confess I don’t know, my father was more fond of his books.”

“Well I would have enjoyed the tale of capturing a hat, if it had not been mine!”

Kitty gasped as did Georgiana. Sir John could have been seriously hurt.

Sir John’s eyes danced as he took in her shock. “I have to confess the hat was not on my head.”

Kitty laughed, “I afraid I have been rude, please sit down.”

Georgiana had curled herself up in the armchair with its back to the door, leaving Sir John to take the chair next to Kitty’s and closet to the fire.

“You do not wish to sit closer to the fire? I do not wish for you to be chilled.”

“I chose this seat so I would not melt! I have already been wrapped up in so many layers and scolded severely into not taking any of them off.”

At this point Georgiana interjected herself into the conversation, “What did you bring to read to us?”

“You did not let Georgiana choose?”

Sir John tried to look abashed, and failed. “I found her choice curiously wanting!”

“That is most unkind of you, sir!”

But Georgiana did not need Kitty’s defence for she was giggling. It was a nervous girlish giggling, one coming from someone who had not had much experience in conversation with personable young men. Kitty had seen many young ladies, including herself and she wasn’t entirely sure she was past that stage, go through it, and could only be happy that Georgiana’s openness and candour was not destined to be constricted to her close family forever.

“I am afraid I chose a book of Edmund Burke’s.”

Kitty had no idea who Edmund Burke was and was afraid her face expressed this.

Sir John, however, did not look at her as if she should know who Edmund Burke was.

“He was a philosopher; he wrote a book, among other things, condemning the French Revolution even while others were supporting it, this was, of course, before noble heads started rolling!”

“Oh,” Kitty did not know what to say. Should she say she would rather read such a book, but she did not wish to appear completely frivolous.

“I did not think it was quite the thing to read to someone who was recovering from an illness.” Sir John paused, “In fact I am not sure I would read it to anyone. I found it tediously hard going.”

Kitty smiled.
“So what will you read to us instead?” said Georgiana.

“I have brought up the Castle of Oranto! I am quite surprised Darcy has it in his collection. I would not think he would fancy such a novel, but I am told young ladies adore it! It is quite gothic.”

“I have heard of it, but never read it,” said Kitty. Georgiana also shook her head, and Sir John rewarded them both with a smile.

“I chose well! I shall of course read dramatically.”

He was not lying. He did indeed read characters’ voices in a different tones and at the right moments he attempted to scare his readers by including the various noises that the characters were hearing.

Kitty had shrunk away, not because she was not entranced by the story but because she was so affected by it. Georgiana had wide eyes and had curled up even tighter in her chair.

Sir John had broke away from the story to laugh at her, and he made a point of leaning forward, his forearms on the arm of her chair, whenever a spectre or some other such thing appeared.

He was in the middle of one such spectre when the door opened suddenly.

“Oh I do apologise. I did not realize I was interrupting,” and then Lord Snitterton was gone as quickly as he appeared.

Kitty blinked. What a completely ridiculous fellow he was, what did he mean bursting into her sitting room and then bursting out again?

Kitty turned to question Sir John, but Sir John had still leaning forward arched one eyebrow and had an amused look on his face.

“This can be no evil spirit,” he said gravely.

Georgiana and Kitty burst out laughing.
“Inviting Snit?” Fitzwilliam was just looking at him.

Darcy wished his cousin wouldn’t refer to his brother in such a fashion. Of course Darcy didn’t mind shortening of names; he often called Georgiana, Georgie.

But Snit? It was just not seemly, even if it might be an accurate reflection of the character of the viscount.

“My uncle felt with the riding to and fro, not to mention that Pemberley is closer to any engagements, that it would be a sound idea.”

Fitzwilliam just raised his eyebrow. “After what I told you?”

“I also thought that some exposure to my household would disabuse him of any false notions he might have. “ Darcy looked intently at the papers on his desk, hoping that his cousin would see it as the dismissal it was intended to be.

No such luck.

“And have you spoken to Kitty?”

“About?” Darcy still firmly kept his eyes on the papers involving rent. He didn’t like being told what to do, nor being interrogated over his actions. It presumed some doubt over his conduct. Fitzwilliam had already done that once this week and Darcy had corrected himself.

“Do not be ridiculous,” said the Colonel.

Darcy sighed before looking up, “She is ill. I will broach the subject with her when she is recovered.”

“I believe she is recovered, at least certainly able to be spoken to!”

“I shall not disturb her.”

Fitzwilliam looked at him; he appeared to be about to object so Darcy put up a hand.

“Fine.” His cousin threw one of his legs over the side of the chair he was lounging in. Another thing Darcy wished he wouldn’t do. It looked entirely like he was about to begin throwing chicken bones over his shoulders or something, or insist upon his droit seigneur. “Have you accepted Mrs Middleton’s invitation?”

“Provisionally yes.”

“Hmm?”

(Of course if Catherine is not well enough to attend, I cannot attend without her. You and the others may, of course, attend. I am sure Miss Bingley would wish to attend.”

“You will not go if Kitty cannot?”

(Of course not. You were the one commenting on my behaviour. I think it would look singularly odd if I attended an evening party when my wife was ill.”

A Middling Party
“I would have thought that would be reason enough to send you up to bully her into hystericis.”

Darcy frowned. He was hardly a bully.

Fitzwilliam clearly saw his frown, “After all, if she has a relapse you will be saved from having to spend an evening next to Mrs Middleton, or praising her daughter, or fending off the devotions of the son!”

Darcy smiled.

Darcy stood impatiently waiting in the entrance hall. They would be late for Mrs Middleton. Not that he minded any kind of reduced exposure to Mrs Middleton. He tried to tell himself that she was an excellent woman who knew his parents well, but he could not convince himself.

At least she could hardly expect him to flirt with Miss Middleton now that he was married. It was one saving grace. Although Fitzwilliam was correct that this would not stop Gervase Middleton asking him impertinent questions. When he had asked Darcy which opera singer was his, after returning from his first trip to London, Darcy had not known where to look. He wondered if Mrs Middleton knew what her son was doing with his allowance!

Catherine had defied the doctor’s orders and only spent two days in bed; he had made no comment. She surely should know when she felt well enough to leave her chambers. Though he had wondered what her reaction would be if he begged her not to rise from her sick bed to save him from this engagement.

“Where are they?” said Mr Hurst in an annoyed tone. Darcy suspected he would also not complain if there was some sudden crisis that prevented them from attending, but now that it seemed they must he also saw no reason for delay.

“The young ladies are dressing,” said Bingley rather unnecessarily.

“Indeed,” said Snitterton.

“Perhaps I should go and bestir them?” asked Sir John.

Darcy looked sideways at the Scotsman. He could not make Sir John out. He was an even tempered, open sort of man. As Fitzwilliam said, it made little sense for him to be close friends with Snitterton. Not that Snitterton was reserved or shy, just that whereas Snitterton tended to focus on the ills of the world, Sir John clearly preferred to see the positives. He was not a rake, but he was a charmer.

Darcy wondered if he should be worried about Georgiana being in close contact with him, considering she was not out and what had occurred with Wickham. For Sir John had struck up a particularly friendship with Georgiana and Catherine, while he was only civil to Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. This was also a point in his favour, but there was something…not that Darcy could put his finger on it.

“No, I shall go and see what is keeping them,” said Darcy.

Darcy took the stairs two at a time, and was surprised to see Catherine pacing in the corridor of the East Wing.

He supposed he should say something about her attire. He could hardly be expected to have said anything at his wedding; it was all he could do to stomach the occasion, and similarly he was too
concerned to notice at his Aunt’s dinner.

He knew she had shopped for dresses in London, he had received the bill. He had been surprised, for while Georgiana was hardly the type to spend exorbitantly, he had assumed that Georgiana’s bills for such items were typical for a young lady that was not out, and thus Catherine would cost him a great deal more. He had, on the suggestion of his attorney, put off giving her her own pin money until the second quarter. Mr Gardiner had agreed as his niece had never had her own income.

He wondered what she would do with it all, if she did not spent it on clothes, which she didn’t appear to be able to do, if a spree in London could cost so little. Perhaps she was overwhelmed.

Yet, as far as Darcy could tell, and he did not follow the fashions of the ladies (hardly seeing the difference between a Hungarian Mantle, and the one above his fireplace), she did not look wildly different from any other young lady of fashion.

He coughed to get her attention, and she stopped short, almost stepping on her train.

“Oh, you startled me.”

“We are waiting for you in the hall.”

“Oh.” Catherine looked surprised but walked towards the stairs, where she had placed her reticle and shawl. “Is there another set of stairs from Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst’s rooms?”

“No,” said Darcy, confused.

“Then how did they get past me to be downstairs?”

“I meant we were waiting for all the ladies.”

“Well I was waiting for them! Miss Bingley said she would be five minutes, so that I might as well wait! I think it has been closer to half an hour. What she can be doing I do not know.”

“We might as well wait downstairs, they must be aware we are waiting on them.”

Catherine nodded and began her descent. Darcy stopped her, before holding his arm out to her.

She looked puzzled but took it.

*Correcting his behaviour indeed,* thought Darcy. That and with that train he did not relish the thought of her falling down the stairs.

Mrs Middleton had gathered as many people as she could find in her now rather confined rooms. In normal circumstances they would be considered spacious.

The Darcys had never mixed a great deal, in his father and mother’s lifetime, with the villagers from Lambton or the other nearby villages. A complicated stratification of society occurred just as much in this part of Derbyshire, as it did in London. It still existed to this day.

However, the younger Middletons, and the younger generation of surrounding families, had grown up with the children of the lower gentry in the nearby villages and thus at their parties such mingling was now likely to occur.

Snitterton appeared to find it slightly distasteful.
“Why, pray, do they think it wise to invite so many people, and of such a nature?”

“A squeeze is a success,” said Darcy in response. He was inured to it, he could only assume his cousin, a far brighter matrimonial prize must be even more aware and used to such situations. It seemed pointless to complain about something that just was.

“I do hope you will hold steady against your wife’s future plans to hold such events in London.”

Darcy turned his eye on his cousin. He had not spoken to him about his behaviour. This was primarily because he had only heard accusations passed to Fitzwilliam from Sir John. Sir John may have been mistaken, Fitzwilliam may have misunderstood. No, to accuse his cousin of such actions would be wrong, unless he had proof. Although he admitted that it would be like his cousin to harbour such thoughts privately, but to express them out loud and purposely to the object of your disdain? It was unfathomable.

Unless the object was capable of defence.

“Darcy?”

Snitterton looked at him, clearly expecting an answer.

“I do not believe Catherine has many acquaintance in London – “ Darcy did not mention the gaggle of relations in Cheapside, they could not be invited to anything a Darcy held – “I rather doubt it would be a squeeze.”

“I fear, she would know enough people, or rather will know enough,” said Snitterton gesturing to where Catherine was playing some card game, with young Middleton clearly giving her advice on which cards to play. Snitterton, was suddenly signalled by one of the elderly matrons on the other side of the room; Mrs Rogers was more than likely wanting to discuss some perceived incroachment of the Matlock estate upon her own. It meant Snitterton would be caught up with prize roses for the next twenty minutes at least.

Darcy was relieved; it allowed him to think, and a reprieve, unless someone came to claim him, from making light conversation with those in the room.

Mrs Middleton had greeted them warmly, and Darcy had felt some slight alarm when she split the group and introduced them to the other guests. But it had been for naught, Miss Middleton was brought nowhere near him.

This had not prevented the fear of being ambushed by Gervase Middleton, but clearly he found Catherine more interesting than her husband. Darcy remembered being Gervase Middleton’s age. At that point, young matrons were attractive, because it was not possible to find yourself suddenly engaged if the young lady in question was already married.

Not that Darcy had practiced any flirtations with young matrons; that had been his contemporaries – Fitzwilliam being one of the prime offenders.

He sipped from his glass and watched the card game.

What Snitterton had said was true; he would no doubt see half of these people in his house in London. He had not an open temper that attracted people. He had also never had occasion to give a party – bachelors did not give parties, they attended them. He could have found a hostess such as his aunt Matlock, but Darcy found such events tedious in other people’s houses; he could not conceive of enjoying such an event in his own home.
He enjoyed the society of those he knew best, and those were a select few. He did not understand how one could appear to their best in such a situation. You were constantly being moved to different people, and then there were dances and card games and musical interludes distracting everyone and making intelligent conversation completely impossible.

He remembered attempting to converse with Elizabeth Bennet at Netherfield Ball, a prime example of a failed conversation. The dance had separated them so much that she was unable to grasp his warning about Wickham, or his attempt at illuminating his own character.

But he should not be thinking of such things.

Catherine appeared to have won a hand, and was looking delighted. Gervase Middleton whispered something at her, which appeared to shock her. She looked intensely uncomfortable, and as Darcy was about to put down his glass and rescue her, Sir John McDonald intervened.

Darcy saw Sir John deftly extract Catherine from the game, clearly giving no offence to the table, or to Catherine, but somehow still appearing to impress the gravity of the situation to Mr Gervase who deflated and looked rather embarrassed.

Darcy was glad, he was almost sure he would have made a scene. He did not have the skill of being dexterously and disarmingly charming. He was certainly capable of rescuing ladies and giving damning set downs but not in a way that did not direct some ire his way, even if he would have been in the right.

However the secondary emotion that flooded him was harder to define. Snitterton had commented on his wife’s seemingly easy manner in making friends. From what he could remember she, and her younger sister, had seemed to have innumerable friends; any discomfort pertaining to her marriage seemed to be slowly melting and that same character re-emerging.

She was smiling at Sir John, who had led her over to a couch and was now gesticulating wildly with his hands, clearly entertaining her with some wild tale.

Darcy’s attention was claimed by one of the local squires, but Darcy chose to look one last time, searchingly at his wife and Sir John. He had a feeling, one that he could not pinpoint, but he was hoping that Sir John was not going to be a problem, or maybe he meant he hoped his wife would not be one.

’’I cannot conceive of why Mrs Middleton insisted on inviting the Broadtons – did you say that was what they were called, Charles? – one would not meet them in town.’’

Miss Bingley was holding forth on her ideas about the company of that evening. Darcy rather wished he was in the other carriage, but if he had not taken this spot, Sir John would have, and Darcy felt some prompting to prevent that from happening.

Bingley frowned – ‘’I thought them pleasant people. Some of the young ladies were charming.’’

Darcy could tell that while the first statement was sincere, the second was only added because Bingley felt it was something he should say. Bingley was still keenly feeling the loss of Jane Bennet, and it pained Darcy to see Bingley in this fashion, with a constant reminder in his face; perhaps he should not have insisted that Bingley keep his engagement with them at Pemberley. It would have been kinder on him not to have done, but Darcy had wanted to keep an eye upon him, and had little motivation to want to remain alone with his small family.

Miss Bingley however did not seem to catch her brother’s insincerity and looked alarmed. ‘’None
of the young ladies there were prettier than Georgiana! She is so refined and elegant. She quite
puts everyone to shame. I do hope you shall be bringing her out soon, Mr Darcy?"

Darcy had not even thought about bringing Georgiana out, he supposed now she should be
launched under the aegis of Catherine which as far as he was concerned would be like shooting
lame ducks – supremely unfair.

Even if Catherine was au fait with the *ton*, Darcy did not know if she would be capable of
presenting Georgiana in the sort of way Miss Darcy of Pemberley needed to be presented.

Darcy wondered why she did not have any response to this query of Miss Bingley’s. Catherine
had barely spoken two words to Miss Bingley since emerging from her sick room. He could not
entirely blame her. He just hoped she would remain civil. He had attempted to explain to her the
importance of civility when he had haltingly explained to her that he understood Miss Bingley’s
behaviour had been the height of rudeness. Fitzwilliam had asked him to repeat the substance of
their conversation, and Darcy had claimed it was private. He did not think it had entirely been a
success, and he could guess what his cousin’s opinion would be.

Looking next to him, it was obvious why Catherine had not responded with some comment about
how she wished Georgiana was out; she was asleep.

He could have allowed the seat to Sir John.
The Middleton’s party had opened the doors for Kitty to pay visits in Lambton.

She could of course have gone before, she knew some acquaintance of her aunt still lived there. She had not been perfectly sure it was Lambton, but she had asked Mrs Reynolds if she had known of any of the ladies that her Aunt had known as a child, and the housekeeper had confirmed they were denizens of Lambton.

Yet, Kitty could not feel comfortable visiting without so much as a by your leave. Aunt Gardiner had not written to her to entreat her to visit her friends, nor had she so much as mentioned them at the wedding. She may have done, conceded Kitty, since she had been distracted that day; equally the subject of Lambton had not come up during any London visit.

Nor did she feel comfortable visiting as Mrs Darcy; Georgiana had not thought her mother visited at the village and Mrs Reynolds had confirmed that. Kitty did not know why Lady Anne had never visited, because it had not been so in Mertyon and Longbourn, the gentry had visited with those in the village, even beyond family lines such as Mrs Bennet and Mrs Phillips. Although there were still boundaries, they were far more flexible than they appeared in Derbyshire. Kitty had not wanted to embarrass anybody, particularly herself!

However, the introductions at the Middleton party, and the subsequent visits of young Mr Middleton and Miss Middleton, as well as others, had meant Kitty felt more secure in paying a visit in the village.

She had not even gone to look at the Lambton shops before now. In fact, apart from several fraught visits to London modistes where, while Kitty knew her fashion, she was terrified of asking for something that would be the equivalent in price to the Regent’s income, she could not think of a time in her life, not since a very small girl, that she had gone so long without at least merely gazing through shop windows.

The visits had been a success. Most likely because Kitty had not had to tell anyone of the visit, apart of course from Mrs Reynolds and those who brought the carriage around!

For the first time since her marriage she did not feel as though she were being examined and found wanting. No one seemed to find it at all strange that she should be Mrs Darcy. They treated her with kindness, but not pity. If anything they merely regarded her as being blessed with fortune.

Miss Almesbury, one of Aunt Gardiner’s childhood friends, had spent most of the visit talking of her dear Madeline’s childhood, and how sad it was that she moved away, but how blessed her union with Mr Gardiner was.

Kitty was only able to comment that her Aunt and Uncle were well, and hoped that Miss Almesbury should not pry much further to reveal that she was not her Aunt’s favourite niece and would hardly be privy to a great deal of information regarding her life once she left Lambton.

Though Kitty realised if she had paid more attention to her Aunt and her sisters who did receive letters, then she would have been in a position to answer more questions and provide reassurances. The visit she had paid Aunt Gardiner in London had not even provided a great deal of information to pass onto Miss Almesbury, that visit had been stilted by Aunt Gardiner’s reluctance to talk about much besides the weather.

The second visit Kitty made to one of the ladies she had met at the Middletons’ party had provided
a slight awkwardness.

Although she was admitted to the parlour, it was quite full; clearly Mrs Calens was holding some sort of informal meeting. Kitty was unsure whether she should apologise for interrupting. But Mrs Calens stood up and warmly welcomed her.

“We were just discussing the charity school.”

Kitty smiled, hoping that her smile wasn’t too vacant, she had no idea Lambton had a charity school!

“We were hoping to open one,” said Miss Almesbury, passing Kitty a cup of tea.

“Oh,” replied Kitty, and let the conversation and organisation wash over her.

Of course she knew that visiting the sick and poor, and helping them in other ways were important tasks for any gentlewoman. Jane and Lizzy had done them at home. Mary was prevented from helping because, as Lizzy exclaimed on more than one occasion, it was bad enough that they were sick they didn’t need to hear about pestilence and sin from Mary!

Mrs Bennet had always claimed nerves and her sickly disposition prevented her from doing any of the visiting. But then Mama had always strongly protested when Lady Lucas, or one of the other ladies, had organised anything charitable without her help.

Kitty had never actually thought about charitable activities actually being designed to help others, rather than provide something for which to fill in the day!

After dinner, the whole Pemberley party sat in one of the grander rooms. Miss Bingley was strolling about the room arm and arm with her sister, conversing with Mrs Hurst, and taking the opportunity to draw anyone else into their conversation as they passed them by.

Georgiana was providing some musical entertainment, but upon Sir John requesting a certain piece Georgiana had exited the room to go in search of the sheet music.

Everyone else were merely sitting (except Mr Hurst, who was in what someone politely might call a semi-recumbent position, and those more frank would say lolling about unconscious) and talking about whether there was to be any cards.

Kitty was staring at a piece of paper.

She had offered her assistance with the charity school, so it had been asked of her if she would write to the rector of Chapel-en-le-Frith, to ask his advice in the establishment of a charity school. They had had some success there with a school.

Now Kitty had to write a letter on behalf of the ladies of Lambton. She had never written a formal letter to anyone in her life! Indeed she had rarely written letters beyond scribbling notes to be delivered by servant to her friend’s in Meryton or the surrounding houses. Who would she need to write a proper letter to?

But she persevered. She had scratched out something approximating what she wanted to say in pencil first, and now she was going to write it up in her best hand.

Of course any time she had written anything up in her best hand, she may not have had a governess but Jane had entreated her to practice her writing by copying passages of novels, she
invariably smudged her writing.

“Studying too much for words of four syllables, Mrs Darcy,” Bingley still, quite rightly Kitty supposed, kept her Christian name for private use.

Kitty turned, surprised by Bingley’s remarks, he was smiling, but not entirely at her.

“Why should I search for words of four syllables when words with less will do just as well?”

Bingley laughed, and seemed to keep his eye on Mr Darcy who stood abruptly from where he was sitting and stalked over to the otherside of the room to stare out of the window.

What had she said? Kitty shook her head; she did not know, and was unlikely to find out the private joke. Except whatever it was, Mr Darcy clearly did not like it. She saw Miss Bingley’s arch look at her and still did not care about her misjudgement. She had answered as she found and she could not do any more or less than that.

“Very well answered,” said the Colonel who turned from his position on the sofa nearest hers.

“Thank you,” replied Kitty before turning back to her letter.

“But who, my dear cousin, are you writing to?” continued the Colonel.

Kitty put down the pen, she was clearly not going to get the letter written at quite this moment, and she was certain she would have to mend the pen first.

“I am writing to Reverend Spinney,” replied Kitty.

“That answers the letter of the question, but not the spirit. Come now, Mrs Darcy! Unless of course you plead privacy!” Sir John was laughing at her, but Kitty did not mind.

“Not at all. I am writing on behalf of the Ladies’ Committee for the Charitable Education of the Poor of Lambton and its Surrounds.”

“You do not need to search for letters of four syllables or more if that is the title of the committee!” said Bingley.

Lord Snitterton coughed, “And what are you hoping to achieve with your letter?”

“Advice,” replied Kitty simply.

“And you think this plan, a good idea, Darcy?”

Mr Darcy turned from the window, Kitty wondered if he would admit to having no knowledge of any of this. She had not thought to tell him; why on earth would he want to know about a Ladies’ Charitable Committee?

“You have something against the education of others, Snitterton?”

Lord Snitterton looked uncomfortable, “No, I merely wonder if it is a good use of Darcy resources.”

“It is a good use of my resources” said Kitty hotly.

Lord Snitterton looked at her as if he could not conceive of her having her own resources.

“Indeed, Mrs Darcy,” said Lord Snitterton, “I beg your pardon. I am just hoping that you have not
engaged to do more than you are able.”

Kitty felt like dashing the ink pot over him; out of the corner of her eye she saw Mr Darcy move away from the window towards the rest of the party.

“I am so glad that I am not a man, Lord Snitterton, for if you had attended you would have heard that I was asking for advice, is that not what someone does when they have little experience? Or is it more sensible to pretend? I had always thought that was the way to squander resources.”

Upon this, she saw Sir John and Colonel Fitzwilliam smirk, Bingley look distinctly uncomfortable at confrontation, and Mr Darcy and the young ladies stop short in their tracks. Kitty did not wait to see Lord Snitterton’s reaction, which appeared delayed by shock; she turned back to her letter.

The pen did need mending and Kitty attacked it viciously with the knife. How dare he imply that about her. Officious, ill-bred – Kitty could not think of a masculine word for harpy.

Over her annoyance she did hear the door opening and Georgiana exclaiming she had found her music, allowing her to continue with the evening’s entertainment.

However it was hardly soothing and she had almost cut herself with the knife several times when a hand closed over hers. She had not heard Mr Darcy come up behind her and take the seat next to the writing desk.

He took the pen and knife out of her hands.

Kitty swore to herself that if he said something, she really would dash the ink over him.

“I cannot, in good faith, have you squandering my pens,” was his remark, and Kitty seethed as she turned to face him, but was confused by the smile that was on his face.

“I cannot mend pens,” was her quiet response.

“I could see that. Should you not have asked for advice?” It was still a lighter tone of voice, one she could never remember hearing before.

Kitty could not help but smile, “But that would be taking my own advice, I cannot do that!”

He did not respond to that.

Kitty looked at her pencil scratchings, and had a slight idea, one that would save her writing what was more than likely going to be a highly embarrassing letter.

“You could write to Reverend Spinney!”

“As a member of a Ladies’ Charitable Committee?” Mr Darcy sounded as though he had never heard of a more ridiculous notion.

“I meant on my behalf.”

“I fear the letter would be rejected.”

“Why?”

“Too many four syllable words.”

Kitty burst into laughter.
Kitty found it odd that despite so many people being in residence, it was possible to be entirely alone. At Longbourn, one had to almost shut oneself in a closet to find some peace.

Not that Kitty had wanted peace, after all peace did not provide excitement and gossip!

But she was happy now to be alone, it meant she was able to concentrate on Jane’s letter.

Jane apologised for having not written before; Kitty could see the reasoning written between her sister’s lines. It had been difficult for Jane to know what to say, and what would be well received by her now married sister.

Kitty could understand that.

Jane and Lizzy were to go to London, they might already be in London judging by the date on the letter. Aunt and Uncle Gardiner had invited them.

From what Mama had written before, and what Jane was writing now, Kitty could clearly picture Mrs Bennet’s wailing about Bingley. Of course it was a delight to be able to brag about her daughter, Mrs Darcy, but if she could also tell everyone in earshot about Mrs Bingley - well then!

Kitty thought she could detect a thawing towards Bingley in Jane’s letter. She had asked about him specifically. Well she had asked also about the Bingley sisters but Kitty would not focus on that, who would want to know about their health!

There was a rather elliptical comment about not judging those by who they associate with, that was mentioned in the middle of discussing how they would be of help to Aunt Gardiner with the children.

Kitty was not fooled.

Jane talked of staying in London some months, which would surely mean they would be there when they returned to London for the season.

Unless they were not returning. Kitty had not thought upon it, well if she had it was probably some vague plea that they not, so that Kitty would not have to sit awkwardly in any more interminable visits.

But even if Bingley and his sisters returned to London, there was no certainty that they would be thrown into the same circles as Jane. In fact Miss Bingley would probably do the utmost to keep them separated.

If she was in London however, how natural would it be for her sisters to visit with her, and how natural for Bingley to be at the townhouse.

Kitty would throw herself into the lions’ den for Jane’s happiness. She must have a happy union, she deserved it. Kitty realised she was being overdramatic, but she knew she could not hide in the countryside forever.

She was accepted by those surrounding Pemberley (well almost all) it gave her some confidence that she could be accepted in London. Or at least some other scandalous union was bound to occur that would distract everyone!

Of course, Kitty’s plans would be disrupted by Darcy. But even he must admit that Bingley was not himself. He must have caught Bingley looking at her on occasion with some modicum of
sadness and regret. It could only be Jane. There was some degree of understanding between her and Darcy, at the present time; she must use it, even if it meant a breaking of it.

He was in his study, and only briefly looked up as she entered.

Kitty had decided some sort of directness was needed.

“Shall we be going to London?”

Darcy looked up and frowned, “What? Now?”

“For the season,” He looked still baffled as to where this question was coming from, that Kitty almost continued – “You remember a lot of dancing…” but she did not think that would put him in charity with the idea.

“Of course, did you think we would not?”

“Georgiana is not coming out – “

“No, but,” he broke off, “Lady Matlock will be of great assistance to you.”

He moved some papers on his desk, so missed Kitty screwing up her nose at the mention of his aunt.

There appeared to be nothing more to say than to ask when exactly they would be leaving – apparently not for several weeks but before Easter, and to apologise for interrupting him.

As she was about to open the door, “Catherine, I do not suppose Miss Bennet will be in town when we arrive, shall she?”

Kitty turned and tried to look nonchalant. “I believe Jane and Lizzy are visiting with my Aunt and Uncle.”

He did not look happy. But that could not be helped, with a lighter heart, and yet another purpose added to her life Kitty left the room.

&&^^&&
Love

Edwards held out two jackets for Darcy’s inspection.

Darcy was not really paying attention, which was surprising, for while he was no arbiter or great follower of fashion he was a firm believer in his own opinion. Thus he was never going to be a man bullied by his valet into choosing this jacket or that jacket.

Yet on this particular morning, he was not thinking about which jacket to wear. He was thinking about the fact he was back in London, facing a season. Again.

He could not even break the monotony by visiting his Aunt in Kent, though perhaps this year’s season would be different because he had a wife. Darcy was not sure, however, he would like the exchange of matchmaking mothers for tittering society ladies.

They had returned to London several days previously after Easter. Catherine had found it difficult to leave her little Charity school organisation. Darcy had strengthened this resolve of his wife’s to remain at Pemberley until her obligations came to an end, as he had no desire to hurry back to the eyes of the ton.

However, because Bingley was becoming restless, he made no objection when the ladies of Lambton convinced Catherine that they wanted, nay needed, her to go to London. It would do no good if Bingley returned to London alone. Not since he discovered that Miss Bennet was in town.

It was Miss Bingley’s fault that her brother had discovered the news. She had made an arch inquiry of Catherine as to whether she would find time for her Cheapside relations upon returning to town.

It was natural for Catherine to respond that since her elder sisters would be staying with her Aunt and Uncle, of course she expected to see a great deal of them.

The look on Caroline Bingley’s face, and then her face again, when she saw her brother’s face, was Miss Bingley’s just deserts for such an impertinent question. Yet he wished that his friend had remained in ignorance, at least while they’d remained at Pemberley.

Darcy had realised it would be useless to attempt to keep the Bennet sisters from Bingley. He had thought for some moments over trying to separate his wife and her sisters, but he had no just cause.

The Gardiners could not move in the same circles as they did, but the elder Bennet sisters had always been propriety itself, and any rejection of Catherine’s family by himself could only be taken by society at large as a repudiation of his wife.

Perhaps if Miss Bennet and Bingley truly loved one another, they should be together? Darcy was not blind; he had seen how Bingley mourned for his lost love, something he had never done in the past. He had previously moved swiftly from one infatuation to the next, hardly looking back.

At first he’d been inclined to suspect it was merely because Catherine was present, reminding him constantly – if not in speech, then in look. But it had continued.

Edwards at this point coughed and proceeded to help Darcy on with his jacket.

“Thank you, Edwards, that will be all.”
Edwards bowed before leaving the room.

Darcy frowned at his reflection, had he picked this coat?

He could not wonder any longer because a knock at the door, followed by a swift opening revealed his sister. In what Darcy could only call a disaster of a hat.

Georgiana laughed and turned about to show off her new accessory, pulling Catherine into the room as she did so.

“What do you think, William?” she said as she twirled some more.

Darcy had realised his wife and sister had gone shopping that morning, in preparation for the season, but he had not thought his wife would buy such a monstrosity. He looked at Catherine, about to tell her that in no way was she to wear such a thing outside the house, when he realised she had interpreted his look and looked indignant.

“It is not my hat!”

Georgiana stopped her twirl. “Oh no, it’s mine, William! I know I am not to come out but I saw it in the shop and fell in love! And before you ask where I can wear it, I thought when Mrs Annesley and I walk in the park! And you did say, William, did you not, that I could spend my pin money where I liked?”

Darcy was dumb-struck. He had never thought of his sister as being one of those frivolous young ladies. Of course she was of an age where fashion and such like was likely to take some hold of the mind, but Darcy had always hoped Georgiana would be the exception. He had expected her, as in the past, to spend her pin-money on books or sheet music.

Perhaps her shyness and reserve, though partly entirely natural, had been merely exacerbated by Wickham and that she was now recovering. Or like him, she found it much easier to perform for those she admired and liked, rather than strangers.

“We came to tell you that we had returned, and that Mrs Gardiner had sent around a note stating her intention to visit this afternoon, so you mustn’t hide in your study!”

Darcy was struck again by the change; his sister of six months ago would not have even mildly teased him, or dreamt of telling him what to do.

Darcy merely nodded and assured her he had no intention of avoiding their guests.

“Good, and perhaps Charles will arrive unannounced during their visit! Kitty tells me that Jane is so handsome that I expect he’ll lose his breath!” With that the ladies made to depart.

“Catherine, if I may have a word?”

Georgiana closed the door behind her.

Catherine seemed to sense why he wished to speak with her. “How, pray, was I supposed to tell her she had chosen the most horrid, hideous, ugly bonnet I had ever seen, without hurting her feelings!”

Darcy opened his mouth to tell her exactly how one did, when he realised he could not. If he, or anyone else, had told Georgiana the bonnet ill became her, it still would have hurt her feelings, because she had chosen the bonnet.
Catherine made a little ‘ha’ sound.

“Very well, but she cannot wear it.”

He expected her to retort that he would have to tell her sister, but Catherine merely replied. “I expect I shall have a terrible accident with it. Although it is a shame, when she has spent so much money on it, but one cannot expose her to laughter.”

“She will have to learn the lesson of making ill-decisions when it comes to spending money freely at some point, it might as well be now,” Darcy adjusted his sleeves, “And I do not expect anyone would laugh at her openly.”

Catherine looked sceptical, “Have you met many young ladies?”

Darcy ignored that remark, “Is it natural to fall in love with a garment?” Darcy had picked up on those words and wondered. He sometimes wished Georgiana had been a brother, at least he could remember what it was like to change from boy to man. He had always hoped to marry before Georgiana made the leap from girl to woman, and he had, but he had assumed his wife would be of an age, and of a certain background to understand Georgiana’s needs. But he had not married such a lady, and he must do as best he could.

“Of course. I fell madly in love with a riding dress today,” Catherine sounded wistful.

Darcy thought that she could not ride and said as much.

“Well, I can sit on a horse, and maybe if he walked very, very slowly I would not fall off, but no, I cannot ride proficiently at all, which is sadly why that lovely gown is not being made up for me.”

Darcy turned to look at her.

“Well I thought you would not approve of such a purchase.”

“Your money is your own to spend as you like.”

Catherine smiled, “I realise it is, but it would not have stopped you saying something. You do not mind hurting my feelings.”

“I would hope you would not be so swayed by any one person’s comments.” He was pleased to note that he did have some power over her behaviour but he still felt, as he had at Netherfield, that it was not a positive trait to be always thinking and doing as other people suggested.

“No. But I have already learnt my lessons about buying silly items, and when one has Lydia, one is only left with silly items.”

Darcy found this an obscure comment. He could easily have let it pass, but he felt like inquiring as to the meaning.

“Only that anything I purchased that was any good would always become Lydia’s. I suspect that does not happen between brother and sister.”

“No, but it does between cousins.” Darcy moved to his dresser. He would have elaborated, but while he knew many things had been swapped between himself and Fitzwilliam, the only thing that came to mind was not to be spoke of in front of a lady, particularly a wife, no matter how she was come by. “I did ask you to stay for another reason.”

“Yes?”
Darcy took a deep breath and turned to lean on the dresser, in order to watch Catherine carefully.

“I wished to ask you a question.”

Catherine’s forehead furrowed, “Will I know the answer?”

“I expect more so than I. Miss Bennet, “ Darcy paused, “do you think she is in love with Bingley?”

“Jane?” Catherine looked down for a second before nervously turning to wander slightly around the chamber. “I think she does, yes.”

“You think?”

“I cannot be certain. We were not close. I liked to think many people in love that in truth might have only had a slight feeling of affection. Jane does not show her feelings well, but I think she did with Charles. I think she did love him. But – “

“But?” prompted Darcy, trying to keep an eye on his wandering wife.

“But, “ she stopped walking and looked up at him, “if she did love him then why – why be so cruel to him when, even if something was the truth, it was not his fault? I cannot understand why someone would believe something so dreadful of the person they love. But perhaps that is love? Perhaps she was so crushed because he had failed to be the man she thought he was. So maybe she does love him and was only hurt because the man she loved was not the man she thought she should love. Or maybe Lizzy – who I am sure you know is of strong opinions – affected her? But where Jane thinks she is right, she is firm. Maybe she thought it would hurt me? I do not know.” Catherine stopped to laugh somewhat nervously. “I expect you wanted a yes or a no?”

“If the answer cannot be a yes, or a no, then no, I do not want any answer to be fit into such confined meaning.”

Darcy heard his guests arrive, and be taken up to the parlour. He realised they did not know how close his study was to the entrance, or how keenly his ears picked up their conversation through the open door as they passed by.

“I cannot believe – “ came a voice that Darcy could place as Elizabeth’s, but the rest of her statement was lost to him, but it sounded as though it was filled with admiration.

“Did you not come here before, Aunt?” That was Miss Bennet

“Oh no, Kitty visited me. I did not think – “ Mrs Gardiner sounded younger than Darcy had expected. Not that Mr Gardiner was in any way a decrepit elderly man, just that he had expected his wife to be of a certain age.

“Of course he would not,” that was Miss Elizabeth’s voice again. The tone was rather scathing. Darcy had a feeling that he was the ‘he’ she was referring to.

“Lizzy,” hissed Miss Bennet, and then they were gone.

Darcy had not expected his first meeting with Miss Elizabeth to occur where she did not even realise he was attending to her words. Usually it had been Darcy speaking and her overhearing.

He could only assume it was directed as his not visiting the Gardiners before, apart from when he
and Mr Gardiner had sorted out the marriage settlements. Now that Darcy was more aware of his behaviour and the construction placed upon his behaviour, he wished he had made at least one social call, particularly one with Catherine.

But there was nothing to be done now. He just hoped he was strong enough to bear their disapproval, and to bear being in the same room as disappointed hopes. To bear being in the room with a woman he had admired, had done more than admire, thinking the worst of him.

He waited what he hoped was an appropriate time for sisters and aunt to be reunited, and for Georgiana to be introduced to them, before joining the ladies.

He realised his bow was stiff, but he has surprised even himself when he had realised his own level of apprehension. If it was this now, Darcy could not begin to imagine how he would feel as the season proper started, and they were likely to be invited hither and thither, firstly because of the Darcy name and secondly, as some sort of new wonder until the next scandalous attachment became known.

Catherine acquitted the introductions and Darcy found himself seated, listening to what could only be described as a stilted conversation.

Georgiana looked slight withdrawn, although with encouragement she spoke more, but in essence the conversation seemed to be entered into with enthusiasm only by Catherine and Mrs Annesley.

Mrs Annesley usually kept herself distant at such times, and her suddenly finding her voice gave Darcy an indication to how the conversation had been before he entered the room. This made Darcy feel marginally better because it could not have been his entrance and presence that had caused the tension in the air.

Mrs Gardiner seemed to be choosing her words very carefully; Miss Bennet added a few quiet words here and their and Miss Elizabeth was uncharacteristically silent. He could see her observing the conversation minutely.

“Perhaps a walk in the square would be nice?” Mrs Annesley finally suggested.

“Oh no I am afraid we should be going – “ said Mrs Gardiner.

“So soon?” asked Catherine.

“Yes, my dear, visits must be strictly timed.”

“So that no party may overstay their welcome!” said Miss Elizabeth archly. Darcy could only wonder if that comment was directed at him, or directed at her sister. If at him it had gone wide of the mark because Catherine looked as if she had taken on all its meaning for herself.

The party stood and said their goodbyes, with Catherine entreating them to call again very soon.

“Write to us, my dear,” said Mrs Gardiner.

&&^^&&

Darcy stood awkwardly in the middle of the room after he had walked to the windows to see the Bennets and their aunt leave the house.

“Come Georgiana, I thought you wished to show me the bonnet you purchased this morning?”

Mrs Annesley had taken the morning to visit a sick aunt, otherwise Darcy was sure she would
have somehow convinced Georgiana not to buy the bonnet; that was, after all, why he was paying her.

Their exit however left him and a silent Catherine alone.

He was not sure what to say.

Catherine appeared to be solving the matter by exiting the room, but even a cursory look at her face showed how upset she was.

“Catherine…”

She stopped, and said something, but so quietly that he could only hear the word sorry.

Darcy did not know what she had to be sorry about, she had behaved well and attempted admirably in a difficult situation. He was only sorry that her aunt and sisters had not known how to behave. That Miss Elizabeth had taken the opportunity to make an arch comment directed, he was sure now, at himself. A comment he would have been intrigued him some months ago, and now was just painful.

Though he could not entirely blame them, for the situation was awkward. They were prevented from speaking openly by the presence of Georgiana and Mrs Annesley. But Georgiana would have objected to not being present, and Darcy had assumed that Catherine and her aunt had spoken properly when she had visited before.

How he could expect her to speak properly, when he would not allow her to tell the true story he did not know. But he could not allow the true story to be known.

Catherine had moved past the stage of merely looking upset, and was openly crying. Perhaps that is why she had been apologising.

Darcy had never been good with the tears of young ladies. He had been exposed to purposeful tears by young ladies who thought the way to his heart was showing their vulnerability. Those tears were always artfully timed, and never mired the face of the crier.

Those tears one ignored.

Genuine tears, however, could not but move even the most hardened heart.

He didn't know what to say to comfort her. There was nothing. The only thing he could do was what he'd done when Georgiana realised Wickham's true nature and intentions. He enfolded Catherine in a tight embrace and let her ruin his coat.

&&^^&&
“It is very beautiful,” said Jane, looking at the necklace, “and far too – you should not have bought this for me!”

“Don’t be silly! Who else am I to buy presents for, but my sisters?” replied Kitty.

Despite their first awkward meeting, Kitty, buoyed by the fact that people like Sir John had returned to town and treated her quite normally, had made the effort to visit her sisters at her aunt’s.

Without the presence of Georgiana or Darcy, it had been less stilted, and it seemed to Kitty that what had happened the previous week had simply been the result of a natural awkwardness attendant on a first meeting after a major change. But it became clear that the subject of Darcy and her marriage would not be touched.

After that first meeting she had fled to her room, after indulging in the tears that left her embarrassed afterwards. There she had time to think.

Their behaviour had been regrettable and their actions poorly done, but when had she and Jane ever been close? When had she and Lizzy ever been close? Kitty’s own behaviour whenever either sister had attempted to correct her behaviour must have made them both despair, and made them have to steel themselves to talk to her on such subjects. Not, of course, that she was as bad as Lydia.

Neither was she close to Aunt Gardiner; fashion was a common topic, she would have never considered discussing deeper matters such as gentlemen with her sisters or her aunt. Or they would have been convinced that Kitty did not have any thoughts of a more serious nature, even on the subject of men.

To be truthful, Kitty had not. Not then.

Nor would they be convinced she would notice any sly comments; Kitty had never paid attention much before to Lizzy’s arch witticisms. Lizzy had a way with words and could say so much without saying anything that could give offence, unless one realised the true meaning of the words. Thinking about it, Lizzy would not have made such a comment about overstaying her welcome to her. It had been directed at Darcy. She had presumed, and more than likely presumed rightly, that Darcy would not wish to have the wife of a tradesman and her nieces in their house a moment longer than necessary.

Yet, in this circumstance, Kitty understood – Lady Matlock had made her understand during those first few bridal visits – that appearances were paramount. Kitty’s relations must visit her, or their marriage would appear even stranger than it already was. The regard of society outweighed the inconvenience of ‘such relations.’

Based on these reflections, Kitty determined to make an effort with her sisters, and gauge the response.

It had been all been moderately successful, organised around the other responsibilities of the season (strange that a ball should now be a responsibility in her eyes) and now she had invited Jane, ostensibly so that she could present her with the necklace but really so that she could finally arrange Bingley to also be present.
“But Kitty, it is your birthday soon, I should buy you a present,” said Jane softly.

Kitty wondered if Jane thought she was going to disclaim, but Kitty loved presents much more than she liked buying things for other people.

“Something lovely, I hope.”

Jane smiled,” I – I do not know what you would like, but I shall try.” Jane seemed on the verge of wanting to say something more. “I do not know how to say this – we have been quite,” Jane paused and drew a deep breath,” the situation of your marriage – “

Kitty turned away from Jane, curling her fingers around her bed post. She had wondered, and hoped, that sometime someone would ask her. To actually wish to ensure she was – Kitty did not know what: happy? Safe?

It had taken some weeks, but now Kitty did not know what to say. She knew Darcy’s feelings on the subject, but he did not know Jane or Lizzy. They could be trusted. Something inside her also twinged at the thought that the blame was being misplaced.

It had taken her some time, waking up in the middle of the night gasping, to have completely remembered what had occurred down by the creek that fatal morning. Wickham had said something to Darcy about spoiling his fun in Ramsgate. It had not made any sense to Kitty at the time, until Georgiana had made some comment about a summer in Ramsgate. The moment she had made the comment she had gone pale and suddenly withdrawn into herself. Kitty had assumed she had been taken ill and insisted Georgiana take to her bed.

Later, it had been as if a piece of a jigsaw had fallen into place, and a pretty mountain scene suddenly come to life when before all you could see were edges and glimpses. Kitty had rarely been good at such puzzles, and this time she wished she had remained ignorant.

It explained to her precisely why her husband did not want to expose Wickham in any way; public exposure of Wickham would very likely involve exposure of Georgiana.

Kitty also found it explained why he had not fought more against the idea of marrying her. He felt guilty. He who knew what Wickham was and had always known, if Mrs Reynolds’ chatter was to go by. Mrs Reynolds had not known she was divulging any great secret as she pointed out the miniature portraits to Kitty, nor did she realise she was causing any great pain to Kitty when she waxed lyrical over Wickham’s faults.

But it would not be public exposure if she told her sisters.

She knew that he would not see it that way, so she had resolved to wait until an opening, which was now.

“Jane,” Kitty began.

“I should not have said anything, forgive me,” Jane looked upset.

The moment was slipping away from her, and Kitty still did not know what to say.

Jane made some silly remark about Kitty’s gown and put out a hand to admire the material. Kitty caught the hand.

“Jane, there is something you should know,” Kitty was not sure what propelled her, but something prompted her to sit at her sister’s feet. Something she had done as a child, looking up at her beautiful big sister and asking for a story. Or telling Jane about the dress of Mama’s she’d ruined
and would Jane break it to Mrs Bennet.

A worried crease marred Jane’s forehead. Jane always looked so serene, but now that had fallen away from her.

“It was Wickham, not Darcy.”

It took Jane several moments to understand what Kitty meant, Kitty could see it on her face.

“But Mrs Long…”

Kitty squeezed Jane’s hand and smiled a watery smile, but a smile nonetheless. “When has Mrs Long ever been right?”

Jane put a hand over her mouth, “Poor Mr Darcy. So honourable…”

Kitty had not seen it as honour. His behaviour after the wedding had not been honourable. But she could sense he was trying. Not as hard as she had, but he was. Did that make it honourable? She did not know.

Jane continued on in this way, including Kitty in her regrets. But when she made to find excuses for Wickham, Kitty pulled back.

“No. There is no excuse, Jane. None. He had done this before.”

Jane looked shocked, as though she couldn’t accept such villainy, and Kitty supposed she couldn’t. Kitty wouldn’t have until she had been confronted by it.

“You see Jane, your Mr Bingley is blameless. Even if Darcy had…Bingley would have still been blameless. He loves you.”

Jane began to cry. Not the blotchy tears that Kitty always managed, but ones that rolled down her cheeks and somehow made her more beautiful.

&&^^&&

Kitty breathed a sigh of relief.

She had told Jane. Jane would confide in Lizzy because Kitty had not asked her not to.

Kitty didn’t know why it was important they know, important to know she wasn’t married to a man who would –

Kitty shook her head. He would not care what they thought.

The first moment she’d seen him, when as part of the stationary couple she could watch the entrance of Bingley’s party to their little assembly. Bingley had looked happy, Mr Hurst bored, the ladies in their finery – Kitty had drooled over their dresses so much so she had not seen their faces, but upon improving her acquaintance she was sure they would have looked smug – but Darcy had seemed completely uncaring. As if expressing to all, his inward thought – why was he bothering attending such an event?

There were few people that Darcy appeared to care about enough for their opinions to warrant any notice. She was not one of them and nor were her family. Yet, now that she had friends in London, those who did not presume to judge her on her marriage or on her family connections, Kitty felt even more keenly the injustice of her situation and a desire to right it.
There was a knock at the door; Kitty looked up from the vanity as Sally moved to admit whoever was on the other side.

They were going to the Opera tonight. Colonel Fitzwilliam had returned from Lady Catherine de Bough’s estate in Kent, and would be accompanying their party.

It seemed ridiculous that she would be the chaperone for her sisters! Or that she would choose the Opera as an outing for her birthday. But it was suggested and Kitty hardly liked to disagree, particularly when it would provide some privacy for both Jane and Bingley.

Jane and Bingley’s quiet conversations since Kitty’s revelation had given her hope that she might succeed where her mother had not. She did not want to interfere any more than she had, and she knew that Darcy suspected she had told her sisters the truth.

He had not said anything to her, but he could not have been blind to the changed demeanour of both sisters on their various visits and the change in the Gardiners that very night when they had stayed to dinner before leaving Jane and Lizzy to their sister’s care.

The door revealed Darcy.

Kitty hoped that he was not going to choose this moment to rebuke her.

As Sally had tactfully gone to attend to Kitty’s opera cloak, Darcy’s first words made her heart sink.

“I can only presume you spoke to one of your sisters about Wickham.”

Kitty made no response, instead looking at the strand of pearls Georgiana had presented her with that morning. She had been so pleased when Kitty had looked delighted, and delighted she was. Her own jewellery!

Of course she had the Darcy jewels, which Mrs Wilson had given the keys to Sally for, and Sally had pulled them all out and gasped. Kitty had been equally stunned. But they were not hers to call her own.

“I cannot pretend to be pleased, I had thought that you would – “

Kitty could not help but cut him off, “I never promised I would not say anything. You assumed my silence was agreement.”

Darcy appeared not to know what to say to that.

“Everyone assumes my silence is agreement, so I don’t hold it against you.” It was true, when, except for rare occasions, she had stopped running to Mama and crying over every incursion of Lydia’s on her wardrobe it was presumed that Kitty no longer minded and had decided that sisterly affection was more important that having ownership of anything.

Kitty just did not see the point of arguing.

“You knew my feelings on the matter.”

And they were stupid male feelings, thought Kitty, like the eldest Lucas boy when he had demanded that none of the young ladies of the village tell the beautiful newcomer of any childish exploits.
“Why, pray tell, did you think that your decision was the correct one?”

He was sounding annoyed at her lack of response. She had always wondered why Mama liked the sound of her own voice during arguments and never seemed to take any heed of anyone’s interjections that was not the purpose of her wailing, so it was much better just to listen. This situation seemed similar.

“I would like for you to answer me.”

Kitty felt intimidated, but if she did not say something it would always be like this. It would be Lydia all over again.

“I am surprised you did not decide to talk to me about this earlier; it must have been clear something had been said to Jane or Lizzy, much before this.”

“It was the fact your Aunt and Uncle have radically changed their behaviour.”

“You think an aunt and uncle in Cheapside are incapable of remaining silent about such a thing?”

Kitty did not need to add that, according to Colonel Fitzwilliam, not to mention her letter sent via Mr Collins, Lady Catherine was spending most of her time gossiping in Kent and writing said gossip to all her friends. Kitty was not meant to know, but it was not her fault if they spoke so loud. She was inclined to agree with the Colonel that the more poisonous tales that Lady Catherine spread the less they were to be believed. Since nobody could be convinced Lady Catherine was the fount of all knowledge when she had not witnessed the courtship, the marriage or even after the marriage.

“I will not make comment on your aunt and uncle’s character. I will not have you exposing this family to scandal.”

“I thought I already had.”

“More scandal.”

That hurt. It had not been her fault. Well it was, but she was not entirely responsible, others were far more culpable than herself. She could not believe she had thought he was trying. It was clearly only acceptable if she did nothing that he did not like.

“I don’t think my aunt and uncle knowing that you do not seduce helpless young women is likely to ruin your reputation.”

Anything Darcy could possibly say would only upset her more, so she spoke quickly to prevent his speaking.

“I think it says something of your character that you choose to speak to me now. Before we are to depart for the Opera. On my birthday. You may think this is convenient for you but it is inconvenient for me and I would ask you to leave.”

Kitty stood up from her place at the dresser for this. She knew that she had no real power to eject him from her bedchamber, she could only rely on his sense of honour.

He looked as if she had somehow wired his jaw shut, so clenched was it.

“Sir?” she asked as imperiously as possible.

That was all it took, he made no bow and shut the door rather firmly on his way out. She had
thought the almost slamming of the door was a childish gesture, something she would have most certainly have done.

Sally returned with her opera cloak, eyes downcast, making Kitty wonder if Darcy was aware of the household being aware of the awkwardness of their situation and thus the hawk eyed look out for any matrimonial discord. After all, he should have known Sally would still be able to hear any comment he might make.

Again he did not care; perhaps he thought servants had no opinions to give, or that his household would, by virtue of being his, agree with him? Kitty did not know that he was right, but she also did not know he was wrong.

Kitty turned to look in the mirror and wondered what she had done.
The journey to the Opera was intolerable. It was the last place Darcy had wanted to be before his conversation with his wife. Now, Darcy wanted nothing more than to be out of everyone’s company.

How dare she disobey him, and then feign indifference to the whole thing? As if the offence had been that he had asked her to pass him the butter and she had not.

Darcy had, and he supposed this was common to most people, never wanted to be an object of scorn and derision. But he had exposed himself to such treatment in order to prevent worse treatment of others and in order not to have people consider him worse than a fool. His marriage was a mere blip in his reputation and standing, a much less serious one than what would occur if his sister’s reputation was sullied in any way or if it was revealed he had, essentially, harboured and helped a known scoundrel.

This was why he had forbidden both Catherine and Mr Bennet to speak of the circumstances of their engagement to anyone. It had become clear Mrs Long thought of the situation as his developing a zealous passion, because that was a story far easier to embroider and be swallowed by the population at large instead of his being a gothic villain.

Though if the offence had been lesser, Darcy had no doubt it would have been easier to cast him in the light of wrong-doer; the denizens of Meryton and its surrounds held him in no particular affection. Darcy had not cared and still did not, because the feeling, apart from a few notable exceptions, was mutual.

If Darcy was honest with himself, he also had no desire for Elizabeth Bennet to realise his foolishness. He wondered if he was punishing her for believing in Wickham’s lies. It was entirely childish. He had seen Fitzwilliam indulge in similar behaviour as a child when he was blamed for a window Snitterton had broken. Fitzwilliam from then on let himself be blamed for all the accidents that followed the Viscount, telling Darcy it would show them when it was revealed that they had wronged him so.

Except it was only a bitter taste that was revealed when he had seen Miss Elizabeth look at him with pity. Not only her, but all her relations; that they should pity him, it was intolerable.

He only listened with half an ear to the conversation in the carriage; it was nonsense led by his wife, who seemed unconcerned at the fact she had not an hour before ejected her husband from her room.

This rankled with Darcy. It implied that she considered him in the wrong and that her behaviour was unimpeachable and thus needed no examining of her own conscience. The idea she might merely be putting up a front so as to not excite comment crossed his mind briefly but he dismissed it. She was only a girl, and one that did not have those meditative deeper feelings; when she felt something she expressed it.

Before they had reached the Opera, Darcy had determined that he would have to act. He had accepted that this was to be his lot in life, a painful realisation, but he could not have his will flouted. Particularly when that will was designed to protect his family and its reputation.

This determination meant he could escort the ladies to the Darcys’ box with equanimity.
It became obvious that Bingley was to have no eyes nor ears for anyone but Miss Bennet. This meant that Colonel Fitzwilliam was left to entertain both Catherine and Miss Elizabeth.

Darcy had never been one for entertaining, even when he felt like making the effort. He watched his cousin. Fitzwilliam was talking animatedly. He had the talent of speaking without saying anything. It was not a talent Darcy wanted to cultivate; on the whole he did not see the point of it, but now watching the conversation flourishing between his wife, her sister and his cousin, he wished that he could speak with ease.

They were discussing fashion and books, which made him think of the Netherfield ball and how incongruous it was to speak of books in a ballroom, and equally so to discuss them at an Opera.

Yet this sort of inconsistency was what society was built upon, and why he felt so out of place. He liked his order and his seriousness. He had never learnt to laugh openly. Many mistook this for a lack of a sense of humour, and perhaps he did lack it comparatively but it was not missing altogether, he did just not see the point in making light of everything.

He wondered how an open and even-tempered man like Bingley would have dealt with Wickham. How he would have dealt with a marriage not of his making and then an ignominious ejection from his wife’s chambers.

Before any of it, and even much after, he would have answered promptly and surely that it was impossible for anyone to have handled it better them himself. He wondered now if this was the height of arrogance – to expect that his way was the only way; the sort of arrogance that Miss Elizabeth Bennet would have fun mocking during her observations of human frailty.

Though Darcy supposed that Miss Elizabeth would object to her views being summarised in such a way; she would not wish to be thought of laughing at human frailty. She preferred to call it absurdity.

What had she said, he could remember her words clearly, and he wondered if this was because of what had happened and whether he would have remembered otherwise.

*Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.*

In other words, the frailty of humanity. Darcy wondered if she had mastered the art of laughing at herself?

He never could. But then he did not profess to be able to do so.

Darcy looked away, suddenly feeling the eyes of his wife on him. She had been watching him apparently openly staring at her sister.

It did not mean what she must think it meant. She was capable of coming to the most probable conclusion, and in any other circumstance, such as Miss Bingley’s teasing at Netherfield, it might have been the right conclusion. But Darcy did not wish to punish himself by letting himself fall more in love with a woman he could never have, not even if an accident were to take his wife from him.

Of course it was *not illegal* as in written into statute books, to marry one’s sister-in-law but it would certainly blot his copy book one too many times for society. And if Darcy was honest with himself, he would feel the same.

The Opera was finally starting which allowed Darcy an object for his scrutiny. The players passed
before his eyes without him paying them more than a jot of attention.

His mind was still wheeling, he was not sure how it had come to this point; after all he had started the night so angry at Catherine and he was not sure when he had started to feel angry with himself.

He had assured himself that he would act to curb dangerous flouting of his will, and now he had thought himself into a realisation that perhaps he was arrogant about his own actions and thoughts. But Darcy had no clue as to how to separate the times he was acting irrationally and when he was not.

The answer was clearly to examine his own behaviour and do so minutely. He still thought that he was correct in choosing to keep his own folly, and that of both Catherine and Georgiana secret. But he had to admit the real damage was the idea that he was not master of every corner of his home. It felt dangerously like submission and a lack of control.

Yet, perhaps Catherine had every right. He had thought that speaking to her of the matter immediately was the right thing to do. After all, disguise of every sort was his abhorrence. The idea that he could go to the Opera and pretend that all was well without speaking his mind was distasteful. Yet what had it brought him? A night of pretending all was well anyway.

But in doing so, he had upset his wife on her birthday. Should it matter if she was in the wrong or not?

Darcy could only conclude his principles were sound, his parents had instilled them in him in a very young age, but his actions were not. His pride and his conceit that his feelings, his needs, should be foremost had meant he had not considered his wife’s feelings or needs.

He could not help but think similarly of Ramsgate. If he had not wished for some respite from his sister – he loved her dearly but the responsibility of an estate and a young sister was something he had never been prepared for at such a young age. He would never shy away from his responsibilities but he had welcomed the idea of her having a holiday from himself. Mrs Younge had suggested it and he had agreed readily, thinking of days available to him to read and visit his club.

And his inability to admit any of this out loud had prevented him from asking any of his numerous relatives if they would bear some of his burden.

Darcy ran his hand through his hair, and then realised where he was and desisted. His eyes flickered around the box and he realised that none of his companions had seen him. His gaze landed on Catherine for a moment longer than the others.

He had thought that things were improving, and he now had to admit to himself that it was solely he who had damaged the relationship, hopefully not beyond repair.

He had never been taught to correct his temper, or to explain himself, but he should try.

“Darcy.”

Darcy turned during the break to Fitzwilliam, who with a nod of his head appeared to wish to speak to him outside of the box. Darcy hoped it was not going to be another comment on his behaviour, he had had enough lectures about his behaviour today.

“I have had a letter from Colonel Forster,” said Fitzwilliam.
Darcy stiffened. Wickham. It could only be about that reprobate.

“They are to go to Brighton. His wife wishes to take Lydia Bennet with them.”

Mr Bennet would not let her go, thought Darcy. He may have been a careless parent prior to his daughter’s marriage but he would be the worst kind of man, for he was not dim-witted, to be careless after it.

“Apparently Mrs Bennet is putting up a great fuss over the matter.”

It suddenly struck Darcy how strange the matter was. Why would Colonel Forster be writing about such intimate family details to Fitzwilliam?

His cousin smiled, “I have encouraged a friendship; after all I am in the regulars, I may be of some use to the Colonel if he ever wants to further his career into the real army. I thought it would be a good way of keeping an eye on Wickham. Although after I suggested a complete audit of his men, and Wickham’s debts and dalliances came to light, I think Forster has had more than an eye on Wickham. He is merely writing of the trials of a militia Colonel. I also expect that he thinks you must complain about your mother-in-law to me.”

Darcy sighed. No matter how crude his mother-in-law was, Darcy would not stoop to the level of complaining about her so publicly.

An internal voice prompted him that he had no reason to complain as while he realised he could not break the connection entirely without arousing talk, he had no intention of soliciting the society of his mother-in-law. Her actions could not harm him if he did not see them, or hear about them.

“Why has Mr Bennet not written to me?” said Darcy. He admitted he had no experience as a son-in-law but was this not part of the requirements, to provide support. Monetary and Moral.

The Colonel merely shrugged. The resumption of the Opera interrupted them, and Darcy was forced to muse on the subject through the next act.

&&^^&&

The act had not afforded him much time to think; he had been distracted by the opera, and in a lesser sense by the opera dancers. Not in the way that he suspected the majority of the males in the audience had been, but simply because he was shocked at their attire.

He wondered if he had never thought on this before because he had never been a husband before.

“Mr Darcy,” he turned to see Elizabeth Bennet smiling at him, in that way she so often did, which belied the fact her sharp mind was probably attributing to him the worst of vices.

“Miss Elizabeth, I hope you are enjoying the Opera.”

“It was good of you to bring us.”

Her emphasis on the word ‘good’ stung him. He had not wanted pity or scorn, and he had not wanted, nor felt he deserved gratitude. If she had known how he had spoken to her sister some hours before, or of his cold treatment – his implacable pride, she would not say he was good.

“It is a pleasure, it will always be a pleasure,” Darcy noticed that Catherine appeared to be raising an eyebrow at him, an attitude he had not known she could adopt. He had forgotten that earlier
she had thought him admiring her sister. Darcy turned away in agitation, knowing that Elizabeth Bennet would think him rude, but not sure what he was supposed to do. This is why he did not like to make light conversation.

“Mrs Darcy,” the salutation made Darcy turn himself back to the party.

Sir John had entered all smiles, accepting Catherine’s hand and bowing over it, kissing it in that graceful way he had that seemed completely unrehearsed. As if he had not practiced that movement many times over with many different ladies.

“I apologise that I have been unable to pay my respects earlier, but I was trapped in my box by an Aunt.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed as he accepted Sir John’s handshake, “The dreaded aunt.”

Catherine at this point introduced everybody, before accepting Sir John’s apology and moving seats so that Sir John could sit next to her.

She should have manoeuvred it so that Sir John would sit next to one of her sisters, thought Darcy. Or one of the sisters should have done so. Perhaps he was tainted by experience from the Bingley sisters. He could only think that Mrs Bennet would certainly have ensured the single gentleman was next to the single lady.

Although since Miss Bennet and Bingley were still huddled in conversation, it was likely she thought one couple was enough, considering she knew his views on the subject. If he had thought much upon it earlier on in the evening, he would have thought that her allowing Bingley and her sister to have uninterrupted conversation was another insult directed at himself.

It would have been a thought beneath him, because it was not as if he had done anything to prevent it.

Bingley was one of his oldest friends and he deserved happiness. It had taken the removal of his own happiness to convince Darcy of this, and even then it had taken some time.

If Jane Bennet made Bingley happy, then Darcy would have to accept it. Though how Bingley could accept a woman who appeared to be even less capable than Darcy than showing her emotions (for himself, he preferred reserve but Bingley was not he) and seemed easily swayed he did not know.

Even if Miss Bennet accepted him for purely monetary reasons (and there was no reason to do so now the Bennets already had their wealthy son-in-law) that was no reason that they might not be happy. Bingley would always have the comfort that he walked into the situation with his eyes and heart open. It would be his choice.

Laughter made him shake out of his reverie. His cousin was now solely in charge of entertaining Miss Elizabeth. But it was not she who was laughing.

Sir John appeared to be telling some tall tale that had Catherine enthralled. His tale was attracting the attention of Miss Bennet, who had a small smile on her face, and even the Colonel seemed to realise his moment of wooing the ladies must be handed over to a far greater expert.

Now that he was paying attention, Darcy remembered this story. He had heard Sir John tell it in Whites one day; he would not have been surprised to hear new details. Stories tended to be embellished, but it was unchanged, and Darcy found that surprisingly honourable.

This thought faltered when glancing away he happened to see his cousin Snitterton in a nearby
box. He had been so ensconced in his own thoughts he had not noticed him before.

Snitterton had a hard look on his face and was staring at Sir John. Then he inclined his head and said something to a neighbour. Darcy kept looking, and Snitterton noticed him looking and nodded his head in greeting before his eyes flicked between Sir John, Catherine, and himself.

The gaze was speculative and Darcy did not like it at all.

&&^^&&
Kitty pulled off her gloves as she entered the house. It was interesting that the townhouse was feeling more and more like her own house. But she didn’t treat it like Longbourn. In Hertfordshire she would have just walked in, not thinking about whether the servants were doing their work, or indeed what sort of work they should be doing, nor whether they were happy and healthy.

Mrs Wilson and Mrs Reynolds had been kind to her and it would have been easy for Kitty to let things go on as they had gone on before. After all, many dead Darcy women could not be wrong. It would also have been easy for both of those worthy women to ignore any of Kitty’s suggestions and requests for change. She was a young lady from the country, and they had been running both of Darcy’s houses for years, even before Lady Anne passed away.

Perhaps it was because Kitty was willing to listen to their opinions before insisting on any change, or because the ideas had merit, or merely because they felt sorry for her – but whatever the reason the house (and Pemberley) was beginning to feel more like home. The house itself that was, not necessarily the occupants.

She’d been out riding that morning. A particularly docile mare, but Kitty had clutched the mane and must have looked terrified anyway. Sir John had offered to teach her to ride, had found a suitable horse, and had been infinitely patient, even though it had been so early. A groomsman had come with her, of course.

She had been glad to escape the house and the atmosphere of the household. If she could only have the house without the husband! She did not think she had exchanged more than two words with Darcy over the last week. This was an exaggeration, but the truth was not far off. Kitty had felt all the fears of the previous months fall back on her shoulders, but this time she did not even have the hope that effort on her part would solve the problems. She had tried that and it had failed.

The only thing that had raised a smile had been Sir John christening her slow-witted mare Daffodil because of that word’s deeply special significance. Some light-hearted teasing had revealed the significance was that they were the flowers Kitty was trampling all over as she tried to control her mare. It was not terribly funny, but it had made her laugh – and continue to trample them.

Sir John was so kind to her that Kitty often thought she did not deserve it; nor did she deserve Georgiana’s friendship; nor the housekeeper’s trust. She had tried with Darcy and those efforts had exhausted her with little response; giving up after one attempt was indicative of a weak character, she knew that, but she had never had much patience, and all of her reserves seemed to have been used up trying to convince others that all was well.

Kitty shook herself out of her reverie and focused on the fact there were letters lying on the tray on the table sitting in the entrance hall. Thinking they were letters for her, Kitty crossed to the table and picked the letters up.

She realised her mistake immediately, these were letters left by her husband to be posted. However as she placed them back on the tray she could not help but notice the second letter, under the first directed to Darcy’s steward, addressed to her father. What was Darcy writing to her father about?

A sudden thought gripped her. She had not been in society long but she had learned some things about morality of the upper ten thousand.

She had not thought that Darcy would agree with that sort of London morality. The sort that had
difficult wives suddenly feel the need to spend long stretches at the country seat, or need to look after their ailing parents permanently, no matter how hale and hearty those parents really were.

Of course she was not stupid; she knew often these arrangements were mutual. She could only base her feelings on her observation and experience of her own relationships and those around her. Sometimes a relationship ended for trivial or serious reasons and while it was easy to sever a friendship with Miss Smith, it was impossible to sever a marriage.

She wondered if that was an option whether Uncle Phillips, or indeed even her own father would have taken it? And they could not avail themselves of the options available to the ton; the options of the very rich.

Kitty mused on this as she went to change her gown.

&&^^&&

Georgiana had managed to get her sheet music in a muddle and they had spread it all over the floor of the drawing room in an attempt to get it in some order. She normally numbered the pages, if not already done so, immediately but Georgiana had apparently been distracted from doing so for this particular set.

“Oh what a mess,” sighed Georgiana.

“I’m afraid I’m no help beyond helping you place it all out; I cannot read music at all well,” said Kitty her place on the floor. “And never mind the mess; we are not expecting anyone for dinner.”

“I still should have done this in my room,” Georgiana fretted.

As if to confirm her sister-in-law’s fears, the door to the drawing room opened to reveal Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“My dear cousins, I was told to inform you that I would be taking pot luck with you tonight, I hope I’m not making your table uneven, Kitty?”

“We are already uneven, in terms of too few men,” replied Kitty.

“It is a pity then that Sir John would not come, then you would have had too many!” replied the Colonel jovially.

“He would not come?” said Georgiana, looking up puzzled from her papers.

Kitty felt that the Colonel was giving her some sort of searching look, before turning back to his cousin.

“My powers of persuasion are clearly rusty.”

“And he was afraid of what our dinner might be,” prompted Kitty.

The conversation turned away from Sir John, as the Colonel, acting quite unlike most gentlemen, happily joined his cousin on the floor to sort out her music. Kitty was glad not to be the focus of discussion as she tried to think why the Colonel would have particularly looked at her before answering. Was it that it would have looked too particular for him to be teaching her to ride in the morning and dining with in the evening?

It seemed too ridiculous to think that could be the case. If it was, Kitty was being too particular with any number of people that she saw in the park in the afternoon and then saw in the evening,
or whom she visited with in the morning and then attended balls with in the evening.

Of course it was different when it was a young man, but Sir John was hardly any young man. He was a family friend.

However Kitty could not get that letter from the hall out of her mind.

It was still in her mind after dinner, and as Georgiana played the restored piece, asking her audience most earnestly to tell her if parts sounded out of order – a monumental task for anyone in the room except possibly Mrs Annesley – Kitty poured a cup of coffee for Darcy.

It was a good cover as any; bringing him a cup of coffee.

He seemed to be intently watching the piano, which Kitty was rather sure was actually his way of being able to think without being interrupted.

However interrupting was what she was good at.

“Coffee?”

Darcy looked up, startled, but accepted the cup. Kitty noted he looked surprised and wondered if he was surprised that she was being nice to him, or surprised that his farouche wife would know how to think of others.

Normally she would have attributed his expression to the latter, but surely as she grew to know the workings of the household and everyone in it, he must know her better? Not that this had been evident last week on her birthday, but surely he must?

Kitty took a seat beside him, “I wish to ask you something?”

Now Darcy looked suspicious, and Kitty wondered if bringing him coffee had been a mistake, perhaps it now looked like a bribe.

“I happened to notice that you wrote to my father today, I hope nothing is serious?”

“I was merely responding to a letter of his regarding some business.”

An answer that was an answer but answered nothing!

“May I read this letter? Papa is such a terrible correspondent, I’m sure that is where I get it from, that if he took the trouble to write a letter of business he would save himself the trouble of a second letter with family news.”

“No, he did not write any family news, since his letter was in response to mine.”

Kitty blinked. Now she was back at wondering what her husband would have to write about to her father. It could not be advice about running an estate or –

“May I know why you wrote?”

“It is nothing for you to know,” was Darcy’s response.

Kitty sensed an annoyed edge to his tone. Clearly he was not used to being open about his actions, or being asked to be so.
Naturally, this left Kitty wanting to know what the mysterious correspondence was about. Kitty had always been curious. Not as much as Lydia or Lizzy, but like her sisters she sensed some prevarication and she must unearth it. She was, however, unlike her elder sister in that boundaries of propriety did not restrain her and unlike her younger sister able to be more subtle in her inquiries. Lizzy would sense this was a matter for gentlemen, not ladies, and not inquire, and Lydia would search Mr Darcy’s desk.

Kitty would do neither.

She was not sure what she would do – for her mother would be unlikely to know and she could hardly request Lydia to search through her father’s desk. And a letter to the ladies of Longbourn would take some time to return, since both the regular correspondents of the household were now in London.

Thoughts of letters reminded her that she had not had a letter from her mother since a brief note for her birthday. It was not to be expected that Lydia would write to her, for Lydia had always thought herself above writing. Not that Kitty would enjoy a letter from either her mother or her sister at the moment. Mrs Bennet’s last letter had bewailed the rumour that the regiment was to leave Meryton for the summer. The summer was still some months away – although creeping closer everyday and for Mrs Bennet time usually contracted when it was going to result in losing something that brought her much valuable gossip.

Lydia was apparently quite devastated. Kitty could not think the rest of the household shared her mother and sister’s thoughts. Her father would no doubt breathe easier knowing that Wickham was no longer in the village.

Wickham.

Kitty turned to the gentleman sitting beside her. “Is it about Wickham?” She spoke softly, not wishing Georgiana to hear her words.

Darcy started. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your letters. To my father.”

Darcy’s silence rather confirmed that Kitty was right.

“You do not need to be silent on my behalf.” There seemed to be nothing more to say on the matter, but Kitty could not help adding, even though it probably would be wiser to remain silent. “You must be glad that the regiment is leaving Meryton, that Wickham cannot cause any more trouble –”

This drew no response so Kitty soldiered on.

“That he cannot say anything about Georgiana.”

This of course brought a reaction, just like Kitty thought it might. She might have supposed he would be angry but he looked more confused than anything. “Did Georgiana confide in you? I hope to God you did not do so in her – “

“No, she had said nothing to me, and I would not spoil her view of the world so by speaking of that to her.”

“You do not mind spoiling the world for your sisters – “

“It was already long before! And Lizzy rather delights in being able to think ill of the world; it
confirms all her worst feelings.”

Darcy gave a rueful smile, which seemed rather out of place to Kitty, “Then who told you? It could not have been Fitzwilliam?”

“I remembered what you said.”

“When?”

“When – “ Kitty could not go on. It was too painful to think any more on the issue and she hoped that he would understand her from this inability. But it was not to be the case.

“I did not catch that?”

Kitty took a deep breath, “At the riverbank.”

“I do not remember saying anything – “

Kitty turned her head away, “I do not expect you to remember.” And she didn’t.

It was unlikely that those moments would be emblazoned on his mind, popping up at the most inconvenient moments after being lost for so long. The moment of horrified realisation for him would be some other time, perhaps that conversation that had happened silently between papa and him as she’d looked on lost. Or maybe some moment earlier in the carriage – when something that made him realise his fate.

“I am sure I did not say my sister’s name.”

“Your sister spoke of her holiday to Ramsgate and Wickham mentioned – “

Kitty wished this conversation was not so broken up, nor that it was taking place with an audience no matter how oblivious they were. But she never thought of consequences.

Darcy appeared to be considering what his response was going to be and it was enough of a pause for Kitty to not wish to hear it.

There was nothing that he could say; there was little anyone could say and Darcy did have an innate ability to say the wrong thing with regards to her. He could just as easily rebuke her for prying into his affairs, and follow it up with a demand for silence, as he could sympathetically turn the conversation to happier thoughts. Kitty was not sure she could bear either; she should not have spoken.

Without thinking of how it might look to others, with a hurried apology she fled the room.

&&^^&&

The morning brought her some comfort, but it did not relieve the nagging doubt that it was now her fault that any steps forward in the creation of some sort of marital felicity had been reversed.

This would not matter if she did not mind having a marriage that primarily existed of her living with many dogs while her husband lost thousands of pounds on women, wine and games. The thought of Darcy surrounded by light-skirts, drinking bad wine and betting on cockroaches, momentarily diverted her.

She did not want that life. Nor did she want her parent’s marriage. But she couldn’t have the alternative. Yet she wasn’t sure she wanted that either.
Meryton saw little of love matches. Well true love matches, or what was considered true – the sort of love found in books and novels. Meryton instead saw those who married for pecuniary reasons, for filial reasons, for adventurous reasons and even those that appeared love matches never lived up to their novel counterparts.

For instance, Kitty could only assume Colonel Forster and Mrs Forster had a love match, yet she was content with chasing officers around and him to watch her. There was no deep connection.

The only couple that could have come close to this was several years ago, a young lady that had been more of a friend to Lizzy than Kitty, had married the grandson of a local gentry family. This couple had stared at each other at events, had only danced with each other, had been spied walking through the environs of Mertyon together. They shopped together, they visited together, they spoke together – Kitty could only guess at what else they could not be parted from each other while doing.

It had been romantic at the start, the younger ladies watching on and sighing while clutching their circular library novels, then it had just begun to grate. It had been difficult to talk to Miss Hughes without Mr Masters present before their marriage – afterwards it had been impossible. This was always going to affect her friendships – and his. But they had no need of anyone but each other.

Yet Kitty could not but help wonder what happened when that haze of love wore off, or when something happened to one or the other. They would have no one but each other.

Then the Masters moved away and Kitty could not observe any longer, and novels rarely examined what happened after the joyous marriages.

These musings did not answer the question of what marriage Kitty did want, and she wasn’t sure she did have an answer.


Was this possible with her current circumstances? And if it wasn’t, how much was she willing to risk to make it happen?

&&^^&&
“What do you think, Darcy?”

Darcy looked up at his friend’s question. He’d been re-reading Mr Bennet’s letter, as well as trying to make sense of an express packet his steward had sent him regarding Pemberley’s tenants and farms. When Bingley had interrupted him so early in the morning, pacing up and down in Darcy’s study but not saying anything, Darcy had assumed it was some matter Bingley needed to mull over before speaking, something that would take hours.

“Darcy!” Bingley chastised.

“I’m sorry, Bingley, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“That was obvious!” Bingley flopped down in the chair opposite Darcy’s desk. “Jane! Jane! Darcy.”

“I assume you are referring to Miss Bennet.”

Bingley smiled. The most genuine smile Darcy had seen on him in some time. “Of course. She is an angel, Darcy.”

“You’ve said so before.”

“Well it’s no less true now than before.”

Darcy paused before speaking, “I rather thought that her halo had been tarnished…”

Bingley stopped smiling, and Darcy was sorry to cause his friend pain, but was more surprised at the lack of pain he felt when referring to something that only a month before had been characterised as the worst events of his life.

“Well, I could hardly blame her – “ Bingley stopped. “And we have spoken.”

“I do not expect you to divulge your private conversations, Bingley. Except I feel I must say that I’m not sure you should have been having private conversations with her.”

“We were not alone; merely not overhead. But we have spoken, and she regrets her judgements and I believe – no, I know – that she realises that she should have trusted more in me - that I could not hold someone so worthless in such high regard.”

“I am glad of it, but I do not see the problem.”

“I wish to marry her, Darcy.”

“Then speaking to me seems not to advance that cause, you would be better to speak to Miss Bennet herself, or her father.”

“You are not going to stop me?”

“I do not believe I could stop you.”

“No. I believe you might have once been able to persuade me, but circumstances have changed. It was not for your permission that I wanted to speak to you, it was for your advice.”
“Well I can’t in conscience tell you that Miss Bennet is the best match you might ever make – “

“That would be your sister?”

Darcy jerked in shock at this comment, he had not realised Bingley to be quite so perceptive. This was the second time in as many days he had been shocked at someone’s perceptiveness. “I confess I did have some – hope, let us say – in that direction but I would have only wanted your happiness.”

“And Miss Bennet makes me happy.”

Darcy couldn’t say that Bingley must marry her then, because a dozen other girls might make Bingley equally as happy but bring better circumstances, but he had wanted Bingley to be his brother-in-law and this would certainly make that the case. He waited for Bingley to continue.

“I only wanted your advice with regards to what should I say to Mr Bennet.”

“Miss Bennet may give you better advice on that ground.”

“I have not asked her to marry me yet; I thought under the circumstances I should ask Mr Bennet first.”

“Whatever for?”

“He may be wary of rich young gentlemen,” smiled Bingley, “I would not wish to disappoint Jane with something I could not provide.”

Darcy could not help but approve of the changes wrought in Bingley – caused by his love of Miss Bennet, or from the pain of their separation, or the observation of his own situation. Bingley was no longer the childish young man that would be at the beck and call of his friends; he had his own opinions and he stuck with them.

“My only advice is: do not let Mrs Bennet know why you are there.”

Bingley laughed before standing, “Then I must go to Hertfordshire, but first is Kitty at home? I should speak to her before I leave and thank her for her continued faith in me.”

Darcy looked at the clock on the mantle, “She was riding in the park this morning, she may not yet be home.”

“I did not think she rode?”

“Sir John is teaching her.”

Bingley looked curious, “Sir John?”

“Yes, I do not have the patience to teach young ladies to ride.”

“Have you tried?” Bingley looked as if he was attempting to picture Darcy the instructor.

“No,” said Darcy and before Bingley could ask any more questions he added, “She did not ask me to teach her.”

Darcy poured himself a drink after his friend’s departure and wondered whether he should have put a stop to the riding lessons. Or at least offered to teach Catherine himself. He was quite sure he
was capable of teaching her to ride. It could not be complicated. He certainly could find the time to do so.

It was just that he found he did not want to upset the fragile balance his household had descended into.

He had promised to himself that he would try, and speak to his wife and apologise even. But Catherine had appeared to have forgotten all about it. Of course they did not sit and chat, but she had no problems speaking to him about the household matters, about Georgiana and so forth.

Georgiana often pretended things were all right when they were really not – he had learnt that after Ramsgate, when it had only been the coming of Mrs Annesley that had brought forth all of Georgiana’s fears of being sent away permanently from her home. So Darcy was not unaware that his wife might still be harbouring ill-feelings towards him, but he did not wish to question her. He had proven, countless times before, that he was ill-equipped to rationally discuss anything with her. It was not her fault, it was his. He was incapable of phrasing himself in such a way that did not insult her. Indeed, when she had confided in him that she had figured out that Wickham’s previous villainies had involved Georgiana he had said very little, but his outward shock that she should have come to the right conclusion with so little evidence had apparently been misread as anger and upset her. He did not even apparently need to speak to upset his wife.

No, it was better that he show himself changed through his actions now, than to drag up any old grievances; to show that he had now thought about his behaviour properly and resigned himself to his situation.

But perhaps he should speak to her. Darcy did not like being indecisive; he distracted himself with another drink. He should make a decision and stick to it – but which should it be? Leave things be or talk about his feelings?

&&^^&&

This feeling was supported by a visit from his aunt; Lady Matlock, that was.

“Nephew,” Lady Matlock crossed the room and offered her hand to Darcy, and then her cheek.

“Aunt,” said Darcy, greeting her as she intended him to; “How are you?”

“Very well,” she replied before taking the seat he offered to her.

“I’m glad. Something to drink?”

“No, not for me. Now I expect you know why I’m here?”

Darcy didn’t, but he knew better than to ask his aunt, her questions tended to be rhetorical.

“Your wife, sir.”

“Catherine?”

“Yes.”

Darcy could not think of anything that his wife had done that would require his aunt to come and speak to him in such a formal manner. “What about her?”

“I expect you realise she has not been visiting with me recently? She had been visiting on her own?”
His aunt’s tone rather suggested that she thought that Darcy didn’t realise, but he did. He had, unlike previous years where he had only attended the barest minimum of events, this season attended as many as he had been invited to.

Well perhaps Darcy had not attended all of them, and attending was not the same as participating. While he made the effort to put in an appearance for the sake of his reputation and in the hope that exposure would lessen the circulating gossip, he did not think that anyone would expect his marriage to turn him into a man who enjoyed dancing and all other trivial delights.

Even if he was a man in love he would hardly expose himself to ridicule by hanging on to his wife’s every word and follow her about like a mooncalf. At the beginning there had been some expectation that he would, but that had died away.

So he went to the balls and the musical evenings and the card parties, he spoke to his particular friends, was happily introduced to people who might become particular friends or who might not, did his duty by dancing with his wife at least once, taking her down to supper when it was required and of course lamented the fact he was not an inveterate gambler so that he could not escape to the card room. All in all how he had behaved before he was married, except then it had been some eligible female he had danced with and escorted to supper, or no one at all.

He had noticed Catherine’s sociable behaviour before, and it did not wilt now under the scrutiny of the ton; she claimed her friends from Derbyshire and continued from there. Darcy had noticed this and congratulated himself on taking his wife to Pemberley. It was perhaps the first of the hopefully long line of correct things he had done in his marriage. There she had made friends, acceptable friends at that and perhaps some unacceptable ones, Darcy did not know the majority of the ladies at Lambton after all, but she would not see them in London so it hardly mattered.

“Catherine has made many acquaintances in London; you have introduced her to all that she should meet, of course she would visit on her own. I would not have thought you would not wish to be constantly visiting, Aunt?”

Lady Matlock gave a little sniff. “No, but I know my duty, Darcy. It is my duty to ensure your wife has the correct place in the world. The place of a Darcy.”

Darcy was confused, “But you have done so, Aunt.”

“Have I? Reputations are so precarious. Positions in our world, so precarious. I would not like to think that one word, or one action, from your wife could cause it all to crash down but there it is, Darcy.”

“I think my reputation and position is secure, Aunt. What do you suppose she might do or say? I do hope that you are not giving any credence to Aunt Catherine’s continued lamentations. My mother did not wish for me to marry Anne.”

“She would not have wished you to marry a poor country chit either, r Darcy.”

That stung. Darcy had not wished to think of what either of his parents would have said about his marriage. He liked to think his father would have understood why Darcy had felt compelled, and even felt guilty himself at his part in Wickham’s capacity to create havoc across the country. However his mother’s reaction was less certain. He could only hope that she would have seen his son’s honour before everything else.

His aunt carried on as if there could be no reaction to her statement. “And it is not a case of might. It is a case of doing. Are the people that she is meeting and visiting with acceptable?”
“She met them in my company,” Darcy was beginning to feel that this was not just another attack from his family on his abilities as a husband but also an attack on his own morality.

“Darcy, you forget that I am your aunt. I have known you since you were a baby. You do not like crowds and crushes. You spend your time circling the dancers, or staring at the piano. I do not expect you remember half the names of the people that Catherine has been introduced to. Not that she is to be entirely blamed for that; the curiosity of society is what it is, and of course a young lady from Hertfordshire would wish for more lively company than the sort of people that we would associate with, but this is why she needs guidance. I cannot but feel that she has rejected mine.” Lady Matlock looked disapproving.

“I can only say that if she has been rude to you, Aunt, I cannot think that it was consciously done.”

Though Darcy remembered Catherine’s reluctance and petulant tone when they had been in London before Pemberley; he had thought then that she might not like his aunt. He had attributed it to her inability to see true respectability. But it might have been that she simply did not like his aunt, or had been frightened by her. He should have done something about it then.

“No she has not been rude to me, she is very polite. I must own I had been surprised by that, but she does have pretty manners. I did think her very shy, but I cannot think her shy now.”

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, aunt.”

“What shall you do about it?”

Darcy, who had been standing in front of his desk and leaning against it quite unconsciously, felt himself tense up, his fingers curling over the edge of the desk. It was one thing for his cousin to comment on his behaviour and insist he rectify it or for his uncle to chide him, but it was grating for it to come from his aunt.

“I shall speak to Catherine.” Apparently the decision had been made for him. He could no longer dither about.

“About?”

“To reassure myself that she is associating with those who I should wish her to associate with,” replied Darcy.

“Darcy, you are a fool.”

Darcy blinked, “I beg your pardon.”

“I had thought I would not have to speak so openly about this, but I see Snitterton was right.”

“My cousin? What has my cousin to do with this? Has he been telling tales to you about my wife?”

“So you do know.”

Darcy was baffled; “I beg you would not speak in circles. The time for frankness is certainly now.”

“My dear boy did speak to me about Catherine’s behaviour – “

“I hope you have informed him, or will inform him, that the behaviour of any of my household is
not a subject of gossip even within the family.”

Lady Matlock’s mouth tightened and red spots grew on her cheeks. “Darcy, I will not have you speak that way about my son. He thinks only of you.”

“Then why did he not talk to me himself?”

Darcy had not believed Fitzwilliam when he had said that his brother had deeply held suspicions about Kitty. He had not even believed it when he had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears, Snittertons’ comments that were vague enough to be ignored but still held some reproof. He had merely thought that his cousin was behaving as he normally did, like a conceited popinjay.

Darcy was only angry now that he had let Snitterton’s actions lead him to have some doubts about Catherine’s behaviour. If Snitterton had had any true concerns he should have brought them to Darcy himself. It was what a gentleman would do. It was what Fitzwilliam had done.

Again Darcy was struck by the difference between the brothers. Fitzwilliam was all honour and his brother hid behind his mother.

“I suspect he thought what he had to say would come better from me.”

“And why pray tell?”

“Because you would not strike a woman.”

“Why would I strike Snit?” Darcy rarely struck another man out of anger – he hardly counted Wickham who was more vermin than man. It was inconceivable that he would hit his cousin, though perhaps this was untrue as he was feeling more and more uncharitable towards that man.

“I wish you would not use Richard’s appalling name for his brother. It is demeaning. And I think that you would have hit him – any man would, I believe, to the messenger informing him that he is being – or very soon will be – cuckolded.”

Darcy was dumbstruck.

“Yes, Darcy. You cannot be that much of a fool. You must do something or you will find one morning that your wife has fled with Sir John MacDonald.”

&&^&
Seemingly Innocent

Kitty smoothed down her ball gown. It was a particularly nice one; pink silk. She was awaiting Sally, who was still to do her hair. Kitty had intended to match the dress with a circlet of flowers in her hair.

At Longbourn she would have more than likely had to do it herself, and find the flowers herself, because the only maids with any ability to dress one’s hair would have been busy with Jane, Lizzy and Lydia, not to mention Mrs Bennet. The circlet would have thus been crooked and uneven, and her enjoyment of the evening would have been partially spoilt. Now she had Sally, and an array of bouquets to choose from.

It amused Kitty to know that she had youthful admirers. It was also pleasant. It meant that she was unlikely to sit down for very long at any dance. Although it also meant she did have to suffer through their attempts at flattery and raillery. She rather suspected that she was a safe target for them to practice their flirtations upon. It was not painful to hear their stuttering declarations or their sometimes blunt comments; it was more a case of trying not to laugh.

Of course, Kitty wondered if they realised how little she had been the subject of such arts? She could only subtly direct them to more pleasing comments and actions because of her observations of how other young ladies had wished to be treated. But if they thought that she must have been the belle of Meryton she was not going to disillusion them.

She should tell them that their gifts of devotion – rather pathetic specimens of flowers – would have to be much improved before they could really fall madly in love with an eligible young lady. Sir John and Fitzwilliam had laughed at one of her wilting posies that she had deigned to carry to an event some weeks ago. Since then they had both proved their worth by sending their own contributions before balls, except Fitzwilliam must have forgotten his tonight – no, of course Fitzwilliam was yet again visiting Lady Catherine de Bourgh; even he could not have flowers sent up express from Kent! She should have remembered that as she had asked him to ask after Charlotte Lucas for her. Married to Mr Collins must be a fate worse than death, Darcy and Harrogate put together!

She had thought that Darcy also though her array of flowers a poor showing, when he had come to ask her when dinner would be served. He had made a particular effort to ask where the posies had come from.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” said Sally bustling into the room carrying a tray. “I was delayed downstairs, but it was a good thing that I was if you do not mind me saying so!”

“Of course I do not mind…” Kitty looked over her shoulder puzzled at her maid’s comments.

“For if I wasn’t delayed, I would not have known that the master had picked such handsome flowers for you, before I had started putting the others in your hair.”

“Oh.” Darcy had brought her flowers? He had never brought her flowers before. Kitty had thought that perhaps he was making more of an effort over the last couple of days; he had certainly been more attentive and questioning than usual. Making more of an effort to ask how her days had been and who she had met, and what sort of pleasantries they had exchanged. Some of these conversations had been overtaken by Georgiana who had taken it as a sign that Darcy finally wished to know all that she and some of her school friends, who she walked with in the park, discussed all day. Kitty merely hoped that did not prevent Darcy from continuing on this pleasanter path.
It was nice to feel able to talk about her friends without the risk of being disapproved of.

“Mrs Darcy?”

“I’m sorry, Sally? I was quite somewhere else.”

“I could see that, begging your pardon, but I was just saying how Mr Darcy seemed quite insistent that you wear or carry these, and that I thought it was a blessing.”

“Yes quite a blessing, considering some of these!” Kitty picked up one of the bouquets which she was quite sure had already been used; more than likely Mr Lewis had pilfered a bouquet his sister had carried already to some other ball. “I never thought that gentlemen had to learn how to be gentlemanly to ladies.”

“Well there is that, but I was thinking it was a blessing not to have to pull apart Sir John’s fine bouquet.”

“It is, though I shall have to tell him that red flowers would not have suited my dress at all! Though they shall look pretty in here.” It was not however Sir John’s fault that he had picked the very flowers that would have made her look extremely ill; he could not have known what she was planning to wear, firstly because she did not make a habit of discussing her attire with others and second because he had been visiting relatives in Surrey.

“There if you will turn your head.”

Kitty turned back to the mirror to allow Sally to work her magic.

Darcy had looked approving at dinner, though he had not said anything. That was left to Georgiana.

“Oh Kitty, you do look pretty.”

“Thank you, I think that most of the credit should go to Sally and the dressmaker though.”

Georgiana disclaimed this before continuing, “I do wish I could go to a ball, and I do not just mean our Pemberley country hops.”

“Do you really, Georgiana?” Darcy had sounded surprised. “I would not have thought you would wish to be presented so soon.”

“Oh, no I think I shall find it extremely frightening, but I shall have Kitty with me! And Miss Dears is out this season and she has been telling us all about the fun to be had.”

“I do not think you should be presented just because you wish for some fun and frivolity. Many young ladies, I believe, do so and the result cannot be said to have improved the tone of society,”

Kitty flicked her eyes between her sister and her husband. Georgiana looked as if she was about to voice her resentment at such a statement; Kitty knew how much Georgiana wished to be treated and thought of as an adult, not a silly chit. However much Kitty might think that Darcy was being incredibly untactful, or at least unconscious of the fact his sister was no longer a child to be cosseted, she could not but agree with him. It seemed ridiculous that she should do so, but there it was.
As far as she could see there was a group of young ladies in London society that resembled Lydia so much as to be frightening. For them flirtation, fun and frivolity was the order of the day. It was not wrong to wish for an evening’s entertainment but when it was the only concern Kitty could see the difficulty. The interrupting of others’ enjoyment, the exposure to ridicule – in short everything that she had not been able to see when it had been she and Lydia doing such things.

However she could hardly say that to Georgiana; she would be offended and rightly so. Kitty could not believe Georgiana would go to any public event and think only of herself, and it was surely a good thing that she was thinking of enjoying herself after what Wickham had surely done to her!

“Well I think that it is a pity that Lizzy and Jane will not be joining us tonight, Lizzy always manages to spot the most ridiculous goings on.”

This distracted Georgiana. “How is Jane?”

“Jane is very well,” Kitty gave a small smile as she ducked her head away to cut her meat.

“You know that is not what I meant!”

Kitty did know but she was not above teasing, “I cannot think of what you mean!”

“Jane and Mr Bingley!”

“Mr Bingley?” Kitty looked at Darcy to see if he was enjoying the joke as well, only to find him looking at her intently and Kitty could not perceive whether it was mere observation or censure. Blushing, she looked away in confusion, “I am sure that Jane is planning her trousseau as we speak.”

This moved the conversation towards a monologue as Georgiana babbled on about how exciting the wedding was sure to be, while Darcy was lost in his own thoughts and Kitty lost in trying to figure out what he could be thinking.

&&^^&&

As Darcy handed her into the carriage, Kitty thanked him for the flowers, wondering if that had been the reason for his dinner table silence; perhaps he expected her to thank him for the gesture? But he merely nodded in response.

“Now I shall not have to break up Sir John’s beautiful bouquet, even though his flowers would have not done at all for my hair! Instead, they can sit on my dresser quite prettily.”

“Have you your dance card?”

Kitty blinked at this rather strange question thrown suddenly into the conversation, but as the carriage began to move she found the item in question in her reticule.

“There I have it.”

“May I see it?”

Kitty could tell this was not really a question but she did not see why he could not see the card. Why he would want to however was a more difficult question to answer.

She watched as Darcy flicked his eyes over the paper, “How is it that you have Sir John marked down for a dance when he has been away from London?”
“Oh that is our dance. We always dance it together, had you not noticed?”

The look on Darcy’s face rather said that he had not so Kitty plunged on, “I cannot dance it at all well, and he is the only person to whom I have confided that! Now I can dance it with equanimity because he knows to move his feet out of the way of mine.” Kitty laughed, but Darcy did not seem to find it amusing.

“You have just confided in me,” he remarked.

Kitty smiled, “Why should I not?”

“Why should you not indeed?” Darcy’s tone was light but Kitty could not help but think that he was forcing it to be. A change in topic was probably for the best if Darcy was not going to voice his true thoughts. But Kitty could not help exploring the possibilities for Darcy’s variable moods, even if last time she had done so she had only ended up upsetting herself.

“I meant to ask you how Lady Matlock was? I did not realise she had come to visit; Mrs Wilson thought I had known she visited earlier this week.”

Darcy turned to look out the window, “My aunt is quite well. I believe she is missing having your company on her morning visits.”

That was most certainly a lie, Kitty could not think of anyone less suited to accompanying the countess of Matlock on morning visits than herself. Most of the dragons of the ton, including the patronesses of Almacks, had been polite to her, some even were kind, but Kitty could not see the purpose of inflicting her company on them more than necessary. After all, from what she could see they already had to endure countless visits from overbearing mothers and their simpering daughters. She would no doubt have to join the circus that was the marriage mart when Georgiana came out, but she would not do so before then.

“And the business with Wickham.”

“Your father is standing firm; Lydia will not go to Brighton and I have every belief that he will go into the regulars.”

Kitty felt her heart twist, wasn’t this a reward? She did not know what Darcy had done when Wickham had turned his attention to Georgiana, but his punishment for what he did to her, and by extension to Darcy, was to be a reward?! She could not help asking if Darcy did not think this was a reward.

“Not if he gets shot, it’s not,” said Darcy grimly.

“Oh,” was all Kitty could reply, not sure she should be glad that she had more than likely got to the root of Darcy’s strange behaviour.

&^&

The ballroom was atrocious. It was the one thing that terrified Kitty when she thought of holding her own event, which she would more than likely have to begin to plan soon. She could cope with the idea of being a hostess, after all as long as she planned the refreshments correctly and primed her staff it could not be too different to being a guest; except for the idea that the guests would be oohing and ahning at her rooms; or in the worse case – the one that terrified her – giggling at the set up.

Darcy had offered her his arm as they walked into the ballroom; he had dropped her arm because
of the greeting line. This was quite usual, what was not was the fact he reclaimed her arm afterwards. His behaviour was confusing Kitty and she was beginning to wonder if there had been some hidden motivation in his beginning to speak to her more, whether there was something specific he wished to know but had not come out and asked it of her directly, but she could not think of what it would be! She knew him well enough to know there was barely a subject that he would not be direct about!

She pushed these musings aside in order to enjoy the evening, and was only pleased that she could squeeze Darcy’s arm in an unspoken command for him to lean down so that she could whisper how hideous the ballroom was.

Kitty looked up and saw that he was more than likely about to make some comment about how ungenerous she was, when the crowd parted someway and they were confronted with a rather indiscreet statue. Kitty tried not to giggle, particularly when she felt Darcy stiffen and saw a group of giggling young ladies who were without their chaperones, who would have clearly tried to shepherd them away.

“I believe I would like a drink,” Kitty commented.

“That is an excellent idea,” replied Darcy before firmly leading her away.

Kitty was happy when Darcy was distracted by several old friends; it allowed her to laugh more openly behind her drink. His sensibilities had clearly been offended, a great deal more than hers. It was just another thing to cross off her list of suitable ballroom decorations. Her sense of the ridiculous was provoked further by the sight of Miss Bingley on the other side of the ballroom.

Miss Bingley had the countenance of a young lady on the way to her death, a countenance she had worn ever since her brother had returned from Hertfordshire and proposed to Jane. Kitty had resisted all attempts to be thrown into her company; she knew that she was likely to bear the brunt of Miss Bingley’s disappointment. Although it could not be very long before Miss Bingley began to see the benefits of her brother being the brother-in-law of Mr Darcy.

“Lots in your thoughts, Mrs Darcy?”

Kitty smiled as she turned to see Sir John. The smile was partially lost when she saw Lord Snitterton lurking behind him.

“Was your trip a pleasant one, sir?”

“It was indeed, although I am always happy to get back to such good company.”

“Does that mean your relations are not good company?”

Sir John smiled, “No, it means they are relations.”

Lord Snitterton moved closer, “I must say I find these statues in the highest order of bad taste. They are entirely inappropriate.”

Kitty could not but agree with him, even though she detested the idea of agreeing with anything Snitterton said, so she only silently agreed with him.

“And it’s a crush. I find I can forgive anything but a crush,” said Sir John as he was jostled by another young gentlemen edging around the corner of the dance floor.

“But a crush means a success, surely you do not begrudge that success to our hostess?” asked Kitty.
Snitterton mumbled something which was more than likely a disavowal of wanting to do any such thing, but Sir John looked slight chastened, though Kitty suspected he was very good at looking chastened but not meaning it.

“Cousin,” said Snitterton, after having to press himself against a wall to avoid the overlarge headdress of an overlarge woman, “do you think you could approve of a walk along the balcony? There could be no wrong in doing so in my company.”

The idea did not appeal at all to Kitty; the walk on the balcony in the cool air did, but not the company. Not even Sir John could make up for listening to Snitterton for any longer than she had to, but the heat was becoming oppressive.

Kitty could not help breathing a sigh of relief when Snitterton was called back into the ballroom by some crony or other.

Sir John gave her an exaggerated look of relief which Kitty rather suspected was mimicry of her own expression. Or perhaps he was truly relieved that Snitterton was no longer walking up and down the balcony peering in at the windows commenting on all and sundry as they passed by.

This was rather confirmed when Sir John watching several couples and groups walking down the steps into the gardens.

“Shall we escape a little way into the garden? Take advantage of the full moon?”

Kitty smiled her assent.

The garden was pretty bathed in the moonlight, and very tasteful; they should have held the dancing out here, and now that they were alone the conversation was tasteful, I too.

Kitty sat down on a bench to watch the fountain and thinking that she should like a fountain at Pemberley, but where to put it?

“It is a pretty view,” said Sir John.

“Yes I cannot even imagine how anyone could make such a thing,”

“I meant you,” Sir John said in a silky voice.

Kitty turned to laugh, “Sir John! You’re worse than Mr Lewis and the others! You do not need the practice, I assure you!”

“I thought you might like a sincere compliment,” Sir John had spread his hands wide in a gesture of mock apology. “Unless…you get many from Darcy?”

An involuntary snort leapt from Kitty before she exclaimed, “from Darcy? Never!”

She regretted it the moment she said it, after all did he not bring her flowers that very night? And something tugged inside her at the thought of exposing Darcy to censure and ridicule even among his friends, he did not entirely deserve it after all. It was hardly his fault he was a taciturn man – she could not see him having the open and jovial temper required to flirt, even with a wife he loved.

“It is a great pity. Darcy usually does take the time to practice, does he not?” mused Sir John.
“But why do so on something unnecessary?”

“It is not necessary to provide you with comfort?” Sir John seemed puzzled.

Kitty wished to turn the conversation away from this difficult path it was taking. She had thought of this herself, and had come to no conclusion – she still did not know what she wanted, but she knew it did no good to dwell on such matters. Though how she was to work out what she wanted and how to get it without thinking about it she still did not know.

Sir John appeared to looking towards the path they had come by, as if he was afraid of being interrupted, which lead Kitty to believe he had not chosen this subject by chance. Sir John was like that: he liked to test out his path before taking it, he clearly wished to ask her advice on some matter and did not wish to be interrupted before he had finished.

No matter how open and gregarious Sir John was, this did not exclude him from having deeper serious feelings; it just surely meant it was more difficult to convince others of their existence.

Kitty felt a stab of guilt at not recognising this in her friend.

“Comfort is always necessary, but one should not rely on others for one’s comfort,” smiled Kitty. This was perhaps the only truth she could discern from her jumbled thoughts and circumstances. Impulsively she grasped his hands, “if you wish to speak to me on some sensitive subject, you may. You must know how highly I regard our friendship.”

Sir John looked down at the ground as though he was struggling with something, before looking again towards the path, then back at her.

“Kitty…”

“Yes?” Kitty was surprised that he should use her given name, he was usually so mindful of proprieties.

He did not respond in words, instead he placed his free hand on her cheek and before she could speak or draw back he had kissed her. Not the sort of kiss that she gave her sisters, either – but a kiss that one might read about in a romance novel.

Kitty could not sort out her feelings, and she did not have time to because a voice cut through the haze – “Cousin!”

Sir John broke away and Kitty turned her head to see Lord Snitterton standing there outraged.

&&^^&&
Aftershock

Darcy read his cousin’s letter and sighed before running his fingers through his hair. He could not decide whether he had acted appropriately or not. But what was done was done, he could not undo it.

He had asked Colonel Fitzwilliam to find a place in the Regulars for Wickham and then he had financed the move. Wickham was going to a regiment that was likely to be put in harm’s way although Wickham himself did not know this - nay the regiment itself did not know – since the information came from the highest sources. Darcy had not read Fitzwilliam’s letter of recommendation to Wickham’s new commanding officer but he was sure that that man would have left no stone unturned to paint an accurate picture of Wickham’s character. Either that or he left him thinking Wickham was the type of man who should be given the most heroic jobs. Darcy hoped it was the former since he was not sure he could have Wickham’s death on his conscience for all that he had done, or how much Darcy made off hand remarks regarding it to Catherine.

But Wickham was out of the country and into a job where he might do some good despite his character. Lydia Bennet and other English girls were safe. So Darcy could sigh with relief.

Except it was short lived as Robert announced that Lord Snitterton wished to speak to him.

Darcy wondered if his cousin was paying the visit because he thought it right, or because his mother had informed him of how disbelieving Darcy had been. And disbelief it had been.

It was ridiculous. First to assume that he would not notice such a thing and second to think that Catherine had any opportunity to do such a thing! He presumed also that she would not do such a thing even with the opportunity. She could not be so very unhappy that she would risk the pain of another scandal. The first one had affected her so violently and changed the whole of her life. No, he might have had a poor opinion of her intellect before but now he had to credit her with the sense to realise anything of the sort of was out of the question.

Of course, Darcy knew households which were enlivened by such goings on, but it was never before children; and while he was sure Catherine realised there were such households she must realise it would be against everything he believed in, even if it did not go against her own beliefs.

Darcy had to admit to myself he had no true knowledge of Sir John’s character. He was quite firmly the friend of his cousins and had, he knew, appointed himself the champion of his wife. Darcy had had some misgivings but he had been pleased to know that he could abdicate the responsibility of dancing constantly with his wife and other societal responsibilities he had now as a husband. It also would be uncomfortable for Catherine and himself if she sat out every dance that was not with him, if she did not speak to anyone else but him. But while Darcy had watched Sir John, he had had very little interaction with the man directly. Sir John had not sought him out and Darcy found he had little inclination to do so himself; Sir John was the open gregarious type of man that Darcy rarely felt comfortable with. Bingley, of course, was an exception.

No, if Lady Matlock had visited him in order to arouse his anger she had certainly done so, but it was directed in an entirely different quarter than what she intended.

He did not stand as Lord Snitterton was ushered into the room, and his cousin had to seat himself for Darcy would not invite him to sit.

He looked clearly uncomfortable and Darcy found some part of him maliciously finding pleasure in it.
“I expect you know why I am here, Darcy?”

Darcy smiled, “Need more money, Snit?”

A cloud of anger crossed Snitterton’s face. He had only ever applied to Darcy for money once in his life and at the time Darcy had genuinely not held it against his cousin’s character. Sometimes there were emergencies and difficulty in laying one’s hand on money at the time that it was needed. It was better Snitterton came to him than a moneylender. But now he was glad he had something to hold against the viscount. After all, if Snitterton was obsessed with appearances he had to remember his was not so sparkling, and Darcy had heard some whispers that Snitterton was not flush in the pocket and was not able to ask his father to advance him more of his allowance for he would have to furnish his accounts of where his already considerable allowance had disappeared to.

“No, Darcy. It is about your wife.”

Darcy remained silent. He expected Snitterton to collapse in the face of his obvious anger, but if anything it seemed to buoy him.

“Yes, your wife and Sir John MacDonald, a man I have been stupid enough to call friend. They were together last night in the garden, I do not I imagine need to tell you what they were doing.”

Darcy tightened his grip on his pen. “You are rather late, cousin. If your mother had not run to me telling tales last week, I might have believed you. Or at least believed that is what you thought you saw, but I’m afraid you are hoisted by your own petard. I did not believe Fitzwilliam when he said you had spoken with such disrespect to my wife upon your first meeting, but I believe it now. You had formed your opinion and, not content with merely stubbornly not changing that opinion, you have decided to make it fact by your lies. I am very sorry you feel my marriage reflects badly upon yourself and thus hinders your advancement in the world, but you might think that I must say the same thing about you.”

Snitterton’s face turned red. “So you lend no credence to the fact that Mrs Darcy wished to leave so early in the evening and so obviously upset?”

“It was a crush,” said Darcy, not faltering. He had not given that much thought, at the time he was just grateful he did not have to stay a moment longer in that chatter – particularly since Miss Bingley had just attached herself to him, all but demanding a dance.

“I see you are determined to make a fool of yourself and your family. I can only repeat to you that I saw your wife kissing Sir John MacDonald where anyone could have – and probably did – see them. I do not need to tell you that it was clearly enjoyed. I always thought that my mother was right.”

“And what would she have been right about?”

“The fact that your wife was no more attacked by Wickham than I have been; you were cleverly played, Darcy.”

“I shall ask you to remove yourself from my house and not step foot in it again,” said Darcy in a low voice.

“Very well, but I shall know how to act if you will not.”

&&^&^&
It took several moments for Darcy to stop seeing red and to wish that Fitzwilliam was not suffering through another visit to Kent (on his behest no less!). He needed someone to talk to that knew Snitterton and Lady Matlock.

A commotion in the hall brought him out of his reverie and he wondered for a moment if Snitterton had not decided to go upstairs to speak to Catherine.

However upon opening the door to the entrance hall, he was treated to the sight of Caroline Bingley and Mrs Hurst.

“Darcy! We have just been told that Mrs Darcy is unwell and thus unable to see us, and that Miss Darcy is unavailable too!” Miss Bingley’s tone seemed to imply that she expected Darcy to do something about it.

All he could do was give Robert an inquiring look.

“I am afraid, sir, that Mrs Darcy is still in her room and Miss Darcy is with her; I was told they were receiving no visitors this morning.”

“Well then there you are, Miss Bingley, I am afraid it was a wasted trip.”

Miss Bingley did not look too put out, she placed her hand confidently on Darcy’s arm. “I do hope she did not catch a chill.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“A chill, last night when she walked outside with Sir John; I thought at the time it was very foolish to go outside.”

“Though of course understandable, it was very oppressive in that room and we thought Sir John would take care of her,” tittered Mrs Hurst as they departed. Not even the Bingley sisters could suggest to visit alone with Darcy.

Darcy merely smiled as Robert shut the door firmly on the ladies. If he was the sort of master who exchanged looks with his servants, he would have done so with Robert at that moment.

Darcy turned to return to his study and saw Mrs Annesley on the stairs.

“Mrs Annesley, I hope Catherine is well?” He half suspected she had pretended to be ill so as to not see Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. He could not entirely blame her.

“I am afraid Mrs Darcy is not well, sir. She is dressed but not well enough to leave her room, Miss Darcy is with her.”

Darcy paused, his hand on the doorframe of his study. “I do hope you will not let Georgiana neglect her practice.”

“Of course not, Mr Darcy. I shall sit with Mrs Darcy while she does so.”

“Oh I do not think there is any need for that, I think she would rather not be cosseted.”

“As you wish.”

Darcy nodded his dismissal at the older lady before closing his study door. It would better if Catherine was alone when he spoke to her, and this way it would not look like he was seeking her out particularly – at least not to Georgiana. And while he waited for Georgiana to start her piano
practice he would continue with his business. His steward was overdue a letter and he should write a formal note of congratulations to Bingley.

He’d only got half way through his letter when Roberts interrupted him.

“A letter for you, sir, the boy delivering it said it must come direct to you.”

“Is an immediate response required?”

“The boy did not say, so I suspect not, sir.”

“Thank you, Robert,” said Darcy, accepting the letter.

He did not recognise the handwriting. But if it had been personally delivered it was urgent.

He unfolded the letter; it was addressed to him.

This is not the letter of a coward. I will be at home awaiting anyone you wish to send to wait upon me. I have not called upon you for I have no wish to further upset your wife.

A heavy feeling settled in Darcy’s stomach and he had to almost force himself to continue reading the letter.

But at this point in time you must not be unaware of what occurred last night. Either your wife has informed you or your cousin. If Mrs Darcy did, then she can only have spoken the truth, but if it was Lord Snitterton then I can only assume he has misled you grossly.

Darcy gave a deep breath and felt a cold sense of anger run over him. A sense of anger and a sense of shame that he had been so foolish and not to see what was in front of him. His Aunt had been correct: he was a fool.

Mrs Darcy is innocent of any wrong-doing and I can only assure you that the blame lies square upon my shoulders, my -

He could not read any further, his whirling mind distracting him. The clear sounds of a piano echoing through the house brought him out of this distraction, allowing him to think clearer as he dropped the letter onto his desk.

He opened the door to his wife’s bedchamber. Mrs Annesley had been correct in saying that she had dressed herself. She had also wrapped herself in a shawl and was staring into the fire. She did not look well but Darcy could not find it within himself to care.

He had put his reputation and his family on the line, in order to prevent her from the utmost degradation and this was how she repaid him? His behaviour for which he had been heartily sorry, his rebuffs and reproofs of her attempts at creating familiar harmony – neither of these deserved such punishment.

It could only be extreme stupidity or some sort of wilful defect of character that could have lead her to this path. Though he had only the word of Snitterton that any attentions had not been forced upon her; there was still a chance that he had misread the situation.
“Catherine,” he was surprised at how calm his voice sounded.

She turned to him and appeared to attempt to raise a wan smile.

“Please tell me it is not true – “ he could not even voice his request more fully. Not wanting to give credence to it all by putting it in words. Surprising himself by how much he wanted her to tell him it was not the case.

She turned away and pulled the shawl tighter around herself. It was an admission, no matter if it wasn’t verbal.

He crossed the room and turned her towards him, his fingers more than likely digging into her shoulders. She was crying now, but this time her tears failed to move him.

“How could you do this?” He was surprised at how calm and controlled his voice sounded. He had been told though that the angrier he got the calmer he appeared, except that looking at him closely betrayed his fury. He was sure it must be reflected in his face now, except she did not shrink away from him. But he did not know whether that was courage or the realisation that she could not.

“It was all my fault. Mine.” she whispered and Darcy felt a hot stab of something, and he released her as if she had scalded him. He had never become violent with a woman and he never would, he turned away from her running his hand across his mouth.

Well he knew what he had to do now, he strode towards the door, but before he could reach it, he felt a hand tugging at his hand.

Catherine had followed him, and was looking at him pleadingly, “Please do not! Please.”

“Are you pleading for him? To me?” Darcy could not believe it, and it was like a floodgate had opened. “To me? Who gave you shelter when I did not have to? Who risked everything?”

He was no longer coldly quiet, he had raised his voice, and raised it further when he had to speak over her sobbing. Everything he had ever wanted to say but had kept it restrained and bottled up flowed out. He was not even sure what he was saying.

“William!” He had not heard Georgiana enter the room; he hadn’t even heard the piano cease. His sister rushed across the room to put her arms around his wife. “What are you doing, William?”

She had never seen him lose his temper before. There were several moments when they appeared frozen in tableau like that and Darcy could only look at his sister and think – but I have done all of this for you! I wanted you to be able to stand tall and proud!

When Darcy could look away from his sister he saw Mrs Annesley standing in the doorway. “Mrs Annesley take Georgiana to her room.” He made the utmost attempt to control his voice.

“William, I cannot not leave you here like this!”

“Mrs Annesley,” Darcy repeated slowly and carefully, that woman crossed the room slowly to tug Georgiana away, speaking softly and soothingly. Georgiana seemed reluctant to leave, and Darcy could feel the shreds of his composure slipping out of control.

“Go!” Darcy all but barked and the sound made the three women jump and Mrs Annesley find the strength to pull Georgiana out of the room.

Catherine had stopped crying.
“Please Darcy, Please.”

Darcy put a hand up to cup her face, roughly but not in a gesture of anger, but rather as a means to make her look at him. It was perhaps not necessary because she had appeared to pull herself together and had been looking at him steadily perhaps for the last minute or two.

“You are in love with him!” Darcy tried not to sound incredulous, or to let some bitter laugh rip from him. He could not fall in love, that was denied to him, yet she thought that she did not have to suffer thusly? Selfish!

“He is a good friend to me, he has been kind. It was my fault. I must have – ”

She broke off there and Darcy wanted to tell her how foolish she had been. She thought that she must have somehow caused Sir John to lose her head. That she had the capability of making an honourable man give into temptation!

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that Sir John had been no friend to her, when he reconsidered. As he had watched her confirm that she had betrayed him last night, somewhere in the upper reaches of his mind he could not help but think of Lord Snitterton. That he had controlled and manipulated the circumstances, but he could not have done that without Sir John’s help or by the happy coincidence of Sir John and Catherine’s mutual growing feeling. Darcy never believed in happy coincidences – he could believe in his wife’s decision to betray him, but not in the fact that at the same time an honest and honourable man could also give into such feelings.

Of course, after manipulating the situation so that his wife would submit right when witnesses could be found – Darcy had the sinking feeling that Snitterton would have made sure that he was not the only witness. Although Snitterton could never have been thought to be an intelligent man; it was possible he was simply relying on Darcy confronting Catherine armed with both his information and Sir John’s. If that had been the plan, it had surely worked.

Yet Sir John’s letter was curiously genuine. In the circumstances Sir John could not place the blame on Catherine for the situation to appear truthful and not contrived but he would have expected more waving in Sir John’s wish to take responsibility and insinuation of the mutual decision making and desire.

“You stupid, stupid girl.”

She had brought up a hand to grasp his arm and nodded, “Yes. Please – “

“Please what? Forgive you?” Darcy was incredulous.

“No,” she shook her head, “do not kill him.”

“You would miss him too much, I expect,” he mocked. It felt beneath him to be so cruel.

“You would have to leave the country. Georgiana needs you.”

Darcy dropped his hand from her cheek, and stepped back.

“I don’t care what you do with me, but please do not do anything that you would regret.”

He did not answer her. He left the room and strode out of the house.

&&^^&
Sir John MacDonald’s lodgings were not in the most fashionable part of town, and they did appear to be tiny. Darcy rapped on the door with his cane and wondered if it was wise for him to have come here himself. He had not thought about it, instead left his house in a blind rage.

But on the walk over, his anger had cooled; it was more than best that he confront the baronet himself. He could hardly ask Lord Snitterton to act on his behalf. Nor was there a worse time for Fitzwilliam to still be in the country. And it would be a monster indeed that dragged Bingley into an affair that might end one misty morning on a deserted heath.

Sir John’s retainer let him into the house with barely a word. That man was old and decrepit and Darcy was sure probably would not hear a word that was spoken, even right in front of his face.

He was ushered into a room with only the barest of furniture. Sir John stood up from the room’s only lounge upon his entry. But Darcy did not notice the state of the limited furniture; after all he could not help but notice the packed valises that were standing near the door.

“I am the worst kind of villain, I assure you that I will delope.”

&&^&

&&
Letters and Guilt

Kitty jumped when she heard the front door slam, and bit her hand in an attempt not to cry again. She would not cry. She had done enough of that.

She had spent all night trying to piece together the events of the evening, and trying to decide what she should tell Darcy. It seemed so strange that while other young ladies could go through their lives unaccosted, it should happen to her twice.

Though to be fair to Sir John, she had hardly minded it this time, she had not been frightened, and if hadn’t been for Snitterton she would have merely told Sir John she was very grateful but he should not comfort her like that again. But Snitterton had arrived, and the look of triumph in his face was more than Kitty could bear. She’d been looking at him in horror, knowing in her heart of hearts he would find the worst construction to place on what he was seeing, and knowing that he might be right. She’d been so focused that she almost missed the curious look on Sir John’s face. It was an apology, which was understandable enough, but it was more than that.

He’d done something stupid, she just had a feeling. But she could not tell from that brief look that was now emblazoned on her mind, whether it was as simple as falling in love with her, or something much more complicated. Either way she should have seen. She should have seen what was happening in front of her very eyes and it was her fault.

She should have done something. These things did not happen to other girls, so it must be her.

She’d spent all night considering it and was no further along than she had been at the start, except to know now that she should have spoken to Darcy immediately; it had made everything that much worse that he should have found out from someone else. She had thought she would hear Lord Snitterton if he came to the house and be able to intercept him, but she clearly had not.

Of course Darcy believed his cousin’s every word, and in this case he had been right to, Snitterton did not have to exaggerate and give his own poisoned version of events. Every word he had said while sitting opposite her that day at Pemberley had come true.

Kitty knew she had to shake herself out of this …because what else could she do? For Georgiana’s sake at the very least.

“Mrs Darcy?”

Kitty turned to see Sally hovering in the door and it suddenly dawned on Kitty that the whole house must be in uproar. The master yelling, the mistress sobbing and Miss Darcy more than likely taken ill to her bed! So Kitty tried to smile reassuringly. “Sally would you be so kind as to find Robert and ask him to bring down that large travelling case we took to Pemberley?”

Sally bobbed a curtsey and thankfully did not ask any questions. Kitty was not sure whether she’d be turned from the house, it seemed a dramatic turn of events that Darcy would not wish to engage in; however she would give him that option at least. After all, Kitty did not know how many people had seen her, or what Darcy was going to do, stalking across town. Everyone in the ton might already know, in which case how could he sit by and do nothing?

&&&^&&

Kitty knocked before opening the door to Georgiana’s room. As expected, Georgiana was lying face down on the bed and Mrs Annesley was attempting to soothe her.
“Mrs Annesley? Could you fetch Miss Darcy a strong cup of tea?”

“Shall I fetch you a cup also, Mrs Darcy?” asked Mrs Annesley rising from the bed.

“No, I shall be fine,” but seeing Mrs Annesley’s disbelieving frown, she relented, “Bring a tray.”

Once the door had been shut, Kitty joined her sister on the bed.

“Georgiana?”

Georgiana turned over before sitting up and enveloping her in a tight hug, “Kitty?”

“Of course it’s me, who else do you think it would be!” said Kitty lightly.

Georgiana drew back and looked at her searchingly, “Where is William?”

“Gone for a walk I expect.”

Georgiana looked disbelieving, “How can you be so calm?”

“Why should I not be?” Kitty prayed that her façade of calm would hold out.

“I have never seen – “

“An argument before? Don’t be so foolish, Georgie!”

“But he did not sound as if he loved you at all.”

Kitty did not know what to say to that. She wished she could explain this all to Georgiana and explain that of course Darcy did not love her. But she would not do that. Georgiana seemed already powerfully affected as if she had seen Darcy in a way she had never contemplated, a way that was wholly unpleasant.

Kitty could not believe that Georgiana had never seen her brother raise his voice in anger or lose his temper. She had seen all of her sisters, with the exception of Jane, lose their tempers at one point or another. She had also seen her parents do so. Of course everyone became angry in different ways. Mary, for instance, would never shout, but her very voice became tight and of a higher pitch and she quoted more verses than ever. Verses that would attempt to catalogue the faults of those she was angry with.

It had never been a method that had affected Kitty very much because she did not care much for verses. Whereas anything Lydia said in anger could cause Kitty to cry almost immediately.

Kitty squeezed Georgiana’s hand, “Of course he did not. He was angry.” Georgiana would erroneously assume those two statements had much in common, but it was not as if Kitty was lying to her.

“What had he done to upset you so much?”

Kitty, despite how hollow she was feeling, almost laughed. The sister who could have, not six months ago, never contemplated the idea that her beloved brother could be to blame for anything, now assumed he must be at fault.

“Nothing.”

“But you were so upset.”
“Yes, I did something very foolish,” said Kitty.

“What?” Georgiana’s earnest entreaties were far harder to ignore than all of the times her sisters had ever tried to wheedle something from her.

“It does not matter.” Kitty shook her head. “It does not.”

Georgiana looked as if she would have said more but Mrs Annesley had returned with tea.

“I have brought hot chocolate as well,” that worthy woman confided.

Kitty unfolded Jane’s letter. The Gardiners’ boy had just delivered it and Kitty was glad of the distraction.

She felt useless just sitting there, but what else could she do? Nothing. Anything she could do would just make things worse. She did not know what Darcy’s reaction would be if he returned home to find her not there, or where he would presume her to be.

Jane’s letter was all lightness. Her love for Bingley almost shone out of every loop of her penmanship. Kitty was so pleased for her. Her elder sister deserved every happiness in life.

A thought suddenly gripped her, causing her to crease the paper; what if she had spoiled it all? Jane and Bingley had only just found each other again after the rift that she had caused between them. Was she about to do it again? The announcement had been sent to the papers, but Jane could cry off if she felt forced or obliged to do so.

When she had told Darcy he could do with her what he liked, she had not been thinking of Jane specifically; but now she was even gladder she had said it. She hoped Darcy could think of his friend through his anger. Kitty could not bear it if her stupidity meant –

Kitty refused to think about it any more, instead she focused on the rest of Jane’s note.

It was ostensibly about crying off from an engagement they should have had that afternoon to visit a dressmaker with regards to Jane’s wedding dresses. Jane had wanted do to so before Mrs Bennet’s insistent notes from Longbourn had made her feel obliged to return home to share her joy with her mother. Kitty had not blamed her. She had not minded at all what Mrs Bennet had picked for her trousseau for she had not minded anything at that time. But Jane would wish for her trousseau to be exactly how Jane wanted it, not Mrs Bennet.

Jane and Lizzy should have come to the ball last night. They had been invited, but had had to choose between a prior, yet casual invitation for dinner with friends of the Gardiners and the ball. Kitty had agreed with them that it would not do to insult any friend of the Gardiners, and that dinner would more than likely be a more pleasant evening than a ton crush primarily full of strangers. Now she wished she had been selfish and asked her sisters to accompany her.

But no, she had to be truthful to herself and admit it had not been selflessness and virtue that had made Kitty press Lizzy and Jane to keep their engagement. Kitty liked being out of their watchful eye. She knew both of them had accepted her growth and position as Mrs Darcy, but they were still her older sisters who had seen her play many a practical joke with the young ladies of Mertyon and exposure everyone to ridicule.

If only they knew she had not grown past that stage.

The only thing that brought a smile to Kitty’s face was the fact that apparently a Mr Devinsham
had insulted Lizzy. Jane was assured that it had been unconsciously done, and it was this insistence on the part of Jane that brought a smile to Kitty’s face, not that Lizzy had been insulted. Although it sounded as though, even reading beyond Jane’s pleasant view of the world, Lizzy had managed to punish him properly for any insult – meant or not. She was glad to know that Jane would still at least, if she heard about the impropriety of the night before, find excuses for her, although it might, this time, take her some time. Nevertheless, she hoped neither of her sisters would ever change.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon.”

Kitty looked up to see the townhouse’s newest maid flushing with embarrassment.

“Yes?”

“I shall come back – “ the young girl – Kate – made to flee.

“Kate, what is it that you need to do?”

“I forgot to properly check that grate, ma’am.”

“Then you better do so, do not mind me.”

Kate moved to examine the fireplace and Kitty returned to her letter.

“I wonder why the master pays the post office.”

Kitty looked up, confused, “I’m sorry?”

“I should not have said anything,” Kate looked cowed. Kitty wondered if she would be happier at a household more like Longbourn where the servants were not expected to be quite so formal.

“No, what do you mean?”

“Just that’s two letters today that have not come by the post. One for you and one for the master.”

“When did Mr Darcy’s letter come?” asked Kitty. She had not heard Snitterton’s entry to the house, perhaps he had written and that is why she had missed it. She had not thought he would write a letter, she had thought his very nature would mean he would wish to see the look on his cousin’s face.

“Oh much earlier, before – “ Kate broke off in confusion.

“Thank you Kate,” Kitty took pity on her. She knew what Kate was referring to, she didn’t need clarification on that point.

&&^&

If one had to rank her actions of the past months with regards to the level of perfidy displayed this would have to rate near the top.

Kitty had never entered Darcy’s study before. There had been no reason to do so before, and in Kitty’s mind it was Darcy’s private sanctuary. It had not seemed fair to her that he should have so many places she would not venture into, and she’d had no problems entering his study at Pemberley, but this room she associated with those first weeks in London.

But it was not the being in his study that was the offence, it was what she planned to do.
Rifle through his desk.

She had to know what that letter said. There were so few excuses she could offer for her behaviour and she was not going to try and excuse herself, but she needed to know what evil slant Snitterton had placed on the events. He had said little yesterday evening, or if he had Kitty had not stayed to listen to him. She’d rushed from that garden and straight to be asked to be taken home. It had been cowardice, but she could not have borne it if Snitterton had revealed her actions then and there, so publicly. It would have quite sunk her and it would have humiliated her entire family.

In the end she did not need to do anything but pick up the letter from the desk where Darcy had clearly dropped it.

Kitty was surprised; it was not from Snitterton, but from Sir John. He took all the blame and made no real mention of what precisely had passed between them. From the tone of the letter they could have merely been seen walking together in the garden –

Kitty walked into the entrance hall. “Robert?”

“Did this letter come for Mr Darcy before or after his cousin visited?” For Darcy had not seemed to be a man who was unaware of the circumstances, Snitterton must have visited.

“After, Mrs Darcy.”

Kitty folded the letter in her hands before thanking Robert.

She returned the letter, but not quite where she found it. It did not seem to be prudent to leave such a letter lying where any servant, though she did not suspect any of them to do such a thing, could read it. She placed it inside one of the account books Darcy had left open clearly while in the middle of checking them.

So he had not believed Snitterton? It could be the only explanation, if he had not sought her out until he had read Sir John’s letter. In many ways this made her feel worse, she had always assumed that Darcy had placed every action of hers in the worst possible light. That he had always been judging her and blaming her. His tirade before had certainly confirmed that in her mind. But it seemed that he had believed in her over his cousin and had been wrong.

&&^^&&

Kitty was glad the events of the morning had exhausted Georgiana and that it had not been hard to convince her to take dinner in her room. Kitty had joined her there for her own dinner where the only difficulty was trying to divert the girl’s mind from Darcy’s continued absence.

She thought that she had succeeded but she hadn’t succeeded in diverting her own mind. So she had picked the dullest looking book and curled up with it in front of her fire. She’d asked for a message to be sent down to the kitchens to ensure that there was something for Darcy to eat when – or if – he returned home. He may have eaten somewhere else or had no plans to return, but Kitty could not simply make an assumption.

Sir John’s letter had confused her. She had trusted him implicitly. She had thought after Wickham that her judgement of character had been much improved. Even though he was friends with Snitterton, Colonel Fitzwilliam counted him as a friend as did, she thought, Darcy. Sir John had been accepted into their family circle – and why would Darcy knowingly expose Georgiana (again!) to any one he even slightly doubted?

“Going somewhere?”
Kitty looked up to see Darcy standing in the doorway, looking at the travelling trunk that had been placed by the door.

“Only if I am told to,” said Kitty softly. She didn’t add her thought that it might save time; it sounded weak and as though she was attempting to draw sympathy from him.

“I think your absence would draw some comment,” said Darcy, stiffly closing the door behind him.

Kitty didn’t know what to say. It would be better to let him speak, but she had to confess that she had read the letter. “If you are looking for Sir John’s letter I put it in one of the account ledgers, I did not think it should be lying in the open.”

“Wanted to ensure he had written what you told him to write?”

Kitty blinked, “No. I thought it was from your cousin, and I wanted to know what he had accused me of.”

Darcy walked to look out of the window; the moon was still at its height. “So you knew what to deny?”

“Yes,” said Kitty.

Darcy’s shoulders tensed, “At least you are honest now.”

“But I will only deny what I did not do,” said Kitty.

“It does not matter,” said Darcy.

Kitty looked at her hands. Of course he would say that. It would not materially affect him. People would of course talk about Darcy, but he could stay in this house and enjoy its luxuries. She would be the one punished by both him and society. If she thought she was entirely responsible she would have to accept it, but she was beginning to have doubts.

“Why is Sir John friends with Lord Snitterton?”

Darcy turned to look at her, “Why do you ask? Is it not customary to be married to the man before you attempt to detach him from his friends?”

“I would not know, I have not tried,” replied Kitty, attempting to keep some of the ill-used feeling out of her voice. “I ask because I do not understand it.” Kitty stood up and walked towards Darcy, who had turned away from the window, his hand playing with his signet ring. “I know you do not wish to hear this, but Sir John is a good man. I’m not in love with him, but I cannot believe that he behaved maliciously; neither did I. It was a mistake,” she paused, thinking. “Your cousin is not a good man and this is why I cannot understand why he and Sir John are friends.”

“Sir John a good man?” Darcy sounded disbelieving.

“Yes. You know that. You thought so of him too, can you not trust your own feelings?”

“I did not trust him.”

Kitty blinked. She had not been expecting that. He had not shown it.

“No. I knew there was something wrong about him. So no do not say that I did not suspect. My error lies in not suspecting you.” Kitty did not know how to react to that. “He inherited an
impoverished estate, and is unable to sell off any portion of it. Snitterton likes having someone handsome and well mannered around him. You might have noticed he likes appearances. However, to keep up these appearances – “

“He has to spend a great deal of money?” said Kitty. “Doesn’t Lord Matlock have a great deal of money?”

“He does not give it to Snit.”

“I do not blame him,” Kitty paused. Was Darcy implying what she thought he was implying? That Sir John had had no real feelings for her, which was as Kitty had been sure he must, even if those feelings had been tempered by something else, and that he was financially dependent on Snitterton and had always been part of some plan of Lord Snitterton’s.
Darcy watched his wife’s countenance change rapidly as she appeared to digest his words.

“Was he to ask money from you to keep my indiscretion secret?”

Darcy was surprised she managed to make the connection; he had not come to it until he had been standing in Sir John’s rooms.

“But you have not said what that indiscretion is?” Darcy did not wish for her to voice it, but it must be said. There was too much unspoken between them and it had caused too much confusion and pain. “Do not say that I know what it is.”

“If you have your information from Sir John or from Snitterton you cannot know what it was. I walked in the garden with Sir John, escaping from Snitterton, and we spoke about comfort, whether I was given any or not. And Sir John kissed me and I let him. If Snitterton had not walked into the garden, I would have merely told Sir John not to give me that sort of comfort again. It most likely would have been a happy memory.”

“Do you tell me that to cause me pain?” Darcy did not mean that it would hurt him that she would enjoy to kiss another though that did not do his pride any good, merely that it was painful to hear her be so flippant about so serious a matter.

“No, because you asked me to tell you the truth and you wish for me to be honest.”

“You said before it was your fault.”

“Yes. I should have seen what he was about, that he was – “ She broke off and looked troubled. “You wish for me to think ill of him, like I hate Wickham, but he is not Wickham. But I still should have seen it, or I should not have been so foolish to walk alone with anyone, knowing that your cousin dislikes me so and would be happy to see me ruined. I have not done anything to him and still it is so.”

Catherine sensed he was not going to respond but she didn’t seem to be going to continue. That irked Darcy as it seemed he was going to have to work to resolve the situation. Although she might simply be waiting for his decision, rather than wish to make him feel as if he was in the wrong.

“I have been to visit Sir John.”

That made her look up from the rug, “Have you challenged him?”

Darcy was about to ask her what she knew about duels and challenges, but then he remembered seeing her often with romance novels. “No,” he responded dryly.

“Why not?”

“Perhaps I don’t find your honour worth defending.”

“I had thought duels were about a man’s honour, nothing to do with the woman.” Darcy should have sworn she’d raised an eyebrow at him.

Darcy suddenly felt defeated and tired; he sought comfort in one of the tall backed chairs by the fire. She was right. Duels were never about the lady’s honour. A lady only had honour connected
to a man. A father, a brother, a husband. If he had challenged Sir John, as much as he might have protested otherwise, it would have been to punish Sir John for his behaviour towards himself. To punish the fact Sir John had come into his household and seduced his wife. Except he had not.

To seduce one had to lead someone away from something, and what did Catherine have to be lead astray from? She felt no tie to him and he had hardly encouraged one. No, she was hardly seduced.

"Why did you not challenge him?"

Darcy looked up, "Do I owe you an explanation?" Darcy rather felt he didn’t.

"Yes."

That certainly captured Darcy’s attention and even made him laugh. "Do I? Why, pray tell?"

"Because I am alone and friendless. I cannot speak to your sister because I would not break her heart. I cannot speak to my sisters because I would not betray you. I did betray you last night, but not in the way you think. I spoke my feelings regarding you to Sir John and that was wrong."

Darcy found that interesting: she classed the betrayal of emotions and thoughts above those of the body. Society certainly did not think of it that way. It was probably not surprising she thought that way; after all, it was gossip that had caused their marriage. She might have seen it as innocent then, but afterwards she could have hardly missed the hidden poisoned sting of such tattle tales.

Then he had a thought, "I see you do not class your revelation to Miss Bennet as a betrayal of me."

"It was not. I told her the truth of the events; I told her that which would make you a hero in her eyes."

"So it is revealing weaknesses which is a betrayal?"

"Yes, particularly those that would lay one open to censure or ridicule."

Darcy would not retort that he had no weakness that would result in that, because his treatment of her in private, and sometimes even in public, certainly would.

"You would have me believe you have acted to protect me?" Darcy was incredulous that she should think that he needed protecting. He knew that emotion leaked into his voice, and that she would more than likely suspect he meant that he needed no protection. His pride made him feel that certainly, but he was more incredulous that she was capable of such feeling towards him.

"I cannot make you believe anything, and I have told you why you must tell me why you did not challenge Sir John."

"Perhaps I am protecting you," replied Darcy. She looked troubled by this response and Darcy was angered that she should be so upset that Sir John was a villain. "Perhaps I did not challenge him because I am a coward."

Catherine smiled, "I know you can fence. Mr Lewis is quite enamoured of your style; he has told me more than once he was sure you could pink a man in minutes."

"Do you even know what that means?" questioned Darcy.

"I imagine it is something to do with managing to best your opponent, and can only think that it
must be touching your opponent with your sword. If you can do that, you could win such a duel.”

“Fencing is rather out of fashion for duels,” commented Darcy who was struck by the absurdity of discussing fencing at such a time.

“But it is not unheard of, besides it is irrelevant; I know you own duelling pistols.”

“You seem to know a great deal,” Darcy was surprised by this. She must listen more than he thought. It only made him think of all the things he failed to pay attention to or absorb. Catherine did not respond, instead moved across the room to curl in the opposite arm chair. “I have answered you, if you choose to disagree then…”

“So what shall you do with me?”

Darcy did not like that phrase. It reminded him forcibly of some gothic novels he had once read. He did not like being cast in the role of abductor or gaoler. They way she said it made him think she thought he was going to lock her up in an attic, and he said as much.

“You mean you would not?”

Darcy had been looking at the fire and felt a different sort of heat come over him but it diffused when he looked over to his wife. She had been teasing him. He rather thought that he should be more annoyed at that, that she should be chastened and humble; but he was more relieved she did not think him such a monster. Except…

“You got down your travelling case.”

“Turning me from the house is hardly the same.”

“It is not something I would do.” His tone was firm.

“I was not thinking properly.”

“Do you ever?”

Later, Darcy could not help but see the injustice in that statement. He had thought her lacking in sense and she had had the sense to piece together the events and hide them as best she could from his servants and Georgiana. He had suspected her of selfishness and she had not abdicated her responsibility; instead she had taken it all upon herself and thought of others.

Most of all he had credited her with having no thought in her head worth having, and she sincerely believed she had betrayed him by speaking to a friend about their marriage.

He had never thought she was struggling with the same feelings as he had been. He had thought she was happy to have the freedom and the money to spend as she liked. But although she had not confided as much in him, it was as if a curtain had been lifted and he could see more clearly. She had a far more open temper than his and it must have been a considerable restraint and effort to remain so outwardly unaffected and he, who had great depth of reserve and was justly proud of it, had been unable to prevent himself in confiding various thoughts and feelings to his cousin, uncle and friend.

Darcy could only believe that someone who knew her well, (and had she not confessed that neither of her elder sisters were close to her?) would have seen that she was struggling with something. Or perhaps it was a case that someone with no preconceived notions of her character
would just assume that she must have such deeper feelings. Sir John certainly had.

He had been so angry when he had entered Sir John’s lodgings, not even knowing what he was going to do. His first thought upon seeing the packed valises was that Sir John was going to flee, not from Darcy seeking revenge but from the outcome of the duel; that Sir John was lying about deloping.

Then Darcy had wondered how he could have the temerity to roll his eyes at young ladies and their gothic novels, he had clearly been reading too many to believe that such a plan was afoot. He might disbelieve Sir John’s character, but he did not believe he was such a man as to kill another in order to run off with his wife, or to kill a man for some plan of Snitterton’s.

Darcy looked at the half finished drink in front of him; he was deliberately sipping the drink, his second. He had decided to sip it when he had realised he had poured his second in as many minutes; he would not turn into Mr Hurst. It was doing nothing to clear his mind. If his mind was not clear, Darcy did not know how he was going to sort out this mess.

Of course there were many easy ways to solve his problems, but those solutions invariably meant that only he himself would be saved. If he challenged Sir John only his own honour in the eyes of society would be restored, it would materially change nothing about the situation in which he and his family found themselves. If he banished Catherine from the house, then the situation was certainly solved and his honour restored, but then the story would affect the Bennet family; it would affect Bingley through Jane. His sister would be affected for she would not believe him if he said Catherine had merely gone on a holiday to the seaside. If he did nothing then Snitterton threatened. His illustrious cousin had not said what he planned to do, only that he ‘knew how to act’. It was not just the kiss, Darcy was sure Snitterton had plenty to say about Catherine’s actions – all of them innocent unless told with a poisoned tongue. He knew just how actions could be tainted by the teller. If anyone but Mrs Long had found him by the creek that morning, the tale they had told might have lead to a completely different ending.

No, if he did nothing then Snitterton would create a scandal anyway. Why he would do so was troubling Darcy. He thought he had the answer, even though he was not sure the source was credible, but the answer made no sense to him.

It was not that Darcy credited Snitterton with a better character, but that he credited himself with more perceptivity.

Even if he took the well tested country retreat option to wait until any scandal might blow over, and to stop any malicious gossiping; he doubted that would satisfy Snitterton.

He had failed with Wickham, and with Miss Bennet, and even with Catherine, but he could not believe he did not know his own cousin. That he could be so fooled was a blow to his pride, far worse than an errant bride.

Darcy gulped the rest of his whiskey and poured himself another. He knew he would be unable to sleep. When something troubled him he had to resolve it before he could rest. He would stay up all night in order to put his thoughts in order, to explain if necessary. Mulling it over in his mind never did any good; he had to decide upon a course of action and take it. It led him to be impulsive occasionally surprising those around him.

Fitzwilliam was not here to discuss the problem with, and nor was writing a letter to anyone going to help. He was devoid of options. There were so few people, who knew the tale, and those that did were either not here or Darcy could not trust himself around them.

Except perhaps one. He had told himself, promised himself, that he would resolve their situation,
and he had not. He could not help but think it was a contributing factor to the current crisis. He had not wanted to own to his faults and the result was chaos.

He opened the door to his room and closed it; Edwards had clearly decided to retire for the night. Darcy was sure if he rang for him that his valet would promptly appear, but it was best that he had gone to bed.

It was the first time that day Darcy contemplated his servants. He had certainly thought of Georgiana and her reaction, though not as deeply as he should have. He had lost control in front of her and he worried he had permanently removed his sister’s rose coloured view of the world – or rather of himself. Something he had, and would have, moved heaven and earth to keep intact. But now he had to think of what the rest of the household was thinking. He had always been proud of the way he was held in such high esteem by those who worked for him. For him their good opinion was worth more than many peers of the realm. He felt it reflected better upon himself and was a much more worthy aspiration than those held by other masters.

Darcy shook these thoughts from his head and moved towards the connecting door to his wife’s chamber. He only realised how late it was when he opened that door. Edwards must have only recently retired because the fire was still burning in his grate. In Catherine’s room the embers were almost cold. Darcy had to return to his room to light a candle in order to see. He must have spent some time in his study thinking. Darcy wished he could say the quick passage of time was a blessing.

The sudden light in her eyes must have woken her, or she had not truly been asleep.

“Mr Darcy?”

It was not to be wondered that she sounded surprised and he did not once think for a moment the surprise was that she expected someone else. No she just had not expected anyone at all.

“You wished for me to answer you when you asked me why I did not challenge Sir John.”

He thought she looked calm, “Very well.”

Darcy put the candle down on the table next to Catherine’s bed, moving the book she was reading out of the way. He idly glanced at the title, “The Man of Feeling.” He thought that might explain their interactions, and her attraction to Sir John.

“Is this what you wish for?”

Catherine looked confused until she saw him fingering the book.

“I think it would be hard on the washerwoman,” at his baffled looked she continued, “a man of feeling such as written there must go through a great deal of handkerchiefs. I should like a man of feeling without the weeping.”

“Indeed.” Darcy would have thought of himself as a man of feeling. He certainly had a great depth of thought, and he cared a great deal. But it was not indiscriminate caring and he had been brought up to think a great deal too much about how people viewed himself and which people’s views to care about to become the man of feeling in that novel.

“You asked me why I did not challenge Sir John. I did not do so because it would be beneath me.”
“Many men do not think so,” replied Catherine hugging her knees. “Do you not think you could wound someone?”

“I do not see the point of it, but I suspect I might if I was avenging purely honour. But in this case what would it serve? Sir John would delope, or maybe he would not, but all it would mean would be the ton discovering something had taken place. I have been taught to do good, but in pride and conceit. I had meant to apologise to you.” He expected her to interrupt him, but she did not. “My behaviour has not been that of a gentleman. However I did not wish to own to my faults so I thought it would be best not to speak of it. I was wrong.”

“I did not mean to do wrong; but I do it so frequently.”

“I had faulty guidance, you did not have any guidance at all.”

Darcy wondered if she would defend her parents.

“There was guidance there if I chose to look for it; Jane and Lizzy have no fault of character.”

“No one has no fault of character,” replied Darcy quietly. “One is always finding them. I thought I was a good judge of character.”

“You said you had suspected Sir John. You cannot fault yourself there.”

“I was not speaking of Sir John. I was speaking of my cousin. You asked me before why they were friends. I thought it was self evident at least from Sir John’s point of view; an impecunious Scotsman and the heir to a wealthy earldom. Snitterton’s motivations have always been less clear. But my cousin has always thought highly of status, wealth and flattery. In this he is supported by a great deal of the ton. Except Snitterton has no charm and no address. Neither do I, but I have never wished for it. My cousin however wishes for the rewards he thinks comes with being able to dazzle society. I can only assume that is why Sir John became an attractive associate to Snitterton. Snitterton neither possesses tact nor subtlety – not that he would tell you so. I was blinded by his blunt nature – his openness in his dislike of you was immaterial because I thought I knew his faults. He would run whichever way the wind blew despite whatever he might have said.”

Darcy looked at the support of the four poster bed and inspected the carvings. He had almost never entered this room when it had been his mother’s. She had visited him in the nursery when it had been appropriate; his father had been more open with his study and chamber. He moved around the bed examining it as much as the light would allow, it gave him something to focus on as he chose his words.

“I assumed I could read my cousin. I did not think him devoid of deviousness; I just thought he could not hide such from me. Perhaps I could not conceive of his feelings of inadequacies, for who could not feel inadequate next to a brother like Richard and a father such as my esteemed uncle? If I could not envision those feelings then how could I realise what they might make capable of? At first I did not believe Fitzwilliam when he said that his brother had such a feeling of dislike towards you. Then I did not regard the idea that it could be anything more than dislike.”

“I gave him opportunities enough to list my faults.”

“More than that; he planned, plotted and engineered situations. My only consolation is that I was not the only one fooled.”

“Who has told you this about your cousin? He can not have admitted to deliberately trying to – He did not. I kissed Sir John willingly.”

Darcy flinched.
“Sir John believed his friend to merely be ranting. He didn’t believe for a moment that Snitterton meant to carry them out – “

“You believe him?” Now Catherine sounded incredulous.

“His address and charm make him a likely suspect. He is open, honest, forthright. He acts on his feelings. He wished to – “Darcy was not sure he could speak the words when it came to it. “- his feelings overtook him and he acted upon them. He is at fault. But I do not suppose him a true villain. “

“Except he – we - gave your cousin the opportunity he was looking for.”

“Indeed.” Darcy was suddenly tired and sank down upon the bed. “Now somehow I must silence my lord Snitterton, prevent his machinations, ones that I have on the whole missed. His manipulation of me, of you – to a lesser extent of Sir John and his mother.”

“Do you not think you are making him into a greater villain than he is? After all he is not saying anything that is untrue – “

“Yes, he has,” said Darcy firmly. She did not know that his poisonous tongue had been let loose much earlier than her indiscretion. There would have been a crisis without any action on her part. It was this conclusion that heartened him in some respect, at least with regards to what he was to do about his marriage. What he was to do with his cousin he still did not know.

&&^&&
Kitty felt the morning before she saw it. The rays of light filtering through her window from where the maid must have opened the curtains tinted the blackness with red. She turned over to seek more sleep but as she did so her hand hit something. She sat bolt upright in shock. She was not sure she was relieved when she realised it was Darcy and not some sort of rodent. Lydia had once put a dead mouse in her bed as a joke.

It was probably best that he had not woken even with her jumping; Darcy would probably not appreciate being compared to a dead mouse.

Kitty slipped out of the bed and into her dressing gown that Sally had clearly thoughtfully laid out for her. As she moved to stoke the fire a little more Kitty wondered what the maid sent to prepare the room and Sally had thought when they’d entered the room to find their master there, fully clothed. It was like those little things that niggled at Kitty that she often wanted to ask of others but it would be improper to do so.

So she just continued to wonder what Sally thought as she rang for her maid, who made no comment when Kitty moved into her dressing room to change into a morning dress.

“Is Georgiana down at breakfast, Sally?”

“I believe Miss Darcy is still abed, ma’am.”

“I thought it was quite late?”

“Yes ma’am but – “she broke off slightly flustered, and flushed at Kitty’s inquiring glance. “- after yesterday it is to be expected.”

Sally did not seem to want to comment any further and Kitty did not blame her.

“There,” Sally exclaimed as she pushed in the final pin that held the rather austere hair style that Sally had effected. Kitty had asked for quick and simple and was not entirely sure she liked the results.

As she turned her head this way and that in the mirror, she saw Sally looking conflicted. “Was there something else, Sally?”

“Mr Edwards was wondering – “

“Oh yes. I am sure Mr Darcy will ring when he needs him.”

Sally affected a curtsey and left the room, leaving Kitty with the question of what was the correct etiquette to wake up one’s husband. The range of options was almost limitless and somehow none of them seemed appropriate.

In the end she decided it was probably best to do nothing and go downstairs to breakfast.

Kitty was closing the door behind her as quietly as possible when she turned her head to see who was coming up the stairs. She assumed it was Mrs Annesley or one of the servants, but it was Lord Snitterton.

She was astounded to see him and he seemed equally so to see her, which struck her as entirely ridiculous as it was in fact her home.
“What are you doing here, my lord?” Kitty had no idea who would have admitted him, at least past the hallway. Any servant would have led him to the drawing room or Darcy’s study, not up here to the private rooms.

“I could say the same about you,” he replied.

“I do not know why you should,” Kitty felt her face heat and felt angry. He had every and no right to speak to her so.

Snitterton reached the hallway and lowered his voice, though who he expected would hear them Kitty did not know. Unless he suspected servants to be hiding in every corner having nothing better to do than spy on their employers.

“Do you not? I believe I told you what you were when we first met.”

“And I wish I had told you what you were,” said Kitty.

“And what would that be, ma’am?”

“The lowest creature upon this earth,” said Kitty, her hand shaking upon the door knob. She still had it placed there, subconsciously wishing to assure herself of some means of escape. “You think you may judge me? Judge yourself!”

“And what crimes might I judge myself of? I have none. You are the one who has brought shame upon this family. I told my father how it would be. Of course he chose to believe that my cousin could not be so fooled. He chose to believe that Darcy was impervious to the sort of mistakes that could ruin a young man’s life. I know better, of course. You think it was a crime to open his eyes?”

Kitty was silenced. It was such a difficult situation. She knew that she was in the wrong. But if Darcy spoke the truth (and why would he not?), then his cousin would have spread base lies about her whatever the outcome of any walk in the garden might have been. If he had respect for his cousin he would of course reveal her unfaithfulness to him. But not in the way he had. He would be sorry to have to do so. Kitty could imagine the look on the Colonel’s face if it had been him in that garden. She could imagine the tact and grace with which he would have handled the situation.

“You cannot answer that.”

“No, but I can speak against your manner. Your every action revolts. My worst crime is not what I have done but what it will allow you to do with ease!”

Snitterton smiled.

“I wish for you to leave this house,” said Kitty firmly.

“I do not think you have any power to eject me,” said Snitterton.

“Why would you even wish to come here? He cannot thank you for what you have told him. You must not know him – you must know he will not rejoice with the messenger.” Kitty paused. Darcy had told her last night that Snitterton had manipulated others. From that she had thought about his behaviour, his sly underhanded comments, his constant belittling, his suggestions. The way he looked at her at the Opera. He planted ideas and then watered them. Darcy had said he had done so with his mother, and from that Kitty could only assume that Lady Matlock had spoken to Darcy about her that time he had not told her of his aunt’s visit. Kitty wondered now that Darcy would take that time to protect her from what was clearly malicious family gossip – then when she was
innocent! – she was not so now. "Or is that why your mother visited him instead of you? You asked her – “

“My mother has known what you were since she first laid eyes on you. I did not need to ask anything of her.”

That stung. Kitty had realised Lady Matlock disapproved of her, she was hardly blind, but she had thought that was just understandable disapproval and snobbery.

“And you asked me why I have come? I have come to remonstrate with my cousin. If he would just act decisively, he could solve all his problems.”

“If he gives you money, you mean?” said Kitty.

“I have never asked for money,” said Snitterton.

“No?” said Kitty.

He faltered then and Kitty was glad her guess was right.

“Blackmail is a commoner’s sport. I merely want to see my cousin returned to his previous good reputation.”

It was plausible. She was a blight upon the Matlock family tree. A girl with no connections – neither monetary or familiar. A girl who had been essentially saved from ruin by a hasty engagement to – as far as society was concerned – the seducer. More than that a young lady who was ill equipped in every way to be Mrs Darcy. Of course a man’s family would attempt to prevent such a marriage.

But the Matlocks had done little to attempt such a thing. The Earl and his younger son seemed complacent and the Countess merely disappointed. Kitty knew that Lady Catherine de Bourgh shouted her displeasure from the country but she seemed to hold no sway over anybody. It made no sense for Snitterton to attempt to rid Darcy of her now. It would only cause even more of a scandal. It was plausible that he was concerned and that he would keep a watchful eye upon her and that is what it had seemed to have been. An outward dislike.

But Kitty had not been able to shake off a feeling of intense dislike of the Viscount; a sort of cold feeling. Adding to this, Darcy had implied last night that it was more than a mere dislike and it had to be more than a dislike of her.

Kitty eyed the man standing not two feet away from her and looked at him truly. This world she had been thrown into was so difficult to navigate. She’d found both the familiar and the foreign, although lately it was more and more the familiar as she had found that those in town were not so different in essentials than those in the country. But this was something completely alien. Although, she had always thought Snitterton a small man, tolerated only for his title and for his acquaintance who were drawn to him through obligation or something more sinister. Kitty could not help but think of Mary King who’d come into money just before Kitty was married. No one had cared two straws for Mary King until she’d been left ten thousand pounds. She could have hardly missed the sudden attention of the men and the reason why. It had hardly bothered her, perhaps because it was new and it would when the novelty had worn off, but it had bothered the other young ladies of the village. They did not see why they could not have ten thousand pounds and the men’s attention. They’d been jealous and spiteful. All sorts of things had suddenly been known and revealed about Mary King. Kitty had been so busy dreading her wedding that she was sure she only knew the half of it.
“Spreading base tales cannot return anybody to their previous good reputation.” Kitty countered, her hand slipped off the door knob as she put up her chin to step closer to the Viscount. She would not have him think her afraid, and she would not have him think her beaten.

“Perhaps not,” he replied.

Now that she was listening to it, she knew that tone. She’d often had it when she’d liked a young gentleman and he’d preferred one of her sisters. It had been stronger when that sister was Lydia. Snitterton was jealous.

He had much to be jealous of. From what he had said, no one ever paid him much attention. Darcy had said he had underestimated him and dismissed him. Kitty could easily believe that Lord Matlock and the Colonel had also done so. While Darcy would claim that he was only courted because of his position – that men like Mr Middleton admired him for reasons beyond his control – he was wrong. Kitty might think her husband an odious man half the time but that stemmed from his unwillingness to bend and learn. At the heart of it, he was a good responsible man and admired for it. Snitterton was tolerated because he must be. A stronger man would look within himself to see what it was that he could improve about himself. A petty man like Snitterton merely resented the world around him and blamed it for his own shortcomings.

Kitty did not like to compare Snitterton to herself, but she must have felt similar feelings to him – she’d felt undervalued by those around her, she’d thought petty thoughts but there the parallel ended. He’d not contained his thoughts and slowly come to self realisation and attempted to change.

“Jealousy and Revenge are true faults, are they not my lord?” asked Kitty.

He looked slightly startled. “Not when justified.”

“And how might they be justified?” Kitty almost leapt at the voice behind her. Snitterton looked more surprised than she. Kitty stepped backwards to remove herself from between the two cousins and she saw Snitterton’s eyes flick between Darcy and the door he had just revealed himself from.

“Darcy, I must say I am quite shocked! Though perhaps I should not be surprised, I had thought you much wiser than you have shown yourself to be! Of course my revelation should send any decent man to the other side of the world, but you! It sends you running – “

“I would not finish that sentence if I were you,” said Darcy in a low tone.

“What would you do if I did?”

Darcy did not answer; instead he levelled his gaze at Kitty. “Catherine, if you would be so good as to wait in your room while I see my cousin from this house.”

Kitty nodded and moved past him back to her chamber.

The door closed behind her firmly. Kitty wondered how much Darcy could have heard through the ajar door and how long he had been standing behind it. She pressed her ear against the door but could hear nothing but muffled footsteps.

&&^^&&

When Darcy did not return for some time, Kitty cautiously made her way downstairs to find Darcy was closeted with his steward who had some urgent business. She was glad to find that he had not meant to leave her in her room as some sort of punishment.
“Kitty?”

Kitty turned to see Georgiana on the stairs. “Georgie! You are finally up!”

“Yes. I could not sleep,” she confessed.

“Are you not feeling well?” Kitty moved up the stairs so she could place a hand on the other girl’s forehead.

“Have you and my brother cried friends again?” Georgiana sounded so uncertain.

Kitty was not sure what to say to that. It would be flippant to think that she and Darcy had never been friends, for it was so important to her sister. But Kitty was not even certain that despite the communication that had occurred between her and her husband that they could be considered to be on any sort of terms. She had committed a crime and it was only in his power to forgive her for it. Even with forgiveness did not come absolution for it was certain to become public knowledge.

A door opened below them and as the steward left the house Darcy moved into the hallway and stopped short when he saw the ladies on the staircase.

“Perhaps we should ask your brother?” said Kitty, turning to look at Darcy. She hoped that being further down the staircase than Georgiana would mean that he could see her expression when his sister could not.

“Ask me what?” said Darcy, apparently trying to sound light.

“If we have cried friends?” Kitty turned to smile at Georgiana but noticed that she was silent and a little pale. Kitty did not understand it, for it was almost nothing to her if her sisters or her parents fought. It was the way of things for her. For Georgiana it appeared to mean a great deal more than that. Kitty hoped that Darcy could see that, and there was no reason he could not for he knew his sister better than her, by virtue of a longer acquaintance but also because he was so solicitous of her.

“Georgie, how could you ask such a foolish question?” said Darcy. Kitty could sense a certain tightness in his voice, but he looked as if he was in a jovial mood as he moved up the staircase towards them.

“You were so angry,” said Georgiana quietly.

“Yes, but it is forgotten now,” said Darcy firmly.

“Are you quite sure?” she asked anxiously.

“Quite forgotten,” smiled Darcy, Kitty seeing the affection he put into smoothing his sister’s hair. Georgiana did not seem convinced. “What more proof do you need than this?” he queried.

He turned to her and Kitty tried to play her part convincingly, but for a moment she could not work out precisely what he wanted her to do, then she noticed he was looking at her hand so she presented it to him. He bent over it and kissed it. Kitty of course had had her hand kissed before, but it seemed so strange for him to be the one doing so.

Kitty tried not to look shocked and plastered a smile on her face as she turned back to Georgiana, her smile almost faltered at the brother and sister’s next exchange.

“So you shall be going to the Sharps’ musical soiree tonight?”
“Of course,” replied Darcy smoothly.

Kitty blinked. She knew who was invited to the soiree and could not believe Darcy would wish her to go or that he would wish to go. Though she imagined that it must be again for appearances’ sake.

Kitty smiled at Mrs Sharp and dutifully admired Miss Sharp’s harp.

“It is a very fine harp,” said Kitty, not knowing what a not fine harp should look like.

She was surprised that Darcy had wandered away, though she supposed it would look peculiar for him to spend the evening following her about when he had never done so before. She felt far more exposed this evening than she had ever done so before.

“Do you play, Mrs Darcy?” Miss Sharp looked at her, the young lady did not seem to be saying it archly like many other young misses might do.

“Oh no, we never had a harp.” Kitty wondered if Miss Sharp would inquire about the other instruments of her household so she decided to forestall her, “and my elder sister commandeered the piano.”

Miss Sharp laughed, “I wish I had sisters who could have prevented me from learning the harp!”

“You do not enjoy it?” Kitty could not understand doing something you did not enjoy if it was not necessary.

“Not particularly. But it shall catch me a rich husband – “

Kitty must have looked slightly shocked. Of course she realised this was what young ladies came to town to do, and what her own mother attempted to do from the moment Jane was sixteen, but she had never heard it said quite as bluntly as that in London. London seemed to pretend that was not what the purpose of the Season was.

Miss Sharp had broken off in slightly confusion, “I should not be so blunt. I do not enjoy it but if I do not then I shall be on the shelf; I should not wish that.”

“No, I do not believe that would be very pleasant,” agreed Kitty.

“Do you not find it curious that the handsome men are always the most ineligible? I think Sir John MacDonald is the most handsome man, but he is quite poor. Perhaps not for a girl from the country – “ Kitty almost flinched at this but restrained herself because it was quite clear Miss Sharp meant no offence by either the reference to Sir John or to the indictment of country ladies! – “but he is not rich enough for a young lady who has come up to London. “

Miss Sharp looked thoughtful, “Your husband is handsome and rich.”

Kitty found herself nodding slightly bewildered by the turn of conversation.

“Is there something wrong with him?”

A little stung, Kitty hotly replied, “Of course there isn’t anything wrong with him!”

“Oh I have offended you,” said Miss Sharp, looking mortified, “It is just I cannot understand why Mama keeps introducing me to the most – I cannot explain it, but I have begun to fear that
something must be wrong with all men!”

Kitty laughed. She was sure poor Jane, if Jane could ever own to an uncharitable thought, had considered the same thing when she was but seventeen and Mrs Bennet had paraded every single gentleman before her. Jane had been very sorry but one was too tall and one was too short, one smelt like onions. Of course the truth was that none of them had been her beloved Mr Bingley. Even then she must have been marked for him. “I am quite sure that it is merely because the perfect gentleman waits for you, he has just not revealed himself yet.”

Miss Sharp smiled, a smile which faltered a little when she saw Mrs Sharp move into the room seemingly to gather people around the harp. “Do stay, Mrs Darcy, and hear my playing.”

“It is a musical soiree! I came for no other purpose,” said Kitty in all seriousness.

Kitty found herself on a slightly distant sofa, in front of some decorative hangings. No one else joined her, either trying to sit closer or further away if they were an eligible gentleman not wishing to be caught in a honey trap. She could not see Darcy anywhere and could only assume he was avoiding the harp, which made little sense because she knew her husband appreciated music, and he could hardly fall prey to matchmaking mamas.

“Do not be alarmed, madam.”

Kitty clutched her reticle when she heard the voice from behind her. It was Sir John.

“I beg you would not look around. I do not wish to – “his disembodied voice broke off. “I merely wished to apologise to you. My actions were not those of a gentleman. But I swear I never meant you any harm. I do not regret –“ Kitty’s eyes flicked across the room but no one seemed to be paying her corner of the room the least bit of attention. Sir John continued, “I do not regret all that I should. I would not have you think the worst of me although I deserve it.”

Kitty was glad some matron had left her fan on the sofa for she could unfurl it and fan herself, hiding the fact she appeared to be speaking to herself.

“I am very sorry that we can no longer be friends, Sir John. I forgive you, but I cannot forgive myself.”

“You have nothing to charge yourself with and I do not deserve your forgiveness. A wolf in sheep’s clothes is still a wolf.”

There was a slight rustle and silence.

Kitty did not believe Sir John was a wolf in sheep’s clothes, that was Wickham; he was perhaps though a fox. But Wickham was the reason she chastised herself she had not been more discerning.

&&^&^&

Darcy helped her into the carriage and she waited until the door was firmly closed behind him and they had set off, following the line of carriages also leaving the Sharps’.

“Sir John spoke to me.”

Darcy stiffened beside her.

“I do not think anyone saw him, although if they saw him it would have looked most peculiar he was hiding behind a curtain.”
Darcy said nothing.

“He merely wished to apologise to me,” there was still no response so Kitty continued after a breath, “I told him I regretted it but that we could no longer be friends.”

Darcy turned to look out the window of the carriage and Kitty’s heart sunk, had she not done the right thing? She had thought that it would be best not to make a scene but rather listen and talk to him and then tell Darcy about it immediately. Why could she not make the right decisions?

Then a hand closed over her own and squeezed her fingers. He was still not looking at her but she felt comforted.

&&^^&&
Sometimes Darcy wondered if he lived in his study. Sometimes he could go days or weeks without having to attend to business except the odd piece here or there, and then it would suddenly tumble all down on top of him. The past little while he’d had no time to spare to even consider anything else, which he was inordinately grateful for. The several days since the Sharps’ soiree had been awkward between himself and Catherine but more importantly between himself and Georgiana. But he had had so little time to consider both matters.

“Darcy, what are you doing holed up in here?”

Darcy looked up at the entrance of his favourite cousin, which considering the options probably did not say as much as it should.

“I did not think you had returned from Kent, Fitzwilliam?”

“Well both you and my father must have realised my return trip to Kent was a futile one. I may be handsome and charming but not even my address is going to stop Lady Catherine braying like a banshee. We can only be grateful that those that listen to her will not be listened to themselves. She has nothing to accuse your wife of, and nothing to accuse you of.”

Darcy tried to keep his face passive, particularly when the Colonel spoke of his aunt having no evidence.

“Why so glum, Darcy? Our Aunt’s next move I believe – in a plan worthy of a general – is to imply that you are fit for Bedlam. How a nephew bereft of his senses could help matters I do not know, but it is sure to convince everybody that she is the true patient!”

Darcy smiled. If only Lady Catherine was his only worry. “I am glad to hear it, Fitzwilliam. Not that our aunt continues in her quest and in such a foolish manner, just – “

“I know what you mean, Darcy, now what have you done to poor Sir John?”

Darcy froze for a moment and it took him a moment to risk looking the Colonel in the eye.

“What do you mean?”

“I asked him to accompany me here and he refused. He seems to be making a habit of refusing to come here – “

Darcy knew that tone in the Colonel’s voice. It meant that the Colonel had suspected a partiality before he left for Kent. Before that ball. It also meant he should have seen it.

Darcy could only conjure up the vision of his meeting with Sir John at his lodgings.

From it, Darcy could gather that while he had been brought up to be reserved, Sir John had been brought up to have no reserve. Each situation brought its own drawbacks and while Darcy would like to have said that it was Sir John’s openness and vigour for life that held the greater share of evil doing or cause of evil doing, Darcy could not but see that either way of life was likely to result in pain.

Sir John had assumed that Darcy would expose his misdoings and wrongs to the Colonel – I can only regret that my association with your family is to be completely at an end.

Darcy had not replied to him in the affirmative, at that moment it had seemed so incredible that
there should even be an implication that Sir John might be allowed to set foot inside a Darcy or Fitzwilliam home ever again. Of course Snitterton had proved himself unworthy of that name and was unlikely to follow the family’s decision, but Darcy had stopped thinking of his cousin as family. It seemed unbelievable to Darcy that a gentleman, as Sir John purported to be, would even wish to inflict his presence upon those he had injured. Though his behaviour at the Sharp soiree perhaps meant that whatever his feelings had been on that morning, he now saw how unwise it would be to be seen in public with Catherine. Or to attempt to approach himself.

Darcy observed his cousin in front of him. When Wickham had seduced Georgiana, the Colonel had wanted to kill him. To challenge him to a duel and put a bullet in his heart or his head, whichever was harder. It was Darcy who had remonstrated with his cousin over the scandal that would cause and how it would destroy an already fragile Georgiana. Of course Darcy had felt that flush of anger and if he had had been able to lay his hands on a pistol in those moments that followed the revelation that Georgiana was almost lost to him, it might have been different but sense had been regained.

Darcy did not doubt that the Colonel would unleash his anger on Sir John. He thought of Catherine as his cousin as much as he thought of Georgiana, Fitzwilliam would think it twice an affront: both to her and to himself. It would of course be impossible for the Colonel to challenge Sir John if Darcy had not, but there were other means of settling scores.

“I am the worst kind of villain, I assure you that I will delope.” Those had been Sir John’s words. Darcy had expected it to follow with an explanation or a series of excuses. Not that Darcy had gone looking for an explanation, there could be none not to his satisfaction, and any attempt would make him think worse of Sir John. He had been thrown off balance by the fact Sir John did not attempt to explain the unexplainable. Darcy had not been appeased by this, though he knew that this was illogical since he would not have been appeased by the presence of an explanation.

Sir John had offered little excuse, except to say that he had thought his conscience clear when he had spoken to Fitzwilliam about Snitterton’s feelings. Sir John said that he regretted that immensely, and it had been at that moment that Darcy felt the weight of the Colonel’s words in his study at Pemberley.

"Fortune hunting – from what Sir John has told me, it seems he is convinced that she will cause a scandal."

Darcy had lost his temper at that point and asked Sir John if he felt that absolved him from accountability. He could not forget the way Sir John had promptly replied that that is exactly what he had thought.

Disguise of every sort was Darcy’s abhorrence yet he seemed incapable of accepting such bald statements. Although, he was sure Sir John’s intent on only seeing guilt in the matter of his cousin and not in the very real one of kissing his wife excused his anger.

Sir John had been evasive regarding Snitterton, making Darcy piece together that puzzle – and it was one that was not yet complete – himself. At one point he accused Sir John of protecting his friend and was surprised at the vehement answer in the negative.

“Darcy?”

Darcy was shaken out of his reverie by his cousin. It was not often that his thoughts were so disordered as this and his insides warred between confessing all to a man he respected so much and who had come to his aid in any and every scrape, and keeping it from him for reasons he could not even put into words.
“I’m sorry, Fitzwilliam, my mind was elsewhere. No there is no reason that Sir John should not wish to come here.” The lie tasted bitter on his tongue but it was said.

Fitzwilliam sighed heavily and moved a chair towards Darcy’s desk before sitting in it heavily. “I am very glad you said that.”

“May I inquire as to why?”

“I think there is something you should know and I am glad it is I that can tell you.”

Darcy’s stomach plummeted. He did not think he could cope with what his cousin was about to tell him. He was pleased to know that Fitzwilliam was loyal to him, but he could not sit here and listen to his cousin pity him.

“What would that be, cousin?” said Darcy carefully.

“There have been some rumours. I do not think they have long been in circulation. But you should not have heard them because I do not think anyone would dare say them to your face.”

“What rumours?” Darcy had not thought Snitterton capable of such a thing. He should not be surprised but Darcy had thought he made it clear to his cousin what he would do to him if he spoke of what happened in the garden. He knew now that Snitterton was in debt, Sir John had confirmed that at least. Snitterton would not want Lord Matlock to know and Darcy held that card up his sleeve. While he had underestimated his cousin’s spite and malice, he thought he could have relied upon his desire for self-preservation.

Of course Sir John could have said something but whatever Darcy might think of him he did not think Sir John was that. That left Lady Matlock. Darcy could not see his aunt stooping to such gossip; she would wish for it to be kept in the family. Or…someone else could have witnessed …

It was too much, Darcy’s mind was whirling.

“They are quite vague of course; accusing your wife of behaviour not befitting a married lady. Naturally there are no names or situations – “

Darcy’s head shot up as he looked penetratingly at his cousin. Luckily the Colonel seemed to be having trouble looking him in the face, otherwise he would have known immediately that this wasn’t the first he had heard of it.

“But?”

“But of course Kitty’s friendship with Sir John – “ The colonel shrugged his shoulders, “I expect he has heard the rumours because he would not come here.”

“I expect.”

“So what shall we do?”

“We shall do nothing, Fitzwilliam. I will not indulge small minded gossips. I never have and I never will.”

Fitzwilliam gave him a searching look before standing, “I think I shall go see Georgiana.”

“I know she will be glad to see you.”

Darcy waiting until the door was closed before dashing off a note that he instructed a footman to
be delivered immediately and into the hand of the recipient even if he had to run him to earth a hundred miles from here. Then he dashed up the stairs.

&&^&&

He didn’t knock, causing Catherine’s maid Sally to give a little shriek.

“Sir! Mrs Darcy is in the bath,” she sounded scandalised, which was utterly ridiculous as far as Darcy was concerned. But it did put a slight spoke into Darcy’s wheel.

“No, no, I am not in yet,” came Catherine’s voice as she walked into the room from her dressing room. She was barefoot and clutching her dressing gown to herself.

Sally, still looking apprehensive, gave a curtsey and left the room. Darcy wondered when his servants had begun to look askance at him. When their loyalty had started to switch to his wife? He suspected it had been when he’d lost his temper, though he’d seen the looks before that. It seemed strange to him because they could not be unaware of the nature of his anger, he would have thought that would have made them detest their mistress, but clearly they did not think like that or they blamed him for any misstep his young wife took.

“I will be dining at Whites.”

She seemed to be on the verge of saying - is that all? when she recovered herself and nodded.

“I am sorry for the short notice.”

“The cook is the one you should apologise to!” said Catherine with a small smile, “And Georgiana. She will miss you at dinner.”

He knew as well as she did that the relationship between brother and sister was still not the same, and his hiding himself in his study these past few days had not helped, but Pemberley needed attention when Pemberley demanded it; he could not put it off.

He felt like explaining this to her, but it was not her he needed to explain it to.

“Enjoy your bath,” was all he said before he departed to his own room to dress.

&&^&&

“Darcy,” He’d not closed the door behind him when the Colonel spotted him; his cousin was coming out of the drawing room on the floor below.

“Yes?” Darcy continued down the stairs and past him.

“Where are you going and what have you done to Georgie? I rallied her about you and – “

Darcy turned his hat over in his hands and looked at his cousin. “What, Fitzwilliam?”

“Nothing.” He paused, “Is there something amiss?”

“I lost my temper and Georgie has not quite forgiven me.”

The Colonel looked disbelieving, “You never lose your temper at Georgie!”

Darcy was tempted to tell Fitzwilliam that it had not been at Georgiana, but if he knew he’d been angry with his wife he was likely to put two and two together. It hurt him but he told himself it was a lie of omission.
“Where are you going at this time?”

“I am dining at Whites. I thought I was past the age of having to have a nanny, Fitzwilliam.”

Fitzwilliam flushed slightly then laughed, “Why did you not say you were dining out tonight? I cannot dine with you for I’m expected to dine at Barracks.”

Darcy laughed at his cousin, “A far more exciting meal than one with me is likely to be.”

“I shall walk you,” said Fitzwilliam, opening the door for Darcy to pass through, “And you might not have a Nanny but you have a wife, is that not the same thing?”

Darcy did not answer, instead strode into the cool of the night.

Darcy was glad that while he was an infrequent guest at societal events, at least in comparison to many others, that he had at least frequented his club enough so that they knew his usual table. It was one that was in a quiet part of the club and where one was unlikely to be disturbed or overheard.

The level of conversation as he walked through the club to be seated rose and fell as he had expected it to, if he was the subject of gossip it was bound to be so. It was also only going to get worse when his diner companion joined him.

Darcy could tell by the sudden louder buzzing of his male companions when that man had arrived. He looked up to see Sir John weaving through the tables looking completely unflappable. Darcy wondered where Sir John got his composure, or his ability to look serene and open when he must know what was being said – or perhaps he merely had no conscience or feeling, which meant that Darcy was playing a dangerous game.

Sir John effortlessly slid into his seat, ordering wine for the table from the nearest waiter as he did so.

“You do not think I ordered wine already?”

“Have you done so?” said Sir John surprised.

“No,” said Darcy shortly.

Sir John smiled, “I did not think you would have.”

“Do not flatter yourself that you have a grasp of my character.”

“I don’t believe many get to do that, Darcy. But tell me do you not think you dining with me tonight is going to give rise to speculation?”

“I hope it will damper speculation,” said Darcy, “otherwise I would not be here.”

“You do not think it will look as if you condone, shall we say, certain goings on?”

“I do not believe that anyone would think that,” said Darcy.

“But you have just said that I who has been a member of your close circle, and an inmate of your household for a period of time can have no understanding of your character – “the wine arrived and conversation had to be ceased, not that Darcy felt able to respond to that. His equilibrium had
been disturbed. He had thought that he would be in control of this dinner but the older man seemed at home like he had been in any other situation.

“Let us not argue,” said Sir John, “I do believe that the impression you wish to give is the one that will be taken.”

“Very well. I think then we should confine ourselves to areas of innocuous conversation.”

Sir John laughed. “You think there can be innocuous conversation between a man who is not sorry he kissed another man’s wife, and that man?”

Darcy attempted not to flush.

“There, I did not think you were so composed. You shall be happy to know I shall be retiring to Scotland for a while.” Sir John affably topped up Darcy’s glass as he spoke.

“You do not think that will give an impression?” said, Darcy trying to keep his voice even.

“I expect something will occur that will divert everyone’s attentions; it is London after all and the Season is not over.”

The waiter at this point asked for their orders and Darcy could only think what a fool he had been to embark on this course of action. He should have told his cousin. After the waiter had left, he found Sir John eyeing him speculatively.

“I wonder what you will do with a bit of information if I give it to you.”

Darcy was not in the mood to play games and he said so, flexing his fingers around the glass in his hand, hoping that no observer could see the tension displayed there.

“I am not playing any game; I wish to know what you would do.”

“It depends on the information. You flatter yourself that you know me. You also know that I could have called you out and I did not.”

“Indeed, but I also know you are a man with a very pretty and lovely wife. A young lady who deserves to be treasured and you look constantly as if you were being led to the gallows.”

“You think I did not challenge you because I do not care for my wife?”

“I do not know, Darcy. I suspect you do not know either.”

Darcy could not answer that, “It is quite ridiculous that I should even consider saying this, but you shall have to trust that I will do with the information what a gentleman would.”

“Touché,” replied Sir John. “But I see our meal arrives. We should eat.”

Darcy had never had a more tough steak in his life; it was like every bite was sinking into his stomach. It only allowed him time to muse on his situation and the man sitting opposite him. A man with a moral code so diametrically opposed to his own. Sir John did not regret his actions, he merely regretted being discovered and causing scandal that might hurt those he apparently did care about. Darcy could not understand giving into fruitless impulses. He never had. Of course he did not mean he had never collapsed under the weight of desire for something his head knew was wrong or impossible, just that he had justly chastised himself for such irrationality. Then again did Sir John think it was a fruitless impulse? He could not ask. It would be beneath him to utter the
words to discover that if Sir John’s perfidy had not been discovered whether he would have continued with it.

“Did you wish to ask me something, Darcy,” said Sir John pouring more wine as he spoke.

“No.”

“I thought that disguise of every sort was your abhorrence?”

Darcy silently cursed Fitzwilliam who had more than likely shared that with his friend over a bottle of wine.

“Come Darcy, I suspect I do know what you wish to ask me. The answer is no.”

Darcy set aside his glass for the moment, “I would not have suspected.”

“Not for any fundamental virtue of character, but because I should not have been successful. Although I should not take that as an invitation to continue on your current path. Time can change all, after all.”

Darcy felt an urge to reach over the table to strangle the other man; it was an urge he tried to suppress when Sir John didn’t continue the conversation he’d abandoned before dinner had arrived and instead suggested they order some dessert.

“What is this information?” Darcy clutched his glass of wine once more, as Sir John called for yet another bottle.

“After I sent that letter to you, I received a visitor, who quite understandably did not wish me to place blame upon myself for what happened in the garden. I am sure you know of whom I speak. He was made so inordinately joyful by the circumstances that he told me something I am not sure he meant to tell me. If I had known at the beginning what he told me then, I would not have believed that my conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam was enough to absolve me of any guilt regarding the Viscount’s actions. I did not know whether he was speaking the truth or not so I did not tell you about it when you called.”

Darcy was leaning forward now.

“I am an open man. It has led me into trouble before and I’m sure it will do so again, but I meant no one any harm. I misjudged your cousin, as I believe so did you. I will offer no excuses. I did not act when I should have acted.”

Darcy snorted and muttered that he rather thought the problem lay that Sir John acted when he should not have done so.

The other man laughed, “Perhaps.”

“This is not very informative,” replied Darcy.

“Then I suggest you look in the betting book at Whites.”

Darcy flicked his eyes towards the door of this room, in the direction of where that book lay even though it could not be seen from where they sat.

“Why would I wish to do that?”

Sir John merely gave him a date and page reference. “I think you will find that informative. I think
you know that this talk – “Sir John made a gesture that took in their surrounds – “was inevitable with or without me, but if you cannot figure out why, perusing the book will explain it to you.”

Sir John downed the last of his wine, wiped his mouth with his napkin and threw it down on the table as he stood up. He stopped by Darcy’s chair.

“Where I have wronged I do make amends. Do remember that and try not to do anything stupid. Although I am an excellent shot and it would be ironic if I were your second.”

On that cryptic note, Sir John departed.

&&^^&&

Darcy subtly asked to see the betting book, and turned to the page that Sir John had suggested and made sure the dates tallied.

There it was in black and white, couched in the vaguest terms of course as such improper bets were made:

That a certain new bride will cuckold her new lord and master within a six month

It took the marks of the bettors for Darcy to be certain. Then he looked at the odds and the amounts staked (what he would gain), and then he looked at the date. It was before Snitterton had ever met Catherine. Darcy’s blood boiled.

It had not subsided by the time he arrived back at the townhouse even though he had walked. He could not stop turning it over and over in his head.

The townhouse was dark, with only the barest candles lit for his return, another sign of disapproval from the servants no doubt. Darcy stumbled up the stairs, blaming the poor lighting but wondering if he had had too much wine at dinner.

He only had one thought in his head. He had to find his duelling pistols and then he was going to find his cousin.

&&^^&&
Kitty was staring at her book. She had not turned a page in the last ten minutes, she was sure. Dinner with Georgiana had been slightly stilted as their interactions had been over the last days.

From her end Kitty was conscious of Georgiana feeling outraged on her behalf, when Kitty had no right to expect such support. From Georgiana’s Kitty could only assume that her sister felt unable to intercede and comment on the relationship between Darcy and herself. Kitty had never minded commenting on her sisters’ flirtations, but she knew that marriage was very different from a flirtation and that Georgiana’s temperament was far more reserved than her own.

It had been a relief though not to have Darcy at dinner; the tension between the siblings was almost too much to bear. Clearly the two had never had such a feeling exist between them, and Kitty herself knew how appalling her husband was at communicating. But Kitty was at a loss to see what she could do beyond what she had already done, apparently it was only time that could heal the situation.

She wished it could be only time that was needed to resolve her own situation. She had not cried off from all of her invitations and had felt a churning sensation when she thought of whom she might meet and what they might say. It had all passed off all right, but she had been angry at herself for putting herself in this situation, and then she had felt angry at Sir John. She had used to look forward to his support and now she dreaded even meeting him!

She could not help but think of Miss Smith and Reginald Bower once more; she had thought it perhaps most unfair (though how stupid of Miss Smith to like such an ugly fellow) that Reginald Bower should receive so little of the blame. Yet now here she was doing the same thing; she could only think it was because she knew that her thoughts and actions had not been the correct ones. They had not been the thoughts that a married lady should have and she did not precisely regret them. Of course it should not have happened but …

Kitty’s musings were interrupted by a crash in the room behind her. She jumped and whirled around, even though she was unlikely to be able to see through walls.

Had burglars managed to break into the house? Kitty wondered if it was her duty to interrupt them. After all they were sure to come into her chamber after they realised that they had only entered the master’s chamber. She had jewellery and other items worth stealing in here, she did not know what could be next door.

Kitty grabbed the candle from beside her bed and cautiously opened the door adjoining the two chambers, ready to run if the worst should be revealed. As she opened it she heard a familiar voice, and sighed with relief. It was only Darcy. He must have tripped over something in the dark. She could leave him her candle to rectify that.

He was nowhere near his bed, which Kitty found strange; even in the dark he could not have forgotten the layout of his own room. Stranger still, and what made her gasp, was the language he was indulging in.

He looked around when he heard her. “Go back to bed.”

“What are you doing?” Kitty crossed the room when she realised he was fumbling with a case. Whatever could be so important that it had to be found in the middle of the night?

“Finding my pistols,” was his response. He had clearly opened the case as upon that reply he had
turned towards her holding one of the said pistols.

Did he intend to shoot her? That was Kitty’s first thought and her alarm must have shown on her face. Or perhaps she was giving him too much credit, her frightened shriek must have told the story well enough.

“I’m not going to shoot you”, said Darcy in some disgust.

“Who are you going to shoot?” Kitty thought it was unlikely he could shoot anyone at night anyway. Unless he was going to do it indoors, after the candles had been lit.

“I’m going to shoot my cousin.”

Kitty decided it was not the time to be flippant and ask which cousin this was precisely. She had met two cousins and she knew he had a third in Anne de Bourgh. No, he could only mean Snitterton.

“Why are you going to shoot your cousin?”

“Don’t you think that’s a foolish question?”

It was perhaps but Kitty decided to phrase it another way, “I meant why are you going to shoot your cousin now? Have you not have provocation before now?”

Darcy was looking in the open case and did not appear to be listening.

“You cannot shoot your cousin. You would have to flee the country or stand trial for murder – are you listening to me, Darcy?”

“I think I know the consequences better than you,” was his reply.

Kitty was bewildered. What on earth had happened? She did not know who he had dined with – perhaps they had seen Snitterton at the club and he had been rude. Why would this surprise Darcy? Snitterton’s customary manner was rude!

“Has something happened? Whom did you dine with?”

“I dined with your lovely Sir John.”

That made Kitty blink – dine with Sir John? It seemed ridiculous. But what could have Sir John said to make Darcy wish to kill Snitterton? She had begun to think that perhaps this was not all her making and this only confirmed it which made her heart ache. To be so deceived! Was he playing a game?

Darcy loaded the pistol. He could not walk around London with a loaded pistol! It was the height of stupidity. Kitty had put down the candle and was beginning to see, as her eyes grew used to the light, that the reason Darcy was acting so completely peculiar was perhaps because he was not quite himself. Had Sir John purposely got him drunk and then turned him loose on an unsuspecting world?

“I cannot think you would believe anything he would say,” said Kitty, carefully keeping her eyes on the pistol.

“Oh I do not believe many words he says, but I am afraid this is incontrovertible.”

He could not be too foxed if he managed to say a word with so many syllables without stumbling;
she could talk him around. It was the last thing Georgiana needed – a brother indicted for duelling!

“But a duel? You told me yourself the pointlessness of them!”

“Did I say I was going to duel with Snit?”

Kitty did not respond to this and did not have to; the door suddenly flung open and Edwards stood there with his blunderbluss and Robert behind him lighting the way. More weaponry! Was Kitty’s first thought. Darcy had his back to the door, and his body hid the pistol he held in his hand from the servants gaze. He had turned his attention to the servants’ so Kitty took her chance to snatch the pistol, return it to its case and shove the case back into the dresser. It had only been the work of a moment and she was sure Edwards and Robert behind him could have only seen a quick flurry of movement.

“I apologise, Sir. We heard noises.”

“Well there were not any candles left out for my return,” said Darcy rather haughtily.

“I am sorry sir. I shall speak to those responsible,” said Edwards, who then eyed Kitty. Kitty could feel her face flushing under his gaze.

“What is it?” Darcy sounded annoyed.

“Would you like me to help you undress, sir?”

“No, no, just go back to bed,” said Darcy. Kitty wished that Edwards would ignore him and stay anyway.

“Of course, sir, I apologise again for the interruption.” With that both Robert and Edwards closed the door behind them.

Kitty felt like laughing. They had not interrupted what they thought they were interrupting. They were interrupting their half-sprung master’s attempts at murder!

“Catherine, stop being silly and move away from there,” said Darcy.

“I’m being silly? You wish to shoot your cousin and you will not even explain why!”

Darcy would not respond.

“Do not be so stupid!”

“Strange. Sir John said that to me as well, I wonder why anyone would think that I would do anything stupid” Darcy sounded irritated.

Kitty was even more lost. Sir John had told him not to do anything stupid? Just how long a conversation had they had and just how much wine had they consumed? Kitty did not voice any of this but rather just looked at her husband, who finally relented into answering.

“He made a bet.” Darcy could only mean Snitterton.

“Like Mr Lewis and scraping of the carriage wheels?” Kitty knew men were very serious about their bets but this was surely an overreaction.

“That is not the only subject men bet on.”

He could not mean what she thought he meant, Kitty felt slightly ill – “A bet about me?”
Darcy merely nodded.

“But if he has been trying to – then he cheated as well!”

Darcy laughed. She had not heard him laugh very often and this was a very different laugh. She knew from experience that men were different when they were bosky, but she had not realised their voices could change as well.

“That is an interesting focus to place upon it. I would have been more concerned about the impugnation on my virtue,” said Darcy, almost mockingly.

“Well I have already proved him right about that!” retorted Kitty.

Darcy scowled and moved to reach around her and wrench the dresser drawer handle open. He was tall enough to do so without so much as touching Kitty, but in the process she still lost her balance.

Darcy had a choice to make between his pistols and his wife. Kitty was so very grateful that at that point he chose her.

“You are unhurt?”

Kitty caught her breath and her footing, although he still had such a hold on her that she could have fainted dead away and not fallen to the floor if she so chose. She nodded quietly and expected him to release her.

But he was looking at her quite oddly. Searchingly even, and Kitty felt as if she was being examined. He brought his free hand up to move her hair away from her face. She had tied her hair up before going to bed, but she’d always found it would come loose by morning and running around in the middle of the night had made it loosen itself much earlier.

“Pretty and lovely,” he said quietly, with his hand still to her face, which to Kitty’s ears did not seem like words he would ever say. Well perhaps lovely, but pretty? Was that a word he would use? He was still looking at her intently and Kitty felt her heart thudding painfully in her chest. She had a sudden thought that he was going to kiss her.

This thought was replaced by a sudden memory, one where she was being equally held in a vice like grip. The smell of wine that invaded her senses at this moment made it all the more real.

With a gasp she shoved with all her might and released herself, stumbling backwards.

Kitty trembled, and could only bear to look up for a moment. And a moment was all it took to see the anger both in his stance and his face. He was angry with her, because how could he know that – she could not even think it again.

“I – I – I am sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?” he said in a brutal tone.

“Wickham,” she could only whisper. That threw him she could tell. “The wine and … “

There was a pause and Kitty still could not move or look up. “Go to bed.”

That did make her look up because how could he be left here when only moments before he seemed intent on ending someone’s existence? She wanted to question him about that, but his
body language now, which seemed a great deal more defeated than it had moments before, told her that her queries would not be welcomed.

She ran past him and closed the door behind herself before dissolving into quiet tears. She had thought that she had recovered, and would be unaffected. She had not …

Kitty could not think for some time, but slowly she recovered hugging her pillow to her chest.

Breathing deeply, she could not but suddenly think that she had misread the situation and that Darcy was not intending to sleep but was still intending to go searching for his cousin. Although she did not know what the use of knowing would be – for by this time he must be long gone if he had gone – she had to know.

She opened the door between the chambers once more and crept in; the candle was doused but the curtains had not been fully drawn and the moonlight allowed her to see that Darcy had in fact decided to sleep on his anger.

She was about to creep back out again when he turned over in his sleep. Kitty froze, she was not sure what the consequence of being caught here would be but she did not think he would appreciate her checking upon him. Except he was apparently not asleep because he had opened his eyes to look at her and then threw his arm over them, muttering something about Fitzwilliam being right about nannies.

Kitty moved out of the room wondering if he had been awake or talking in his sleep like Lydia sometimes did.

&&^&^&

“Do you not wish to come to visit Miss Gable with me?” said Georgiana brightly over the breakfast table.

Kitty had not, in the end, managed to sleep a great deal, and the thought of several young ladies all talking about how they longed to be out, and asking her all manner of questions did not appeal. It was better that Georgiana go and visit her school friends on her own, then she could be the expert of the party; for apart from Miss Dears who apparently was becoming too grand to associate with her old friends, none of her friends had such obliging elder sisters as apparently she was to Georgiana. Kitty did not think she was very obliging in telling Georgiana all the gossip and fashion, but apparently if she only told a little the others told none at all.

“I am very sorry not to, Georgie, but Lizzy and Jane are to come to me today. They shall go back to Longbourn soon to prepare for the wedding.”

“Oh, yes. We shall be attending the wedding, shall we not?”

Kitty had no idea, she had not even thought about it. She had assumed that they would but it was not her decision. “I expect you will have to ask your brother.”

“But Jane is your sister, of course you must be there. Fitzwilliam would never …“ Georgiana paused and suddenly looked upset and Kitty regretted saying anything at all.

“I was just being silly. I did not get enough sleep last night,” said Kitty airily before considering what her words might imply to Georgiana, “because of course your brother fell over that trunk.” She finished lamely.

“I do not understand why there were no candles, and my brother usually can see in the dark. Was he not well?”
Kitty wondered how Georgiana could be quite so naïve.

“Yes, he was most unwell,” she almost added, *something to do with the wine* but even Georgiana could not have missed that implication!

Apparently a great deal of wine, Kitty thought since he had not been down to breakfast but on asking if they should keep some of the spread aside the footman confided in her that Mr Darcy had gone riding quite early that morning. Kitty squashed the desire to run upstairs to see if he’d taken his pistols. No, once he was in his right mind she could not believe he would do such a thing.

Georgiana had tripped off to see her friends and Kitty attempted to continue her embroidery. She’d brought down her fashion magazines and some material she had recently purchased so Jane and Lizzy could take them back to Longbourn with them.

Jane hardly needed another stitch but they knew their mother; if she could not have some say over what her dear Jane would wear she would go mad, and inflict said madness on the household.

Kitty was glad Jane was marrying Charles, not only because it would make both of them so happy but because it also had allowed her a good reason to decline those invitations that she had not felt up to attending. It had been so easy to say that she must help with the preparations. It was not a complete lie. She had been to several emporiums with her sisters and visited twice with her aunt to aid discussions.

They’d even run into Mr Devinsham at one of the emporiums buying gloves for himself. Kitty had not thought him at all a rude man, yet Lizzy could not help censure him (once, of course, they had parted company) for his abominable vanity. Kitty did not understand her sister most of the time.

After stabbing herself with the needle at least twice, Kitty realised she could not embroider and think at the same time. It was just not a possibility. So she packed it away and wondered how else to idle away her time between now and when her sisters arrived.

She did not have much time to think on this because she received a visitor in the form of Darcy.

He looked fresh from his ride and Kitty wondered if he expected to find his sister here. She also wondered if it was just her who felt the attendant awkwardness. She expected it was. Darcy began to pace about the room and Kitty watched him in some hesitation.

“My actions were unforgivable,” Darcy had moved to the window looking down into the street before looking back towards her. “It was not the behaviour of a gentleman and I cannot forgive myself for it.”

Kitty was surprised by the vehemence of his apology, an apology she hardly expected.

“To present myself to anyone in the condition that – “he broke off, “I can only offer in my defence… I cannot offer any defence. It was cruel and unthinking.”

Kitty twisted her hands in her lap before speaking. “You need no forgiveness.”

This brought him towards her side of the room, and then to her side. He sat beside her on the sofa and, noticing her trembling hands, put his hand over hers. “You are too gracious. But I do need to beg your pardon, not just for my behaviour last night but for – “

Kitty felt wretched. It had been her weakness! She did not realise that it was not just her hands trembling until he put his arm around her, pulling her towards him.
“You must know that you are safe in my house. You must know that you are safe with me.”

Kitty did know, but last night it hadn’t been him she was frightened of, not really. She tried to say as much but it was muffled by both her inability to speak and Darcy’s lapels.

“It does not matter; it was unconscionable of me.”

“You are not only to blame. I should not have – “ Kitty could not finish that sentence. “If you need forgiveness than I do not know what I need.”

“Others are far more culpable than you,” was Darcy’s quiet reply.

“If I forgive you, will you – “ Kitty did not know how to ask what she wanted to ask.

Darcy had her hand in his, and he leant back from her for a moment to bring that hand upwards. Kitty glanced up, not sure what he was doing. He looked her in the eye. “It is already done.”

Kitty let a sigh go that she did not know that she was holding, and watched him place a chaste kiss on her inner wrist before dropping her hand. “Perhaps we should start afresh,” he said quietly, moving his hand to stroke her cheek.

“Without shooting anyone?” said Kitty almost archly.

Darcy gave a short laugh before enveloping her into a tighter hug, and Kitty felt him bestow a kiss on her forehead. She felt comforted and happier than she had in quite some time.

This comfort was shattered when the door opened and Lizzy and Jane were admitted. Kitty turned rapidly as Darcy sprung away from her, and almost laughed at the pole-axed expression on Lizzy’s face. Darcy on the other hand looked embarrassed.

Such a reserved man could only be embarrassed by being caught in such a position thought Kitty as she watched her husband bow hurriedly and almost flee the room.

Jane appeared not to have noticed anything untoward, being as she was behind Lizzy and blind to anything that did not have to do with her wedding. So Jane was able to carry on the conversation until it seemed to Kitty that Lizzy and herself had recovered from their respective shocks.

“Do you think it would be possible, Kitty?”

Kitty had missed what Jane had just said and blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“I was thinking how lovely it would be if you could come to Netherfield before the wedding. Of course you will be there for the day, but I think Charles would need Mr Darcy’s support before then, and I would want you there.”

Kitty smiled, but inwardly she could only wonder what it would be like for either her or Darcy to return to the scene of their misfortune.

&&^^&&
“Do you not think so?”

Darcy stared at his friend uncomprehendingly. He was seated in Whites where he had run most opportunely into Bingley. Opportune for his friend who seemed to wish to speak to him, and opportune for Darcy because Darcy wished to be able to while away some time without looking peculiar. Burning a hole in his inside pocket was a note from Lord Matlock summoning him to the Matlock townhouse in the afternoon.

Darcy had not thought he could keep his composure at home so had braved the gentleman’s club. He would rather look a fool there than alarm anybody at home. His greatest fear was that Lord Matlock had heard the rumours.

Darcy had done his best to scotch these rumours by his actions. The source of the rumours was more difficult. His cousin had seemed to completely go to ground. He was never ‘at home’ and his servants seemed completely unable to furnish Darcy with either his whereabouts or when he might be home. Darcy was loath to try and run him to ground himself, because if it looked as though he was stalking someone to ground, the wrong impression might be given.

He was sure those at Mantons had thought Darcy imagined an entirely different fellow than the one he had done when Darcy had in frustration gone to the shooting gallery. Not that they would be entirely incorrect, Darcy had imagined Sir John during a few rounds of firing. It had been satisfying in a hollow sort of way to release his anger on the drawn targets, particularly since he was denied his cousin and Sir John had not gone to Scotland.

Darcy was in no mood to discover why that gentleman had not kept his word, it was enough that he had not!

But before he could consider the baronet, he must face his uncle. Surely Snitterton could not have been so stupid as to acquaint his father with the rumours that he himself had spread? Lord Matlock was the best of noblemen and was in no way mentally deficient. No, Lord Maltock had to have heard the rumours from other quarters and Darcy feared he faced an interrogation he was not sure he was prepared for.

Darcy became aware that Bingley was staring at him expectantly.

“I’m sorry?”

“The settlements, Darcy!”

“I can read them later,” said Darcy dismissively.

“When later? We depart shortly for Longbourn.”

“Tomorrow, Bingley, or the next day. There is plenty of time.”

Darcy shook his head. As his nuptials approached, Charles Bingley was becoming more and more nervous. Darcy would have thought he would become more animated and impatient, since he was marrying a lady he loved more, he claimed, than life itself. But there it was, Bingley was apprehensive and jittery.

He’d been fussing over the settlements to be made over his wedding for nigh on a week, and Darcy could only be glad that Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth had departed for Longbourn first.
Mrs Bennet would be sure to take one look at Bingley and fear he was wishing to cry off!

Darcy knew Bingley did not wish to do any such thing, but his whole demeanour spoke of his internal distress of fearing that he was doing the wrong thing. Not in marrying Miss Bennet, but in the manner of doing so, in the way he would provide for her, whether he could provide for her.

Darcy could only hope that he would calm down on the carriage journey to Hertfordshire. Georgiana was not to go with them, Darcy having encouraged her to keep a prior engagement with a school friend. She would join them later before the wedding, but this way Darcy was sure the whispering and comments that were sure to occur with his return to the neighbourhood would have died down.

Darcy wished he had not his own problems to attend to so that he could focus solely on soothing his friend. Bingley had no reason to worry; Mr Gardiner was attending to the drawing up of the settlements and Darcy had no reason to doubt his ability. Mr Bennet, if Darcy correctly surmised his character, would no doubt only give the settlements a cursory glance. Mrs Bennet would only see the 5000 pounds per annum and Miss Bennet would not care a jot. No doubt she would not even understand the settlements made upon her. It was not a subject many men spoke to young ladies about.

“I can read it in the carriage, if it worries you that much Bingley.”

Bingley did not look appeased by this offer, rather he looked appalled. If Darcy was in a lighter mood the look on his friend’s face would have given him a great deal of amusement. He looked for all the world like Darcy had kicked his puppy.

At this point Darcy noticed the sort of furtive groupings around the clubroom that denoted a fresh on-dit. He hoped it was something to divert attention from the rumours attending his marriage; but he could not deny that knowing his current circumstances it was probably some fresh attack upon his family and his heart sank.

“Do you think this is enough of an allowance?”

Darcy blinked at the paper thrust under his nose.

“I hardly know, Bingley! You should be able to judge yourself what you can best afford and what Miss Bennet is likely to need!”

Bingley looked hurt and Darcy realised that he should not inflict his temper upon the other man. Bingley needed advice and reassurance and that is what had attracted them to each other at Cambridge. Darcy enjoyed giving advice and Bingley enjoyed receiving it and, to be fair to Bingley, marriage was not a step he had taken before thus the prior knowledge he could obtain without advice was slim.

“But I will say this, Bingley, if she is anything like her sister she will not need half that amount.” Darcy offered his friend a smile and hoped that he was forgiven.

&&^^&&

Darcy walked up the street towards his uncle’s townhouse and almost ran into Sir John on the footpath.

Sir John made an exaggerated bow and doffed his hat. Darcy stiffly returned the greeting. He expected Sir John to pass him and continue up the street, but instead the baronet stood still as if he expected some conversation as if they were any two acquaintances who met in the street. Darcy stonily did not reply and wondered if there was any etiquette he should employ when abruptly
turning to walk up the stairs. Of course Sir John would put him in this position in public.

“You do not think we should have some conversation, Darcy? Perhaps I could ask after your lovely wife?”

Darcy reddened, “Do you take delight in vexing me?”

Sir John laughed, “Of course. I quite treasure your wife’s, your cousin’s, your sister’s and your friend’s friendship. I mean that quite sincerely. You however, I am afraid to say I think you a fool.”

Darcy knew he should not ask why. Sir John’s opinion meant nothing to him after all, but he could not help the question spilling out, although he assured the other man of the worthlessness of his opinion.

“Darcy, therein you have answered your own question!” replied Sir John.

Darcy stiffened further, if that was at all possible, and made a slight bow to Sir John, who returned it with a flourish.

He expected them for them to part, and for it not to be a good preface to what Darcy knew was going to be a trying conversation with his Uncle. Except he found their feet taking the same path up the Matlock stairs. Darcy stopped short, grabbing Sir John’s arm to prevent his further motion at the same time.

“Is something wrong, Darcy?” said Sir John with ease.

“Have you been summoned by my uncle or is this a mere social call? If it is a social call, I beg you call some other time!”

Sir John smiled, “No, I assure you I have been summoned.”

Darcy could not believe it. If his uncle had heard the rumours he would not ask the man in question to visit him at the same time, would he? Unless his uncle thought that it would dispel gossip!

“Was there something else, Darcy, or do you just enjoy ruining coats?” Sir John looked significantly at Darcy’s hand which was still digging into his coat. Darcy dropped his hand rapidly.

“No, nothing. After you, Sir John.”

“Oh no, after you,” said Sir John.

Darcy felt they could stand on the stoop being falsely polite to each other or he could just knock.

&&^&&

Darcy had always looked up to his uncle as the epitome of breeding, good manners and other manly arts. Of course his father was held an equal position in Darcy’s view, but an uncle was far enough removed for a young man not to feel that chafing that might occur when a father handed down an edict.

Now Darcy wished Lord Matlock didn’t adhere to societal niceties. Sitting in his study as Lord Matlock offered everyone – Darcy had been unsurprised to find Colonel Fitzwilliam there – drinks. Darcy did not think for one moment the Colonel had spoken to his father about the
rumours. Lord Matlock also inquired after family and friends. Darcy willed him to get to the point and wished he had accepted the proffered glass merely so he could have something with which to distract his mind.

“I am deeply saddened by the reason I called you to wait upon me today. It is so serious an event that I could not but ask you as members of my family to be here today.” Darcy took in the absence of Snitterton and stared at Sir John - family? “Of course Sir John is here as a friend,” concluded his uncle to Darcy’s relief.

His relief was short-lived when Lord Matlock turned to him, “I must ask you, nephew, is the information Sir John has brought to me correct?”

Lord Matlock seemed to think that no other explanation of what information was necessary and Darcy thought asking for a clarification might mean his uncle started to wonder what other scandal was about to be brought down around his ears. Darcy flicked his eyes to Sir John who was looking at him expectantly. He had to make a split decision based on his willingness to trust in Sir John’s character no matter his behaviour to himself.

“Yes, I am afraid it is, Uncle.”

Lord Matlock took several paces so that he could lay his hands upon his desk, where his hands clenched and unclenched. “That I could countenance such a member of this family!” For a horrific moment Darcy thought he had answered incorrectly and leant forward determined to defend his wife, then his uncle continued “That my own flesh and blood, that my heir, would stoop so low!”

“I am just sorry, sir, that my admiration of Mrs Darcy could lead to such an end,” said Sir John.

Lord Matlock looked up and shook his head. “No such admiration when well placed is ever to be regretted. An innocent admiration brought low by baseless accusations and gossip mongering.”

Darcy was pleased to see the almost flinch Sir John gave when his uncle mentioned the word innocent. Lord Matlock did not notice as he was now addressing his other son, who looked overwhelmed by the situation.

“I guess you have little idea of what we speak, Richard?”

“No, sir, I do not!” replied the Colonel.

Darcy let Lord Matlock’s explanation to his son wash over himself. The story was almost identical to the truth, down to the bet. The only aberration was the scene in the garden.

“And there is no basis for these rumours?” asked the Colonel whose eyes had sharpened upon Darcy.

Lord Matlock looked shocked his son would ask such a thing.

“Do you think my pride would allow me to sit here if they were, Richard?” said Darcy calmly.

The colonel nodded. “I knew my brother lived outside of his income but to need money so desperately as to make such a bet– “

Sir John nodded. “The difference between your brother and myself is that he may draw upon his expectancies. It is not only mere bills he must pay back, and I am afraid his manner has offended a great many of his creditors so they are not willing to wait for – I beg your pardon, my lord – the inevitable.”
Lord Matlock nodded. “I thank you, Sir John. But I must now beg your indulgence in my desire to see this matter resolved within my family circle.”

Sir John bowed, “I understand but I fear that circumstances may have overtaken you, my lord. I have just come from Whites – “

Darcy’s head shot up at this lie. He had just been at Whites. Sir John had certainly not been there, he had come to the townhouse from the completely wrong direction.

“I believe your son was playing cards last night. I am afraid I do not know the particulars although I am to gather it was some disreputable hell…”

Sir John was cut off by the Earl’s sigh. “My son is not of an age where I can dismiss such actions. He is not a young boy looking to sow his oats and run on a spree.”

“I am afraid that is not the whole story,” said Sir John.

“I am loath to ask.”

“Lord Snitterton cheated at cards last night. Of course I have only heard this second hand at Whites but the source I do not doubt.”

Darcy thought of the gossiping groups at Whites. If this was true, it would ruin his cousin. Gaming, although seemingly dishonourable, was where honour was held to be the highest. One paid one’s gambling debts before one paid the grocer. One did not play if one could not pay. To cheat was a step that society would not tolerate. Darcy did not disbelieve the fact that Snitterton was capable of cheating; Catherine had been right when she had said that making that bet and then spreading the rumours himself had been cheating. Although being caught at that was far less serious than being caught cheating at cards. But the fact Sir John lied about the circumstances in which he had discovered the Viscount’s crime gave Darcy pause for thought.

He let both his cousin and his uncle’s exclamations wash over him and tried to examine the baronet.

The conversation in the room was interrupted by a footman who had come to announce Lord Snitterton.

“I will see him in another room. I do not wish to inflict his presence on you, my boy,” said Lord Matlock to Darcy. “I hold no hope that my son will admit to his crimes but -“ The earl broke off in some anxiety.

“I have no hope for that either, my lord,” said Sir John. “I feel sure he will deny it.”

His uncle left the room and the Colonel dithered for some moments before following his father.

Darcy was on his feet and across the room in seconds. “Of course he will deny it! For he has not done it! I do not know what you have done but you have ruined my cousin!”

Sir John shook his head, “Do you know why Snitterton’s debts are so pressing?” At Darcy’s lack of response Sir John continued, “No, I did not think so. A large sum was paid to a certain feckless younger son of a peer of the realm. This young man caught your cousin cheating at piquet. However your cousin forgot that in such cases often one sum of money is not enough.”

Darcy shook his head, “You knew this and you knew of his plan to – “

“No. I did not know of the bet. I thought he was just venting his spleen. What gratification he
could get from spreading such lies; I did not think it was monetary. If I had known it was then I would have realised how much was at stake.”

“Venting his spleen or not – “

“Who would have believed him if you acted as you should?”

Darcy tried to restrain himself. “No one would have believed him, as no one believes my aunt and her ravings from Kent, if you have not acted as you did!”

“You would have preferred your wife shunned? Interesting, Darcy, very interesting!”

“I will not deign to respond to that. You feel no shame in what you did?”

“Do you refer to the garden or your cousin?”

“Both.”

“My sense of regret is deep in one, though not in the way you think I should regret, and not at all in the other.”

“Even though you have caused my uncle and Fitzwilliam pain?”

“I?” said Sir John. “As the messenger, I grant you, but your cousin made his own way and he sought to manipulate me, I cannot forgive that.”

“You mean you cannot forgive that he did not manipulate you. So you cannot absolve yourself of blame.”

“And you wish to absolve yourself by defending a man I am entirely sure you have wished to kill? You think that makes you noble, Darcy?”

Darcy stood stock still.

“It would make you noble if you truly meant it! But you use it to pretend to yourself you are virtuous, holding yourself in judgement of all others, seeing no fault within yourself but that can be blamed on others. You would be better to give in to your desires – “

Sir John could not continue his speech as Darcy was incapable of restraining himself from punching him cleanly in the face.

Sir John brought his head back to face Darcy, fingers examining his split lip, he laughed. “Better Darcy, better. I am sorry that I have caused your family pain, but I feel it was only a matter of time where your cousin is concerned, and I would rather protect the truly innocent than wait for a time where the circumstances were true. Please apologise for my absence to your esteemed uncle and the Colonel.”

Sir John bowed and left the room. Darcy flexed his fingers and rubbed them unconsciously. He thought he would berate himself for that loss of control, but he did not. He had known the truth in perhaps what Sir John said, but he had no right to say it. Darcy did acknowledge his faults; he could not but think in shame of his actions in his chamber when he had become little better than Wickham! No, he did own to his faults and now he had seen how close to tragedy his behaviour had led him he would not ignore said faults again.
Darcy felt drained as he handed his hat to Robert. He’d missed dinner, remembering to scribble a hasty apology to both Catherine and Georgiana, because he had spent the afternoon sequestered with his uncle and cousins.

The truth of the matter had been that although several persons had seen Lord Snitterton with cards up his sleeve; it could yet still be hushed up to some degree. The rumours of course would still exist but they would die away in time. Snitterton wished of course to brazen it out, as he still protested his innocence. Although he had not been so vocal when Darcy had given him a look; Snitterton was not innocent.

Lord Matlock could of course disinherit his son. He could not prevent the title going to Snitterton but he could prevent the money, but Darcy had counselled that that should be only the extreme. Breaking up the family estate should be considered the last resort. It had been a close-run thing because of Snitterton’s obstinacy, but he had at last accepted banishment to the Matlock’s West Indian property. Darcy wished he could feel sorry for his cousin but he could only hope that there Snitterton would learn to be a man and not a weak-willed boy. Age did not necessarily mean maturity, a fact Darcy was rapidly coming to accept.

Of course with the ton buzzing about my lord Snitterton’s disgrace, they were either forgetting past scandals or beginning to disbelieve such things; after all, who had told them? And look at what he was capable of! Darcy was glad of his stiff uncompromising character, as far as society was concerned; it made scandal harder to stick.

It was Edwards’ day off and Darcy rued the fact he’d agreed to it, though he could not have known at the time how much he would desire to be waited upon when he returned home. He pulled off his jacket and deftly removed his cufflinks.

There was a knock at the door and Darcy turned to see Catherine enter. She entered from her room and Darcy was surprised she knocked. There was little reason for her to knock. Darcy hoped that it was not because of what had occurred some nights previous. He had thought that they had moved past that together and had agreed to forget past grievances.

“I am sorry, even though Georgiana has gone to bed early, I thought I might as well ask. She was worried that your absence meant an illness with her aunt or cousins – “

Darcy shook his head, “No, no illness.”

Catherine closed the door behind her and crept closer a little, “It is not because of me – “

Darcy gave a tight smile and shook his head, “No, nothing to do with that. My lamentable cousin stepped one step too far that is all.”

“Oh.” He expected her to ask, but she seemed willing to leave the room, which surprised him. She had certainly not restrained herself from questioning him in the past! Although, he had needed that questioning desperately to prevent himself from doing anything brainless.

“He will be going to the West Indies as soon as a passage can be secured under the circumstances,” he was of course referring to the war.

She blinked, “How nice for him.”

“Nice?” Darcy was astounded. The West Indies nice?

“Is it not supposed to be very sunny?”

Darcy laughed, he had certainly not thought of it that way. He could not imagine his cousin in the
colonies; Snitterton was too particular. Now, he would always envision his cousin blinded by sunlight! Darcy could not help but be glad he could appreciate Catherine’s conversation. If it had been not two months previous, he might have assumed she really meant that it would be pleasant for his cousin.

“Well I shall leave you.”

“Wait.”

She turned back towards him, puzzled and inquiring. Darcy had tried to be noble and virtuous and had played the martyr. He could not but regret it; it had prevented not only his happiness but that of all those around him. He’d refused to see any virtues in the lady standing before him. His introspection and petty jealousy of those with more open tempers was getting him nowhere. It would have to stop.

Without allowing his mind to interfere, Darcy made the two paces that brought him in front of her, cupped her cheek and kissed her.

&&^&^&
Divide and Conquer

The morning brought disorientation for Kitty. One of those mornings, where no matter how much sleep one had had, one still wanted more. It had taken her several moments to process that she was in her bed and that she must rise and face the day.

Kitty managed to dress herself but she was unable to make it out of her chamber before Mrs Wilson had bustled up the stairs clutching the mail, a breakfast tray and a request for Kitty to help her pass judgement on some petty squabble between the exuberant Kate and another maid, Sophie.

“I do think, with your permission, ma’am, that I shall turn out the house while you and the master are visiting with Mr Bingley.”

Kitty nodded, wishing Mrs Wilson wouldn’t ask her permission just as she was taking a bite of toast.

“Of course we’ve already done our spring cleaning, but if you’ll beg our pardon everything was topsy turvy from trying to present it at its best to you when you first arrived that – “Mrs Wilson threw up her hands, “Ah well.”

Kitty smiled, “Do not concern yourself, Mrs Wilson, I hardly noticed.” She didn’t add she hardly noticed anything when she’d first arrived.

“Well, I think you would have been too good to say anything, Mrs Darcy.”

“It would more be that my mother’s idea of organising a turning out of the house is not equal to yours, so naturally I was dazzled.”

Mrs Wilson laughed, and fussed about the tray.

“Mrs Wilson, I have been thinking about Kate. Do you not think that she would feel more at home at Pemberley?”

Mrs Wilson stopped putting the dishes back on the tray, “I did not like to say, but I think that London is too tempting for her. I have heard her speak to Miss Darcy in a manner that was not improper but not precisely proper either.”

“If that is the case, then when we return to Pemberley, if she is not adverse to it, perhaps it would be best if we took her with us.”

Mrs Wilson nodded, before leaving with the tray.

The talk and organisation with Mrs Wilson had put Kitty behind in her day and she’d not had the time to open the personal letters. She’d had to put them out of reach until she’d finished the menus with Mrs Wilson and the other daily tasks she had to carry out.

Finally, however she could almost tear them open in excitement. Mrs Calens had kept Kitty sporadically updated with news from Lambton, particularly noting the exodus of families. Kitty had only briefly seen the Middletons in town, and apparently according to Miss Almesbury (also an infrequent correspondent) Miss Middleton had been in danger of contracting a very ineligible match and had been whisked away to an obscure seaside resort where the fashionable young fribble could not in conscience set foot even for Miss Middleton’s beauty.
Mrs Calens had also written about the school. While the school had been close to starting its first classes as Kitty had left for London, Mrs Calens wrote that they had run into a few difficulties. The local rector had been incensed he had not been asked for advice where Reverend Spinney had been, even though he had not supported their initial idea (preaching that the uneducated were irreclaimable) nor did he have any experience in setting up such a venture. As such it had taken all the powers of persuasion of the remaining ladies of Lambton to cajole him into a malleable temper. For the clergyman had the ear of the Parrish council and the local gentlemen, and was liable to remove permission to use some of the village and church buildings for the classes.

Kitty folded up the letter and put it in her dresser but not before making a note for herself to pen a reply, not only to Mrs Calens but also to the petulant rector.

&&^&^&&

Kitty’s timing had been perfect. As she had left her room Robert had been ascending the stairs.

“Forgive me, Ma’am. I told her ladyship that no one was at home but she did not believe me.”

“Which ladyship?” said Kitty, feeling a sense of impending dread.

“Lady Matlock. I’ve put her in the parlour,” Robert sounded most apologetic.

Kitty knew she could not hide. Not matter how much she wanted to do so. Lady Matlock had never liked her, but now with her son’s disgrace Kitty did not want to think what her thoughts were now.

Lady Matlock would not blame her son and Kitty did not blame her for that. Mothers, it seemed, could forgive their children anything, but Kitty did not think motherhood provided an excuse to then blame others for one’s children’s mistakes. And this was what Kitty knew that Lady Maltock would do. Somehow every falsehood, every treacherous act, every throw of the dice, would be attributed irrationally to her.

“You dare show your face?”

Lady Matlock had been pacing around the sofas, but upon Kitty’s entrance she had turned on Kitty drawing herself up to her full height.

“I thought that you wished to see me, my lady,” said Kitty.

“See you! You are nothing more than a treacherous snake lying in wait to ruin my family. Snitterton saw through you and now –“ Lady Matlock broke off in some distress.

Kitty only felt a small pang of sympathy for her. It must be hard to be parted from your child, no matter how grown he was. Yet any feeling of charity towards the countess was rapidly eroded by that lady’s past and present behaviour.

“Lady Matlock, you must understand, that I had nothing to do with Lord Snitterton’s distress – “

“See how she lies!”

Kitty thought this was an odd thing to say, it seemed peculiarly dramatic to speak to an invisible audience, but a movement in the corner of the room made Kitty realise that they did have an audience.

A lady about the same age as Lady Matlock was sitting imperiously by the fireplace. Her clothing bespoke her situation in life and the expression on her face proved her to be a friend of Lady
Nevertheless Kitty dropped a small curtsey in her direction, “I beg your pardon, ma’am, I did not
see you there.” Kitty expected Lady Matlock to introduce her but she did not.

“You feign ignorance of what your husband has done at your bidding! I do not know what arts
you used to tempt and lure him into banishing my son – “

Kitty was taken aback at this and if it wasn’t quite so ridiculous she would have laughed. The idea
that she could use any arts to tempt or lure Darcy into doing anything – that any woman could do
so was preposterous.

“Lady Matlock, your son cheated at cards. I cannot see how you can place that action at my
doorstep."

“I am sure Snitterton never entered such a hell before you,” sniffed Lady Matlock.

There seemed no point in talking to the Countess any longer; her comments were irrational and
illogical. Instead Kitty pulled the bell that would call the servants.

This caused the lady in the corner, who had previously been silent, to stand and looked outraged.
“Do you think to throw us out of this house?”

Kitty would have liked to, but it would be ill-mannered and Kitty wouldn’t stoop to their level.
“No, I was merely calling for some refreshment. I have been impolite.”

The lady sniffed. “You know who I am, of course?”

Kitty looked bewildered.

“I am Mr Darcy’s aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. As such I am entitled to know his concerns; I
have been alarmed at his rapid spiral into the depths of the abyss. You seem content to ruin him
and everyone associated with him! I expected no less of such a woman.”

Kitty felt she should have recognised the infamous Lady Catherine the moment she’d clapped
eyes on her. She looked exactly as she should have: all outrage and ostrich feathers.

“Your name does not deserve to be mentioned by any of us! You will never henceforth be noticed
by any of us! Not only have you been the means of preventing a union much hoped for by my
dear nephew’s mother, but you have polluted the shades of Matlock. The merest hint of scandal
was never attached to the name Darcy or Fitzwilliam until you took it upon yourself to scheme
your way out of your sphere.”

Kitty had taken a seat at this point; there seemed no way of stopping Lady Catherine’s diatribe.
When Lady Maltock had become tired and emotional, the plan had clearly been for Lady
Catherine to take over berating. Kitty did not see what outcome either lady was hoping for unless
it was for her to keel over and perspire of shame or boredom. Kitty could only sit in silence and let
such talk wash over her.

It was all nonsense. Kitty had met more highly bred ladies than either Lady Matlock and Lady
Catherine, and she had come to the conclusion that the majority of people concerned with status
and its trappings weren’t those with the most. She’d noticed also that women like Darcy’s aunts
would bemoan the vulgarity of the gentry and the ‘cits’ in their slavish devotion to decorum and
attempts to *ape their betters*. Yet what was the difference with what they were doing?

The true leaders of the *ton* didn’t give two figs for their money or status, of course that was
because they expected it to be there and would be in for a sad time of it if the Exchange crashed or their crops all failed. But nevertheless they found it in themselves to be quite affable and not at all starched to their collar points.

It was funny what money and elevation did to people. Sir William Lucas had felt it necessary to give up his trade when he had been knighted at St James. If he had not given up his trade he could have given his daughters better portions and Charlotte Lucas would not have ended up marrying Mr Collins, instead she would have married that young man who had courted her when Kitty had been thirteen. It also caused the Bingley sisters to forget they had made their money in trade. Kitty had been most surprised when Bingley had revealed this to her; the way his sisters carried on she had thought they would not have even spoken to anyone who knew someone who owned a shop. More so, it meant that Lady Catherine and Lady Matlock thought they had some right to speak to her as they did.

Of course Darcy would have picked this morning to ride; in fact she was not sure she put it past either of his aunts to have not been waiting around the corner to pounce when they saw he was not at home.

The ladies in the room were still speaking, interjecting when the other spoke to place their unique form of barb. They were a united front and Kitty had no hope of relief. Georgiana was certainly in the house but Kitty would not for the world pray for relief from that quarter; no, she must remain in ignorance. Kitty could only assume that both ladies had been reading of Napoleon’s exploits and had learned much from that gentleman’s (although she hesitated to use the word) exploits on the battlefield.

“It is not to be borne!”

Kitty looked up; this seemed to be the end of Lady Catherine’s speech. It still seemed amazing to her that this woman in front of her was the sister of Lord Matlock. Of course one did not expect a man’s wife to necessarily be anything like him, but a sister? The Bennet sisters were all varying but there were points of commonality. Lady Catherine seemed a stranger bent on battle. Kitty could only behave towards her as Wellington would to Napoleon and his allies: rout their forces. Except she was no Wellington.

“Of course not,” said Kitty serenely, clearly confusing Lady Catherine. “But there is one thing I do not understand. I thought that the Viscount had been in debt long before I even met Mr Darcy?”

“Nonsense,” said Lady Matlock

“My nephew would not be so foolish.” Lady Catherine fixed her eye upon Kitty

“Oh. I cannot believe that your brother would lie, Lady Catherine.”

“Edwin! Lie! That is impossible.”

“Then he must have been misled.”

“My brother, the Earl of Matlock, misled. A ridiculous notion! “

“Then he must not be misled about his own son’s conduct …” said Kitty trying to look innocent.

Lady Catherine did not seem to know what to say to that. Lady Matlock was not silenced however.

“Matlock has always despised my darling Snitterton! Just because he has no depth of feeling – “
“Enough, madam! The house of Matlock will not be disparaged in this way,” interjected Lady Catherine. “Perhaps my nephew did indulge in some sport. Why my father, the late Earl, was a known gambler in his youth. It is nothing more than youthful high spirits to be expected in a nobleman.”

“Indeed,” said Kitty helpfully. “But is not Lord Snitterton past thirty; perhaps it is merely my age, but I had not thought that young.”

Lady Catherine seemed to consider this. “My nephew clearly has inherited the lamentable trait inherent in all my nephews of keeping bad company.”

Lady Matlock seemed to wish to argue this, but decided against it.

Kitty ignored the veiled commented directed at her – after all she must be the bad company that had corrupted Darcy. “It is a pity that Lord Snitterton did not pay more attention to you, Lady Catherine. I am sure if he listened to your advice then he would have realised the ruin that would come from keeping such company. But then I understand he did not visit you in Kent very often? I know that Darcy was so very upset that he had offended you so deeply that he was unable to visit. And Colonel Fitzwilliam has visited you twice this year.”

Lady Catherine looked mollified. “Indeed, their attachment to Rosings grows each year.”

“I cannot wonder at it. Darcy has spoken so affectionately of it and so constantly. I cannot believe Lord Snitterton did not enjoy it!”

“I do not understand it either. If he had come to me then he would not have found himself in such disgrace for I would have told him the correct way to play cards.”

“Catherine!” said Lady Matlock. “Snitterton is not to blame.”

“If he would not listen to guidance, then he has no one to blame but himself,” said Lady Catherine, clearly forgetting for the moment that this stricture covered not only Snitterton but Darcy.

“I will not have you speaking about my son in this manner!”

“I will speak how I find! If he has lost himself so much as to forget what he owes himself and his family! If he refuses the claims of duty honour and gratitude! He has brought shame upon our family and I shudder to think that he will one day wear the garb that my esteemed father wore.”

The colour drained out of Lady Matlock’s face until there were only two burning red spots remaining. “You have no right to speak! Sir Lewis de Bourgh marrying the only daughter of the Earl of Matlock! You married to suit yourself and not your family. How dare you claim my son does not understand the responsibilities of his name. In comparison to you!”

“My husband was not my most titled suitor, but he was the most eligible in wealth and consequence,” said Lady Catherine acidly.

“A union that produced an ill child that cannot even be presented at court! She will never bear a child and Rosings will fall to some unworthy distant scion of the de Bourgh household.”

“Anne is an accomplished young woman! She understands her position in the world – “

“I cannot see how, since she cannot leave her room and is so nearsighted that she confused me for Mrs Jenkins last time I visited. I have always said blood will out! But I will make no comment on
whose blood that might be.”

Lady Catherine’s teacup was shaking in her hand as she looked as if she might keel over from an apoplexy.

“Indeed. I often wondered at how solicitous you were over Lord Meltcalfe’s girls! I cannot imagine why unless you perceived a close connection.”

Kitty could not help widen her eyes at this exchange. Clearly Lady Matlock and Lady Catherine were only united when there was a joint enemy to engage with! She was even more struck by how deluded Darcy must have been if he thought her family worse than his!

Kitty could not imagine her mother telling Aunt Gardiner to her face that she suspected little Edward was Mr Beaumaris from down the street’s child. Not even her mother would be that vulgar.

“Leave. Leave this house at once!” Lady Catherine boomed. “Your mother’s father was a mere shopkeeper. I told my brother you smelt of the shop.”

Kitty fervently hoped this was not the point where Lady Matlock turned to her for support. But Lady Matlock merely grabbed her reticule from where it had lain on the sofa and stalked to the door. She turned to make her parting shot. “I take no leave of you and send no regards to your daughter; you deserve no such attention!”

&&^&^&
Darcy could not believe he was relieved to be finally setting out for Hertfordshire, probably not as much as Bingley was, but nevertheless he would breathe a sigh of relief when he set foot in Netherfield once more.

The descent of his Aunt upon London had set the fox among the chickens in the worst way. It would take some time for Darcy to recover from the sight of his wife and Lady Catherine calmly discussing curtains in his parlour. He’d burst in, ready to engage with his aunt, after Roberts had informed him of Lady Catherine’s presence.

Of course his aunt had not accepted Catherine. She’d quite pointedly told Darcy as she’d been leaving that his wife, while far more polite, poised and intelligent than she expected, was still a blight upon the noble houses of Fitzwilliam and Darcy.

Then again Lady Catherine had been under the impression that Darcy’s prime topic of conversation was Rosings. Darcy could only marvel at the level of his aunt’s delusion. Rosings was her home and thus everyone in the world must covet it.

Anyhow Darcy was relieved that Lady Catherine appeared no longer to be quite so vehemently against his marriage. That this had come at the cost of her relationship with Aunt Matlock was another thing. He’d never thought about his aunts’ relationship with each other; he’d assumed it was cordial. He’d never seen evidence of it being otherwise, then again he’d rarely seen them together and if they had been together he avoided them. Two aunts were rather worse than one.

Apparently, this cordiality was another misconception of his. The curt letters sent to his house and the almost permanent visiting of Colonel Fitzwilliam told the true story. His cousin had also requested permission to cling on behind the carriage as they went to Netherfield. That or fold himself into one of the trunks. Darcy didn’t blame the Colonel at all.

Naturally the family turmoil was only expressed privately. Darcy realised how hypocritical that was. It caused him almost to long for the society of Meryton where everyone spoke their mind, if not in word but in expression.

Although Darcy wondered what their reaction would be when the Darcys returned to Netherfield. Both the Miss Bennets had returned to Longbourn and he was sure that either of the sisters, in fact maybe both of them, would make some effort to smooth over any gossip and whispering that might be attendant on their return. Either way it could not be worse than the current situation where Darcy felt he was in the middle of a battle where he could not win. Unpleasantness would abound no matter which ‘side’ he chose.

Darcy put on his coat and hat, left his final instructions with the servants for any business that might not directly go to Netherfield.

The Bingleys had brought their carriage around. Mr and Mrs Hurst had decided to continue with their seaside holiday (although it was not quite summer yet) and only attend the wedding, not the preceding weeks of preparation. Darcy suspected that Miss Bingley would have joined them, except for the fact that without her Catherine would have been Netherfield’s hostess. Miss Bingley’s pride would most definitely not survive that!

However their voices appeared to be raised as in unison as he approached the carriage.

“Charles, that is the fourth time you have stepped on my gown, do you know how much I paid for
“I do not think there is room!” Catherine sounded equally as annoyed.

“No, no we just move it this way…” Bingley sounded his normal affable self, if slightly flustered.

“Charles!” shrieked Miss Bingley.

“Charles, you almost caused Miss Bingley an injury – Oh do not swing it that way.”

“Why must this be in the carriage? I am sure someone can strap it to the back of the carriage. If our footman is too incompetent to do it, I am sure Darcy’s is not!”

“But I must have it in the carriage, Caroline.”

“Why? What conceivable use can you have for a portable writing desk?! I do not even know why anyone would wish to write in a carriage!”

Catherine seemed to agree with this.

“Darcy has still not read the marriage settlements!”

Darcy groaned at his friend’s comments. Bingley had become slightly calmer over his impending marriage (although it was not as if it was to be tomorrow Mrs Bennet had apparently planned a whole series of celebratory events to be got through first!) but the settlements were still weighing on his mind.

“Darcy must read them and make notes!”

“Notes?” said Miss Bingley in some alarm. “You cannot be serious in allowing an open pot of ink in a moving carriage! These seats have just been redone, Charles! It would be most inconvenient to have to recover them. Not that we could not afford it.”

“Oh not to mention we’ll end up black from head to toe before we even arrive at Netherfield.”

“We shall look a sight!” Miss Bingley sounded more horrified than ever.

“But you must understand, Darcy – “

“Hang Darcy!” was his wife’s uncharitable response.

Darcy opened the door to the carriage, and took in the sight within. The portable writing desk did not look as though it was at all portable and if it ever had had any practical use it would not be in a carriage with four occupants.

“I do not think this necessary, Bingley. I may read the settlements at Netherfield.”

“But I am sure Mr Bennet will expect me to be organised. You cannot wish me to make a bad impression.”

“I do not think Papa will even read them,” injected Catherine. She was more than likely right but Darcy did not think that would help soothe Bingley.

“I may read them in the carriage; I do not need this contraption to read, Bingley.”

“You will wish to make notes!”
“I shall endeavour to remember them and add them on our arrival.”

With the carriage now freed of awkward woodwork, they were finally able to set off.

Miss Bingley adjusted her bonnet, which seemed most ornate for a country trip but Darcy suspected she wished to storm Meryton just as she had done so last September when Bingley had taken possession of Netherfield.

“Your wife has just been telling us of her most interesting way of ridding herself of you,” said Miss Bingley, leaning forward conspiratorially. “She thinks you fit for the gallows.”

Caroline you know that Kitty did not mean - “ injected Bingley. Darcy wondered why Bingley bothered; if was not as if his sister would let him change the course of the conversation.

“So what do you say to that?” Miss Bingley finished archly.

Darcy had nothing to say to that.

“Well maybe Mr Darcy was born to hang,” said Catherine. Darcy looked up from Bingley’s papers with a curious expression.

“Oh!” exclaimed Miss Bingley with a titter, “Never! Mr Darcy commit a crime. How abominable of you to say so!”

Catherine looked innocent, but gave him a quick look before answering Miss Bingley. “I merely meant his proclivity for wanting to shoot things might lead him into trouble.”

“Hunting is a gentleman’s sport,” said Miss Bingley incredulously. “Perhaps you do not know a great deal of gentlemen but I assure you it is certainly not a crime.”

Darcy found himself hiding his smile behind the dreary legal terminology, and avoiding Bingley’s questioning eyebrow that clearly wanted to know the joke that his sister had so completely missed.

Darcy sighed as he tipped his head back into the warm water. It had only been a twelve mile journey and had not even taken the whole morning, but it was with a feeling of great relief that he felt able to submit to the soothing water. Any sort of carriage ride where he had to be shut up in close proximity to Caroline Bingley was likely to bring on a headache. Add to that trying to read a document that was written by a man who wished to prove why one was giving him a great deal of money to write it! He should have ridden, but Darcy was not sure he even could have combined holding the reins and reading settlements.

Hertfordshire was supposed to be a blessed relief from the chaos that was London. For one, his aunt’s weeping at Snitterton’s impending departure had grated on Darcy’s nerves. While Darcy had no real reason to think that Fitzwilliam or his uncle would fail in their mission to put Snitterton on that ship, Darcy would not sigh a final sigh of relief until he’d opened the letter that definitively said his cousin had left England’s shores.

Nevertheless Darcy’d found himself unconsciously rubbing the back of his neck for the last stages of their journey. Thus he was unaccountably glad that Edwards first suggestion upon arriving was to fetch his master up a bath.

Darcy had been half expecting Mrs Bennet and her daughters to be in residence upon their arrival, but the house had been blessedly quiet. Bingley of course wanted to ride over immediately (particularly after Darcy had reported he had no changes to make to his and Miss Bennet’s
marriage settlements) it had only been the sudden thought that he might pass his beloved on the way that made him wait.

Darcy approved of Bingley’s enthusiasm in theory but in practice it was prone to become overwhelming.

“Edwards, I must commend you on this excellent idea,” said Darcy, shaking his head, as his valet bustled around the small enclave in his chamber. Darcy had no idea why the dressing enclave would be at this end of the room for it was quite at the front of the house and overlooked the drive. It was a very pretty and practical view that seemed wasted for an area used solely for bathing and dressing. “I hope it was not a burden.” While it was Edward’s job to look after his master, Darcy did not wish him to be unnecessarily inconvenienced.

“No, sir. Netherfield’s servants were most organised. I cannot, however, take credit for the idea. Mrs Darcy indicated you were subjected to a most uncomfortable journey.”

Darcy tapped the edge of the tub lost in some thought. He was only distracted by the faint sound of something rumbling up the driveway outside and then Bingley’s shout for his servants to stand to attention.

Darcy wondered if he just put his head under the water, could he claim not to have heard the Bennets’ arrival? He would have thought Miss Bennet, if she could prevent her mother from insisting on greeting them, would have managed to restrain her until at least the morrow. The house was still being uncovered! Darcy did not understand that since Bingley had given plenty of warning for his arrival! But he should not judge, since the house had been without a competent mistress for some time, unlike Pemberley and his town house.

Edwards indicated that he was going to fetch more hot water, but before he could exit, pitcher in hand, Catherine burst through the connecting door, making Edwards give an almost imperceptible jump. Darcy was not quite so lucky: he lost his grip on the tub and almost very ungracefully slid under water.

She clearly wished to take advantage of the superior view from the windows in the room and did not notice his or his valet’s surprise.

“Oh! It is not Mama at all. It is Sir William!” she said, turning back to the room. She then appeared to take in the scene around her. “Oh!” she exclaimed again looking slightly flustered – “I had thought you would – “She didn’t finish her sentence and resolutely turned her eyes back to peering out of the panes of glass.

Darcy sat up and motioned to Edward that he would like his dressing gown.

Edwards held the garment up for Darcy to wrap himself in as he climbed out of the bath.

Sir William Lucas had not impressed Darcy; then again very few of the Meryton residents had done so. His sudden desire to completely turn his back on his previous life, his overzealous affability – they weren’t grievous faults but they grated. He did feel a sense of disappointment, he would have thought Sir William sensible of the proprieties – if not the courtesy – of leaving a man some time to settle back into his home before paying calls.

“I expect he wishes to be the first to congratulate Charles.”

Darcy blinked. Had he been speaking out loud? Catherine had finally turned from the window now that he was at least semi-clad.

“It is still the height of bad manners,” replied Darcy.
“You needn’t go downstairs to meet him. He’ll only want to see Charles,” Catherine spoke quite blithely.

Yet it nettled Darcy slightly. The implication that he must feel that to submit himself to Sir William’s company was beneath him. It might be the truth but Darcy resented the idea he was so transparent. That his foibles were so transparent!

“Darcy! Sir William has come to call!” said Miss Bingley unnecessarily and Darcy suspected she only spoke in order to mock.

That worthy man did not seem to notice. Either he was not quick witted enough, in which case it was cruel to ridicule him, or he was too polite to show his understanding, in which case he was a far better man than Miss Bingley was a lady.

Darcy bowed. “Sir William, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Yes! Yes!” Sir William looked somewhat nervous now. Darcy wondered if this was the reaction he would receive throughout the town.

Darcy made a polite observation about the weather and asked after Lady Lucas.

“Oh yes she is quite well. You must have heard that my eldest daughter was recently married - not long after – well quite!”

“I have had the pleasure of my aunt’s company in town, Sir William, and she assured me Mrs Collins is very much enjoying her new position. I understand you visited her for some time?”

This innocuous line of conversation was sustained for some time.

“I believe Mrs Bennet has many plans for the happy day! Such a blessed union!” said Sir William, looking warmly at Bingley.

Bingley beamed and looked ready to say something but Sir William continued. “I’ll wager a pretty sum that you’d wish all her parties and dinners to the depths of the ocean because they extend the time before you can bring your Mrs Bingley home! Such a desirous event!”

Bingley demurred.

“Mrs Bennet has the happiness of seeing two of her daughters marry well; it has quite transformed her,” said Sir William confidentially. “Mrs Darcy is quite well?”

Darcy who had begun to tune out Sir William’s raptures, in practice of having to hear them repeated constantly in the weeks leading up to the wedding, started at the question directed to him. “Very well.”

“Capital! Capital! What congratulations will flow in when more desirable events come upon us – eh Darcy?”

Darcy stiffened. Sir William could not be referring to what he thought he was referring to! The open conversation rather suggested it could not be, but the nodding and inclination of Sir William’s head suggested otherwise.

Sir William did not dwell on that line of questioning, instead asked Miss Bingley if she had yet
had a chance to visit St James.

“It is intolerable. We are not five minutes in the house when we are inundated with a man who thinks that he could introduce me at St James Court! I could hardly keep my countenance. He must be highly forgetful because he has made me that offer before.”

“Caroline,” said Bingley wearily, “I expect he was merely being helpful.”

“Helpful! Do not be so stupid, Charles.”

Bingley made some retort that was out of character for him, but Darcy suspected Bingley was out of sorts because Sir William’s visit had made it almost impossible for him to attend to the business of Netherfield, overseeing the unpacking and deciding upon the feasibility of some renovations he had planned before his marriage and ride over to Longbourn.

Mrs Bennet would have been happy to see him at any hour, but Bingley was conscious of not wishing to appear completely devoid of sensibility to foist himself upon a family that was not expecting him. Or at least appear arrogant in making the assumption that they were expecting him.

Darcy made the silent prediction that the morning would either bring Mrs Bennet to Netherfield in the early hours saying that she had ordered dinner for Bingley and he was heartless for not arriving for it, or bring Bingley to Longbourn at the crack of dawn to hear the same reproach. Darcy could only be glad Bingley had not asked his advice on whether to ride over to Longbourn and thus he could not be blamed for the outcome.

Dinner was a subdued affair as Miss Bingley seemed to wish to vent her spleen in order to prepare herself for the privations of company she seemed to think she was about to encounter. Darcy wished he could openly roll his eyes as Catherine appeared to be doing.

Bingley sighed with relief when the ladies departed, “I know she is my sister, Darcy, but I do wish she could have gone with Louisa! I wish to enjoy my time with Jane before our marriage, not to wonder at who my sister has offended now!”

Darcy sipped his wine. “Where your sister offends – “ Darcy spread his hands wide “You can but remedy.”

Bingley cocked his head to one side.

“I think the society here will forgive your sister much because you are so very amiable to be marrying one of their Belles.”

“With that logic, Darcy, even you will be accepted!” said Bingley with a smile.

Darcy laughed.

Bingley went to join the ladies but Darcy decided his threshold of exposure to Miss Bingley’s wit had been reached and climbed the stairs to his chamber. Edwards was not expecting him but that did not prevent Darcy stripping off his jacket and removing his cravat.

The morrow would bring Mrs Bennet and the other worthy ladies of Meryton. He half hoped they would be as Bingley had described, or at the very least like Sir William – wary but affable. Although perhaps not as outspoken.
The door was pushed open slowly. “Darcy?”

“Yes?”

“You could not stand Miss Bingley’s company any more either?”

“No,” said Darcy honestly.

“I just wished to tell you before tomorrow to not mind Mama. Do not let her offend you. Most of the time she does not mean it.”

“Most of the time?” queried Darcy.

Catherine laughed. “You refused to dance with Lizzy. Not dancing with one of her daughters? That is a mortal sin from which you will never recover.”

Darcy snorted. Catherine moved from the door and reached up on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. “Good Night.”

“Good Night, Catherine.”

&&^^&&
Kitty peered in through the window of Mertyon’s drapery. She could see Mr Warpole fussing about behind one of the counters. Kitty was admiring one of the prints, but as he stood he saw her and frowned. Perhaps all those moments of looking and never purchasing had caught up with her!

“I understand from Aunt Phillips that Meryton thinks that Mrs Darcy would never patronise one of their unfashionable stores. Particularly since Jane bought most of her trousseau in town,” Lizzy whispered, amused.

“Well then!” said Kitty, linking arms with Lizzy. “I’ve always wanted to spend what I wanted in Warpole’s!”

Kitty and Lizzy had walked into Meryton. It had only been mere days since their arrival but Kitty was already feeling that it did not matter how much space there was, nowhere was big enough when Caroline Bingley was under the same roof.

Bingley had wished Jane to oversee some of the changes being wrought to Netherfield, since they were being made for her benefit; the changes to the mistress’ bedchamber and so forth. Jane of course was very happy to look through magazines and help pick out furnishings. So too was Mrs Bennet who had been denied the pleasure of helping with the wedding clothes as much as she would have liked.

Caroline Bingley however had strongly resisted, claiming that poor Jane should not have to shoulder such a responsibility, and insisted on being involved. Except of course when any decision had to be made she would absent herself, which meant that in the last three days no decision had even been made as to the colour of the new curtains in the breakfast room.

The fuss that was occurring quite overwhelmed Kitty and made her somewhat fondly think of the considerable lack of excitement over her own wedding. It had not been the ideal wedding preparations but at least it had not involved a committee of people arguing over whether chintz, damask or brocade was the best covering for the new dining room chairs.

Miss Bingley had declared herself the true arbiter of fashion. Jane in her goodness did not resent her soon to be sister’s involvement (an understatement in the extreme others; would say she had taken over). Mrs Bennet ignored this, merely continuing with her own plans. Only Lizzy truly disliked it and fully felt the barbs that her sister brushed off and her mother was incapable of seeing.

In truth it was both Kitty and Lizzy who found themselves in the role of attempting to keep the peace, with such different methods of doing so. Kitty’s efforts had exhausted her and she saw her sister’s temper rapidly fraying. So the walk into Meryton was proposed.

It was a relief to be able to pick some fabric without having an argument over it.

“I think it will do very well,” said Lizzy as they walked out of the shop, the wrapped parcel of fabric in Lizzy’s basket.

“Yes, but very well for what? It was very pretty…maybe I shall give it to Georgiana and she can make something of it. It would make a nice bonnet trim perhaps?”

Lizzy laughed, “Do not think of practicalities. Relish the fact we just decided on something without the walls of hell closing in upon us!”
The two girls continued their way up the street of Meryton. They’d stopped and talked politely to everyone who had greeted them upon entering the town and thus were not accosted as they made their way to the path that would lead them back to Netherfield.

Except of course for one man.

Lizzy had stiffened upon seeing him and Kitty had tried not to stifle a laugh.

“Miss Bennet, Mrs Darcy,” Mr Devinsham’s leg was executed with style.

“I had not thought to see you here, Mr Devinsham,” said Lizzy.

“You and your aunt were so eloquent on the beauties of this area that I had to come and see them for myself. I had intended to pay my respects to you at your home, but I see fate has intervened.”

“Yes, and I am afraid we are most busy, sir. The preparations for my sister’s wedding.”

“I thought that was some weeks away?” said Mr Devinsham, puzzled.

“It is, but my mother has planned a veritable gala of events,” smiled Kitty. It was like Lizzy to be so provoking to the poor young man. Lizzy was never good with young men who liked her very much indeed. “I am sure you will be welcome to join us, if you make our mother’s acquaintance.”

Kitty did not react even when Lizzy surreptitiously pinched her hand.

“Good day, Mr Devinsham,” said Lizzy brightly.

“Good day, Miss Bennet. Mrs Darcy,” he dipped his hat to them as they continued past him.

“Do not look at me like that, Lizzy! You never know, he may fall in love with Mary. Though I think it would be a poor exchange in his eyes.”

“He is not in love with me.”

“I think he likes you very much. He has followed you from town.”

Lizzy laughed. “Should I encourage him out of a sense of gratitude? No, I am not the sort of lady who torments a respectable young man.”

Kitty remained silent.

“I am almost one and twenty and have received no proposals of marriage,” said Lizzy almost to no one in particular.

“It is not so very old. Charlotte Lucas was twenty-seven,” commented Kitty.

Lizzy made a face. “And the man is everything that is conceited, pompous, narrow-minded and silly!”

Kitty wondered if it was a bad thing she was ticking off some of those flaws in her own husband.

“She wished only to be comfortable and respectable. I told Jane once that I could only marry for the deepest love. Charlotte disagreed with me. She said happiness in marriage is entirely by chance! That you always contrive to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have your share of vexation! That is what she said to me. I shall never forget it.”

“Because you were so disappointed that she did not think as you did,” said Kitty, squeezing
Lizzy’s arm.

‘I expect so.’ They walked on a bit further before Lizzy continued. ‘With Jane marrying we will be parted.’

‘By three miles!’ laughed Kitty, puzzling at her sister’s sudden thoughtfulness but also joyful that she had chosen to share it with her. That she accepted that Kitty could understand her thoughts and feelings.

“Jane will not be at Netherfield for long. Too close to Mama.”

“I hope it is not a short stay! Otherwise we have spent all this time preventing a feud over chairs and curtains that will soon be covered in cloth and used by someone else!” Kitty paused, “No, this is their own furniture is it not? For Bingley could not change the furniture as it exists if he is merely the tenant.” She stopped short.

“Kitty?”

“Where is all the current furniture going to be put?” Kitty almost wailed at the idea of Caroline Bingley foisting on her the responsibility of finding a place in Netherfield to put all the current owner’s furniture. Bingley was more than likely completely oblivious to the fact that everything would have to be moved somewhere. He was after all a man.

“Why do you think I was counselling Jane and Bingley to wait? But no, Mama must have new chairs for her newly married daughter!”

“Hang Mama,” said Kitty petulantly.

Lizzy laughed, “Kitty. You should not speak so!”

“No, I should not,” she agreed. “But we were speaking of you.”

“We were indeed.”

“Being parted from Jane – though you are such an excellent correspondent.”

“True. But Jane was not so obliging as to fall in love with a member of parliament or a peer of the realm and thus we shall have to pay for the privilege of the post. I shall be lonely.”

“In a house with Mama, Papa, Mary and Lydia? Granted Papa and Mary make little noise unless Mary is playing the pianoforte, but Lydia and Mama cannot be said to be silent!”

“I was speaking of a different sort of silence.”

“Of course. I was merely trying to turn your mind to better things. Jane will wish you to visit her constantly.”

“Then I must ask myself whether I can be the means of ruining my sister’s happiness,” said Lizzy lightly.

“I do not think your presence can be considered any more harmful to marital felicity than the constant companionship of Caroline Bingley!”

“Yes, but could I hold my tongue in her presence?”

“I wish you would not.”
“Jane would wish that I would!”

“But you may stay with me. I have no Miss Bingley, only a Miss Darcy who is the dearest thing. And I can just as easily throw you into the path of other rich men as Jane will be able.”

“I do not think Mr Darcy would wish for such a long term guest.”

“He may easily avoid you. There are many cupboards,” Kitty consoled Lizzy.

Lizzy looked incredulous and Kitty had to shake her head and ask that Lizzy inquire no more. Not that Darcy would really hide in the cupboards from Lizzy. He’d been scrupulously polite to Sir William as far as Kitty could tell and the other people he had interacted with over the last days were the family from Longbourn and she could not blame him for avoiding her mother. Kitty was trying to avoid her mother.

“Are you sure you are quite well, Kitty? You do look a little pale.”

Kitty was surprised, “No, I am quite well. I am not used to such a walk of course. Mama will never forgive me if I fall ill.”

“I am not sure she will notice. I think she has forgotten that she has other daughters. Lydia is most put out, of course.”

“The soldiers are still encamped. She has distractions enough, although they leave soon do they not?”


“You may say his name. He holds no power over me.”

“…Wickham very well, as she always does. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Just like me!” said Kitty. The limited letters she had received from her younger sister had been no surprise to Kitty. Neither was the sudden passion for her company when she had returned. Of course Kitty could not be the companion to Lydia that she had been when she had not been married. Indeed she did not wish to be that companion. Kitty wondered if Lydia realised this, since their interaction had only been confined to a tour of Netherfield and a fashion parade of Lydia’s new bonnets.

They were approaching Netherfield when the sound of horse hoofs made them turn. Darcy was thundering out of the forest; he’d clearly sought to escape too.

“If only Bingley had a docile mare, I could escape the house in that way too,” said Kitty.

Lizzy looked dubious. “Do you not mean if you could ride well enough?”

“Oh did I not tell you in London?” Kitty supposed she had not since that period of time was so confused and tumultuous. “Sir John taught me to ride, well to ride better than I could before!”

Kitty was glad she could say his name without betraying herself; betraying her ultimate folly to her sister who would not understand.

“Then it is a pity Mr Bingley does not have a suitable mount!” Lizzy put her hand over her eyes to watch the path Darcy was taking with his horse. The stallion seemed fidgety and he was clearly working out his fidgets by riding around somewhat aimlessly.
Of course, a lady had no such licence to remove her frustrations and Kitty commented as such.

“Well if there is no one to see…”

When they had been much younger and Kitty had preferred rocks and mountains to flirtations, she had walked more with Lizzy. Of course Jane and Lizzy would walk together with their heads pressed together, but occasionally when Jane was older and required by their mother Lizzy and Kitty would walk alone. Lizzy enjoyed running and frolicking about, and Kitty was quite sure she continued her exertions even now she was a grown woman. Sometimes Lizzy had teased Kitty into chasing her, but Kitty could never catch her.

With that remark Lizzy laughed and started towards the house. Even as a child she’d rarely given warning. There was little Kitty could do but, in the most lady-like fashion imaginable, lift up her skirts and run after her.

&&^^&&

Kitty was sure she should not be quite this out of breath. She had not even been running fast!

“Lizzy, I do believe that was cheating!”

Lizzy looked impish as she stood on the lower steps leading into Netherfield.

“I thought the aim of a race was to be first at the finishing post; if so then Miss Bennet cannot be said to have won either,” Darcy had clearly returned to the house faster than either of them, as he stood on the landing.

“You had what I believe is called an unfair advantage,” retorted Kitty.

“Nevertheless – “

Anything he had been about to say and Kitty was not sure whether it would have been light teasing (of which he was rarely capable) or a remonstration that Mrs Darcy should not be harrying about the countryside like a hoyden was cut off by Mrs Bennet bustling out the door.

“Heavens! Where have you been, child! And what have you been doing!”

Kitty had thought Mrs Bennet would have departed for Longbourn by now; after all it was there she was holding her dinner: the one that Bingley had promised to attend all those months ago before he had departed for London. It was only that thought that mollified her into not insisting on throwing the party from Netherfield itself.

“Mama, should you not be – “

“My turtle! Mr Smythe assured me that it would arrive! And now it is all ruined.”

“Mama I do not think we need discuss this now,” said Lizzy. Kitty noticed her watching Darcy warily.

“When shall we discuss it then? When everyone comes to my turtle soup dinner and finds no turtle! I shall be ruined.”

“Mama I doubt – “ Kitty could hardly get an word in edgewise but she forced herself into the flow of words babbling out of her mother’s mouth – “cannot you make mock turtle soup?”

“Mock Turtle Soup?! What a notion. You think I should want people to think that I cannot afford
turtle?”

Kitty wished very much to tell her mother that she couldn’t afford turtle. Kitty had been aghast (almost as much as she had been when she’d seen such a recipe existed – after all who wanted to eat such a creature?) at how much money one would cost when she’d seen the recipe in one of Mrs Wilson’s book and asked Mrs Wilson why it was such an extravagant dish.

“But if you do not have one – “ Kitty tried to reason with her mother.

“I am afraid I cannot abide turtle. It makes me most unwell – “ suddenly interjected Darcy.

“Oh. I did not realise,” said Mrs Bennet, suddenly noticing her son-in-law for the first time. “Of course we cannot have such a dish; everyone will understand the change now!”

Now the problem seemed to be what to serve. Kitty sighed as she accompanied her mother into the house. Kitty was sure she had brought the recipe for the soup she’d so admired at numerous houses; it was apparently brought back from India so it would be exotic enough for Mrs Bennet’s tastes. If only they had all the ingredients.

&&&&

Sally unwound the curl and let it bounce into place; “There! Despite our obstacles you look very well.” Sally of course meant the fact that the whole house had been in such an uproar that Kitty had had barely enough time to dress herself before they were to depart. “If you do not mind me saying so, I suspect you will be above pleased when you return to London.”

“Oh do not tempt me, Sally, when there are so many more weeks! I love my family dearly but Mama is zealous.”

Sally smiled, “I shall just fetch your cloak, ma’am.”

Kitty had a change of heart over the necklace she was wearing and placed several others up against her neck to admire them in the mirror. She could hear Sally’s greeting of Darcy behind her, and saw her quick curtsey in the reflection.

“I shall not be much longer.”

“It does not much signify,” replied Darcy.

“Thank you for your help with Mama.”

Darcy twisted his signet ring. “I do not suppose it will stop Miss Bingley insisting on holding her own turtle dinner now.”

“You will have to remember not to have any.”

“That shall be easy. I was not lying; I cannot abide the dish.”

“I will endeavour to remember it,” said Kitty, who rejoiced in the notion she would not have to ever serve such a dish.

Darcy seemed slightly aimless, fingering the package for Georgiana that was still lying wrapped upon the dresser. “I hope Georgiana will be able to join us soon.”

“Indeed,” said Kitty, “I miss her.”

“Perhaps her improved spirits can only but help your sister in her battle of wills against Miss
Bingley and Mrs Bennet.

“Jane has never engaged in any sort of battle!”

“It is to her detriment. Though I suppose they are both of a pair. Too obliging. Their servants will cheat them.”

Kitty laughed, “I do not think Bingley such a simpleton. Having a good heart does not require one to be stupid.”

“No, it does not,” Darcy looked thoughtful.

Kitty was still undecided over the necklace she wished to wear. Since Sally was not in the room she could only ask Darcy for his opinion.

“None of them,” was his reply.

Kitty thought she’d make a very strange sight if she wore no necklace. Neither her earrings, dress or hairstyle were dramatic enough to need no adornment. She was about to make this comment to Darcy when he placed a box in front of her. Her questioning look was only greeted with a command to open it.

Kitty opened the box and inside was a necklace. A triangular net of emeralds glittered back at her, connected by delicate silver chains. It was impressive in its simplicity. Kitty was not sure what she had done to deserve such a present. Darcy seemed to sense her slight confusion.

“I missed your birthday.”

Kitty smiled. He not so much as missed it as had behaved abominably but Kitty would not quibble. There was no question that she would wear this necklace now. Not only because it was breathtakingly beautiful but because he had made the effort and Kitty would not rebuff him.

It was easy to remove the necklace she already wore, but Kitty always had difficulty with the catches when she tried to put on any necklace.

“Here,” Darcy took the ends of the necklace from her and fixed it in place. He left his hand on her neck, idly fingering the delicate chains, as he looked into the mirror admiring both her and the necklace. “You look very well.”

“Thank you,” smiled Kitty. “I would not look half as well if I did not have this.”

Darcy shook his head, “You should learn to accept a compliment graciously.”

Kitty laughed, “You should learn to accept gratitude with equanimity.”

Darcy stiffened. “I do not think this deserves gratitude. It is only right – “

“Do not spoil the moment,” said Kitty, craning her neck to look at him properly and not through the mirror.

Darcy inclined his head at her, clearly in acceptance of the critique. Kitty smiled and turned back to examine herself in the mirror once more. A thumping sound below them made Kitty realise that the hour must be growing late.

“Once more into the breach,” said Darcy.
Kitty laughed as she stood, “It’s a dinner party at my mother’s; we are not fighting the French.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow and Kitty was forced to concede the point.

&&^^&&
Darcy eyed the spare pack of cards. He’d always been slightly wary of the Whist custom to have two packs of cards at play to save time between hands. Sir John had probably manipulated that spare pack of cards to implicate Snit in cheating. Darcy did not feel much guilt over the knowledge since he did not doubt it was Snit who taught Sir John. Although Darcy found now that Fitzwilliam had written of Snit’s departure, Darcy could think of him almost with equanimity. The fact he could spend so long contemplating the customs instead of the game itself spoke volumes about his partners. He’d sat at this table because he was not under any circumstances sitting with Mrs Long. It had meant that he was partnering Mrs Goulding. Mr Robinson and Lady Lucas were also of their table.

Mrs Goulding could never remember trumps and seemed too interested in the goings on around her to actually pay attention to who had already played what card. It was only the last vestige of Darcy’s pride that prevented him from merely randomly throwing out his cards.

Mrs Bennet kept a good table and the dinner had been pleasant enough. Their cook had perhaps gone overboard in the spices for the opening soup but that was neither here nor there. The focus of the evening was not himself but Bingley and that gentlemen took the attention well.

Darcy had been alternatively surprised and unsurprised by the townsfolk’s reactions to his presence that evening. Some whispering, but not as much as had occurred in town; when they had seen that he was not adverse to conversation – not that anyone had engaged him in a conversation deeper than that of the weather – even that had ceased. He would never be a favourite and that did not worry him a great deal, but he was reassured that their behaviour would not upset Georgiana when she arrived and nor would it upset Catherine.

Of course this was only their specific behaviour towards himself and his wife; as to their general behaviour they were as much as they ever were. Lady Lucas had asked him outright about Bingley’s plans for purchasing an estate, and Mrs Goulding had hinted that perhaps Mrs Bennet was exaggerating Mr Bingley’s worth.

Darcy had directed their attention back to the game, perhaps not as skilfully as others may have done, but he hoped he had not given offence.

“Oh!” cried Mrs Goulding when they lost yet another trick.

“Another game lost, Mr Darcy,” said Lady Lucas. “Though I expect you play for higher stakes in town.” Lady Lucas appeared to think it unfashionable to play for such low stakes.

Darcy did not agree with the sort of gambling that was rife amongst his peers but he was not adverse to playing at his clubs on occasion. Nevertheless the enjoyment should be drawn from the game, not the potential winnings.

“I am afraid if I did, Lady Lucas, I would find myself in difficulties.”

“I do not believe that, Mr Darcy. If you but had a better partner!” cried Mrs Goulding.

“You give me too much credit,” replied Darcy.

Mrs Goulding laughed. “I was not at all paying attention. I would have played Lottery tickets, but I thought that best left for those who are far more boisterous than I.”
Lady Lucas continued upon this theme, “I never guess correctly. If one has a good memory than one might guess later on in the game but…”

The conversation strayed to the types of games preferred by the young and this allowed Darcy the chance to look around the room without seeming as if he was doing so.

Apart from the whist tables and the lottery table, the rest of the party seemed content to make conversation.

“My husband may wish to join the game – “ suddenly commented Mrs Goulding managing to translate the body language of her husband standing stiffly on the other side of the room. “I expect he has just spoken to Sir William about the fields. I wish they would not talk such business at a dinner engagement, it always ends in hurt feelings!”

Lady Lucas agreed, and Darcy took it as a sign to relinquish his seat to the older gentlemen. Perhaps he would know his wife well enough to predict which cards she was likely to play and thus which cards were needed to win tricks for them.

Darcy accepted a cup of coffee from one of the young ladies. He had been introduced to her all those months ago but he could not remember her name. He felt embarrassed by that and resolved to ask Catherine. He was determined to behave civilly and the least he could do was know names.

“Oh Lord!” Lydia Bennet was sitting quite near him and she looked most put out. Mrs Bennet had apparently invited only Colonel Forster and his wife, thus there were no soldiers for her to flirt with. Darcy had heard her bemoaning her mother’s cruelty in not allowing her to spend all the time the soldiers had left with them. Darcy could only think that Mrs Bennet’s preoccupation with her eldest daughter’s marriage had lead to an excellent outcome. Even if it was unintended.

“Mary is going to sing!”

“Hush!” said Miss Lucas.

“Hush! You should tell her to hush. Kitty! Kitty! Tell Mary not to sing.”

Darcy had not seen his wife move across the room. She ignored her sister until she was closer.

“Mary would not listen to me even if I should ask her, and why should she not sing? We are all friends here.”

“She will sing something dreadfully dull.”

“It is not as if there is anyone to dance with, Lydia. Is that not what you said before dinner?”

Miss Lydia seemed put out at such logic. “Very well. But I shall not sit here and listen to her.”

It then dawned on Darcy that if he remained seated where he was, he would have to listen to Mary Bennet. Yet he could hardly move without appearing as if he was fleeing her.

“The only consolation is everyone else with manners is trapped here as well,” Catherine had joined him on the sofa.

Darcy spoke in an undertone, “Is she likely to sing for –“

“She used to practice for hours.” Darcy thought at first she was teasing him but then he realised she was serious. After all, Darcy’s only recollection of Miss Mary’s singing had been at the Netherfield Ball where she had been silenced after only a song but only by the intervention of Mr
Indeed from the first note Darcy could tell that the song would be interminable. He recognised it as one that Georgiana had learnt to play the previous summer; he had found it long and not his tastes when she had recited it.

He attempted not to wince when she did not hit any of the right notes during one of the refrains. Why did she insist on displaying her accomplishments? Was not a lady’s true accomplishment understanding what she did best? If this required her not to sing nor play the pianoforte then that must be the case.

Beside him Catherine waved her fan, looking slightly heated. Mrs Bennet had certainly chosen the maximum number of guests for her rooms.

“\textcolor{red}{\dots}” Catherine paused looking around at the rest of the party. “At least no one has attempted to cheat at cards, cast aspersions on our lineage or wish to shoot someone.”

Darcy laughed. No, those faults were peculiar to his own family.

“If we were to stand up now we may make our escape,” mused Catherine. “Would you play piquet with me?”

Darcy looked over puzzled by her request. “Piquet?”

“Yes, it is not popular in Meryton, at least not at private gatherings. Though, I suspect gentlemen play it over their cups. Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr Lewis and Sir John all had a hand in teaching it to me, but I still do not understand it at all.”

“It merely requires practice,” said Darcy. “And a piece of paper.” Darcy stood as it became increasingly obvious that Miss Mary had found her sheet music.

Catherine took his proffered arm and they went in search of cards.

Darcy patted his horse’s mane. Well it was technically one of Bingley’s thoroughbreds, but Darcy had commandeered it for the duration. Darcy remembered telling Bingley that he’d find the society around Netherfield something savage. His friend had disagreed. What they had not disagreed upon was the prospect of Netherfield although Darcy had been less zealous in his pronouncements.
When they had been here last year, the rides Darcy took around the area had increased his opinion of the area, at least of its nature. Now he had become reacquainted and he would be tempted to say it was something more than pretty if anyone asked. Nothing to Pemberley of course! But the peaks of Derbyshire were a sight not to be matched by many others.

Although Darcy had to wonder whether this appreciation for the countryside was because it represented escape! He did not have to converse with anyone as he whisked by on horseback. He could merely give them a neighbourly nod. No one could say he thought the countryside nothing at all, if he spent all his time in it.

But he could not spend all of his time riding about, it was growing late and more than one person would be displeased if he failed to present himself properly at the house.

Darcy noticed upon approach that Netherfield had visitors. The carriage and horses were being attended to near the stables. It was most likely members of the Bennet clan and Darcy reminded himself he should really learn what their carriage looked like.

However, in case it was not the Bennets Darcy chose to take the back stairs. He would rather not expose himself to ridicule by walking through the front of the house in all his dirt if the visitors were revealed to be some other worthy resident of the neighbourhood.

He took the stairs two at a time, holding his hat and crop in one hand, grasping the banister. He turned a corner and almost collided with Miss Elizabeth Bennet struggling with a chair.

“I do apologise,” said Darcy slightly out of breath.

“No need I assure you. No one was at fault.”

“You appear to be carrying a chair,” said Darcy, nonplussed.

“As you can see,” said Miss Elizabeth tartly.

“Do you require some assistance?”

“If you would be so kind,” she placed the chair back on the ground. He recognised it as being one of the ornate chairs placed along the wall in one of the receiving rooms. What use it could be being dragged downstairs Darcy did not know.

A thump came from above them, and Catherine came into view, also trying to manoeuvre a chair down the stairs. She looked hot and somewhat fatigued.

Darcy moved up the flight of stairs to carry the chair down to the landing that the other one stood upon. Whether it was to save his wife the effort or rescue the chair from the rough handling he did not know.

“What are you doing?”

Catherine gave him a look of disbelief. “Moving the furniture.”

Darcy was tempted to say he could see that. “But why?”

She looked annoyed. “Have you not been paying attention?”

Darcy wanted to ask when he had ever paid any attention to furniture but he was acutely aware of
Miss Elizabeth’s presence.

“These are the chairs that Charles leased from Mr – oh whatever his name is. I can only remember that he was fa – rotund. He is buying new chairs for Jane. So these chairs must be removed.”

That Darcy could understand; what he could not understand was why they were being brought down from the upper floors.

His wife sighed. “We took them upstairs to put them under Holland covers. But apparently Miss Bingley and Mama think the room looks bare without them and the new chairs are not arriving until – “ She broke off looking at her sister.

“I beg you would not ask me!” said Miss Elizabeth. “You see, Mr Darcy, the whole house is in uproar!”

“Could not you find someone to assist?”

“Between Mama, Miss Bingley and Mr Bingley there is not a servant to be got,” replied Catherine. “It seemed easier to do it ourselves. I assure you I am quite capable of carrying a chair.”

“As am I!” added her sister, “Unless you think that country ladies are incapable?”

Darcy ignored her teasing comment. He did not think any lady should carry chairs up and down stairs, particularly ones that were not her own, because someone kept changing their mind. He could not abide that weakness of character.

“I assure you, Miss Bennet, I do not think you incapable. You will find that I am also quite capable of moving furniture. I beg that you would – “

“Escape while there is still an opportunity?” put in Catherine, looking relieved. “You do not need to ask me twice,” she replied before fleeing back up the stairs.

Miss Elizabeth curtseyed and followed her sister, a smile playing at her lips, but Darcy could not tell if it was a genuine or bittersweet smile.

So he was left with the chairs.

&&^^&&

“Bingley, I would speak to you,” Darcy had avoided Mrs Bennet and had merely put in an appearance to wave them off, with Mrs Bennet’s regrets that she had ordered such a fine dinner of her own that she and her daughters could not stay and partake of Netherfield’s.

“Darcy! Where have you been hiding yourself? Of course I know how you detest balls and would rather go to bed, but I had thought you would like to reign in my extravagance. Although you would have a hard time in convincing me of it. I wish to show everyone my love for Jane.”

“Is it important that everyone see your love in such a way? Is it not enough that she knows it?”

Bingley smiled. “Of course it is enough that Jane knows how I feel about her. She is an angel. But I should like everyone to know what joy she brings me.”

Darcy smiled, “Very well. But I did not come to talk to about the ball.”

“It is not the settlements – “

“No, Bingley,” said Darcy.
“Then what can make you look as serious as you did when you entered the room?”

“May I ask you why I found Catherine arranging your furniture? Carrying the chairs up and down the stairs – “Darcy stopped because he saw the look of ignorance on Bingley’s face. “You have not been attending to the furniture either? ”

“I had not realised.” Bingley sat on the side of his desk and ran a hand through his hair. “Caroline insists on being difficult. Of course she is too well-bred - “ Darcy could not believe Bingley could be sincere when he commented on his sister’s breeding, but it was Bingley; maybe he could be sincere about such a thing. “ to openly flout my wishes. She just … I did not realise that Kitty was arranging the things that Caroline ought to be. She should of course only carry your chairs.”

Darcy wondered if planning a ball and forthcoming nuptials had affected his friend’s mind – “I do not think Catherine should be required to carry any furniture. At any time.”

“Of course. I will speak to Caroline.”

“Why do you not just involve Miss Bennet more? It shall be her home. I have been told that young ladies like to change things to suit themselves. This way the changes will happen once. Bingley, you cannot spend your life allowing others to dictate to you and being in love does not give you licence to neglect your responsibilities.”

Bingley nodded. “I do not wish to see Caroline’s reaction, but she shall have to come to terms with my marriage.” Bingley turned to look at Darcy, “I think that she had more hopes than you did of my marrying Georgiana.”

Darcy offered Bingley a drink.

“By the by, Darcy, did you mean that I should not allow you to dictate to me, as you were giving me a dictate?”

“I of course meant following no more dictates after you had followed mine, “ Darcy kept a straight face.

Bingley laughed then he sobered. “Why does marriage have to be so difficult?”

&&^^&&

Mr Goulding patted the mare’s mane, and held his pipe in the other, a rather unfashionable pasttime Darcy had thought. He’d certainly seen young Mr Goulding with snuff. “She’s a good beast. My silly chit took a fall from her – her fault, not the mare’s – and now won’t even look at a horse.”

Darcy inferred that Mr Goulding was talking about his daughter, for whom the other man had bought the horse.

“I do not believe that will be of long duration. It is difficult to recover one’s pride after a fall,” commented Darcy, who was still examining the animal.

“You do not know my daughter. It is fashionable to ride, so she must ride. Of course she has little expectation of what that entails; it is not merely sitting atop and looking pretty.”

Darcy did not know Miss Goulding (except for seeing her across rooms at various gatherings) but he rather suspected he knew a great deal of women like her. “Then you had better not sell the animal.” Darcy had become entangled in a conversation with Mr Goulding at the Lucas’s as that
man had wished to avoid an argument with their host. He’d been surprised that Mr Goulding had not approached him with the same superficiality that other gentleman of the area had done so. Perhaps Mr Goulding saw nothing wrong in what Darcy was presumed to have done, or he did not mind Darcy’s taciturn nature. Darcy had begun to think it was the latter which affected reactions towards him more.

Mr Goulding did not seem perturbed though and had spent some time discussing his problems with his fields and those that backed onto Sir William’s. Darcy found it comforting to know he could provide advice, and that there were those in the area that were happy to accept his advice. After all managing an estate was something he was more proficient in than others. When Mr Goulding had mentioned he was going to have to sell one of his horses, Darcy had felt no discomfort in questioning him more about the animal.

“I confess I may have had some plan in that direction,” said Mr Goulding.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I would be right in thinking that Bingley has no animal suitable for a young lady?” Darcy nodded. “Then I see no reason why you should not borrow mine. It is the country way.” Mr Goulding smiled widely.

“And your daughter may suddenly realise the benefits of riding once more and your expense will not be for nothing?”

Mr Goulding puffed on his pipe; “I see we understand each other.”

&&&&

“Riding?” Catherine looked perturbed. Darcy thought for a moment he had overestimated her abilities, “But the ball – “

“Does not need you,” replied Darcy. His wife frowned and Darcy caught the implication of his words. “It is not your responsibility. You have done enough. “

She did not seem to need much more convincing; she returned in much less time than he would have allotted in a riding habit. It was different to the one she’d worn in London for her lessons. This one was certainly in line with the fashion for military style adornments.

“I thought you said there would be no fighting of the French?”

“It is much admired in London,” said Catherine laughing. “Georgiana has a walking dress in this fashion; Fitzwilliam said we were being suitably patriotic.”

“Fitzwilliam would say that,” said Darcy as he helped her mount and handing her a riding crop.

“It is a pity it is not hunting season,” said Catherine letting the horse fidget a little. Darcy eyed the mare warily as he hoisted himself into his saddle; he hoped that his idea would not turn out to be a bad one.

“I had thought this to be a restful activity.”

Catherine gave him a peculiar look.

“Riding is preferable to a ball, or even planning for one.”

“Indeed,” she replied. “There is a pretty little copse to the east, shall we go there?”
Darcy thought he knew the spot she meant and nodded. It was an easy enough ride and would make for a pleasant afternoon.
“You do not approve?”

“Do you need my approval?” said Jane, fingering the satin. In any other sister it might be seen as envy, but Kitty knew Jane was above such thoughts.

“I should like my sister to like my gown!” Kitty twirled in the dress, before turning to choose her gems, running her fingers over the necklace Darcy had given her before choosing another. She couldn’t wear the same necklace twice in such a short space of time even if she had wanted to.

“I thought I was supposed to be the belle of the ball?” said Jane, smiling.

“Precisely!” said Kitty. Taking in her sister’s puzzled expression, she continued, “I cannot wear a gown that would outshine you. So you must be sure to make me wear the most matronly gown.”

“I should not mind you outshining me, Kitty,” said Jane.

Kitty laughed. “I should suspect you say that merely because you know it’s impossible. But I cannot; you are too good.”

Jane blushed. The sisters were dressing themselves at Netherfield before attending the dinner and ball.

“I thought you wished to wear the dress with the sarsnet petticoat, the one we chose together?” said Jane.

Kitty turned from the mirror at the dresser “Madam Fancot made it up to the wrong measurements! I shall have to take it back to her when we return to town.”

“That is too bad, but the satin suits you perfectly.”

Kitty continued to place in her earrings. “I would complement you but you do not need it. I think you could wear a sack and no one would notice.”

Jane looked alarmed. “I should hope that they would! Why should they not notice?”

“I should have said they would not care. You are marrying Mr Bingley!”

“You do not think Mrs Long or Lady Lucas would not notice?”

“I think that is the most uncharitable thing I have heard you say, Jane!”

“Oh I did not mean – “

“Jane! I was teasing you.”

Jane blushed. Kitty watched her in the mirror. She seemed nervous and it could not just be Kitty’s teasing. It reminded her of when Jane had broached the subject of Darcy and their marriage and Kitty had had to take hold of the conversation before it floated away.

“Jane, is something wrong?” Kitty wondered what was taking Lizzy so long. Lydia had insisted Lizzy help her with her gown but even Lydia could not be taking this long to pick from the dresses she had bought with her. She had not even bought that many, Mr Bennet utterly refusing
to sit on the box to make room for more dresses.

“No. It is nothing.” Jane was unconvincing.

“I am sure Lizzy will not be long,” said Kitty.

Jane looked somewhat mortified. “Oh no I – “

“It is all right, Jane. You have always been closer to Lizzy. If something is weighing on your mind – “

Jane stood up and came to play with the pearled comb in Kitty’s hair, “I do need to speak with you. I could speak to Mama or Aunt Philips but…!”

Kitty froze. She did not know whether to be offended that Jane only wished to speak to her because she was married or be alarmed. She could provide Jane with no advice! Their situations were so different.

“Aunt Gardiner is coming to the wedding,” said Kitty hopefully. Aunt Gardiner had a love match, as far as Kitty was concerned anyway; she would be much better suited to giving Jane any marital advice.

“But I should like to know now,” said Jane returning to sit on the bed. Kitty had not seen her serene sister so fidgety.

The idea of giving her elder sister advice was so strange to her that Kitty could hardly contemplate it. Yet Kitty had dreamed of being totally included in the kind of friendship that Lizzy and Jane enjoyed. Now it was she who had knowledge of things her sisters could not. It was a circumstance she had never thought of before. She had been so used to being the ignorant sister!

“I do not know what I could tell you?”

“Everything,” said Jane breathlessly. “It is one thing to live among sisters and one’s parents – “

“You live with people who love you and you will exchange them for people who love you.”

Jane looked slightly sceptical and, to save her sister having to be out of character more than once in a night, Kitty continued, “Well one person that loves you and one person who I think loves no one but herself. I suppose also Mr and Mrs Hurst will be there as well.”

“Kitty! This is why I must ask you. Longbourn is my home. Netherfield is not.”

“But it will become your home.”

“Will it? I love Charles so deeply but I cannot wish sometimes that it was the man who left his family, and that I could stay.”

“You will be surprised how much you feel at home, and before long you will be discussing drapes with his aunt.”

“I do not think Charles has an aunt,” said Jane with a wry smile.

“I was speaking generally,” said Kitty. “But Jane, you worry too much. It is most unlike you.”

“But I should not wish to upset anyone. I wish so much to ensure everyone’s happiness – “Kitty shot her a look and Jane’s cheeks reddened slightly – “without compromising my own.”
“That is more like you,“ said Kitty. Then she had a thought. “Jane? Have you been distancing yourself from things, allowing Mama to take over, for fear of looking forward and controlling or for fear of offending Charles or Miss Bingley?”

Her sister did not respond. Kitty almost laughed at the sheer irony of the situation. “Jane! Charles has been trying so hard to involve –“

Kitty broke off, for Bingley had made a great deal of plans without Jane, which Kitty could not think of without regret for it had required her to somehow attempt to guide Netherfield without appearing to be doing so. Then he had come to some realisation and had encouraged Jane who’d been reticent. If they had both been acting under such cross-purposes then each had been drawing away from each other when they should have been moving together.

Jane looked mortified. “I thought that it was not my place to – I know that Caroline has long been mistress of the household, even before old Mr Bingley’s death. “

“What shall you do, submit to her wishes until she marries? What if she never marries, and considering her sharp tongue I should not like to wager on that subject!”

“Kitty, it is part of the vows –“

“You are not marrying Miss Bingley! Charles cannot and I am sure does not, want you to feel a visitor in your own home!”

Kitty could not wish to put Jane through what she had felt those first lonely months of her marriage: the feeling that merely breathing was the wrong thing to do. Kitty had assumed that being in love with one’s husband was the cure for such feelings. Apparently she was wrong. She felt strangely buoyed that her reactions had not been so unusual despite the unusual situation. She had felt so different and out of place all her life but perhaps she had not been so.

“No, I am sure you are right, Kitty, but I did not think that I should be so misled by either of the Bingley’s sisters behaviour. You did not realise, I daresay, but Caroline wrote me a note. I will not repeat the contents to you.”

Kitty had a fair idea that it would have been a similar note to the one Lady Catherine de Bourgh had sent. Except not perhaps as caustic; if there was one thing Miss Bingley managed to do it was at least attempt to be subtle. For in subtlety – pointed barbs under one’s breath, mere allusions and so forth – one could remain a lady. And a lady Miss Bingley was most desirous to remain. Lady Catherine, with her ancestors reaching back in time and consorting with the upper echelons of each generation’s society, she could be as a rude and as transparent as she liked. For a granddaughter of a tradesman that was just not possible. Although to attempt to think well of Miss Bingley: Jane was a creature who might miss rudeness all together in her rose coloured view of the world, but when she did see rudeness she picked it up in the most mild of situations. Caroline Bingley might have not been writing anything more spiteful than she would have done if no scandalous forced marriage had been on the cards.

“Added to that her behaviour when we were in London! She returned our call most rudely. If you had not –“

“You would not have felt as if you could intrude upon her, even to see Charles?”

Jane shook her head. “It would have at the very least made Aunt Gardiner uncomfortable.”

Kitty wished she had time to muse on the things that made Aunt Gardiner uncomfortable; she could list a number of them!
“I am sure that I shall wish to speak to you before the wedding; Mama has such advice – “

Kitty turned her head away to hide her expression. Mama had never given her any advice. Well there had been one moment of advice which had done nothing for her composure but apart from that Mrs Bennet had seemed only interested in the fact that her daughter would be married and what this would mean for her social status, not how it would affect Kitty and how she could improve her situation.

“Kitty?” said Jane softly. Kitty was ashamed to feel herself tearing up. It was not worth crying over. “I did not mean to upset you!” Jane impulsively hugged her tightly.

“It is nothing, Jane. I do not know why I am upset. She loves us, I know, but Mama’s advice can only be used to do the opposite! So I should be glad that she did not – “ Kitty’s voice caught for a moment, “but I can only think it means she does not love me as much as she loves you.”

Jane would of course deny this, which she did. But Kitty knew the truth. It was an unpleasant truth but her mother had her favourites and had done little to hide the fact. Even her father had his favourites. Kitty vowed she would never do the same.

“I did not mean to interrupt!” said Lizzy. Both Kitty and Jane turned to see their sister standing in the doorway.

“Oh, I am just being silly,” said Kitty, drying her cheeks hurriedly. Looking in the mirror she grimaced. Of course she would make herself cry before a ball, now she looked drawn and she had no rouge. But it always made her look ghastly. Well it had done so the two times she had used it when she had just come out. Lydia had convinced her that she looked serene and divine. Kitty had never forgiven Lydia for that.

Lizzy looked concerned, “If someone has upset you?”

Kitty laughed. “No one but myself!”

Lizzy did not look convinced by did not press the matter rather she gave a slight twirl.

“You look very nice, Lizzy.”

“Is there anyone we should not dance with?” asked Kitty teasingly.

Lizzy suddenly looked put out. “I wish you would dance with Mr Devinsham! He has requested the first two and the supper dances.”

“He is not the most persistent of your admirers, Lizzy, and surely he is better than the partner who requested your hand for Bingley’s last ball?” said Kitty.

“Well yes, I am unlikely to ever receive the attention of such as man as Mr Collins, not that he was brought up to scratch. For which I shall be eternally grateful!”

“Lizzy,” said Jane warningly.

“Yes I know, Jane, Mr Collins is a good man.”

Kitty snorted.

“Kitty!” admonished Jane.

“I am sorry, Jane, but the fact of the matter is Mr Collins might not do anyone a great deal of harm
but he cannot be characterised as good, or a good match.”

“He is respectable; she will have a comfortable home – “

“She will not!” argued Kitty. She had, when she and Lizzy had previously discussed Mr Collins and Charlotte, thought of the faults of Mr Collins and the faults of Darcy. But for all Darcy’s faults he was not stupid. He would not, she was convinced now, place others’ happiness above her own. Even if he did not realise that it was her happiness that he was regarding. Charlotte Lucas had married a man who would always think of others before herself. Who would take the advice and the reasoning of others before herself. Lizzy had told her that Charlotte had written of how often she and Mr Collins were apart. To only be able to bear one’s marriage through absence!

Kitty would not be hypocritical: some absence was entirely necessary, but to purposely arrange your life so that … what had Charlotte written in the letter to Lizzy?

“So, it often happens that a whole day passes in which we haven’t spent more than a few minutes in each other’s company.

A few minutes!

Kitty caught Lizzy’s eye and realised that while they might agree over this issue, Jane would not and it would just upset her to push the issue.

&&^&^&

It used to be the case that Kitty felt it was possible to wish things into being. She had not believed in this power for some years, particularly when Lydia had discovered her belief and terrorised her by managing to make every bad thing Kitty had thought of come true. Kitty had spent a least a week fearing she had really developed a terrible power and would be burnt at the stake like the girls in those books until she spotted Lydia cutting up Mary’s sheet music just after Kitty had confessed to Lydia she wished the music would tear itself into shreds so Mary could not play it any longer.

However she could not blame Lydia for the current state of affairs.

“Now my dear, I know we have had not time to talk, and Mr Bennet was so silly to tell me that of course you would not wish to do so immediately. I told him not to be so ridiculous! That you, my darling girl, would not want your sister with you in your time of need! Who else would you speak to in that giant house! You must tell me how much pin money – and what a pity you did not come down in your own carriage!”

“Mama, Georgiana is more than enough company for me and she shall be coming down in the car-“

“Miss Darcy better than your own dear Lydia? Nonsense. Mr Darcy would not wish you unhappy – I am sure he quite dotes on you.”

Kitty stared at her mother. How could she have forgotten pushing Kitty into her father’s library and shrieking about how the villain must be made to marry her? At times Kitty thought that Mrs Bennet’s memory would be a blessing, but at other times, it could only be a curse. But surely it was a curse of Mrs Bennet’s own wilfulness. She just chose not to remember anything that did not fit her own unique view of the world and her place in it.

“But I am not unhappy,” she merely replied.

Mrs Bennet had not expected that response. “But if Lydia does not go to town she will not meet
eligible gentlemen!”

Kitty was tempted to retort that Lydia had no problems meeting men, but her mother had added the word eligible.

“Perhaps Jane – “ it seemed ungracious to foist Lydia upon Jane, but Kitty could not help herself. Lydia, despite her desire to go to London, might not wish to go stay with Jane. After all if she so desperately needed to visit their capital she could have harassed their aunt and uncle for an invitation. But to visit in Cheapside where the entertainment was sure to be so respectable was not what Lydia had in mind.

Kitty could hardly argue she only went to respectable parties. She went to ton parties and there was a difference!

“Lizzy will stay with Jane and – “

“Would it not be best for Lydia to wait until Lizzy is married? We cannot have two Miss Bennets presented at once.”

“Why ever not? It should not be my fault if they outshine everyone else!”

Kitty could sense she was slowly losing a battle and quite possibly the war.

&&^^&&

Netherfield did not have a balcony, but there was of course a withdrawing room, utilised when Mr Collins (and others of his ilk) stood on women’s trains. However even that was too crowded for Kitty. She felt tired and felt a headache coming upon her.

If this had been how Darcy and his party had seen their family at the last Netherfield ball, or if this was how her elder sisters had felt! She was not so much embarrassed or ashamed as just tired. It had been impossible for her mother not to speak loudly about both her situation and her sister’s (and to elaborate on the possibilities for her other daughters).

This was not unusual, but a ball at Netherfield had other guests apart from the small number of gentry surrounding Meryton. Bingley had, as he had for the ball in November, invited some of his friends from town, and then there were other families from Hertfordshire and its surrounds that one only saw at occasions like this where an effort was made to draw people together more.

Mrs Bennet was exposing herself to them!

And the officers! They were relocating to Brighton in a matter of days and as a result this ball was one of their last opportunities to make love to all the young ladies. Kitty had found herself briefly propositioned by a young lieutenant who wished her to go behind one of the potted plants occupying the corners of the ballroom; Kitty was part disgusted and part flattered until she had realised that he had confused her for Lydia and then she was just wholly disgusted.

Kitty escaped to one of Netherfield’s hallways. She was sure it was an indicator of a great flaw in her character that after all that had happened she could still be flattered by a young man finding her attractive. Although she could not explain it, but it was the wrong sort of flattery as he had not cared about her – well Lydia’s – reputation at all; if he was a gentlemen he would worship from afar.

Except if being a gentlemen meant worshipping from afar then no one would get married and – Kitty’s head spun, why was she thinking such ridiculous trivial thoughts?
“Catherine?” Kitty looked up from her chosen place of concealment on the stairs to see her husband looking at her. He sat beside her. “Are you unwell? I could not but think you out of sorts.”

She’d danced with Darcy of course. He’d asked her to stand up with him for the opening dance as was proper, but also the dance that Kitty had confessed to him she could not dance at all well. He was better at moving his feet out of the way than Sir John had been. That had not surprised her, what had surprised her was the fact he could carry on a conversation just as well; though why that had surprised her she was not quite sure. She’d merely been tired when they danced, because that had been before her mother had chosen to take supper at her table.

“Is it wrong I wished to strangle my mother?”

“It is not an emotion I would admit to. I cannot counsel it,” Darcy sounded strangely serious.

“I did not mean it!” Kitty looked at him strangely thinking perhaps it was worse than absence to have a husband so devoid of feeling!

“I am very glad to hear about it. I am responsible for you,” again that strange serious tone which made Kitty’s head ache. Then he appeared to be smiling at her; it stopped when he apparently took in her confusion. “You are unwell. Otherwise I cannot conceive of you missing the opportunity of jesting of being able to put me once again in the position of facing the gallows.”

“Merely frustrated.”

“The ball is as good as finished. Indeed it should have finished!”

“You would think that five minutes after the ball had started,” said Kitty tiredly.

“I would give it at least ten,” responded Darcy before insisting on escorting her to bed.

&&^^&&
Eyes Open

Darcy picked his coat for the day before dismissing Edwards. He intended to go downstairs for breakfast, but he would check upon Catherine first. He did not expect her to be awake, not with her feeling unwell and the ball. He himself felt quite lazy as he had not woken early and completed either some of his letter writing or an early morning walk before time came for breakfast.

Darcy was surprised to find his wife awake. Sally or some other servant had brought her breakfast and she was happily eating a cold spread from the tray piled with toast and spreads and cups of chocolate and tea. Darcy had never seen her eat meat for breakfast but then Pemberley and the townhouse served a smaller repast than the one Caroline Bingley felt necessary to demonstrate Netherfield’s superiority. Darcy had found it quite difficult to know what to choose from the large assortment laid out each morning.

Catherine could not speak and merely waved one of her plates at him.

“No, thank you, I am about to go down to breakfast. I merely came to assure myself of your health, you are much better I see.”

She finished her mouthful, “Oh yes! It was just mama. She gave me the headache! And then worrying that the ball was not going to be an embarrassment for Charles or Jane!”

“Since you seemed to organise a great deal of it,” added Darcy.

“I did not mind,” she replied. Darcy was not sure she was entirely sincere. She may not have minded in principle the idea of arranging a ball, but the petty problems that often had to be sorted out because of such a large event would be less romantic. “I did not have a chance to have a party in town. Will that be considered odd?”

“Perhaps,” said Darcy. It was true. Everyone could not have a party in town; there were not enough nights and it meant that many parties would fall flat through lack of guests. “But Georgiana is not out, and I am not known for enjoying events.”

She looked appeased. He bowed in preparation of leaving her, but she suddenly appeared to remember something.

“Did I tell you about Lydia?”

Darcy froze. It would be wrong to assume that the youngest Bennet had done anything wrong, but it was the first though that leapt into his mind, he resolved to attempt not to reveal that.

“Oh I see that I did not,” apparently he was transparent in his fear, “Mama wishes for her to stay with us in town.”

Darcy could not think of a worse thing. Lydia Bennet was wild to a fault, would not think twice about corrupting Georgiana, and to his horror had seemed to continue to find him interesting. A fact that had only occurred since he was supposed to have carried out an act that should have made him worse than a scoundrel in respectable eyes.

“That cannot be,” Darcy managed to say. He wished that he could be subtle and charming. He had no wish to upset Catherine. Miss Lydia was her sister and no doubt she loved her despite her serious flaws, he only hoped she recognised those flaws.
She nodded, “Yes, put your foot down! Do!”

Darcy was about to ask her meaning when Sally entered the room. She was carrying what appeared to be a pot of clotted cream which his wife had appeared to have requested. It was clearly Darcy’s cue to leave but he could only wonder what she intended to put it on.

He was still trying to decipher his wife’s motivations for not wishing her sister to visit when he entered the breakfast room. She must know of his feelings on the matter and that is why she acted as she did. Although he thought he might be underestimating her, she had realised the potential for embarrassment last night, perhaps she did not want to be inflicted with her sister’s exuberance.

Darcy was surprised the room had so many occupants, although of course many of Bingley’s London guests would be journeying back to London today. One of them was Lord Milton, who had been at Cambridge with both Darcy and Bingley; he’d been Bingley’s closest friend when Darcy had left the university.

He gestured for Darcy to take the seat next to him once he had filled his plate.

“Darcy! I hardly got to speak to you last night! I had not expected such a crowd for a country hop!”

Darcy smiled. Neither had he. All of Meryton and its surrounds had turned out and every one of the London guests they had invited had arrived even, if it had meant staying elsewhere. Clearly Bingley’s bride was of interest to all and sundry. That or it had become a rage to go to country hops.

“Your lovely wife is still abed, I presume?”

Darcy nodded in the affirmative.

“Talkative!” said Lord Milton.

“Me or my wife?” said Darcy.

“I did mean you, in an ironic sense. But your wife is lively and talkative. I don’t know how she puts up with you. I don’t know how Bingley put up with you. I don’t know how I put up with you!”

Darcy shook his head in some mirth. “It is too early for you!”

Lord Milton drank his tea. “Are there more Bennet girls? I had not the pleasure of meeting Miss Bennet until last night. Bingley spoke the truth there; she is an angel.”

“There are five.”

“Five! Were they all present last night?” Lord Milton sounded surprised.

“I believe so,” said Darcy.

“I thought they were cousins! So many girls all out at once! Pity.”

Darcy raised an eye at Lord Milton.

“I did not take to the others.”
Darcy wondered if that meant his friend was ‘taken with’ Catherine. More than likely since Milton enjoyed lively company particularly if they were pretty girls.

“I am glad that nonsense is over.”

“So am I,” replied Darcy. “While it would be impossible to hold a ball without dancing, it seems a waste of an evening.”

Lord Milton leant closer to him after glancing around, “I meant the on-dits flowing about town.”

Darcy stiffened. No one had mentioned the matter outright to him before.

“Relax! I am not going to drag up the matter, or question you about it. I own I like my head where it is! I am just happy that the old harpies are prevented from maligning people’s reputations. After all why should you not come to the country and fall violently in love with a pretty little thing with no fortune or prospects? I own it is slightly out of character for you, but look at Bingley: he has become serious! Love does strange things to men. I do not intend to be caught in its trap.”

“No, it is not to wonder at all,” replied Darcy. “Except I had not noticed any seriousness in Bingley! He is more collected and calm at present but I do not think Bingley will ever be serious, not in the manner that you mean.”

“He would not engage me in a bet!” replied Lord Milton. Despite Darcy’s misgivings about bets and the harm they could do, Darcy asked his friend what bet he had wanted to make. “That his sister will take very good care to marry a rich man before the year is out. I know she has been attempting to do so since she was out, but I think she has an added incentive!”

Darcy laughed. He would not bet on a certainty and if Jane Bennet had any kind of presence of mind, and Darcy had no reason to think that she did not, she would encourage Caroline Bingley’s romantic endeavours to the utmost.

Lord Milton watched Jane Bennet enter the room with her mother. All the Bennets had stayed for Mrs Bennet wished to be the last to leave and had been stymied in this goal by the presence of those who would sleep at Netherfield. The solution sleep at Netherfield herself.

“I said I do not want to be caught in love’s trap, but if all my friends are falling – “Lord Milton shot Darcy a look. “I should like to be warned.”

“I cannot tell you if you are falling in love, Milton.”

“But you can tell me if I would regret it.”

“Have you forgotten Miss Hughson so soon? You certainly said you were in love with her.”

“But I did not marry her. I was asking whether I would regret that?” Lord Milton struck a pose as he intoned quite seriously, “The Institution of Marriage, would I regret that?”

“No, Milton. I do not think you would regret that.” Darcy was surprised at his own sincerity.

“Spoken like an old married man. Will you ride?”

Darcy should have liked nothing more than to ride, but Mrs Bennet was in the room and he must have some conversation with her.
He waited until his mother-in-law had finished her meal, and her mild berating of her eldest daughter for not putting herself forward enough.

“Anyone would think that Caroline Bingley was mistress of this household!”

“She is mistress of Netherfield,” Jane Bennet commented.

“She is only mistress of Netherfield like Charlotte is mistress of Longbourn,” added Miss Elizabeth who had joined them.

This turned out to be an unwise statement, as it seemed to set Mrs Bennet off in some sort of apoplexy. Assumedly that had not been her daughter’s intention but apparently this was a topic of conversation that annoyed her second daughter.

Darcy could only think of intervening before Mrs Bennet’s voice carried too far or she got so distressed that she started to complain about her nerves.

He congratulated Miss Bennet on an excellent ball. This earned him an odd look from both the sisters, who must have known how little Miss Bennet had been allowed to do, how little Caroline Bingley had done and how much Mrs Nicholls and Catherine had done.

Mrs Bennet however was pleased to begin a conversation about the virtues of her eldest.

“Mama, you know that Kitty – “ began Miss Elizabeth.

“No, I do not wish to be rude, ma’am, but I cannot have you speaking of my wife in such a fashion,” said Darcy.

Mrs Bennet looked cowed for a moment and then regaining her momentum began her apology to him which seemed to be hidden in an explanation of her daughter’s fault; ending of course with Catherine’s desire not to have Miss Lydia stay with them.

“My poor Lyddie denied a trip to Brighton and now her own sister wishes her nothing but boredom!”

“Lydia can come stay with us…” began Miss Bennet in an attempt to defuse the situation.

“But you must concentrate on finding Lizzy a husband!” said Mrs Bennet fretfully.

“I am afraid we shall be returning to Pemberley. I cannot think of any gentlemen who might appreciate Miss Lydia’s distinct charms near Pemberley.”

“Then you must stay in London! If you cannot, then Kitty and Lydia can!”

“I cannot approve of such a plan, Mrs Bennet. I am sorry but Miss Lydia will have to wait for her London visit.”

“Wait! Why should she wait?”

“She deserves a proper visit,” replied Darcy. “If we cannot provide one now, it is better to wait until such a time as it is possible. Unless you think your daughter only deserves the tail end of a season, or a little season? I find it abhorrent, the end of a season.”

Mrs Bennet looked curious, “What, pray, would be objectionable about the end of a season?”
Darcy finished the last of his toast before replying, “Young ladies at the end of a season, or in a little season, are so often considered those who did not create an impression.”

Darcy thought it best to let Mrs Bennet think on the matter; with a little daughterly persuasion she would come to regard the idea as her own. Of course it only postponed the matter, but Darcy for once felt able to let the matter go until then.

“William!” cried Georgiana, flinging herself into Darcy’s arms. Darcy had been waiting a week for this moment. He’d told himself that the ball and all its attendant worries would be made bearable by the fact that a week after the ball his sister would be with them. Of course he’d had to suffer a week of wedding crises (and would have to suffer through two more) but it was all worth it to see his sister’s smiling face.

Darcy was usually not given to overt public displays of affection but he could not help returning her hug tightly, lifting her off the ground. He was forgiven by his sister he now had no doubt. That had been what he had been waiting for, wondering whether his relationship with her had been materially and permanently affected by his boorish behaviour. Words could not express his happiness that his world was beginning to fall back into place.

“Oh I have so much to tell you!” said Georgiana quite breathlessly. Her smiling face made him even more sure he had made the right decision to keep her in town until the militia had departed. While she would not have attended the ball or the Forster’s party she would have heard about them and Darcy was not sure that would have been a good thing.

“Come into the house and you may tell me all about it,” said Darcy, linking her arm with his as they walked up the stairs.

“So this is Netherfield. It is even more charming than Kitty described,” Georgiana paused to look up at the façade a bit more, “Although of course it is nothing to Pemberley!”

“I should hope not. But I am glad you can appreciate other homes,” said Darcy.

“Well Pemberley will not always be my home,” said Georgiana, dropping his arm as they saw Bingley in the hallway.

Darcy was struck by this comment. Georgiana was thinking of marriage?

“She is so excited she did not even see me!” Darcy turned to see Catherine entering the hall, “I called out but you did not hear.”

Darcy took in her attire; she was glowing, clearly having been for an early morning walk, but he was too distracted to attend to her, turning back to look at his sister who was cheerfully greeting Bingley.

He felt a hand slip through his arm, “I should not worry. I think she was only thinking that she will get married. At some point in the future, not say for instance tomorrow. I don’t think there is any young man that you need to question minutely.”

“I am glad for that,” said Darcy. His sister was hardly ready to be married, was she? Or was that his feelings of selfishness, he did not want to lose his sister to another man? He was also conscious of the fact that his sister’s happiness depended on the gentleman she chose to be her husband.

“It is not to be wondered at that she should think of handsome men. I’ve been thinking of handsome men for years!”
Darcy shot his wife a look.

She looked contrite, “Of course I do not think about handsome men anymore.”

Darcy tried not to laugh, “Except for myself?” Darcy grew strangely offended when she looked at him in complete wonderment. He was about to make a cutting comment when she apparently could not keep this pose any longer and burst out laughing.

“I am sure you are very handsome.”

“I am relieved you think so.”

“Except handsome is not a husbandly requirement surely for Georgiana? You will have to vet the young men who come to call next year very closely. But you will do a good job.”

“We will do a good job,” murmured Darcy. He was not sure she heard him because Georgiana had heard her laugh and flew back down the hall to embrace her. His sister led Catherine off laughing and Darcy could only hear the word ‘bonnet’.

“Darcy, your sister is so grown; I should have hardly recognised her!”

It was a sentiment echoed by Caroline Bingley in one of the sitting rooms, except Miss Bingley was more effusive in her praise of Georgiana.

“I had not realised she had arrived! Louisa and I were discussing the new curtains.” Louisa Hurst and her husband had arrived at Netherfield two days ago and Darcy could not find it an improvement. “She will need attending to!”

“Catherine is with her,” replied Darcy dismissively.

Miss Bingley deflated somewhat, but it did not stop her leaving the room with her sister, clearly intent on finding Georgiana.

“Are we to have any sport?” asked Mr Hurst from the sofa.

Bingley looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, “Jane will be here – “

Mr Hurst stopped lounging and sat up. “My dear brother, you have a fortnight before sport – at least of that nature – will be denied to you as you play the happy husband. Do not deny yourself pleasure!”

Darcy wanted to point out that Hurst was concerned about denying himself pleasure only. He would have normally not deigned to make such a remark, or if he had done so made his remark cutting, but he found himself making a light comment on the matter.

“Of course I am thinking of myself, Darcy. You and I are old married men! We know one must get one’s pleasure where one can! Bingley does not realise this but soon he will not be able to do a thing except for what it pleases his wife to do!”

Bingley looked slightly amused. “You cannot frighten me. First, my Jane is an angel. Second, you do not seem too incommoded by my sister’s desires. Third, Darcy is not at anyone’s beck and call.”

Hurst made an indelicate sound, “You do not have to return to London in a fortnight with your wife and her sister.”
Darcy, could not help but add, “I will be returning to London with my wife and my sister how does that fare?”

“No one has to return to London in a fortnight!” interjected Bingley.

“Why? Shall you not be at Netherfield?” asked Hurst.

“No, Jane and I shall be here, but our presence does not mean you have to flee!”

“And watch you make calf eyes at each other and put me off my food?” asked Hurst. “I shall take my chances with the sisters.”

Darcy saw Bingley almost roll his eyes at his brother-in-law before turning to Darcy – “You shall not go? Jane will not wish to be parted from her sister immediately.”

Darcy could not answer that; it would of course be up to Catherine.

&&^^&&
“Oh Jane!” said Lizzy, looking at her sister in pride.

The sisters were crammed into Jane’s bedroom along with Aunt Gardiner, Maria Lucas and Georgiana. Kitty found herself wedged near the dresser. It was not that the room could not feasibly hold five sisters (even Mary had been persuaded to attend), an aunt and two guests, but when one was in the midst of packing it became a tight squeeze.

Jane was standing in front of the mirror trying on the gown she would wear for the wedding. It had been made up in London, but some of the trimming had been done by Mrs Fraser, the modiste in Meryton. Kitty admired Jane’s ability to include everyone so no one could be offended. She had not mastered it.

“Think, in four days you will be Mrs Bingley, and the happiest woman in the world,” said Lizzy hugging Jane.

“Not to be leaving you all,” said Jane with a hint of sadness in her voice.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “Three miles!” she exclaimed under her breath.

Kitty leaned over to pinch her. Trust Lydia to attempt to ruin Jane’s mood.

“Kitty!” shrieked Lydia.

“What are you girls doing?” said Mrs Gardiner.

“She pinched me!”

“I did!” said Kitty.

“You did too,” said Lydia clearly pre-empting where the conversation was going to lead.

“Yes, I said that!”

Lydia looked momentarily confused, and Kitty could not help laughing at her sister’s face.

“You will miss this?” said Lizzy.

Jane laughed, “Even this.”

Lydia did not like being the subject of much amusement and flounced out of the room.

“You do look beautiful, Jane. You always do,” said Kitty giving Jane a hug, trying to be careful of the dress.

“If I do not get a chance to say this before the wedding, thank you,” whispered Jane into her ear.

“Whatever for?” Kitty was only teasing because she knew what Jane was referring to; both Kitty’s actions at Netherfield but also the conversations they had had before now. Conversations that may have been awkward but not as awkward as those Jane had had to endure with Mrs Bennet.

Jane smiled, “I think you know. I am sorry too.”

“Thank yous and sorrys!” exclaimed Kitty. She did know what Jane was apologising for and felt
that coming home was the best thing she’d done for some time. She’d felt out of place at Longbourn, and unappreciated. However, how could she be appreciated if she had done little to deserve it? If all she wished to talk about were soldiers and gossip then of course her elder sisters would not include her in their more serious discussions. They did not purposely exclude her (most of the time at least), they merely thought her uninterested.

These last six weeks had proved to Kitty that she was capable of being both – serious and not so serious. She had wondered much earlier on whether being married meant that one could only be severe but that was not her.

Just like she was pleased to realise that she was capable of running a household that was not even her own. She’d always assumed she was stupid and unable to learn. She’d realised how much she’d learnt at Pemberley or in London but it was not until she was home that she grasped the full extent of the change.

Instead of sitting gazing out the window or merely listening to the ladies of Mertyon, she’d been able to join the conversation. She even found herself the centre of attention when it came to new fashions, books and gossip.

Kitty was conscious of some lingering interest in the details of her marriage, and some lingering disapproval but on the whole Meryton was exactly as it ever was and her place in it was the same but different. It was too difficult for Kitty to quite explain; how she felt now amongst those who had known her all her life.

The fact Jane was voicing the change that had been wrought in her made her hug Jane all the more tighter.

She’d told Jane the day before that she thought moving from Netherfield at some point in the future a good plan. Jane had sought her opinion and Kitty had given it. Kitty kept some of her reasoning secret. Jane would never be herself – be properly herself – if she remained at Netherfield. She would always be Miss Bennet as was never just her new identity of Mrs Bingley. Not that Jane (or indeed any other married lady, as Kitty was learning) should suddenly become a different person after saying her vows, but that there was a subtle difference in the two and Jane deserved the chance of entering her new life most fully.

&&^^&&

Lydia and Maria Lucas had retired to Lydia’s room. Kitty passed the door to see them whispering and giggling and wondered why she did not feel a pang of envy or jealousy that her sister had replaced Kitty in her affections so easily. Of course she hoped that she would still be important to Lydia, but she did not pin all her hopes upon it.

“Kitty!” said Lydia, clearly forgetting or forgiving Kitty laughing at her. “La! You look so smart. But you have forgotten me!” she pouted. “Now that you are the fine Mrs Darcy you have had no time to see me!”

“That’s not true,” said Kitty. “I’ve seen you at the Lucases’, the Harringtons’, the Gouldings’, Aunt Phillips’, the Kings’ and here! And at Netherfield!”

Kitty tried not to laugh when listing the engagements made her remember Darcy’s moaning that never again would he say that four-and-twenty families was a small number. She’d remembered the conversation between Mama and Darcy over the confined nature of the country. It was true, they dined with and associated with far more than four-and-twenty families in London, but in some ways the country seemed unsuited to always going here and there at night. It had certainly kept them busy.
“And the Forsters’ party!” added Maria.

Kitty could hardly forget the Forsters’ party two weeks ago, but before Georgiana’s arrival. Colonel Forster had caved to his wife and Lydia’s demands for one last gathering before the militia were forced to leave the surrounds by a very cruel War office. Although perhaps it was the Home Office since they were not proper troops? It made no difference to Lydia and the other young ladies. Someone was wresting handsome redcoats from them.

The party had been a sombre affair which had livened up immensely due to some terrible punch that Kitty suspected had almost certainly been tampered with. She’d taken a sip and then foisted her glass upon Darcy who, finding it not to his taste, had poured it into a potted plant.

She could not have imagined him two months ago feeling able to throw drinks into plants, but perhaps he realised the country was less confining. It was not that he did not care what people thought of him; he might think that but Kitty was sure that was Darcy’s problem. He cared too much what people thought of him, even those people he did not think he cared a jot for. No, it was more likely that the event allowed him to be so free.

He’d gone to the event most unwillingly, not wishing to hear of Wickham, but in the end only the barest mention had been made of him. The officers were toasting his good fortune in having a better commission. Of course they were toasting to his increased ability to meet young ladies. Darcy had under his breath made some comment about the lack of young ladies in the middle of nowhere in the mud, but apart from that he had behaved civilly and the party had passed off well enough. Despite the punch which had led to some behaviour that had been the talk of Meryton for the next week, and the arrival of Miss Darcy Kitty had been glad to find Georgiana completely unconcerned about the attention given to her as Kitty had shown her all the shops of her girlhood. While Kitty thought Georgiana was entirely ready to be out, she was relieved she was not at the present time so she would not have to endure the scrutiny.

“Now we have no red coats,” sighed Lydia bringing Kitty back to the present. “Although I cannot believe Chamberlayne tried to put on Harriet’s gown!”

“In the middle of the party!” giggled Maria, putting her hand over her mouth in shock that was still real after two weeks.

Kitty had only thanked heavens that Darcy had not witnessed that! It would have probably confirmed all the bad opinions he had had which he was only slowly re-evaluating. Not that it was the worst thing Kitty had seen. Her eyes had been opened more than once at various ton parties. Kitty did not think money should allow one the licence to do such things. Although to give her husband his due, she was sure he disapproved of such activities across the board.

The other occupants of the room were still alternatively giggling over the exploits of the officers at that party and at other times, and lamenting their loss.

“Mama said that Darcy’s, “ Kitty smiled at her sister’s free use of his name, Lydia was never one to be in awe of anyone, unlike Mrs Bennet and Mrs Phillips who were sometimes subdued by her husband’s presence, “cousin will be coming to the wedding and that he is a solider. Is that true, Kitty?”

“Yes, Colonel Fitzwilliam will be attending and he is a solider.”

“In the militia?” said Maria, eyes lighting up.
“Better!” said Lydia. “The Regulars, is he not?”

“Indeed.” Kitty did think the regulars much better than the militia and she would not confess it to anyone else but she still thought a red coat made a man handsome; but she was quite content with mere appreciating glances.

“He is handsome and unwed?” asked Maria, as if she did not need confirmation of both before she could deem Colonel Fitzwilliam a prospect.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was not traditionally handsome though as far as Kitty was concerned he was far more attractive physically than his brother. However Colonel Fitzwilliam’s attractiveness came from his whole countenance and character.

“He is a well looking man, and very engaging,” answered Kitty, and then seeing the prompting face of her sister, “and yes, he is single.”

Maria sighed, “How delightful.” She then was prepared to fawn over the Colonel.

Lydia however needed more questions answered. “How old is he?”

Kitty laughed, “Very old. Over thirty!”

Lydia sighed and then perked up. “But it does not mean that I cannot flirt with him!”

Kitty did not regret confessing Fitzwilliam’s charms to her sister; he was a battle hardened soldier, and he should be able to cope with a flirtatious young lady.

Lydia flipped idly through The Lady’s Magazine; Maria seemed happier to examine Kitty’s dress. “Oh I wish I could go to London and visit Bond Street.”

Kitty stiffened slightly, wondering if this comment would draw Lydia out on the subject of London. Their mother had decided that Lydia should not go to London straight away, but rather be presented when everyone could appreciate her daughter properly. Mr Bennet had almost spoiled the plan by commenting that surely Lydia just wanted to expose herself in some public place and that timing could be immaterial. Mrs Bennet had shushed him with her nerves.

Lydia was not stupid however, she had to have realised that visiting London under Kitty’s aegis meant Darcy, who was unlikely to be an easy chaperone. That and Lydia had met Georgiana. If Lydia had detested Mary King for her ₤10 000 she was hardly likely to find Georgiana’s poise and beauty, missing in Mary King, to be more palatable.

“I wish Charlotte had married a gentleman,” said Maria.

“Mr Collins is a gentlemen,” replied Kitty, “although only if one used a loose definition of the word.”

Maria shrugged, “She writes about her chickens and the pig getting into the garden and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Her letters were so very dull and visiting her worse. Lady Catherine quite terrified me! Your letters are always so amusing! Lydia let me read them once she realised what Charlotte was writing to me.”

Kitty turned to her sister, “You read my letters?”

Lydia gave a non-committal gesture though Kitty knew what it meant; Lydia was never uncommitted to her responses. Kitty rushed to give her younger sister a hug and kiss.
“You’ve crushed my gown,” was her only reward, but Kitty did not care. Lydia cared about her, in her own way which was never going to be like others, but it was enough for Kitty to know she was not uncaring.

If only her mother would show her some particular love, Kitty felt her heart would be close to bursting.

Kitty tried to pay attention to the service, but Darcy was shifting in his seat. She wondered if he was remembering the last wedding he had attended in this church, six months ago. It was difficult to think it had been six months! It was less of a reminder for Kitty for she’d seen several weddings in this church, and it had been the church she’d attended all her life. One event in it could hardly upset all the others.

“Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace.” intoned the Reverend and Kitty forced herself not to turn around to see if Caroline Bingley or her sister were about to stand.

No one spoke and thus her sister was bound in marriage to Mr Bingley. Mrs Bennet who was next to her and shed more tears than her handkerchief could sustain; Kitty had to hand over hers. Jane shed a tear and if Kitty looked closely she thought Bingley might have done so as well.

“Oh Mrs Bennet how proud you must be: two daughters married!” Kitty overheard Mrs Long prattle as Darcy and her made their way out of the churchyard. She’d asked to walk back to Longbourn so that she could avoid her mother’s effusions over Jane for even a short while.

“And another well on the way!” smiled Mrs Bennet.

Darcy closed the church gate behind them. Kitty could only imagine her mother was talking about Lizzy and Mr Devinsham, except that everyone except Mrs Bennet could see that Mr Devinsham was more ‘in love’ with Lizzy than she was with him. She’d said it was her sister’s fate to be pursued by men!

Darcy didn’t comment even though it was clear Kitty was leading them down a path that would take longer to reach Longbourn than was typical. It was clear he would also like a respite from Mrs Bennet. They did not speak for a while, instead merely enjoyed the warmer weather.

Darcy examined the bottom of his cane, after flicking it into a hedge on the laneway before speaking. “How long until we may make our escape?”

“From the breakfast or from Netherfield?”

“From the breakfast. Bingley seemed adamant that we stay out the week.”

“He will change his mind.”

“Perhaps,” Darcy did not sound so certain. Kitty assumed this was because while Bingley had been so changeable in the past, his engagement had wrought changes in his behaviour. He was no longer afraid of his own opinion for instance.

“I am sure of it. At the moment he is thinking like a good host. Not a good husband.”

“This is true. But Miss Bingley and the Hursts do not leave until the week is out. He can be a good host and a good husband by requiring your presence until they leave.”
“The solution should be a wedding trip. But they could not decide; which must be a lie. “ Kitty could only think that both Jane and Bingley had decided to save their wedding trip for when Mrs Bennet became unbearable. Although neither would have phrased their decision quite like that. “You are very sensible” she added.

This threw Darcy. “I am sorry?”

“For having an estate so far away; it was very thoughtful.”

Darcy laughed. “I try to be.”

The wedding breakfast was like all wedding breakfasts: noisy and celebratory. Although of course it might depend on the wedding who precisely was celebratory. In this case it was everyone.

Jane’s belongings were ceremonially put in Bingley’s carriage. It was actually, Kitty mused, entirely ceremonial as all Jane’s trousseau was already in residence at Netherfield; Kitty had seen to it herself. Everyone hugged and kissed the bride, although Lizzy clung on for longer than was necessary which might have less to do with the three miles they would now be separated by and more the fact that Mr Devinsham had been hovering around her.

Kitty took pity on Lizzy and engaged that gentleman in conversation once the carriage had been waved off.

“You must be glad to see your sister so well situated,” said Mr Devinsham.

Kitty nodded, “But I am happier to see her happy.”

“Indeed. You would wish all your sisters happy, I hope?” the gentleman smiled.

“What sister would not?”

The conversation seemed at an end there, unless Mr Devinsham decided to speak about his business and Lizzy had complained he was a gentleman who did not think that young ladies could understand business.

Kitty thought that Lizzy was a fool if she thought that a bad thing. The reasoning was unsound of course and insulting, but did one really wish to spend an evening listening to fluctuating prices? It would be worse than listening to Mr Collins reading from Fordyce every night before you went to bed.

“Oh there you are my dear; you must come and show Mrs Goulding your gown. She is quite envious, of course. As she should be!” Kitty was dragged away, not entirely unwillingly to talk of London Fashion to the ladies.

Once she’d escaped the ladies, her feet felt unaccountably sore and the only seat available in an area where she was unlikely to be interrupted was with a group of gentlemen including her husband and Mr Devinsham.

“Of course they would they do not care how overtaxed – “ Mr Devinsham broke off his speech to stand and bow to her. Most gentlemanly but then he did not finish his sentence. The other gentlemen seemed perplexed as he began to talk of innocuous matters like the weather.

Darcy coughed, “My cousin would be a better source of information, and I do not wish to be seen as an authority, but we defeated the French at Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and Salamanca - of
course that may not hold. I believe the stalemate to be over.”

Kitty almost rolled her eyes, had they been speaking of military matters when she approached and that is why Mr Devinsham ceased speaking? The fact the gentlemen enthusiastically took up Darcy’s point suggested they had been. Kitty had no real grasp on the matter but she was not devoid of interest!

“What do they not think Napoleon wishes to invade Russia? Colonel Fitzwilliam said it was inconceivable as it was a poor plan,” added Kitty triumphantly to the conversation.

“Oh come in out of the rain, Kitty!” said Jane, opening the side door as Kitty ran in. She’d been to the kitchen gardens for Jane and the weather that had been threatening in the two days since the wedding broke. It was a good thing that Jane and Bingley had insisted they stay and not set back for London; if they had Kitty was sure the weather would have descended upon them the minute they stepped into the carriage.

“I am only a little bit wet,” said Kitty, pulling off her spencer and bonnet. “There almost dry!” she waved her sister’s hands away from her and declined her entreaty to change. “I’ll change my stockings in a moment.”

She only wanted to sit down. Now that Jane was in residence, Kitty had thought she would no longer be tired as she would not have to rush hither and thither seeing to things that Miss Bingley thought unimportant. However Mrs Bennet had thought Jane devoid of knowledge regarding an estate and ignored the proprieties that would indicate that a bridal couple should, if one could help it, be left to themselves for at least three days. Kitty had found herself distracting her mother with town gossip, fashion and pure nonsense. Luckily Mrs Bennet did not necessarily require new information, and Meryton provided its own distractions.

“Jane,” Bingley was walking towards them, “Your family is to stay to dinner, in light of the weather I thought – “ Kitty did not hear the rest of Bingley’s explanation. He sounded rather faint to Kitty’s ears until she shook her head. That and Kitty knew what he was going to say. Jane and Bingley were too good. They should put their foot down and insist upon privacy.

Darcy had agreed with her, and they had been strenuously arguing against any extension of residence for anyone but Jane and Bingley at Netherfield. However Mother Nature might be against them.

Lizzy seemed attendant of the awkwardness at dinner, having told Kitty she’d only come with their mother to curb her behaviour. Lizzy had also prompted her father to visit since he was unlikely to overstay his welcome.

Her plan however had not ended in the best outcome; instead it looked as though Netherfield would have three guests not one. Jane, of course, appreciated all her guests equally but Lizzy was perhaps more equal than most. However, the benefits brought by the presence of a most beloved sister could not outweigh the fact Mrs Bennet was delighting in the fact that Caroline Bingley had now no say in the future of Netherfield. Mrs Bennet showed this pleasure by criticising the previous arrangement of the room and congratulating Jane’s taste.

“I never understand how women can so transform a room – “ interjected the Colonel in an attempt to make the conversation more palatable. Miss Bingley for one looked as if she had eaten something unpleasant.

Although that might not be far from the truth, Kitty did not know if it was the meal Mrs Nicholls
had overseen or the tension at the table but everything tasted horrendous and Kitty could not eat more than a bite or two.

After dinner the ladies, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst seemed happy to fiddle with their bracelets. This left Georgiana and the sisters to attempt to converse.

“Have you read the new *Tales of a Fashionable Life*?” asked Kitty, trying to help stimulate better conversation. Even though Georgiana should be used to the atmosphere at Netherfield by now, she was still overwhelmed by the attitude of the Bingley sisters and fearful of causing dislike in others. She had not learnt not to care that people would dislike her merely because of who she was, not that the Bennet sisters would be among that number, except perhaps Lydia who was not present.

“I doubt it will have made it to Mertyon,” said Mrs Hurst with a sniff.

Kitty sighed. She must be unwell, she should have realised her attempt to bring everyone into the conversation would allow either of the sisters to make a pointed comment.

Georgiana would not put herself forward and play the piano, so Kitty crossed the floor with the intention of playing herself until Georgiana felt compelled to rescue her, or tempt her to the piano with some of the sheet music. She’d almost reached the piano when the gentlemen joined them, and Kitty was never so glad to see them. She turned to greet them and suddenly felt violently unwell.

The world spun and then went black.
Distracted

Darcy ran his hands through his hair. He was above pacing the floor but only by a little.

They had stayed, as was the custom, to talk in the dining room after dinner, and the evening was enlivened by Mr Bennet’s caustic presence. They’d spoken of military matters, led enthusiastically by Colonel Fitzwilliam. It had hardly been a serious conversation since it was only he who could be said to regularly seriously converse. Darcy had thought his father-in-law surprised that he could speak lightly upon subjects. But they were all friends at the table. He might not respect Hurst, but Hurst was an old acquaintance. Darcy had been completely himself in front of Hurst, although that was usually because he’d forgotten the other man’s presence.

Bingley had been impatient to return to the ladies and finally they had indulged him; Darcy had not taken one step into the room before he’d seen Catherine obviously crossing the room. She’d turned to greet them, looked pale and collapsed before their eyes. None of the gentleman had reached her before she’d reached the floor.

She’d been swiftly taken upstairs, still lifeless, and Mr Jones called. The house was in uproar. Darcy was glad for the presence of mind of both Mrs Bingley and Miss Bennet who’d taken it upon themselves to comfort Georgiana, who’d been most distressed, as well as care for their sister. He, as well as the other gentleman, would only get in the way, so they’d retired to Bingley’s study. Not before of course he’d heard Mrs Bingley comment that she’d told Catherine to remove her wet stockings. Darcy had felt unaccountably angry; what had she been doing to endanger her health and make him worry so?

If he had thought six months ago, on that day in the church, that he’d come to worry about her fate so deeply he would have laughed at himself. Of course he would always care for the health of any woman of his acquaintance. He’d been sincere in his wish for Mrs Bingley’s recovery when she’d caught a cold at Netherfield, and not simply for reasons of removing two obstacles, as he saw them, for his and Bingley’s future happiness. He had not however been worried for her.

“Women’s nerves,” mused Mr Bennet, sitting in an armchair beside him.

“With all due respect, sir, I do not think that is the case here,” said Darcy sharper than he meant to.

Mr Bennet nodded, “Of course. I meant that my daughter’s unfortunate health is likely to cause nerves in my wife. She will take to her bed in an attempt to be more interesting. Of Kitty’s health, I am sure she will be well.”

Darcy could only but wonder at his father-in-law’s callous opinion of Mrs Bennet. He did not say that it was untrue, but what if his wife did truly become ill? Darcy was not sure Mr Bennet would behave any differently than he was now.

“Darcy, come mark for us,” said the Colonel.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Hurst and I are to play billiards...”

Darcy was going to make some comment about the inappropriateness of the request when he realised his cousin was attempting to mount a distraction. After all, a house of illness was likely to make all jittery.
Fitzwilliam won the game, and Darcy was convinced by Hurst to play his cousin. He felt heartless indulging in such an activity but it was better than watching Hurst play so woefully.

Bingley entered the billiard room and Darcy thought he saw some reproach in his friend’s eyes. “Jane has managed to calm Mrs Bennet. Mr Jones has arrived and was forced to give her some laudanum before seeing Kitty. But Jane and Elizabeth remain with their mother.”

Darcy wanted at that point to say something cutting about Mrs Bennet that would certainly be desired but his next thought pushed that one from his mind, “Then who is with Catherine?”

“Georgiana.”

Darcy was surprised. Georgiana’s reaction during the period of matrimonial upset had not convinced him that she would cope with the crises. It was part of the reason he was so loathe to be convinced that his sister was ready to be presented to the world and ready to become a wife. If she took to her bed upset because he and Catherine had an argument then how would she react when it was her and her husband? Georgiana disliked seeing anyone ill, and their father’s illness had affected her deeply, but apparently she was capable of not losing her head. It made Darcy more proud of her than he had been before.

“And the apothecary is seeing her now?”

“Yes,” said Bingley, looking worried. “Jane is so worried that it was Kitty’s going to the kitchen garden for her. She should not be so obliging.”

“I would not think that a bad trait,” said Darcy. He was sincere even though if she had been more selfish then she might not have fainted.

“Women faint all the time,” said the Colonel sensibly. “I cannot wonder at it given the garments they are expected to wear. Why I – “

Darcy held up a hand. He was sure Mr Bennet, who had wandered in to read a book while they played, did not wish to hear about the Colonel’s exploits with stays. Particularly if it was the incident that Darcy himself had witnessed when he himself was a greenhorn upon the town.

“As I said,” said Mr Bennet patiently, “nerves. I do not think it will be anything more serious.”

Between them they had almost convinced Darcy that this would be the case. No more than the time she had caught cold at Pemberley. But Darcy could not help but think of her being unwell at the Ball, and looking heated and fatigued many a time over the last six weeks. He should have intervened and prevented her from exerting herself so much. There had been no need to do so; it was not her responsibility. Perhaps it had been his fault? He had been so hard upon her that she felt it necessary to prove her worth?

Darcy had thrown a great deal of his opinion at her when he’d been so angry that he’d been unable to temper his tongue. While he had meant a great deal of them, he had not thought seriously of them for some time. Some of them not even when he had been speaking them! If she had thought herself unworthy and had behaved accordingly than it was no doubt his fault that she’d become exhausted to the point of collapse.

When she recovered, and she would recover, Darcy promised himself that they would return to Pemberley as soon as they might and they would not have the Bingleys or any other guests that would try her patience. Georgiana he could trust to be on her best behaviour.

&&^&&
Darcy took the stairs two by two as he went to see what was taking Mr Jones so long. He didn’t have to wait long for his answer as he saw Mr Jones leaving the bedchamber reserved for Mrs Bennet.

“Mr Jones.”

“Ah Mr Darcy, I was coming to find you,” said the short bespectacled man.

“As I was you,” said Darcy. He attempted to keep concealed both his concern for his wife and his annoyance at the apothecary’s seeming preferential attention to Mrs Bennet.

“Mrs Bennet will keep to her room for some time I am sure, since she had suffered an extreme shock. I have prescribed her some draughts – “

Darcy stared at the man. What did he care for Mrs Bennet’s health? Mrs Bennet had received a shock? He’d received a shock! The person who had received the most shock was his wife and Mr Jones did not seem to care for her! It was with great restraint that Darcy did not say anything and let Mr Jones ramble on.

“Mrs Darcy of course should rest. She is asleep now. But is nothing to worry about; these things are quite natural – “ Darcy wanted to ask what ladies or indeed people, Mr Jones was treating if a healthy young woman fainting was natural. “I did not of course examine her with Miss Darcy present – “

So he’d examined her when she was alone and helpless? His mother had been sickly ever since he could remember and she had fainted more times than he could remember towards the end of her life. She’d always been uncomprehending and confused when she had recovered from the swoon. His father had always insisted someone she knew and trusted be with her when she awoke. The fact that this had not happened here was another blow to Darcy’s conscience. Mr Jones appeared not to wish to say anything more and Darcy curtly dismissed him.

Of course the good man would go downstairs and make free with Bingley’s wine. It made Darcy even more convinced that he would send an express to London for someone far more trustworthy to attend Catherine if he found her health unchanged.

Darcy closed the bedchambers door behind him quietly. Georgiana was the only other person in the room beside his wife, who was pale and asleep.

“William,” whispered Georgiana in an angry tone, “that man is detestable!”

Darcy crossed the room and to the other side of the four poster bed. It allowed him to sit on the edge of the bed and observe Catherine. He noted, she did not appear to have a fever, as he checked her forehead.

“William, are you not listening!? He was detestable – “ Georgiana’s voice grew higher.

“I did hear you, Georgie, but I would ask you to keep your voice down.”

Georgiana looked slightly chastened. “I hope you would not merely listen to Mr Jones’ advice.”

“Did she wake?”

“Yes. Protesting she was quite well and not to fuss. But you will not listen to her – “

Darcy cut his sister off. He would not be able to tell until she was awake and he could see for himself, whether he needed to send for a London doctor. Her protesting her health was promising,
but not a reliable sign as he thought it was part of her character to insist she was well. If she was the more delicate of the sisters she probably either had to become dependant on cosseting or annoyed by it. It seemed to be the latter in his wife’s case.

The door opened and Mrs Bingley and Miss Bennet entered.

When it seemed Georgiana would not do so, Darcy had to politely ask after their mother’s health.

“She is asleep,” said Mrs Bingley, after thanking him for his solitude. “And Kitty?” Apparently although Mr Jones had seen Mrs Bennet in their presence he’d been too focused on that patient’s health to discuss the others.

Darcy replied dryly that the doctor had informed him it was quite natural. Miss Bennet appeared to find that statement as ludicrous as he had done. Mrs Bingley assured him that they would stay with Catherine, and Darcy found that that was his cue to leave. He was curious reticent about doing so, but it was not his place, at least it was assumed to be not.

After discovering that Mr Jones had imparted the same knowledge to the gentlemen, Darcy retired to his bed but did not sleep soundly.

Darcy ran his hand over his eyes before sitting up slightly disorientated.

“Would sir like to wash?” Edwards, as omnipresent as ever, was standing by the bed with a jug of water.

Darcy nodded before climbing out of the bed and performing his morning ablutions.

He dressed himself quickly, but he paused before the door connecting his chamber to the next one. It seemed ridiculous to walk into the hallway and through the other door, but it seemed improper to merely walk through this door, considering Catherine was unlikely to be alone, and unlikely to be awake.

He compromised and knocked before entering.

Mrs Bingley was sitting by the bed, she looked up as he entered and smiled at him. Darcy wondered if she had been sitting there all night.

“I sent Miss Darcy and Lizzy to bed,” said Mrs Bingley and seeming to understand what his next unspoken question would be, “I think Kitty is much recovered.”

Mrs Bingley put down the embroidery she had been working upon and excused herself.

Catherine was still asleep. He told himself he could have sat on the chair vacated by Mrs Bingley but he chose to sit at the side of the bed. It seemed natural; as much as it was to move the strands of hair that had fallen across her face. She appeared much better, looking far less pale. Perhaps it was merely a natural response to several weeks of activity.

“Oh,” she’d opened her eyes and looked shocked at his presence.

“You are feeling better?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” she said looking self-conscious and attempting to sit up.

“You should rest.”
“Oh no, I’ve rested enough,” she appeared flustered, which confused Darcy. She had no reason to be.

“You have been unwell, and no matter what Mr Jones says I do not think it natural to swoon.”

Her hands knotted into the bed linen, now that she was sitting up properly. If she insisted upon sitting up Darcy could not but try to arrange the pillows better behind her. If anything this seemed to disconcert her more.

“It may be natural – “ she suddenly said.

Darcy did not wish to offend her or cast aspersions on her intelligence but it was not and he must say so.

She shook her head, “I mean – “ she stopped and blushed.

“What is it?” Darcy became slightly alarmed. She had not had difficulty speaking her mind to him in some months, why had she begun so now?

“I – “

He could not think how to encourage her to speak, when she seemed to decide leaning forward and whispering in his ear was the best solution.

Darcy took in her words, and found himself releasing a breath of air he had not thought he was holding. His first impulse after that was to embrace her.

She drew back looking surprised, “You are not upset?”

Darcy looked confused, “Upset? Why should I be upset?”

“Because – “ she looked incapable of finishing her sentence.

Darcy was not sure of the source of her apprehension but it was entirely unwarranted. Had she thought that he might suspect her? A kiss was a kiss and nothing more than that. No, he had never really thought her capable or desirous of such villainy. Foolish actions but not malicious ones.

She appeared to want to attempt to continue her explanation and Darcy found he did not wish to hear it so he silenced her.

“You are happy?” she asked when he released her.

“Are you not?” was his response.

“Yes,” she replied a little breathlessly, “at least I think I am.”

There seemed no reason to think on Darcy’s part. It was a matter of course that one day he would have children. He had not expected it ever to be, or to feel, quite like this. He was part relieved that Mr Jones had spoke the truth, that it was quite natural (particularly after an exhausting series of weeks), and that there was not something more seriously wrong. He was also pleased. The relationship he had with his parents, his father specifically, had been so rewarding. It had had its flaws and as an adult Darcy could easily identify them, and he was excited to think that he could avoid those flaws.

Not that he thought he would be able to avoid all mistakes. That would be impossible and only an arrogant individual would think that he was perfection. But it would be an opportunity to try.
His silence had allowed his wife an opportunity to think. “I know that I cannot be the sort of—“

Darcy shook his head and took her face in his hands; “Do not speak nonsense. You care more deeply for people than I. Far more capable than I of love and showing that affection.”

“And you may teach her – or him – sense,” said Kitty with a small smile.

“That is not what I meant to imply. It would not be the truth either.”

“I thought that you did think I lacked sense,” it was said lightly but Darcy could tell it was borne from a very real feeling.

“I may have done. But I have thought, done and said many things of which I have been ashamed of later,” She did not respond so Darcy added, “and that is one of them.”

Catherine blushed. “Now I must get dressed.”

Darcy started slightly, “Why?”

She looked at him as if she was suddenly convinced of the fact she could not be considered the silly one, “Because I cannot walk around in my nightgown.”

“You should stay in bed.”

“But I am perfectly well. I cannot stay in bed for the next seven months – “ she sensed his sudden desire to contradict her – “I would be bored. Boredom cannot be healthy.”

He was sure that she was correct. He would have to bow to her, and others’ (who he would be sure to ask), superior knowledge. But that did not mean he was obliged to like it; particularly when she had only recently over-exerted herself and required the attention of a doctor.

His concern must have shown because she grasped his hands, “You are not lying are you?”

Darcy shook his head, “No, I am not.” He was not one who found it easy to show his emotions. He so often offended when he did not mean to and misread situations so easily that caused him to say the wrong thing. Her questioning made him smile because it was certainly one way of ensuring that they communicated. That and she needed his support more now than ever.

“I lied,” she said, and Darcy looked at her quizzically. He could not think of what she meant by that comment. It could not be anything. If it was it might spoil this moment and he did not wish for that. He pre-empted her next sentence with a teasing response.

“I know you did, but I am not quite sure what about.”

He’d confused her, and her forehead wrinkled.

“Either you are not sure that I am handsome, or you were lying about my being born to hang. I know which I would prefer to be the lie.”

“That was better than what I was going to say.”

Darcy suddenly felt some remorse. If she was going to be honest and truthful with him – why was it that he felt bound to prevent that? Did he feel he might be hurt by her? It was a foreign concept to him, and he was surprised by how close it felt to being reality.

“What were you going to say?”
“It was nothing.”

“No it was not,” he made her look at him.

“I was just being silly. I wanted to say that I was sure that I was happy. I did not think I would be, after — “

Darcy cupped her cheek and kissed her again.

“Yes. I am happy. More particularly I am happy we shall be going to London in a matter of days,” said Catherine.

Darcy was unsure about this. He would be against the plan completely except it would mean staying at Netherfield in close proximity to Mrs Bennet for an extended period of time. But he could bear that if it was the right thing to do. Except clearly Catherine did not wish for such an event, and Darcy was rapidly coming to the conclusion he might be unable to deny his wife anything she desired.

&&^&^&
The water was relaxing. Kitty had been so relieved to step out of her carriage she’d almost bounded out of it. She only got sick in carriages if the blinds were drawn, but that did not mean she liked being cooped up on a long journey and this one certainly did not agree with her.

The last time she’d peered out of a carriage up Pemberley’s drive she’d been apprehensive; if she was frank with herself it had moved beyond apprehension to fear. Yet now Pemberley’s edifice inspired no shortness of breath. There were no servants’ averted eyes and suppressed sniggers. Indeed, only Mrs Reynolds and two footmen had waited on the steps to greet them; so ordinary now must be their arrival to Pemberley.

Mrs Reynolds had uttered pleasantries as Kitty walked up the stairs. Georgiana lagged behind them, far more fatigued than Kitty had been by the journey. Darcy of course directed the removal of their baggage. It seemed familiar and comfortable. There was no awkwardness and Kitty was keenly aware of the difference between her previous visit and this one.

Mrs Reynolds proved herself, as much as her counterpart in London, an excellent housekeeper and had ordered baths drawn up for both Kitty and Georgiana the minute she’d seen the carriage.

Kitty had wanted to call Mrs Reynolds a prince amongst men, but that was hardly suitable. Now she was relaxing she could ponder why no one ever commented that someone was a princess amongst women. Perhaps it was because all women of her class were supposed to be treated with the respect that one assumed a princess should be given? Indeed, sometimes more if the current Royal family were to be regarded.

“Kitty?” Georgiana was wrapped up warmly, but her newly washed hair was dripping slightly.

“Georgie, you’ll become ill!”

The younger girl shook her head, “It’s not at all cold and I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Kitty sighed. “By making me worry about you? Besides is there a reason you should be particularly concerned about my welfare?”

Georgiana gave her a pointed look and Kitty averted her gaze. She felt perfectly fine and she was not an invalid. She was not yet accustomed to being considered something to protect; yet it was for no virtue of her own.

The message had been relayed to her while she was barely dressed. The night before they’d taken an early supper and she’d retired to bed but now it was morning and apparently Mrs Calens had come to call. At first to Kitty it seemed uncharacteristically impolite of Mrs Calens to call so early, although Kitty could not think of a previous visit Mrs Calens, or any of the other ladies from Lambton had made to Pemberley. Perhaps it was the village way? But once Kitty had consulted the clock sitting on her mantelpiece she realised it was she who was impolite. She’d spent the morning asleep! Sally was unrepentant in letting her mistress sleep and Kitty added it to the long list of grievances she was beginning to feel.

Kitty needn’t have worried. Mrs Calens was not left sitting alone in the receiving room as she’d feared. Not only was Georgiana conversing with her on some piano piece which apparently Mr
Huston had in store in Lambton which Georgiana had been unable to find in Meryton, but Darcy was also present.

Kitty was slightly surprised and then checked herself. She should not be surprised. He’d put himself forward in Meryton, why should he not do so now in his own home?

It pleased Kitty to realise he was not merely observing Georgiana playing hostess. He’d been inquiring about Mrs Calens and her concerns as well as Lambton’s apparently. It reminded Kitty of her thoughts about gentlemen, like Mr Lewis, needing to learn how to be gentlemen. Watching Darcy for those first few moments before the room realised her presence made her wonder about those traits of character that were innate and could not be learned, though they could be suppressed and ignored. His current manner was not learnt, it was not the way he had been brought to believe was the correct manner in dealing with those of a different order- this natural ease and friendliness was in many respects alien to his teaching or his manner for the most part she’d known him. She was glad to see that circumstances had conspired to allow him to be himself, although perhaps it was merely Pemberley. She’d not noticed such a change before, but that was then and this was now.

"My dear Mrs Calens," said Kitty, finally walking across the room to extend her hand to her friend.

She’d not noticed at first but Mrs Calens was dressed so very minutely for a simple visit to a friend. Kitty momentarily felt a pang that anyone should be afraid to come to Pemberley because they feared their appearance might be commented upon, but Mrs Calens’ next words soothed her.

"I did not write to you about this, my dear, because I knew it would hardly reach you in time. After all which inn would I send it to? But today we are having a little open day for our school. Those who have supported us in word rather than deed are coming to see what their support has achieved. I thought I might come to see if there was a possibility that you might wish to - "

"Of course." Kitty could not contain her glee. She had not seen the school in its full working condition and she wanted to see the changes wrought in the children.

Georgiana had declined Mrs Calens' invitation. Kitty privately thought she would have to discuss such a refusal with Georgiana. Kitty understood why Georgiana could not go; she would be unsure that it was right considering she was not out, added to that was Georgiana's shyness. She had not yet overcome her natural aversion to people she did not know. Kitty had thought she was growing beyond that but evidence suggested otherwise. However, Georgiana must be made to realise her actions could be interpreted as pride and contempt by those who did not know her well.

Darcy appeared to be thinking the same as her, for Kitty noticed him speaking quietly to Mrs Calens as Kitty descended the stairs after fetching a bonnet and reticule. Although Kitty might have been mistaken for the reasoning for the subdued conversation; it appeared Darcy was coming with them.

"You wish to see the school?"

"Why should I not?” asked Darcy.

"There is no reason," replied Kitty. She merely hoped that Darcy genuinely wished to visit the school, not just keep an eye on her. She understood his concern, and in no way thought it was a reflection on her own behaviour, but nevertheless she could only chaff under such scrutiny. It was not as if she was ill. She’d avoided thinking of the circumstances prompting Darcy’s solicitude. It was a subject that brought up so many feelings that were impossible to separate and rationally reflect on.
"Indeed, Mr Darcy could only positively influence Reverend Towers. He has been pacified but he still feels that we are being too generous," added Mrs Calens who clearly sensed Kitty's wavering feelings, but attributed them to the wrong quarter.

"Indeed. I am quite prepared to be used in such a manner."

Darcy was not lying. He was quite prepared to step into the breach and listen to Reverend Towers’ edifying sermon on the reason for the class system.

Kitty had a feeling Darcy was thoroughly agreeing with Reverend Towers, when he spoke of his lament that the class system was not more entrenched. This agreement had nothing to do with feelings of pride or superiority; merely it was a reflection of the fact the living at Lambton was not in his purview. Kitty felt sure neither Darcy nor his father would have employed such a man as Reverend Towers.

The school room was impeccable and Kitty wondered if the children within it, forced to come and sit at the tables, appreciated learning more than she had and realised that running wild was not as attractive as it might sound. Apparently, they did if the letters some of them had been learning to write were anything to go by.

“‘I know you have not been in Derbyshire long, Mrs Darcy,” said Mrs Wylde. Kitty only really knew Mrs Wylde by sight. She had become involved in the school after they’d left for London. The only other details Kitty knew of her were what Miss Almesbury had written; she had two daughters, one of which she was determined would become Mrs Towers. Kitty determined not to gossip but it was plain to see that Miss Almesbury had been correct and that organising the villages charitable activities according to Mr Towers’ wishes was apparently the first stage of her siege of him. Kitty pitied her daughters.

“I have not Mrs Wylde, that is true,” replied Kitty politely.

“Of course and you have charitable concerns far wider than our little village, but you must realise that often our poor are visited more than once because of a lack of communication,” Mrs Wylde let her implication hang unsaid. It was clear however from her tone and her look that she meant visiting more than once would of course make them lazy. Kitty chose to misunderstand her.

“That is indeed appalling, because of course if that happens it must also be true that some miss out completely. I think your suggestion is an excellent one. Miss Almesbury,” Kitty called over her Aunt’s friend, “do you not think Mrs Wylde’s plan commendable?”

Miss Almesbury denied knowledge of any plan, leaving Mrs Wylde stuttering until Kitty rescued her. “Our next plan of improvement should be a far less informal system of visits.”

Mrs Wylde recovered herself and smiled, “Indeed, and of course we should include the sick. I am sure Mrs Darcy would herself like to supervise that.”

Kitty paused. She had little experience of doing so, but did not think herself above it in any way; however she had more than herself to think of. She could not harm the child!

Mrs Wylde smiled at her discomfort, clearly relishing winning at least one trick. No doubt she thought the new Mrs Darcy too proud to really come down from her station.

Miss Almesbury looked shrewdly at Kitty and flicked her eyes down Kitty’s form before injecting herself in the conversation. “Of course such a plan would be eminently suitable. I will tell Mrs
Calens at our next meeting, that is if you once again find yourself unable to attend, Mrs Wylde, that you have agreed to chair a sub-committee."

Mrs Wylde’s inability to speak allowed Kitty to flee to the other side of the schoolroom.

“What, pray tell, was that about?” Darcy appeared behind her.

Kitty studiously studied the children’s artwork. “Village politics.”

“A dangerous game – “

“I am sure it is more dangerous at Westminster.”

“Members of Parliament do not usually sit down for cake with other members of Parliament; there is less chance of accidental poisoning for instance.”

“I am surprised that once again your thoughts tend to the murderous bent.”

Darcy laughed, then sobered. “Do not involve yourself if it is likely to upset you.”

Kitty shook her head, trying to appear amused. She wished to speak to him but this was hardly the time or place. She was glad for the distraction of more visitors that she must greet.

&&^^&&

Kitty frowned as the candle fluttered, sending shadows across the page. She was just at the point where the heroine found herself in the impenetrable fortress!

She’d even been responsible and read her letters from home first; of course the light would become distracting when she’d picked up her novel! It had been a decision which to read first: Lizzy’s, Jane’s or Mrs Bennet. It was strange they had all written to her, since surely there could not be enough individual events in Longbourn, Netherfield and Meryton to fill three letters; her sisters and mother were close enough to discuss most events. In the end she’d opened Mrs Bennet’s letter first, discovering it was full of personal grievances. Apparently the gloss of having two well married daughters was beginning to pall and the visiting and news was regaining its hold in the activities of her life. Lizzy was being distinctly undutiful in relation to Mr Devinsham, Mr Bennet ungrateful in not letting her have the carriage more to visit Jane and Lydia annoying her with her regrets over the militia. This, of course, led to Lizzy’s letter which roundly condemned Mr Devinsham but Kitty thought she could sense a softening towards the man. She’s apparently had a spirited discussion with Mr Devinsham over dinner about his opinions on the education of women. (That had caused the greatest part of anguish in her mother’s letter). Lizzy always did like triumphing in an argument. Jane’s letter was merely the raptures of a new bride, although Kitty could sense neither Jane nor Charles had any idea of permanently settling in Hertfordshire. Kitty had closed her eyes, attempting not to think of the chairs. Then she wondered if she was going to become the sister that everyone communicated everything to because of her distance. She could hardly accidentally tell Lizzy how Mrs Bennet plotted to bring her and Mr Devinsham together; nor could she confess to Jane that Lizzy had misplaced a present Jane had once given her – and so forth: the perfect confidante.

It was liable to become tiresome, but for the moment Kitty was pleased to be needed, although worried; it was again for a circumstance out of her control.

The fluttering light seemed to disturb Georgiana who cursed – well as much as that girl could ever be known to utter a coarse word.

Darcy was also attempting to read and he looked up curiously at his sister who blushed under the
scrutiny.

“Do you need more light?”

“Oh no. I just dropped a stitch, but I regained it and now it is done!” Georgiana sounded victorious which was not out of place to Kitty who’d once tried knitting and found it like embroidery – in her proficiency at it – except one was less likely to draw blood with knitting needles.

“What are you knitting?” Kitty was curious because her sister had been secretive about what she was knitting. Kitty thought if it was finished she should know what it was but Kitty was unable to distinguish it.

Georgiana held it up proudly, giving Kitty a better view. “See, it is something for the baby.”

“You alarm me,” said Kitty.

Georgiana’s face fell; “Oh but no everything shall be all right. I should have thought – “

“I think Catherine perhaps was alarmed by your commentary on our son’s – “ Darcy coughed after a look from Kitty – “or daughter’s possible condition.” At Georgiana’s confused look he continued, “The surplus of holes in your knitting.”

Georgiana looked down at her creation. There were certainly two arm holes, but between them were two holes. “Oh!”

Kitty giggled. “But it is very prettily done otherwise. Consider it practice.”

“But I should be a true proficient!” said Georgiana looking distressed.

Kitty at first thought Darcy was coughing or choking, but he was clearly trying not to laugh. Kitty did not understand the joke and neither apparently did Georgiana who had to be soothed and reassured that her brother of course did not find her poor knitting an amusing matter.

&&^^&&

Kitty brushed out her own hair, ready for plaiting in preparation for bed. A knock sounded and Kitty called for whomever it was to enter. It was Darcy.

“I wish to speak to you,” said Darcy sounding ominously formal.

Kitty did not feel in the mood to speak formally so attempted to lighten the atmosphere; “what was so amusing in Georgiana saying she wished to be a true proficient? Granted it was a superior thing for her to say, but she is unlikely to become a young lady concerned only with her appearance and talents. Although I know you feel differently about her acquaintance from school.”

Darcy was distracted by this, “It is not that I disapprove of them.” He paused. “I have never been good with groups of giggling young ladies.”

“I am sure this is the point where I am to advise you that it is now no longer possible to become expert in that field,” Kitty finished her plait and tied it off with ribbon.

“You will not offer me that comfort?” said Darcy.

“Too most husbands one would think that would be a punishment but of course for you…!”

Darcy sat down in one of the chairs by the fire. “Yet I do not wish to become a brother who does
yet I do not wish to become a brother who does not involve himself when Georgiana comes out.”

“You know where that ends,” said Kitty lightly. Darcy did not acknowledge the statement verbally but she could tell he was thinking about it.

“I cannot expect Georgiana to confide all in me, about her season, after all much of it is going to be womanly concerns; naturally you shall be a better confidante.”

Kitty turned back to the mirror to fuss with the ribbon.

“I did not mean that as a slight,” said Darcy noticing her action. “Georgiana could need no better confidante.”

Kitty just nodded. How could she explain her feelings?

“Catherine. I came to speak to you and you’ve neatly sidetracked me, but I cannot leave without saying what I wished to say. I sense you wish to say something to me but cannot bring yourself to do so. I thought we could have no secrets between us any longer – “

“It is not a secret,” said Kitty, “at least not in the way you mean. It can cause no harm to anyone.”

“It can cause harm to our relationship,” said Darcy.

Kitty looked up, “Perhaps.”

“I will worry what I have done to upset you. I do worry.”

Kitty gave a small smile. Of course when he had done nothing he would worry about what he had done, and when he had done something he would be oblivious. No indeed Darcy had been all solitude and care since she’d told him that he was to be a father. She’d worried he would not feel as he ought because she was not the woman he would have chosen, but she needn’t have worried. Nor did she worry about her own feelings towards the child. Kitty felt herself capable of being a good mother; she would have to learn but so would he. At least they would be at the same point. She also surprised herself at the feelings she had, of protection and love towards something that was not even quite real yet. She did not know; was it only a baby once it had been born?

No, her worry was stupid and it was why she had not voiced it. Not only was it foolish but she knew that the answer to the question could not be what she wanted.

“Catherine?” Darcy had stood up and come to stand next to her and maybe sensing that in this position he could look intimidating, standing over her in such a manner, he crouched down, hand on the back of her chair.

“No, of course you have been all that is good and kindness, if slightly overprotective! You and Georgiana seem to think I cannot walk to breakfast without assistance! But I can have no real complaint.”

“You do?” said Darcy astutely.

“It is not a complaint. I just wonder if…”

“If?”

“Well, it is not directed at me is it? It would be the same if it was any other – “

Darcy looked confused; “Any other…what? Woman?” Kitty nodded. “I have little answer. I
cannot speak on behaviour that cannot be known. I do not know what I would be like with another woman who was carrying my child. No one else has – “Darcy suddenly paused as if struck and then shook his head, amusing Kitty greatly. Though she doubted he had sired any children he did not know about! “but why should that worry you?”

“It should not. You are right.”

Darcy looked at her. “But you are concerned, why?”

“I just feel – a little not very much – as if no one would treat me this way if I were not – it is not me. I do not deserve such treatment, only…” Kitty broke off delicately placing a hand over her stomach, “deserves such treatment.”

Darcy placed his hand over hers, “I cannot separate the two. How can I solely care for someone who would not exist if it were not for you? It has been difficult. I have acted badly – “

“We have both acted badly,” said Kitty truthfully and loyally.

“We have both acted badly but I cannot say I am unhappy and I cannot say I have any regrets. Indeed I must say I am content and free from qualms, except for some very understandable concerns – but I should not smother you, I know.”

Kitty smiled; Darcy cupped her face and as he made to stand up kissed her on the forehead. “Now will you indulge me and my unnecessary concern for your welfare and sleep?”

Kitty nodded and stood, but gave into impulse and stood up on her toes to kiss her husband.

He returned her gesture with an embrace and whispered words which she happily returned.

&&^^&&
Miss Georgiana Darcy tripped down the steps from the Darcy townhouse, bonnet in one hand and reticule swinging in the other. The carriage had pulled up in front of the house and she accepted the hand of the footman who jumped down to hand her into the carriage.

She closed the door behind her and toyed with the notion of pulling all the shades down to hide. Instead she slid the pane of the window on the road side and stuck her head out the window. There was precious little to see. It was a genteel square with no lumbering carts or other street activity. The only thing was the square of lawn on which children were playing with attendant nurses.

She smirked; she knew those young ladies who were now hampered with nurses and having to help with their younger brothers and sisters. As they turned she smiled and waved to them.

“Anna!” said one, running to the railings. “Where are you going?”

“Where? I am off to the library, and then to do some shopping;” she replied in her most adult of voices. It was slightly undermined by the fact she had to almost shout and repeat herself so that Miss Celia could actually hear her.

However the speech had the desired effect; Miss Celia looked positively jealous. Of course Mrs Levant would never allow Celia the use of the carriage; she didn’t think her old enough even though Celia was two months older than Anna.

“Sir Walter Scott, he has a new novel does he not?” shouted Miss Celia, now joined by her younger sister, Miss Penelope. Anna saw that Miss Penelope was enviously looking at her gloves; Anna sent a silent thanks to her Aunt Lydia, in Paris with her husband, the former Captain Chamberlayne as he was styled by the war’s end. They’d remained after the Army of Occupation left because Aunt Lydia found the society too enjoyable. They had opened of all things a fabric shop but this suited Anna as she got all the French fashions earlier than most girls.

“A romance!” said Miss Penelope who was addicted to romances, despite being only thirteen.

“Georgiana Darcy, cease yelling across the square!”

Anna turned to see the carriage door being opened by her mother. “Yes, Mama,” she replied dutifully and shut the pane. “Thank you for taking me,” she added.

“I merely gave in,” her mother replied and Anna tried to look innocent.

“I didn’t nag you too much.”

“Unlike the sash.”

“Unlike the sash,” agreed Anna. But that had been Papa. He was always far easier to work on. Anna had but to tear up and he would race to discover how to purchase what it was she wanted. She was exaggerating of course; Papa was not such a weak willed man. But he was far easier to extract presents from. She suspected this was because he and Aunt Georgiana were so far apart in age and thus he had never really been able to view the wiles of females as a boy. Mama had four sisters and only eight years separated Aunt Jane from Aunt Lydia; she knew all the girlish tricks.
While Mama browsed and chatted, Anna searched the shelves looking for exciting novels to read. She adored reading and was the bane of her drawing master. Anna found no interest in sketching a scene; she’d rather see one sketched out before her very eyes in words. Luckily, the drawing master had more of a pupil in Lucy.

Anna looked around to ensure her mother was not watching her draw a particular novel from the shelf; her mother was on the other side of the shelf and Anna could easily keep her in her sights. “Mrs Darcy.” Anna ducked her head slightly to see the gentleman doffing his hat to her mother. “Sir John, and where is your charming wife?”

“Picking a selection of what I am sure will be entertaining reading material, in French.” Anna was sure that meant something but she had no clue what. She recognised the gentleman as Sir John Macdonald. She had seen him at the Lavents, and maybe at a ball at their townhouse but she could not be certain. “You are looking radiant.”

“Thank you,” replied Mama. Anna wished someone else was being flattered, it was entirely wasted on one’s mother. “Entirely comforted too.” There was a smile.

“I did not even think to ask, it was so obvious.”

Her mother laughed. Out of all her friends Anna was certainly blessed with the happiest mother, even when she scolded she never looked cross. It was a point of envy amongst her friends. Anna had missed part of the conversation; “…like water under the bridge.”

“I am glad,” was Sir John’s reply. “I was such a rake.”

“Was?” was Mama’s incredulous reply.

“Come, I am married and a father. I do not have time!”

“One would expect you to make time.”

“Why should one do so merely for appearances’ sake? No, I am much happier being old and staid.”

“I do not believe you.”

“Wise woman. Give my regards to your husband. Although I suspect he should not want them.”

“Why?” Her mother’s tone was somewhat sharp now.

“Only that I tempted him into a game of billiards, at Whites, and sadly won.”

That earned him a laughing, “Good day, Sir John.”

Mama came round the shelves then and Anna quickly hid her book behind her back.

“Were you eavesdropping, Anna?”

“No…Yes. He is fearfully handsome.”

“Is he? I suppose he is. I would thought him too old for your eyes. Young Mr Levant is your age, you should think him handsome”

“Oh no. He’s spotty.”
“Well, Anna, the handsome ones are trouble.”

“Papa was handsome. He was not trouble.”

Mama laughed, “You think so? You are sadly deceived. Now what book do you have behind your back?”

Anna sighed and showed it to her mother.

“I will make you a bargain. I will take this book, but I shall read it first to make sure it’s suitable.”

Anna knew what that meant. Her mother had been looking for the book for herself.

&&^&^&

“Master Thomas!”

Thomas quickly hid the wine goblet behind his back.

“Young man, I know you have a glass behind your back. Sophy was distraught when she was counting the glassware and she thought one was missing. Your father was never this ill behaved.”

Thomas groaned. Statements like that always made him wonder why Mrs Wilson was not retired to a small cottage on their estate. She and Mrs Reynolds would surely be more comfortable gossiping away over tea and baked goods. They would be more prone to giving away those cakes to the children of their beloved master if they were squirreled away from the main houses.

Thomas held out the glass to Mrs Wilson, who noticed the spider crawling at the bottom and shrieked. This of course led to him being shepherded to his father’s study. Thomas doubted Papa would believe he was being high minded and helping rid the house of vermin.

Papa peered at the spider. “You were going to frighten your sisters, no doubt? Or your mother.”

“No, my cousins,” replied Thomas truthfully. “Mama isn’t afraid of spiders.”

“Any particular reason?”

“That Mama is not afraid of spiders?” Thomas sobered at the glare send his way, “No reason, sir.”

“Bored?”

“Yes.” Thomas had not wanted to go to school; of course, he’d lied when the other boys taunted him with suggestions that he’d cried when parted from his mother. But he found now on holidays that his younger brothers and sisters were quite tedious. If he was honest, they were tedious because he couldn’t order them about and that is what he lacked at school. He was unable to order anyone about at school. They’d found new games to play, and Miss Winston the governess and Mrs Addison the nanny were focusing on their main charges. If they did notice Thomas it was to infantilise him. They didn’t understand he was a man now, who could use such words.

“I gathered, considering the cricket ball through Fitzwilliam’s window.”

“Uncle Fitzwilliam did not mind; well not much. Richard and I didn’t mean it.” Thomas was just glad that his cousin – for while the retired Brigadier-General was certainly a brother-in-arms to his father, hence the term Uncle, he was only a cousin, perhaps even twice over since he had married his father’s other cousin Anne de Bourgh – had not mentioned that the glass had shattered all over Aunt Georgiana and her husband, Sir James.
Papa smiled, “Fitzwilliam did not mind because he remembers what it is like to be a boy.”

“You don’t remember?”

“I cannot remember yesterday,” muttered his father. Thomas was fairly sure his father was being humorous, since his father had a lamentably long memory; he had proof of that.

Thomas drew himself up “Well, if I promise to behave and uphold the family name may I leave?” Papa frowned and handed Thomas a stack of paper. Thomas stared at it. “Sir?”

“You will not know the meaning of boredom until you understand estate management.”

“I already – “protested Thomas; ever since he could remember his father had taken him – and his brothers and sisters – riding around the estate, on his tenant visits and so forth.

“I have sheltered you from the paperwork.”

&&^^&&

Thomas adjusted his crown. Thomas thought it must look ridiculous but Lucy had been insistent that the Prince of the West Indies would wear a crown. Thomas had tried to explain to her that the West Indies were in fact a name for several separate colonies and that being colonies they wouldn’t have a prince, they’d have a king. The same George the Fourth that England had! But Lucy didn’t care, The West Indies was the mythical place the bad Lord Snitterton had been sent – they’d never quite worked out what he’d done, except he was hardly spoken of despite being the heir to the earldom of Matlock. In novels that meant he was the black sheep. Or perhaps that was the man whose miniature was in Grandfather Darcy’s cabinet; Mrs Reynolds sniffed, in that unimpressed way she had, over him even though he’d died at Waterloo. Men who died in battle were supposed to be heroes thought Thomas, not sniffed over by housekeepers. So Thomas could only conclude that George Wickham had done something wrong and sacrificed himself to a bullet to atone. At least that’s what Thomas liked to think; it was probably nobler than the truth.

In any case, Thomas could only thank God Almighty that they were doing Lucy’s play and not Anna’s. Anna would write a romance and Thomas was not being romantic to his sister or anyone else. Except he might be wrong since Lucy was complaining she didn’t have a princess.

“Cannot Anna be the princess?” complained Henry who ever since he’d ignored the girls’ script had been related to playing trees and such like. He was currently being the castle.

“I’m the heroine; a peasant who is really a virtuous noble lady,” replied Anna. Thomas rolled his eyes.

“Mama!” cried Lucy as their mother walked into the school room still dressed in her visiting dress. “You can be the princess.”

“Why cannot you be the princess, Miss Lucy?” his mother replied, kissing Lucy after Lucy had flung herself at her.

“I am the witch.” Lucy pulled back, “I’m a good witch though. I’m to stop an evil count abducting Anna, who’s a noble lady who thinks she is a peasant.”

Henry groaned – “Where’s the count? The babies cannot be the Count.”

Lucy’s face fell and Thomas took off his crown. It seemed as if the play would come to naught and he could go outside. After all if it took more than a moment to find the count, Miss Winston
would come back from the library and start lessons again.

“Catherine, I cannot – “

“Oh the evil count!” shrieked their mother, startling Papa.

“I – What?”

“Lucy – I mean cankerous crone – save us from the wicked count!” cried Mama, laughing.

“Papa! You’ll be our count! We don’t have a script. So you will just have to repeat after me.”

“How wicked am I?” asked Papa cautiously.


“Ah, that sort of wicked count,” replied their father, as Lucy cried, “No, Mama. That’s wrong.”

Their parents looked contrite and submitted to listening to Lucy’s demands.

&&^^&&

The portraits were leaning against the wall with the cloth that protected them on the journey still wrapped around them. They should be hanging at Longbourn, which was Grandfather Bennet’s estate, but Grandmother Bennet wished for the frames to be clean and apparently she would not trust them to anyone but a London specialist.

Lucy had heard her mother speaking to Aunt Mary who was in London with her husband giving a speech about women’s education. Lucy wished Aunt Mary would not; if Aunt Mary succeeded then surely even more of Lucy’s day would be spent learning the rivers of Europe. Lucy intended to sail the rivers of Europe – perhaps as a pirate – just because if she was forced to learn this knowledge it must be put to good use at some point.

But, on the matter of the portraits, Aunt Mary and Mama had said that Grandmother Bennet had merely wished to demonstrate to the new tenants of Netherfield that she had connections – whatever that meant.

All Lucy knew was that it meant she had the portraits to look at. Miss Winston thought she had great talent in drawing and painting, like Aunt Georgiana had been talented as a girl. Perhaps she was still talented. Mama and Papa thought so too, but Lucy was entirely sure as parents it was their job to pretend their children could excel at anything. That could be the only reason Mama found Henry funny. Henry wasn’t funny.

Lucy tugged off the covers. Aunt Jane and Uncle Bingley with their family; Aunt Lizzy and Uncle Devinsham and their children – Aunt Lizzy lived in Newcastle and her husband was in glass, or ships or printing, Lucy thought it was one of those. Whatever it was it always involved pretty presents.

The last cover came off and, like most young ladies when confronted with her own image, she recoiled; she could not imagine herself such a chubby baby. She was consoled with the thought that if she had been a chubby infant she could hardly find a word for Henry.

“Miss Lucy, I thought you had been put to bed hours ago?” Lucy turned at her mother’s voice and hurriedly put the covers back on the paintings. She scrambled to her feet.
“We should have another portrait taken.”

“Will you all sit still enough?” Lucy noticed now that her mother was dressed for an evening’s entertainment. Her hair was all pearls and roses. She was the prettiest mother.

“Of course we will sit still! Are you going to a ball?”

“A musical soiree,” said her mother, shepherding Lucy back to the room she shared with Anna.

“Anyone I know?”

“A friend of mine, Miss Sharp as was; her daughter Louisa, well step-daughter, has just come out.”

“Will you play?” Mama played silly childish songs with them, but Lucy did not know if she could play seriously like Anna.

“Gracious, I don’t wish to spoil the evening; now, Miss Lucy go to bed.”

“If there is a harp will you play?” Lucy turned to see her father who had clearly come to investigate why Mama was taking so long.

“And rob you of the pleasure?”

“You play the harp?” said Lucy astounded. She’s always thought her father could do anything, but anything had never included the harp.

“No, Miss Lucy, I don’t play the harp. But I may be forced to do something equally as rash if you do not go to bed; otherwise we will be later than can properly be termed fashionable.”

Lucy kissed both her parents, and they departed, presumably for the soiree.

&&^&

Something woke her. The intermittent rain on the roof perhaps, but it could not have been a nightmare! She’s not had a nightmare for some time, not since Henry had told her a monster lived under the bed and only came out at night, and that had been years, or maybe months.

Lucy crept out of bed and pulled the knitted coverlet from her bed – it had been a present from Aunt Georgiana. She wrapped it around her tightly and crept from her bedroom. It was darker than when she’d escaped from bed before, but not as dark as the house could have been because if her parents were out for the evening there must be still light for them to see.

The stairs creaked under her weight, Lucy made for the light from the crack of the study door. Lucy pushed it open further and found that her parents had returned. Something amusing had obviously been said because Mama, who had been removing her gloves by the fire (they’d been dampened by the rain coming in from the carriage), had looked over her shoulder towards the desk and was looking satisfied with herself.

“You did not get too wet?”

“No, it is only a shower. While just shows water so profoundly. At least they had a card room.”

“Selflessly though I managed to sit through Miss Kenworthy’s rather uninspired performance instead of escaping.”

“I do not call it selfless, the faces you were making! I barely kept my countenance.”
Lucy peeked her head in a little further so she could see her father at his desk sipping from his glass. He’d merely shrugged in response to Mama, but he was laughing at her. Lucy didn’t see what was amusing in her mother’s stance or in her conversation. But adults were strange.

Lucy ducked back to avoid being seen by her mother and scolded for still being awake, as she turned to move towards the desk to lean and give Papa a kiss on the cheek.

Lucy stored up the look for her next play, and his movement in stroking her mother’s cheek.

“What would I do without you?”

“I am not sure that I would want to know,” teased Mama.

“Ah, heartless creature.”

“Of course, I hope someone has it safe.”

“You do not trust me?”

“Implicitly.”

It was all far too sentimental for Lucy who could not help betraying her presence with a noise. Then she fled from the scene.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!