A hit, a very palpable hit

by Shem

Summary

Mr Bennet’s family is larger than just Mr Collins (thank heavens). One of his sisters, Clara, who has been distant for some ten years, re-emerges into his life demanding the company of one his daughters. Both Mr and Mrs Bennet consider Kitty expendable so it is she who is dispatched right in the middle of the most exciting period of her life, after all how often does a regiment of soldiers visit Merton? But Clara’s presence will effect more than just Kitty.

Notes

This work was first published at the Derbyshire Writers Guild in 2004-05. 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 from Hamlet, Act 5 Scene Two.
Prologue

…. So it is of course no surprise to you that, after that nonsense, I could not stand living with our sister, Elizabeth, for one moment longer. Neither am I able to return to Netherfield, (by the by is Mr Bingley keeping my furniture well?) nor am I able to stomach living under the same roof as Fanny, so you can quite understand my decision to quit Worthing for the charming little town of Upton Grey, well to be precise the delightful cottage I have rented is somewhere between Upton Grey and Tunworth. Though I am afraid to say I have been here three weeks and am heartily bored. Pray spare me one of your many daughters, to save me from going quite steadily mad…

Mr Bennet sighed. His situation was much to be lamented; a house full of females while he grew up and nothing but a house full of females after he married. And he supposed on reflection it had been much too much to hope that Clara would have found in Worthing a permanent home.

In fact Mr Bennet had always been surprised that his youngest sister had ever married; he had always supposed that she would have been much too fastidious to ever like someone well enough. But like Mr Sutton she did, and as far as any one else was concerned the minute Miss Clara Bennet settled on Mr Sutton as her future husband, there was nothing anyone else could have done about it. She was not a woman to be gainsaid.

Thus after a very short couple of months Clara had become Mrs Clara Sutton, Mistress of Netherfield and very shortly after pulled her husband around the continent on a grand tour that was not even to be halted by such a paltry thing as the French Revolution. The onset of War however did put a slight cramp into the proceedings, but Clara persevered.

Thus it was that neither Longbourn nor Netherfield saw much of the Suttons and Netherfield was left standing idle. It was assumed rather than hoped by Mr Bennet that when a long illness carried Mr Sutton off in Bath some ten years ago, Clara would return to Netherfield. But having no children Clara preferred to let Netherfield and, after a decent period of mourning in solitude, live with their elder sister Elizabeth. This was not surprising as Clara detested her sister-in-law and the feeling was quite mutual.

The aforementioned sister-in-law – Mrs Bennet, interrupted these musings.

“Well my dear? You summoned me? I am quite put out for I was just about to make it entirely clear to Mr Collins that Jane is practically considered engaged – “

“I would not count your chickens before they are hatched…” Mr Bennet warned.

“Well I dare say you have not seen the way Mr Bingley looks at Jane! Mrs Long was telling me only the other day that she was constantly trying not to blush at those looks…”

“Well if Mrs Long blushes at looks not meant for her, then I am quite at a loss to see how she ever married…. Such over-sensibility…”

“Well Mr Long was never much to look at,” mused Mrs Bennet. “But that is not to the purpose! I mean to warn Mr Collins that Jane is quite already spoken for, because although Mr Collins is a very worthy young man, he can hardly compare to Mr Bingley!”
“Indeed. But I did not summon you, as you put it, to talk of something that has not occurred and is very unlikely to ever occur. I have had a letter from Clara.”

Mrs Bennet who had been occupied in fluttering her handkerchief around some of Mr Bennet books, for he would never allow the maid to dust as much as Mrs Bennet would have liked, gave a start.

“Well, why is that such a to-do? She is quite well I hope?”

“Very well, but an unfortunate occurrence has made her quit Worthing.”

“An unfortunate occurrence?” Mrs Bennet looked torn between not wanting to know anything about her detestable sister-in-law and her incurable need for gossip.

“Elizabeth did not take kindly to Clara’s warning off a suitor for Alice, though I daresay Clara will turn out to be right in the end.”

“She isn’t coming for a visit?!” Mrs Bennet could not think of anything worse. Clara would stick her bib in where it wasn’t wanted, probably take a dislike to Mr Collins and tell Lizzy to refuse him. After all she had not even written to tell them that Netherfield had been let at last, she had to hear that her own family’s house (Mrs Bennet had a very loose notion of family) had been let from Mrs Long! Mrs Bennet felt that was the height of incivility, especially when it was a single man of good fortune doing the letting!

“Oh no, she has found a little cottage in Hampshire and only wishes one our daughters to lend her company.”

“Oh,” replied Mrs Bennet much relieved. But then a thought struck her. She could hardly send Jane. Mrs Bennet had no reliance on men; Mr Bingley was as likely to forget all about Jane, as pine for her if she suddenly disappeared from his sight.

“Well the last time Clara was here, just after dear Frederick passed away, Lizzy seemed to – “ Mrs Bennet paused. She had seen the way Mr Collins had looked very torn between her two eldest and he had hardly paid any attention to the younger girls…

Perhaps Mary…then she remembered the unfortunate incident with an very young Mary ringing a homily over her Aunt Sutton. And while Mrs Bennet would like nothing more than to annoy her sister-in-law, it would in all probability end in Clara bringing Mary back to Longbourn in person, that is if Mary could be persuaded to go in the first place.

That left Kitty and Lydia. Clara had no objection to either, if Mrs Bennet remembered rightly, in fact both of them would have been far too young, to even remember their aunt.

“I mean, perhaps Kitty or Lydia would like to visit their aunt. Though I am sure I could not cope without my darling Lydia and it would be quite cruel to send her away while the regiment is encamped here. Indeed I know I cried for quite three days when Colonel Millar’s regiment went away…”

“So Kitty it must be,” replied Mr Bennet shortly, wanting very desperately to have his library back. He wondered at the wisdom of sending one of his younger daughters, for he doubted very much Clara would suffer a silly girl lightly. On the other hand she had changed much after her husband’s death and those who often commented that she had only married her husband for convenience were effectively silenced at the very real way Clara had grieved.

“Yes, and Kitty will be able to tell her news this evening at Sister Phillip’s party. I expect
everyone will be quite jealous! When shall she go?”

“Well Clara writes that she would like her as soon as possible, which as far as Clara is concerned was yesterday…” Mr Bennet was growing bored by the conversation, he had been concerned he would be deprived of the company of his elder daughters but now this was not to the case, he didn’t much care how the business was done.

“Well there is hardly likely to be many balls or parties, and Kitty only recently got that new muslin made up…”

“Mrs Bennet no muslin I beg you!”

“Well I was only – I expect Kitty could leave tomorrow if that suited you after all, I am sure you have not noticed but Hill has predicted that this fine weather will not hold.

“She would have to leave early, it would be a long day. And a letter would not reach Clara before her…though it sounds as though she is quite prepared for her to arrive at any time.”

“Then it is settled. I shall go now and start organising.”

With that Mrs Bennet started to bustle out of the room.

“Mrs Bennet, do not forget the errand I so carelessly interrupted.”

“Oh yes, heavens! Mr Collins.”

Mr Bennet was not quite sure what inner devil prompted him to remind his wife, but some days later he was to regret that Mr Collins had been hinted off his eldest daughter only to fix his hopes on his favourite.

But as it was his wife left him to his musings. He folded up his sister’s letter and placed it with the rest of his correspondence. Mr Bennet was an infrequent and neglectful correspondent, however the re-emergence into his life of a regular correspondence with his sister had occurred some six weeks previously, via a letter requesting him to ensure Mr Bingley was a suitable tenant. This had sent Mr Bennet to Netherfield under the guise of appeasing his wife. He had not disclosed that his visit was anything more than a social call, having too much of lively sense of the ridiculous to want to reveal all his families secrets straight away and enough understanding to know that most young men would not take kindly to being inspected for suitability of character even after taking possession.

He had found in Mr Bingley an affable young man, but apart from that Mr Bennet felt he had discharged both the requirements of his wife and sister.

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Chapter 2

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… I am very sorry, Mrs Forster, to have to cry off my engagement to you on Monday next, but I am obliged to visit my Aunt S. in Hampshire almost immediately, in fact immediately. Please apologise for me to the gentlemen and say all that is necessary, indeed say more than is necessary for I am very sorry to not be amongst you all.…

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It is not to be expected that a lively girl of seventeen, who until this point never pleased anyone but herself (though more often than not she was forced to please her youngest sister), would take kindly to being forced on a trip to an aunt she barely remembered right in the middle of the most exciting thing that had ever happened in her life – a regiment of soldiers.

Kitty Bennet had never seen so many attractive men. And how solicitous they all were, though Kitty was not such a simpleton to see that they were far more interested in her sister and Mrs Forster. Still, it was more than she had ever hoped for and to be dragged away, just at the moment she was sure Mr Bingley was going to hold the ball that Lydia had begged for, was more that she could bear.

It was too cruel; especially since she had reason to believe her Aunt Sutton was not likely to be as accommodating as her Aunt Phillips. She was far more likely to disapprove of Kitty being out and expect her to sew samplers.

To top the whole thing off she had not been allowed to attend her aunt’s party in favour of packing. Packing! Mrs Bennet deciding at the last minute she could not do all the work herself, indeed this way Kitty would pack her trunks and Hill and Sarah would be free to attend her fluttering nerves, which had been exacerbated by Lizzy appearing to be quite impertinent to Mr Collins.

Kitty had however defied her mother and stayed up late, she particularly wanted to know from Lydia what Mr Wickham was like. Now he was a handsome man, and he would soon be in regimentals, which was the only thing he lacked.

“I cannot believe Lizzy,” grumbled Lydia as she walked through the door to their shared bedroom, though Kitty often felt it was Lydia’s bedroom and she was an interloper, the way Lydia carried on sometimes.

“You will not believe it but she spent most of the night talking to Mr Wickham! I could hardly speak to him! Though I did get to dance with him, for I overhead him telling her he had not had a dance in this age! “

Kitty sighed inwardly. Dancing. She had just known she was going to miss out on fun.

“And I heard that Mr Bingley is very fixed on the 26th for his Ball, though they were not there. I expect it was quite below Mr Darcy’s touch. He is a very disagreeable man! I expect not even regimentals would solve his problems. La, I am so fagged!”

Kitty glared at her sister ineffectually as Lydia proceeded to blow out all the candles without so much as a by your leave.

Kitty wondered if it was worth disturbing her elder sisters to ask how the party had been, but she’d probably get nothing out of them. Mary wouldn’t have noticed anything, Jane would have been thinking of Mr Bingley and Lizzy would have been avoiding Mr Collins and from the
sounds of it making Mr Wickham fall violently in love with her.

After all it would not be surprising considering that Lizzy was very pretty and outspoken, a combination of two virtues that men seemed to like best of all, which was why men seemed to fall violently in love with Lizzy most out of all her sisters. Her mother would repudiate that notion and claim it was Jane’s superior beauty or Lydia’s playful nature that won the most hearts, but Kitty had a shrewd notion that many of Jane’s and Lydia’s admirers were just that admirers, not lovers... after all none of them had come up to scratch and proposed marriage! Well at least none she had heard of, and she doubted Jane could keep such a secret from Mama and Lydia would certainly crow about it.

Then again none had offered for Lizzy either, but that was probably because Lizzy took great care in making sure they were well aware she wouldn’t appreciate a proposal. But for all Lizzy claimed she ensured that respectable but sadly ineligible men would not fall in love with her if she could help it, Kitty knew for certain she had broken some hearts. Sometimes Lizzy was so blind.

Nevertheless, Kitty had to take what Lizzy (and Jane) had said to her that afternoon about her Aunt Sutton to be the truth, after all the last time she had seen her aunt she has only been seven and Lizzy had seen her Aunt both then and in London several years after that event.

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“Do you think I shall need to take all my ball gowns?”

“I rather doubt you’ll need to take any,” replied Lizzy.

“Oh I am sure my Aunt shan’t keep Kitty cloistered away,” responded Jane ever the optimist.

“Does not Aunt Sutton like parties?”

“No, I don’t think she does Kitty, after all last time she was in London when Jane and I were visiting the Gardiner’s she did not come once with us anywhere, or to any of the parties that the Gardiners went to which we didn’t being far too young of course.”

“Not like parties!” How anyone could not like parties was beyond the scope of understanding for Kitty.

“Well that was some years ago Lizzy, perhaps our aunt feels more comfortable in company now…”

“Well Aunt Brompton always complains in her letters about how much Aunt Sutton detested going out in company in Worthing.”

Kitty’s face fell. Not only was she going to an aunt she barely knew but she was also going to an unsociable one. One that probably had a hundred cats and didn’t stir out of doors and kept the candles to a minimum.

Though on reflection Kitty remembered her aunt had only been at the house for three weeks, hardly enough time to cultivate that many cats, even if she was determined to do so.

“Why do neither of Papa’s sisters visit very often? I mean we see Aunt Phillips all the time, although she lives in Meryton, but Aunt and Uncle Gardiner live in London and, well, Worthing is not much further comparatively…” This had always puzzled Kitty.
“I’m not sure, perhaps neither likes travelling?” suggested Jane as she folded up several of Kitty’s work gowns.

“No that won’t do Jane, after all we could easily visit them if they don’t like travelling. I think it has more to do with the fact that both our father’s sisters fell out with Mama,” said Lizzy dryly.

“Lizzy, please. I’m sure it was nothing like that.”

“Jane, I know you cannot bear to have anyone dislike anyone else and must see the good in everyone but here I am not making any judgement on who was right and who was wrong, after all they would have all known each other as girls and it is very easy to fall out with girls you have known all your life.”

“Just like we have clearly fallen out with the Miss Lucas’s, not to mention the Miss Longs, Gouldings and Harringtons,” countered Jane with uncharacteristic irony.

“Well I don’t care why Mama and my aunts fell out, if indeed they did, all I care about is the fact I don’t see why I should have to go and stay with her at all,” announced Kitty hotly.

“Kitty. Our aunt is probably very lonely…” chided Jane.

“After three weeks?” Kitty did not think even Lydia could be that lonely after only three weeks.

“Either way, I’m sure you will have a very good time.”

With that Jane had gone in search of some paper to help wrap her sisters’ finer gowns, not that they were that fine being the fourth of five daughters.

“Lizzy you can’t believe that surely.”

“Perhaps not, but I must say I’d prefer I was going to my aunts then having to stay here with Mr Collins.”

“Oh yes, he is such a – “ Kitty broke off unable to think of any word to properly describe Mr Collins that would not require Lizzy to scold her for being improper.

“Exactly,” replied Lizzy. “He has been here not three days and already he makes his intentions clear?” Lizzy shook her head.

“Well I always thought it would be romantic to fall violently in love with someone on first sight…”

“But Mr Collins cannot even claim that, after all he liked Jane until Mama told him of Mr Bingley.”

“It will be very ironic if Jane becomes Mistress of Netherfield.”

“I expect Mama will be extremely happy.” This statement did not fully encompass the expected enjoyment of Mrs Bennet, if that happy event came to pass. After all, her eldest married very well and installed in the very house Clara used to crow at her about being mistress of, was no small thing. Though even Mrs Bennet would have had to have said that Clara never openly boasted of her position, but Mrs Bennet could see it in her eyes.

“Perhaps then Aunt Sutton will return to oust the Bingleys out of Netherfield.”

“I doubt she will do that, she has no quarrel with Papa, or us!” replied Lizzy brightly.
Lizzy paused for a moment wonder if the superior sisters were at all aware that they were residing in her aunt’s house. After all she very much doubted that Jane would have mentioned her father’s family, from what Jane had said they were more interested in inquiring into her mother’s family and probing the ‘sordid’ details of those connections. Not to mention that Mr Morris, her aunt’s man of business, understood his employers reticence and lack of enjoyment of society and would hardly have mentioned her name unless entirely necessary and certainly would not have mentioned her connections.

And the Bingley sisters did not seem the type to promote relations with their servants. No, Lizzy supposed they did not know the Bennet girls had a childless aunt who was very respectable.

She knew for certain that despite the grandeur of having the owner of Netherfield as one’s sister-in-law, her mother would rather have been thrown into the hedgerows than have it be said that she owed any of her daughter’s admirers to the existence of Clara. Lizzy threw off such thoughts and returned to the task at hand.

“Well you are almost packed, I’m sorry that you cannot come to Aunt Phillips tonight, but I’m almost certain that you shall be glad of escaping Mr Collins.”

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That had certainly been true thought Kitty as she drifted off into sleep, but the pleasure of a Collins-free evening hardly outweighed the fact there had been dancing.

The morning was fine and, despite Hill’s grim predictions, held fair as the Bennets and Mr Collins waved Kitty off.

“I shan’t ask you to write of any beaux Kitty, for I doubt you shall have any!” laughed Lydia as she kissed her sister into the carriage.

Kitty tried not to frown at this pronouncement however true it might be, and simply waved as the carriage set off down the drive.

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… Oh I wish you had been at the ball, it was so delightful, and I was so worried that Lizzy would dance every dance with Mr W., but it was not to be so for he was not there. And how cross L. looked at Mr D. for it, though I don’t know why he should be to blame. Yet she danced with him and didn’t seem to enjoy it though she had only just danced with Mr C. who went the wrong way and almost tripped Mrs R., and then Mr C. stood on my frock and tore it you know? I had to pin it up in on the balcony which was most disagreeable except who do you think I found out there?

Denny and Sanderson, dear S. …

Kitty had been at her aunt’s a week when Lydia’s letter arrived and she had not been expecting a letter from Lydia for months, however she should have known the ball at Netherfield would be too much of an event for Lydia not to boast to her sister about.

For the moment, Kitty, was sitting at the breakfast table, buttering her bread, while trying to decipher the rest of her sister’s letter. She was lucky that her mother had written a short postscript, which was far more legible if not intelligible.

After finishing her breakfast, she supposed she would perhaps take a short stroll around the very confined garden adjoining the cottage, and do some gardening. Or indeed she might help her aunt with the running of the household which was not such a feat considering there was only her, her aunt and two female servants.

It was a far too sedate lifestyle. Kitty had known it would be. There was nothing to do but reading, darning, sewing and gardening (and it was far too cold to be doing much of that and after all there were only so many bulbs one could plant).

Though she supposed her aunt was not to blame for that, not knowing anyone else in the neighbourhood when she arrived. The only other people apart from those in the cottage, Kitty had seen in the first couple of days were at church.

That had been interesting, Kitty had never been ‘an event’ at church, and having always attended the small Parish Church at Longbourn she was surprised at the attention paid to her as a new comer in Upton Grey. She now doubted whether she had been right to point and crane her neck at anyone new that arrived around Longbourn. It was not the most pleasant feeling in the world to be stared and pointed at.

Though it had served the purpose. Apparently it had been her aunt’s first appearance at church as well; it having rained incessantly the previous Sundays and Clara had been far too occupied with a possible hole in the roof to find a suitable method of conveyance.

Thus, that Monday had brought both Mrs Marshall of the Manor House and Mrs Elizabeth Sclater of Hoddington House to call.

Both women seemed pleasant enough, though for Kitty’s taste they appeared too much like her aunt had at that time. Neither seemed likely to enter into her enthusiasm for men or gossip. (She was later to learn that it took several visits for it to be deemed proper to gossip!)

In fact both bemoaned the fact there were no suitable young ladies in the surrounding area, so that Kitty could go for longer walks.
“It is such a pity, for there were the Miss Becketts, but the eldest is lately married and her sister is making a long stay with her…And my own daughter, is paying a visit to her father’s relations, it is such a pity!”

Kitty had wanted to laugh at this and say she was well able to walk by herself but the disapproving eye of her aunt silenced her.

“Well, I’m sure Mary can be spared on occasion,” Clara responded.

“It’s just such a pity!” This seemed to be Mrs Marshall’s favourite saying. “Though I shall ask Raddington to send one of the boys down with our newspaper, once we have finished with it, because I do hate to think of you both down here with nothing to do!”

“I do have quite a good little library, that I brought with me from Worthing and Kitty is quite an appalling hand at darning so I dare say some practice will be worthwhile.”

Kitty hadn’t quite known how to respond to that considering her aunt had arched an eyebrow at her. “Well with four sisters I can assure you it was very easy to avoid something I dislike doing and is so tedious! Which you must own darning is, I can never keep my attention on it, so it turns out all wrong. I much prefer working on a new gown or better still a hat.”

Mrs Sclater had made a face, and attached herself to a thread of the conversation she felt strongly about, “Darning! I cannot imagine why no one has invented a better way of doing it!”

Kitty had laughed at that and surprisingly no one had glared at her.

After that the conversation had descended into the various ins and outs of domestic work and how tiresome it all was, and how much they had to thank the servants for.

Once both ladies had left, with Mrs Marshall promising to send the carriage around the next day so they could spend the day at the Manor House, Kitty noticed that her aunt appeared quite less stiff than she had been.

Her aunt had welcomed her arrival incredibly coolly; there was none of the cap fluttering “Well what have we here? Let me tell you the news,” of Aunt Phillips nor was there any of the hand holding, smiling and quiet dignity of her Aunt Gardiner.

All there had been was an “Ah, Catherine I presume.”

In fact Clara had been surprised that her brother would send one of his younger daughters, but the reasons behind that became obvious when Kitty had babbled on after dinner about Mr Collins and Mr Bingley along with all the other gossip Kitty knew. By the end of the evening Clara was wondering if there were any two thoughts of sense put together in her nieces head, but now she realised it had been the product of nerves and the fact it was painfully obvious Kitty did not have the favour of either parent. Something Clara understood all too well, while her parents had both died while she was very young, Elizabeth and Thomas had been far closer to each other than they had been to her.

However the damage was done as some rather cutting remarks about the state of Kitty’s education and her being out far too young, had made Kitty retreat into a sort of formal politeness that while was completely foreign to Kitty made her aunt not lose hope in her.

Once however they began to receive and make visits, Clara hoped they had a better understanding of one another.
This was quite true; Kitty was able to better understand her aunt and even like her more than she expected she would. Her aunt was however obviously used to order and Kitty had never lived in an ordered household before. Her mother and order were not two concepts that went together well. Indeed she doubted that the word order and her family had ever been in the same sentence before. Neither had she been in a household where propriety had been considered paramount. Though she was beginning to learn that perhaps her aunt’s ideas of propriety weren’t quite at the level of say Fordyce, as Clara hadn’t been able to contain her laughter after reading a very interesting crim. con. in a copy of The Times and had seen no problem in showing it to her niece. It was slightly at odds with the way her aunt was unmoving regarding the subject of any young female walking alone. Kitty wondered how Lizzy would have coped though because one thing Clara did not think was at all right was rambling about on one’s own.

In fact the more Kitty thought about it the whole thing had seemed extremely odd after all Clara’s cottage was full of interesting artefacts from her jaunts around Europe so she could not have always been so mindful of either order or propriety.

One night she had posed this conundrum to her aunt.

“IT is entirely stupid I’m sure, but after Frederick died, I felt much more comfortable with calmness, though I have always preferred order. It’s just sometimes – especially while travelling my dear because some people just have no concept of the fact that well it might not be the most enjoyable thing in the world to be cramped up in one room because they quite forgot you were coming! – order is entirely difficult to achieve. As for propriety I am sad to say there is one rule for married ladies and one rule for unmarried ladies. My advice would be to get married.”

“Is that why you married?”

“Partly. Though I certainly would not have married a man I did not like or could not respect – “

“Mama is quite angry that Lizzy should have refused Mr Collins, but he is the most odious man and I don’t blame her in the slightest.”

“Mr Collins proposed to Elizabeth?” Clara looked astonished.

“Oh I am sorry, Mama wrote to me today, I meant to tell you of it, but I quite forgot, after becoming so engrossed in Coelebs in Search of a Wife.”

At this Clara started. “You were engrossed in….”

“Yes it’s quite fascinating all the gardening and housewifely chores…”

“And the hero, that is the type of man that…? ” Clara could not finish her sentence; she had been starting to appreciate her niece, but the idea that anyone could like such a character! Respect maybe…but like?


“I was about to say, I thought perhaps Fanny had sent me the wrong daughter! Though Miss More does have quite a point I have always thought about female education…. Now tell me about your sister? Mr Collins proposed?”

“Yes and Mama is quite beside herself, she is sure that at any moment Papa is about to …… no longer be with us and that we shall be all cast out in the hedgerows…”
“What a piece of nonsense. What does your mother expect me to do while this happens? Sit idly by? Well perhaps I would if it was just your mother, though I should not speak ill of her in front of you.”

“Perhaps not. But Mama seems to be disregarding not only yourself, but Mr Gardiner, Mr Phillips and Mr Brompton.”

“Yes I dare say between the four of us, if the worst did befall Thomas that we should at least be able to find slightly better accommodation for you all than The Hedgerows. Perhaps a ditch. Yes I daresay that would be better.”

Stifling a snort, Kitty gave over her mother’s letter. Clara deciphered most of it with ease having almost a lifetime of knowledge of Mrs Bennet.

“Well it seems a piece of foolishness to suppose Elizabeth will be in the least persuaded to marry a man does not like, and indeed he seems to have nothing to recommend him except he will inherit Longbourn.”

“You forget Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“Oh yes his noble patroness. Now where do I know that name? Be a dear and hand me Debretts.”

Kitty did as she was told and watched her aunt flick through it. “Of course. Oh, I forgot that…did you know Mr Darcy is related to Lady Catherine?”

“I think Lydia, when she wrote about the Ball, said Mr Collins introduced himself to Mr Darcy to tell him that his aunt was well.”

“Hmm and what do you think of Mr Darcy? I do not remember him featuring in any of your tales about Longbourn, and considering his father was a well looking man, I am surprised. Though I confess I don’t know him at all, but I do know his aunt - not Lady Catherine, but the Countess of Matlock. Lady Harriet Chevely as was.”

“I don’t think he spoke to me at all. So I doubt I am the best person to ask. But he is not at all liked I gather! He did offend Lizzy that I know.”

“Oh yes I have just got to the part of your mother’s letter where she calls him ‘the most horrid, the most displeasing, disobliging man in all of the England’. Well even taking into account your mothers flights of fancy it does not sound as though he is an agreeable man, what a pity. And to think he is staying in my house!”

“I’d be more concerned about Mr Bingley’s sisters, in regards to your house!”

“Hmm well I can only hope it will be all in one piece, if I remember rightly some of the furniture in parlour I was most attached to. But never mind. Now if you can take your mind off Coelebs and take a look at this magazine Mrs Marshall sent over.”

The next half an hour was spent with their heads bent over the latest edition of Lady’s Monthly Museum, with only Clara’s exclamation of how stupid it seemed to her to have dresses that incorporated Roman, Chinese, Turkish and French influences, one would probably look like a walking version of that awful monstrosity the Prince seemed determined to build at Brighton.

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Kitty had never before realised how important letters were, and how important it was to be a good letter writer. After all before this visit she had never been away from those who she would want to
receive letters from, and if need be she was always somewhere were someone else could write and decipher letters for her.

She was finding it particularly difficult to compose letters to Longbourn.

*I woke up. Had some breakfast, walked around the garden, oh and yesterday Aunt and I walked all the way to Hoddington House and back, then I did some sewing and then I did some reading, both the newspaper and a novel. For what I did for the rest of the past week please reorder the previous paragraph. Oh no, I tell a lie we spent the day with Mrs Marshall, where I walked around the garden and talked about a whole lot of people wholly unconnected to me or to you.*

It was not the most scintillating of letters; it was also short and hardly worth sending only for it to cost her father sixpence. So Kitty found it far easier to write her letter at the bottom of her aunt’s letter to her mother. It did mean she communicated far less directly with Lydia then it might have been supposed she would.

She did not doubt that if it had been Lydia in her shoes that she would have had no trouble in crossing the whole page very closely. Lydia was that type of girl.

Kitty enjoyed far more the letters that arrived from Longbourn, chiefly from her mother, but occasionally from Jane. It was always highly interesting to see the different perspectives on events that each author would give. Her mother had been highly incensed at Lizzy for refusing Mr Collins and now it seemed definite that Lizzy would never be spoken to again now that he had proposed to Charlotte Lucas and had been accepted. Kitty did not envy her a jot. Especially now that she had *read* some Fordyce! Though Kitty had very soon abandoned that for *The Peloponnesian War*, though that was after accidentally perusing part of the third book of Ars Amatoria it being the first thing she laid her hands on and being utterly amazed that Mrs Marshall would even *have* such a thing in her house… either way the fact Kitty was willing to read Thucydides said something about Fordyce!

Jane’s more measured letter had balanced her mother’s hysterical ranting over Mr Collins and *Hedgerows*, however the removal of the Bingleys and Mr Darcy was a subject that while Jane’s language did not match her mothers the sentiment was the same. Kitty was very sorry for her eldest sisters disappointment, which seemed now inevitable since the arrival of Miss Bingley’s latest letter. From her mothers letter, Kitty gathered that both Lizzy and her had urged Jane to go to town with the Gardiners after Christmas, but Miss Bingley’s letter had stated that how busy Mr Bingley was and how likely it was he was to be visiting Yorkshire with his dear friend in the very foreseeable future. This had undermined the reason for Jane’s proposed visit, the purpose of which Mrs Bennet was happy to be explicit about – *She must go and see Mr Bingley in Town Kitty it’s the only thing to be done!* Lizzy’s reasons were no doubt similar though she probably had expressed them more subtly. But where Jane felt herself to be right, she was firm. She felt there would be nothing to gain by removing another daughter from the household, especially when she would go to London with Lizzy, who was to visit Charlotte Lucas after her marriage.

All in all Jane seemed to think she had been mistaken in Mr Bingley’s affections, and Mrs Bennet just unleashed her vehemence at ungrateful daughters (Kitty assumed she was only talking about Lizzy here, no one could call Jane ungrateful), ungrateful young men and the dangers of hedgerows. Kitty felt that it was entirely likely that Mr Bingley’s sisters had been involved somehow in separating the two. Kitty had felt their disapproval when visiting Netherfield while Jane had been ill.

This became even more likely to be the case when a letter came from Mr Morris for Clara, which made no mention of Mr Bingley’s wishing to quit Netherfield, but that Mr Bingley had written to say what a lovely house it was and how beautifully it had been situated.
That was chiefly how the rest of November and December passed away for Kitty. Though the intimacy with Mrs Marshall brought Miss Marshall’s horse, as Mrs Marshall assumed all country girls could ride. Luckily Juno was incapable of going much beyond a trot, so Kitty did not feel like she was risking her life by breaking her routine by occasionally riding around the district.

Kitty had never in her life thought she could like such an existence, but she did own it was peaceful and to be the focus of someone’s attention was a rather unique situation. She did of course miss her family, and when she did hear of Lydia, mainly through her mother’s letters she did sometimes wish very much she was at home with the soldiers! Regimentals! There were no suitable young men around Upton Grey. Though both her and her aunt thought one of the boys from the Manor House was rather handsome and were occasionally tried to play matchmaker between him and one of their maids.

Clara was also surprised that she enjoyed having her niece for company. She had spent so many years convincing herself she wished to be a recluse that it was a surprise that the moment she did send herself off into the country that she became lonely and bored. Then it was even more of a surprise that she started actively contemplating what she could do for her nieces, not only Kitty. After all if Fanny was so desperate as to be courting Mr Collins for one of her daughters! Not to mention flinging her eldest so hard at her tenants head that he ran to London for cover!

Though Clara was undecided at exactly what she was going to do for her nieces, well her brother’s daughters at least. Elizabeth’s daughters had proved far too recalcitrant for her tastes. She had only given Alice a hint that Mr Brown may have been paying attention to several young women and then she had only told Mr Brown she was keeping an eye on him, and what did her silly niece do? But run to her mother. Clara had every faith in the fact that none of the Bennet girls would ever run to their mother.

Clara started to have more of an idea of how she could help her nieces when over Christmas dinner, to which Mrs Marshall had kindly invited both Clara and Kitty, (after all Christmas is no time to be alone), at the Manor House, Mrs Marshall announced that she was receiving two guests in several days time - an old school friend of hers and her niece.

Clara’s eyes lit up when Mrs Marshall announced it was Lady Matlock and Miss Darcy.
My dear Mrs Marshall, I do hope I am not foisting myself upon you in accepting your invitation, but I find myself quite put out! My husband is of course holding a house party at Matlock, and my niece and I find that we are quite in the way! For of course we can neither hunt nor shoot! Edwin is quite counting the days until he can shut the doors on us, I daresay! Thus I happily accept your invitation to stay at the Manor House, I bring my niece Georgiana Darcy, as my daughter Annabelle is visiting with her grandmother…

“Harriet always had a way with words,” remarked Clara as she handed the letter back to Mrs Marshall. “Yes and of course you know why her daughter is visiting with her grandmother!” Mrs Marshall leaned forward and looked conspiratorial. Clara shot a side glance at Kitty, wondering how she would react to this proffering of what was far more interesting gossip, than had previously come her way while sojourning in Hampshire. She was pleased to note that Kitty did not look disinterested, but neither did she look eager. “Well I imagine she must often visit her grandmother…” “No!” exclaimed Mrs Marshall forcefully, “Well obviously yes she does visit her grandmother, but she is visiting quite close to Carlon… The Earl of Upton’s seat. He has been courting her you know and is such a close friend of her brother, Lord Ashbourne.” “Ah,” replied Clara, not quite at all sure what else she was supposed to say to such a confidence. “Well I hope that Harriet and Miss Darcy are charming companions for you while Mr Marshall is away.” “Yes, it is very vexing that he should have to go away on business!” Kitty was relieved that her aunt had managed to sway the other woman’s mind from her impending visit. Mrs Marshall had talked of nothing else all day when they were to arrive in the morning, what they most likely would be bringing and then most of all who they were connected to, she had brought out Debretts peerage and had taken great delight in pointing out all the pages. Kitty was sick of it. Mrs Marshall was beginning to sound like a female version of Mr Collins, what little Kitty had seen of him. She wondered if Miss Darcy would be anything like her brother, she hoped not, but with all the preparations that Mrs Marshall felt necessary for their arrival and they were only staying less than a fortnight, Kitty did not hold out much hope! The next day Clara and Kitty spent a quiet day in the cottage. It was far too cold to take a walk, so Kitty tried her hand at some darning. Of course it turned out hideous and lumpy, but she was at least able now to make the hole insignificant, though the first time she had darned anything, it was a bag and she had unfortunately sewn the sides of the bag together.

Her aunt kept looking out the window.
“They must only have arrived, aunt, you can hardly expect …”

“Expect! Expect what pray? I have nothing to expect.” Clara cut her niece off effectively before muttering under her breath. “I should be considered a far better friend to Harriet!!”

“How do you know Lady Matlock?”

“Oh well, I did have a season in town before I was married and one after, that was before Frederick and I went on our European adventure. Though I did know her before she became Lady Matlock, Mama had some mutual acquaintances, but I was far too young to really have known her then. Seven years when you are ten is such a gap! Oh yes anyway, when I was brought out Lady Matlock was quite the dashing young matron, having already done her duty and presented an heir and a spare!”

Clara broke off and smiled lost in recollections of her youth. “Anyway we used to write to each other but somehow lost touch, I expect it was quite my fault, I moved from Bath to Norfolk but I found it not to my taste and went to Worthing. Either I was careless about the forwarding address, or the Royal Mail is to blame. “

“Well on one of Jane’s letters she wrote the direction very ill, and it was misdirected at first, so perhaps the Royal Mail is not infallible.”

“Have you heard from Jane anymore on her disappointment?”

“No. But I am most sorry for her. Especially since Lydia seem to have no qualms in flaunting her conquests!”

“Does your sister make conquests?” After all Lydia was only fifteen, it was entirely possible that these men, Clara hesitated to call them gentlemen, were only joking with Lydia, though it was also entirely possible that they weren’t.

“Oh yes. She flirts a great deal. And she is at the moment rejoicing in almost luring Mr Wickham away from Lizzy. She is convinced it is only a matter of time.”

Indeed with Kitty absent, Lizzy appeared to have been the sister chosen by Lydia to fill her place. Lizzy was certainly not biddable like Kitty, but it seemed that Lizzy was happy to accede, to some extent, to Lydia’s requests for her company and thus was thrown much into the company of the officers and Mr Wickham.

Clara raised her eyebrows. “Is Mr Wickham paying Elizabeth attentions?”

“Yes from what Mama and Jane have written yes. Mama is very happy, although she is upset that Mr Wickham does not have his rightful wealth.”

Clara dropped the curtain she had been unconsciously pulling back and turned around to look at Kitty.

“His rightful wealth?”

“Apparently Mr Darcy, whose father was Mr Wickham’s godfather as Mr Wickham senior was his steward, did not give him his rightful inheritance from old Mr Darcy’s will.”

“Really? And how does your mother know this?”

Kitty paused. “I think that Mr Wickham has been telling people. It sounds very odd that he should abuse Mr Darcy to everybody, but I suppose it is safe to do so now that everyone has left
Netherfield. And that everybody already dislikes Mr Darcy.”

Kitty opened the desk that was designated for her use and retrieved the letters she had received while she had been away, and handed the most recent letters to her Aunt.

“It seems rather fortuitous for Mr Wickham that it is so,” remarked the elder woman as Kitty pointed out the appropriate passages.

“Aunt, if he has been truly wronged should he not seek some sort of …revenge?”

“Legal recourse would have been my first option, not gossiping like a fishwife… across what appears to be the greater part of Hertfordshire.”

Kitty had never thought of it from that perspective, she had not thought it odd that Mr Wickham waited until Mr Darcy left the county to talk about his affairs; she now wondered that he spoke of them at all.

“Ah I see, your mother writes that the bequest was of such a vague legal nature that Mr Darcy could choose not to honour it. Seems very shabby behaviour of him, if it is true.” Clara continued by muttering something about shabby lawyers. Indeed if they had been her lawyers she would have had them dismissed immediately.

“If?”

“Well my dear, you can hardly believe one man simply because he appears all charm, and disbelieve another just because he seems disagreeable. That is foolish. Appearances can be deceiving.”

Kitty collected the letters and put them back in the desk, locking it firmly. “Lizzy believes him and she prides herself on being a good judge of character. But only having met him once, I cannot judge. I did not even see him in regimentals.”

“Red doesn’t suit every man Kitty!” laughed her aunt. “I never did like a man in uniform.”

Kitty looked aghast. “Not like a man in uniform!”

“I don’t know what it is, but …well they are obliged to do things you see, I’m sure I could not cope being left behind while they went off on some adventure.”

“But you could go with them!”

“And follow the drum? Or be cooped up in some tiny cabin on a ship, where women are considered bad luck?! No, thank you.”

“But to be with the man you love!” Kitty sighed in what she considered to be a romantic fashion.

“While he gets shot at…yes very romantic,” responded Clara dryly.

“You can’t pretend not to be romantic aunt, you enjoyed Cowper, Blake and Sir Walter Scott, as much as I did! And I will not even dare to remind you how you trembled over The Romance of the Forest.”

“I was shuddering.”

Kitty smiled.
Lady Matlock visited the very next day, which highly gratified Clara though of course she would have never admitted it. Kitty did know what to expect of a countess. She had never seen one before; the closest she had come was Lady Lucas!

She supposed from novels, newspapers and her mother’s chattering that a countess must always be a tall thin woman with a distinguished nose and had to look down it quite a bit. Kitty was thus surprised when Mary introduced her ladyship with a nervous bob and a ‘Lady Matlock to see you ma’am’, and a medium sized (in both height and girth) woman with a perfectly normal nose walked in.

“My dear Clara! I quite thought you had disappeared off the face of the Earth or taken off for New South Wales! I cannot tell you how delighted I was to find you less than a mile from the Manor House!”

“Harriet you haven’t changed a jot!” Clara clasped Lady Matlock’s hands and found herself kissed on both cheeks.

“So I was always this old?”

Clara laughed. “Of course. Now stop jesting, you will give my niece a very odd impression of us both! Lady Matlock may I present my niece, my brother’s daughter, Catherine Bennet.”

Kitty curtseyed quickly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, your ladyship.”

“Well I dare say you’d much rather meet my niece, as she is your age, or a little younger! Thank you Clara.”

Lady Matlock took the proffered cup of tea and sat down on the chaise. “Now what are you doing in a cottage in Hampshire.”

“I decided I needed a change of scene and society.”

“I would have thought you would have preferred a house in London, you did have that nice house in Cavendish Square, or on Mr Sutton’s estate in the country…. I always forget whether it was in Herefordshire or Hertfordshire? Why anyone would be stupid enough to only allow one letter to differentiate two counties I will never know!”

“Hertfordshire, Netherfield Park.”

Lady Matlock smiled and then frowned. “Where have I heard that name recently?”

Kitty spoke up, “I believe your nephew, Mr Darcy, has been staying at Netherfield with my Aunt’s new tenant, Mr Bingley.”

“Of course that’s where I have heard the name! I cannot believe I forgot its connection! I left both Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy at Matlock Close. I found it surprising that if Mr Bingley had his own estate now that he should choose to shoot with us!”

“Perhaps he finds the sport superior,” commented Kitty. This earned a laugh from the countess.

“And you know about hunting?”

Kitty blushed slightly. “No – “
Lady Matlock laughed. “Well you sound as if you do, which is better than I can say. Edwin once found me with one of his guns looking straight down the barrel!”

Clara laughed at the image this presented.

“To answer your question about why I chose to stay here rather than either at Netherfield or in London was because I thought I needed a repairing lease.”

“And you find it isn’t quite what you expected?” Harriet picked out a slice of cake that Kitty had just finished cutting.

“Not at all. I find that I do miss society far more now than I ever did with my sister in Worthing.”

“Well I shan’t contradict you! Though I know many who feel obliged to say how much they detest society, and many of them keep turning up year after year for the season!”

“Though where does it say that the season in London and society, are the same thing?” added Kitty.

“Very true Miss Bennet, I for one certainly don’t ascribe to the view that it is at all a bad thing, though of course some elements could be done without.”

“Such as…” smiled Clara.

“Well that awful parade of young girls making their debut, every season for one. Though I suppose it is not their fault but their mothers. They seem to take every chance to thrust their daughters into the first available man’s arms, without thought as to whether the match will prosper on a personal level as well as a financial one.”

“I agree, surely it would be far better to allow them time to enjoy themselves!”

“I expect you shall be making your come-out soon Miss Bennet?”

“Oh no I’ve been out for years, though I have never been to London.”

Harriet’s forehead creased, “Oh you are the eldest…”

“Oh no I have four sisters, three elder and one younger. All unmarried.”

“Oh your mother doesn’t hold with denying her younger daughters their share of society just because the eldest have no inclination or opportunity of marrying, that is very wise.”

“You would not think so if you met my sister-in-law. I suspect if my brother could stand London, she would be one of your matchmaking mamas,” interjected Clara.

Harriet’s eyebrows arched as she looked towards Kitty to see her reaction.

Kitty placed her teacup back on its saucer. “Yes my mother’s chief aim is to hurry us all to the altar, but well you cannot blame her considering my father’s land is entailed, and I have no brothers.”

“Really…. I would have thought…” There was a pointed look in Clara’s direction that was missed by Kitty.

“What can I say I’m capricious!” replied Clara lightly before turning the conversation back towards Miss Darcy.
“What sort of girl is she? I have heard a good deal of her brother from my spies in Hertfordshire.”

“Georgiana is quite shy, and quite idealises her brother, which made it quite difficult to persuade her to leave Derbyshire while he was still in it.”

Kitty contemplated feeling as much sisterly duty to her sisters as Miss Darcy appeared to feel for her brother. It was quite impossible. Though she was sure it was partially her fault considering that she had made no attempt to understand her elder sisters, and well Lydia…Lydia was at a stage (at least one hoped it was a stage) where it was almost impossible to feel sisterly towards her.

“Perhaps she has a penchant for hunting?”

“If she does, Clara, then it is well hidden, but I was able to assure her that unfortunately it was quite possible her brother would not even realise she was absent. Indeed he has been particularly grave and thoughtful this Christmas!”

“So is Miss Darcy at the Manor?” asked Kitty.

“Yes she is Miss Bennet. I thought it best to leave her there today as she is quite worn out from our trip!”

“I do hope that I may meet her soon.”

“Well, that was partly the reason for my visit, Mrs Marshall asked me to issue an invitation for tomorrow, you are both to come and spend the day with us, so that I may interrogate your aunt and you may find yourself with a far more interesting companion.”

Kitty was slightly intrigued by what she might find in Miss Darcy, considering her aunt was not at all what she expected.

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Chapter 5

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…Mr Collins will arrive soon, but as he will stay at Lucas Lodge until the wedding, it is of little direct effect to us, except to wish Charlotte and him well. Unfortunately, poor mama’s nervous spasms are brought on by the mere mention of his name, which makes it difficult to discuss the wedding. As a consequence dear Lizzy I know cannot wait to leave for London. I fear my decision not to leave for London with my aunt and uncle after Christmas has heightened both her and my dear mothers worry and I feel very sorry that I should be the cause of such feelings. Though we shall be travelling to town for the first week of March, from whence Lizzy shall go to Hunsford for a month to visit with Mr and Mrs C., and I shall stay at Gracechurch St. I hope that you are enjoying your stay with our Aunt S. ….

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Kitty folded up Jane’s letter and popped it into the drawer and locked it. She was becoming a far more proficient correspondent than she ever thought she would not so many weeks ago, and the addition of Lady Matlock and her niece to their small circle was sure to make writing to Longbourn far easier. Lizzy she was sure would want an in-depth comparison of Miss Darcy and Mr Darcy.

Not that Kitty had met Miss Darcy yet; she was just awaiting her aunt to find her reticule before they took the gig that Mrs Marshall had thoughtfully sent around.

When that item had been found, Clara promptly turned her nose up at the gig, and Kitty found herself in the unusual position of chiding her aunt by telling her there was nothing wrong with a gig, and it was far better than walking in mud.

However she soon discovered it was not the conveyance that Clara did not like, it was the fact they were all to be squashed up next to the boy sent down from the Manor house while he drove the gig.

“James, I think I am quite capable of driving the gig, Mary will have some breakfast for you, if you do not mind walking back to the Manor.”

“Yes Ma’am.” James tipped his hat, not daring to question a lady of unquestionable Quality even if she was reduced to living in a cottage. Though he would bet Carlton House to a Charley’s shelter that Mrs Sutton did not know how to manage a horse and he was glad he hadn’t brought the phaeton.

Kitty, marginally alarmed, tried to climb down from the gig.

“I think I may walk…”

“Oh do not be so silly! I have driven before!”

Kitty was reassured, but several moments later wished she had not been. She clutched the side of the gig, as her aunt seemed to find every bump and groove in the track.

“Frederick considered me quite a nonpareil,” remarked Clara as the gig lurched dangerously to the left and Kitty almost slid out of the seat. “He did say it was a pity that there was no club for me to showcase my talents.”
Kitty’s eyes widened as she saw her aunt was about to manoeuvre the vehicle onto a very narrow path. “I think I would have liked to know my uncle, ma’am, I collect he had a sense of humour.”

Clara laughed. “I always thought it was a pity that the Four-in-hand club only really started after he died. I should have liked to see him dressed up to the nines and parading out to Salt Hill! For of course I would not have been allowed so I would have had to live vicariously through him.”

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They did arrive at the Manor in one piece, something Kitty found quite miraculous. At one point her aunt had offered to teach her to drive, something Kitty had no hesitation in refusing.

Mrs Marshall was almost obsequious in her attentions as she introduced her guests to her other guests. She had been grievously upset that Clara had not exaggerated her relationship with Lady Matlock, but was overjoyed to find that the honour of introducing them to Miss Darcy of Pemberley was still hers.

Kitty found in Miss Darcy the complete opposite of her brother, at least in looks. Miss Darcy was blonde and gave the impression of being petite despite being a fairly tall girl, whereas Kitty’s recollection of Mr Darcy had been of a tall, imposing, dark man, yet they must be relations since they seemed to share a habit of not speaking very much. Something Kitty found draining when the elder women consciously left them alone to talk on one side of the room. After several abortive starts at conversation about the weather and her trip, Kitty hit upon the idea to ask about their surroundings.

“So I am sure it is too soon to ask you how you like Hampshire? And I expect that I would not fully appreciate your answer, considering that I have only been here two months!”

Even to Kitty’s own ears did she sound far too formal, she was not used to being so formal with someone her own age. However, something about Miss Darcy inspired it. Kitty hoped it would not last.

Miss Darcy answered in a quiet voice, “Yes I have had not time to – My aunt says you are from Hertfordshire?”

“Yes Longbourn, near Meryton. In fact I believe I know your brother. His friend Mr Bingley -“

Miss Darcy broke in with an exclamation and then blushed. “I am sorry please continue…”

“No, please, what were you going to say?”

“Just that my brother wrote to me of the Misses Bennet of Longbourn, I did not realise – “

“Well it is a common name. Should I ask you what your brother wrote of us?”

As expected Miss Darcy coloured up. Privately Kitty thought she knew exactly what Mr Darcy would have written, and thought perhaps she shouldn’t have teased Miss Darcy about it.

“No, it was infamous of me to have asked. I’m sure I would not want to know what your brother wrote! I collect he does not like the country much.”

“No!” Miss Darcy looked surprised. “My brother loves the country. In fact, I came here with my aunt and thence will go to London, because I did not want Fitzwilliam to have to leave to take me.”

“Of course men do seem to love their sport. Except my own father who loves nothing more than a

“My brothers Christian name. It was my mother’s surname.”

“Which probably makes it very confusing when her family are around.”

“Oh yes. Of course it is only confusing when my cousin Richard is around. He is a Colonel in the army and –“

Miss Darcy paused as though she was wondering whether she should continue.

“I assume he is called Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Oh yes. So of course it becomes confusing.” Miss Darcy subsided into silence.

Kitty was at a bit of a loss as to how to proceed. It was clear Miss Darcy liked to talk of her brother and though Kitty had no reason to think well of him thus no reason to wish to hear of him, she could hardly sit in silence.

“Well I hope that it does not rain too much for them in Derbyshire.”

“Yes, I know my brother would dislike the party to break up.”

“Is the party very large? My father does not hold shooting parties and Netherfield has been vacant for so long….and no one else in the area has shooting parties either.”

“Well my cousins and uncle are there along with Fitzwilliam and Mr Bingley, and Aunt Matlock’s nephews Lord Holling and his brothers of course along with some others I do not know so well…”

“Sounds like quite a party.” Kitty was secretly envious and wondered at Miss Darcy for leaving. To have so many gentlemen around!

“Yes though Ash – I mean Lord Ashbourne, my cousin, came up to Matlock from Leicestershire to only spend a week or so, before returning there.”

“Leicestershire?”

“He hunts with the Quorn and elsewhere in …. ” Miss Darcy trailed off.

“Quite a fashionable sportsman…”

“Yes. Excuse me.” With that Miss Darcy rose and crossed to the other side of the room.

Kitty stared at her and felt quite silly sitting all on her own until Lady Matlock noticing her niece’s hurried movement, came to take her place.

“Ah Miss Bennet, I hope you will forgive my niece, she is incredibly shy! I declare she was not as shy - something must have occurred - but no matter. Her mother died when she was very young and her father only five years ago, and Darcy cosets her so. I told him he would have been far better off sending her to me! Though if he had done that I daresay Lady Catherine would have insisted she was better able to take care of Georgie which would have caused such a fight…oh how I ramble on!”

Kitty smiled. “No, I think I agree with you, one thing I do miss is the excitement that being one of five sisters creates. Of course I was entirely overlooked then! It’s surprising what one misses.”

Lady Matlock returned Kitty’s smile. “Yes though, I certainly would not miss being one of so
many girls! Or so many men come to think of it, the very reason I decided to accept Mrs Marshall’s invitation!”

“Miss Darcy told me that Lord Matlock was holding quite a party.” Kitty tried to keep the wistfulness out of her voice, but Lady Matlock noticed it.

“Finding that your sisters are not the only think you miss?”

“Yes and no. I am not at all missing my sisters receiving far more attentions than I ever do!”

“I am surprised to hear that. Though I do collect that the Misses Bennet…or should I say one Miss Bennet caused quite a reaction in my nephew.” Lady Matlock paused. “Of course I would be in great trouble with him if he knew Georgie had spilled his secret.”

Kitty’s eyes widened. “I had thought that Mr Darcy – I did not realise?” Kitty’s mind was working through her sisters, who on earth would Mr Darcy…but then his aunt did not say he ‘liked’ a Miss Bennet, just that she caused quite a reaction.

“Has my nephew been making himself odious?”

“Yes. Oh no, I mean ,I was not often in his company – “ Kitty paused. “I mean I of course cannot judge, but perhaps he is just shy like his sister?”

“Oh fadge. My nephew is 28 years old! He should be able to conquer shyness! I did suspect perhaps things had not prospered considering he was moping about Matlock. And so was his friend.”

Kitty turned to look at Lady Matlock intently. She wondered how she could press the countess on the issue of Mr Bingley.

But Kitty was stopped in this endeavour by Mrs Marshall having found some old embroidery from her schools days and wished Lady Matlock to see how very fine hers at been when they had been at school and how appalling her own had been.

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Kitty was loath to just blurt out her questions about Mr Bingley to Lady Matlock when they next met nor was she capable of asking subtly. She had no experience in such things because had she been at home she would have just hinted to the question to Lydia and Lydia never had any compunction in asking anyone anything.

Instead Kitty tried to put the subject aside, after all Jane seemed to have tolerably gotten over his disappointment. Though Kitty could not be sure because Jane and she had never been close and she could not read Jane as well as she could read Lydia. To ask Jane directly seemed unlikely to gain a proper answer and to ask Lizzy, who would know best, might be considered by her elder sister as impertinence and Lizzy could never be relied upon to give a serious answer when she felt someone was being impertinent.

So Kitty was left to hope the conversation would turn that way again.

Miss Darcy, appeared much less shy the next time the two girls met, but it was obvious to Kitty that Mrs Marshall’s rather overbearing nature was quite frightening to Miss Darcy, so took every chance to ask Miss Darcy to go for a walk or invite her to visit at the cottage.

It was hard work coaxing Miss Darcy out of her shyness but Kitty managed on several occasions and slowly it became more of the norm than the extraordinary.
She had at first envied Miss Darcy for her position and her male relations. After all Kitty had no men in her family beyond her father and uncles, so she had always felt slightly awkward around them, until she had discovered flirting, a talent soon overtaken by Lydia. Though, Kitty thought, Miss Darcy was proof that position and male relations did not make one confident, in fact despite Miss Darcy’s numerous male relations Kitty felt confident that Miss Darcy would regard some of Kitty and her sister’s interactions with the male sex highly shocking. (Indeed they had made a habit of calling upon men when they were highly unlikely to be dressed!)

Kitty soon found in Miss Darcy a sensible companion but not above the ridiculous. It soon ended as many friendships made under such a short and intimate acquaintance, with first names being used and more intimate subjects being covered, than the weather and the state of the roads.

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Lady Matlock, after sensing that Kitty was missing a more convivial party than what was available in Hampshire tried to enliven the party by introducing card games more exciting than whist and other such activities. She took an opportunity to whisper to Kitty that she was sorry she could not do more but Lady Matlock felt the only other thing she could do was talk about people that Kitty could have no interest in beyond wishing she could meet them.

So Lady Matlock kept her musings and gossip for Clara, who on the most part knew of who she spoke, or had known some part of their family.

Thus it was from Clara that Kitty found out more about Mr Bingley and his moping.

“Kitty has Lady Matlock mentioned Mr Bingley to you?”

“Yes, she said he was moping about Matlock along with Mr Darcy.”

“She told me the same thing. I find it very strange that if he is moping because of Jane that he would stay in Derbyshire…”

“Perhaps he does not wish to leave Mr Darcy?”

“Surely not? He is a grown man; he isn’t tied to Mr Darcy’s purse or apron strings…” Clara paused and looked pensive, “At least I assume and hope he is not!”

Kitty had a brief mental image of Mr Bingley physically tied to Mr Darcy and laughed. “No, but I believe from what Lizzy has said that Mr Bingley thinks the world of Mr Darcy and is much guided by him.”

“Humph, what is the world coming to that a young man could be dissuaded from a perfectly fine young lady by his friend!”

“Lady Matlock says that one of my sisters had a powerful effect on her nephew.”

Clara raised her eyebrows, “One can only hope it was a positive effect, and is she sure it was not you who had such a powerful effect?”

Kitty laughed at her aunt. “If it was then he must be very weak to be sent a leveller by a girl he hardly saw and exchanged no words with!”

“Well then, one of your sisters, and let me just say from your mothers letters and your descriptions that I have to assume it is Lizzy, unless Mr Darcy is stupid enough to fall in love with the same girl as his friend, that has made a fine conquest! And then Jane with Mr Bingley, if he is moping
about Jane, and I cannot think of a single other thing that should make a man unbearable.”

“Unless he has lost all his fortune on the ‘change.”

“Well yes there is that, but let us think of happier things and assume it is Jane. So that is two of your sisters taken care of, and then if Lydia can snare Mr Wickham…that only leaves yourself and Mary, but naturally you will be thrown into the paths of other rich men by your sisters.

Kitty rolled her eyes. “I very much doubt that any of your proposed matches will ever come into being! Especially Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy becoming brothers-in-law.”

“Oh yes I quite forgot that. Either Lizzy or Lydia must give up her man for the sake of familiar domesticity.”

“I wish you would write to Lizzy with the idea Mr Darcy may be in love with her, how she would laugh!”

Clara laughed. “Yes especially since it is most likely all in Harriet’s imagination. Mr Bingley perhaps not, but certainly she must be mistaken about her nephew!”

“Well she only said a ‘powerful effect’; he may have been entirely disgusted with our whole family and be keeping Mr Bingley away from us all.”

Kitty watched to see how her Aunt took her theory, one she had not voiced before.

“Well if that is the case he is a singularly foolish young man, and so is his friend for allowing it to happen. Your mother may quite possibly be the silliest woman in the county but I can assure you I know several, nay countless, more highly bred than her who are far sillier throughout the rest of the country. And she means well. Which is more than I can say for quite a number of the females I know of the ton.”

“It may not have been my mother he took in dislike.”

“Very true, but I cannot see what there is to dislike in you, nor your sisters, though perhaps you are all untrained in the ways of the world and being such a large family likely to vie for attention in perhaps inappropriate ways. And as for my brother, he no doubt should have taken you in hand better but all I can say is what I said about your mother, I know far worse fathers.”

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The next morning brought Georgiana to the cottage with several books and an invitation to Kitty to walk back to the Manor with her and let her teach Kitty a new piano piece.

Kitty, never being one to attempt the feminine arts all that much, would have ranked her musical skills far below her darning skills and that was saying something, but she did not have the heart to tell Georgiana that.

On Georgiana’s part she thought Kitty played very prettily when she wasn’t focusing on how very bad she thought she was, and told her as much.

Kitty laughed. “Flatterer.”

“I have heard from my brother. He is still at Matlock and means to go from there further north to visit potential estates for Mr Bingley and other such things that he says I could have no knowledge of thus does not wish to bore me.” Here Georgiana frowned and Kitty wondered if it was because of her brother’s dismissive attitude towards Georgiana’s knowledge.
“Potential estates? So Mr Bingley is not coming back to Netherfield?”

“It appears so.”

“I wonder why; Netherfield is so happily situated!”

“Yes, especially since…” Georgiana paused and looked at Kitty.

“Since?”

“Since, I thought perhaps he had a grown to like the place.”

“Or grown to like a person?” Kitty asked archly.

Georgiana paused in her walking and turned.

“Do not be distressed, your aunt told me of it, I think she was hoping that I could tell her more…” quickly interjected Kitty, before obliging her friend to hurry on after her.

“Well I am afraid…” replied Georgiana slightly breathlessly.

“Of course, I would not wish you to betray a confidence. Only it would be useful to know! My aunt has been planning matches for my sisters and I know it would be greatly useful to her to know which sisters are unaccounted for.”

Georgiana laughed. “I did not think your aunt was the type. I am glad that Lady Matlock only teases when she speaks of such things.”

“Aunt Clara is bored, and has nothing to do but match off her unmarried nieces. Do you want to hear who she has paired off?”

“Certainly!” Though Kitty sensed Georgiana’s enthusiasm for the idea was not entirely true.

“Well she has decided that Mr Darcy must like my second eldest sister Elizabeth, which I find strange considering he offended her and only called her tolerable!”

Kitty watched Georgiana out of the corner of her eye and considering that lady did not even twitch she wondered if her aunt’s reasoning was incorrect.

“And then Jane must of course be Mr Bingley’s, leaving Lydia to Mr Wickham, a lieutenant in the militia, who should have been Lizzy’s since he liked her first but apparently he has deserted her for Lydia, which I think is quite typical of men…”

Kitty noticed that during her speech, Georgiana had stopped walking and had gone dreadfully pale.

“Mr Wickham?” she gasped.
… Do you still mean to be in town by the 12th? I shall probably be in town by the middle of that week, and thus will be at your service. I am afraid by all reports you shall find London sadly flat, but I shall try my best to amuse you and Georgie. I left my father well, except he begged me not to tell you he accidentally cracked your Sevres vase while demonstrating an obscure hunting technique – something I have no compunction about revealing since he accidentally told my aunt that I had no wish to go to Rosings in March. This of course led Lady C. to write me such a dressing down, but her letter did not have the desired effect, as I am still not going to Rosings. I do not wish to be undutiful, but I cannot think of anything more undesirable than a month in the country with Lady C. My cousins are all well. However Richard and I believe there is something the matter with Darcy and no doubt R. will wrest it out of him at some point. There I must conclude, as I must get ready for the New Year’s Hunt. Your affectionate Son, Ash.

Lady Matlock, popped her son’s letter back into her reticule and peered out the window, frowning. It was taking Georgiana far too long to fetch Miss Bennet. She hoped that Georgie had not got lost; her nephew would never forgive her.

Perhaps they had just spent longer at the cottage discussing the books she had taken down for Kitty. It was most vexing especially since Lady Matlock wanted to discuss, with Georgiana, the idea that had popped into her head the night before, right when she had seen the look on Clara’s face when she had talked of the balls of last season. If Lady Matlock was a good judge of character, and she most certainly thought she was, Clara would not be averse to joining the ranks of the ton this season. As long as it wasn’t put to her in a manner that made Clara feel as though she was relenting or reneging on her self imposed exile.

This is why Lady Matlock wished to engage her niece as an ally: if Georgiana could make a comment wishing that Kitty would be coming to London when they departed, then of course Mrs Marshall would add her entreaties, as Lady Matlock knew she would, after all Mrs Marshall did not understand why all girls were not presented to the ton! Then Clara would gracefully surrender her own feelings for the greater good of her niece.

Clara Sutton had always been a strong character and difficult to manoeuvre, but Lady Matlock had always felt herself stronger and much harder to outmanoeuvre.

What was keeping the girls?

Kitty, as soon as she noticed her friend’s pallid countenance, she ran back to her side and leant her an arm.

There was a small stonewall running alongside the lane, and Kitty suggested that Georgiana should take a seat until she recovered. Georgiana did not speak but nodded her acceptance.

Kitty took off her bonnet and fanned Georgiana’s face, an action she was not at sure was at all to the purpose considering that it was winter!

“No, no I am not hot,” protested the younger girl as she slowly regained colour.
“Well, I don’t have any smelling salts!”

Georgiana gave a laugh. “I should suppose not! You would feel very feeble, I dare say, carrying them around.”

“I should carry them for my unfortunate companions,” replied Kitty, who was feeling guilty for mentioning Mr Wickham. But she had not thought that this disagreement between Mr Darcy and that gentleman would have affected her friend so much.

Georgiana blushed. “I expect you think me very foolish.”

“No, I think myself very foolish! I am so used to talking of such things with my sister, Lydia and my mother and aunt that I did not consider that…” Kitty paused. “I did not consider that it was probably very improper to be coupling my sisters’ names with every Tom Dick and Harry! And to mention that man’s name to you…”

Georgiana lifted her eyes from where she had been examining the nearby verge.

“You know – “

“Yes. I know very well that y– your family – and Mr Wickham have a disagreeable past.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. So of course it is a sensitive subject with you.”

“Who – who did you hear it from?”

“Where does anyone hear these sorts of things but through gossip! It’s difficult to keep any secrets in a small town.”

“My poor brother!”

Kitty was taken back by the fact her friend instead of becoming more composed was falling more apart. It seemed to her that Georgiana was overreacting and to be feeling sorry for her brother! To be sure it was disagreeable to have one’s brother gossiped about and despised! Indeed it could not be very comfortable, but when one’s brother was one who felt himself so far above everyone else, his being gossiped about was bound to happen!

“Georgiana, considering that the whole business is quite your brother’s fault. I do not see - ”

“No!” Kitty was slightly shocked by the forcefulness of Georgiana’s tone. “My brother is blameless! I am completely to blame.”

“I cannot see how you could be held to blame! Your brother had responsibilities which he did not discharge –“

“That is the grossest falsehood! He is the most responsible brother imaginable! He is too good to me!”

“Well it does not sound as though he was at all! What he was thinking allowing Wickham to –“

Kitty was not allowed to finish her feeling about Mr Darcy’s inability to stop Mr Wickham’s gossipping. If she had been Mr Darcy, and if she had felt it necessary to behave poorly to Mr Wickham in regards to an inheritance, she would have made sure that Mr Wickham did not have the chance to speak about it.
“No! I was the one! I was the one who consented to elope with him! My brother is not at all to blame and I cannot have you saying so!”

“Elope!?” Kitty was confused. “Elope with your brother? Good God you mean Wickham?”

Georgiana who had sprung up from her seat, in her brother’s defence flushed to the roots of her blonde curls. “You didn’t – I thought you – “

“Thought I?” Kitty echoed faintly. She had never encountered anyone who had actually consented to elope with anyone, and if someone had said that one of her acquaintance had done so she would have never guessed that the terminally shy Miss Darcy was the one!

“I thought you knew. You said you knew about my ‘disagreeable past.’”

“I meant – I meant the fact your brother had not given Mr Wickham your father’s bequest. Not that…”

“Oh! I – I beg you not to …”

“Of course I would not say a word! But are you married? Did you really elope?”

“Married? Oh no my brother stopped it all before…”

“But…but when?”

Kitty was feeling rather confused and faint herself. How did Mr Darcy come to have a sister who would consent to elope with Mr Wickham? How did Mr Wickham come to want to elope with her? That Georgiana should like Mr Wickham was not at all surprising but an elopement!

“This summer. Perhaps I should tell you the whole story."

“Please do!”

Georgiana retook her seat on the stonewall and proceeded to explain Mr Wickham’s history with her family, while drawing from Kitty what Mr Wickham had been spreading about Meryton. She baulked however when it came to fully explaining the elopement, feeling incapable of putting it into words.

“So you see from that, what was I suppose to assume? My father had been nothing but kind to him and he and Fitzwilliam used to play together. And he had always been kind to me. I thought that he – “ here she broke off unable to continue.

“But I do not see what is so wrong – I mean eloping at fifteen is very romantic though I have thought not at all practical, but surely in your case entirely unnecessary…”

“But I only thought – it turns out he is not a young man that anyone should know.”

This mysterious sentence was all Georgiana seemed wiling to disclose, from which Kitty was left to assume which of a vast multitude of sins could be placed at Mr Wickham’s door.

Georgiana took a deep breath and continued her story, “He ran into debt and my brother who had given him money after my father died, no matter what Mr - he, says, refused to give him any more and…and he came to Ramsgate and I thought – I thought he loved me and – “

“No, no, don’t say anymore I understand!” Kitty did understand. She did not at all care what Mr Wickham’s other sins were, he could be a libertine, thief or a murderer and she would not care
more than she did that he had wanted to elope with a girl not yet sixteen simply for her money.

Elopements were supposed to be romantic, two people flying in the face of insurmountable and ridiculous parental and authoritarian obstacles. They were not supposed to be between a girl who was shy to a fault and a man who only wanted her for her money.

“No, but I must make you understand it was not my brother’s fault!”

“Did Mr – “ Kitty paused but plunged on, Georgiana must at least be able to hear his name with some semblance of composure – “Wickham, tell your brother that he only wanted to – “

“I do not know, but Fitzwilliam said it must be the case.”

“Perhaps your brother is labouring under a false assumption?”

“Then why did he not ask my brother for permission? We are old family friends, there could be…I know my brother is proud, but there could be no real issue of money if I loved someone! He loves me too well for that!”

Kitty could not deny the truth of the first part of her answer and bowed to Georgiana’s superior knowledge of her brother for the last part.

“If only Kitty, I had thought of that before agreeing to the scheme! But my companion at the time Mrs Younge saw no problem with it, she thought it was romantic; we were all deceived in her! I am just glad I told my brother the whole.”

Kitty could only nod. “Did your brother know of Mr Wickham’s – difficulties ?”

“Yes he told me…afterwards that he was not at all the thing…”

“Why did he not tell you beforehand!” exclaimed Kitty. “It would have saved a great deal …” Kitty felt she had been right; it had been all Mr Darcy’s fault! To not at least communicate some of the whole to his sister before abandoning her in Ramsgate!

“No, I am sure he was trying to protect me. But Kitty you said your sister…I could not bear…”

“Well we have no money!” replied Kitty lightly thinking that it was entirely unlikely that Lydia would fix her interest with one man when she could have an entire regiment at her feet.

“But, my brother…told me afterwards he believed Mr Wickham capable of anything! Please you must warn your sister and your family! If Wickham was to impose on your family, and I had done nothing to warn…! If he is spreading lies about my brother….to tell people that my brother did not honour my father’s will!”

“No one will believe me! And do you want me to tell everybody that you almost eloped with him?”

Georgiana looked thoughtful. “I would be ruined.”

This bald statement surprised Kitty; she had never thought much about the matter before. Neither her mother, nor her contemporaries in Meryton, set much store around proprieties, but Kitty was almost positive an elopement would shock even her mother.

“Then I cannot say anything! And without saying that I do not think anyone would believe me!”

“But my brother…”
“Is not at all well liked. Mr Wickham was believed because your brother had done nothing to recommend himself to the neighbourhood.”

Georgiana looked shocked, “My brother can be…” then she stopped. “He has had many. …it’s all my fault.”

Kitty giggled. “You keep saying that and I keep not believing you!”

Georgiana gave a small smile. “Thank you for being so kind to me. Very few people know, not even my aunt! Only my brother and my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, and the other people closely involved. I was so worried that everyone would judge me.”

“It is not a good thing that Mr Wickham is so charming then. But if people were to see you as well, they would know you could not be in the least to blame.”

“Would you try, for me, to warn your sister? From what you have told me, she seems likely to…”

“Ruin herself?”

Georgiana shot her friend a look. “That is not what I was going to say!”

“I will try. But Lydia listens to no one and if she was about to start she would not choose me to listen to!”

But, nevertheless, Kitty promised to attempt the task.

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Lady Matlock did not at all believe the girls’ excuses when they finally made it to the manor. But she was so pleased that they appeared to be on such good terms that she did not pry any further. In fact, her niece appeared in better spirits than she had for the last six months.

This boded well for Lady Matlock’s plans which Georgiana eagerly agreed to, and promptly brought up the next time both Clara and Kitty were visiting the Manor.

It was done in a trice. Clara was to write off an express to her lawyer and have her house in Cavendish Square prepared for her and her niece’s arrival, as luck would have it, it had not been hired for the season.

Lady Matlock smiled. She knew she could out-jockey Clara Sutton if need be.

Clara smiled at her friend’s triumph, glad that her promptings had lead the countess to follow such a plan. Harriet had always been so easy to guide!

Kitty’s enjoyment of the scheme was materially lessened by the fact she had to write her letter to Lydia. Kitty had wondered whether it would be better to write to Lizzy or but decided against it. Lizzy would hardly believe her as Kitty could not write the whole of the story not to mention the fact several people seemed to have tried to tell her of the subject already – Miss and Mr Bingley! Even if she did believe it, she was hardly likely to have any influence over Lydia’s behaviour, and it was Lydia that Kitty had more cause to worry over. Lizzy would not do anything foolish over a man who had little but his charm to recommend him, not that her sister was mercenary, she was just practical. Jane would believe her, but Jane’s good nature was such that she would try and excuse Mr Wickham’s behaviour. Kitty could see her now deciding it would be wrong to expose Mr Wickham in case he was trying to re-establish himself in the world.

No it must be Lydia. Kitty had composed the letter countless times in her head, not to mention
several more times on paper, and still she knew it would have no effect on Lydia. Lydia cared not for gaming debts and rakish behaviour. They would only make Mr Wickham a far more desirable object.

In fact, if Kitty was truthful to herself, it would have made him far more desirable in her eyes if she had not known Georgiana, and seen the consequences of such actions. Georgiana had taken the opportunity to talk more to her new found friend once assured of Kitty’s secrecy and non-judgement. It was not to be wondered at, in fact the only thing Kitty wondered at was that Georgiana had managed not to speak to anyone besides her two guardians (which was a completely different thing!) on the matter.

There was no way she could mention Georgiana’s aborted flight to the border to Lydia, Lydia would not hesitate to tell that story, but without it there was no way Lydia would attend to the idea that Mr Wickham was a reprehensible character.

Unless… Kitty suddenly thought of the only person Lydia had any affection for. It was a surprising fact, but Lydia held onto a childish fascination with one of Mr Bennet’s former labourers and carpenters. It was borne out of pure selfishness of course, for Lydia knew no other way.

Edward Sacking was old enough to be the girl’s grandfather, and having no grandfather themselves and as Edward’s only granddaughter had died while Lydia and Kitty were still very young, he tended to treat them much as he would have his own granddaughter, despite them being the master’s daughters.

But it was Lydia who could wrap him around her little finger; Edward carved toys for her, taught her to ride when she was far too young to be on a horse, and when she was older, flirted with her in an avuncular fashion and flattered her. He also made sure to take any of the blame for any of the scrapes Lydia found herself in when she would scamper about the countryside. Of late Lydia had felt herself to be far too grown-up and worldly to bother much with her old friend, but if Mrs Bennet had a basket of goods to send down to the Sacking cottage, Lydia who would never heed her family’s responsibility as landlords in any other circumstance, would take the basket down to dear old Mr Sacking.

Inspired by her genius, and by Georgiana’s confidences that Mr Wickham often not only left gaming debts but was known to run up shockingly large unpaid sums with tradesmen, Kitty wrote a letter along these lines and hinted to Lydia that it would be quite a sad thing if poor Edward had been taken in by such a man.

It was more than Kitty could hope that Lydia would take this warning to heart, but she had couched in the only way she knew how that would even lead to Lydia reading it!

Once that was done, Kitty could enjoy the prospect of removing to London.

London! She had always wanted to go to London, and she was to go as her aunt’s sole companion, something that would never have happened with Aunt Gardiner. Kitty was tolerably certain that between Mrs Marshall who was removing to the metropolis some days after them, Lady Matlock and herself, they would ensure her aunt properly indulged in all the enjoyments that town had to offer.

In fact Kitty was almost certain Clara would need no prompting at all! Her aunt had thrown herself into reacquainting herself with London, through a guidebook that Mrs Marshall brought down to the cottage, and discussing what must be done on arrival and how best they might enjoy themselves.
“For you deserve some fun in town, for being such a dutiful niece these past weeks! I will say this now, I was disappointed that Thomas sent you to me, but now I cannot think of anyone I’d more like to have with me.

Kitty had frowned at this and then laughed, she was beginning to see the resemblance between her father and her aunt. She spent the rest of the time they had in Hampshire thinking of what could befall her in London – the opera, the theatres, dancing, shopping! (Not to mention convincing her aunt to allow Mary to pierce her ears!)

Little did Kitty realise that her aunt had quite decided what use she could finally be to her brother, and was going to expend all her energy on bringing it about. She anticipated that it would end up being a very agreeable task considering that her niece was such a good girl and not at all likely to embarrass anyone if guided properly.
Chapter 7

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…and I have enclosed a list of all the best warehouses, I daresay Clara would have no notion of where to go for such things. I hear that Grafton House is quite the place to go for bargains! Now take every opportunity of enjoying yourself, my dearest daughter, you could not be so disobedeg as to refuse to go to London! Now I am quite sure C. has little acquaintance in London having closeted herself in the backwater of Worthing all these years, but you must not let that get in your way! I have written to all my acquaintances in London and they assure me that they will introduce you about, especially to single gentlemen! Do not waste this opportunity! And if a gentleman should take a fancy to you, do not hint him away like Lizzy! ...

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Clara frowned at the letter that had preceded them to London and had been waiting on the smart table in the entrance hall of Clara’s snug little house. Kitty would not have called the house snug, but her aunt assured her that it was quite small for a fashionable London house.

“Do you think we shall have Mama’s friends waiting on us?”

“I sincerely trust not. Your mother does not know many people in London! And those she does I’m sure I shall have to repulse.”

Kitty frowned.

“Don’t frown at me! It is not their breeding but their manners that alarms me! Any persons that can assure your mother they will fling young men at your head are not persons I want in my parlour!”

Kitty wondered if this meant her aunt did not want Kitty associating with men at all, while they were in London.

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If Kitty was impressed with the size of the entrance hall, and the outside of the house this was nothing to how she felt when she looked at her room, or should she say suite of rooms. Her bedroom opened out into a small sitting room (others would have dismissed it as hardly a room, but to Kitty it was an extravagance) and she had a small room that was obviously for bathing and dressing. Having shared a room with her sister all her life, Kitty could hardly believe her eyes. Neither could she believe her ears when her aunt and a middle-aged woman entered the room and she was introduced to Mrs Bents, the thoroughly respectable women Mr Morris had engaged to be her aunt’s dresser and if Kitty heard correctly her dresser as well.

Following from this was a conversation which quite startled Kitty, a discussion on all the fabrics and dresses that would become ‘the young miss’ and how miss should have her hair cut and displayed. (When it was done the next morning Kitty could hardly say she recognised herself in the glass!) It said much for the shock Kitty was suffering under that she could hardly add two words to a conversation devoted to clothing.

Bents soon curtseyed and left her mistress and niece to admire the bedchamber.

“It’s quite gothic I know. But it has been well looked after, and I was quite surprised that some of
the change of furnishings downstairs which I have paid for over the years at the request of my tenants was not as appalling as I thought it would be!”

“Gothic?” Kitty could see no resemblance of anything in the house to anything she would expect to see in any of her romance novels.

“I meant quite old! The gothic influence is quite pretty, as long as one does not go to extremes!”

Kitty disclaimed, having never seen anything prettier than her surroundings, everything was a shade of pink and cherry, with deep mahogany furnishings. Clara privately thought the room must have been made to show off to best advantage all of Kitty’s natural assets, and said as much to her niece including that any man who saw her as such would immediately be smitten.

“Not that any man, besides the servants, is allowed past the second flight of stairs! Remember that Kitty! It brings me to mind of some things I must tell you that I had no occasion to do so in the country and I dare say from what you have told me of your goings-on at home your mother has never told you.”

Kitty sighed. She had suspected this was coming.

“Don’t sigh at me young lady. In town a young unmarried lady must be virtuous! And follow some simple rules. Well actually not at all simple and from anything they have gotten more complicated and strict since my day! You must on no account visit a young man. Not at his townhouse, not at his lodging, not at any establishment that contains beds. And particularly not early in the morning.”

Kitty suppressed a giggle. “But the look on Denny’s face when he would run into the parlour!”

Clara frowned gave her niece a quelling look.

“You must never be without chaperonage! So no visiting young – or old – ladies alone!”

Clara paced around the room a little more. “No going anywhere near St James Street! No walking or riding or driving up it!”

Kitty’s eyes widened. “What if it is the most direct route? That is a stupid rule!”

“Nevertheless it is a hard and fast rule and if you don’t want to be socially ruined! St James St contains a number of gentlemen’s clubs and lodgings…quite the gentleman’s domain.”

“What If one drove up it in a closed carriage and only peeked out the windows?”

“Of course that would be – Kitty do not be ridiculous! I do not think you are attending to the most important part of my conversation.”

“No aunt, I am listening and I promise not to do anything that you should dislike.” Kitty primly folded up her hands and looked up at her aunt demurely – something that did not at all fool her aunt.

“Do not make promises like that until you hear all of my strictures”

And hear them Kitty most certainly did.

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The next day being Monday, Clara and Kitty armed with various patterns and ideas set off for a
whirlwind round of mantua-makers, modistes, warehouses and milliners. It was even more fun considering that Georgiana had shown up on their stoop that morning insisting she be taken along. Clara even relented to letting the girls go to Grafton House and the Pantheon Bazaar which she had no hesitation in condemning as not good *ton*, until of course she had been and decided both were actually quite cheap and had a very good selection though being quite busy.

As a consequence, Kitty had an increased wardrobe, with further additions to come from the hands of Bents and herself. She also planned to make up some more hats for herself. It was the only thing that Lydia and herself had ever put any energy into mastering (besides dancing and flirting), so she was going put it to good use! Georgiana had barely bought anything for herself, instead using her far more refined taste to dissuade Kitty from anything too improper or hideous.

Kitty’s near perfect day would have been made perfect if she had come home to a letter from Lydia saying, “Of course she would stay away from that nasty Wickham.” But there was no such letter, but there were several cards that had been left for Clara.

“How well the Blaketons, but that is not at all surprising considering they are just next door. But how on earth did Lady Sefton know I was in town? And why on earth is she in town! She must be passing through!”

Similar comments followed the other cards that had been left.

“Well that will take care of how we shall spend tomorrow morning, returning all these calls!”

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And that it did, after spending an evening at Matlock House in a quiet dinner party with Lady Matlock and Georgiana – which boded for a sojourn in London that would see them rarely at their own table – Kitty and Clara spent the next morning returning and making morning calls.

It was mostly just leaving cards, a practice Kitty had never been entirely *au fait* with, but their last visit saw them paying a visit to Sir Oscar Blaketon’s townhouse, which was literally next door.

Lady Blaketon greeted them warmly.

“My dear Mrs Sutton, I could not believe it when I saw your carriage pull up on Sunday! I said to my dear Oscar that no doubt it was another set of persons letting the place! And he said to me, no my love, I am sure the servants have revealed to you that Mrs Sutton is returning and I said No I could not believe it! And then would you credit it, I saw you and your niece popping out of the carriage! And I recognised you! After these ten years at least! Though of course you have been to London since then, have you not? I hope you have, though I never saw you if you did!”

“Lady Blaketon it is very good to see you again too. May I present my niece, Miss Bennet?”

Kitty curtseyed obediently, wondering how Lady Blaketon managed to breath around all her rattling on.

Lady Blaketon eager to please, happily presented Kitty to her two daughters; Fanny and Sarah.

The Misses Blaketon were as far as Kitty could tell about Mary and Lizzy’s age, they appeared to such advantage with each other that it was not surprising their Mama had allowed Miss Sarah to come out before Miss Blaketon could even be considered on the shelf.

Also in the room was their eldest brother, Mr Blaketon, a slight young man who having never been up to Oxford or Cambridge was spending his time being inducted into all manner of gentlemanly pursuits in London. Though it would have appeared to the knowing eye that he was
having difficult deciding whether he preferred the Corinthian or Dandy set.

He recognised in Kitty immediately a girl who would not be at all adverse to flirtation and would not become all missish on him, something he dreaded. So instead of escaping to a club, or some other manly pursuit, he stayed for the half an hour that it took for Clara to extract herself from Lady Blaketon’s conversation.

“Oh must you go? Oh but I have an excellent notion. I am giving a little dinner party here tonight, nothing formal; just a little party for my young ones, London is so flat that I must give them some amusement! But Poor Mrs Chesston and her daughter have fallen ill, so I am two persons short! Of course I would have not invited you in such a hury burly manner if I had known you were going to be town, but I did not! You cannot be offended by my asking you to make up the party? See my daughters are quite enchanted with your niece! You could not deprive them of her company!”

Clara was forced to acquiesce, but it did not take too much stretching on her behalf. Lady Blaketon may be tiresome in her speech but she was respectable and was likely to know a great many young people that would be unexceptional friends for Kitty.

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That evening Kitty took forever to complete her toilette. She was going to her first London party. Her first London Party!

She almost had to pinch herself to believe it was true.

Not that it would be a substantial party, Clara had warned her that it would be very similar she supposed to what she was used to at home. But her aunt had also told her in the strictest of terms that even though these parties were informal her behaviour must not be.

“If you were from a family quite well known to London, and held a great position then perhaps at these events your behaviour could be a little freer. But having said that do not I beg you become one of those insufferable young ladies I was forever meeting in Worthing that could not speak two words to the opposite sex and were forever bright red.”

Kitty wondered how successful she was going to be in walking the fine line between propriety and impropriety.

The party as it turned out was watched over by only four chaperones, Clara, Lady Blaketon, Sir Oscar and a Mrs Hick. (and considering that Sir Oscar only put in an appearance at dinner this could hardly be considered adequate chaperonage).

Of the younger generation apart from the two Misses Blaketon, Mr Blaketon and Kitty, there were the two Miss Hicks, Mr Fancot, Mr Bradford and Mr Kirby and his brother Arthur.

It seemed that this party had a long-standing acquaintanceship with each other, so Kitty’s presence amongst them could have been considered as an interloper. However she found herself quite the focal point of the party.

This was something entirely unexpected, and unusual for Kitty, but she rose nobly to the occasion and happily answered everybody’s questions.

“You have quite taken my brother’s fancy Miss Bennet!” giggled Miss Blaketon as the women adjourned after dinner.

“Not to mention Mr Fancot!” added Miss Hick.
“Indeed you are all the rage with all the gentlemen,” said Miss Rebecca, the younger Miss Hick. Kitty could privately reason why, it was nothing more than being someone new. She knew exactly how it was when the regiment came to Meryton and all the girls forgot their old flirts. But for the first time she wondered if she was going to be the object of resentment.

Apparently the girls of the party were far too complaisant to mind too much the defection of the gentlemen or at least not to express it in the direct manner that most of the girls of Kitty’s acquaintance would have! But it became obvious that Kitty was being subtly asked which of the men she preferred and that all but one of the gentlemen was considered the property of one or other of the girls.

Kitty wisely made it clear she had no intentions of ‘stealing’ any of the gentlemen by marking her preference for Mr Fancot. Lydia she knew would have had no hesitation in declaring to like whomever she did happen to like regardless (or more like because) of prior claims. Lydia did not care a jot for female friendships and tended to only have female friends because the girls realised where Lydia went men went also, and because to some girls Lydia became something of an idol. Kitty however had to, and indeed wanted to be, more circumspect.

It was just a lucky occurrence that she did happen to prefer Mr Fancot. Mr Fancot was about four and twenty, with reddish hair. He was the only son of a gentleman from Dorset, he had met Mr Blaketon at Winchester and they had remained fast friends. He was a personable young man and knew however remotely Captain Denny, which gave them something to talk about beyond the polite pleasantries.

It was much the same when the gentlemen returned having not lingered much over the dinner table.

“Since you know none of them, Miss Bennet, my sisters and I are making up a party to go to the theatre tomorrow night, would you be of the party?” asked Mr Blaketon eagerly after hearing Kitty’s response to Mr Bradford’s question about which of the London theatres she preferred.

Clara overhead this invitation and frowned, it was not for Mr Blaketon to issue invitations like that, she was glad however that Kitty returned a response that reminded him that she was at her aunt’s pleasure.

Mr Blaketon immediately applied to his mother for her support, which she readily gave.

“If my aunt agrees,” replied Kitty to this renewed attack. Not that it was very hard for Kitty, she desperately wanted to go to the theatre.

“Very well,” replied Clara, rapidly beginning to dislike the fact the Blaketons were their neighbours.

She had forgotten how tiresome Margaret could be, chattering on in that breathless manner of hers. She also foresaw trouble with young Mr Blaketon, who seemed to be regarding her niece as some sort of goddess. Why Clara had no idea. Kitty was not particularly beautiful, nor displayed in a particularly becoming gown. She did notice her niece was being far more refined than the other girls (and indeed more refined than Kitty was generally), which surprised her, but she attributed this to her stern lecture.

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“I hope I do not need to tell you how improper it was for Mr Blaketon to issue an invitation directly to you! It was certainly up to his sisters to ask, or to ask me!”
“You do not like Mr Blaketon?”

“No, I mean I do not dislike him, he is clearly a young rattle though! Do not believe I did not hear him discuss how he leapt over a dining table with his horse!”

Kitty broke out into laughter. “I would have given anything to see the look on the servants’ faces! Or on Sir Oscar’s!”

Clara pondered that experience and gave a laugh herself.

“Yes, but it would be very uncomfortable to be obliged to attend to all of those young gentleman’s tricks!”

“Of course.” Kitty sobered. She had been thinking last night and pondering her mother. Her mother of course would want to know of all the young men she had met and would immediately offer her advice on how to catch them. This would not necessarily be a bad thing considering that Kitty did want to be married. The Misses Hick had an elder sister who was married and the description of activities she was allowed to indulge in had made Kitty slightly jealous. Indeed it was not much more beyond what she had been allowed to do in Mertyon, but nonetheless.

“Aunt? I have decided that what my mother said at the end of her letter was quite right.”

“Hmmm?” Clara tried to straighten her carriage dress, while she listened to her niece.

“That it is my duty to find myself a husband. I mean to accept the first young man who offers for me – as long as I like him well enough that is.”

Clara turned to stare at her niece. “You mean to do what?”

“Well you told me I ought to get married! That I would enjoy it!”

Clara turned back to the mirror and ruefully thought ‘hoisted by my own petard! And one of Fanny’s making as well!’

“I do not think you need to be thinking of that quite yet.”

“No probably not. But I should like to be married before any of my sisters.”

“But not to a man you could not like!”

“But I like most men!”

Clara rolled her eyes. “Well in that case…”

Kitty laughed at her aunt’s reaction. “No but I do like most men, I don’t know how I shall know who I should marry. Or who I like better than all other men.”

“You shall know,” replied Clara sagely, “and if you don’t I shall make sure to pick for you. Now are we ready? Miss Darcy must be sitting at home anxiously awaiting us.”

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Georgiana had not been anxiously awaiting them, indeed both Clara and Kitty had to wait for at least 10 minutes as she finished her breakfast.

Clara had agreed to take the girls all over some of the sights of London, as Kitty had discovered
an old guidebook of London. Georgiana had seen quite a number of these edifices before but what she had not heard was about Kitty’s first London party. Georgiana was quite glad not to be out, being shy before the Wickham incident and painfully shy afterwards, and thus her feelings on Kitty’s small triumph was one free of any envy.

“Oh I do wish I could meet them Kitty!”

“Sad romps Miss Darcy. I expect your brother would forbid you to meet any of them or indeed attend such a party!”

Georgiana looked at Clara and smiled. “No, how could he when you and Kitty would be there? You are not sad romps.”

“Well one of us isn’t,” replied Clara.

“Really aunt? I never knew you were a romp.” Kitty arched a practiced eyebrow while responding to her aunt.

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Chapter 8

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My dear Miss Darcy, how it pains me to say that both L and I are unable to be with you in London at this present time, but circumstances you understand keep us in the North. Our friendship I know is vital to you at this moment and I hope it shall still exist when we do return and that you have not quite cast us off. Your brother I am happy to say is well (as well as being the support and guide of my brother), but does not look to return to London until early March before passing on to Lady C. We shall hardly return to London until he does. I do hope you have continued practicing that delightful concerto that I bought for you at Christmas....

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Georgiana had been quite put out to find that letter awaiting her return from her excursion; though Kitty had to own that her response to the letter was far beyond that of Georgiana’s.

Kitty had not liked Miss Bingley or her sister. They thought too well of themselves and felt themselves allowed to do things they condemned in others. And to write such a letter to Georgiana constantly coupling her name with her brothers and hers... Kitty did not know whether Mr Darcy was going to marry Miss Bingley sometime in the future, but they were not engaged now and as such Miss Bingley had no claims on Georgiana.

If Kitty was entirely truthful she was slightly jealous, she had never had her own particular friend before and did not want to share the one she had finally found. She blurted this fact out to her friend who laughed and reassured her.

“Oh! As if I could ….I’m afraid Miss Bingley alarms me. She always is so very kind to me...but I do not think she would be at all kind if I was not Fitzwilliam’s sister and...” Georgiana broke off here and looked towards the floor.

“Well, “ Kitty replied brightening, “if you are afraid that I am like Miss Bingley let me reassure you, I quite dislike your brother.”

This did make Georgiana laugh. “But you are only funning. You do like my brother do you not?”

Kitty was not funning, but she had to own she did not know Mr Darcy enough to dislike him or like him so she said so.

“Well then I must go find my aunt and depart I only have time to write a letter to my mother before I must start getting ready for the theatre.”

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“You know, if I were you Kitty, I should take care what I wrote to your mother,” commented Clara as they drove back to Cavendish Square.

Kitty drew her eyebrows together. “I beg pardon?”

“I just do not think your mother needs to know every detail and every body you meet.”

Clara had the deepest concern that Fanny would implore her daughter via the medium of the royal mail to marry the first young man she saw, or worse come up to London to make sure of the fact.

Kitty too saw the problems arising from mentioning all of her doings in London, she had not been
in London above four days and already she had met a baronet and a group of young ladies and gentlemen, and was often in the company of a countess and heiress. And the future only looked more complicated! She would probably bring on her mother’s nervous spasms if she mentioned all of this in her letters.

“No I think you are right. Beside I always get left out of things at home, I do not see why I have to let them into my secrets.”

“Well you should not have secrets from me. That would be most improper.”

Kitty smiled. “No I will not keep secrets from you. No clandestine meetings or letters nor sneaking young gentlemen upstairs dressed as chimney-sweeps.”

Clara gave a start. “Dressed as what?”

“That is what I am told happened to young Mr Kirby in Bath I am told, but he was found out and the young lady was sent into the wilds of Northumberland.”

“Well a chimney sweep?”

“I know! I would have thought that was a stupid disguise because he would have to be all dirty and grimy to fool anybody and that is hardly very romantic.”

Clara recovered her wits. “Very true. But it would be most improper of you to keep any secrets from me, as I stand in place of your mother while you are in London and anything that she needs to know I will write to Thomas about.”

Kitty stifled a giggle.

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In fact it was not just a letter to her mother that Kitty had to compose. Lydia had replied to her letter.

Kitty stared at the letter before dashing up to her bedchamber to read it in private.

The contents surprised her.

Not only had Lydia read the letter but she had gone down to demand from Mr Sacking an explanation.

If Kitty had the means of transporting herself back to Longbourn she would have kissed Mr Sacking there and then. Whatever he said, it had been enough to convince Lydia that Mr Wickham was not a gentleman to know.

It seemed as though Mr Wickham was running up debts with the tradesmen of the town and meddling with their daughters, but it appeared it was the fact that he had interfered with Mr Sackings employment and family that weighed most with Lydia, that and the fact Lydia liked her men to only be in love with her. She did not have to be constant, but they did.

The only alarming part of the letter was the fact someone had revealed to Mr Sacking that Mr Wickham was hanging out for a rich wife and did not much care whether he came by her rightfully or wrongly. Lydia who had some innate shrewdness had made the staggeringly correct guess of assuming that Miss Darcy had been in love with Mr Wickham and possibly wanted to run off with him. After all Lydia could not conceive how any women would not be charmed by him even one who had known him all her life.
Kitty took up her pen to beg her sister not to talk nonsense about Miss Darcy, but as the rest of the letter contained no other mention of Lydia’s theory she was not sure whether it would be best to let the matter go. Especially since, Lydia ended her tirade on Mr Wickham by telling her sister she refused to tell anybody about Mr Wickham, since as far as she was concerned if they could not tell what sort of man he was, it was their own fault.

Lydia continued by roundly abusing Kitty for being such a boring correspondent and that nothing, not even the delights of London could make her letters anything but those fit to be consigned to the fire.

Kitty frowned at this, for Lydia would have been the only one she could have openly revealed all her London news. Lydia would hardly make it family gossip, firstly because they would not listen to it and secondly because it would make Lydia realise what she was missing out on and Lydia never willingly made herself second best.

Kitty tapped her pen against the pile of novels Clara had picked up from a circulating library, during their shopping expedition on Monday. Kitty idly picked up one which was a lurid romance entitled the *Castle of Wolfenbach*, and she had an idea.

Dipping the pen into the ink she began to write her reply to her sister.

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The party made up for the theatre that night was, the Blaketons and Mr Fancot.

Lady Blaketon confided to Kitty as they took their seats in the box that young gentlemen did not like to dance attendance on young ladies, and that it had to be a compliment to her that both the young men had brought themselves up to scratch.

They had only arrived in time for the curtain to go up at the *Sans Pareil* on the Strand, as the Miss Blaketons had changed their gowns several times and had invited Kitty up to their chambers to help them choose. As a consequence Kitty was slightly out of patience with them. She understood it was dowdy to want to arrive exactly when the doors opened, but Kitty wanted to experience all London had to offer immediately and fully. She supposed it was a fault to be so impatient. Mary would indeed say so.

As it was Kitty did not care for the first play – being a farce, with the title “An Animated Effigy” was enough to explain this. The Comic opera that followed had a long and improbable title, and final piece, the pantomime, was entitled “The Poison Tree; or, Harlequin in Java” yet was celebrating a British military victory of the previous year in Java. Kitty applied to the gentlemen of the party to explain what the context of this pantomime was, but neither of them could tell her beyond pointing out to her the ‘superb orangerie and garden of Asiatic plants’ As it was she was more confused (though not in an intellectual sense) by the material presented on the stage then she had thought to be. She far more enjoyed the social aspect of the theatre.

The Miss Blaketons pointed out every single person of note they were acquainted with in the theatre, but considering it was only mid-January there were not many persons of rank in the place.

Clara and Lady Blaketon held their own conversation towards the back of the box for most of the intervals between the plays, but occasionally both would contribute to the general conversation.

“That is a very pretty dress Miss Bennet.”

“Really?” Kitty looked down. “It is a dress I had made up in Meryton!”
“Oh, but it is very pretty! If that is what country dress-makers can achieve!” Miss Blaketon smiled.

“Yes Miss Bennet you take the wind out of my sisters’ sails, and them in proper London fashions.”

Kitty smiled at Mr Blaketon, trying hard not to let his flattery go to her head.

“A very unhandsome thing to say Blaketon, you will make your sisters unlikely to invite Miss Bennet anywhere!” added Mr Fancot deftly.

The Miss Blaketons immediately disclaimed that they would do any such thing.

“And it is very unhandsome of you to say that, Mr Fancot, when you know that they would never do such a thing,” retorted Kitty.

Mr Fancot smiled. “A hit! Miss Bennet. It was very un-gentlemanly. Both Blaketon and I are!”

“Un-gentlemanly! Speak for yourself Giles! I know how to behave with ladies!”

The ladies laughed at this.

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Kitty was exhausted after her night at the theatre and tumbled into bed and slept soundly, she was only thankful they had nothing planned for the next morning or the next evening. Clara warned her that just because the beginning of her visit had been so hectic, not to expect such a pace until much later as the season had not even officially started.

The morning brought a quiet breakfast with her aunt, and helping her with organising the management of the household. Mr Morris had hired all the servants beyond the skeletal staff kept even if there were no tenants, but Clara preferred to speak to all of them to ascertain their worth herself. Also it was a way of learning their names.

Kitty knew all of Longbourn’s servants by name and a great deal of servants who belonged to other household’s by name as well, but she did expect in London that things would be different and told her aunt so.

“They could be different in other households, but in mine I prefer to know who exactly is doing what!” was how her aunt answered her remark.

Kitty helped draw up the planned menus for the nights that they expected to be at home, and organise the full turning out of the household that Clara deemed necessary.

“I should have done this as soon as we arrived, but we fell in with the Blaketons.”

Thus when Lady Blaketon offered to escort Kitty to a different theatre that night, promising the plays would be much better, Clara declined from going, but after a pleading look from Kitty (who could not bear to catalogue a single piece of linen more) agreed that Lady Blaketon could offer enough chaperonage.

The party was, with the exception of Clara, the same party from the night before.

It was an agreeable party and considering that the same persons had spent three nights running in the same company, everyone was well on the way to thinking that Kitty was very much part of their set and always had been.
The play that night was Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” which Kitty enjoyed far more than she had the plays of the previous night.

“You prefer Shakespeare Miss Bennet?” asked Mr Blaketon

“Oh yes, I have read his plays you see and to see it performed is exciting!”

“How very blue-stocking of you!” commented Miss Blaketon.

“Is it?”

“Oh yes, and it is quite bad ton to be a bluestocking Kitty!” giggled Miss Sarah.

Kitty, after grasping this meant that the Blaketon’s thought she was scholarly, tried not to have fit of giggles. She wondered what they would think of Mary!

“Is knowing Shakespeare considered bad ton?”

“Oh do you know the playwright?” commented Miss Blaketon.

“I think Miss Bennet, meant knowledge in the sense of having read the plays -” added Mr Fancot with a smile in his eyes that Kitty noted and appreciated.

“Thank you Mr Fancot, that is exactly what I meant.”

Mr Blaketon seemed to consider this appreciation for that rotter Shakespeare as proof that a girl he was well on the way to placing on a pedestal had feet of clay. Mr Fancot however seemed to find it charming.

Mr Blaketon took himself and his sisters off during interval to speak to a group of his cronies and their sisters in a neighbouring box, leaving Mr Fancot and Kitty to rather restful chaperonage. Indeed Lady Blaketon had managed to fall asleep.

“I promise I shall not take advantage.”

Kitty was not quite sure she could believe that, but of all the gentlemen friends Mr Blaketon spoke about, and of those at Lady Blaketon’s little party, Mr Fancot was the most stable.

“If you did I should scream and scream,” replied Kitty not entirely truthfully.

Mr Fancot leaned back in his chair and smiled.

“Most young ladies would only say that they would do such a thing, but secretly hope I would – and I do not mean they wish I would scream.”

Kitty gave Mr Fancot a look that she hoped did not convey the fact that she was – or had been – such a lady.

“I do not think well of such ladies. It is most improper.” Kitty hoped it was her most haughty tone.

“Indeed Miss Bennet. What type of lady are you?”

“I do not think that is a proper question and you are quizzing me.”

Mr Fancot held up two hands in defeat and gave up, which secretly disappointed Kitty she did not like to win so easily.
Kitty did not know quite what her feelings were about Mr Fancot. After all knowing someone for three evenings together was hardly anything. And it was not at all like Bingley had been towards Jane (though perhaps that was not the best example), Mr Fancot was not wholly inattentive to everyone else and neither was she. Neither was it at all like a romance novel.

Though Kitty did suppose he was a very gentlemanly like gentlemen, despite being present at the table leaping, and having bet on how many carriage wheels Mr Arthur Kirby could scrape in a laneway in Gloucestershire.

Though his inability to make sure the carriage was brought round on time as they were leaving the theatre did put a blot on his good reputation as far as Kitty was concerned. Even though that responsibility should have been Mr Blaketon’s in the first place.

“Did you have a good time Kitty?”

Kitty jumped, having not seen her aunt in her little antechamber.

“What are you doing in here?” exclaimed Kitty feeling as though her territory had been invaded.

“Seeing what the maids have not been doing while I have been away.”

Kitty blinked. Considering it had been ten years, Kitty was not surprised the maids may have forgotten how to please their mistress, considering they probably did not even know who she was!

“Aunt, what do you think of Mr Fancot.”

Clara frowned. “A very respectable young man I daresay, past that trying time, unlike his friend Mr Blaketon.”

Clara made to leave the room before a thought struck her. “You are not – were not – thinking of Mr Fancot when you made that decision about – what you should do in London?”

“Marriage?” Kitty shook her head. “Oh no I was not thinking of him. Do you think I should be?”

“No.” replied Clara shortly. “I do not think you should.”

Kitty frowned, not sure what to make of this.
…It is too odious Mama, my grandmother does nothing but hint to Miles that he should offer for my hand, and Miles does nothing but glare. I have informed Grandmamma that you have begged for me to come back to town. I know it is only a slight stretch of the truth because how could you not wish for me back? M. will attend us of course. Though he has much business on his estate so I am not sure precisely when that will be. I long to see both you and G. again. It is such a pity that D. would not allow dear G. to come out this year. For she is so pretty and ladylike she would have all of London at her feet! You see I am not selfish enough to deny my cousin her right, I do not need all of London at my feet!…”

Georgiana blushed. “My cousin is too kind.”

“My daughter,” replied Lady Matlock from her seat facing forward in the landau, “is far too flighty for her own good, and such a trial. Playing hard and fast with every man that comes her way! And then creates such a scene that – “

Clara smiled at Lady Matlock’s grievances, indeed it sounded as though Lady Annabelle had far too much of a much younger Harriet in her, but she felt obliged to stop her friends tirade. “When do you expect to see Lady Annabelle in town?”

“Oh do not ask me! I am only her mother! I have entirely undutiful children! All of them!”

Kitty giggled at the affronted look on Lady Matlock’s face, but Georgiana hurried broke into a voluble defence of her cousins.

They were taking the air in the Park, Kitty was slightly envious of those she saw riding about the park. Not that she was particularly enamoured of the sport only being a reasonable horsewomen, it just seemed far more dashing and fashionable. The only good thing was the look of dismay in her young friends’ faces when she had to decline their offer to come riding in the Park. Clara did not have a suitable horse in her meagre stable and was not at all supportive of the idea (offered by Mr Bradford on that first night at Lady Blaketon’s) that Mr Morris should go to Tattersalls and purchase a horse suitable for a lady. (It had to be said that Mr Morris did not think himself a judge of horseflesh and would have strongly fought against the idea that he should choose one for his employer’s niece).

So Kitty had to be content with the landau.

It was nice however to be able to look around at leisure and not have to think about controlling the actions of your mount. Not that there was much to see.

“So you enjoyed the theatre Miss Bennet?”

“Yes I did! Though I much preferred Hamlet at The Covent Garden, rather than what was showing at the Sans Pareil.”

“Really you prefer a more serious play? I would not have thought it!”

“Oh no, I did like the amusement, but I had thought the theatre in London would be more serious!”
“Serious? London! What odd notions you have my dear!” smiled Lady Matlock.

Kitty was about to make a response when she saw that the countess was distracted.

“Of all the abominable!” Lady Matlock exclaimed and started waving her closed parasol (for the weather was quite good) in a distracted fashion. Lady Matlock signalled to her coachman that she wished him to slow down.

Kitty turned to look at what or who had attracted such a violent response and saw riding towards the carriage, a man on a grey horse. Kitty could discern little from this distance and was loath to stare at him as he rode the rest of the way to the moving carriage.

“Of all the horrid disobliging…”

“Mama, no! When I particularly came to find you!”

“It is Friday! Friday!”

“Is it?  The man’s tone had an ironic inflexion in it. “Where would I be without you, my dear mama?”

“Do not take that tone with me! You know what I mean! I was expecting you in the middle of the week. Friday is not the middle! Georgiana and I stayed home last night expressly…”

Kitty at this point realised that the gentleman before her had to be Lady Matlock’s eldest, Lord Ashbourne. She had leisure to admire him now that the carriage had stopped and he had closed the gap between them. She could not tell his height, but she supposed him to be tall and of a medium build. What she could perceive was that he was immaculately dressed and that unlike poor Mr Kirby had the shoulders to do justice to his coat.

Lord Ashbourne addressed himself to his cousin, “I am very sorry if you waited for me last night.”

“Oh, but we would have been at home anyway!” replied Georgiana, earning a hurt look from her aunt.

“I expect you did not come here to look for us! I expect you have been in town all this time and forgotten us.” Lady Matlock was not to be swayed from her grievance.

“I swear on whatever you wish me to swear on that I only arrived in London today and the first thing I did was ride directly to your door. It is not my fault you were not there, instead here – on pleasure bent again!”

Lady Matlock frowned. “I expect you left a card.”

“Of course I did. I am always polite!”

“You left your own mother a card! A card!” Then she noticed her son’s expression. “Oh you take delight in vexing me! But I am most put out! You have abandoned us all with no male escort!”

It was then Lady Matlock realised she had forgotten to introduce her companions.

“Oh my dear Clara, and Miss Bennet, may I present to you my eldest? Ash, this is Mrs Sutton and Miss Bennet.”

Lord Ashbourne bowed as elegantly as it was possible on a horse that was clearly becoming restless.
“I should not listen to your mother Lord Ashbourne, I can speak for myself and my niece when I say we have not at all suffered from having no male escort. And we cannot impose upon you in such a manner.” Clara smiled at the viscount, seeing in him a great deal of resemblance to his father who had been a very handsome man, though his son appeared a great deal taller.

“Yes,” added Kitty, “I find there are a number of gentlemen in town quite happy to attend to us! So you see you are quite let off the hook as far as we are concerned!”

Clara’s eyebrows rose sharply but Lord Ashbourne laughed. Clara expected him to make some further response to her niece, and was happy to find he turned the subject back to his mother.

“Shall I redeem myself by presenting myself at Grosvenor Square tonight?”

“Well considering I did not expect to see you – We are dining with Mrs Sutton tonight.”

“You are most welcome to come if you like my lord? Though there is to be no one there but ourselves,” added Clara with little expectation that it would find favour with the gentleman.

“I could not think of anything more charming.”

“You mean, I collect my lord that you have nothing better to do?” Kitty was aware of her aunt’s quelling look, but she could not help herself.

“Miss Bennet you injure me!” Lord Ashbourne laughed as he spoke.

At this point Lord Ashbourne’s mount showed an alarming tendency to wish to strike out.

“I am afraid, ladies that this is my cue to depart.”

Kitty peered at the horse. “He is a very handsome horse, what sort is he?”

“Andalusian, from the Peninsular. He was my mount when I was there; the least I could do was bring him back with me. But I am afraid he is getting far too impatient with this pace! I shall see you all tonight.”

With that Lord Ashbourne picked up his pace and started to allow his horse to kick out his fidgets.

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Clara was slightly apprehensive. She really had not expected Lord Ashbourne to accept her careless invitation.

“Why do you look so concerned?” Kitty had not made any special effort to dress for dinner, after all it was only an informal affair.

Clara looked at her niece appraisingly, she wondered if she should make Kitty aware of exactly who was to be her dinner guest. She wondered what Kitty’s reaction would be when she found out exactly how, charming, handsome, rich, titled and unmarried Lord Ashbourne was.

“Aunt?”

“I am just concerned that we shall not be exciting enough for Lord Ashbourne.”

Kitty stared at her aunt. “Well he needn’t have come if he did not like it!”

Kitty liked the look of Lord Ashbourne. He was very handsome, and she liked the fact he seemed
to laugh with his eyes as well as his smile. Something in the back of her head did prick at her, telling her that she could not just class him as she had previously classed all men that came her way as either like the Lucas boys, the officers, or other.

The Lucas boys were Kitty’s mould of the young men she had grown up with, who were inclined to think longingly of the larks they could be kicking up in London. They also were very amateur when it came to flirting.

The officers were far more refined, had more address, but were equally likely to want to (and actually did) kick up larks like dress up as women and fool each other.

The others, as the category suggested was everyone else, those people a young lady could easily ignore, such as fathers and uncles and those older gentlemen who liked to relive their youth by putting their arms in a strictly avuncular way, around young ladies waists.

Kitty usually had no problem placing gentlemen she met into their proper place, but Lord Ashbourne may on reflection need his own category. Though Kitty was not silly enough to assume he was a unique person, just that she had never come across his type before.

Not even Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy. Mr Bingley with his affable ways tended to be more like the Lucas boys and Mr Darcy had immediately been stigmatised as an other.

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Despite Clara’s misgivings the dinner passed off creditably, and Lord Ashbourne did not linger over the port Clara had provided, instead almost immediately followed the ladies up to the drawing room.

Kitty had learned very little over the dinner table. Clara, Lady Matlock and Lord Ashbourne had spent the dinner conversation talking about mutual acquaintances and family. Kitty had also learned that Georgiana was slightly wary of her elder cousin. This meant very little to Kitty as Georgiana was very wary of everyone!

“So my lord, you said you had been in Spain?”

“Yes I was in the army.”

Kitty’s eyes lit up. “You were?”

“Yes I joined after several terms at Oxford. I found it was not for me.”

“Really? Not an intellectual?”

“I decided I preferred to live my experiences than gain them by reading about them.”

“But we have only recently started out expedition into Spain…”

“You are very knowledgeable.”

Kitty smiled. “Well there is at present militia stationed in Meryton.” Kitty flashed a brief look at Georgiana, but she was not attending to their conversation instead deep in conversation with her aunt and Clara.

“Ah, well yes I joined some years ago, but was present in Portugal for the battles of Rolica and Vimiero, so I may have mislead you slightly when I said the Peninsular. “
“No I quite forgot about Portugal, I am not very good with geography. Did you serve with Wellington?”

“Yes, I also served under Wellington in India, when I was part of the 33rd Foot. But that seems an age ago.”

“You have sold out now though?”

“Yes, I was injured – thought not gravely – in Portugal and my father and I decided it was for the best if I sold out. After all it would not do to for my father to have both his sons fighting.”

“What in India did you go?”

Lord Ashbourne took a breath as he thought. “Perhaps if Mrs Sutton had a globe or an atlas?”

Kitty looked over to her aunt as Lord Ashbourne repeated the question.

“Well, Fredrick, my late husband certainly had an atlas among his books in his study, but I suspect that it would have been stored somewhere else in the house as Frederick’s study has served many purposes besides such for my tenants. I have been turning out the house, but I have not as yet found that particular set of items.”

Clara rang the bell and a footman materialised. On being questioned, he ventured that such an item would be most likely found in a closet on the third floor.

“Kitty, be a dear and run up and find it if you need it, I should not like to put the servants out.”

Kitty stood up to do as she was bid when another voice joined her aunts. “If you have no objection Mrs Sutton, do you mind if I accompany Miss Bennet. I find when one is looking for something it always tends to be just out of reach.”

Clara looked at Lady Matlock who seemed complacent at the idea and nodded her ascent.

Kitty followed Lord Ashbourne, out the door, turning to her aunt just as she did, “Do not worry Aunt, he is not dressed properly for the occasion, see no soot!”

Clara choked on the sip of wine she had just taken so was unable to reply until the door had been firmly closed.

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“Not dressed for the occasion?”

Kitty could have burst out laughing at his face. She hesitated, but only slightly, in explaining her comment.

“You are not dressed as a chimney sweep. At least unless the fashion for sweeps has changed?”

Lord Ashbourne blinked, but rallied tolerably. “No, but may I beg to know why I should be a sweep?”

“Do you know at all, a Mr Blaketon and his set?”

“Very vaguely.”

“Well Mr Arthur Kirby I am told was smuggled up to his paramour, you know because a young man should not venture pasted the first floor, as a chimney sweep.”
Lord Ashbourne laughed as they reached the third floor and headed towards the storage area, on the way he noted to Kitty that: "if one really wanted to climb up to one’s love, it is far more romantic to do it outside, via a trellis."

“One would have to be a good climber. It would not be much fun to fall two floors at least!”

“Indeed Miss Bennet.”

The Atlas turned out not to be in too arduous a location and it was not long before it had been brought back down to the drawing room.

Kitty wondered where such an unwieldy book, for it was large, should be placed as Clara only had several small tables in the room. Lord Ashbourne solved the problem by placing it on the floor and inviting Kitty and Georgiana to join him on the floor.

Kitty who had not found Lord Ashbourne particularly stiff in his manner, not compared with his cousin at least, found nothing wrong with this invitation. The other occupants of the room found it slight disconcerting, but were soon distracted by the lively conversation the Atlas threw up.

The party, though it could hardly be called one, broke up far later than a informal party would be expected to and not before Georgiana begged her cousin to take her driving on Monday to see the Kensington Gardens despite it being winter, and of course the invitation was extended to Kitty and Mrs Sutton. Kitty was looking forward to the excursion but did not entirely wish to drive to Kensington confined in a full carriage and expressed this dissatisfaction with the plan, but added her entreaties to go nevertheless.

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Chapter 10

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…If my daughter is causing any trouble, pray remember you asked for her. She is silly enough for anything! Her absence has produced a change in my youngest daughter. Instead of her effect being maximised by my penultimate daughter’s absence, it is quite minimised. I am quite disappointed. Though I know she hopes that she too will be allowed to expose herself in some public place as her sister is doing! Fanny asks me to tell you to throw my daughter into the path of every rich man you can find. I doubt very much if this will answer! For men of sense do not want silly wives. Though I am assuming here that wealth equals sense, which is not always the case.

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Clara folded the letter distastefully and put it aside. Thomas could be so flippant. She wondered idly what he would say if he knew that Kitty would be the only eligible female in a party where the only male was an unattached heir to an earldom. Fanny would have a nervous complaint, but Thomas would laugh and that rankled with Clara. She was even more determined to keep Kitty’s season from her parents and family. If Kitty was a success then so be it, and if she was a failure, which often so many young ladies were, then at least she could have the knowledge that no one of her family could laugh at her.

“Kitty! I do wish to be ready when Lady Matlock calls!”

“Coming!” Kitty ran down the stairs lightly, running her hand along the banister.

Both ladies had spent the weekend fixing up both the house and their wardrobes. For this excursion Kitty was wearing a riding habit. She knew the closest she was getting to a horse was watching them pull the landau, but she just had to have a riding habit.

She had chosen the latest riding habit out of the Lady’s Monthly Museum, though had it made up in a deep blue, it was ornamented with frogs militaire and came with a charming velvet hat trimmed in white. Kitty felt safe in the knowledge that she must look very fashionable.

“Look here is Lady Matlock,” remarked Clara peering out the window, at the landau, which drove up, but it was only Georgiana who burst through the door.

“Kitty, you will never guess!” Georgiana looked as though she was about to burst with happiness.

“Where is your aunt?” questioned Clara peering out the window again.

“Oh she has taken the carriage around the block! But Kitty, Ash has bought me a horse!”

“Oh.” Kitty felt a pang of envy. Now Georgiana would ride to Kensington and she would be shut up in the carriage. Kitty scolded herself that the carriage would be an open one for the weather was not at all inclement and that should be happy for her friend. “That is delightful! You have such a good cousin! Such a handsome present!”

“Oh but you misunderstand me. He brought the mare around on Saturday, she is black and named Cleopatra!”

“Out of Shakespeare! Or is it purely from history? I can never remember!”
Kitty’s train of thought, made Georgiana shake the muff she was holding petulantly. Kitty was not paying attention to the important point!!

“Yes!” she exclaimed torn between exasperation and delight, “but Ash thought I would not be scared of her! Indeed he had thought I would have quite outgrown my fear of horses! But I have not!”

Kitty blinked. That was quite true now she thought of it, Georgiana had even walked on the opposite side of a laneway if a horse was pacing around in a field. She only tolerated carriage horses as a necessity.

“But…”

“Yes. Ash was going to take her back, when I came up with a famous notion! You could ride her! Indeed I shall loan her to you for the season! You need a horse and I have a horse!”

This speech was the most voluble and bubbly Kitty had ever seen her friend, so much so it was impossible to say no, even if Kitty had such a wish.

“Aunt may I?”

Clara had watched this display with a slight frown, but it cleared, “I see no problems, at least for this once, I have no desire to be cooped up in a full carriage either. Now I see your mother driving up once more, along with Lord Ashbourne, we must go.”

Clara descended the stairs first and thus was in a position to see Kitty’s face as she came down the stairs. It startled her slightly; she had not seen her niece look so pretty.

“Famous! I must warn you though I’m not a very good horsewomen!” declared Kitty on seeing Lord Ashbourne leading Cleopatra.

“Oh no, you are much better than me!” laughed Georgiana. “For I cannot even look at one.”

“I am quite inured to female riders Miss Bennet. You can have no fear from me, or a horse that I have picked. ”

Lord Ashbourne helped Kitty mount Cleopatra and kept an eye on her until he was sure she could handle navigating her way through the busy streets. The state of the roads around Mayfair allowed neither rider the chance of speech with neither each other nor the occupants of the carriage until they had passed the Piccadilly turnpike.

“I believe you were saying something about female riders, my lord?” Internally Kitty was very happy to have managed to navigate herself without coming to grief but her mount was very docile and easy to control yet not a complete sluggard.

“I believe I was.”

“What precisely did you mean by that? You cannot say we are all similar!”

“No, Miss Bennet, but you do fall into categories.” Lord Ashbourne smiled at the look that came over Kitty’s face.

“What categories would these be?”

“Well you have those that are passable riders, those that are excellent riders and those that think they are excellent but are merely passable. It is that last category that a gentlemen escort has to
watch for. They are likely to try to go fast at wood and slow at water and take a terrible fall.”

“Which am I?”

“Passable Miss Bennet. Merely passable.”

Kitty looked affronted. She supposed it was the truth, but it was not very gentlemanly to say such a thing.

“You should hope, my lord, that I do not take it into my head to think I am excellent and try and jump that hedge!”

At that point the road allowed them to ride next to the carriage, which opened up the conversation to all members of the party.

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Later, the conversation turned to Kitty and her family, with Lady Matlock questioning her on whether she often had excursions of this type around her home. As Kitty could not remember a time when she had taken a trip to see a garden, or some other feature of nature, especially not with her family, had laughed.

This allowed Lord Ashbourne to talk of the militia that was stationed in Meryton.

“I managed to discover which militia was your militia, Miss Bennet.”

“They are not my militia.” Kitty looked anxiously towards Georgiana for a brief moment and tried to convey in her tone that this was not a welcome topic.

Lord Ashbourne sensed this, so directed his next comment to his mother. “You will never believe who is part of that regiment! George Wickham! I am surprised to see him in the army.”

Kitty could immediately see that Georgiana had grown slightly pale under her bonnet. Not considering how she would figure to the either her aunt, Lady Matlock or the viscount and only caring of how to turn the subject away from Wickham – Kitty gave Cleopatra a taste of the whip that Georgiana had lent her, and called out over her shoulder, “Who is passable now, my lord?”

Lord Ashbourne accepted the challenge and rode up beside her and they continued the rest of the way to Kensington, riding in front of the carriage.

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It was not easy for Kitty, once arriving at Kensington to break Georgiana away from the party to make sure she was all right. For one it would have been impolite, something Kitty was surprised she cared about, and two it would have looked very odd and likely would have drawn more comments than either of the girls would have liked.

It took some time but finally Kitty found herself walking down a path with Georgiana. Both their aunts had sat down to refresh themselves and who knew where Lord Ashbourne had gone.

“Are you all right Georgiana?”

Georgiana nodded. “Yes I am fine. Though I am glad you distracted everyone. I know I should be perfectly able to hear his name being mentioned, but I am not especially when spoken by my family. I wish they knew what pain it causes me. I wish I could tell them.”
“Why do they not know?”

“Fitzwilliam thought it was best that no one other than those directly concerned, he only told Richard – Colonel Fitzwilliam, because he is also my guardian. I confess I did not wish them to know, they would be disappointed, perhaps very angry with me.”

“Why? It is not your fault George Wickham is an unconscionable cad! But let us not talk of him, let us sit down and talk of something much nicer.”

Georgiana gratefully took a seat near a sculpted hedge and smiled.

“What is it?” Kitty could not think what he could have written to make Georgiana look so unless – “He is not engaged is he?”

“Oh no! It is just. He was not very nice in his last letter.”

“No… I do not think he quite understood what I had written to him.”

“What had you written to him?”

Georgiana looked up from where she had been examining her own lap intently. “I had written to him of my new friend, of you. But I think I did not express myself very well, for I fear he misunderstood me! So I shall have to be very carefully how I do so in the future! Perhaps I should not try to explain things to him until he comes to London!”

“He misunderstood you?”

“Yes, but I am such a terrible correspondent, of course he must have done so. He could not think – as he does – if he…” Georgiana trailed off.

“If he knew me better?” Kitty remarked ironically. “Well, I shan’t ask you what his impression of me is!”

“Oh pray don’t. I am very sorry. It must be my fault, because he is usually so amiable to my friends – not that I have ever had – “

“Well I was not very well behaved when I knew him in Meryton. So of course he has a bad impression of me.” Kitty felt this was being a trifle too generous towards Mr Darcy, but Georgiana thought the world of him so Kitty was only too happy to find excuses for him.

“Well, “ confided Georgiana gently, “He seems to be quite mistaken about Mrs Sutton as well, so I do think it was the way I wrote about it. I was so happy that perhaps I phrased it very wrong.”

Kitty stiffened. She was on the point of enquiring exactly what impression Mr Darcy did have of both her and her aunt, for she could understand that he had taken her in dislike (for he was the type not to like free manners) but what had her aunt done? However the approach of Lord Ashbourne interrupted her.

“Miss Bennet I do hope you will excuse Georgiana but I would like a word with her.” His tone
was inflexible and Kitty noticed it gave his countenance a rather forbidding aspect.

Georgiana’s eyes widened. Kitty was about to make a flippant remark regarding gentlemen who abandoned girls alone in pleasure gardens, but on reviewing Lord Ashbourne’s face decided against it. Especially since Georgiana seemed to wish to speak to her cousin.

Kitty watched them walk off and took the opportunity to look at her surroundings. It was very pretty, even in winter.

It was almost a quarter of an hour before Georgiana returned alone, looking as though she was about to faint and obviously trying not to cry.

All Kitty could coax out of her was that her cousin had guessed some secret was attached to George Wickham from both her and Georgiana’s reaction to his name and had demanded to know what it was. He had apparently not taken the news very well, and Georgiana was convinced that he now detested the sight of her.

Kitty could make no response to this, and had not time to formulate one as her aunt sailed into view. All she could think of was to get Georgiana home as soon as possible.

“Oh aunt, Georgiana is feeling most unwell I think we must return immediately.”

“Where is Lord Ashbourne? I had thought him to be with you.” Clara was annoyed that he had left the girls alone.

“He has gone looking for you both, so that the carriage may be fetched.” Kitty thought rapidly. “But he did not know the direction in which you may have walked, perhaps you should make sure Lady Matlock is aware of what has happened.”

“Very well. Do not move. I do not like the idea of two gently bred females alone in such a place.”

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Kitty gave a sigh of relief as her aunt disappeared around a corner.

“Now Georgiana, try and be calm.”

“He will tell my aunt and she will throw me out of doors, and Mrs Annesley is not back until Wednesday!”

“Do not be ridiculous!”

“Yes, Georgie do not be ridiculous.” Kitty jumped at the arrival of another voice. This is becoming quite a farce of arrivals and departures! She thought.

Lord Ashbourne sat next to Georgiana on the bench and took her small hands in his large ones. “I am not angry with you. I could never be angry with you. There are people that I am angry with, but they are not you. None of this was your fault.”

“But I agreed – “

“You should have had better guidance, if that woman was any kind of companion – You would not have thought of George if she had not promoted his visits would you?”

“No.”
“And you told Darcy, rather than stick with your plan, did you not.”

“Yes.”

“Then no, it is not your fault. I am sorry that I – but you could not see me like that.”

Georgiana smiled, her tears starting to dry on her face. Lord Ashbourne then appeared to notice that Kitty was there.

“Forgive me I – “

“She knows Ash, I told her.”

“Yes and I swear I will not tell another soul, though I think that Georgiana should tell her aunt she will not judge her will she sir?”

“No, my mother would be the last woman to judge!”

Georgiana nodded. It took several minutes for her to completely agree to tell her aunt, and tell her that night. It was clear Georgiana felt ashamed of what she had done and clung to the opinion that she would deserve the censure that she was sure her aunt would express. But she did agree to tell, and to tell Mrs Annesley if Lady Matlock thought that was for the best, for as Lord Ashbourne said Georgiana needed guidance, and female guidance.

“For I am no help,” he added. “What I wish to do would do nothing but harm.”

Kitty brightened. “If I was you, I would go straight down to Meryton and run a sword through him. Is that what you wish to do?”

Lord Ashbourne blinked. “Not quite Miss Bennet. I was thinking of only…”

“Knocking him down? I think that is quite paltry! A mill! When you could duel with him! Though I suppose that would not answer for it would create a scandal for why would you duel with him? No it is much better for just run a sword through him.”

“I think arriving in Meryton only to attack him with my sword would probably create a scandal by itself, Miss Bennet.”

“But everyone would think you had run mad and not connect it all with Georgiana.”

Georgiana giggled quite unable to help herself.

“I love you very much dear,” said the viscount to his cousin, “but I will not spend the rest of my life in Bedlam for you.”

“Oh no, please do not Ash, for I am sure they make you wear very dowdy clothes.”

The idea of her cousin in Bedlam took a very strong hold in Georgiana, indeed it was an image that amused her greatly so when the elder ladies returned to escort her to the carriage she was able to say with perfect truth that although she would like to return home she was feeling in much better spirits.

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The trip back to London was just as oppressive to Kitty as the trip to Kensington had been once Lord Ashbourne had mentioned Wickham. Both he and Kitty rode ahead of the carriage.
Kitty was hopeful that her friend would recover a great deal quickly than she had previously if her aunt could provide her with support. Kitty had been taken aback when Georgiana had told her these events had happened a little above a six-month ago.

She could not conceive of being so affected by a situation, indeed she could have only understood it if Georgiana had still been in love with Wickham. Yet how she could be when she knew the truth! Kitty had fancied herself in love several times in her life, but that love had withered and died once some distasteful thing that been revealed about her chosen partner. (Usually this distasteful thing was a predilection for one of her sisters!) So it must surely not be love that kept Georgiana hurt over this occurrence. For what could be more unpalatable and more able to kill love than finding out your love was really only after your money and wishing to revenge himself upon your brother?

The more Kitty thought about it then more she realised it was about what Georgiana had been about to do - throw herself on the mercy of a man, leaving her family to do so. Kitty had thought that was romantic. But what if one picked the wrong man? She knew that she could not be targeted for her wealth, but it would have been Georgiana’s wealth that would have protected her, Wickham would had to have married her to get the money, Kitty did not have that certainty. It was certainly food for thought.

“Miss Bennet?” Lord Ashbourne sounded unsure. If Kitty had known his lordship, she would have known how very infrequent it was that such a tone would find its way into his voice.

“I am a very poor companion,” smiled Kitty ruefully. “And you have had a much bigger shock than I have!”

“I assure you Miss Bennet, I am very capable of recovering and dealing with shocks.”

“What I do not understand, my lord, is why you did not know?” Kitty paused, wondering why she had said that; after all it was possible the cousins were not close. Though from what Georgiana had told her there was not even a year between Lord Ashbourne and his brother, and Colonel Fitzwilliam was certainly a close companion of Mr Darcy.

“That Miss Bennet, is a question I too would like answered.”

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Chapter 11

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…Oh how I wish I had confided in my aunt much sooner. I feel a weight has been lifted, and I feel comfortable knowing that soon Mrs Annesley will be here, so that my aunt instead of being tied to me (not liking to go out leaving me here by myself), shall be able to go to parties with my cousin when she returns, which I hope will be soon. You shall like Annabelle, everyone does! This note is simply to say thank you and to tell you that we are going out of town for a couple of days to stay with a relative of Lady M’s…

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Clara watched Kitty pouring over the short note sent around from her friend.

“I hope you are not keeping secrets from me Kitty.” It was said playfully, but Clara was serious about such matters.

“Yes, but it is not my secret to tell, and she is not keeping secrets from her relations, so it is all perfectly acceptable.”

Clara smiled, and thought to herself for probably the hundredth time since meeting her niece that she was a good girl and vastly improving every day.

“Well as long as that is the case, then I shall not keep secrets from you. Mrs Hick is having a small drum, tomorrow and has invited us.”

“Have you accepted?”

“I have.” Clara laughed as Kitty jumped up and kissed her on the cheek. “That is not all! A good friend of mine Mrs Gilmore has invited us on Thursday to a small card party.”

“And you said that London may be flat at this time of the year!”

“This is flat! We only have one invitation per night! And not for all nights!”

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Kitty stepped down from Mr Sutton’s antiquated carriage and looked up at the Hick residence in Clarges Street. She dutifully followed her aunt up the stairs wondering who else she would know besides the hostess and her daughters.

All of the party from Lady Blaketon’s dinner were there, and many more besides. Kitty did not think it was a small party, and almost gaped at her aunt when she had whispered that this was not a crush in London terms.

A whole number of people were whisked before Kitty to be introduced; the only person really standing out was Mrs Gresham the former eldest Miss Hick. Mrs Gresham was about twenty years old and was only lately married, having married in the summer.

“My sisters told me all about you Miss Bennet! But now you must tell me about yourself!”

Kitty had no objection to this, and was quite happy sitting next to Mrs Gresham, though was slightly bewildered when some other young ladies gathered around her. She wondered what was fascinating about Hertfordshire.
“So have you seen much of London?” asked a girl with blonde ringlets who Kitty had not caught the name of, after Kitty had exhausted all the conversation that Meryton left open to her.

“Yes we took a drive around to look at St Pauls and the Tower and all the other sights, oh and we drove out to Kensington Gardens on Monday.”

“Who is we?” asked Miss Hick.

“Oh my aunt, Mrs Sutton, and myself…and of course Miss Darcy accompanied us around London and her aunt Lady Matlock came with us to Kensington.”

Kitty paused, “Oh yes and her son Lord Ashbourne.”

“Really?” Mrs Gresham’s eyes lit up as though this had been what she was waiting for. “And what is he like? In person?”

Kitty suddenly found herself in the centre of the piercing gaze of half a dozen young ladies.

“What is he like?” she repeated rather stupidly, wondering what on earth they would want to know for, and how she could describe the Viscount Ashbourne.

She was rescued from this fate by the appearance of Mr Blaketon.

“I have persuaded Mrs Hick to let put on a bit of a hop. Will you do me the honour Miss Bennet?”

Kitty accepted. How long it was since she had danced! She hoped that she had not forgotten any of the steps, or that London dances were vastly different from Hertfordshire ones.

They weren’t and Kitty had barely finished the hastily formed set with Mr Blaketon then she was asked to dance by Mr Bradford, indeed she did not sit down at all for all the dances.

Mr Fancot who she had danced with last before Mrs Hick announced supper, lead her down the stairs.

“You are an excellent dancer Miss Bennet.”

“Thank you! My sister and I love dancing and try never to be sitting down during a set when we go to assemblies.”

“Do you often succeed?”

“Oh yes! Well at least Lydia, my sister does, for if she is without a partner she just goes up to a young man and tells her he is to dance with her.”

Mr Fancot laughed. “Well Miss Bennet if I am ever at a dance with you and you have no partner you have my permission to inform me I am your partner.”

“That is very kind of you Mr Fancot.”

Kitty allowed him to fetch some supper for her and then sat down with him to eat her supper. She noticed she was getting some rather ogling looks and not just from men. Not that Kitty expected men to ogle her…

Mr Fancot seemed to notice the attention they were received and frowned.

“Are you going to Mrs Gilmore’s tomorrow Mr Fancot?”
“Are you?” asked Mr Fancot a smile on his face.

“Yes.”

“Well then Miss Bennet you shall see me there.”

Kitty laughed at this. “Very flattering. I hope you did not decline her invitation in that case.”

“No I never outright decline an invitation, or accept one for I can never tell of a morning just what I want to do that evening.”

“And yet here you are making up your mind today about tomorrow, be careful that you don’t have a change of heart in the morning.”

“I won’t Miss Bennet.”

Kitty decided it was wise to change the subject. “Why are we attracting so much attention? You are not some sort of august personage are you? A noble prince in disguise?”

But this change of subject brought them back to where Kitty had judged they were before. “No, sadly just a gentleman from Dorset, but I fear that this set tend to gossip and jump to assumptions very quickly, and while this is very true of most of London society, they are not quite as averse to showing that interest.”

Kitty blushed. Of course she was used to that sort of interest being generated in Meryton but she had thought London would be different.

“Oh.”

“Indeed Miss Bennet.”

This revelation did much to sour Kitty’s evening and she did not know why. She barely knew Mr Fancot and to be subjected to all those prying eyes. She wondered if that was the root of the question about Lord Ashbourne.

She now sincerely pitied all those girls in Meryton who had conducted their courtship in front of everyone. Poor Jane! And then to have Mr Bingley leave town without – It was too much to be borne!

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Clara noticed her niece’s distraction in the carriage ride home. Clara had enjoyed her evening well enough, though had surreptitiously kept an eye on Kitty and had thought she was enjoying her evening well enough as well.

“Are you quite well Kitty?”

“No I am not” – was the blunt answer.

Clara raised her eyebrows to express her displeasure with being addressed in such a way.

“First I am asked – well one impertinent question – though it was not that impertinent but it was the manner in which it was asked! And then everyone stared at me having supper with Mr Fancot! And you know why they stared at me!”

Clara did know why. “Well surely you should be used to such behaviour?” she asked gently.
“No! Not on the receiving end of it! And certainly did not expect it in London. I thought everyone was very proper in London!”

“No, everyone just pretends London is very proper. What was the impertinent question?”

“Mrs Gresham asked me what Lord Ashbourne was like. Why on earth would she want to know? Surely she would know him herself, after all this is my first season and I’ve never been to London before!”

Clara could answer her niece’s questions, but chose not to divulge the answers.

“Perhaps you should not dedicate too much of your time to Mr Fancot, or any other gentlemen, if you do not like the reaction?”

Kitty let out a long breath. “No! It is much more likely to make me want to spend more time with whoever I choose to spend my time with, to spite them! Though poor Jane.”

“Poor Jane?” Clara was momentarily thrown off by this change of tack.

“Yes, to be always in Mr Bingley’s company, to truly fall in love and then have him abandon her! See I shall be on my guard and shall not care! But poor Jane!”

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The next morning, Mr Fancot called to ask if Kitty was allowed to drive out with him. Kitty was doubtful that her aunt would agree, remembering Clara’s talk about never being without a chaperon. Clara however made no comment against the idea so Kitty was left to assume that a tiger clinging up behind the phaeton was perfectly acceptable as a chaperon.

“I am surprised you came to see me Mr Fancot, considering we are to see each other tonight?”

Giles turned his head in mock shame. “I am afraid Miss Bennet I must break my promise.”

Kitty frowned and then laughed. “Did I not tell you?”

“You did indeed! An aunt of mine who lives in Margate has requested my attendance; she claims to be an invalid but I have a feeling she will outlive us all.”

“You are a good nephew then Mr Fancot.”

“How do you know I am not dancing attendance on her simply for her great fortune?”

“Does she have a great fortune?”

“No. But I could be lying.”

Kitty laughed. “You are being very frivolous today!”

“Perhaps it is a result of my charming company.”

“Now that is too toadying!”

Kitty loved being whisked about the park in Mr Fancot’s high perch phaeton, and was sorry to see it end, though she did still have to write a return letter to Lydia and get ready for the party.

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Kitty was surprised at how well Lydia had taken her last letter, but she had, and she had written her return letter in a similar style. This made Kitty laugh more than she would have if Lydia had just written of the happenings in Meryton, instead of writing in a flowery, hyperbolic, tone much admired by heroines of gothic novels. Kitty laughed as she wrote her letter in a similar but more satirical tone, painting all those she had met in London in broad defining brush strokes. She faltered slightly when describing Lord Ashbourne, but she recovered admirably after spying the old Lady’s Magazines Clara had found in the attic. The ridiculousness of the story contained in one of them whereby a libertine, a Mr Fairfax, was reclaimed to himself by what appeared to be a perfectly normal set of actions by his wife, (though done in an overly dramatic fashion) appealed to Kitty. Though of course Lord Ashbourne was the direct opposite of this Mr Fairfax, but still it was difficult to go past the idea of ‘the romantic part of Derbyshire.’ Kitty wondered what the romantic part of Derbyshire looked like. She would have to ask Lord Ashbourne whether that was the part Matlock Close was situated.

The Gilmore’s lived in a comfortable house in Half Moon Street. It was very soon obvious to Kitty that the Gilmore’s consisting of a widow, her son and her last unwed daughter, were members of a much more tonnish family.

Mrs Gilmore seemed genuinely happy to see Clara and Kitty, exclaiming to Clara that she had been so surprised to see so many people in town in January!

“I thought I simply must have a little party for all us poor dears still in town!” Kitty was entranced by the lilting in her tone, and afterwards ascribed this to her being of Welsh origins.

It was at this point that Kitty realised she did not see the Blaketon’s or any of their friends. By all, Mrs Gilmore clearly only meant her friends.

It was a larger party than either lady had expected, and Clara not knowing anybody by sight apart from Mrs Gilmore, seemed more than happy to stand near the door talking to her old friend.

Kitty wished that Mr Fancot had consigned his aunt to the Devil and not gone off to Margate where he must be for several days. It was uncomfortable not knowing anyone, and it did not seem like a party where it would be advisable to introduce yourself to anyone, and Mrs Gilmore was too concerned with waiting for the rest of her guests to perform the introductions herself.

Clara was herself beginning to wonder exactly how they would be able to avoid standing in a corner looking to all the world like Mrs Gilmore’s poor relations, or some such thing, when the next guests arrived.

“My dear Lady Marianne!”

The lady in question was a middle-aged lady, who left an overall impression of being rather faded.

“Oh Mrs Gilmore, I am so sorry I did not respond to your kind invitation. But I had no notion that my niece would be in town and require my attendance.”

Kitty regarded Lady Marianne’s niece, she was a very pretty brunette with striking eyes, and demure would not be a useful descriptor.

The girl made a curtsey to her hostess before explaining herself to no one in particular. “How was I to know that my mother would choose this very week to absent herself from town?”

Clara chose this moment to bring herself to the attention of Lady Marianne Bassett.

“Marianne. I daresay you do not remember me – “
“Clara! Clara Sutton! Harriet said you were in town! How do you do? May I present Harriet’s
daughter Lady Annabelle Fitzwilliam?”

Clara inclined her head and assessed Lady Annabelle. She was a pretty girl and must owe much
of her stunning looks to the combination of her father and mother, as she did not resemble either of
them greatly.

“And may I present my niece, Miss Bennet? It appears we are both on chaperoning duties
tonight.”

“Indeed! Though why Belle even wanted to attend tonight I do not know!”

“Because it would have been insufferably insipid to sit at home!” retorted that lady. “Miss Bennet
would you care to take a turn about the rooms?”

Kitty agreed and smiled up at Lady Annabelle who was more than slightly taller than her.

“Is this your first visit to London?”

“Oh yes! Your mother has been very kind to us.”

“Well she had taken such a liking to you! And she wrote to me that you have helped with my
cousin?”

Kitty furrowed her brows. “Helped? If you mean by that, that I am Georgiana’s friend then
certainly I have helped.”

“My cousin’s manners are very reserved, especially compared to mine! I know my aunt was
shocked that I had returned to town with very little warning to my relations!”

“Lady Matlock was…slightly put out that you had not written the dates. “

“Slightly put out?” laughed Lady Annabelle. “Are you sure you do not mean my mother was
furious?”

Kitty made no answer, so Lady Annabelle pressed on.

“I am lucky, even though I found my mother not at home, her letter advising me that she was
visiting Cousin Lucy must have passed me on the road, that I have an obliging brother who is
happy to quit his lodgings to stay with me in Grosvenor Street! And an even more obliging aunt
who will come to parties with me.”

“Is not Lord Ashbourne coming to the party?”

“Yes, but he did not wish to accompany me. I expect it means that he had not decided whether he
wished to come, and also wanted the ability to leave whenever he wished. Selfish. “ Lady
Annabelle laughed.

Kitty smiled and thought that was probably the case. She knew the Lucas boys never wanted to
squire Charlotte and Maria around, and they were paragons of sisters! (Except for the desire to
marry revolting clergymen.)

Lady Annabelle was a charming companion and happily introduced Kitty to a range of people.
Though she was always telling Kitty that all the best people were still in the country. Kitty loved
the blithe way Lady Annabelle seemed to disregard the fact that they were currently in town, thus
her statement excluded a fair few of her own relations and her companion.
“You are probably wondering why I am not still in the country!”

“I collect you were bored.”

“Yes it was such a trial…oh Ash has come, and Miles too.” Lady Annabelle broke off and smiled at the two newcomers to the room. Kitty turned and immediately pinpointed Lord Ashbourne in the throng. The man with him Kitty judged to be a little older than the Viscount, and very handsome. Handsome in a different way to Lord Ashbourne as he was blonde, but he had an engaging smile. He reminded her slightly of a more manly Mr Bingley.

If this was Lord Upton, then Kitty’s estimation of Lady Annabelle severely plummeted, how on earth could she have been bored?

The gentlemen reached them and bowed. After a brief interlude of greetings between those of the party that knew each other Lord Ashbourne introduced ‘his oldest friend’ Miles Carlon, the Earl of Upton, to Kitty.

“How do you mean to stay long at the party my lord? Lady Annabelle thought you might attempt to run away?”

Lord Upton shot a look at his friend, but Lord Ashbourne laughed. “I would never do such an unhandsome thing.”

“Do not believe a word he says Miss Bennet, I have seen him do it with my own two eyes,” added Lord Upton.

“Yes he abandoned me once at a ball – “

“You were with mama, it was hardly abandoning!”

“He abandoned me, to the sole care of Miles and – “ Lady Annabelle broke off here in semi confusion.

Kitty sensed that Lady Annabelle had almost made reference to something that would be better off undiscussed and launched herself into the breach.

“I would have thought that you would both prefer to be hunting?”

“Indeed, in fact I came to town to see what was keeping my friend here,” responded Lord Upton. He smiled down at Kitty, “and now I have found my answer.”

“Really? But of course you know now that Lady Matlock is in town and does not wish to let her male escort leave.”

Kitty was not naïve. She realised Lord Upton meant to imply that she was the reason Lord Ashbourne was still in town, however that was ridiculous. He had been in town a week. Hardly absenting himself for a long period of time!

Lord Upton smiled in reply, and turned to his friend.

“Yes and I mean to escape my mother as soon as possible, in fact if you are not adverse I thought we should go into Leicestershire next week,” was Lord Ashbourne’s response.

“You see Lord Upton; nothing will keep a gentleman from his sport.”

Lady Annabelle had been unusually quiet during this interchange and used the break in
conversation to excuse herself.

Kitty noted that Lord Upton watched her intently until she had left the room.

At this point Kitty noted that a great number of people had sat down to cards, which was she supposed the point of a card party.

“I suppose we should play cards.” Kitty’s tone was doubtful.

“You do not wish to play cards Miss Bennet?”

Kitty looked up at Lord Upton as she stepped forward to whisper conspiratorially to both gentlemen, “I’m not very good. I do not think it very wise for me to play for money…or with anyone else!”

“Well, there I think we can help you, can you play piquet?”

“Marginally. Your mother only taught it to me several weeks ago mind!”

“Then let us play piquet, and Miles can watch.”

“Very condescending of you, my lord,” replied Lord Upton sardonically.

There were several tables for two set up in the corner of one of the rooms and Lord Upton pulled up a chair.

The cards were dealt but before Kitty picked them up she bit her lip. “I think we should play for some stake, I would not wish to be provincial.”

Kitty wondered why she added that, it was not as though they had openly mocked her, but perhaps they were by agreeing to play with her in such a manner, after all even in Meryton they played for stakes. Not to mention at Mrs Hick’s drum she had heard the whispers of ‘a mere country girl’, being passed about behind her. She was certain worse things would be said here.

“Very well, I think we should play for answers,” responded Lord Ashbourne promptly. “If you win a point you can ask me a question, if I win a point then I shall ask you one.”

“That is very impertinent of you,” replied Kitty in her tartest tone; it was more a lip service to what she felt her aunt would expect her to do. Kitty was not at all averse to answering question. Partly as she did not feel that Lord Ashbourne was a gentleman and would not ask entirely debauched questions, and partly because Kitty had no answers to give to such questions! Unless she pretended she was Lydia! If she had not been assured of these two points she may have felt adverse to such a game.

“Very well Miss Bennet, you may ask me questions and I shall ask mine to Miles.”

Kitty giggled, especially at the affronted look on Lord Upton’s face.

***&&***
Chapter 12

***&&***

Score

Ash: IIIV IIII IIII II
Kitty: IIIV IIII III
Miles III I II

*Injured shoulder, broken window, once stole apples from Farmer Maggot…*

***&&***

Kitty scribbled on the piece of paper with the pencil that had been provided to her after Ash had requested both items from Mrs Gilmore’s footman. She scribbled both the score and any little notes she wished to remember. After all it was pointless to find out such things from people if one didn’t store them up as ammunition.

She was surprised at her score; she felt that both gentlemen, Miles having filled in both for her and for Ash in various points, were being easy on her. Though she could understand that considering she asked far easier questions than either of them asked the other.

Clara had warned Kitty that most gentlemen of the ton were likely to be rather stiff and formal from what she was used to. (Unless of course they were sad rattles like Mr Blaketon.) Indeed Kitty had seen Ash being stiff and formal though that was while he was reeling from the shock of Georgiana and Wickham!

But nobody listening to the banter between these school friends and her would think either the Viscount or the Earl was anything less than affable and sociable. Indeed Kitty had a hard time drawing the difference between the evening and any evening she had spent at home. Though if she thought hard about it she could, it had not for instance descended into petty arguments, or stepped over the bounds of what was fun into scandalous behaviour, and of course the participants were far more interesting than anyone at home.

Kitty did not realise that the behaviour of her partners, had a lot to do with her demeanour. She did not know that young ladies of the ton often did not submit to play such foolish, even if completely innocent games, and if they did they used it to their advantage and asked simpering, stupid questions easily exposed for the flattery it was. Kitty asked questions straight from her own curiosity with no underlying scheme attached.

The only plan that Kitty had had since coming to London was to accept the first man who proposed to her, but that scheme had easily been forgotten in the face of the enjoyment London was providing. After all, her mother had been the one with all the matrimonial schemes; Kitty was unused to having and executing them all by herself.

Thus she was enjoying herself greatly listening to the revelations her questions resulted in, and had consented to answer some of her own. She had now the entirety of the history between the two gentleman, where each had been born, schooled and everything until now. They knew too about her own life, both expressing a wish to see Meryton. Kitty thought they would change their mind...
about that the minute they arrived in the place. Expanded also was her knowledge about various society members, and of course, of sport, both were loquacious on that subject. They had also ascertained that they all liked the colour blue the best and that at school they preferred the Classics, well Kitty would have if she had gone to school. They were rapidly running out of things to ask.

Kitty won a point and sighed. “I think I have run out of questions.”

“Impossible!” replied Miles.

“Indeed it is not my lord. What am I to ask?”

“May I take your question?” Ash asked it so innocently that Kitty looked sharply at him.

“Of course.”

“Well then, Miles when are you going to ask my sister to marry you?”

Miles glared at his friend. “I shan’t dignify that with a response,” was his haughty reply.

Kitty couldn’t stop a giggle escaping. She decided to rescue Miles. “I have thought of a question. Who is that gentleman?”

Kitty surreptitiously pointed towards a young man of about both their ages who was dressed meticulously all in black and could only be described as solid. He was standing in the opposite corner of the room to them and looked heartily bored.

“You have not met our host Miss Bennet?” Inquired Miles.

“Oh is that Mrs Gilmore’s son?”

“Yes, quite a wealthy man, and puts up with his mother’s parties, not to mention matchmaking, and the squiring of his sisters, though there is only one left now. A better man than either Ash or I.”

Kitty looked inquiringly at Miles, she ignored the obvious hint that she should reassure them both they were better men.

“You do not think he is likely to fall into the clutches of a matchmaking mama?”

“No, Gilmore is a confirmed bachelor,” replied Ash.

“Yes, a confirmer bachelor,” echoed Miles with a smile.

“But he is your age is he not? Are you both confirmed bachelors then?”

“No, we are not clever enough to be confirmed bachelors, we shall be caught eventually.”

“Miles, I do hate to be the one who points it out to you, but you are already caught.”

“A trap of my own making.”

Ash laughed and Kitty could not help joining in. Although neither she nor Ash had directly asked about Lady Annabelle, her name had arisen in many of Miles’ answers leading Kitty to the conclusion that they were definitely a match, though Lady Annabelle sounded as though she needed some convincing.

They had been playing while they spoke and it was Ash’s turn to ask a question.
“How is Cleopatra treating you Miss Bennet?”

“Very well, though I do not have a chance to ride her as often as I would like, in fact I have not been on her since our excursion to Kensington.”

“Cleopatra? Are you consorting with mummies Miss Bennet?”

“Mummies? No! It is a horse, a very beautiful little mare that Miss Darcy has lent me. Or should I say Lord Ashbourne has lent me, for he bought it for his cousin…”

“And Georgie does not care to ride,” concluded Ash.

Miles raised an eyebrow at Ash, but said nothing to him instead directed a comment at Kitty.

“You should ride with us; we would of course slow down for you.”

Kitty suppressed a childish urge to poke her tongue out at Miles. “When you come back from Leicestershire you mean? And should you be speaking for your friend?”

“Oh, I always speak for him,” replied Miles cheerfully.

“Does that mean I should speak for you?” Ash asked quizzically. “If so I think I may go find my sister.”

Ash had only half-risen from his seat before Miles made a move to restrain him.

“I think Lord Upton can speak for himself in that matter,” interjected Kitty smiling. “I think he will speak very creditably on the matter.”

It was at this point that Kitty became aware of the fact she had spent a great deal of the evening, in fact one could say all of the evening, in the company of two gentlemen. Even in Meryton that would look particular, so Kitty with great reluctance asked to be returned to her aunt.

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Clara looked approvingly at her niece. She had not had to fetch Kitty away; Kitty had come all by herself. Clara was surprised that Kitty had spent a great deal of the evening tucked away in a corner with two gentlemen who were if her ton spies and her instincts were correct, were two notable Corinthians or if one was to use vulgar parlance, bucks of the first stare.

She had seen them playing cards and enjoying themselves greatly, not to mention scribbling things down on pieces of paper. Clara was marginally alarmed. She very much doubted that either of the young noblemen would be fleecing her niece, but she knew Kitty did not have a great deal of money with her, only a few coins that Clara felt one could not come to a card party without.

She accepted Kitty’s return without comment; it would do no good to ask now in front of so many prying eyes even if they were only the vestiges of the ton at the moment.

However, one of Mrs Gilmore’s cronies, Lady Agatha Hagg, was not going to let the opportunity pass, as soon as an introduction was made between Kitty and herself.

“You simply must tell us how you do it!”

“Do what ma’am?” asked Kitty bewildered.

“I’m the doting mother of three hopeful girls and they could never inspire such attention from the
gentleman as you have just done! Especially such gentlemen.”

Kitty frowned. “We were playing piquet ma’am. It was very enjoyable.”

“To be sure my dear!” laughed Lady Agatha presenting what she knew was a knowing smile to the gathered ladies. “I hope you won a little Miss Bennet! But they are such accredited card players!”

“I won but little, and I doubt at all fairly, but we were not playing for money, so it did not matter.”

“Not playing for money! Well I do not know what to say to that. Indeed I do not. How very charitable!”

Clara was about to deflect Lady Agatha’s comments when her niece spoke again.

“Yes, Lord Ashbourne is the cousin of my very dear friend Miss Darcy. It was very kind of both him and Lord Upton to take pity on me and rescue me from having to inflict my card playing abilities on others.” Kitty said this calmly but directly to Lady Agatha. She then turned to the young lady opposite her.

“I’m sure you will be looking forward to seeing Georgiana again Lady Annabelle?”

Lady Annabelle smiled. “Yes! Dear Georgiana! It is a pity that Darcy will not let her come out this season! Perhaps she is a bit young, but to be cooped up another year! I could not bear it!”

“But Miss Darcy has a far different temperament to you!” retorted Lady Marianne; clearly wishing that Georgiana was her niece.

“Well it would be a very sad world if we were all alike,” concluded Clara before suggesting that Kitty accompany her down to supper.

The rest of the evening went pleasantly; Kitty avoided playing any more cards by taking a turn around the room with Lady Annabelle. Despite being three years older, Lady Annabelle did not appear to Kitty to be much different to herself, and not at all likely to assume Kitty would not understand or enter into her feelings due to her being younger.

From her conversation, Kitty’s theory that Lady Annabelle needed any persuading to accept a proposal from Miles seemed quite incorrect. Indeed if Kitty was correct she would welcome it. .

“I feel I must warn you, Miss Bennet that spending time with any one young man, or rather allowing him to spend time with you, does tend to set the tongues wagging!”

“I have already experienced that.”

“Tonight? That was nothing.”

“No at another party, at a Mrs Hick’s!”

Lady Annabelle’s eyebrows flew upwards. “How long have you been in Town? Two weeks? You are worse than I! To be setting up so many flirts!”

It was Kitty’s turn to feel surprised. She would not call any of them flirts! Indeed Kitty did not think she had properly flirted with anyone since she had come to town; Mr Fancot she supposed came the closest.

“No, do not say anything! You fear to incriminate yourself. All I can say is make sure they are
respectable men! Otherwise…. You shall find yourself creating a bit more of a stir than you should like! Trust me I have experience!”

Kitty wondered if that was a hint to inquire more. On one hand she was tempted to ask more, but on the other she knew that she shouldn’t.

“I am not sure I ought to inquire more Lady Annabelle...”

“Belle, please, or at the very least Annabelle!! If you are a dear friend of Georgiana’s then you are a dear friend of mine. She would never do anything to disgrace her family, like I almost did. Very foolish, I was trying to push Miles away by flirting with the worst rakes in town. I succeeded in my object, but it was not a good idea.”

Kitty smiled, she did not think at all that Annabelle had succeeded.

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That night, as Bents helped Clara out of her dress and into her dressing gown, Clara could not help frowning into the mirror. Bents took this in umbrage assuming it was dissatisfaction in her appearance, and thus in Bents’s abilities.

After assuring her dresser this was not the case she asked if Bents could summon Kitty to her rooms.

Clara wondered how to approach her niece. She did not wish to ask her directly because it would no doubt be seen as an assumption that Kitty did not know how to look after herself, or that Kitty was incapable of acting properly in society. Clara could tell that both were sensitive topics to her young niece. How Clara wished she had shaken some sense into her brother years ago!

On the other hand she could not abandon her niece to flounder along as best she could. Especially since she knew Lady Agatha would not have forgotten the ‘not playing for money’ comment. Heaven knew what construction she had placed on that! No, Clara did know, having heard whispers of ‘poor girl’ which all too soon would turn into other less nice words and ideas! It was at times like these that Clara wished she was in Debretts or some other publication of that nature. That way those nosy people could look up her family, instead of resorting to innuendo and gossip. Kitty, nor any of the Misses Bennet, if Clara could help it, would be painted as ‘out for what they can get’ even if Clara had to puff off her consequence to achieve such a thing.

Of course in this situation the ideal solution would have been Kitty come to her, but Clara was far too impatient for that.

At this point Kitty knocked on her aunt’s door. Clara thought she looked charming, with her night gown falling off one shoulder and her hair falling out of it’s plait even though it must have just been put up that way.

“You wanted to see me?”

Clara motioned towards the fire, which while burning low still gave out enough heat.

Kitty curled up in one of the armchairs and looked absurdly young.

“Did you have a good time tonight?”

“Yes, “ Kitty yawned, “I think I am much better at piquet now, though I’m sure they were letting me win.”
“I hope you won’t be too offended with me if I point out how particular your behaviour seemed tonight!”

“No I know it did. But I did not realise how quickly time was passing, and after all it was with two gentlemen! They cannot say I am dangling, or encouraging someone to dangle after me, if there are two of them!”

Kitty paused. “No, of course you are right, they can say that!”

“I should not worry, you have hardly committed a major social faux-pas! Though I am wondering what you scribbled down, it could not be vowels, for you were not playing for money.”

Kitty laughed, and thought of the pieces of paper she had secreted in the desk in her room. “It was the score and some notes.”

“Notes?”

“We were playing for answers! Though I did not allow them to ask me questions … well too many questions.” Kitty amended.

Clara could not help looking surprised she wondered what Kitty had scribbled down, but forbore to ask. “Well I am glad you had a good time. I meant to tell you this morning but I have received a note from Madeline. It appears your aunt and uncle have returned to town. We should pay them a visit on Monday.”

Kitty screwed up her nose. Of course she loved her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, but she had never been a favourite of theirs.

Clara noticed her reaction. “It would only be civil.”

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As it was their proposed visit was postponed until Tuesday as Annabelle arrived on Monday morning and begged to be allowed to take Kitty riding.

Kitty was quite happy to postpone the visit, considering that the weather looked as though it was turning and both her aunt and herself could foresee at least of week of inhospitable weather.

Annabelle brought news from her mother and Georgiana whose visit was concluding and would be back in town for Wednesday.

“She charged me to ask you whether we should make up a party to go to the theatre on Friday. We would have gone Thursday but it is Martyr’s day, poor Charles, and most of the theatres are closed.”

Kitty could not think of a better plan, but then she paused. “Will there be gentlemen escorts?”

Annabelle giggled.

“No I did not mean it in – “ Kitty became slightly flustered. “Oh this is ridiculous, I cannot say anything properly! Aunt Clara says that one should always have an escort to these type of functions!”

“I’m sure she says that because it is far more interesting if there is a gentleman in the party. They provide amusement, and are obliged to flirt with one.”
“Were you speaking then as yourself or as my aunt?”

“As both! I think I should like to be an older lady, simply because young gentlemen would have to turn me up sweet, and flirt with me if they wanted me to smile on their flirtation with the young ladies under my charge.”

Kitty privately thought that Annabelle just liked attention full stop, whatever her age and whatever her admirer’s age. Not that Kitty could at all blame her; it was a very elevating feeling. Mary would scold something savage though!

It was while thinking these thoughts that Kitty noticed a rider further along the path.

“Lad – I mean Belle, Do you know Mr Fancot?” Kitty pointed him out with her whip.

“Oh yes! Though he is a trifle younger than I like!” Annabelle smiled inwardly. *Mr Fancot!!*

“Would your mother like him to help make up our party?”

“What a splendid idea Kitty! I knew we should be great friends!” replied Annabelle archly.

***&&***
Chapter 13

I am now convinced, my dear aunt, that I have never been much in love; for had I really experienced that pure and elevating passion, I should at present detest his very name, and wish him all manner of evil. But my feelings are not only cordial towards him; they are even impartial towards Miss King. I cannot find out that I hate her at all, or that I am in the least unwilling to think her a very good sort of girl. There can be no love in all this. My watchfulness has been effectual; and though I should certainly be a more interesting object to all my acquaintance, were I distractedly in love with him, I cannot say that I regret my comparative insignificance. Importance may sometimes be purchased too dearly. Surprisingly Lydia appears takes his deflection even much less to heart than I do. Mama on the other hand is threatening to never speak to Mr W. again."

As it turned out Mrs Gardiner came to them.

Kitty had put on her green pelisse and was just calling for her aunt to hurry up; she had stepped off the last step into the foyer when the footman opened the door to admit Mrs Gardiner.

“Aunt! We were just coming to visit you! How lucky, we would have passed you if we had left any sooner!”

Despite Kitty’s reservations prior to the event, she was very pleased to see her aunt and enveloped her in a spontaneous hug.

“Oh do come up! Aberton please tell my aunt that Mrs Gardiner has called and we are in the drawing room.”

Mrs Gardiner smiled as her excitable niece preceded her up the staircase.

“I do not have to ask you if you have been having a good time.”

“Oh yes, plays and parties and all manner of good things!”

Mrs Gardiner sat down in one of the chairs, covered in striped gold and burgundy damask, and opened her reticule.

“Before I forget, I must let you read Lizzy’s letter.” Mrs Gardiner handed the letter over. “I trust you will remember that it is not for everyone’s knowledge.”

Kitty made no comment to that, but skimmed over her sister’s letter which imparted all the news that Lizzy felt her aunt would want to know, it was far more newsworthy than many of the letters that reached her. Kitty paused at the point which mentioned Mr Wickham and was all too glad that Mary King had entranced him away, thought she hoped Miss King had protectors enough to keep her safe.

In fact, Kitty thought perhaps it would be best after all to write to Jane. Even though she doubted Jane would publish the information abroad, she was likely to ensure Mr Wickham was not going to try and ruin Mary King like he attempted to do with Georgiana, though of course Kitty could
hardly write *that* into any letter no matter to whom.

“Kitty?”

Kitty looked up quickly from the letter. “Oh! I was just engrossed…”

“I could see that!” laughed Mrs Gardiner.

“Mrs Gardiner, how do you do?” Clara shut the door behind her. “I must apologise for not waiting on you earlier!”

“No please do not apologise, I am glad you did not for the house was all in an uproar, after more than a month’s absence!”

“I am afraid you will get little sympathy from me, as this house was all in an uproar after years of absence!”

“I do not envy you a jot!”

“Well Kitty has been helping me so I have not had to do it all alone!”

Mrs Gardiner looked approvingly at Kitty – a look which gave Kitty equal measures of pleasure at being approved of and displeasure in the knowledge that her aunt had thought her incapable previously of such actions.

“Are you looking forward to your niece’s visit in March?”

“Yes! We should have loved to have brought Jane back to town with us, even though her absence meant we could visit my relations in Hitchin. We shall have her with us for a whole month, so we cannot be that upset, although I would have preferred to have Lizzy with us more than a day!”

“Perhaps when she comes back from Hunsford she can stay in town for a while!” suggested Kitty.

“You will have to help persuade her that Thomas can do without her!” laughed Clara. “He seems inordinately fond of her!”

Mrs Gardiner smiled, but appeared unimpressed. “You have not seen Lizzy recently have you? She has grown into a very sensible and mature young lady.”

“I’m sure she has, but when a father prefers one daughter over all others, nothing good comes of it.”

“Only look at King Lear!” injected Kitty, involuntarily.

Clara tried not to let a smile cross her face, but gave into the feeling when Mrs Gardiner barely suppressed her own laugh.

“I would not repeat that comparison outside the family circle my dear, it does little justice to my dear brother.”

“Or in fact to me…” replied Kitty, “I’d rather not be Goneril or Reagan.”

“Have you any plans for this week?” asked Mrs Gardiner.

“We are to go to the theatre on Friday, perhaps you could come! It would make such a merry party!”
As Clara made no comment, Mrs Gardiner asked who was to be of the party.”

“Well, myself, my Aunt, Lady Matlock, her daughter Lady Annabelle, a Mr Fancot, and well then you and my uncle! We are to be in Lady Matlock’s box.”

“If it is to be somebody else’s party, you should not be making invitations!” admonished Mrs Gardiner.

“Lady Matlock would not care!”

“Madeline, I am sure she would welcome you as part of the party, otherwise it shall be just her and I, and the young people.”

Mrs Gardiner was forced to accept, and took her leave, feeling quite confident that a note would be sent around cancelling the party.

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To Mrs Gardiner’s surprise the party was not cancelled and Clara’s carriage called in Gracechurch Street to collect them. They were to go to the Lyceum in the strand and see ‘The Hyprocrite” which Mrs Gardiner felt was very apt.

Mrs Gardiner wondered if Lady Matlock was aware that she was about to entertain two people in trade. After all if the actions of her nephew and the Bingley sisters (for Mrs Gardiner also blamed them almost entirely for Mr Bingley’s defection) were the norm, the hypocrisy and hatred surrounding those in ‘trade’ still held firm. If sisters whose fortune was made through trade could sneer down their noses at a family who had such connections!

Mrs Gardiner wronged Lady Matlock. She did indeed know that the Gardiners were kept in style by trade and worse still that Mr Gardiner actively oversaw his business. But this did not matter to Lady Matlock. From her discreet inquires she found that they were respectable which is all that mattered. Indeed Mr Gardiner’s active endeavours in business made her think better of him, than she would have if she found him eschewing the earning side of his wealth.

By a chance of fate, Lady Matlock also discovered on Friday morning that Mrs Gardiner’s French relations were by no means in any way shabby, rather being of good birth, but with the unlucky fate of having to flee the troubles with barely a shirt to their names.

In Lady Matlock the Gardiner’s found an affable woman who in no way seemed displeased to have them in her box. In fact she seemed inclined to ask Mr Gardiner all manner of questions about his business. These were not impertinent questions posed to put them to blush instead they were questions designed to discover whether Mr Gardiner would be of use to Lord Matlock in a new business endeavour.

Kitty was glad to see that despite her aunt’s reservations she appeared to be quite comfortable. Mr Gardiner indeed looked quite in his element, he always enjoyed being of use to people.

This allowed Kitty to enjoy the play, and of course enjoy the other company.

“Did you find your aunt well, Mr Fancot?”

Mr Fancot smiled. “I did indeed.”

“I am glad your suspicions were correct, regarding your aunt”
“So am I Miss Bennet.”

Mr Fancot was far from comfortable. Despite being very young at the time, (he called himself so, even though it had only been two seasons ago), he had been one of Lady Annabelle’s more devoted admirers. She had treated him appallingly, but he had the satisfaction of knowing she treated all her admirers appallingly, even the one he and everyone else knew she was intending to marry.

It was not that he did not still like Lady Annabelle, he did. He liked her very well, but being two years older and far wiser (at least from his point of view) he could see how like a over grown puppy dog he and his actions must have looked to her and everyone else.

He wondered if she had disclosed this to Miss Bennet, he rather doubted it as that young lady screwed up her nose when Lady Annabelle referred to him as Giles. Something he thought ruefully, that showed just how much like a younger brother she had regarded him. He hoped that Miss Bennet did not think similarly.

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Kitty tried very hard not to laugh at Mr Fancot’s face. She had a feeling that he was wishing Annabelle at the devil.

From Annabelle’s actions Kitty had no doubt that Mr Fancot had dangled after her at some point. Kitty was not at all jealous, more amused. She did however notice Annabelle’s blasé yet pointed use of Mr Fancot’s Christian name.

While Mr Fancot was attending to something Clara asked him about the play, Kitty took the opportunity to whisper to Annabelle.

“Should you be using his name in that fashion?”

“Jealous?” whispered Annabelle.

“No, I just did not think it was at all proper…. ” Then Kitty realised she had at least in her head been referring to Lord Ashbourne and Lord Upton by derivatives.

“Kitty, as long as you remember where you are before you speak so, you can do anything as long as you sound confident.”

Kitty smiled, and then paused. If she referred to Mr Fancot as anything but Mr Fancot then perhaps he might think… and that would not do? Would it?

At that point the curtain went up for the second act and Kitty did not have to think of anything but the actors.

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“Giles, are you still acquainted with Mr Blaketon?”

“That is how I met Mr Fancot, so I can answer for him!” Kitty laughed.

“Indeed Miss Bennet is correct, Annabelle” Kitty noticed that Mr Fancot emphasised his abandonment of Annabelle’s correct title and tried not to giggle.
“Well Giles, I must say I thought better of you! Mr Blaketon is such a tedious young man, he has no conversation and when he did have any it was all about such ridiculous things as how many carriage wheels he could scrape past, or whether it was possible to walk backwards to Brighton.”

“Is that possible?” exclaimed Kitty much diverted, but also slightly contemptuous of such feats. They reminded her far too much of the Lucas boys and the officers at their most vexing.

Both Mr Fancot and Annabelle ignored her, far too engrossed in their own little tit for tat game.

“I beg you would not disparage my friends Annabelle, such games may be childish but they are not as wild as some of the activities some of your admirers have indulged in.”

“I am not disagreeing with you there Giles, duelling for instance is a very wild activity.”

“Duelling?! Who pray tell?” interrupted Kitty who was once again ignored.

“I do hope nobody has ever duelled over you… Annabelle.”

“I should love it above all things, Giles, if somebody did!”

“I do not think you shall have to wait very long Annabelle, with all your admirers.”

“Of which you were one, at least once upon a time you were Giles.”

“I am well aware of what a fool I made of myself Annabelle.”

“Oh for heavens sake! Do stop this nonsense. Shall I call you Giles too? Would that make you feel less … piqued about Belle calling you by your given name?”

Both Annabelle and Giles had almost forgotten Kitty’s existence until her exasperated voice called them to reason.

“Oh I am sorry Kitty. It is just I fear Mr Fancot is still hurt over my Turkish treatment of him for the past two years.”

“Not at all Lady Annabelle, I know that it was not solely directed at myself! I pity the man who offers for you and is accepted.”

“Oh I should behave better if I was in love,” replied Annabelle contritely.

Kitty snorted and then quickly turned her head. “Does this mean I cannot call you just Giles ?”

“I would be very happy if you did call me just Giles ,” laughed Giles.

Annabelle laughed. She had always like Giles, despite what she termed his youth. He did have charm and was usually to be relied upon, both in terms of his ability to achieve things but also in his address!

The fact he appeared to have been, piqued by her gave Annabelle pleasure, but she was glad he had moved past the fawning stage. Only two of her admirers had ever moved past that stage.

This was something that was forcibly thrust upon her during one of the intervals. The inclement weather had brought some of the young bucks back to town. Mr Blaketon was the only one who that came to the box to see how his friend and Kitty did, rather than for Lady Annabelle who he thought was not only above his touch but far too hot to handle.

The others came solely for the gratification of being able to boast of their intimacy with Lady
Annabelle Fitzwilliam. That such a rich and beautiful girl was still part of the Marriage Mart despite being out for two years, had set her up as rather a captivating prize, one that most men would take a chance of gaining, or at least be seen to be aspiring for her hand.

Indeed the only reason that Annabelle’s name did not grace the betting books at various gentlemen’s clubs around town was the existence of my lord Ashbourne, who would have taken great exception to his sister’s name being bandied about and my lord Upton who would have taken even greater exception.

Kitty watched in amusement as Annabelle handled her admirer’s. Kitty wished she was so adept at handling men, but she wasn’t, she never really had the opportunity to learn either. What she was good at was watching men flirt with other young ladies!

***&&***

“Are you enjoying yourself in town Miss Bennet?” asked Mr Blaketon after questioning Giles minutely about whether he would be participating in an upcoming carriage race.

“Yes I am.” Kitty wished people would stop asking her such insipidly inane questions. What was she supposed to answer? No, she hated every moment of it? Kitty resolved that the next person to ask her that question would be receiving a decidedly negative answer, just to see what they would do.

“I am glad of that! Jolly boring play don’t you think? Wish m’ sisters didn’t insist on my escorting them! London is so flat.”

Kitty attempted not to roll her eyes, but her action did not escape Giles who made a face over Mr Blaketon’s shoulder. Kitty barely restrained her laughter. Another phrase Kitty detested ‘London is so flat’. If London was so flat, she had a feeling it had more to do with the person that said it than London itself. One could always create amusement!

“Indeed Mr Blaketon,” she replied once she had regained control of her countenance.

“All the fellows are still in the country! Though this inclement weather will soon draw them back into town and then we shall have some fun!” He then turned to Giles. “I am going to attempt to beat Lord Ashbourne’s feat of three hours and forty minutes to Newmarket.”

“I beg your pardon,” exclaimed Kitty involuntarily.

“Carriage race Miss Bennet! Going to see how long it takes from London to Newmarket! It’s above sixty miles; I’ve had a curricle specially designed. The bets are against me I know, but for Mr Gale to dare say it would take me above four hours to get there!”

At this point Kitty would have astounded her acquaintance and relations at Longbourn, with a supreme feat of mental arithmetic – “But that is above 17 miles an hour!”

“Indeed,” replied Giles. “I would not even attempt it. I am not a non-pareil. And neither are you…..”

“Bet you a pony I am!” replied Mr Blaketon promptly.

“And this is a race that has been held before?” asked Kitty.

“Oh yes, though it is difficult to beat! “ replied Giles before Mr Blaketon could start prattling on about all the people to attempt it.
“And you are attempting to beat Lord Ashbourne’s record?”

“Devilishly good with a pair in hand…” mused Mr Blaketon. “But if one is going to be so
dammed good at such things, one has to try and beat a non-pareil. Though I do not think he has
walked backwards to Brighton.”

“I should hope not!” exclaimed Kitty before opening her program in disgust. Men! Did they not
have anything better to do!

Giles senses Kitty’s annoyance and reprimanded his friend for both using such language in front
of a lady and for boring her at the same time.

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1. Jane Austen wrote it far better than I could have, text from Pride & Prejudice, Chapter III of
Volume II (Chap. 26)

back to story

***&&***
Chapter 14

***&&***

...you will find it hard to believe, I know, but our party was enlivened by my nephew’s absence, despite this severely reducing the party! I do not pretend to know what goes on in D’s head but I wish he would either share his annoyances or learn to govern them better. His temperament spread to B., normally such an affable man. Indeed, I know no one better tempered than B. even, last Christmas, when R came close to shooting his head off. The standards of the British army have clearly fallen in recent times! The weather is appalling, and government calls, so you will see me in London earlier than expected, though I understand London is almost full of our relations already! I hope you will have time for your poor husband...

***&&***

Lady Matlock was holding a family party that night; enjoying the fact she did not have to make small talk to people she did not know.

Kitty liked these parties. At home, she detested nights or days when she saw no one but the same people over and over – especially when those people were her family. However she enjoyed playing childish games like spilikins and speculation when it was just the Matlock party – which this evening including Miles as he and Ash had returned from their Leicestershire sojourn that morning.

“The only fault of my dear Edwin!” exclaimed an exasperated Lady Matlock, “and he must pass it on to our children! Why can none of them be specific! Well of course apart from Ash…who states dates and then doesn’t keep to them!”

“I resemble that remark,” smiled her undutiful son. “By the by does Richard come with my father?”

“Why should I know that? I’m only his mother!” laughed Lady Matlock. “I think he intends to go North to see how Darcy does. Though what Darcy is doing in the North I do not know. Some business with Mr Bingley, but why he should need the counsel of both my nephew and son I do not know.”

There was a pause. “Unless...you do not think, Darcy or Richard has developed a tendre for Miss Bingley?!” The expression on Lady Matlock’s face was one of barely masked horror.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about there ma’am,” laughed Ash, from his position lounging in one of the chairs. He had one leg negligently thrown over one of the arms, as he leant back, clearly comfortable.

“From Richard or your cousin?”

“Either! Miss Bingley is not the woman to attract either my brother or Darcy.”

“Can you be sure of that?” questioned Kitty.

Clara turned her head at her niece’s question, Kitty had been uncharacteristically quiet this evening. She had wondered if she was feeling quite the thing, as over the past week it had become almost impossible to keep the noise down when Kitty, Annabelle and Georgiana had been together. Not to mention that Kitty had also been spending a great deal of time with Miss Blaketon
and her friends. She hoped it was not the presence of the men that was restricting Kitty, because it would be a great pity if she did turn out to be one of those horribly missish girls. For it was either that, or somebody had told her how flattered and important she should feel that she was spending a convivial family party with either of the young gentlemen currently present. She had no doubt that Fanny had drummed into all her daughters head the worth, of well….money, and while even Fanny did not expect her daughters to set their caps at unpleasant gentlemen, there was not that impediment here.

“Tolerably certain,” though the group could sense that Ash’s tone had become less certain.

At this moment, both Kitty and Georgiana realised what Ash was suddenly reminded of.

“You should be more than tolerably certain,” laughed Miles. “Even if one of them has fallen into her clutches a word from you should dissuade them! I remember Darcy when you returned to England! Such a gudgeon! You would not think it to look at him, but his attempts to try his hand at tying his cravat just like yours!”

Miles lost in this amusing recollection, did not notice that it did not raise a smile on Ash’s face. Indeed a black expression crossed his face.

Kitty felt very sorry at this point that she had even brought up the topic, and even though she felt herself on shaky ground that he could have been as absurdly youthful to …she infinitely preferred that topic of conversation to the one at present.

“Did you know Mr Blaketon was racing to Newmarket soon?”

Ash raised his eyebrows “No, I did not…”

“Giles – I mean Mr Fancot told us, apparently he is attempting to beat your record. I would have thought you would have better things to do then race your carriage…”

“Of course not, I have nothing better to do than to race my curriole and shop for tie pins….do not I beg you Miss Bennet think that I am anything more than a fribble!”

Kitty laughed. “One does not become a brigadier general by being a fribble.”

“Indeed one does, you cannot promote someone who does not know how to take care of the uniform, and of course they must appreciate shiny badges….”

Kitty heroically ignored this bait. “You do not look as though you care that Mr Blaketon is attempting to beat your record.”

“That is because he won’t.”

“You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“It’s a requirement if one is an officer….and certainly if one is a nobleman.”

“Now that is certainly funning!”

Ash smiled, completely losing the stern countenance he had had for most of the evening. “Perhaps, though I assure you if it was almost anyone but Blaketon I would not be so sure of myself.”

“I have never seen a more cow-handed person!” adding Miles. “He is a tolerable rider, but he should never be let near a pair or a team!”
“I am surprised. For G – Mr Fancot, one of Mr Blaketon’s particular friends, is a very good with a pair, and a good rider. We went riding yesterday morning together. You would have thought he would have taught Mr Blaketon!”

“Fancot is a bruising rider. I am surprised he has only followed one of the hunts this season,” commented Ash. “As for your last comment, I do not think Blaketon is the type to take direction from anyone. “

Miles coughed and muttered under his breath something that sounded suspiciously like “except that one time you told him to sell those greys.”

Ash shot Miles a darkling look.

“This is tedious!” exclaimed Annabelle earning a slightly hurt look from Georgiana who had been trying to show her how to play a concerto.

“Indeed. You should be entertaining me!”

Even Georgiana glared at Ash’s presumption.

“We could play cards,” offered Kitty.

This was shot down as tedious by Annabelle. Various other solutions were offered and found equally tedious by that lady. Clara and Lady Matlock withdrew to the fire, and let the young people sort themselves out.

“I know a theatrical! An impromptu theatrical! I am sure we put one on before!” Since it was her own suggestion Annabelle had no objections.

Ash groaned. “Do not remind me of that awful …”

“It was not awful! Just because you had to play opposite Louisa Hurst.”

Ash shuddered.

“What was the play?” asked Annabelle.

“If you were in it cannot you remember?” asked Georgiana surprised, closing the piano, realising that her idle playing would be overborne.

“It was a Midsummer's Night Dream.”

“Really? Miles was it? Oh that is right we cut out most of that awful Bottom stuff… we should still have the scripts around somewhere. I remember copying them out most faithfully in my best copperplate!” Annabelle exclaimed before dashing off to find the scripts and ignoring her brother’s heartfelt protestations.

“You cannot object to playing opposite to any of us! Surely I am not as bad as Mrs Hurst!” exclaimed Kitty.

“Ash shuddered.

“What was the play?” asked Annabelle.

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“You cannot object to playing opposite to any of us! Surely I am not as bad as Mrs Hurst!” exclaimed Kitty.

“I do not know,” replied Ash plaintively. “I have not seen you act.”

“And that of course was your chief objection to Mrs Hurst.” Kitty’s tone was sardonic.

“Indeed it was…did you think it was otherwise?”
“Well, I shall just watch,” commented Georgiana rescuing Kitty from having to answer the viscount.

“You will do no such thing!” exclaimed Annabelle as she returned to the room bearing handfuls of paper.

She handed around the scripts. “We cut it down to seven characters! And look we have seven people. ’Tis fate!”

Clara accepted one of the scripts happily; she had not been in a theatrical since she was a girl… and Fanny had always stolen the best characters and done them very ill. Not all characters should be played with a healthy fascination for their nerves. Lady Matlock had to be convinced, but she was soon powerless in the face of her daughter’s pleas.

“Now who shall be what role?”

Kitty looked at the dramatic personae and tried to remember the play from her brief reading of it when in Hampshire. “I will be Puck.”

“I claim Oberon, who shall be my Titania?” Ash stood up at this point, looking about, “Anyone?”

“Well it cannot be me,” replied Lady Matlock. “I’m not making love to my own son.”

Annabelle wrinkled her nose. “And it would be farouche to be making up to your brother.”

Georgiana at this point had gone bright red and was wondering how she would refuse without looking entirely silly, she already felt silly. It was ridiculous to compare her cousin, to Wickham (or, indeed, any other gentlemen). Clara noticed her discomfort and volunteered her services as Queen of the Faeries.

“Nothing would make me happier ma’am,” replied her king, bowing over her hand.

“I claim Demetrius,” announced Miles.

“I do not like all this claiming being done by the gentlemen!” exclaimed Annabelle. “I shall be Helena.”

“How very surprising,” commented her brother.

“Well my dear,” smiled Lady Matlock, towards her niece, “That leaves you and I as Hermia and Lysander, do let me be the boy!”

The party soon found that the play was not so much a play as sections of the play designed to allow as much dramatism as possible (plus the inclusion of all the romantic parts. Kitty sensed a scheme there, but wondered if she was indeed correct.)

“What else was of your party when you did the play last time” she asked Ash.

“Apart from myself and Mrs Hurst there was Annabelle, Darcy, Miss Bingley, Mr Bingley and Richard. I was Demetrius.”

“Mrs Hurst was Helena?”

“Yes, Richard was Puck, Bingley was Lysander and Annabelle was Hermia, it was not so
farouche then to play opposite one’s brother, though I suppose it was acceptable considering Hermia does not love Demetrius!"

“Leaving Mr Darcy and Miss Bingley as the king and queen! Gracious, I do not think your cousin would have been very happy.”

“He was not. I believe he tried everything to get out of it, but the Bingley sisters are not to be stopped.”

“Come this is not getting our brief rehearsal done!” scolded Clara. “Your line my lord.”

“*Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania*”

“What jealous Oberon!…”

Kitty dutifully watched the script to make sure they made no mistake, all the while imagining Mr Darcy so very formal and stiff playing the Fairy King.

“My gentle Puck come hither…” Ash repeated his line as he saw his faithful attendant was caught up in reading ahead. He stretched out his hand and gained her attention by lifting her chin with two fingers.

Kitty started. “Oh this is my part.” She exclaimed before getting into her part. Ash’s hand dropped back to rest between them on the chaise.

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The performance was hardly a professional one, the stage was mocked up by marking it out with some ropes stolen from the drapes hanging in the windows enclosure, there was no curtain instead it was imaginary. The set was equally non existent. The play passed off well, and the evening was an enjoyable one doing much to distract all in the room from any other concerns they may have had running through their heads. Though there was one moment that set itself above the rest.

“I am your spaniel; and Demetrius, The more you beat me, I will fawn on your. Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me, neglect me, lose me, only give me leave, unworthy as I am, to follow you. What worse place can I beg in your love – than to be used as your dog?”

This was an impassioned speech by Helena given equally passionately by her portrayer.

Georgiana leant over to Kitty and whispered “How could she say such things without blushing. It is most…It could be taken seriously!”

Kitty whispered back. “I think Belle does mean it.”

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Annabelle seemed surprised that her almost open declaration was not immediately met with a proposal, and expressed this feeling to her friend the following day while walking in the park.

“I think he is punishing me.”

Kitty tried to frame a suitable response, she did not think her friend would wish to hear the truth, which was from all accounts, she had behaved very stupidly with regards to his lordship and was paying the price – a lengthy wait.

Kitty had no doubt that Miles would ask Annabelle to marry him, but it would be on his terms,
something Kitty wholly supported. She wished that someone would treat Lydia in the same fashion; it would do wonders for her complexion.

“Kitty? Did you not hear me; I think he is punishing me!”

“Yes I dare say he is, and if what you said to me about playing with a dozen men’s, including his, affections, is true than I cannot and will not blame him.”

Annabelle looked put out at this forthright speech and then sighed. “You are right. I wish I had learnt sooner how very dangerous it is to toy with someone’s affection! He might never ask me now!”

Kitty turned her head so Annabelle would not see her roll her eyes. She had seen how Demetrius, looked at Helena, and she placed no confidence in Mile’s acting abilities.

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Annabelle and Lady Matlock, left Clara and Kitty to continue walking in the park.

“I’m sure I do not need to guess what her ladyship was talking of,” commented Clara. “Harriet says she is full of the subject, and that she would never have guessed Lord Upton could be so clever as to embark on such a good plan.”

“I do not think it is a plan, or rather that it is a plan to win Belle, I think it is purely self preservation. Oh, look there is Miss Blaketon."

Kitty abandoned her aunt to walk ahead to greet Miss Blaketon and a gaggle of her friends.

“Oh Kitty, just the very person we wish to speak to! We are planning a house party at Richmond, just for a weekend and you and your aunt must come. Do say yes Mrs Sutton.”

Clara had walked into range of Miss Blaketon’s speech to only hear the entreaty; luckily the group was quite happy to repeat the request, with more information.

Kitty had interrupted her aunt’s response, saying that they had no plans, which pushed Clara into having to say that they would attend.

It was not at all what Clara would have wanted. The Blaketon’s set reminded her far too much of her sister-in-law. It was not a matter of amusement, but a matter of gossip and curiosity. London thrived on it, but at least in other circles one might be reasonably able to point out one’s friends, people that one could count on.

“Though what we shall do I do not know!” giggled a Miss Thompson. “London has been so boring!”

Kitty rolled her eyes and was almost caught when Miss Rebecca Hopkins asked her what she had been doing recently.

“Oh, last night we put on a very impromptu theatrical.”

Clara’s fingernails gripped her reticle when she heard Kitty’s answer. She hoped that only Miss Rebecca had heard, for she had no hesitation in saying that Lady Blaketon would countenance such an activity, if it got into the girls’ heads.

Unfortunately it did, especially once Kitty had mentioned who else had been a party to the impromptu play. Clara foresaw trouble.
Chapter 15

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*It is to be such fun! Everyone is coming! And we have chosen a play, Congreve’s Love for Love, and you are to be Angelica and Mr Fancot is to be Valentine. We have it all decided. We have made up red curtains for the stage and have made Father bring furniture down from Blaketon Court. He was not at all amused, but we cajoled him until he submitted to our wishes! There are even a few other families coming to see us perform! It will be such fun! Here is your script! Do learn your part as best you can for we shall not have much time to rehearse.*

***&&***

Kitty looked at the wad of paper that Miss Blaketon had sent over via her footman. Then she re-read the letter. Kitty had not meant that they should take the theatrical seriously, or that she would have to perform in front people other than those involved.

It was not a feeling that sprung from reasons of proprietary, it was self preservation. She was quite sure she was an appalling actress!

Reading the play did nothing to allay her fears. Even in her estimation some of the sections were quite… well, there was no other word for it but *warm*.

To be saying such things in public! And to Giles, not to mention some other gentlemen she did not know!! She was not sure she could do it.

After a brief moment, Kitty dismissed the idea of begging her aunt to feign illness and stop them going to the house party. The idea of turning down a party of pleasure was abhorrent to her. Not to mention that for the first time Kitty found herself liked for herself, for there was no sister for whose sake they felt that had to be kind to Kitty.

She decided she would just have to steel herself to take part in the play. It might not even go ahead; surely one of the chaperones would object. Giles might even refuse to play the part. Kitty was not sure whether she wanted him to or not.

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Kitty declined going with her aunt to pay some calls in favour of curling up in the morning room that had once been her uncle’s study. It was called a morning room, though its use neither she nor her aunt had managed to discover. It seemed that it was all at once part music room, part study, part library and part sewing room.

Kitty was attempting to consign to her memory all her lines. She hoped that the performance would be one that allowed the use of scripts. Otherwise she was going certainly give a memorable performance!

She heard a knock at the door, and only briefly looked up to try and hear who might be at the door. She heard the butler deny her aunt.

“If your mistress is from home, I should like to leave a note for her.”

That voice made Kitty leave her seat; she slipped out into the entrance.

“My lord, perhaps I could give my aunt your message?”
Ash looked slightly discomposed, as if he were embarrassed at being caught in the act of removing his gloves. “I would prefer to write it down.”

“In case I forget? You do not trust me?”

Ash did not respond and Kitty dismissed the butler and led the viscount into the morning room. Despite being on the ground floor, she was fairly positive that allowing a gentleman to visit one alone in one’s morning room was vastly improper. But it was Ash.

“Here is some paper and a pen.” Kitty returned to her seat and looked in askance at her visitor.

“I had thought your aunt would have warned you about receiving gentlemen on your own.” Ash sat down at what probably was a relic of Mr Sutton’s study and dipped the pen in ink.

“Well we are on the first floor, and while this house certainly has bedrooms, you visited me. Or at least you visited my aunt.”

Ash glanced briefly at what Kitty was reading. “Practicing your speeches?”

“Yes.”

“How many speeches do you have?”

“Too many!” Kitty flung the script aside. “I wish I had never put the idea into any of their heads! Why should I be the heroine?!”

“Indeed, you are very unlike a heroine.”

Kitty giggled. “Is that a compliment?”

“It depends on what kind of heroine you wish to be, Miss Bennet?”

“Well I would rather not be one like in Mrs Radcliffe’s tales. To be fainting all over the place, and she was in love with such a – annoying little…I would have much preferred Louis.”

“But Adeline is a perfect heroine.” Ash’s face held no hint of a smile, though his tone proved to Kitty he was not serious. “Have you mastered any of your part?”

“Some,” replied Kitty.

“Do you foresee any problems with the production of the play?”

“Miss Blaketon assures me that there will be none. Oh well, it is something to pass the time and will be all amusement I daresay.”

Ash replaced the pen and folded up his note. “You may give this to your aunt when she returns.”

“Wait, I must ask you something. Does this sound at all believable – ‘Am I? Well, I freely confess I have resisted a great deal of temptation.’”

“Have you?” Ash looked curious.

“It is a line from the play!” laughed Kitty.

“Oh, then you are very believable.”

Once he had departed, Kitty unfolded the note. He had not sealed it, and even if he had she would
have opened it.

My dear Miss Bennet, has anyone ever told you how rude it is to open other people’s notes? Your devoted servant Ash.

Kitty glared at the closed door.

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The place where they were to spend the weekend was Lady Blaketon’s sister’s house.

The minute Kitty was shown the ‘theatre’ she knew this wasn’t going to be a private theatrical thrown together at the last moment. While the audience would be very select there would still be an audience.

“I am not sure – “ Kitty tried to address her concerns to Miss Blaketon but it was impossible. Miss Blaketon was in alt and would brook no interruption.

“Oh and it will be such fun! Even though I am only to be Mrs Frail! Rebecca was so cattish when we made her be Miss Prue! An awkward country girl indeed!”

“I could be Miss Prue! After all, I am an awkward country girl!” Though reading the play she did not think she could escape embarrassing moments by changing parts.

“Oh no! It was your idea, you must play the heroine.”

Clara still had a sense of foreboding, especially on overhearing this. It was not that it was improper; well, it was not entirely improper…

She wished she had accidentally fallen down some stairs, and had to remain in London, with Kitty by her side.

She was ashamed to admit to herself that she was partly testing her niece. She only hoped Kitty would pass it and that she would not have to know that her niece’s first season was ruined due to her lack of care.

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The weather was perfect theatrical weather – dark, grey and cold.

Giles put Kitty at ease almost instantly, for which he had her eternal gratitude. She was also glad that the other gentlemen in the play were all known to her from that first party at the Blaketon’s. There were no problems there when reading her part. They took it all in the manner in which it was to be taken; it was all for pleasure, nothing else.

However it was the actions of the young ladies that put Kitty on her guard. It was obvious that they expected a match to be made between her and Giles and that she had accepted the role opposite his confirmed it.

“You are the perfect Angelica! And do not you think Mr Fancot plays Valentine to perfection?”

“Yes, to be able to play madness so convincingly is a talent,” Kitty remarked caustically before begging to be excused and retreating to the seat below the window. She had claimed feeling limp from the heat the fire was producing, and it was not completely a lie. Kitty was feeling drained.

She was beginning to see why no respectable woman became an actress. It seemed impossible for
people to see that you were just pretending. Though not all people were like that. No one at Grosvenor Street thought she was really a fairy attendant!

Not to mention the gossiping that occurred amongst the participants regarding other participants! She also found that the other girls were inordinately interested in her telling them about the theatricals at the Matlocks. Kitty could understand why they were interested, after all it was only natural that they wish to compare, but they began to harp upon it in such a way that Kitty could not mention any of her acquaintance in that circle without feeling uncomfortable. Except of course to Giles, any comment she wished to make on her friends, she could easily do to him.

Kitty got as far as the rehearsal in front of the rest of the guests (the audience would not arrive until the next morning). It was at this rehearsal that she fully comprehended the giggles and expectations of the assembled party. It was insupportable.

Not only did she never really want to put on play, but she had certainly not asked to be the heroine, she was completely unsuited to playing an heiress! Nor had she asked to be coupled off with Giles. She supposed she was lucky it was Giles, not one of the other young men, who could not be counted on as Giles could to act within the bounds of propriety. But even then he was acting in this play, which was not the action of a good friend, was it? Kitty was sure it was not.

So Kitty did the only sensible thing, and for the first time in her life fainted. The only disappointment was that Ash was not there to see her become a proper heroine.

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Clara listened to the doctor tell her in a very grave tone that Miss Bennet was in grave danger and needed to be blooded immediately. Clara wondered if she should agree to it just to teach her niece a lesson.

Clara had not thought she could be as worried as she had been when right in front of her eyes Kitty had dropped lifeless to the floor.

At that moment, she could only be thankful that Giles had been so very quick in scooping her niece up and depositing her on a couch. He had taken charge, calling for a doctor and then carrying Kitty up to her room as though she had only weighed a feather.

It had taken all of a minute to realise once she had shut the door on Giles and the rest of the party that Kitty was perfectly fine, well, was not on the verge of lifelessness!

The most abominable girl! But even Clara had to admit as an escape plan it was flawless. All Kitty had to rely on was her aunt’s intelligence and ability to insist that transportation back to London immediately was necessary (and considering that was exactly what Clara had done, it had hardly been a risk).

Indeed Kitty’s indisposition seemed to have affected only one out of the party, Giles; the rest of the group simply re-cast the role of Angelica and went on with their amusement. Clara was interested to note that Giles resigned his role as well.

He came to the carriage window after the rest of the party had made their rather rushed goodbyes.

“I am very sorry – “ He didn’t get much further.

“What have you to apologise for?” asked Kitty, surprised.

“I should have realised – “
Kitty waited. Was he about to say he should have realised she was unwell, or should have realised that the play was a bad idea?

At this point Clara waved him aside. “Yes, yes Mr Fancot, this is all very touching, but I must get my niece back to London.”

In Kitty’s opinion, Giles showed himself to be a very poor sort of man when it came to dealing with aunts, as he allowed himself to be waved aside. But not before grasping Kitty’s hand in his and drawing it towards him, but instead of dropping a kiss on her hand, he turned it over and kissed the inside of her wrist, before releasing her and stepping back. Kitty stared at her hand and was relieved to find that her aunt had been distracted by giving commands to their coachman.

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“I hope you have learnt a lesson from this,” Clara had not meant to preach. She had always said she would never be that sort of authority figure, but now she actually had someone to be authoritarian to she found it was impossible to suppress the lecturing.

“Yes aunt.”

“What have you learnt?” Kitty’s voice had been suspiciously quiet.

“That it is best to say no very early.”

Clara made a disapproving clucking sound and then felt mortified with herself. She was turning into her mother.

Kitty laughed at the expression on her aunt’s face. “No, I have learnt that what might be appropriate for a small party is not appropriate at other times.”

“Very well,” Clara tried to sound stern and failed. There was a pause. “Though I wish you would tell me how you managed to faint so convincingly. I never could do anything as convincing.”

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As it turned out, Kitty’s acting skills were not as extraordinary as she or her aunt thought; the next morning, she awoke with a slight head cold and felt rather faint.

Bents was of the opinion that it was best to treat such an illness immediately, especially considering what was supposed to be the opening crush of the season was only a little over a week away.

Clara agreed wholeheartedly with her dresser; Kitty could not be looking anything but her best for Lord Merton and Lady Jennifer’s party. Indeed it would be also good if Kitty kept to her bed for a little while, considering she was supposed to be very ill. Clara had enough feeling for Lady Blaketon for her not to want it to come to Lady Blaketon’s ears that both Clara and Kitty had fled Lady Blaketon’s party under false pretences.

The only person who saw anything wrong with the idea of staying in bed was Kitty herself, until Clara promised to persuade Lady Matlock to let Georgiana bear her company.

“I cannot believe you even agreed to be in that play!” exclaimed Georgiana for the tenth time in ten minutes.

“You have said that,” Kitty blew her nose with her handkerchief. “Repeatedly.”
“Sorry,” though Georgiana did not look that sorry. “I was thinking of this dress for Lord Merton’s ball….”

Kitty magnanimously allowed herself to be distracted. Georgiana was fussing about in Kitty’s wardrobe, pulling out dresses and twirling about holding them close.

“You will look so very pretty!” exclaimed Georgiana.

“Unlike I usually do?”

Georgiana opened her mouth to protest, then correctly read her friend’s expression. “Do not tease me Kitty! You know you look very pretty all the time.”

Kitty rolled her eyes. She did not quite agree, but she did own she looked much better than she ever thought she would, which just proved that one’s appearance did rely on clothes.

“And no, it has nothing to do with your clothes!” injected Georgiana sensing what Kitty’s next remark would be.

“Well, perhaps not for you only have to look at the gentlemen to see that the same clothes do very different things to different people.”

Georgiana giggled and then flushed red.

This was not entirely what Kitty had been expecting. Georgiana followed her giggle with a string of words muttered in such a low tone that Kitty could only hear “most handsome…”

It was again apparent that Georgiana’s exposure to the male sex had not made her any more confident around them, though exposure to Wickham in particular did not seem to have made her want to eschew the male sex.

Instead of trying to get Georgiana to elaborate on a subject she was embarrassed about Kitty reached for one of the many ladies magazines on the bed and became engrossed in trying to figure out one of the dresses.

“Oh Kitty!”

This breathless utterance made Kitty look up to see the door to her bedchamber had opened and one of the maids was being almost dwarfed by a vase of flowers.

Georgiana almost pounced on the vase as soon as it had been placed on the chest of drawers.

“There is a note! Oh what am I saying, of course there would be a note, it would be rather disturbing to receive flowers without even a secret admirer’s note.”

“They are most likely from my uncle…you may open the note!”

Georgiana opened the sealed billet hurriedly; she had always wished to receive flowers, proper flowers not ones a relation had hurriedly picked for her, and not the ones she had purposely forgotten about that had come from George. No proper flowers from an admirer!

It was such a pretty selection of crocuses and hyacinths, all in shades of blues and purple, except for a lightly coloured red hyacinth here and there.

Kitty thought it looked very becoming as a contrast from the rest of the room.

Georgiana’s eyes widened when she read the note. “I do not think this was meant for my eyes!”
Kitty took the note.

*I hope these flowers brighten up your room. Forgive me for not dressing like a chimney sweep and discovering the colouring of your room. I hope blue does not offend your sensibilities or your eyes. Your devoted servant Ash.*

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Chapter 16

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My dear Georgiana, Bingley and I hope to be in town by the 11th. I had hoped to reach town earlier than this, but B. has business that cannot be avoided. Unfortunately this means that I shall be in town only for four days, before our departure for Rosings. Unless… are you sure I cannot persuade you to accompany R. and me to our aunt’s? It seems pointless then to remove you from Lady M for such a short period of time, but when I return in April it may be time for you to return home. I hope that Lady M has managed to keep you entertained, and you have not let An. convince you that you would like to come out this season. I know you would not enjoy it…

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Georgiana did not need such a letter from her brother to make up her mind that she did not want to come out that season. She could easily live vicariously through Kitty. (And certainly no correspondent, not even her beloved brother could convince her to visit her Aunt Catherine.)

It had not taken long for Kitty to feel better. Kitty was by nature delicate and often prone to coughing, but Clara and Bents had secret recipes that were jealously guarded by both, which restored her to health.

Very little had happened between rising from her sick bed and the night of the first true ball of the season; gentlemen had raced to fit in more sport before they would be commanded to squire their mothers and young ladies around the town and ladies made their last trips to the modistes, to make sure they were properly attired.

The only alarming thing had been that Kitty had met Lord Matlock. She should have known to reverse her assumptions; she had expected a tall figure imposing figure, due to the nature of his son, but Lord Matlock was significantly shorter than his eldest born and was not as imposing. Indeed he was quite affable with the same laughing eyes.

He had been incredibly welcoming of her, calling her by her Christian name as his wife did, and within days had pinched her chin in an affectionate manner. Kitty had never been treated in such a fatherly fashion before.

“So whose bouquet are you going to favour?” Georgiana looked longingly at the two bunches of flowers.

There had been three, the third had been from Lord Matlock but Clara did not think it would be correct to carry those to the ball, even if they had been given in an avuncular fashion. Both girls thought it had more to do with the fact that Clara wished to carry the flowers, in a continuation of some private joke between her and Lady Matlock.

“Could I not favour both?” Kitty was averse to deciding, even though she knew a decision had to be made. A small part of her wished to have both because then she could show the world how favoured she was. Not that it was much more than friendship.

“Well Annabelle…”

“Might be displeased if I carried Lord Upton’s flowers?” Kitty continued, agreeing with Georgiana.

So Lord Ashbourne’s flowers it would be. Both had sent charmingly written notes, and requests.
for dances to be kept for them.

It was a triumph, to already have four dances reserved before one even attended a London ball. Kitty was used to not sitting down at a ball, but Clara had warned her that this was certainly not to be the case at the Merton’s ball.

“You must tell me everything that happens! Everything!”

Kitty smiled. Once the veil of shyness had been removed, Georgiana was far stronger in will than Kitty could ever have imagined on that first day they met; it was probably something she did share with her brother.

Kitty was wearing pale lilac dress, over a white sarsnet, the dress had a small demi-train which Kitty had to be mindful of as she walked. The décolletage was low, and all the seams were trimmed with beads. La Belle Assemblée had the dress accompanied by a demi turban, something which Kitty felt turned her into her mother, so she instead opted for a headdress of flowers and pearls.

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Lady Jennifer had outdone herself preparing for what was shaping up to be the first real crush of a party, the ball that signified the start of the season. Flowers were seen everywhere and, considering it was only the end of February this in itself was considered a major triumph.

So too were the guests; at least four Almack’s patronesses were there, and a gratifying number of Corinthians and Dandies. Not to mention all the Incomparables and Toasts of the ton and of course those young ladies aspiring to take their places. There was plenty to gossip about too; the maiden speech to the House of Lords of a most promising young lord for example, was most talked of in some circles.

In such company, Kitty almost felt herself unworthy, after all she was only seventeen, had no money and was from the country!

She hoped, rather than knew, she acquitted herself well when again she was presented to countless people, she tried to at least remember names and their faces. That was the most important thing, she knew the worst thing she could do was forget someone’s name or appearance.

She had had that experience in Meryton when she had forgotten the name of one of the officers’ wives and had the uncomfortable experience of being cut in a fit of pique. Lydia had not been impressed, for if Kitty was cut, the ladies of Meryton often took the opportunity to exclude Lydia as well.

It was with considerable relief that Kitty espied Miss Blaketon.

“Oh you are quite recovered!” Miss Blaketon said when Kitty had reached her and her friends.

“Yes, I do hope the play was not spoiled. I would have made a frightful Angelica anyway.”

Miss Blaketon nodded, a bright smile plastered across her face, “Well the play was quite a success.”

But there was something in her tone that made Kitty swallow her next question regarding the play and allow Miss Blaketon to introduce her to the girls of her party with whom she was unacquainted.
It was soon time for the first dance, for Clara had warned against arriving early when Kitty had been pacing the parlour urging her aunt to call for the carriage. Kitty had no partner, but Miss Blaketon and many of her friends did, leaving Kitty with a young lady who appeared some years older than herself.

Miss Greysan moved over on the sofa to allow Kitty to sit down. “Have you been in town long?”

“Since mid-January, I have been staying with my aunt.”

“I understand from Miss Blaketon that you are acquainted with Lady Matlock.”

Kitty tried to suppress a small frown; that was something she was beginning to perceive was of utmost importance to people.

“Pray don’t be offended, I just meant that my mother went to school with Lady Matlock and I was hoping that you could tell me if she planned to attend, my mother has commanded me with a list of messages for her.”

“Yes, I do believe she is here, though why did you not – “

“Call on her before this? I am staying with one of my own school friends, a Miss Jones, a very worthy family but how do I put it delicately? I do not think I can, so I shall be very frank. Mrs Jones would impose on Lady Matlock.”

Kitty gave a small smile and wondered just how many people imposed on Lady Matlock. She hoped no one thought that of Clara or herself.

“Indeed Mrs Jones is very desirous of gaining an entrance for her youngest daughter, Sophia, a very beautiful girl; I think you may have met her?”

“Oh yes, Miss Jones! At Lady Blaketon’s party!”

“She took over your role in the play.”

“Oh I hope she did it much more justice than I could have!”

“I believe she acted creditably, but I was witness to such a scolding of Lady Blaketon by Mrs Jones for allowing the amusement to go forward. For she believes Sophia’s chances with the Duke of Kerle, or any other rich nobleman, have been destroyed by her acting in public.”

“But it was not public!”

“It was enough for Mrs Jones. Any social misstep and ….” Miss Graysan let her sentence trail off and looked at Kitty meaningfully.

It was only then that Kitty realised what a escape she had, though she was intelligent to realise that it might have also been the play’s subject matter that had made it even more fast in the eyes of society.

Private theatricals where the subject matter was unexceptional and where young single ladies were not acting opposite single gentlemen had to be acceptable. It would be stupid if they were not, especially when Lady Matlock had sanctioned one, but then Kitty thought of the St James rule.

She did not have much longer to ponder the seeming contradictions in societal rules, as the first dance was over and the ladies were returning. Miss Blaketon’s partner was a roguish looking blonde.
“Sir Christian Montgomery. A rake!” hissed Miss Graysan at Kitty.

Sir Christian was very handsome and had laughing eyes that reminded Kitty very much of the litter of puppies that she and Maria Lucas had fawned over the past summer.

Miss Blaketon introduced her partner to Kitty, and suggested that perhaps Sir Christian should squire Kitty for the next dance.

Sir Christian was about to reply, when he was cut off by the arrival of Giles.

To Kitty, Giles looked slightly out of breath; a slight flush had risen in his face, clashing a little with his hair.

“Miss Bennet, you have not forgotten my dance have you?”

Kitty tried not to gape. She had not promised Giles a dance. She had hardly discussed the ball with him; surely she had not agreed to dance with him and forgotten about it. If she had managed to do that then she shuddered to think of who else she may have in an abstraction agreed to dance with. Not that she minded dancing with Giles. Indeed since their parting at the house party, Kitty wondered if she should be thinking of Giles in a different light.

“Giles, I – “

Giles interrupted her by bending over her hand and kissing it, then without so much as a by your leave dragging Kitty into the newly forming set.

When the dance allowed him, he scolded her.

“You should not be speaking to such a man.”

“Why?”

“He is a …. I dare not say it in front of you.”

“A rake? Miss Graysan told me. But what do you expect him to do here?” Kitty also thought that she could handle a rake.

“That is not the point. He – “ here Mr Fancot lowed his voice, “has engaged in the most licentious behaviour.”

“Like Mr Blaketon?”

“No! Of the most… these are not the excesses of youth…”

The dance separated them at this point, leaving Kitty to wonder at why it was that Giles felt it was his duty to warn her, and wondering just what type of excesses he was talking of. Sir Christian did not look like the type – but then again, Mr Wickham had all the appearance of charm and he had a cold wicked heart. Then on the other hand, some excesses were just childishness or boredom, Kitty had seen that enough in the officers.

“What sort of excesses?”

Giles looked surprised, like he had assumed that Kitty would not need further explanation.

“Women….gambling…” Giles stuttered and then gave up, “and other things that should not come to your ears, Miss Bennet.”
“Has he ever pretended to love a woman, in order to use her for her money? Abducted a respectable woman?” Kitty had blurted that out, she did not know why and hoped that Giles had taken it as just a comment rather than something she may have personal experience of.

“No, he is not such a man as that! But he is wild, a libertine, and I forbid you to have anything to do with him.” Giles sounded quite shocked, so Kitty did not say any more. She had thought Giles was not as prudish as this; after all he had flirted quite admirably with her, and countenanced Mr Blaketon’s pranks.

Kitty was also slightly offended by the fact he thought he had any right to forbid her to do anything. He had no right beyond that of a friend, and even if he did have the right, Kitty rebelled against the idea. She knew that she had to obey her father and then would have to obey her husband. It was preposterous; her father had never taken enough interest in her to forbid anything and while she hoped her husband took more interest in her than her father, she was not sure if he was going to go around forbidding her to do things that it was a fair trade.

As the dance ended Giles turned to her, “Who would you like me to return you to?”

“My next dance is with Lord Ashbourne.” Kitty replied stiffly. “I hope you do not think he is unsuitable.” Kitty tried to convey with her eyes that if he dared to continue with his strictures she might have to stamp on his foot.

Unfortunately, Giles took the opening offered to him, “There is nothing to object to there! Leader of the ton! Very respectable, could learn a lot from him.”

Kitty almost felt herself in a forgiving mood when she saw how adorable Giles looked when he tried to straighten his cravat when they approached the doorway that Ash appeared to be lounging in. Kitty suspected he had chosen that position so he could escape through it, in either direction, if someone he did not like came his way.

“Miss Bennet, Fancot. My dance is it?”

Giles bowed awkwardly before leaving them, Kitty felt too much for him to coldly ignore him as she had wanted to several moments before and instead bestowed a warm smile and a press of her hand before turning back to the viscount.

“Well my lord, I do believe it is your dance.”

It did not take Kitty long to realise Ash was a far superior dancer to Giles, and she enjoyed the dance far better than she had her last, not least because Ash showed no compulsion to scold her as if she was a naughty little girl. She noticed the looks they were receiving both within the dance and without it, but she ignored it, she had faith in her ability to dance without making a fool of herself.

In-between dancing and talking of inconsequential things, Kitty caught sight of Sir Christian stalking about on the side of the room. He had a searching look in his eyes and Kitty wondered what he was looking for.

“Find something more fascinating than myself? I am hurt.”

Kitty laughed. “No I was just looking at Sir Christian Montgomery. Do you know him?”

Ash inclined his head. “Yes.”

“G- Mr Fancot, told me that I should not know him, in fact he forbade me from speaking to him, that he was a libertine, indulging in all the worst excesses.”
Ash smiled and replied in a dismissive tone. “Yes, his friends could possibly wish he would grow up.”

The dance parted them. Kitty pondered his statement. Did that mean that they were friends? Or just that he did not feel Sir Christian was as black as he was painted.

Ash must have sensed her confusion. “Sir Christian does not care for the opinion of the ton. There is nothing that angers the ton more especially when you do not care to the extent that you are indiscreet in everything you do.”

“Why was he even invited?”

“Well, he is young, and at the moment rich. If he does not gamble it all away and I do not believe he will as he is anything but stupid. Does that answer your question? But really as he is, he is no suitable companion for a female, especially a delicate female.”

Kitty ignored the teasing tone, or the implication that she was a delicate female. “You are not going to also forbid me from having anything to do with him?”

“I would never do anything so unwise.”

The dance ended and Ash led her back to her aunt who had extricated herself from her contemporaries.

“Are you having fun Kitty?”

“It has been enlightening,” replied Kitty.

“That is very enigmatic of you.”

Kitty smiled at her aunt and was about to respond when a young man who she had previously been introduced to, a Mr Wilhem Reinke who part of the Prussian Ambassador’s staff. He was a very earnest man who put all that earnestness to use when soliciting Kitty’s hand to dance. Kitty liked him immediately, a view that was reinforced by his not patronising her instead engaging her in a conversation about the war, and the likelihood of Prussia re-joining it.

At the end of their dance, she saw her aunt entering the card room, and allowed Mr Reinke to leave her, at the threshold of the room.

However it was not Clara, it was a hook-nosed woman who was dressed remarkably similarly to her aunt. That was the problem of relying too much on the magazines for dresses Kitty supposed, everyone else used them too!

Kitty felt slightly exposed in the card room, with all the older gentlemen and ladies staring at her.

“Lost Miss Bennet?” Kitty wheeled around to see Sir Christian.

“Sir Christian.”

“Well? Why has such a beautiful young lady hidden herself away in the card room?”

“I am sure you have seen women far more beautiful than myself. I know your reputation, Lord Ashbourne informed me of it!”

Though what she had heard was sketchy, from her experience and from her aunt’s colourful descriptions of men she should avoid, Kitty was fairly sure that did know his reputation.
“Touché Miss Bennet” there was a pause. “I assume do you know French?”

Kitty was not about to say her knowledge of French consisted of a couple of words, several of which were not very complimentary.

“May I remind you, Sir Christian that we are at war with the French?”

“I thought we were at war with Napoleon?”

Kitty ignored him. “Since you have a fascination with the French, I assume you know how to play piquet. You will play with me.”

It was the only way to deal with men like him, forceful, plus a man of his reputation would hardly refuse, and Kitty did want to play with someone she knew would not let her win.

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Sir Christian was certainly not letting her win. In fact she was glad she had thought to bring a pile of coins with her. However Kitty was starting to have suspicions that although her partner was not allowing her to win he had deliberately set the price for each point considerably low. He had also revised his behaviour towards her and was acting almost brotherly. If one had a brother who was a rake, that is.

Kitty’s suspicions were due to the surprised looks they kept being given, by the young gentlemen who had escaped to the card room as soon as they could abandon their female charges.

Kitty had experienced a pang of anxiety over her rash declaration to play cards with Sir Christian, especially since several eyes had fixed on them and the owners of those eyes had then had whispered conversations with the people around them.

But Kitty saw that others were playing in a similar fashion and refused to be made feel like a social outcast. Besides she could always claim she had no idea who Sir Christian was, Giles and Ash would not betray her and Miss Graysan did not seem the type to do so either.

The game was almost over when a third figure joined them at the table.

“Miss Bennet, I hope you have not forgotten our dance?”

Kitty looked up expecting Miles to be looking either worried or furious, she was not far wrong, he had manage to combine the two expressions admirably.

“But of course I have not. Is the dance beginning soon? The game has not long to go I believe. Though the ending I can already foresee.”

Kitty tried to concentrate on which card to discard, but when she looked up not only did she see Ash approaching but she also saw Miles look approvingly at first the stakes that Sir Christian had set and then at Sir Christian himself.

It was beyond enough. She was not a child. Nor was she ignorant of the pay or play rules that governed polite gambling.

“So I see that you are above letting me win, but not above treating like child. May I point out that neither you, nor Lord Upton, nor Mr Fancot, are either my father or my brother? I do not require any of your proffered filial protection. I shall await you in the ball room, for our dance.”
Kitty threw down the cards in disgust and with her head held high retreated to the ballroom. She had not meant to look back, but she did.

Sir Christian was staring at her in shock, she supposed young ladies didn’t often run from his charms, Miles was looking at Ash in the same state of disbelief.

And Ash? He had an amused look on his face and she could almost make out what he said in that dry drawling voice that always made you pay attention.

“That was well done. I have never seen a thing done so well.” To whom he was referring, Kitty never could tell.

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Chapter 17

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…I know this is grossly improper, for a single gentleman, to write to you, a single lady, your widowed state offering no protection from this attack on your unimpeached reputation. Nevertheless I write to you, in this gross imposition, to beg you to lend your presence to my opera party. Your presence would lend the much needed respectability that my company of friends lacks. We go on Tuesday. By all means bring Miss Bennet, I would not wish her to feel neglected…

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Clara sat in Mrs Gardiner’s drawing room, awaiting the sisters to return from Kitty’s inspection of Jane and Lizzy’s new articles of clothing.

Clara felt that she could detect the hand of more than just Miles in the letter she was re-reading; indeed, one could almost sense an evil genius by the name of Lord Ashbourne. Either that or he was drunk, or possibly both even.

Nevertheless, it was a highly flattering letter and couched in the exact terms necessary to make Clara comply. Not that there was anything at all indecent or licentious about a party of Miles’ making. She was also not at all misled by the throwaway reference to Kitty. Clara was shrewd enough to realise that her niece’s attendance was becoming perhaps necessary to more than one gentleman.

The week since the ball that had so deftly opened the season a month earlier than normal, had been filled with all manner of social engagements. Even now on-dits and rumours swirled around London. Clara knew that Kitty had become such an object of attention. For a young lady to attract the attention of such diverse men as the Viscount of Ashbourne, Earl of Upton, Sir Christian Montgomery and Mr Giles Fancot, at the first ball of the season, meant that she would of course be considered an entity in the season.

Rides, walks in the park, morning balls, Venetian breakfasts, card parties, routs and pleasure excursions appeared to be becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Clara’s musings were interrupted by the return of her nieces.

“Jane has the most beautiful rose coloured dress; she looks like an angel, well even more of an angel in it!”

Jane blushed at her younger sister’s praise.

“Jane will you never learn to take a compliment,” scolded Lizzy, laughing. “Now I wish you would tell me, aunt, of what you and my sister have been doing in London.”

Kitty collapsed on one of Mrs Gardiner’s fine couches, exhausted. How she would survive the season she did not quite know. She was happy however. So many parties and people!

The Merton’s ball had ended happily, something for which Kitty was eternally grateful.
Kitty knew that it was supposed to be an honour to be protected and that she deserved to be so looked after, but she railed against it. She was not stupid, or a child! Though she knew she was not intelligent, that she could be silly and not realise her actions had consequences.

She had realised that the minute she had left the Merton’s card room. Everyone had seen her flare-up at the gentlemen, though she doubted anyone had heard the entirety of her outburst. Luckily, Miles had saved her from looking ridiculous by almost immediately joining her and leading her out for their dance.

She had apologised to him, and been surprised when he apologised himself. For he knew he did not have the right, but from his expression it was clear he was not thinking of Kitty when he spoke so sadly of holding no position that allowed him such liberties.

Instead of examining her feelings, Kitty much preferred convincing the handsome Earl that to have the right to spoke as he chose, all he had to do was ask and that Annabelle would not say no.

“Kitty? Aunt Clara asked you a question?” Jane, in her gentle way, roused Kitty from her reverie.

Kitty blinked, confused, causing her aunt to laugh. “I was just proposing that we all visit the theatre tonight, since Elizabeth will be leaving early on Monday, when Sir William and Miss Lucas come to collect her.”

“Of course! Do you have to go, Lizzy? I know you would wish to see Charlotte, but Mr Collins!”

Lizzy smiled. “I am looking forward to seeing Charlotte and even time may have changed Mr Collins,” Lizzy’s tone contradicted this statement, “plus I have a great desire to see the great Lady Catherine.”

“Lord, yes! You must write to tell me what she is like! Such a harridan that even Ash pretends to be terrified of her!”

“Ash?” Lizzy looked at her younger sister quizzically.

Clara cleared her throat and wondered when her niece had decided to call him by his nickname, she had heard Kitty call Mr Fancot “Giles” and wondered what to do about that, it was far too confusing! She had worried that her plan would come to naught and now it appeared that instead of having one course open to her, Clara had multiple.

“Oh, I mean Lord Ashbourne, Lady Catherine’s nephew, and cousin to Mr Darcy.”

This chance comment, made Kitty suddenly realise she had never written to Jane about Mr Wickham. How could she be so selfish? She had forgotten it all in the enjoyment of London.

Lizzy did not look happy at the mention of Mr Darcy. “Is Mr Darcy in town?” Lizzy was not sure why she expected Kitty to know whether this was so or not, Mr Darcy was far too proud to be associating with people outside his sphere, as he saw it at least. What his cousin was doing, Lizzy could hardly speculate on.

“No, he and Mr Bingley,” Kitty watched her eldest sister stiffen at this name, and
wondered if that denoted disgust or love, “are in the North. So are the Bingley sisters, thank goodness!”

Clara noticing Kitty’s change in demeanour, took heart that her charge would watch her conversation in the future, took her leave to go help Mrs Gardiner with her young children.

Kitty was glad that Clara had left the room; it allowed her to speak more openly with her sisters. She would have preferred to have written what she had to say, but it was her own fault for forgetting.

“Mr Wickham? Is he still in Meryton? Still dangling after Mary King?” The abrupt sentences were all Kitty could think to say to open the subject.

Indeed it was a change in subject that confused both her sisters. Jane had hoped the conversation would turn away from Mr Bingley, the subject of many hours of inner lamentations and the cause of many wet pillowcases. Lizzy, however, had hoped to ask her sister more about her acquaintance in town.

“He had pursued her most doggedly, but I believe her uncle is averse to the idea. He will most certainly forbid the banns, and she is under age.”

“She will not elope with him will she?”

“Kitty, that is no joking matter!” exclaimed Jane.

Lizzy wondered why her sister would ask, “No, even if it was in her nature to do so, her uncle keeps a strict watch over her.”

Kitty’s sigh of relief was palpable, and caught the attention of Lizzy.

“You seem concerned for Mr Wickham?”

“No! I am concerned for Miss King. But if you think she is safe!”

“Concerned for Miss King?”

“Mr Wickham is not a respectable man.”

Jane looked shocked. “Whatever do you mean Kitty?”

Kitty paused before speaking. She could hardly tell either of her sisters about Georgiana, it was not her secret to tell. “I have learned that Mr Wickham is not a respectable man. I trust my source implicitly.”

“Who is your source? This Lord Ashbourne?” Lizzy spoke hotly, and even she was taken back at her vehemence. “Did he know the particulars?”

“Well no but he –“

“Then he has had his account from Mr Darcy!”

Lizzy was beginning to see Mr Darcy as this malevolent figure destroying the lives of all those he did not like, or approve of.

Kitty did not know what do say to this, she could contradict Lizzy and confess Georgiana as her source, but then how to confirm Georgiana spoke the truth, only
revealing the truth in all its glory would do that. For no one would ruin their reputation as part of their brother’s revenge.

Jane, sensing the uncomfortable nature of the topic for both her sisters, deftly changed the subject.

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The theatre was enjoyable that night; Kitty heard all the news from her sisters, and imparted her own. Though Kitty was more interested in hearing the Meryton news, she did not think her own London tales would be of any interest to her elder sisters, so she kept them to a minimum. If she examined her feelings more minutely she would also find she did not want to share her triumphs with her sisters.

However, Lizzy was suspicious of Kitty’s silence on what she had been doing in London. Lizzy had seen the long letters she had been writing Lydia, who had giggled over them but refused to let anyone else read them, claiming that Kitty only wanted her to know. Anything that could only be said to Lydia could be nothing good.

On the other hand, Kitty was so convinced that Wickham was disreputable, and this Lord Ashbourne must have been very convincing because Wickham was handsome and charming. Lizzy knew these were severe obstacles to overcome before her younger sisters could dislike someone.

Even Mrs Gardiner appeared to have been wary of Wickham, calling him mercenary in his attention to Mary King. Lizzy had defended her former favourite, but now wondered if she should have. Someone who could be so open about switching his allegiances…

It was now Lizzy’s turn to be roused by her aunt speaking to her.

“Elizabeth, may I present you to Mr Fancot?”

Lizzy had not noticed that the curtain had come down and that people were entering and leaving the boxes.

Kitty greeted Giles warmly as he took the vacant seat next to her. She had long since forgiven him for his actions at the ball, especially since he showed no sign of repeating them.

She was even more inclined towards him because despite being polite towards Jane and Lizzy, he showed no inclination to show them more attention than that. Kitty had always had the experience that when a gentleman met any of her sisters, well apart from Mary, that one of them became far more fascinating to him than her.

They talked for a short while, Kitty delighting in telling Giles about all the parties she had attended which he had not, particularly delighting in telling him about how they had had a picnic which had been soured by rain and how she had laughed so much at the gentlemen, including both Ash and Miles, caught in the rain. She had had to shelter under some trees with both the men in question and Annabelle until the rain had dispersed.

“I am sorry to say, Miss Bennet, that I must leave again….”

“My aunt?”
“My aunt. Though I suspect you will not miss me!”

“Of course I shall, after all you promised to save me from sitting down during dances.” Kitty gave Giles an impish smile. “Now when you return you must promise to coming riding with me in the Park, Lord Ashbourne when he condescends to ride with me complains so! You would not be so unhandsome?”

“Indeed I would not ma’am.”

***&***

After the weekend Lizzy departed with much food for thought and Jane did not expect to see much of her younger sister, despite them being both in London!

Both Jane and Lizzy had listened, astonished, to the amount of parties that Kitty had been invited to and expected to attend.

Clara had reassured them both this was perfectly normal and that Kitty was acquitting herself perfectly.

They perhaps would not have been so reassured it they had seen the dress Kitty went to the Opera in.

The modiste had made the décolletage too low.

This fact had been discovered only an hour before they were to depart for the Opera. It was hardly immodest, but it was not the sort of dress a young lady should wear, certainly not on a regular basis.

After a hurried consultation with Bents, Clara saw nothing materially wrong with the dress. It was not as shocking as dampening one’s petticoats and only the highest stickler would find anything wrong in its being worn once.

Kitty however was torn; she did not want to be seen in a bad light, yet she had her heart set on the dress. It was a beautiful pale violet gossamer gown over white satin, with the bosom, sleeves and bottoms trimmed with embossed white silk bindings. It was provoking, for she had received it just in time for the Opera and had been overjoyed, for she had already tried on all her dresses in an attempt to find one she wanted to wear.

The combined opinions of Clara, Bents and herself was that it would be acceptable to wear the dress as it was just this once. After all, she could stay towards the back of the box and wear the concealing shawl at all other times.

Indeed the dress did not even warrant a raised eyebrow. Annabelle greeted her warmly and even complimented her on the dress.

“It is such a pity my mother could not be here, she would catch a trifling cold right at the start of season!”

“Better than catching it in the middle of season,” said Clara knowing it was useless to remonstrate with Annabelle.

“That is very true. But Mama, has Georgiana with her this evening, so she will be happy. Though it was an effort to tear Georgie from Darcy.”
Kitty turned her head, slightly upset. She had heard of nothing from Georgie but ‘her brother this’ and ‘her brother that’ over the past days, and now it appeared that Mr Darcy was actually in town. She did not know what he had done to earn such loyalty but he could not deserve it.

But she was not going to let such thoughts spoil her night at the opera.

Indeed, it was a very merry evening.

They were only an intimate party of herself, Clara, Annabelle, Miles, Ash and their mutual acquaintance Mr Blacksel.

Kitty dismissed Mr Blacksel as ‘an other’, the moment she saw him, he was inclined to portliness being considerably older than the other gentlemen, but apart from this physical defect he had an annoying bray-like laugh and he tended to laugh at anything.

Kitty suspected he was chosen as the third gentleman because of these assets; he could in no way outshine his friends, though Ash had leant to whisper apologetically to Kitty that he was in fact a ‘friend of the late Earl of Carlon and my father’s.’ Kitty understood those type of acquaintances; she was forever being stopped in Mertyon by her mother’s friends, and she knew what a scolding she received if she snubbed any of them.

His role was clearly to entertain Clara, who had known him back in her *ton* days. However Annabelle had spent most of the evening flirting outrageously with him.

It had only taken Kitty a moment to realise why. Annabelle was desperate. She was frantic to rouse the jealousy of Miles and she was desperate enough to use whatever came to hand, including Mr Blacksel. Though it must be said Mr Blacksel was probably a good choice considering he was supremely unlikely to take the flirtation seriously.

However, this meant that Miles was unlikely to take it seriously; indeed Kitty wondered how Annabelle thought that he ever *would* take her protestations to Mr Blacksel that he was still in his best looks, and that she would so enjoy riding next to him in his curricle, in seriousness.

In revenge, Miles flirted with Kitty.

Kitty had then the choice between a return flirtation with Miles, or saving Ash from the ignominy of being ignored to flirt wildly with him. Kitty was uncomfortable with either choice, so chose to flirt with everyone.

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During a break in the Opera, Miles opened his snuff box.

“Did you know, Miss Bennet, that a man used to take snuff from the wrist of his lady?”

“Really? Would that not tickle?”

“For the lady or the man, Miss Bennet?” interjected Ash.

“The lady, why should I care what a man feels?”
Kitty held out her hand, palm upwards towards Miles.

“Well? I am sure you did not make that comment idly.”

Miles, smiled at Kitty’s challenge and carefully tipped some of the snuff onto Kitty’s wrist.

Kitty almost flinched when he brought his head down to take the snuff.

“It tickles! I knew it would.”

She quickly brought her hand away laughing. “But there is some left!” Kitty made to brush away the remnants but Ash stopped her.

“First rule of snuff taking, Miss Bennet; do not waste it.”

“Even if it is a bad sort?” asked Miles smiling.

“Especially if it is a bad sort. You save that to rid yourself of annoying guests. Or to give to very foxed gentlemen who would not appreciate a good sort.”

Kitty stared at Ash who was still holding her wrist. “Are you going to give me back my hand, sir?”

“I was waiting for permission.”

“Very well, you have permission.”

He brought her hand, smiled at her, wickedly, and removed the rest of the snuff. Kitty blushed and did not attempt to reclaim her hand.

“I say, you cad! Release Miss Bennet at once,” Miles exclaimed.

Laughing, Ash did that, leaving Kitty to wonder why she felt disappointed.

She turned back to Miles. “I have never tried snuff, may I?”

“I am very glad you asked me, for Ash refuses to let any disreputable – “ at this Kitty opened her mouth to protest, “ or – let me finish – untried person take his snuff.”

Kitty turned firmly away from the viscount. “Then it is very good that I would like to try yours, I am sure yours is much better anyway.”

Miles smirked, and held out his snuff box.

“If you are going to do this damned foolish thing, then at least promise to try mine afterwards,” drawled Ash.

“I fear yours will be second best, my lord,” replied Kitty as she tried to emulate the actions she had seen many gentlemen make.

It caused a small coughing fit, and a small sneeze.

“You see, Miles, Miss Bennet was right, yours really will be second best.”

“I meant yours,” Kitty gave a shudder and waved her hand in Ash’s direction. “Oh
that is awful. I cannot understand how you would … I am afraid – “

Kitty wrinkled her nose, and found a strong arm around her guiding her to the back of the box.

Clara, who had been trying to divert Mr Blacksel’s attention away from Annabelle, looked at her niece disapprovingly.

“What ever are you doing, Kitty? Taking snuff is not a lady’s pastime.”

“Unless one is a dashing, out of the common, female,” replied Ash.

“I am very glad I do not want to be a dashing, out of the common, female.”

“I am very glad you do not want to be one either!” replied Clara.

Mr Blacksel proved his worth by fetching a glass of water for Kitty.

While Kitty drank, he tapped Ash on the shoulder. “Is that not your cousin?”

Kitty looked up and spotted, in a box almost directly opposite, Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley.

Almost nervously she turned to look at Ash, a guarded expression had fallen over his face.

***&&***
Chapter 18

***&&***

Miss B{ smudge }. I had not realised you were in {smudge} do forgive me for the presumption of this { smudge } but I do hope that you are { smudge } and your parents and all your { smudge }’s. Pray are they all still at { smudge }? If it is not too much to ask, may I { smudge} on you? Sincerely Charles { smudge }ly.

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Darcy watched as Bingley fumbled trying to fold up the scrap piece of paper he had found. Bingley also dropped the stub of a pencil he had scrawled his message with.

“Do you really not think I should go around there in person?”

“No, I think it would be most unwise.”

Darcy had cringed when he noticed very early on in the evening just who was in the box opposite them.

He was separating Bingley from Miss Bennet for Bingley’s own good, anyone could see that. But he thought it was slightly beneath him not to mention that one of her sisters was in town, especially when his sister had seemed to have formed some attachment to her!

But he had sworn to Miss Bingley, Mrs Hurst and himself that he would not do so.

He had not counted on her being present at the Opera, and in a box with his own cousin!

Darcy had spent most of the Opera, instead of watching the performers, fixated on Miss Catherine Bennet cavorting in the box opposite wearing a most inappropriate gown, and seemingly encouraged by his cousin.

He wished Ash would not do such things. He did them in jest and while Darcy did not disapprove (indeed he had wished more than once Ash would play such a trick on Miss Bingley) he did not approve either.

Watching the flirtation happen in the other box, Darcy was even more assured he had made the right decision… but how to prevent Bingley from reacquainting himself? But perhaps there was no danger, after all Miss Catherine had shown little interest in Bingley in Meryton; she was unlikely to pose a danger to Bingley by reminding him of her sister. Maybe she would forget to mention it to her mother. Darcy internally shuddered at the reaction that letter would have on Mrs Bennet.

“Well, cousin, you have managed to escape Georgie.”

Darcy turned, his musings had meant he had not seen Ash leave the box.

“Ash.” He stood and greeted his cousin.

Bingley greeted Ash enthusiastically.

“My lord, can I beg you to give Miss Catherine Bennet this note?”

Ash, quizzically raised his eyebrow at Bingley’s pleading tone.
“I can do better than that Bingley; I can suggest you go around and give Miss Bennet the note yourself. I was instructed to bring you back to the box.”

Bingley needed no more encouragement than that and shot out of the box.

Darcy frowned and returned to his seat, turning his head away to hide his annoyance.

“Have I done something to offend you?” commented Ash, taking a seat also.

Darcy smiled, “Of course not.” There was a small pause. “You did not spend long at Matlock.”

“There was far more amusement elsewhere.”

Darcy tried to suppress a frown and a flicker of his eyes towards the opposite box. Ash was looking at him far too closely. But it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. It was one thing that Darcy had always tried to emulate, and never quite mastered.

“After all, you and Bingley were not such good company. It seems to run in the family. Georgiana has not been in spirits.”

Darcy was very glad at that point he was watching the movement down in the stalls.

“She was missing me. I am sure,” Darcy smiled.

“I do not think that was it. I wonder what the true reason was.”

There was a pause. Darcy tried to turn the conversation towards the Opera but Ash was stuck on the subject.

“It must have been something important, for Georgiana may be shy but she had such a sunny nature.”

“I do not think I shall ever understand women, otherwise I would be happy to enlighten you.”

Whatever Ash’s response to that was going to be, Darcy was forever glad that the signal for the resumption of the Opera was given.

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Bingley looked pained.

“Well it would not do to leave Darcy alone!” A short bow and he left, upset that instead of being able to question Miss Catherine about her sister, or to search for some of Jane in her face, he had been accosted by her aunt. A very worthy woman but not who he wished to speak to.

“So that is the young man who has my house,” commented Clara as Bingley left.

“Why did you not tell him that you owned Netherfield?” asked Kitty. She had been waiting for that to come up in their short conversation but her aunt had kept it to pleasantries.

“I should not wish to embarrass him! Now that it seems he will go there no more. He may suspect that I only tell him to find out what is wrong with the place, and that secretly I am offended with him.”

Kitty thought that perhaps her aunt just liked keeping everyone in the dark.
“Besides, Kitty, he could hardly say to me it was a whole family of Bennets that was keeping him away could he?”

Kitty giggled.


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However the chance meeting at the Opera set in motion in Kitty’s mind a plan. A perfect plan – to either prove the love Mr Bingley had for Jane, or to allow Jane some measure of revenge. Neither option would Jane force herself, which was why she had four sisters to do those things that were distasteful to her!

Jane walked beside her sister wondering exactly how much money her aunt had outlaid for Kitty’s wardrobe, not that she was jealous or begrudging of it, she just hoped that her sister would not become used to such luxuries.

But looking at the way many of the other young ladies of the *ton* were dressed, it did not appear that Kitty was *so* very fine after all.

Even so Kitty was elegantly dressed out in a muslin walking gown, lemon coloured chip hat (with matching gloves and shoes), pale pink sarsnet scarf and matching parasol. She looked very smart, even with the feather curling down from her bonnet. The best part, Jane decided, was that she seemed completely unconscious of it. Not that Jane ever expected she would be, as Jane found it incomprehensible that anyone *would* be conscious, let alone *appear* conscious of such a thing!

“The Opera was so much fun, next time you must come with us!” Kitty was trying not to mention the presence of Mr Bingley, because Jane could (very rarely) be stubborn and it would be best not to arouse that side of her at this point.

Jane and Mrs Gardiner murmured some comment in response, but Kitty espied her target and excused herself to walk very fast (not run for that was very unladylike, but one would be hard pressed to see the difference) towards the sighted carriage.

“Lady Matlock, I see you are quite recovered!”

Lady Matlock stretched down her hand and patted Kitty on the cheek. “Yes I am quite recovered, now I wonder if you are pleased for my sake, or because I am well enough to do as you requested?”

Kitty pouted, something she had not done since leaving Meryton. “How could you ask me such a thing?”

“I am only funning, my dear. Now I have done what you asked! And may I say that I have no idea what you shall do to make it up to me, but it shall have to be something very large!”

“Yes, yes, but what did they say?!” Kitty was impatient as Jane and Aunt Gardiner were slowly but surely closing the gap between them.

“Inviting that horrid Bingley woman, and her sister and husband too, to *my* ball, just so their brother would come! You would be well served if they had accepted and he had refused!”

“He did not?”

“No he did not, they all accepted! And I know that all of Miss Bingley’s acquaintance have heard the story exaggerated to the point where I could not have organised the ball without her and how it is given in her honour. Her conceit knows no bounds.” Then inexplicably Lady Matlock added,
“Poor woman.”

Kitty clapped her hands together happily. One obstacle down.

“Ah, Mrs Gardiner, I was on my way to visit you, but I thought perhaps I would see you here. I come to issue an invitation for you, and your niece and Mr Gardiner to my Ball on Friday. It is very short notice, but I have been ill, so you must excuse me.”

Jane looked uncomfortable, even after her introduction to Lady Matlock, but Mrs Gardiner deftly answered. “I am afraid I shall have to decline for myself and my husband, but I see no reason that Jane should not go. I assume Mrs Sutton would be willing to escort her.”

“But, Aunt, I cannot – “

“And why not, pray? You deserve some fun – “

“And dancing!” Kitty interrupted her aunt. “With all the handsome men!”

Jane blushed, and gave her acceptance *sotto voce*.

Kitty suppressed the urge to clap her hands together gleefully. Twice in one day was probably too much.

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Friday could not come soon enough for Kitty. She was almost impatient with her newly forming court of admirers and was impatient with those who had known her longer.

Georgiana had simply scolded her, informed her tartly that matchmaking never worked and insisted she help sew the chair cover she was making for her brother’s return from Rosings. Kitty had resisted the urge to incorporate a rude message on it, she had seen Darcy watching her for the rest of the Opera and he had radiated disapproval. Kitty had never more wanted to slap someone with her fan.

Clara had directed her niece’s energy into constructive channels and everyone else had ignored her restlessness, though she had sensed that Giles had been offended or hurt by her shortness with him. Kitty had tried to make amends by only expressing her frustration with those who were impervious to it, namely Miles and Ash.

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Georgiana giggled as Kitty yelped.

“Ow!”

“Well, sit still! Otherwise I shall keep sticking these pins into you!”

Georgiana was helping dress Kitty’s hair for the ball. They were discussing all the events that Kitty had already been to, and all the people she had met. Kitty had not had much time to tell Georgiana all about her season, due to her brother.

But his last days before leaving for Rosings seemed to suddenly be taken up by urgent business with Bingley. So Kitty, apart from that brief glimpse at the Opera, had not seen him.
Sadly, she had not seen the Colonel either; she had seen a portrait of him that Lord Matlock had shown her and from his and Ash’s description of him, he sounded like someone Kitty would love to know.

And now they were both at Rosings, and Kitty hoped that Lizzy was giving one of them, at least, her best effort with regards to teasing and being provoking.

“There, finished.” Georgiana stood back and admired her handiwork.

“Thank you,” Kitty gave Georgiana a kiss on the cheek.

“Now, how many dances do you have free?”

Kitty rolled her eyes, and looked at her dance card. “Not that many.”

Georgiana and Kitty giggled. “A success! I hope though you saved dances for my cousin!”

“Of course, it would be very churlish of me not to considering he was so obliging to bring me into fashion.”

Kitty picked up her reticle and her bouquet of flowers and checked herself in the looking glass. “Whether he meant to or not.”

Georgiana frowned. “You are being very flippant – you do like Ash…?”

“Of course I do.”

Georgiana was not convinced by this and looked worried. “But – “

However at this point Jane entered the room; she was dressed all in white and looked like some fairy princess, but far more elegant than the school room misses that often tried this look.

“Well, I think Aunt Clara is ready to leave…”

“Oh have I kept you both waiting?”

Georgiana complemented Jane’s gown profusely, and Jane almost as vehemently shook her head with an accompanying “no, no”

Kitty laughed. “I should never have thought to see you both arguing with each other thus!”

“We are not arguing, Kitty!” exclaimed Jane

“Oh no, but she will not see that she looks so very beautiful,” returned Georgiana.

Jane was forced to concede for the sake of harmony.

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“It was very kind of you to have this dress made for me, Aunt Clara…I –“

“Oh shush, you are my niece and very beautiful, do I need any other reason to spoil you in this way? What negative construction have you placed on my action?!”

Jane realised she was outmanoeuvred, as she did not think her aunt seriously thought she was being suspicious!
Jane’s dance card was not empty, as Kitty had made sure she had introduced her sister to as many gentlemen as possible. It would not do for Mr Bingley to see Jane again, and for Jane to have all the time in the world for him, even if this is what she most wanted to do.

And from the reaction of the gentlemen when they arrived at Lady Matlock’s, her remaining dances would be soon solicited.

Kitty hoped this would not happen before Mr Bingley arrived.

“What are you planning, Miss Bennet?” came a voice from behind her.

Kitty frowned. “I am not planning anything my lord, and you really should not sneak up on people like that.”

Leaning down Ash looked over Kitty’s shoulder at what she was looking at – the door.

“If you are awaiting Mr Bingley, I am afraid he was not invited for dinner. Not even you could cajole my mother into that. I do not think anyone could. “

Kitty sighed. “But that means that Jane might not have any dances left for Mr Bingley.”

“Mr Bingley can have my dances.”

Kitty turned and frowned. “You asked my sister to dance?”

“It was only polite, but more importantly she is very beautiful.”

Kitty suddenly found a burning desire to flirt with one of Lady Matlock’s nephews, Mr Andrew Bassett.

As the table for dinner was set according to precedence, Kitty had ample opportunity to do so before the ball actually began.

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“Why are you hovering over here near the door?”

“I am waiting for the Bingleys, Belle!”

“Why?” Annabelle sounded horrified; she avoided Miss Bingley whenever she could.

“Never you mind!”

“But…”

Kitty waved frantically at her friend to be silent, because Jane, who had been talking to Clara had moved their way.

“Jane, do you see anyone we know?”

“So many people, and Aunt Clara says there are many more people to come. And who do I know in town, Kitty?”

“I don’t know, we may have some acquaintance.” Kitty tried to sound innocent.

“You mean you have some acquaintance! So many people, I wonder why people prefer town to the country!”
Jane looked at the milling people and was alarmed, how she did wish she had someone comfortable to talk to. Kitty was as far from comfortable as you could get; she was so at home with all the people, and could not understand at all why Jane could not be.

At this moment Kitty noticed the Bingleys arriving and clutched her sister’s arm; indeed it had to be them, for who else would wear such a virulent shade of orange and green together than Miss Bingley?

“Jane, he has come!”

“Who has come?” Jane turned back to her sister in surprise. “Kitty?”

“Mr Bingley!” Kitty hoped she sounded surprised.

Jane looked towards the door, and indeed saw it was Mr Bingley. Then he saw her.

Jane tried to turn away and flee, but Kitty had too strong a grasp.

“Miss Bennet!” Bingley had entirely ignored the etiquette of greeting his host and hostess and had made straight for them.

“Miss Bennet I cannot tell you how delighted to see you! It is…almost three months since I last saw you at the ball at Netherfield. You look so well.”

“Mr Bingley,” murmured Jane with a simple curtsey.

Annabelle stared at Kitty, Kitty smiled back. It was as if Mr Bingley could see no one else but Jane. Annabelle had hardly ever seen anything like it.

“Indeed. Well, I hope you have a dance available for me Miss Bennet, being such old friends….”

Jane blushed and stared at the floor. “I am afraid sir, that all my dances - “

“Do not be silly Jane, you have the Boulanger, I’m sure you would like to dance that with Mr Bingley,” interrupted Kitty firmly.

Jane looked alarmed and whispered at Kitty, “No, Kitty. Lord Ashbourne has already asked for those dances.”

“Hang Lord Ashbourne, he is not Mr Bingley!”

Jane looked horrified. “But he will – “

“He won’t care, I assure you. I’ll dance with him, one Bennet sister for another.”

Bingley had a glazed look during these hurried whispers, he only heard snatches of the conversation and wondered what Lord Ashbourne was to Miss Bennet.

“I am not engaged for the Boulanger, sir.”

Bingley beamed.

Kitty and Annabelle chose this moment to abandon Jane to Bingley.

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Kitty and Annabelle giggled in the small window enclosure they had found.

“I have never seen my sister commit such a social faux-pas!”

“She must love him then,” replied Annabelle. “Besides it is only Ash, though he is a stickler for such things.”

She paused. “But it is you! I’m sure you could persuade him to do anything.”

Kitty’s brow furrowed. “Well yes, I think I am becoming very good at making people do things, only look at your mother!”

“That is not what I meant, Kitty.”

Kitty ignored her.

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Kitty examined her dance card happily. Not one dance would she have to sit down unless she chose to ask her partner to do so. She could almost feel that she was back in Meryton. But at least there was no Lydia here to spoil her fun. Though if Kitty were truthful, she would have preferred Lydia’s boisterousness to Jane’s endless serenity; it was hard to tell if Jane was enjoying herself and whether Kitty’s plan was working.

The ball was opened, as usual, according to precedence thus Ash as a son of the house (indeed the only one present) had to lead out the second highest ranking lady in attendance. It was also only
polite for Annabelle to do the same with the highest ranking gentlemen.

Kitty danced with Mr Andrew Basset, who had amused her so over dinner. He had also engaged her for these dances several days previously when she had seen him at a drum given by his mother, Lady Marianne. He was a pleasant young man who had decided Kitty was a welcome distraction from the tediousness of the school room misses thrown in his direction by his mother every year.

The dance, however, was forgettable.

***&**

Kitty smiled, “It was very clever of you to choose the Boulanger.”

Ash looked quizzical, as the dance forced them to part.

“Because now,” resumed Kitty when she could, “Miles, to whom I was engaged, can dance with Annabelle, and Bingley can dance with Jane. It is all perfect, and between us we have managed to help two couples.”

“Well, it has not happened like that yet, Miss Bennet.”

“You won’t insist on dancing with Jane.” It was hardly a question, rather a statement before they separated again.

Ash made no response to it, instead commenting “Two couples?” In a tone that implied Kitty was wrong.

A quick revision made Kitty look at Ash as though he was silly, “Yes, two couples. “

“If you say so, Miss Bennet.”

Kitty laughed. “Well perhaps three couples, if you count us? But you would much prefer to dance with someone else than me I am sure, thus I do not.”

Ash made no response to this which, if Kitty looked deep inside herself, hurt. She had expected some glib response where he disclaimed any such thing.

“My next dance is with Mr Fancot, sir.”

“Not Giles?”

“I can hardly call him that here!”

“Why not, Miss Bennet?”

“It’s hardly proper…”

“Says the young lady who has just engineered grave affronts against the rules that govern a ball?”

Kitty smiled. “But that was in a good cause.”

***&**

Giles sensed Kitty’s nervousness, and most likely attributed it to a different cause than from
whence it sprang.

Upon joining the set, Kitty had seen Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst talking quite animatedly to Jane. That could not be a good thing.

Annabelle had spoken much of the Superior Sisters to Kitty and laughed when Kitty had divulged the name that Lizzy had bestowed upon them. So much so that Kitty could, despite the distance, guess what they were saying. Most likely they were talking of Georgiana and how she was madly in love with Mr Bingley and how Mr Bingley was madly in love with Georgiana.

She had tried to beg off from the dance, but Giles was being unusually firm.

“Kitty?”

Kitty jumped and turned to her partner.

“I am sorry but you were most distracted…”

“I am just worried about my sister sir, I hope that she is enjoying herself.”

“Well I promise to make her dances with me as enjoyable as possible.”

“You asked Jane to dance?” Kitty blinked. Why was everyone asking Jane to dance?

“Of course, as your sister I could hardly do less?”

“You asked her to please me?”

“Of course I asked her to please you. You would not wish to see your sister slighted at a ball, you are too generous.”

Kitty smiled. “Thank you, Giles.”

This earned her a quick kiss on the hand as they moved with the steps of the dance.

***&&***

Kitty had no opportunity to talk to her sister, or indeed anyone else but her partners and those she met just off the dance floor in between sets forming, until they all went down to supper.

Mr Gilmore, as her last partner before supper, led her down to it, but asked for, and was granted most politely by Kitty, leave to abandon her to her aunt.

Kitty was beginning to realise how skilful some men could be at avoiding even the hint of the ‘parson’s mousetrap.’

Kitty sat down with Clara and Jane.

Clara looked at her niece, “How nice of you to join us, Kitty.”

Jane smiled. “Aunt Clara, Kitty cannot help being asked to dance every single dance, or that unlike me, she chooses to dance than ask her partners to sit down with her!”

“Are you enjoying yourself Jane?”

Here, Jane’s smile disappeared. “Yes, but I should not have told Mr Bingley I would dance the
next with him, it’s very improper …”

“Nonsense,” injected Clara. “He wishes to dance with you, you wish to dance with him. I wish you would pay no mind to what the Bingley sisters said to you.”

“But aunt I was already promised to – “

“What did the Bingley sisters say to you?”

Jane turned to Kitty. “Just how glad there were to see me in town, and how – “ here Jane could not continue.

So Clara continued for her, having torturously dragged it out of Jane earlier in the evening. “and how Mr Bingley was promised to Miss Darcy, which both of us know is not the truth.”

“Georgiana would faint if she heard she was supposed to be marrying Mr Bingley. I assure you, Jane, she knows she is not the woman for Mr Bingley, and I think she has her own ideas on who would be.”

“Oh well I do hope that she is a good woman.” Jane tried to eat a spoonful of the repast before her and failed.

“Oh yes, she is an excellent woman, and I can say that having known her all my life.”

Jane blinked, “Me?”

“Yes, Georgiana thinks you make an excellent couple.”


But she was interrupted by the arrival of the man himself.

“May I?”

Jane nodded and allowed him to sit next to her. Thus she was lost to them, for the entire supper she did nothing but speak quietly to Mr Bingley.

This left Clara and Kitty to talk to the rest of his party.

“So, Miss Kitty, I see you are enjoying London.”

“I am Miss Bingley.”

“And this is your aunt?”

“Oh do forgive me. Aunt Clara, this is Miss Bingley. Miss Bingley this is my aunt, Mrs Sutton.”

Miss Bingley smiled thinly, noting how Kitty had presumed that Mrs Sutton was her social superior.

“And how are you finding having two nieces staying with you, Mrs Sutton? I do hope it is not too cramped.”

“Well I only have Catherine with me; Jane is staying with another aunt and uncle”

“Oh, and which aunt and uncle is this?”
“The Gardiners, my mother’s brother’s family,” Kitty responded.

“Oh yes, of course. In Cheapside, what street was it?” commented Mrs Hurst.

“Gracechurch Street,” replied Clara smoothly.

“We should call on them, when we are next in that part of town,” smiled Mrs Hurst.

“I am sure they would welcome the visit,” returned Clara.

Mrs Hurst tried to hide her smile, from the other side of the table, but her sister who had taken a seat next to Clara noticed it and returned a much clearer smirk.

“So do you intend to be in town for very long?” Clara sensed that Kitty had no interest in speaking to either of the sisters and thus it was up to her not to allow the conversation to lull.

She would have to speak to Kitty about that; as much as you may not like some people, sometimes you had to put on a fake smile and pretend, not pick at your supper.

“Oh yes, the entire season, though it will not be the same, unless dear Mr Darcy returns. Are you acquainted with Mr Darcy?”

“I? No, I have never met the gentlemen, though I have heard of him from my nieces.”

“He is currently visiting with his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, at Rosings Park in Kent.”

Kitty wrinkled her nose in distaste. Miss Bingley sounded triumphant, and Kitty wished she would just vanish.

Clara nodded vaguely, which annoyed both Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, why was she not impressed by such relations?

“Are all your other sisters are home, Miss Kitty?” questioned Mrs Hurst.

“No, Elizabeth is visiting her friend Charlotte Lucas as was, now Mrs Collins at Hunsford. I believe Lady Catherine is Mr Collins’ patroness.”

It was now Miss Bingley’s turn to look disgusted. Miss Eliza near her Mr Darcy. It was insupportable. But Miss Bingley consoled herself with the knowledge that Mr Darcy would return even more strengthened in his resolve to separate her brother from Miss Bennet. Yes, Miss Eliza’s presence would only serve to remind Darcy of their utter want in conduct as a family.

Though Miss Bingley did wonder how with such low connections, the Bennets, had managed to be invited to such a prestigious event as this! She did not have long to ponder this, or indeed ask Mrs Sutton, as she had been planning, just to what lengths had she gone to receive an invitation.

Her sister flashed a warning look towards her, making Miss Bingley take in her surroundings. Walking her way was a picture of manly excellence, and certainly would be on her list of gentlemen to earn the devotion of, if it wasn’t for Mr Darcy. Sadly she had met Mr Darcy first, and she wasn’t stupid enough to think that Mr Darcy would appreciate her flirting with his cousin. She didn’t doubt that Darcy had lost the devotion of many women’s hearts to his cousin, and adding herself to that list would be stupid. As handsome and eligible as Lord Ashbourne was, he was an enigma and didn’t escape matchmaking mama’s and daughters, as much as somehow failed to be on their lists, to be blunt, he just eluded them.

No, Darcy was a much safer bet, even though his cousin was by far the bigger prize. Caroline had
dreamed often of being one day the Countess of Matlock, but she was quite willing to be Mrs Darcy of Pemberley. Darcy would be an easy husband, she was quite sure of that, and she was equally certain Lord Ashbourne wouldn’t be.

However Darcy was not present, so a slight flirtation was not out of the question.

“My dear Lord Ashbourne, how are you?” cooed Miss Bingley.

Ash paused in his movement across the room. He allowed one hand to rest on the back of the nearest chair as he bowed to acknowledge Miss Bingley.

“I am very well, Miss Bingley, and yourself?”

“So glad to be back in town. There are so many amusements here.”

“Indeed.”

“Though I do not wish you to think that I found either your brother or your cousin poor company!” she laughed.

“No, it would reflect badly on my family if it were so,” smiled Ash.

Miss Bingley did not quite understand his lordship so she changed tack. “Do join us?” she tried to surreptitiously indicate the empty seat beside her.

Kitty who had been concentrating on her supper, had turned when Miss Bingley had hailed Ash in such a friendly fashion. He had paused beside her chair, laying a hand on the backrest.

Kitty tried not to smile when she saw him clench ever so slightly when Miss Bingley mentioned his brother and Mr Darcy in such caressing terms. He should be careful she thought, Miss Bingley may take it as jealousy!

Ash nodded his acceptance of Miss Bingley’s invitation and smoothly slid into the seat beside Kitty. Miss Bingley blinked in surprise and she and Mrs Hurst shared a look of discontentment.

“Mrs Hurst, Mrs Sutton, Miss Catherine.” Then Ash cleared his throat. “Bingley, Miss Bennet.”

Bingley looked up from his intense conversation and smiled. “Hello, have you met Miss Bennet? Oh of course you have…” trailing off slightly confused.

Jane blushed. How could she get up from supper to go dance with Mr Bingley if the person she was actually promised to was sitting almost directly opposite her?

Bingley saw Jane’s blush and frowned but he chose to ignore it.

“Caroline, Miss Bennet and I were talking about how nice it might be to take a trip out to Richmond…”

Miss Bingley frowned, “But Charles…”

“I think it’s a lovely idea!” injected Kitty. “As long as the weather holds…and if it does not I am sure we could move the party indoors?”

“An excellent idea, Miss Kitty! What do you say, Caroline? Louisa? Tuesday perhaps?”

“I am afraid that we have promised to visit dear Georgiana.”
Bingley’s face fell – “What about – “

“And we are much engaged around town, you know that, Charles,” replied Mrs Hurst.

“I am sure Georgiana would be happy to accompany you on Tuesday, Bingley, thus fulfilling everybody’s wishes.”

Bingley looked gratefully at Ash. “Well? Miss Bennet foresees no problems, and of course Mrs Sutton, Miss Kitty, you would be welcome as well, for you are as – “

Bingley stopped here, realising that a public announcement of his feelings would not be appreciated by many, especially perhaps Miss Bennet, considering he still did not know if Darcy was right and that she did not feel any decided partiality for him.

“We would love to accept.” Clara smiled. She had to hand it to Kitty, she was turning out to be a very adroit matchmaker. Though she had an easy couple to work with, two people who no sooner had to look at each other again than to wish for nothing more than to speak to each other, and only each other.

Miss Bingley frowned. A whole day with Bennets and nothing more than a day of attempting to separate Charles from Jane! Though Georgiana would be with them; Miss Bingley genuinely liked Georgiana, despite not understanding her shyness. She just needed, in Miss Bingley’s opinion, a push in the right direction. But a day where Charles would be comparing both ladies, Georgiana would not emerge victorious.

Miss Bingley sighed. She could do nothing to stop the planned amusement now, she would just look uncivil and unmannered. But she could attempt to make the day more enjoyable.

“Lord Ashbourne, will you not come to chaperone your cousin? Indeed I think another male in our party would not go amiss.”

Kitty rolled her eyes slightly. Miss Bingley would do better to not be so transparent.

Under the table Clara, remonstrated with her niece by tapping her arm sharply.

“I would be delighted Miss Bingley, that is if Bingley does not mind?”

“Of course I do not mind! It would be delightful!”

***&amp;***

Supper was soon over and Miss Bingley could hardly contain her disappointment when Lord Ashbourne rose from the table.

“I believe this is my dance Miss Bennet?” he said holding out his hand.

Miss Bingley noticed the change of colour that diffused Jane’s face and wondered. Perhaps Jane would accomplish what it seemed neither Charles’ sisters or friend could do. It was not so incredible that perhaps she would like Lord Ashbourne more than Charles.

Charles looked confused and Miss Bingley wondered exactly what was happening, until Miss Kitty stood up and placed her hand in Lord Ashbourne’s.

“I believe this is our dance my lord.”
Miss Bingley was perturbed to see the look of disapproval and remonstration on Miss Kitty’s face, and was even more perturbed by the inscrutable look of response on his lordship’s.

**** Dance Cards. Oh how difficult the internet is about them. Also I don’t know if “two dances” that each lady danced with a partner was one dance on the list? Anyway I tried. Also I have a feeling that, yes, Kitty standing up twice in one ball with the same man would be remarked upon.

back to story
Chapter 20

***&&***

Dear Jane,

I am sure you have already heard from your sister of her safe arrival to our little parsonage here at Hunsford. Be assured that she is well, well as well as anybody could be in the circumstances. I am afraid that her enjoyment has been slightly curtailed by the arrival in our little neighbourhood of Lady C’s two nephews, one of whom is known to you. So perhaps I should say L’s enjoyment has increased, since we know how fond she is of teasing and watching human folly. Colonel Fitzwilliam is a pleasant charming man and I should like to know him better, and so should L, but sadly anything more than that is out of the question being a second son. You will be interested to know that the other gentlemen continues his attentions to your sister, though she denies it is any such thing. She has already questioned him about seeing you in town, to which he replied he had no idea you were in town….

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“What am I, pray?” exclaimed Kitty after putting the letter down.

Jane smiled.

“I am serious Jane, he saw me at the Opera, I know he saw me, and even if he did not…Mr Bingley – oh…”

Kitty had betrayed herself.

“Mr Bingley … what Kitty? You did not say you had seen him before Lady Matlock’s ball.”

“Isn’t this a fascinating letter, though I have to agree with Lizzy that I am sure Mr Darcy is not paying her attention, at least not in that respect. I am very glad to know that Colonel Fitzwilliam is an amiable man, because between Mr Collins, Lady Catherine and Mr Darcy I am sure they would find more cheer in a graveyard!”

“Kitty.” Jane rarely scolded in a serious tone, but this was one of these times.

“Oh yes, fine, Jane. I did know Mr Bingley was in town, what of it?”

Jane frowned. “Did you compel him to meet me again?”

“Compel him? I’d hardly say he minded considering the moment he saw you he could not drag himself from your side even to greet his hostess!”

“Kitty…”

“I merely made sure you would both be at the same event. What happened after that was entirely of both your makings….well apart from the dancing, but you already knew I orchestrated that!”

Jane put down her sewing unsteadily. The sisters were enjoying a comfortable coze in Mrs
Gardiner’s parlour, while Clara and Mrs Gardiner were on some errands, and the children were quiet.

“Kitty, I – “

Kitty decided to cut Jane off from whatever she was about to say; after all was not attack the best form of defence?

“What do you feel about Mr Bingley, Jane?”

“I – He is the most amiable man of my acquaintance and the renewal of our friendship has only made that more … but, Kitty, I do not know if he was –“

“So easily persuaded to leave you?”

Jane blinked, “I do not think… he could have decided that I was –“

“Jane, no one could decide that about you; you are far too beautiful, kind and elegant, not to mention his reaction to you when he first saw you again! No, he was persuaded to leave you, by whatever means…I do not blame you for being wary…”

“You do not? I do …care…very much for him, and I do hope that …for I could not see myself… But you do understand that I do not wish for him to offer marriage to me now? If he is so changeable and persuadable then I may find myself….”

“In a marriage too similar to our parents?”

“Yes, but worse…in a marriage where I have all the feeling and I could not bear that, Kitty. I do so want to marry for love…”

“And so you shall, and I promise to do everything to forestall Mr Bingley.”

Jane smiled, “I think we are presuming too much; he may not – “

“Jane, we are not presuming. I never saw a man so in love, he did not speak more than five words with anyone else the entire evening… he spent it gazing at you!”

“You exaggerate, Kitty! But I do so hope – “

“So do I. But he does love you and he will prove to you that he does. Just as long as you don’t reject him!”

Jane smiled. “I do not think I would have the heart to do so even if he did offer for me now. I shall just have to rely upon my friends to make sure it does not happen until I am sure.”

“You will have my help, and Aunt Clara’s…not to mention I am sure Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst will help!” laughed Kitty.

Jane frowned. “I do hope they just wish to see their brother happy, whatever he chooses.”

“No, they wish to see themselves happy, regardless of their brother’s feelings, and for them happiness appears to be entirely Darcy related.”

This elicited a giggle. “Indeed, I wish I could feel worse about dashing all their hopes.”

“Oh it shall not be you, Jane, I have more than a feeling that it will be Mr Darcy and Georgiana themselves who dash all their hopes.”
Jane just resumed her sewing.

“Besides, there is one good thing about Mr Bingley being so persuadable!”

Jane looked at her sister quizzically.

“Well, if he had not been persuaded away then you would have had to continue your courtship under Mama’s watchful eye! You would have had no opportunity to look at leisure!”

Jane smiled in agreement.

***&&***

Kitty looked out at the weather. It was not going to hold. They were certainly not going to Richmond, but at least that allowed them to attend Lady Peppertree’s rout, which they could not have done if they were so exhausted by a trip to Richmond in the morning.

However it did mean that before her was an entire day with the Bingleys in their townhouse. At least in Richmond she could have escaped. And Clara had the headache.

Kitty suspected it was more a Bingley-ache than a headache. They had seen Miss Bingley in the park on Monday and at a drum that same evening and she had managed to tease Clara into a foul mood.

Clara had even twice thought about insisting Mr Morris tear up Mr Bingley’s lease, or at least add to it the fact his sister was never to set foot in Netherfield again.

Kitty did not know exactly what Miss Bingley had said to Clara, but she had a feeling it had been about her.

Kitty wished that Miss Bingley would say something to her face, and then perhaps she would be able to say a few choice things back.

She was distracted from thoughts of putting Miss Bingley in her place by the doorbell. It was Ash and Georgiana ready to escort her to the Bingley’s.

“You will never guess, Kitty! No, you won’t so I shall just tell you! Miles finally proposed!”

Kitty blinked at Georgiana. “And she accepted?”

“Of course she accepted!” Georgiana looked delighted and far more animated that she usually did.

“And my mother is in a foul mood,” injected Ash.

“Why? Because he did not do so before the ball, where it could have been a formal announcement?”

“You are very perceptive, Miss Bennet,” smiled Ash.

Georgiana frowned and stepped in front of Kitty, blocking her view of Ash. “They are to be married very soon!” With this she compelled Kitty to sit down with her on the sofa so they could discuss the event.

“So that my sister does not get any idea about crying off.”
“Ash, stop being so unromantic!”

“Yes, my lord, it has been quite a romance, of course it must finish with a hasty wedding,” said Kitty archly.

“Well not hasty…but at least very soon!”

“I like to think, Georgie, that it was my organising of them to dance the Boulanger together that was the final straw.”

Ash rolled his eyes, from the seat he had taken. “Save me from matchmaking!”

Kitty frowned. But Georgiana claimed her attention again, “Ignore him! Now I have to tell you how he proposed!”

There was a groan from the opposite chair.

Kitty laughed, she was glad to see Georgiana was finding happiness in her cousin’s engagement; as far as Kitty could tell it showed that she was not as wounded by Wickham as she had once been.

“My darling Annabelle, I have loved you from the moment I saw you, let us ignore the fact that I first knew you were you were only a baby.”

Kitty turned to laugh at Ash, who had risen dramatically.

“Everybody knows that clearly I made friends with your brother for no other purpose. I have courted you expertly, have made no mistakes, and I know of at least five other gentlemen following the same tactics to woo their brides.”

Ash had crossed the room and held out a hand to Kitty. Laughing, she took it and found herself tugged upright, pulled flush against him as he put one arm around her waist and flung out the other as though he was on the stage giving a compelling soliloquy.

Kitty giggled as she looked between Georgiana and Ash’s faces.

“So of course when I proposed I compared your eyes to limpid pool of midnight sky and your hair to flaxen wheat that had been dyed black by dancing fairies and waxed poetical on your ankles… how could you say no?”

Kitty was almost overcome by giggles. “But my lord, perhaps I played a much better strategy in letting you think that your plan was working? Indeed I knew I wished to marry you the moment I saw you, I remember it clearly as I lay in my cradle and I bided my time, teasing you until you could bear it no longer!”

“But let us not quibble over such things my dear, all that matters is that we shall be married, and soon because I am not so in love that I do not know you are flighty!”

With that Ash leant down and Kitty, giggling, ducked out of his embrace.

Georgiana clapped. “Bravo! Very like the theatre. But not I am sure how it happened!”

Kitty caught her breath and clapped too. “Have you thought of a career on the stage?”

Ash looked sardonic, “I do not think I would be very good.”
At least the news of Annabelle’s and Miles’ impending marriage, made known to the Bingley sisters by the method of gossip (how it worked so effectively no one ever knew), gave them all something to discuss during their morning engagement.

Kitty sat demurely on a chaise slightly removed from the rest of the party, she was just happy to watch Miss Bingley attempt to throw Georgiana and her brother together and Georgiana almost as firmly resist any such attempt. Georgiana clung to Jane’s side, being quite happy to be ignored by both Jane and Mr Bingley; at least then she was not being talked at by Miss Bingley who confused and scared her.

Ash had fallen victim to both sisters the moment he walked in the door, being teased about how he would be the next to be married, and wouldn’t that lady be very lucky.

Kitty didn’t notice he had escaped until he came to sit beside her.

“What did I ever agree to this?”

“Because you are a good cousin?”

“No that is certainly not the reason. I think I was acting out of some misguided sense of duty….”

“Towards whom?”

“I cannot tell you.”

Ash put one hand over his face, sighing.

Kitty tried not to laugh at the too obvious self-pity. He could easily rebuff Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst if he tried, but it was either too much effort, or the grossest incivility, something he would never do.

Kitty was betting it was the former rather than the latter, and she was not going to indulge him! However the glimmer of the signet ring he always wore on his left hand distracted her.

Ash looked at her. “It’s an emerald.”

“It doesn’t look like one.”

“It’s a rare type, also very hard to shape, would you like a closer look?”

He eased it off his finger and handed it to her.

Kitty examined it, it was very beautiful, she slipped it on her own finger and admired it.

“No a piece of jewellery for a young lady,” commented her companion as she handed it back to him. But instead of taking it from Kitty, Ash held out his left pinkie finger and allowed her to slide it back on, curling his fingers over hers, in some sort of sign that Kitty was not entirely able to decode, especially since Caroline Bingley, suddenly realising Ash’s desertion, insisted on his rejoining the main party.

Not long after this the gentlemen excused themselves on the pretence that there was something of
great import in Bingley’s library. In truth two of the gentlemen wished to escape the inanity of the conversation and the third, being the host, could not refuse them.

“Miss Darcy, are you like me in forever trying not to laugh at the attempts of all the young ladies to induce your many handsome and rich relations into marriage?”

Georgiana stared at Miss Bingley. To hear such a thing from her mouth!

“I confess I do not pay any attention; I am not out, so where would I see such things?”

“Well, those young ladies who are vulgar enough to set their caps at young men tend to indulge in such activities everywhere,” smiled Mrs Hurst.

Jane wondered very much if they were speaking about her, and chastised herself for being obvious, for she had not meant to be.

Kitty bit her lip in an attempt to stop herself from saying something about Miss Bingley’s behaviour to certain gentlemen. But as she had only heard of such things from Georgiana, and only seen for herself what she felt was a toned down performance she decided it would be best not to say anything.

“And men are so very cruel over it. They place bets over which lady they can make fall in love with them.”

Miss Bingley said this with an arch look in Kitty’s direction, so that Kitty could no longer be quite as blind as to what they were referring.

Jane was shocked. “Surely that would be – “

“Oh it is often done, Jane,” interrupted Mrs Hurst. “I am glad I am married so that my name would not appear in such a light! One should take care one is not made a fool of. Especially since London tends to gossip about these things very readily, so it is not just the gentlemen who would be making sport of one!”

Mrs Hurst also turned her gaze towards Kitty, who found to her disgust that she was blushing.

Kitty did not know what to say to defend herself, she was not even entirely sure whether they did mean her? And if they did what had she done wrong, she could think of nothing. She was not setting her cap at anybody!

“That is very good advice,” was the only thing she could think of saying.

***&&***
...and you asked me to write if I discovered the cause of D’s unfortunate temper. I believe I have even found a name for his temper, the condition has been confirmed as la Bennet. If one were going to describe la Bennet, she would be of average height, very pretty, very impertinent, and most of all does not seem to care for D at all. The effects of la Bennet seem to be the insertion of one’s foot in one’s mouth, unusual sullenness, brooding and staring. I could not be more delighted as I know you will be too, dearest brother. Of all the young ladies D could have found appealing he has chosen one who could not care less for his money, breeding and manners. It is a pity, because she is a very handsome woman and I believe under different circumstances...

Ash folded the letter up and returned it to his desk. How very like Darcy, to on the one hand be pining, well at least in some Darcyfied way, for a Bennet sister, while on the other be plotting to separate his best friend from another Bennet sister. Ash was not stupid; Bingley was a man in love and could only have been separated from his love for three months by either the gravest of circumstances or the influence of Darcy. How Darcy managed to have that much sway over Bingley, Ash never did understand, how could anyone allow themselves to be influenced so greatly by another person?! It was not a credit to one’s character to be so influenced, just as it was no credit to be incapable of listening and accepting a friend’s opinion.

He wondered briefly at Richard not mentioning this strange chasm in Darcy’s logic and behaviour. However Richard knew more of Darcy and was more in his confidence, perhaps he did not wish to betray Darcy’s follies to him.

Ash frowned.

“Well this is very amusing.”

Ash turned and shot an exasperated glance at his friend. “I do not believe I invited you, Miles, you are quite welcome to leave.”

“That would be very rude considering you are soon to be my brother.”

“Something I am infinitely glad you did; you were becoming a dead bore. Now is this the part where, since you are going to be joining the family, you disclose all your debts for me to settle?”

“Now that you mention it, I do owe you a monkey, so if you would be so good as to consider it settled.”

It was Ash’s turn to look quizzical. “My lamentable memory…”

Miles smiled. “Well if you don’t remember…you were properly shot in the neck, too much Blue Ruin. We had a bet on whether my mother would race back from Bath in record time when she heard the news. I foolishly thought that perhaps she wouldn’t, would not wish to look unseemly and cause tongues to wag all over London.”

Ash smiled. “You really should not have bet against your mother wanting to throw all considerable weight behind any effort to release you from your engagement.”

“You would think she would be glad! Any other mother would be, to be so happy that I have
finally chosen to end my bachelor days!”

“I believe if it were any other girl…”

Miles looked rueful. “I foresee many scenes between my wife and my mother…”

“I foresee many scenes between your wife and yourself.”

Miles smiled. “Well, shall we go?”

***&&***

Lady Matlock may have been prevented by timing from celebrating her daughter’s engagement by a ball, but an impromptu rout, just before everybody left for the country for Easter, was not out of the question. Well she was telling everyone it was just a little party, quite on the spur of the moment, very informal…. Those who came, and they were many, would have been very interested to see a party of Lady Matlock’s that was formal, planned and not little.

Kitty sipped her punch as she listened to Lady Goodwin’s idle chatter. Lady Goodwin was an elderly lady, a friend of Lady Matlock’s aunt and while not deaf, was hard of hearing, short sighted and often confused people.

Kitty had met her several times, but was surprised when she was hailed as a dear girl and invited to sit next to her upon the sofa. Kitty was quite sure she was being confused for someone and wondered how she could inform the baronet’s widow who she really was.

She had seen other ladies yell into Lady Goodwin’s ear something like “I’m not your daughter! I’m Mrs Salisbury!” or “No, no, I’m Arabella, not Jane!” but Kitty did not feel up to either.

“Ah there is Mrs Sutton!” exclaimed Lady Goodwin.

Kitty saw an opening. “Yes, Mrs Sutton is my aunt.”

“Oh she is a friend of your aunt?”

“No, Mrs Sutton is my aunt.”

“Oh they are very close are they? Mrs Sutton is very close to Lady Matlock – “

“I know – “

“Don’t interrupt me gel! What was I saying, Mrs Sutton….?”

“Mrs Sutton, my aunt,” prompted Kitty.

“No, I was speaking of Mrs Sutton not your aunt. I don’t know who your aunt is! I did not think you this tiresome Sarah!”

“No, I’m – “

“Never mind that! I was speaking of Mrs Sutton, she has brought a rather pretty niece to town this season and ….well!” Lady Goodwin looked at Kitty, in a prompting fashion; as if she should be able discern her unspoken meaning.

Kitty was torn, did she try to convince the old lady she was the niece in question, or did she let the woman speak and hear whatever gossip may be circulating about her?
She did not have the chance to decide, as Lady Goodwin started talking again.

“Yes, it is a pity that Mrs Sutton’s fortune is entailed away, or left to her for her lifetime only or something like that. It must be so for Mr Sutton despite his grandfather being a merchant would not be stupid! Do you know what that means?”

Kitty blinked. “Yes, my father’s land is …”

“Ah poor thing, so her niece I suppose comes to get a good match. I hope for her sake she does have a respectable fortune, or that she makes some man fall very deeply in love with her, because she seems a nice enough girl. She’ll make a match of it with Mr Fancot, I knew his mother, a lovely gel, and he deserves a nice wife. Yes, I dare say they will make a match of it, he is forever with her, and she does not mind it”

Lady Goodwin took a sip of her punch and then waved the cup around in front of her. “Better him than have her die of a broken heart! Fancy, Lady Jersey, who heard it from Lady Sheringham, the dowager that is, was telling Lady Sefton that the poor girl thinks she could have Lord Ashbourne! Lord Ashbourne! I mean he does seem to be displaying far more interest in her than any other young lady I have seen him do, but well what does that mean? Not much since he is hardly likely to make a cake of himself, and I am quite sure he does not mean to marry just yet. He is so rich and connected he can wait as long as he likes! And be as disagreeable as he likes.”

Kitty found grasping her punch increasingly difficult as her ladyship continued.

“Not that he is disagreeable; I daresay any betting going on about Miss Bennet dying of a broken heart will be kept away from him, because he is a gentlemen and would not wish to inflict such damage. But like most men, my dear, like my own John, god bless his soul, he has no idea what he does to female hearts! At least she has not fallen victim to that poetry fellow; I expect he would feel obliged to marry her, I mean of course Lord Ashbourne not that George person, I expect he has no morals to speak of! Who speaks of concubines and carnal companie? If he, Lord Ashbourne, I mean, felt he had injured her in any way! But that is supposing he is not making a May game of her, which would be too bad, and too like his set. No it would be much better for her to marry that nice Mr Fancot.”

Kitty could only manage a gurgle in the back of her throat as a response.

“Do you know how rich the Matlocks are? I have always wondered… that Miss Bingley, now there is a woman who cannot see more than two feet in front of her own nose, always tells me that their cousin Mr Darcy is worth ten thousand a year, but that is a paltry sum, do not you think, Sarah?”

“I think – “ Kitty struggled to speak, “That I see my aunt, I must go to her.”

***&&***

Kitty fled into the hallway, down the stairs and opened the first door she saw; it was Lord Matlock’s library.

Kitty leant against the door and took a deep breath.

Well at least she now knew what Miss Bingley had been accusing her of. How could anyone think – and ten thousand pounds paltry and – betting books – and Giles? What was Aunt Clara going to say when she realised that she had caused so much gossip! She had not meant to, Kitty could think of nothing she had done!
Kitty could not think full stop. She took refuge in a deep armchair and wondered if she could stay in there until the party was over.

It was dark, with only the moonlight illuminating the room; it was peaceful which was in direct contrast to Kitty’s feelings.

Her first instinct was to dismiss it all as the ramblings of an old woman, indeed it was! Kitty had heard many ladies both in Meryton and London do similar things, taking the smallest thing and turning it into a topic of conversation that could run for months.

No, she had done nothing wrong, she had not behaved improperly now that she examined her actions, and all she could do was continue as she had done. Though how she was going to face everybody knowing they were speaking of her was something she was not at all confident she would be able to do.

Friendship, that was all it was, of course that was all it was, after all, Kitty was not so stupid to think that anyone could be so interested in her! Especially if they were handsome, dashing and ….

It was probably wise to stop thinking right there. Kitty hugged a cushion to her chest, and then turned towards the door when she heard a noise.

The door swung open. “Miss Bennet?”

Kitty rolled her eyes, perfect timing, now all the old tabbies needed was to see her ‘luring’ Lord Ashbourne away into a darkened room.

Kitty stood up and wondered what she was going to say to him, but she did not have to find out. Hard upon his heels was Giles who looked most concerned.

“Kitty, are you unwell? Let me fetch you a doctor immediately! Indeed you must be unwell, do not just stand there, my lord.”

“Oh for heavens sake, go away, both of you!”

Giles looked hurt and turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

Kitty rolled her eyes. “Now I shall have to apologise, won’t I?”

“Well, he did only have your best interests at heart.”

“And you did not?”

“Of course I did not,” retorted Ash. “I was merely wondering what was so fascinating in my father’s study, and you know I cannot bear it if I am missing out on something.”

“Well unless you call listening to very enlightening gossip and escaping from it, fascinating, you have not missed anything, my lord.”

“Enlightening?” Ash looked interested.

“There was nothing flattering to you in it!”

Kitty swept by him into the hall and made to return to the party.

“You mean it was unflattering to me? Who is this blackguard sullying my name?! I shall challenge them to a duel!”
Kitty turned on the stair to look down at him, watching the footman and the butler studiously ignoring the scion of their household and her having a most interesting conversation, in their foyer.

“If you did so my lord, she would probably think you had offered her a ride on your mule, so I would be careful.”

***&&***

It was only the work of a moment to realise that apologising to Giles, no matter how particular it would look to everyone else was of paramount importance. Friendship was far more important than what people said of one.

Giles was skulking in a window enclosure. It was not shut off from everyone else, but the heavy set curtains provided a modicum of privacy.

“I am very sorry that I was so rude to you, I just – Lady Goodwin confused me for someone else and told me a great deal of gossip that involved me, and it upset me.”

Giles turned from the window and gave an understanding smile. “And it was about me as well?”

Kitty looked at the floor. “Yes.”

“I am sorry for that…”

“No that does not bother me, well it does, but I am not going to let it annoy me. After all what are we doing that is wrong? I enjoy your company and you I hope enjoy mine…”

“Of course I do,” smiled Giles.

“Then everyone else can hang! If they all have commonplace minds it is hardly our fault! Now let us talk of pleasanter things, we should make some gossip ourselves! I could talk for example of Miss Bingley and her ever present plans to entrap a husband. She has moved, I believe, to Ash! That should keep the gossips quiet for a while, even though he tries to run out of the room whenever he sees her! What do you think of that?”

Giles took a step forward with his hand outstretched, but whatever he was going to say was forestalled.

“Kitty?” Georgiana had been allowed to be present at the rout as it was an informal celebration.

She peeked her head around the curtains and her eyes widened when she saw Giles. “I hope I am not – “

“Interrupting? Of course not!”

“It is just Annabelle wishes to speak to you!”

***&&***

Annabelle looked like the proverbial cat, she could not stop smiling.

“We are to be married at the end of April. We decided to have the ceremony here in London and then we shall retire to Carlon. I wish it was possible to travel for our honeymoon but it is not possible due to the war, and Miles says he will take me to the Great Lakes in the summer.”

“Have you told her yet?”
Annabelle frowned at Georgiana. “Told her what?”

“That we are going to Carlon for Easter and she is to come with us!”

“Am I?” asked Kitty, confused.

“Yes, everyone leaves town for a little while during Easter. Parliament is adjourned and everything. We shall be such a merry little party – well we should be if Lady Upton had not returned! But I expect she will feign an illness and stay in town!”

Georgiana giggled and then looked repentant. “You should not speak of her so, Belle; she is to be your new mother!”

Annabelle rolled her eyes and ignored her cousin. “Carlon is in Cambridgeshire, near Huntingdon. It is to be a family affair!”

Kitty smiled. But could she trust that Jane and Mr Bingley would use their time in London properly?

No, surely she could trust that Bingley would not be swayed from Jane if she only was mere streets away!

“Yes, Giles?”

Kitty looked up, at Annabelle’s greeting, to see that Giles had approached.

“Miss Bennet…” Giles ignored Annabelle.

“Yes?”

“Your aunt has informed me that you will be out of town for Easter…”

“Yes! I was only just informed of it! Well I suppose I am at my aunt’s beck and call, she can do with me as she wishes.”

At that point both Annabelle and Georgiana’s attention was claimed by a well wishing relation, so Giles seemed to take advantage of that, to sit beside Kitty and to take her hands.

“I wish you were not going!”

“But I understand that most people are leaving London for a short while, there are going to be hardly any parties!”

“Kitty… are we not friends?”

“Of course we are friends.” Kitty was confused. A separation of less than a week was hardly of any import!

“Then can I say, as I wished to before, that I wish that your name was not being bandied about, and that I would, if I could, anything to have it cease to happen. I do not know what Lady Goodwin told you but… it is not just my name…”

Kitty giggled. “I know that it is not! I should be flattered should I not? Or maybe I should not be since the on-dit hardly places me in a flattering light. It is all nonsense though!”

“Yes but people, do talk and it does place you in a very unflattering light…and I wish it was not so but people will judge you, even those mentioned with your name, and thus should know the
truth.”

“Who will judge me?” Kitty was starting to get a headache.

“Kitty, I wish you would – “

“You are not beginning to tell me what to do again are you?”

Giles fell silent, and Kitty realised her hands had still been claimed, she removed them. “Will you speak plainly?”

Giles looked away.

“Well if you cannot speak plainly then, all I can say to you is I shall see you when I return from Carlon.”

***&&***
**Chapter 22**

***&&***

*Kitty, I wish that I could speak to you plainly. I have no desire to remove from you your innocent view of the world. But I would warn you... No, I must not. Not yet. I know I have no right to speak to you thus, or to tell you what to do, and I have no wish to do such a thing. I only wish to protect you, a feeling that is prompted by the most noble of sources. When you return from Carlon I wish ....I must close now before I betray myself. Giles.*

***&&***

Kitty closed her fingers around the folded piece of paper, hidden in her reticle, as she looked intently at the passing landscape.

That morning, a young maid had nervously shuffled into her room and, hand outstretched, had bobbed a curtsey and whispered “Miss…please, if you would read this?” Then, when Kitty had taken the screwed up note, she had fled.

Kitty had received notes from gentleman before in the past, slipped to her by the gentleman themselves, by blushing maids or sometimes by bold maids, but this was different.

While she had spoken to Clara about what Lady Goodwin had said, she had not told her of this note. Kitty felt protective of Giles; it would hardly be very ladylike to expose his folly…and folly it was! Well at least in Kitty’s opinion. It was a note designed to scare a young lady off! Though Kitty did not know what she was going to do when Giles did finally ‘betray’ himself. Slapping him out of this silly gothic romantic hero role was certainly a possibility.

But she was also flattered; any attention given to her in the past had been dried up by the presence of her far lovelier sisters. Or else the gentlemen themselves, of course only those brave enough to ignore Lydia in her favour, often were only playing at love.

Kitty could not tell if Giles was only playing at love; she rather thought perhaps he was, or that whatever he had persuaded himself he felt was much less than he realised, for he was playing the dramatic role again. She had a feeling this was how he had acted when he had thought himself in love with Annabelle. Kitty knew how that had ended!

She had no wish to be sitting at the theatre with Giles and herself hissing their Christian names at each other.

Why did he have to be quite so silly about it? Although Kitty was flattered she was overwhelmed; though Giles had said nothing to her directly, this note implied that he would and if he said such things to her as….! Kitty did not know how she would react, she had had little time to examine her feelings since being in London, indeed she liked it that way.

Perhaps in this case absence would make the heart realise what a fool it had been, or perhaps the note, as Lizzy often joked, would starve the love away.

Kitty returned to gazing out the carriage window, thinking of the previous night when she had finally sought her aunt’s advice.

***&&***
Clara had laughed when Kitty had told her of the gossip swirling about London.

“London envies, thinks well of and despises all at once a young lady who comes from nowhere to catch the interest of any attractive single gentlemen. And by attractive I am talking about the full range of possibilities – rich, handsome, good breeding…and so forth.”

Clara had pulled her robe around her at that stage and walked over to stoke the fire.

“It is a rule that a young lady must marry above herself, or at least at the same level, but only if one talks of wealth and rank. Then you have done very well for yourself and for your family. However, if like me, you marry a man who is wealthier than you but not quite of your station then you are considered either mercenary or a martyr to your family’s greed.”

“Or incredibly romantic…” added Kitty.

“Yes, or incredibly romantic…” Clara returned to her seat, clutching her robe to her chest. “Yes, romantic….” There was a brief moment where she almost felt herself growing sad again but she shook it away.

“And, heaven forbid, if you marry a poorer and socially inferior man, then you have married to spite your family and are incredibly selfish. Or you are considered a fool.”

Kitty picked at the tasselled fringes on the chaise covering. “What about the men? Or are they, as usual, allowed to do as they like?”

“That is the irony of the whole situation. Men marrying women below them either in wealth or rank, are considered fools, or, worse, brain-addled by love.”

“So in London no one can marry anyone else without criticism being levelled at you? Unless you find someone of exactly the same rank and fortune?”

“Yes, and you thought London was a sensible place.”

Clara looked at her niece and wondered if this was the right time to ask whether Kitty was upset by such rumours because of what it might make the gentlemen involved think of her. And whether there was more feeling for one or the other.

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Kitty knew that while Clara was serious, she did not mean that Kitty should take any of what she said seriously. It was ridiculous the gossip and the skewed perspectives and logic that occurred in such a select group of people.

Anyway Kitty was resolved not to think of it anymore, she was determined to not think of anything unpleasant while she was at Carlon for Easter. People could think what they liked.

In fact she hoped they did and they thought she was going to Carlon to win Miles away from Annabelle, or that she had set her cap at Lord Matlock and was plotting to poison Lady Matlock in her sleep, the more ridiculous the more amusing.

One of the ladies in question was fast asleep in front of her; how Lady Matlock could sleep with the rocking of the carriage Kitty did not know, it was not of a lulling nature. Annabelle was in the other carriage with Georgiana, Mrs Annseley, Bents and Lady Maltock’s maid Yardsley.

Clara had her spectacles on and was perusing a recently published book of poetry that was causing a sensation in London.
Kitty leant forward and struggled with the window; she managed finally to slide it down.

“Are you unwell?” Clara looked up at her niece.

“No, I just felt like some fresh air… I did not realise it was raining though.”

“Only slightly, nothing of importance.”

“But the gentlemen will be wet!”

“They are of a hardy sort, they will survive,” smiled Clara, returning to her book.

Kitty, however, leant out of the window to look for the gentlemen. The three gentlemen accompanying them were riding behind the carriage.

“Should you not be riding ahead of us, my lords? To protect us!” she called out.

“Protect you from what?” asked Lord Matlock, spurring his mount to bring himself level with the carriage.

“Bandits, ruffians…”

“This is England, Miss Bennet, not the Peninsula,” was the reply.

Kitty pouted.

“Do not pout at me! You are nice and warm in my carriage…”

Kitty laughed. “Well I could ride, and you could take my place?”

Lord Matlock’s eyebrow rose. “Can you ride astride, Miss Bennet?”

“I can do anything.” Kitty proclaimed cheekily.

“I am quite sure you can, now if I were you I would sit back and not expose yourself to this rain. I would not wish to have you faint.”

Kitty looked amazed. “I may look delicate sir, but I do not faint!”

“That is not what I hear,” smiled the Earl.

“I must protest at what I have reason to believe your son told you! I told him that story in good faith, I am ill used! Not to mention I am sure he told you the story all wrong, and misrepresented me shamefully!”

“I assure you my son never misrepresents, and thus am sure disclosed the story admirably. If it was at all proper, I would wish to see you further your acting, if only so I could be tutored in the art of escaping something I do not wish to do. I would like to practice it on my sister.”

Kitty frowned, but gave the Earl a wink as she closed the window.

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Carlon was actually a comfortable residence that had been much restored since its original construction after the earldom was created by Elizabeth I.
Miles told her and Clara, the only two guests that had never visited Carlon before, the history of the place and its surrounds and how, if they found anything uncomfortable, they should remember at least it was not his Grandfather’s place.

His grandfather, Lord Rupert Mayfield, lived in the remnants of a Scottish castle, an entirely damp and inconvenient domicile, which his nephew, the current duke, had entirely abandoned to him after stigmatising it as an offensive crumbling building.

Kitty laughed at the stories of a young Miles pulling out bits of stones and being soundly told off by his grandfather for chancing the entire structure to fall around his ears.

“My grandfather loves the place though, as barren as it is; he is not a people person, unless of course he knows he can torment them that is! He loves the place so much that I know he tried to convince my cousin that the place was haunted, I saw him trying on the sheets to prove it.”

Kitty smiled, “Well your cousin allowed him the house so it did work.”

“Yes, but I have no ghosts here.”

“If I saw one I would hit it with the bed pan…” announced Kitty loudly.

“What a pity…” Ash approached up the Great Portrait Hall. “I was so looking forward to terrifying you with my headless Baron. Has Miles been boring you with talk of his ancestors?”

“No, it has been very interesting,” Kitty smiled at him.

“I hate to inform you, but none of them are actually his ancestors, all of his are such ugly brutes that he bought all of these portraits at Somerset House.”

Miles rolled his eyes. “At great expense I am sure…”

“Of course, do you want cheap ancestors?”

“Is there a time when you are both serious?” asked Kitty.

“I am always serious, Miss Bennet. In fact I am very serious now, when I say that you should all come to tea which is being served at this moment.”

***&&***

Curled up by the fireside that night, Kitty felt curiously disinclined to do a thing. She did not wish to read, or play cards, or do any sort of needle work. She was feeling drained not only from the journey, but from her London adventure, and from what she was told that was not likely to become less tiring once they returned.

Kitty wondered when her aunt would tire of London, or tire of her, after all she would have to return to Longbourn sometime.

Perhaps with her sisters when Lizzy returned, would she return home. Kitty was not looking forward to it; she was having too much fun, even if it was tempered by the occasional incident.

In addition she had never been closer to Lydia now that distance had separated them, the letters they exchanged twice weekly were costing her father and aunt a fortune, but providing both sisters with more amusement than should occur from a crossed piece of paper.

Lydia would know how to deal with a love-sick gentlemen, or a gentlemen playing a being a
love-sick gentlemen, whichever Giles was. Kitty however would still rather stick herself with a needle than ask Lydia for assistance.

“Are you thinking of anything in particular, Miss Bennet? You are gazing most intently.”

Kitty looked up at her companion who had taken the other fireside chair. She could hardly speak to Ash of what she was thinking.

“I was thinking of the fire, sir.”

“A topic worthy of meditation.”

“Yes, how is it that a tinderbox creates it? Also what causes it in nature and why?”

Ash looked bemused. “Er…”

But he valiantly struggled with the topic, first in his attempt to find a way of not talking nonsense, and then in the attempt to make Kitty understand what he meant.

At the end of the rather involved conversation, Ash leant back in his chair and sighed. “I should have just told you it was stolen from the Gods…”

Kitty laughed.

“Is there any other topic you wish for enlightenment? Please bear in mind that I did leave Oxford! Miles however struggled there for many years…”

“Well I shall pick something that you should know? I wish you would tell me more of India, I know you have already spoken to me of it, but it was so long ago and you did not go into very much detail.”

“I was afraid I would bore you.”

“Well, I promise I will tell you if you start becoming a bore…”

“Very well let me think of something interesting; well once there was this elephant –“

Kitty put her hand over her mouth and yawned.

Ash responded by throwing a cushion at her.

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The next two days were occupied by Easter Activities, including of course Church. The church at Carlon was a chapel of the most romantic having been built around the remains of an older church. Kitty teased Miles about his Gothic ruins and how he must have come out here to weep and rail against humanity while he felt his pursuit of Annabelle was futile.

Miles disclaimed ever doing any such thing, but Annabelle became so enamoured of the idea that he had, she almost decided to change the entire wedding plans, simply so they could be married in this church.

Annabelle had been easily distracted by the promise of a ride to much more picturesque locations, or even a ride to see where Oliver Cromwell had been born. That plan was abandoned as too much of an arduous ride, especially when Annabelle realised she had never liked the Earl of Sandwich.
Instead on Monday they (being the younger members of the party, excluding Georgiana who preferred to stay indoors and practice her music) took a gentle ride around the park.

Well it was not so gentle with Kitty having to cry off the ride once they returned near to the house. Kitty was no expert rider and was still tired from her London exertions, though while she claimed this as her excuse, she really had gained a headache from being in the saddle, trying to keep up with the other riders.

Kitty slipped in a side entrance into the small room that was being utilised as both a morning room and a secondary library. A house that had so many books there was more than one library, both Lizzy and Mary would truly be at home here!

Kitty had slipped in this way to remain unnoticed, no mean feat, after convincing her companions to continue their tour of the park. She just wanted to be alone. She did not know what had come over her but she was just so fatigued. Annabelle’s prattling about London society during their ride had just reminded her of Giles’ note and then Lady Goodwin’s gossips and then of Clara’s strictures.

She untied the laces of her bonnet, and sat down on the day chaise. She wondered whether this room was used often, she had only entered it during Miles’ tour when they arrived.

The likelihood was slim, so she pulled off her boots and stockings and thus free from restraints lay down on the chaise. Her riding gown was not the most comfortable gown in which to lie down, but weighing up the for and against of going upstairs to change, the chaise won.

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Sleep failed to come, however Kitty kept her eyes closed in the vain hope that it would. Instead she ran her mind over all the events of the last months, all the beautiful dresses she had seen, and worn. All the dances, how jealous her sisters would be of her, well, how jealous she hoped they would be of her. It was all so vivid before her that she almost believed herself asleep and dreaming.

She remembered sitting outside with her sisters when she was very young, at Longbourn, both Lydia and herself playing idly on the swing while they tried to overhear Jane, Lizzy and Charlotte’s conversations.

Their conversation had revolved about gentlemen and kisses, they spoke in hurried whispers and under voices, Kitty could hardly remember how old they had been and whether there had ever been any kisses.

She wondered what being kissed would be like. Lydia of course had been kissed, she said it was a most pleasant experience, but Miss Gould had told her the gentlemen in question had accosted Lydia and kissed her roughly and ran off. That did not sound at all pleasant.

Kitty had read enough novels to know how hers should go. Now if only her imaginings would clear enough so she could see who he would be, rather than the situation that it would happen in.

Kitty frowned; something was tickling her face and distracting her from her pleasant thoughts. She moved her head slightly and tried to remember of what she had been thinking. Whatever it was, was still there so she batted it away.

Her hand met someone else’s.

Kitty’s eyes flew open and she sat up, shocked, her hand still grasping the other.
Kitty blinked as Ash smiled down at her; he was not in his riding dress which indicated that some time had passed, and he was standing awfully close to the chaise. She was not sure what she should do; she was sure her hair was all in disarray not to mention she was half undressed, well at least less clothed then she should have been.

“My lord…”

Kitty stood up and realised that this, while mitigating the height difference somewhat, might not have been the most intelligent move.

She dropped her hand from his, which had moved to pinch her chin, while he smiled down at her.

Kitty expected him to drop his hand and then tease her for being surprised in such a fashion, but he did not. Instead he somehow managed to close even the small gap between them and draw her face towards his. Kitty’s eyes widened as she took a deep breath.

***&&***
In a second the moment was gone, because the door opened and Clara walked in carrying a pile of ledgers and papers.

Kitty saw that her aunt almost lost her grip on the papers, but what she could have seen Kitty did not know, considering it was with almost superhuman speed that Ash had managed to place himself some feet away behind a chair.

He looked embarrassed which confused Kitty. Perhaps he had made a mistake? Or had she misread the situation?

“My lord, I thought we had an arrangement for you to examine my accounts?”

Clara was torn between laughing at the expression on Ash’s face and feeling indignant on behalf of her niece.

“Of course, Mrs Sutton, I have not forgotten. I am most ready to serve you in that respect.” Ash sounded stilted and not at all himself.

Kitty looked between her aunt and Ash and realised that neither of them were going to mention what had just happened. Which was strange to Kitty, did that mean it had not happened?

Kitty was used to situations like this, well not situations like this, but situations where she was doing something she perhaps should not have. However her sisters tended not to ignore it; instead they would, depending on what age they had been, pull her hair and snatch their possessions back, or simply snatch their possessions back. If it was Lizzy biting words would occur, moralising if it was Mary, and if it was Lydia…hair pulling was still an option.

If they were going to ignore it, then so would she. “Are you going to help my aunt?”

“I am, Miss Bennet.”

Kitty looked slyly towards her aunt, but Clara waved a hand at her as she deposited the papers onto a small table in the corner of the room.

“Yes, Kitty, I am quite able to check these accounts myself, but a second pair of eyes and opinion is always a good option. In business and in fashion.”
Kitty pouted. “How did you know what I was going to say?”

Clara simply smiled and sat down at the table. “Well, my lord?”

Ash gracefully sat down next to Clara and seemed to grimace at the organisation or lack thereof of the papers.

“Are you tired, Kitty?”

“No, aunt, I’m very well rested.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Clara turned back to the papers.

Kitty walked towards the table and sat down on the other side of her aunt.

She pulled a piece of paper towards her. “So what do all these numbers mean?”

***&&***

Kitty pulled on her dress for dinner and wondered why she had not received a visit from her aunt.

Leaving the small study, after struggling and giggling over the account books, she had expected her aunt to follow her, chiding her for her state of undress or her actions.

Or more probably both.

But Clara had remained behind and showed no sign of coming to speak to Kitty before dinner.

Did this mean her aunt thought nothing of what had occurred and therefore it was nothing?

Kitty was confused. First the letter from Giles which may or may not mean anything, and then this which may or may not mean anything.

Kitty was almost certain that both did mean something, because well she was neither stupid nor blind, but there was an element of doubt.

When she had been fourteen, a young man had come to Meryton to take a position with her Uncle Phillips. He had been tall, slim and beautiful. Of course all the girls, of an age, had fallen in love with him (well apart from Mary who found him lacking in studious qualities). Better yet, Lydia had only been twelve and still at that point found climbing trees and playing with the local tenant children of more interest than young gentlemen who did neither.

Kitty had convinced herself that Mr Marshall’s actions towards her betook his undying love, repressed of course, as he was a gentlemen, so it could not be outwardly spoken. But he spoke so kindly to her and every time he saw her in the village he would offer to carry her parcels. He asked her questions about Longbourn and would tell her she was very pretty.

Kitty at this stage was not out in a formal sense and did not go to many of the nightly activities of the town, but Lizzy and Jane would talk of him when they returned, Lizzy especially would tell her every little detail, Kitty hung on every word. In retrospect Kitty should have realised, but it had been a shock when she walked into Meryton, taking the longer route to prevent the muddy short cut spoiling her dress, and saw on the village’s outskirts her sister and Mr Marshall.

The way Lizzy looked at him and the way he looked at her; Kitty had felt her heart break.

Kitty was not sure she wished to make a similar mistake, even if she was three years older than
she had been then. Of course she didn’t feel the same way about either of the two gentlemen than as she had about Mr Marshall.

***&&***

At dinner Kitty was sure.

She was sure she was right not to jump to conclusions and push everything to one side.

She was also sure that no one else at the table was feeling at all awkward. Except for her.

So she suppressed those feelings and refused to be silent at the table.

The eight of them had sat down at the greatly reduced table for normally it could be used for large, important dinners.

Mrs Annesley had been invited to dinner, but she had preferred to dine with Yardsley and Bents, as Mrs Yardsley was a cousin of hers. Thus it was an informal party with no attention paid to precedence in the seating arrangement.

Kitty sat between Georgiana and Miles, the latter only having eyes for his bride-to-be who was directly opposite him. Georgiana, however, was bubbling away about a recent letter from her brother.

It was surprising to see Georgiana thus. When in the bosom of her family and closest friends, her shyness melted away; she was still reserved in comparison to other young ladies but it was not painful for her to talk.

“Fitzwilliam writes to me that he may have a surprise for me when he returns to London? What could it be, Kitty?”

“I have no idea,” Kitty replied, wishing that she was not sitting opposite a certain gentlemen who was making her resolve to act naturally weaken.

“If it was a gift he had brought in the North he surely would have given it to me when he was in London, would he not have?”

“That would be the sensible thing to do.”

“But what is there to buy in Kent? And he already has given me so many presents and…”

“Perhaps it is not a surprise in the sense that you are thinking, it may not be a present,” interrupted Ash from the other side of the table.

“A surprise that is not a gift? What else could a brother surprise a sister with, sir?” replied Kitty.

“Frogs in her bed?” was the response.

Annabelle who was seated on her brother’s left, glared at her brother, then her gaze softened. “No, that was not you was it? It was Ricky!”

Ash placed his fork on his plate. “I’m afraid though that I told him to do it.”

Annabelle snorted. “Yes, but we aren’t talking about my abominable brothers, we are talking about Darcy. He would not do such a thing, and even if he did, he would not be stupid enough to announce it in a letter before hand.”
Georgiana giggled. “No, I do not think Fitzwilliam would put frogs in my bed!”

Clara smiled at Lord Matlock at the head of the table closest to her, “Is this how you raised your children? To terrorise their sisters?”

Lord Matlock sipped his wine. “Of course, I terrorised mine, except for Catherine; no one could terrorise her!”

“Lady Catherine!” exclaimed Kitty, causing everyone to look at her. Kitty blushed. The mention of Lady Catherine had reminded her of a letter she had received from Lydia where Wickham had told Lizzy and herself that Anne de Bourgh was to marry Mr Darcy. But perhaps she should not say so, considering how trusted a source Wickham was!

“I was just thinking aloud.” She clarified.

“Well continue thinking aloud!” rallied Lady Matlock. “I do wish to know what you were thinking! I shall never get to bed if I cannot think of what this surprise is!”

Georgiana at this point looked quite red, she had only meant for it to be a topic of conversation between Kitty and herself! She was sure her brother had meant it only for her ears!

“Aunt, I do not think my brother would – “

“Oh nonsense, your brother is a great deal too proud and private for his own good, we are his family! We are entitled to know his nearest concerns – and – oh dear I just sounded like Catherine…” trailed off Lady Matlock, laughing.

“Well, Miss Bennet?” asked Miles turning to face her, “what is your opinion?”

Kitty ate a bit of the buttered crab before answering. “I wish I had not said anything, but perhaps it is a surprise in the form of a new sister…that would be a surprise that is not a present in the usual sense.”

Miles choked on his wine and exchanged a speaking look with Ash, who had very carefully placed his glass back on the table.

“A sister? But who in Kent is there for him to propose to?”

Georgiana’s eyes had widened. “Please let it be someone from Kent if it is so!”

“Well there is your cousin,” remarked Kitty.

Lord Matlock rolled his eyes. “Ah Anne, yes my beloved sisters’ only wish, that their son and daughter be united. I think that perhaps Catherine has forgotten what Anne, my sister Anne that is, would have truly wanted.”

“Which was?” asked Clara.

“For both her son and niece to be happy…and I doubt my nephew and niece would be happily married.”

“Then perhaps there is your sister, Miss Bennet, she is at Hunsford at present…” smiled Ash.

It was Kitty’s turn to cough, she had seen just before leaving London another of her sister’s letters which condemned Mr Darcy so very roundly…

“Lizzy?” she managed to squeak. “I do not think Mr Darcy would find her ….she is not …no.”
“No?” asked Miles laughingly. “Perhaps you do not understand what gentlemen like in ladies…” Kitty blushed and fixed her eye on her plate.

“Yes, but that is not a weakness of only ladies, like Miss Bennet; I for one have no idea what you see in my sister.”

This earned Ash a slap on the arm from his sister but a laughing salutation with a wine glass from his soon to be brother.

***&&***

Kitty brushed her hair that night and plaited it before getting into bed. They would be returning to London tomorrow night. She hoped she would be able to either forget about what had almost happened or at least be able to clarify…

Secondly she hoped that Giles had forgotten all about his letter, and she would find him when she returned completely back to normal.

There was a knock on her door. Georgiana’s head peeped around the corner.

“Can I come in?”

“Yes, of course.”

Georgiana shivered in the cold air and took the opportunity to huddle under the covers with Kitty.

“You did not mean it when you said my brother’s surprise may be a sister?”

“No, well…” Kitty paused. “Wickham told Lydia and Lizzy that your brother was expected to marry his cousin Anne de Bourgh….”

Georgiana shivered again but not because of the cold. “Well that was not a lie, but he is only expected to marry Anne by my aunt!”

“Well then I doubt he will be proposing…”

“Yes but – I did not…” Georgiana looked confused. “Do you not remember ages ago you asked about my brother and his letters?”

“Yes.” Now it was Kitty’s turn to be confused.

“Well I did not want to, but now – I think my brother does like your sister. You spoke teasingly of it before, but I think that it is true.”

Kitty snorted. “Oh dear.”

“Oh dear? We could be sisters!”

“That would require Lizzy to accept him, and I am afraid she does not have a good opinion of him at all…”

“Well we shall have to help her see that – for I should dearly love you as a sister…”

“Lizzy will have to persuade herself I am afraid…it would be no good to convince her because she never believes anyone but herself!”
Georgiana pouted.

Kitty put her arm around Georgiana and squeezed. “Do not worry. We do not have to be real sisters to be sisters.”

“If it is not Lizzy, though…” Georgiana paused. “Who could it be? Miss Bingley is the only other option and I do not wish to be rude but ….I hope that it is not!”

“Georgie, I am quite sure that when Mr Darcy returns it will be with an overly expensive case of sheet music and you will laugh at how silly we have all been.”

“You are right. But I do hope he does not like your sister, if she does not like him…but then how could anyone not like Fitzwilliam? He is so good and kind and… but he would not propose if he did not know, without a doubt, the young lady’s feelings… no man would even if they were a scoundrel!”

With that Georgiana gave Kitty a quick kiss on the cheek and scrambled off to her own room.

It left Kitty with much to think about. Did that mean if she wanted a man to propose to her she had to be obvious in her feelings? But that would leave her open to embarrassment if the man she thought had feelings for her did not…

Kitty pulled the sheets over her head and wished fervently she could wake up and everything be solved.

***&&***

The next day Kitty found no opportunity to be alone with either her aunt or Ash. None.

Everyone else she managed to see on their own and be dragged into all sorts of useless conversations with, but the two people she did wish to talk to ….

It made her quite cross, though she could always corner Clara when they returned to London.

*But the gentleman.* She was most seriously displeased. How could he just not speak to her?

***&&***

1. Names and Dates changed from the [Duke of Portland’s Estate Papers](http://example.com)

back to story

***&&***
Chapter 24

***&&***

As per your instructions, I have sought clarification from Mr Bingley. I wrote to him to inform him that my client had received worrying information about his intentions regarding Netherfield. I also expressed to him that both our concerns were that Netherfield has languished without a permanent resident, something that my client could not achieve, and had assumed that he as a single man of large fortune would be in want of a wife and thus settle the matter. To the contrary of rumours circulating amongst his acquaintance and Hertfordshire, Mr Bingley visited me promptly, instead of writing, to impart his desire to remain at Netherfield for at least the remainder of his lease. So I hope that lessens your concerns, though I believe your concerns are less monetary based. My brother-in-law’s brother is Mr Bingley’s solicitor, which as you know is how Mr Bingley discovered Netherfield. Mr Barron has told us that his client’s sisters are all in uproar over the inappropriateness of a young lady from Hertfordshire, whom Mr Bingley intends to make his wife. Sincerely, your servant, Mr Morris. P.S If this marriage should eventuate I think it would not be long before you needed to find a new tenant!

***&&***

Clara refolded Mr Morris’ letter and smiled.

She looked over at her niece who had a wan expression on her face.

“Are you feeling quite well, Kitty?”

“No.”

“Would it be best if you did not come with me today?”

“No.”

“You are contradictory today, or perhaps it should be ‘in agreement’ since you have said the same word. What is the matter?”

“I – “ Kitty paused, and took a deep breath before continuing. “You have not said anything to me of what happened at Carlon.”

Clara raised her eyebrow. “I was not aware anything did happen at Carlon; did I miss some excitement? I wish you had told me of it sooner!”

“I was referring to what – what happened – what may have happened between – “ Kitty’s voice failed her.

Clara took pity on her niece. “If you are referring to an interlude I interrupted, I would not refine too much upon it, at least with me. I will not, firstly, because I know that you understand that anywhere else, and indeed if it had been anyone else but me, it would have been a scandal. Secondly, I know that you are not blind, or stupid. I am sure you know what occurred and what it means. But more importantly, lastly, because I know you, and I know that my advice at the moment would only confuse you further.”

Kitty closed her mouth which she had opened to retort. The one thing she disliked was when
people were so detestably right all the time!

Kitty pushed her plate away from her. Why did things have to be difficult? Should she sit down, think of nothing else, and write little lists to help her? They were not doing any such things and she was sure they probably delighted in tormenting her.

Well she was only a woman, in these matters it did not signify what she wanted! Of course she had the opportunity of declining, or accepting but apart from that! And if her father, or more likely he at her mother’s behest, decided to contradict her response, she had no say in that either.

So they could bother with the messy thinking part of it. Kitty was going to go shopping and buy a bonnet.

***&&***

Jane fingered the delicate lace. “It is very lovely and not at all dear, though this place is crowded, Kitty.”

Kitty squeaked as a matron of indiscernible age jostled her with a sharp elbow to the ribs. “Well, it is a place for bargains!”

Jane managed to serenely part the women clambering for service as they made for the street, after they had made their purchases.

Clara’s footman’s eye’s widened when he noticed the array of packages about to be handed into his care. He wondered how he was supposed to walk protectively behind the two young ladies if he could hardly see for paper.

Kitty looked apprehensively at the servant and tried to keep a couple of parcels for them to carry but had them forcefully removed.

They strolled arm in arm, along Bond Street towards Oxford Street, and Clara’s home in Cavendish Square.

“So, “ started Kitty, trying to sound innocent and nonchalant.

“Are you going to ask me about Mr Bingley?”

“Of course not. I was going to point out that nice hat.”

“Kitty, I have known you all your life.”

“Fine, I was going to ask about Mr Bingley. After all you are desperately in love with him.”

Kitty shot a look at her sister to see how she took the teasing, Jane smiled and tried to hide it.

“I knew it! Did he propose?”

“Oh no, but, Kitty,” Jane tightened her hold on Kitty’s arm, “we spent almost every day together, he was very attentive and … no, I must not get ahead of myself, I wish to make sure it lasts.”

“Be careful Jane…”

“You do not think me in danger?”

“Yes, I think you very much in danger that you will find yourself trapped in a closet, while Mr Bingley proposes because he could find no other way.”
Jane looked shocked. “Kitty! I…”

“Though I expect you would refuse him because if he did that you would think him deranged.”

Jane giggled. “I am sure Mr Bingley is much more of a gentleman than that… but I have been trying to make him aware that I am not adverse to him. I sometimes think perhaps Charlotte was right in saying perhaps he did not see my heart. I know that to others, I may seem very reserved.”

Kitty stopped walking. “What have you been doing, Jane?” Her mind boggled at what Jane would do, that Jane would think was ‘obvious’ yet still within the bounds of propriety.

***&&***

Kitty was still attempting to work out what exactly Jane had been doing to be obvious when she was alighting from the carriage to attend Mrs Aylward’s drum.

“Mind your dress!” called Clara as she adjusted her gold turban. “That Grecian Border, around the bottom will lose all its startling good looks if streaked with mud. Oh, listen to me! I sound like one of those magazines. It is all your fault, I have not opened one of those magazines in years and then you – “

Kitty smiled and shook her head at Clara.

It was a wet night, so they had to hold their dresses up high as they made their way into the townhouse.

“How pretty you look, Miss Bennet,” smiled Mrs Aylward as she greeted them at the door.

Kitty curtseyed and smiled before thanking her hostess.

Leaving her aunt to properly greet the matronly ladies swarming around the entrance, Kitty gave them all a smile and a curtsey and moved further into the rooms.

She was looking for one person in particular; however she was stopped in her search by the arrival of Lord Ffourkes.

“Miss Bennet you look delightful this evening. I am the man of the hour managing to steal a march on them!”

Lord Ffourkes managed to part the crowds forming and find a deserted sofa. Kitty always found it miraculous that gentlemen could do that, just manage to find an empty sofa, to impress a young lady with.

It was not long before Mr Soperton descended upon them begging to be allowed to bring Kitty a glass of some refreshment.

Kitty tried to smile at both gentlemen, indeed she was very flattered, and if it had been under any other circumstance she would have been very happy to listen to their outrageous compliments.

It took her some moments to be able to be heard in their loud and jovial conversation that had drawn in some nearby bucks.

“Lord Ffourkes, do excuse me, but have you see Lord Ashbourne? I have something particular I must speak to him about and it would not do to forget it.”
Lord Ffourkes smiled, and looked at several other of the gentlemen in a knowing way, which infuriated Kitty. She mentally noted next time she was dancing with Lord Ffourkes to tell him what she thought of people who believed such gossip.

Not that perhaps it was gossip. Was it gossip if it was true? Was it even true? Something was pushing away at her trying to tell her something but Kitty had a feeling she didn’t want to listen.

“Miss Bennet? I was just saying I believe Lord Ashbourne to be spending the night at Watiers. Indeed I saw him there before coming here, I do not think he will be leaving the table before….dawn!”

Kitty tried not to grimace. “Oh well, I do hope I do not forget what I was meant to tell him. If I do it will be entirely his fault!”

***&&***

“You speak a lot of Lord Ashbourne, Miss Bennet,” smiled Mr Gilmore as he returned to Kitty with a drink.

“Do I? Are you sure? I hope I do not.”

“Why, Miss Bennet? He is a fascinating subject.”

Kitty looked at Mr Gilmore astonished. “I do not find him so.”

“Well then why do you speak of him so often?”

“Well perhaps this evening, I speak of him because I am annoyed at him.”

Mr Gilmore smiled. “But you speak of him often elsewhere, when I took you for a drive in the park, you could speak of little else. If your intention was to awake in my breast a feeling of jealousy…I am afraid – “

Kitty almost glared at Mr Gilmore’s smirk, but gestured him to go on.

“It did not work.”

“Well since it was not my intention to awake any feelings in your – breast – sir, and certainly not my intention to talk often of any one particular gentlemen – “

“Really? It has been quite the tale around town. If you did not mean to awake any feelings, if not in me, or if you did not mean it to awake such feelings in anybody, then Lord Ashbourne must have some sway over you to make you talk of all his exploits in such a glowing fashion? Even my tiger, Luke, has commented upon it to me!”

Kitty took a sip of her drink and tried not to look bewildered. Was Mr Gilmore teasing her? Or did she speak too much of Ash?

No, she was sure she did not, or if she did it was only because she often was in his company being friends with his cousin and being much in the company of his mother.

“You, sir, are being quite ridiculous.”

“Ah, so Lord Ashbourne is compelling you to make him look good.”

“I do not believe he needs me to make himself look good, Mr Gilmore. He is a man who stands on
his own merits. Are you perhaps jealous?"

“Of what pray, Miss Bennet? What startling qualities does he have that I do not?”

“Now you are asking for trouble!”

Mr Gilmore smiled and allowed Kitty at that point to turn away to speak to Sir Louis.

***&&***

Towards the middle of the evening, Kitty finally spotted Giles. He had called the day they returned from London but Kitty happened to be upon the stairs and managed to signal to the footman to deny her and Clara.

It would be much safer to meet him in company.

“Mr Fancot, it is very good to see you.”

Giles grasped Kitty’s hand and kissed it.

Kitty wondered if this was a good sign or a bad one.

Most of the party had moved off to listen to the young ladies exhibiting their musical skill.

“Come and sit with me, Kitty; we shall sit here at the back, so we shall not appear rude.”

Kitty followed him and sat down, the view of the musicians was obscured but the music was still audible. She could see, however, Mr Bingley and another gentleman urging Jane to sing them a song. Kitty smiled. Mr Bingley and Jane had acted as if they were joined together the whole evening and the one time she had approached them, Mr Bingley had almost forgotten her name!

“Kitty?”

Kitty turned to her companion. “Oh I was just thinking about my sister!”

“Yes, Mr Bingley and she make a fine couple.”

“Yes they do… Giles?”

“Yes?”

“Do I speak too often of Lord Ashbourne?”

“Lord Ashbourne?” Giles looked momentarily taken back. “No I don’t believe I have noticed you speak of him …a great deal …no…why do you ask?”

Kitty rolled her eyes. “No reason, Mr Gilmore was funning with me earlier.”

“No, Kitty, any rumour that has surfaced in that respect has not been fuelled by you! Your behaviour is exemplary.”

Kitty giggled. “I do not think so! You were not at the Opera.”

Giles looked slightly stiff. “I did hear…”

Kitty raised her eyebrows. “Gracious, is that considered something interesting to pass around to one’s acquaintance.” Then she sighed, “No of course it is, I would have spoken of it!”
“But you were not to blame, others hold culpability!”

“No one does! Nothing that was wrong was done!”

“No, of course not.”

Giles looked flustered and Kitty was sure she also looked as she had when she had gotten into her mother’s rouge.

Giles stood up and walked into the next room and over to a window, he pulled aside the curtain and tried to open the window. He struggled pathetically with it until Kitty joined him.

“Some sort of man I am! I cannot even open a window!”

Giles laughed, but when he turned to her, Kitty realised that they were all alone together hidden from the rest of the party.

“Kitty – “

Kitty tried not to wince. Was this it? What was one supposed to say to their first marriage proposal? How was one supposed to react?

“I – “

Marriage proposals – if this was what it was – did not seem to be very coherent.

“I – “ Giles stopped and started again for the fourth time.

“Kitty, I – you cannot be unaware, my note that I – “

There was a laboured pause. “Oh hell.”

Giles lunged at her and kissed her.

Kitty gave a gasp of surprise, which made the situation become more complicated than she would have imagined.

This was not exactly how she expected her first kiss to eventuate! She had expected more – she did not know exactly what she had expected in terms of the kiss! She had dreamt on how it would come about, but not what it would feel like. Why had nobody told her?

Giles’ fingers became entangled in her hair and her hands had flown up to rest on his chest.

And thus as it appeared quite easily done, Kitty found herself kissing Giles back.

***&&***
Chapter 25

***&&***

Do not be alarmed, Madam, there is no ill intent in this missive. I hope I did not offend you last night with my teasing. It would be the last thing I meant for the world. You appeared pale last night soon after the young ladies exhibited their prowess at the various instruments of music. I noticed you did not display your talent, which I am sure you possess. I hope that your illness, whatever the cause, swiftly passes. Sincerely yours, Charles Gilmore.

***&&***

“My word, you are popular,” remarked Clara as Kitty put down the fourth bouquet of flowers she had received that morning.

Kitty placed Mr Gilmore’s flowers with Sir Louis’ flowers which were sitting with Lord Ffourkes’ flowers. Each gentleman had been concerned about her ‘health’ which apparently had appeared to rapidly wilt away after the young ladies finished their impromptu musical performance.

The last bouquet of flowers, from Giles, was effusive in its apologies for taking liberties but also with its hints of pleasure and disappointment from being interrupted, which they had been.

No one had seen them, but it had been a near run thing.

Kitty had very soon after discovered she had the headache and had begged to be taken home.

“Kitty?”

“Oh yes, aunt, I’m very popular.”

“You seem put out, nonetheless.”

“No, of course I am not put out!”

Clara silently added to herself, “Of course you aren’t, you silly girl, you just look as though you have eaten lemons!”

Kitty had had a very sleepless night; she was almost positively sure, no in fact she was sure that one was supposed to feel elated after one’s first kiss, not slightly disappointed and vaguely sick.

Kitty was regretting her decision to kiss Giles; it was a spur of the moment decision based more on the fact that someone wished to kiss her than on who that someone was. It was a kiss based on friendship; Giles was such a good friend, and she did not want to lose his friendship. It could be more than friendship, Kitty knew, but that was not what she had been thinking at the time!

She hoped that Giles had taken it in the spirit in which it was meant. His note was ambiguous.

“Perhaps you should take your flowers upstairs?”

Clara had spent most of the morning watching her niece stare off into nothingness. From her pale complexion it looked as though she had spent most of the night doing it as well. Clara was very close to ordering from Kitty an explanation.

Kitty was saved from this fate by the entrance of a footman. “Lady Annabelle Fitzwilliam and
Lord Ashbourne, ma’am.”

“Ah, we missed you last night,” smiled Clara.

“Well, my mother was feeling unwell; she is much better now and sends her regards! As for my brother’s excuse…”

Ash bowed and took Clara’s nodded offer of a seat. “I am afraid I was much occupied elsewhere.”

“Losing a great deal of money?” commented Kitty, who tried to look as though she was focused on playing with her flowers.

Ash smiled. “No.”

“Oh so you were not at Watiers?”

“No, I was; I just did not lose a great deal of money.”

Kitty glared at him, but only got an amused smile in response.

***&&***

Clara drew Annabelle into a conversation about her wedding plans knowing that the young girl could speak of little else, hoping that the other two occupants of the room would take the opportunity to speak. Clara was not above leaving them alone together but she was well aware of how that would look, even with the only other witness being Annabelle.

Kitty sat down on the chaise closest to the window and picked up some embroidery that she had been working on since Easter.

“I see that your tree is coming along nicely.”

Kitty gave Ash a puzzled look and then realised he was talking of the apple tree she was currently creating.

“Not as quickly as I would like, but I lack the talent.”

“I would say you lack the perseverance, and you have many other things to that better occupy your time.”

Kitty rolled her eyes.

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“Me, flatter?”

Ash’s look of studied innocence was too ridiculous and Kitty burst out giggling.

Perhaps she was making too much of what happened at Carlon, and of what happened at Mrs Aylward’s party.

Neither gentleman it appeared would refine upon it; well, Ash did not and he was the model of gentlemanly behaviour.

***&&***
Clara could have kicked Annabelle when only twenty minutes later she announced her desire to go for a ride in the park.

Clara had been keeping one eye on the promising conversation that was happening on the other side of the room. There were bowed heads and muted laughter, all very promising signs!

However, while the understanding between the two did not seem to be broken by Annabelle’s interruption the private conversation surely was.

Clara did not have anything to worry about; Kitty and Ash’s conversation had not touched on any private topics by the design of both parties.

“Mrs Sutton, my mother is calling for us in a short while, perhaps you could take our seats in her carriage, and we could call for our horses.”

Clara nodded her assent. “I’m sure that would be lovely Annabelle.”

“Yes, I do wish to hear all the gossip about what happened last night!”

“You always wish to hear about the gossip,” retorted her brother. “Why,” he lamented, “can you not believe that because you were not there, that nothing interesting could possibly occur?”

“Is that what you believe, my lord?” remarked Kitty.

Ash smiled. Kitty had not noticed how particularly wicked he could look when he smiled. “Of course.”

“I hate to contradict you.”

“Well then don’t, Miss Bennet, let me labour under my delusions.”

“Very well, now if we are to go riding, I must go change.”

***&&***

Hyde Park was just filling up with all the fashionable personages of the ton. Kitty was wearing her blue riding dress and felt so confident sitting atop Cleopatra.

She had never seen herself ever being confident, not in these situations. She was completely comfortable with herself and with her companions.

Well almost. There was still a couple of issues to be cleared up, which Kitty would rather she did not have to think about. She was not Lydia; to fall in love easily and quickly and fall out of it just as quickly and easily was not her style. Neither was it her style to make men flirt and fall for her, and not care about their predicament.

She was also not as direct and as forceful as her sister, Lizzy, who would not let such a situation arise. She was sure that if it had or did come to it, Lizzy would tell Mr Darcy very clearly what she thought of him.

But it was not in Kitty, or at least she very much hoped she would not have to. Perhaps she would not have to, and perhaps Giles, as his letter indicated, would treat it as an occurrence and nothing more.

After all, they had had no time to talk.
Kitty blushed as she wondered how that conversation would go, how would she respond?

“Are you hot, Miss Bennet?”

Startled, Kitty almost dropped her reins.

“No, I am feeling very well.”

“Forgive me, but you do not look it.”

Kitty smiled at Ash’s concern but shook her head. “I am fine. I promise.”

At that point Ash’s attention was claimed by Mrs Gresham who exhibited amazing horsewomanship by almost colliding with him. Of course after such a display it would have hardly been gentlemanly for Ash not to slow down to speak to her, even if everyone realised it was only a ploy.

Kitty was not left without a male escort for very long; Mr Gilmore pulled up his phaeton besides hers. It was not a smooth stop as his tiger, Luke, almost went flying.

Kitty giggled at the tiger’s face as he swore profusely and fluently at his master.

Mr Gilmore, however, looked serenely unrepentant about it, merely remarking it was unlikely that he would ever join the Four in Hand Club.

“Miss Bennet, I do hope you enjoyed your flowers?”

“Yes, they were by far the most beautiful.”

Mr Gilmore smiled. “Well I do have excellent taste.”

“Miss Bennet, I overheard your comment and must protest that my bouquet was by far in better taste and more beautiful!”

Kitty turned her head to see the arrival of not only the indignant Lord Ffourkes, but Sir Louis Peppertree and Giles.

“Yours, my lord, were the most elegant, Sir Louis’s were the most suited and Mr Fancot’s were the most diverse.”

“I am afraid, Miss Bennet, that we shall not let you get off so lightly, I demand you tell us now who the best bouquet giver is.” Sir Louis on his dappled bay, tried to look and sound imperious.

Kitty giggled. “I am afraid I shall have to answer none of you.”

“Oh, do not say ‘my father’ or something equally as coquettish as that!” exclaimed Mr Gilmore.

“Oh no, I would never do that, but I have to say Lord Ashbourne.”

Mr Gilmore gave Kitty a sly smile which she ignored.

“And what did he do?” asked Sir Louis curiously.

“I would have to say the note. It made me laugh.”

At that point, Mr Gilmore’s tiger curtly pointed out that his horses were becoming restless. Mr Gilmore looked sheepish and took his leave.
Giles snorted at Mr Gilmore’s erratic progress. “Why he persists….I do not know.”

Kitty giggled. “Yes, but Lord Ashbourne says he makes everyone else look good.”

The gentlemen laughed, though Giles seemed more subdued then the others.

“That is very true, Miss Bennet,” replied Lord Ffourkes.

It was difficult to ride four abreast, so Sir Louis and Giles fell behind, though Kitty made every effort to turn her head and engage them in conversation as much as possible.

“So Miss Bennet, much has been made of country girls when they come to town, what is your opinion on the subject?”

“Should I have an opinion on the subject?” Kitty raised one eye brow at Lord Ffourkes.

Lord Ffourkes laughed. “Well I can see who you have been taking lessons from!”

Kitty giggled and gave his lordship a quizzical look, “and who do you mean?”

“Lord Ashbourne of course.”

“I would never take lessons! I am very proficient all by myself.”

“Of course you are.”

At this point Sir Louis managed to manoeuvre up beside Kitty and Lord Ffourkes was obliged to be gentlemanly and keep Giles company.

Sir Louis asked her very kindly if she was feeling better and Kitty told him that she was and how Ash had convinced her to come out riding.

“Very solicitous of your health,” was his reply.

“Oh yes.”

“I heard you scold Ffourkes for asking you a similar question, but you must tell me how the country compares to town.”

“You must have a country seat!”

“Yes, I do. But I hardly spend any time there. I could hardly be able to compare living in town to the country!”

“And I should be able to compare seventeen years in the country to several months here in London?”

Sir Louis shrugged.

“Very well, I hate to disappoint you but society is very similar in country and in town. The events of course are different, but the way people interact and the kinds of people…..”

Kitty paused as she thought. “Though there is better fashion in town. I have never seen a more well dressed man than Mr Brummel. Though I suppose Lord Ashbourne comes close, but he confesses he studies too much at it. Which Mr Brummel must do also so – “

“He confessed this to you?” Sir Louis looked astounded.
“Yes?”

Sir Louis shook his head. “No matter, so you are as happy in the country as you are in town, Miss Bennet.”

“I would not say that. Town does have distinct advantages over the country.”

“I believe I can guess what those are.”

Kitty smiled, thinking of her four sisters and her mother, and how happy she was that not all of them were in town. Jane had clearly made her choice and was so …so…Jane that she hardly counted in that respect.

***&&***

A while later, Lord Ffourkes and Sir Louis were claimed by their respective families.

Kitty turned to Giles and smiled. He had been very silent.

“Thank you for your flowers.”

Giles nodded.

“Ash commented on how much effort you must have gone to, to collect them all…”

“Well, you – “ Giles paused and just looked away.

Kitty looked at him briefly with a puzzled look before her attention was claimed by Cleopatra. “I? You should not leave me in suspense. It is most unfair of you! In fact I think it is the trait of males to do such things. Can you believe that this morning Ash told me about the campaign on the Peninsular and then stopped! Stopped! So frustrating.”

Kitty turned to look at Giles, who had suddenly stopped his horse. He had the strangest look on his face.

“Giles?”

“Is it too much to hope, Kitty, that when you are with Lord Ashbourne that all you talk of is me? After all, it was I who kissed you last night.”

He turned to look at her directly and Kitty choked back tears which threatened, as she heard his strangled, hurt and bitter tone which matched the look in his eyes.

Kitty blindly whipped Cleopatra into action and rode across the park towards Lady Matlock’s carriage.

Giles swore under his breath.

“I thought, Fancot, the object with young ladies was to keep them by your side, not send them careening off to the other side of the park, as fast as their horse will take them from you.”

Giles tensed and moved to acknowledge Ash’s presence.

“My lord.” Giles made his bow and made to leave.

“A minute, Fancot, I am just now going to Manton’s. If you would accompany me?”
“I am not in the mood for shooting,” replied Giles, not telling the complete truth.

“It was not a request, Fancot.”

***&&***
Chapter 26

***&&***

I wonder why my cousin Darcy opts to visit us, when all he does is spend his time walking about our grounds? Mother choses to see it as the future master surveying his domain. I do hope it is not so. I would hate to have to do something drastic. No, I would not be strong enough to fight it, but he shows no inclination for me, or should I say more importantly for Rosings. You and Richard comfort me by telling me it is not his plan. But that is not my reason for writing, or should I say directing Mrs Jenkins to write to you. Our vicar, Mr Collins, has recently married and his wife has visitors, her sister and a friend. I think from your correspondence that the friend is the sister of your friend?! She is a very healthy looking girl and I believe spends much of her time walking about our grounds. D. has I believe accidentally been in her company at Hunsford, alone. It would not do for my mother to find out....

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Kitty would have detested the tone of the letter shown to her, if she could concentrate on it.

“Well?” Georgiana looked hopeful, but all she received for her trouble was a wan smile. “Are you not well?”

Answering that question was difficult. There was nothing wrong with her health, or should she say her physical health! On the other hand, it did not feel incredibly elevating to suddenly realise you had quite possibly broken one man’s heart, while being madly in love with another.

She had feigned a headache upon waking on Saturday, and had spent the weekend indisposed. It had been weak of her; she knew that and was determined to no longer hide from anyone.

It was easier, however, to do in theory than in practice.

After Clara had brought her home from the park on Friday, it had only been the work of a moment to sort out her feelings. It was like that moment of clarity when she had seen Mr Marshall with Lizzy.

Firstly, she had been mistaken with Giles; he was truly in love with her, or at least thought he was, which was just as painful. Secondly, those who told her she seemed inordinately fond of talking of Ash were right. Thirdly, whether they had guessed the cause or not, Kitty knew it. She was in love with him.

It was not complicated once you actually sat down and thought about it, and Kitty realised she had been avoiding that.

The reason, for that was not hard to find; while she was sure Ash liked her that did not necessarily mean anything. Lots of men, for instance, liked Jane, and Lizzy, and Lydia. Last time Kitty looked, none of them were married! Though obviously Jane was close!

It hurt to think that her feelings might not be reciprocated, that her feelings of dependence were not returned. She depended on him to tell her things, make her laugh and to be there. It was all so subtle that Kitty was not surprised she could have ignored it for so long.

Surely it did not make her the stupidest woman alive? After all, she had never felt quite this way about anybody before…was it so surprising she had not realised quite how she felt? Of course she could hardly have not realised how attractive…but she never dreamed that anything…..and then…
of course perhaps she was protecting herself from this awful feeling of knowing that ….

“Kitty?”

Kitty had forgotten Georgiana was still standing there. “No, Georgie, I’m fine.”

Georgiana looked unconvinced.

“Really!”

Georgiana, put her cousin’s letter away in her reticule. “What did you think of Anne’s letter?”

“Anne’s - ? Oh, yes. Most interesting.”

“You did not read a single word of it, did you?”

“Of course I did – she commented on – and then talked about – “

Georgiana shot her a look that was part hurt and part annoyance.

“I’m sorry, I have had a lot on my mind.” This statement only made Georgiana look more hurt.

Kitty could understand that, Georgiana had trusted her with her deepest secret, and here she was not even willing to talk about something that was a trifle in comparison.

“I kissed Mr Fancot and he now knows I’m not in love with him. Worse still, he knows that I’m not in love with him because I’m in love with your cousin.”

Georgiana blinked and then swallowed a giggle. “Sorry, it’s very tragic really…”

She didn’t get much further before dissolving into laughter.

Luckily it was infectious and Kitty found herself laughing for no reason.

Georgiana moved over to sit with Kitty, and gave her a fierce hug.

“It was just how matter of fact you were!”

“Yes, I know,” replied Kitty, wiping tears of mirth, but they were more than likely mixed with real tears.

“Are you in love with Ash?” Georgina queried. “I do not mean to suggest that you aren’t, it is just…”

“Just?” Kitty looked confused.

“I did go to school for a while, but I detested it which is why I was in Ramsgate with Mrs Younge and…” Georgiana paused. “My cousins would visit the school, it was in Bath you see, so if they were in town…and I had a couple of school friends stay with me in the holidays. My friend and her sister who was three years older, and she, the sister, thought…I suppose she was…because she was sixteen, was in love with ….well… of course it was not reciprocated because she was so silly and…I expect he is quite used to having …indeed Belle’s friends used to try and twist their ankles….and then all those young ladies Fitzwilliam would tease him about…”

Georgiana trailed off, realising her remembrances were probably not what Kitty wanted to hear… indeed she looked very pale and Georgiana wished she had not said anything because she was sure that the circumstances were different. Though she did not know how to say that now without
looking as though she was only saying it to make Kitty feel better. Georgiana felt so stupid.

Which was exactly how her friend was feeling, so stupid! Kitty had allowed herself to have a little fantasy, quite similar to the gothic novels she devoured from the circulating library, but now she saw that was all it was. A fantasy.

Even if she had a little hope that at least Ash liked her, it was best to expect nothing because…it would be so painful to … She could hardly expect from all those other…that she would be…no it was silly. What was there to recommend her above all others?

“What are you going to do about Mr Fancot?” Georgiana decided the best course of action was to change the subject.

“Apologise?” said Kitty doubtfully.

Georgiana looked dubious. “Saying what precisely? ‘I am terribly sorry that I’m not in love with you. Oh and that I kissed you, possibly making you think that I was?’”

It was Kitty’s turn to look dubious. “I am sure that is just how I should phrase it!”

“How else could you phrase it? I do not think an apology will work, beyond perhaps saying you are very sorry for hurting him?”

“No, you are right.” Kitty thought hard about how she would have felt, for example, if Mr Marshall had apologised for liking Lizzy.

She would have wanted to slap him silly.

Not that Giles – Mr Fancot had the luxury of being able to do that.

“Hopefully he will be civil, because if he cuts you then it – it won’t create a scandal but it will make people talk.”

“It’s no more than I deserve.”

Kitty slumped back in her chair; it was most unladylike but it was comfortable and more importantly it suited her mood.

Georgiana looked amused, but joined Kitty in her slouching. She slipped off her shoes and tucked her feet underneath her.

“Mrs Annesley would quite possibly go mad if she saw me now.”

“Luckily, for us she is not here, and is unlikely to be so. Besides, who is going to call upon us? I can think of no one who would disapprove greatly!”

“Miss Bingley?”

Kitty snorted. “I doubt Miss Bingley would call upon me.”

This was not entirely true as Clara had taken refuge in Kitty’s sickroom on Saturday as Miss Bingley, for some reason known only to herself, had called to see how the poor darling was holding up.

“No, she does not appear to think too highly of your family. Perhaps she is jealous.”

Kitty suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.
“I saw that, Kitty. I know you do not believe that anything is – I know I have to realise you know your sister far better than I do, but can you not allow a girl to hope? My brother has given up so much for me. I just wish he could be happy.”

“Well, does he not return next week? As does Lizzy, so we shall know by next Monday.”

Georgiana smiled. “Have I distracted you?”

“Partly, I wish you were out. Then you could distract me tonight!”

“I’m sure your many beaux will do that!”

Kitty mentally groaned when she thought of them. How happy she had been to be popular, to be even more popular than her sister. That was not entirely true because everyone in London seemed to like Jane, but it was not the same as Jane was clearly Mr Bingley’s. Her court were the men who either simply admired beauty or admired an unobtainable woman because they did not have to even make an attempt to woo her.

Now, however, all the attention that she was likely to still receive made Kitty feel slightly ill. She had misjudged Giles; she would likely do it again to somebody else.

The last thing she wanted or needed was to see pain, hurt and suffering in another person’s eyes because of her.

“Have I said something wrong?”

Kitty turned her attention back to her friend. “No. You have just reminded me I must make my position clear to everyone…well…the not being in love with any of my beaux part! I could not stand to hurt anyone else.”

“Kitty,” remonstrated Georgiana, “I do not think you have thought this through. It would be the same as apologising to Mr Fancot! Even I know that you cannot tell a group of men that you are not in love with them!” Georgiana paused. “Unless you are my cousin; Annabelle would be able to do it.”

“So would Lizzy,” Kitty sighed. “You are right, I shall just have to show them.”

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She had her opportunity the next day at Lady Ffourke’s ball. Kitty seemed disinclined to dance, though she tried not to directly refuse anybody because that meant she would be unable to dance at all.

That would have presented a very odd picture; firstly because it was known that she loved to dance and secondly because she always had had partners at previous balls and parties. Though she felt she deserved some censure, the gossip and petty conversation that would arise from her spending an entire ball sitting down was disproportionate to her crime!

Kitty sat discontentedly, on a sofa in the card room. She was sipping a glass of champagne.

“Miss Bennet.”

Kitty looked up at the handsome viscount who had sat down next to her and felt like glaring.
Of course, it was just like him, and gentlemen in general, to arrive just when one did not want them. When she wanted to speak to Ash he was not there; when she did not, well the answer was clear. How could she sit there calmly when….and he was just so frustrating, why could he not be like Mr Bingley then she would have her answer in his face in a second! Her anger and frustration took the edge over her fear that her feelings would show.

“My lord.”

“What are you doing?”

“I am sitting, drinking champagne,” said Kitty in a voice that clearly said – *what do you think I am doing?*

“I meant, Miss Bennet that I was standing over there.” Kitty watched him gesture, beyond the card room, to one of the double doors that lead from the rest of the house to the ballroom. “And what did I see?”

“I have no idea,” Kitty was feeling peevish, but curious.

“Firstly, I saw you walking very hurriedly in this direction,” more hand waving,” I assume to avoid Ffourkes, but then you seemed to come across Gilmore, so suddenly you turned. Then in this direction it appeared Sir Louis converged upon you. I can only assume it was his presence that made you suddenly interested in Lady Agatha Hagg and her cronies.”

Kitty stared at him.

“Then you seemed to be attacked from two fronts by Basset and Soperton. Incredibly you managed to make both fronts smash into each other and be caught in Lady Blaketon’s grasp. It was a movement worthy of Wellington. And now you are hiding in the card room.”

Ash leant back against the sofa, with one arm draped along the back. “The question is….why?”

Kitty wondered what besides the truth would sound plausible.

“I have …”

I have what? She thought. I have tired of their attention? No that sounded far too arrogant. I have no wish to break their hearts. That was the truth but now Kitty voiced it in her mind it too sounded arrogant. As thought she, Kitty Bennet, could capture the hearts of men at will. It was all very silly, as though any change in her behaviour would be less talked of than the behaviour in the first place. No she would just have to act to everyone as she had always had, no matter her feelings, and that went double for the gentlemen next to her.

“You have…?”

“I do not think I have to explain myself to you.”

“That is very true. But, you should not act so rough and ready with them, it will leave you open to criticism.”

Kitty barely attended to this, as she spotted Giles making his way across the room.

He should not *be* here, was her first thought. Surely he should be somewhere…no,… where else should he be? He had every right to be there.

That did not mean Kitty was in any way ready to meet him. At that time she wished she was
Lizzy or Lydia or Mary! Or even Jane. All of her sisters would know how to act, in their different ways.

Kitty was sure, though, that only Lydia would have found herself in a similar situation!

“My lord? Are you ready to dance?”

Ash looked amused. He hadn’t asked her to dance, but Kitty was hoping he wouldn’t feel obliged to point that out.

He didn’t. Now if they just moved this direction, thought Kitty, then she would avoid Giles!

However, Giles changed direction and inexplicably came directly over to them.

“Ashbourne, Miss Bennet. I hope that you are not engaged for this dance?”

Kitty blinked at Giles. Was he talking to her? Of course he had to be unless he wished to shock the ton by leading Ash out for a country dance!

“I am afraid, that I an engaged to Lord Ashbourne for this dance, Mr Fancot.” There now Giles could feign disappointment and walk away.

Giles did not look disappointed. “Perhaps the next, Miss Bennet? Unless you are otherwise engaged?”

Kitty had moved past blinking to gaping. “No, I am free for the next.”

Giles bowed and moved away.

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Kitty clung to Ash’s arm as they made their way from the rapidly dwindling dance floor. How she had managed to dance at all credibly she could not explain.

She had read gothic novels, she knew how scorned men were supposed to act.

Unless Giles was being a noble scorned lover?

Kitty shook her head. This was not a novel, this appeared to be her life!

“Fancot, I believe this is your dance.”

Kitty felt that inward stab of annoyance, that she always felt when some action made it sound as though she was some possession to be handed about at a man’s whim. Although, she knew it was neither of the men’s intention and that for all intents and purposes she was under the control of men.

Kitty curtseyed as Ash took his leave and then she was left with Giles.

“Miss Bennet, you do not look very well, perhaps you would prefer to take a walk on the terrace? I think the air would do you well.”

Kitty nodded. It would be worse than dancing with him, where nothing could happen, but she did owe him an apology.

She wrapped her arms around her as the night air made its presence felt.
“Giles, I – “ she spoke softly not wishing to be overheard by anybody.

He held up a hand. “You see me, Kitty; I don’t feel at all like shooting myself. I don’t even feel much like shooting him. I hope that we – “

Giles paused as he leant against the parapet. “I hope that we shall always be friends.”

“I do love you very much,” Kitty blurted unexpectedly.

“But not enough,” her companion sighed.

“No, it’s not a matter of enough or amounts; it’s a matter of kinds and ways.”

“Very profound.” Giles smiled at her wryly.

“I am very sorry.”

“I know, but, well, a man likes to be crossed in love now and then. In a month’s time I will be looking at all my married friends wondering why on earth I wished to join their state.”

Kitty smiled, but gave Giles a light slap on the arm. “Are you suggesting that women are more trouble then they are worth?”

“Never!”

“Perhaps we should go inside; I would rather not be gossiped about further than I already am!”

Giles inclined his head towards the other end of the terrace. “We can claim we are playing proprieties.”

Kitty looked past him and saw Jane and Mr Bingley talking closely. So much for Jane’s claim she was avoiding situations were a marriage proposal might arise!

Kitty turned her back on the couple and looked down into the little courtyard garden that the terrace bordered.

Giles joined her. “Is that not Miss Bingley?” he whispered.

Down in the shadows, Kitty could see two females walking from further out in the garden towards a bench almost directly below them. Why on earth were they wandering around the garden in the middle of a ball? It was difficult to distinguish features but Kitty thought she could recognise Miss Bingley’s necklace as it glimmered in the moonlight.

Voices floated up towards them, and Giles’s assertion was true, it was clearly Miss Bingley.

“You see, I had no idea! She owns Netherfield that is the estate I was telling you about. Nasty environment! She, of course, only has it for her lifetime, and it is entirely in debt. No wonder little Miss Catherine is throwing herself at every rich man she sees, and Miss Bennet is tempting my brother!”

The unknown woman spoke up, “But surely their father…”

“Estate entailed away. They have no money and their aunt will be leaving her heir, whoever they may be, in terrible debt. It’s a shame to see the ton so taken in.”

At this point, it was obvious Miss Bingley’s companion was unconvinced so Miss Bingley continued. “I saw the papers for myself. I was visiting poor Miss Catherine, who has clearly
decided being ill makes her interesting, and Mrs Sutton left me in her incredibly small parlour. So it is hardly my fault it was the only reading material available. Poor dears. But Jane Bennet must not be allowed to marry my brother. The Bingleys were not meant to be united with the poor, the socially unacceptable and the foolish with money!”

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Yes, my dear, it’s all true. Is it not shocking? My sister and I are glad Mr Darcy is returning next week, so we can lay before him all the facts. We would like your opinion on the matter, nevertheless. Being the eldest of my family I cannot help but feel that Charles is my responsibility and to have him fall into such a trap. Jane is a sweet girl, and under any other circumstances! I suppose if he truly loves her…but if that were so he would not be persuaded away from her so easily….

Clara noticed Miss Dewhurst looking at her oddly and craned her neck the other direction as if she were stretching.

Clara felt no compunction in reading Louisa Hurst’s private correspondence as her sister had felt no shame in reading hers!

Kitty had poured out the whole troubled story to her, leading to a most painful conversation at first, as Clara had no wish to discuss her finances with any of her nieces, especially not Kitty.

However, she had to allay the fears Kitty had brought to her. Clara had been shocked; she had never thought Caroline Bingley was stupid! Miss Bingley, Clara thought, was one of those women who thought they were so shrewd and clever; they were even smug about it.

She shook her head; it would almost be painful to have to enlighten her. Though Clara would only do that when it was beneficial to herself; after all, she could hardly miss the opportunity to make it known to Miss Bingley’s acquaintance that, firstly, she read private documents and secondly, that she grossly misunderstood them. Fancy not knowing what having tenants in arrears meant. Of course, if every one of your tenants were in arrears then theoretically it was possible for you to have no money to speak of! So perhaps she should not be too hard on poor Miss Bingley.

But, adding this to the rumour circulating that Netherfield was only hers for her lifetime – Clara could see amusement or heartache looming on the horizon. She hoped it would be amusement.

Kitty looked over at her aunt. She wondered what Clara had been attempting to read on Mrs Hurst’s writing table.

Giles had whisked her away from Lady Ffourkes’ terrace, partly, Kitty surmised, because it was improper for them to be alone for any longer and party, because he knew her well enough to know she probably would have marched down to confront Miss Bingley.

She had no opportunity til the morning after the ball, to tell Clara of what she had overheard Miss Bingley telling her friend in the garden.

Kitty had dismissed most of what Miss Bingley had said as nonsense; she had read the papers in question herself! Nevertheless, she could not help but think of Clara asking for Ash’s opinion and
of the rumours circulating about the way Netherfield was settled.

Clara had explained that Mr Sutton had left her his entire fortune, apart from some minor bequests, and it was entirely at her disposal both during her life and after it.

That was all her aunt had to say on the matter, apart from instructing Kitty that it would be foolish and more than likely futile for her to defend Clara. This was something that Kitty had already realised! People believed what they wished to believe, and all their friends would not care! Not to mention that it did not negate the fact that Kitty herself was virtually penniless!

She would, also, feel too much like her mother, discussing money and property with others! Next she would be talking of Mr Bingley’s £5000 per annum!

Listening to Miss Dewhurst speak glowingly of a recently published three volume novel, it was obvious that the discussion of estates and money was not a subject that would come up in conversation.

Or, Kitty amended, not in conversation where each young lady was attempting to display her most amiable side. She was sure privately every lady here would talk and think about such things. At least this gave her an opportunity to think of something else than…well, Kitty had thought about that even more and decided she would rather just… be near… Yes, be near all her friends and enjoy all their company and she would just have to cope when she returned home. Whenever that was likely to be...

“Miss Bennet, my niece tells me that you are quite a capable rider and are often seen in the park.” Mrs Brockleton said to Kitty as she sipped her tea.

Kitty knew why Clara and herself were visiting Mrs Hurst. Clara declared that it did no good to avoid people who were gossiping about you, in fact it would probably leave you with no one to socialise with. But what Mrs Brockleton thought she would accompany by bringing her niece, Miss Dewhurst, to visit, Kitty did not know!

“I would say I was no more than competent, ma’am, but I enjoy it. I’m not much good at anything else really.”

Mrs Brockleton smiled, “Well you have enough gentlemen willing to escort you and see that you come to no harm.” Her tone held no reproach or malice, which surprised Kitty.

“My niece, sadly is a poor horsewoman, she needs practice. Perhaps you would consent, Miss Bennet, to let her accompany you on your next ride?”

Ah….Kitty smiled, realising from the sudden arrested look on Miss Dewhurst’s face that it was probably a plan to throw her into the path of well connected, and above all, single gentlemen. Kitty recognised the signs well.

Mrs Bennet had once made Jane stand up, when only just sixteen, at her first ball, in front of a whole assembly of people, and sing. Twice. Mrs Bennet even made Jane sing a duet with the reigning Belle of Meryton.

Kitty had peeped out of the nursery; it was titled as such however with Lydia as an inmate it had been anything but. Jane had come home all pale and shaking and that had been hours later. Her mother had snapped at Jane that it was just what one had to do to be seen. It didn’t matter if it was something distasteful to yourself, or that you had to socialise with young ladies you didn’t like, if either threw you in company with single gentlemen then it must be done.

Kitty had always thought it was part of the reason Lizzy had insisted she be brought out the next
season. Lizzy had always been Jane’s champion, even if they both denied it.

Kitty shook her head as she realised she had not answered Mrs Brockleton. “I am sorry, of course I would love for Miss Dewhurst to accompany me if she wishes. Though I was just thinking of how rude some of my companions can be about my riding skill, I hope that would not bother you, Miss Dewhurst?”

Miss Dewhurst smiled, but the smile was plastered on her face, as her aunt glared at her. “I would be delighted, and no, they would not bother me.”

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It became obvious the next day that Miss Dewhurst was clearly a spirited liar when she had to be. While the gentlemen did not bother her, it was clear the method of her being able to be in the company of them did.

It did not help that her mount was clearly a wilful animal that sensed that Miss Dewhurst was unable to control her.

After several minutes, Kitty wondered if this was like when her mother sent Jane to Netherfield in the rain, for all the gentlemen were so attentive and had abandoned Kitty to plod along behind them as they tried to control Miss Dewhurst’s horse.

“No, no, Miss Dewhurst, pull on this side…”

“Perhaps it would be best if you allowed me to lead your horse? I could easily do it while still mounted, and then you would not have to do a thing.”

Kitty tried not to giggle at the looks of vexation as Vixen lived up to her name by attempting to chomp on Lord Ffourkes’ hand as he reached for her bridle.

Kitty did not mind the sudden desertion of her court of admirers; how could she after she had tried to engineer it herself! Though Kitty had realised after some thought that perhaps that was not necessary, after all, nothing truly bad had come of her adventure. As long as she didn’t do anything stupid, to allow a man to think she felt more than she did, ever again, she would have nothing to reproach herself with.

However the apparent desertion of other friends did trouble her. Miss Blaketon had just ignored her point blank. It was possible of course she had just not seen Kitty, since Miss Blaketon’s riding habit included a thick veil. But there was no excuse for the other young ladies of the party, or indeed for Lady Blaketon in her landau!

“Ah, Miss Bennet,” Kitty turned to see Miss Greysan approaching on foot.

“Good morning, Miss Greysan!”

“Is there someone you can consign your horse to? I should dearly love a walk.”

Kitty nodded and allowed Clara’s groom who had been trailing the group to help her dismount. Kitty asked him to tell Miss Dewhurst what she was doing, but it seemed that propriety did not matter as Miss Blaketon and her friends had joined the group a little further on the path.

“You seem very well, Miss Bennet.”

“I am, and you?”
“Yes very well. I hope you do not think I am intruding, but I was very frank with you when we met – “

Miss Greysan paused.

“If you wish to be frank now, I have no objection.”

“Thank you. I do wish to be frank. Gossip has reached our little circle, and I am afraid that – I wished to warn you that some of your friends may be a little colder to you than they have previously been.”

Kitty stopped. “Is this gossip about my aunt and – “

“Yes,” injected Miss Greysan, not seeming to wish to hear the details said out loud.

“Well, what is being said about my aunt is not true, but it is true that I have no money! My father’s estate is entailed and I have four sisters.”

Miss Greysan smiled. “I know that situation well! Though my mother has a comfortable settlement. I did not wish to see you slighted and not know the cause.”

“Thank you, but I can hardly believe that anyone who is my friend will believe such nonsense, or have it change their opinion of me, or their behaviour. I have never once pretended to be anything than what I am! The gentlemen …”

Though the gentlemen had abandoned her; Kitty faltered.

“Oh, the gentlemen will not care I assure you, for most of them do not mean – I beg your pardon.”

Miss Greysan looked guilty, to be betrayed into almost saying such a thing!

“No it is quite right; I know that they all have no intention of asking for my hand! Indeed I think I would faint if any of them did! I would have no idea what to say!”

Kitty smiled, she had even chased Giles away before he could properly propose! If she were a sensible girl she should have allowed him to propose so she could practice how to behave when one received an offer. Though if she were following her own strictures, laid down when she first came to town, she should have accepted it! But she knew now she could only do that if her heart dictated she should accept, not just her head. Unfortunately her heart was screaming out for one person and she was sure he must just see her as the silly friend of his little cousin.

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Kitty had assumed that Miss Graysan had been exaggerating in her warnings. By Saturday night when they attended a musical soiree and Kitty found herself alone on one of the sofas, she was forced to accept that Miss Graysan had not been exaggerating.

The last couple of days had been full of hectic social engagements. During each one of them it was forcibly borne on Kitty that something had changed.

Kitty had not presumed to see many of her gentlemen friends tonight. Sir Louis had condemned it as ‘damn infernal caterwauling,’ Mr Gilmore had claimed that harps gave him a rash and Giles refused to attend on the grounds that he may incriminate himself.

Kitty had no idea what he meant by that, but Mr Soperton told her he thought it was a reference to
being forced to sing a duet with some young lady last season. Ash had been present at some of her recent social engagements and Kitty almost sensed that he was being protective of her. But his protective spirit, if that is what it was, had failed tonight. He had apologised in the park saying that he wished he could attend but – no just no.

In fact all the gentlemen present, save one or two, were either older, corpulent gentlemen, those much infatuated with one of the young ladies present, engaged gentlemen, or those too much under their mother’s thumb.

However the lack of appropriate gentlemen did not explain the actions of the young ladies. Miss Jones and Miss Blaketon, as well as the Misses Hicks, had pretended not to know Kitty. Even Miss Dewhurst who had ridden with her only on Thursday seemed to have forgotten that fact! At least that is how it seemed.

Other young ladies who Kitty barely knew acted strangely towards her. Their behaviour did not hurt, but that of her friends did. Surely her financial situation had no bearing on how they behaved to her! She could have forgiven a change in the gentlemen’s behaviour more than that, for despite them being friends, gentlemen did have to marry prudently, and being friends with a penniless girl would hamper those opportunities. Indeed a couple of them had suddenly become quite cool towards her, but it was nothing compared to the continued actions of the ladies.

She tried to look as though she did not mind sitting alone, both her aunt and Lady Matlock had been hemmed into a conversation with Lady Agatha Hagg and Mrs Goodwin. Annabelle looked as those she would have once or twice joined Kitty, but Kitty tried to surreptitiously signal her to stay where she was – beside her handsome fiancé.

She regretted this generosity when someone sat down next to her on the sofa. Sir Christian. Why he was invited and why he accepted was a complete mystery and, if Kitty read her hostess’s face correctly, completely inexplicable to her as well!

“My mother and she were great friends, she felt obliged. I felt like a dreary evening. Does that answer your question?”

“I do not believe I said anything.”

“No, but I could tell what was happening in that pretty head of yours. Is it so very bad now that all your friends have deserted you? You could hardly expect any less!”

Kitty looked sharply at the man lounging to her right. He was turned towards her, leaning on the back of the sofa, with his elbow hooked over the edge and his hand near his face. He clearly thought himself dangerous and seductive in that pose.

“Well? You could not. A young lady fresh from the country and such a success in town, when many town bred girls are not looked twice at! Then when such gossip comes along about her, of course they would take the opportunity!”

“I am hardly a success, Sir Christian.”

“No, you are not an Incomparable, or a Toast, I shall grant you that. But you have raised the interest of more than one gentleman and such gentlemen at that. Why I have no idea. You are passably pretty and are no great wit.”

Sir Christian said this so mildly that Kitty saw red. No one was looking at them, or at least openly facing their direction. This however meant nothing; the walls had ears in these kinds of parties. So Kitty smiled broadly at Sir Christian.
He looked mildly perturbed by this as though he expected some other reaction.

“How nice of you to say so, Sir Christian, I do completely agree with you.” While speaking, she grasped her fan in one hand and brought it heavily across his knuckles. “Oh my mistake, sir, I thought I saw something creepy moving on the sofa.”

Sir Christian glared as he sucked his abused knuckles. “I was only joking,” he commented plaintively.

“I am in no mood to joke.”

“I can see that. I thought you needed some cheering!”

“That was not a good method.”

“I did not realise I was dealing with a vicious harpy!”

Surprisingly, most of all to Kitty herself, this did make her laugh. Sir Christian with his bruised pride and knuckles glowered at her.

“I’m not very sorry, so I won’t say that I am!” she declared. “I wish however that I could hit almost everyone in this room with my fan. And it’s not on my behalf, well not completely.”

Kitty had been hurt to see that the tide of opinion had changed towards Jane and Mr Bingley. Not that they were very important to the ton as it was, but in those circles who had cared about the match, suddenly Jane was not a suitable match, or had entrapped him. She did not know whether Jane had even realised, though Kitty was smart enough to know that just because Jane did not openly display something did not mean it was not there. It made Kitty wish once again that courtships did not have to be played out in public.

Perhaps they should all be relocated to the middle of the ocean, but even then she surmised some ship would pass carrying judgemental sailors.

“It is all a mess.”

Sir Christian smiled. “Of course it is. You could always use this opportunity.”

“Use this opportunity?”

“And become a scarlet woman. Go to gaming hells, set up house, drink!”

Kitty rolled her eyes and Sir Christian sighed. “Worth a try, I’m sure I’ll find a young lady who will do just that for me.”

“No, you will find a young lady who makes you stop being a – scarlet – gentlemen, stops you from going to gaming hells, takes over your house and makes you abstain from drinking.”

Sir Christian shuddered.

“Anyway I could not do that, even if I wished to. I have my sister to think about, and then Lizzy is returning on Monday. Oh and Mr Darcy apparently arrived this morning which is just another thing I need to worry about.”

“You need to worry about Mr Darcy?! How many …. friends do you have!” Sir Christian looked amazed.

Kitty choked. “No, I mean, he does not like me, and I do not like him but Georgiana, his sister, is
my friend and she will be hurt if we do not at least appear as if we like each other. Why am I telling you this?"

“My over-abundant charm?”

“When you are amusing me.”

Sir Christian smiled. “I’m glad I could be such a good substitute.”

“Did…?” Kitty wondered if someone had asked Sir Christian to come for her sake. Had? A little hope flared.

“Not in so many words, but yes. Additionally, was a good way to prove I have more bottom than the rest of them! I am not likely to be scared away by a paltry harp!”

“Indeed.”

“Though I would rather be where I was last night.” Sir Christian dropped his voice, and said in an almost taunting fashion, “a hell…carousing, quaffing…”

Kitty looked speculatively at him, as the evening had progressed, she had realised why the gentlemen had found themselves engaged elsewhere. The musical talent was quite low, though there were the exceptions. To the annoyance of almost all, Annabelle could play and sing flawlessly. But the other young ladies did not confine themselves to playing a few pieces, but they also sang. One lady had even done a small dance. Then there were the duets!

The gentlemen were expected to listen enrapt, unless they wanted a glare from the turbaned dowagers ranged alongside them. Then they had to beg for another piece even if they would have rather thrown themselves off the balcony. The unlucky ones had to help turn the pages, or even participate!

Kitty was glad she was sitting as far away as possible. She knew she was barely passable on the piano and had not tried singing since her father asked her why she was scaring all their livestock away.

However at this moment Kitty saw her opportunity for revenge.

Miss Dewhurst finished her piece, received her glowing praise, and declined playing any more.

Kitty stood and moved towards the piano.

“Does anyone mind if I play?”

No one made a comment.

“I have been looking forward to playing all evening, especially since Sir Christian has agreed to sing a delightful song he learnt last night. Is that not right, sir?”

The look on his face was without price.

***&&***
Chapter 28

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I feel myself called upon by our relationship, and my situation in life, to rejoice with you on the heavenly situation you are now experiencing, of which we were yesterday informed by your daughter Elizabeth. Be assured, my dear Sir, that Mrs. Collins and myself sincerely congratulate you, and all your respectable family, in your present celebration. I have always thought Jane a worthy and respectable young lady, and Mr Bingley a respectable, worthy gentlemen.

Having thus offered you the sincere congratulations of Mrs. Collins and myself on this happy event, let me now add a short hint on the subject of another; of which we have been advertised by the same authority. Your daughter Catherine, it is presumed, will not long bear the name of Bennet, after her elder sister has resigned it, and the chosen partner of her fate may be reasonably looked up to as one of the most illustrious personages in this land.

Let me advise you then, my dear Sir, to reward yourself as much as possible, to embrace your worthy children to your affection forever, and enjoy with them the fruits of their own beauteous nature. We hope to see much of all your family before long. Sincerely William Collins.

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Mr Bennet blinked at the letter that reached his library in Hertfordshire. It had been sent late on Friday and had made exceedingly good time to Longbourn, arriving early Saturday.

That was put down to a male servant of Hunsford, who had gone with the new bride, needing to return to Hertfordshire to care for a sick mother. Though why Mr Collins had not sent the letter with Sir William or Miss Lucas was a mystery to Mr Bennet.

Indeed why had he sent a letter at all, he could have easily left a message with Lizzy. But therein lay the rub; Lizzy would not be returning to Longbourn, she had decided to remain in London.

This was not surprising, if Mr Bingley’s courtship of Jane was going so well as for him to receive missives about it from his distant relations!

But he dearly wished his daughter was with him, firstly, to provide him with some much needed wit and, secondly, to explain to him what on earth Mr Collins was talking about.

He did not think Jane was even engaged yet and had heard no word about Kitty! Indeed, the possibly identity of the gentleman, if it was a gentleman, (there was the possibility of course that Kitty could run off with a chimneysweep) was a complete mystery to Mr Bennet.

Though he could not blame his cousin for congratulating him so precipitously, if two of his daughters were to be advantageously married there could be money and livings in it for him!

Not to mention that the family connections, and Mr Collins’ boasting power, would increase tenfold at least!

Perhaps he should go to London and see what all the fuss was about, but how to do that without arousing the suspicions of his wife? The last thing Jane needed was her mother helping her courtship.
Oblivious to the letter that her father had spent the weekend mulling over, Lizzy tried to conceal her displeasure at the plans being made around her.

Maria Lucas was practically bouncing with joy at the idea of a picnic in Richmond Park; she had already convinced her father to remain in London longer than he had expected, what more was one day for a picnic? Sir William had come up to London on business and to escort his daughter and Lizzy home. However he had fallen victim to his daughter’s constant pleading.

Lizzy had no qualms with a picnic, though listening to the proposed guest list she would know very few people; it was the inclusion of Mr Darcy that alarmed her. She had confided in her eldest sister that very morning as she was unpacking her trunks from Hunsford.

Jane’s reaction allowed Lizzy to feel less for Mr Darcy and for her own misguided judgements, but it did not mean she was at all capable of meeting in company the man she had so lately refused and abused roundly to his face.

His letter had explained much to Lizzy, though it hardly excused him from his attempts to separate Jane from Mr Bingley. Neither did his summary dissection of the faults of her family do anything to endear him to her.

She may agree, in principle, with some of his statements but they were her family!

“So is that settled?” Lizzy looked up at Kitty’s voice.

What Mr Darcy had said about her was inexcusable; Lizzy could not imagine that Kitty without Lydia’s direct influence would actively engage in the type of behaviour Mr Darcy had accused her of. It was just his contemptible feelings that no Bennet was good enough for anybody!

Though when Lizzy had spoken of it to Jane, Jane’s comments had made Lizzy think twice; perhaps she did need to speak to her younger sister. On the other hand Kitty had tried to warn her about Wickham, and she hadn’t listened, so why would Kitty listen to her?

“Lizzy?” Kitty’s voice was petulant now.

“That sounds lovely.” Lizzy replied, then saw Jane look curiously at her and wondered what she had agreed to.

“You do realise you agreed that it would be best that you took the carriage with Miss Bingley, and Mrs Hurst…” Jane whispered to her as their guests took their leave, all but their aunt and Kitty.

Lizzy groaned. “Detestable distraction!”

“I did think you were being particularly magnanimous,” giggled Kitty. “I do hope we actually get to Richmond, this time.”

Lizzy furrowed her brow, and then remembered Jane’s letter about the aborted trip to Richmond that had ended in the Bingley’s townhouse.

“I am sure Jane will not complain either way.”

Jane blinked.

“After all, Mr Bingley will be there either way,” replied Lizzy archly to Jane’s blank look.
Jane blushed and tried to look disapproving.

“Yes, I am surprised he has not proposed already, even though I know how you feel about that, Jane.”

It was Lizzy’s turn to blink; she had not thought Jane would take Kitty into her confidence. It was very unlike Jane to take anybody but her into her confidence.

“I am, almost, confident that he does truly love me, and that he loved me all the time. He has several times, I think, I hope, nearly declared…”

Lizzy wondered if Mr Bingley was still worried about his friend and sisters’ opinion. Perhaps she should not be thinking of Mr Darcy’s plan as a failed plan, as it had seemed to her when Colonel Fitzwilliam had confessed it, not of course that he realised he was confessing anything, rather the Colonel thought it an interesting point of conversation.

“Why has he stopped?” Kitty could not understand it. Jane had, as far as she was concerned, been quite plain with her feelings.

Jane giggled. “I think he is worried I may form an attachment elsewhere.”

“To anyone in particular?” Lizzy was curious, Mr Bingley was the indecisive type, and likely to be unsure of his own worth, but to think that Jane would – it was ridiculous.

“I think, he may still be worried that I have formed a liking of …” here Jane smiled, “Lord Ashbourne. If he does think such a thing, I am sure it is all your fault, Kitty!”

Kitty gaped at Mr Bingley’s stupidity and then went off into peals of laughter.

“Why would….” Lizzy was confused.

“There was some…subterfuge…at Lady Matlock’s ball, which caused Jane to feel very embarrassed around Lord Ashbourne. Mr Bingley may have mistaken her blushes.”

It was Jane’s turn to blush deeply and confess, “I may have not undeceived him.”

“Jane! London has turned you positively wicked!” laughed Kitty.

Even Lizzy found the idea of a wicked Jane appealing.

“As much as I find myself hating the idea of agreeing with a notion of Charlotte’s I once condemned, perhaps you should leave him in no doubt of your feelings.”

After all Jane was unaware of the other obstacles put in her way. Obstacles Mr Darcy was unlikely to remove, especially after her harsh words to him. Not that most of them were undeserved, thought Lizzy.

“No, I think you should flirt with Ash!”

Lizzy frowned.

“He would not mind, Lizzy!” exclaimed Kitty.

No, he would not, since, he had said he found Jane beautiful. Kitty briefly thought whether this latest idea would affect ….but she dismissed that quickly. Jane and Mr Bingley were more important than her own feelings, and she doubted that Jane’s rather subdued idea of what flirting
was would distract Ash from her. If indeed that was possible.

Kitty did not even know that his attention, apart from in a friendly, boredom dispelling way, was seriously directed at her. Part of her did not really wish to know…she was afraid of the answer.

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“No! Absolutely not!”

Darcy looked horrified.

Bingley didn’t understand at all why he looked like that. It was to be a lovely picnic in the countryside, nothing to object to at all.

Darcy would know all of the guests, well apart from Mrs Sutton and the Gardiners, so it was not as though he would be amongst strangers.

“But, it has already been arranged.”

“You had no right to speak on my behalf!”

Bingley looked chastised and suddenly Darcy felt guilty. It was hardly Bingley’s fault he wished to spend time with the woman he loved. He didn’t know that his love’s sister had just cruelly and pointlessly refused him.

If he was honest with himself, she hadn’t done it pointlessly; she had believed the worst about him regarding one matter where he was to blame and another where he was not.

Though Darcy would not assign the word blame to what he tried to do between Bingley and Miss Bennet. He still did not believe that Jane Bennet loved Bingley, but he had to admit that one of the reasons he had attributed to Miss Bennet’s behaviour had been removed, and yet she still encouraged him.

When it had been forcibly borne on Darcy, returning from Rosings that he would have to contend with three Bennet sisters, and an aunt, Darcy had felt like returning to his Aunt.

He could not escape them. He swore every word out of Georgiana’s mouth was “Kitty;” Bingley was mooning about his beloved Jane; the Bingley sisters spat venom and gossip, and his cousin appeared to have appointed himself their gentleman escort.

“Darcy?”

Darcy blinked and tried to look apologetic. “I am sorry, Bingley, I am in an awful mood.”

He hoped that Bingley would take his meaning and Bingley did, smiling. “And it is not even a Sunday! And I’m offering you something to do!”

“Very well, I am sure a picnic will be charming.”

He just had to stay away from anyone with fine eyes.

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Despite being a studier of human folly, the journey to Richmond, though made at a cracking pace,
was insufferable.

The Bingley sisters’ brand of folly was nothing new to Lizzy and it afforded her no amusement. They made snide remarks about her family and their future prospects.

She was happy when they finally spoke, quite knowingly; about a couple Lizzy knew nothing about. Lizzy could have easily kissed both Lady Annabelle and Lord Upton, and congratulated them on their forthcoming marriage, by the journey’s end.

It may be inane chatter, but it was inane chatter that was unlikely to make her say something unwise. Though it did nothing to stop Lizzy occasionally looking over to watch one of the gentleman who rode with them.

Her feelings regarding him confused her; she felt she should apologise for her grievous error regarding Mr Wickham. Both Jane and she felt that one had all the appearance of goodness and while the other actually had it!

But she could not apologise, could she? Would it not be simply taken by Mr Darcy as a recognition that all else he said was also correct?

She wondered if any of her statements to him, had made him think as much as she was thinking of his.

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He was. Darcy tried to look straight ahead as he rode along side one of the carriages. He could have chosen to ride along side the first carriage which contained his sister, but his cousins had been before him. He could of course chosen to ride next to the third carriage which contained Sir William, his daughter and the Gardiners, but Darcy did not feel up to engaging in small talk. Or hearing Capital! Capital!

He was glad to see that the Colonel had not lost his way of making Georgiana laugh, he had not seen her in such spirits for a very long time.

As it was Bingley was riding so close to the second carriage, he was surprised it had not run off into a ditch. He had been forced to call Bingley to account several times for it. Each time acutely aware that one of the carriage’s occupants was probably attributing his actions to the worst possible motives.

But what was she to judge his actions? To judge him. He had done nothing to paint himself as the black villain she threw at his head in the groves of Rosings.

She could not expect him to rejoice over a family with such low connections and such manners. With the exception of the two eldest daughters the family was unable to behave to a standard expected in public. Even Miss Elizabeth would have to acknowledge that.

She could hardly expect him to wish that his friend be trapped into a loveless and unacceptable marriage.

No, his pride had nothing to do with it. Now he just had to keep telling himself that.

It was all he could do, when they stopped briefly to change horses, not to start at the younger Miss Bennet all but jumping out of the carriage to engage Ash in private conversation. What concerned Darcy more was the fact his sister was sitting watching all this with a laugh on her face.
Clara rolled her eyes when Kitty almost leapt back into the carriage and immediately started whispering with Georgiana. It took all of Clara’s effort to pretend she didn’t hear what they were saying.

“Well?”

“Well what, Georgie?”

“What did he say?”

“He did not say anything. I did not give him a chance!”

Clara began to wonder what exactly her niece had been revealing.

“How could he not say anything? It would be just like him to be so used to women flirting with him that being told another one would do so, would be of no interest to him. Abominable!”

Clara did not think her eyebrows could rise any further after that comment but they did.

“Well it is Jane! Her idea of flirting would be to ask him to pass the potatoes!”

“Does he know?”

“That she might wish to make Mr Bingley jealous? Of course that is what I told him she was doing.”

Clara suddenly found herself, engulfed by a coughing fit.

“Aunt, are you quite right?”

“Yes, yes, but, please girls, do not say anymore I do not think my poor heart could take it. Whatever is my niece about?”

Kitty vacillated for a moment but it was Georgiana who answered. “We decided that Mr Bingley might think Miss Bennet liked someone else just as much as him,” here Georgiana broke into giggles and could not reveal that Mr Bingley was just alarmed about Ash, “If that is proved to him, surely that would make him propose.”

“Or it could make him realise that he was not worthy of Jane.”

“That’s what Ash said,” mused Kitty.

“I thought you said he didn’t say anything,” exclaimed Georgiana.

“I meant he didn’t say anything I paid attention to! Well it will all come to naught, as if Jane could be that calculating. She would not be Jane if she was. Then again, I would have never thought she would leave Mr Bingley thinking there was a chance she liked Ash more than him!!”

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They were almost at their picnic destination. Of course it was not a true picnic like the ones Kitty had at home, where they grabbed a rug and some food in a hamper and lazed around in a meadow
somewhere. Often discarding items of apparel, nothing too indiscreet, but certainly not ladylike.

However on this occasion they had dispensed with the overloaded trundling cart with servants and furniture, they were to spread a rug out, even if that was degrading to the consequence of some of the members of the party. But they had not dispensed with servants, or prepared food.

Kitty also did not think that clothes would be removed!

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1 Mainly Austen’s words, but I had a little fun with them.

back to story

***&&***
Chapter 29

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There will be so much to tell when I reach home! A real lady, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, spoke so kindly to me! Telling me how to pack my trunk! We were invited to her house for dinner no less than nine times. And now I am picnicking with Lords, well a Lord! Mama and my sisters will hardly believe it. Neither will Lydia, though I am sure Kitty is keeping her informed. If Lydia were my sister I would be. Anne and Julia will be wild when I tell them. They are so handsome. Not Anne and Julia, but the gentlemen! And not just today, Lady Catherine had her nephews to stay, so unlike Hannah’s prophecy – we were not just bored with Mr Collins. Mr Darcy improves on closer acquaintance, in both manners and looks, though I am still deathly afraid of him! But his cousin the Colonel was so affable and lovely...I hope to find out whether his brother is just as affable but I must close otherwise I will be asked what am I writing!

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Maria Lucas closed her diary surreptitiously; she had sat down on a convenient tree stump while the picnic rug was laid. She watched everyone as they bustled about; most seemed comfortable with their environs, but some looked stiff and unbending. Miss Bingley stood like a rod next to Mr Darcy as they watched the rug being laid.

“Well shall we have our picnic first, or take a stroll?” The Colonel looked at the party and wondered why anyone thought this party would be happy company. Everyone appeared to have some quarrel with someone else in the party!

Darcy and Miss Elizabeth, never the friendliest of acquaintances, seemed to have had some quarrel because they were almost glacial with each other; most certainly not looking at each other.

In fact the Colonel was becoming unnerved; Bingley was most obviously in love with the eldest Miss Bennet. He was hoping this was a new love, as opposed to the re-emergence of a love that Darcy thought he crushed. That would be awkward. Especially since he, the Colonel, had told La Bennet all about it.

Darcy might be dashing, handsome and rich, but the Colonel did not think those merits would outweigh the fact he had tried to separate La Bennet’s sister from his best friend. Unfortunately, he could think of nothing else but the revelation of that, from his own lips, that could have caused the frosty relationship between the two.

They had never been friendly but at least she had teased him, and he had borne it.

In fact if it wasn’t for Darcy’s staring, the Colonel may have doubted his conviction that Darcy liked her. He had come very close to taking Darcy aside and explaining to him that this wasn’t the way one wooed a young lady.

The Colonel was shaken from his reverie by the party’s unanimous decision to take a stroll. Well, it was a unanimous decision by virtue of the fact only two people voiced their opinion and no one opposed them.

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Kitty had been one of those who had voiced their opinion with Georgiana surprisingly being the
other. However both soon saw their plan of splitting people off into appropriate groups was not going to work. The party was far too segregated and too many people were working against them. So they disappeared off into shrubbery on their own. Kitty doubted very much if any plan involving Bingley, Jane or Ash would be possible under the forbidding circumstances.

“I think something, perhaps something my aunt has said or done, has upset my brother. He has not been himself since returning from Rosings.”

Kitty nodded. “I don’t think this picnic was a very good idea. Your brother does not look like good company, and neither is my sister! She has been very snappish since returning from Hunsford. Not to mention that Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst seem intent on ignoring half the party!”

Georgiana squeezed on Kitty’s arm. “He has proposed! And she has refused!”

“Someone has proposed to Miss Bingley?”

“No! Fitzwilliam proposed to Miss Elizabeth! Though why she would refuse, unless she does not think such a short acquaintance could really be love?”

Kitty snorted at Georgiana’s rather naïve view on the world, and her rather idealistic view of her brother.

“I do not think that is what happened.”

“Well I think it is. How could we find out? Would your sister tell you?”

“No! Would your brother?”

“No, he thinks me too young.”

There was an apologetic throat clearing from behind them.

“I am very sorry, but my dear, you are too young!”

Georgiana glared at her cousin. “You should not listen to private conversations!”

“I am afraid that being a Colonel, I have to listen to private conversations, in case they provide me with intelligence.”

But Georgiana did not seem to be mollified by this joking conversation from the Colonel.

“Are you not going to defend your eavesdropping, my lord?” Kitty tried to steer the conversation away from the rocky path it was about to take.

Ash smiled. “I have nothing to defend myself from. It is hardly my fault that two giggly young ladies are having a loud conversation.”

“Giggly!” exclaimed Georgiana, increasingly becoming agitated.

Kitty did not know what had brought on Georgiana’s sudden attack of sensitivity; however, Ash seemed to sense his misstep but the Colonel tried to pinch his young cousin under the chin and was slapped away.

Kitty thought it would be best to ignore Georgiana’s outburst.

“Perhaps you could be so good as to discover why your cousin is behaving in such a cold manner
to my sister?"

“I am not sure that Darcy would confide in me.” Ash’s voice was even, but it still made Kitty roll her eyes.

“Is there something that is unique to your family that makes you so oversensitive?”

“Oversensitive? My guardians think that I am too young to do anything? Including choosing my own friends, yet they know I’m not too young to be seduced!” Georgiana turned and stormed off.

The Colonel looked distressed and turned to his brother for guidance and then seemed to remember something.

“Well, what things girls say!” He tried to sound jovial.

“Spare me, Richard. I know. Mama knows. Miss Bennet knows. The only thing I fail to understand in this entire business is why I am only knowing now, and not from you or Darcy?”

The Colonel’s look of distress turned into a look that sometimes came into the face of deer as they spied huntsmen. Ash, however, looked furious.

“I – “

“Yes?” It was a dangerous tone.

Kitty had seen many arguments between the boys in the village and the Lucas boys and arguments were always more serious, at least while it was occurring, between brothers. Although both the Viscount and the Colonel were hardly boys, the tension was palpable. Kitty foresaw trouble especially when the Colonel lost his hunted look and set his jaw in a manner that reminded her very much of his brother.

“I think this is an entirely inappropriate conversation for a convivial picnic,” injected Kitty, firmly. “You can discuss this later.”

“I think it would be best if you rejoined the others, Miss Bennet,” stated the Colonel calmly.

Kitty could see where this was going. Neither was likely to admit that the other had a point while in the heat of the moment. The result? Blood and then Mrs Sukey, the washerwoman, emptying her tub over the miscreants. Except there wasn’t a Mrs Sukey at the present moment, just her.

“Right!”

However, that didn’t seem to make a difference they were both still glaring at each other.

So Kitty stood between the two gentlemen and faced Ash, and meant to speak severely to him, but for the thousandth time in her life wished she was taller. She very much doubted she could prevent a rupture by speaking to the bottom of someone’s cravat. Looking up she noticed he was paying no attention to her, but at least with her between them they could hardly start any childish behaviour.

This is ridiculous! She thought, so she stamped on his foot.

“Ow!” This got the desired reaction, well not that Kitty desired Ash to be hopping about on one foot looking pained, but it was good enough.

“Yes! I would like to point out my presence and the fact you are both behaving like school boys,
and if I have to separate you like naughty schoolchildren, I will be very displeased. Now both of you behave, and take me back to the picnic. Georgiana will have made her reappearance quite a while ago!”

“Yes, well if I could walk, I’d quite happily offer you my arm. I would not have thought you could do quite so much damage.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

“Indeed, now you will, I am afraid, have to lend me your arm.”

Neither realised that in this exchange the Colonel was quite forgotten.

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Georgiana had returned to the rest of the party who had not wandered off as far, instead congregating in groups.

Lizzy had accompanied Jane and Mr Bingley to the water’s edge; Darcy was standing with Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley but watching Georgiana who was on her own; the rest of the party was admiring the rug.

“Yes, I believe the rug has survived many disasters,” commented Clara, in response to some question from Sir William. “Are we ready to…picnic?”

Miss Bingley crinkled up her nose at having to sit down on the rug, and arranged her skirt meticulously. “Isn’t this rustic? I expect, being from the country, you are quite used to being so rural?”

Jane was the only Bennet sister who responded, “Yes, it is so very nice and tranquil! I never understand the allure of the city with all its bustle. It’s far more comfortable having a nice day like today.”

“A day in the country does not have to be comfortable and tranquil, Jane,” laughed Clara. “I remember once being on a nice stroll through the countryside and being quite disturbed by a hare.”

Lizzy laughed. “Disturbed by a hare?! But, aunt, you grew up in the country, you must be used to creatures!”

“Indeed! Unlike myself, who hardly steps foot out of the city except for visits!” laughed Mrs Gardiner.

“Perhaps I should reveal that a fox was chasing the hare…and that the fox was being chased by an overzealous hound. Such a noise, first from the animals, then from the ladies!” There was a pause, “especially when we realised we had strayed into the path of one of the Leicestershire hunts.”

This story met with laughter from most quarters and led Mr Gardiner to say, “But my wife exaggerates, do you not, Madeline, I enjoy fishing immensely and where could I do this but the country!”

“You enjoy fishing, Mr Gardiner?” It was so far Mr Darcy’s only contribution to the discussion and it was not a promising line of conversation. He cleared his throat and continued, noting the gaze of most of the party, “I enjoy fishing for trout in my lake.”

“Falling into your lake, more like,” laughed the Colonel.
Miss Bingley giggled and then tried to stifle it.

Kitty stared at the only sign of humanity she had ever seen in Miss Bingley. “No! You cannot laugh in such a manner and not tell us why you were laughing…”

Miss Bingley looked amused. “I was just thinking of how very elegant Mr Darcy managed to appear afterwards, even with the addition of weeds from the pond!”

Mrs Hurst, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Georgiana, Mr Bingley and Ash could not withhold their collective memories of the incident any longer.

To Kitty’s eye Mr Darcy looked as though he was going to take exception to being the laughing stock of the party, but he seemed to accept it with good grace.

“There was a great deal of mud!” he said defensively. “And I would have you know I take my clothes off now before swimming in my lake.”

This was said while looking in Lizzy’s direction, noted Kitty, before realising that he had done so and she could discern a blush rise on his cheeks.

“I meant, I remove my coat, obviously I do not…” Mr Darcy looked flustered.

“I think we understood you perfectly, Mr Darcy,” said Mrs Gardiner, “now who would like some of this pie?”

Lizzy was wondering what had happened while she was away. When had her sisters been replaced by … who knew what? Jane was smiling very avidly at all the gentlemen, obviously in an attempt to make Mr Bingley jealous, while Kitty! Lizzy hardly recognised the girl who had left Longborn those long months ago.

Lizzy wondered if believing Mr Darcy was the right thing to do; she knew he had to be correct regarding Mr Wickham, for now she had met Miss Darcy! Miss Darcy seemed shy, though while she seemed shy one moment she was bubbly the next. But she was nothing like her brother, and certainly incapable of wishing to hurt him in any way. Lizzy had heard enough of Kitty’s mutterings to know Miss Darcy thought the world of him.

But was he correct in his assessment of her family? Were his feelings the feelings that would be natural to anyone in his circle? Certainly, even the Bingley sisters could be pleasant where they chose, but pleasant did not mean approval, real friendship, or acceptance. Was that how Lord and Lady Matlock felt? How their sons felt?

And why had Mr Bingley not proposed? Jane was being far more open than she had been at Longbourn, having longer to assess her feelings and compatibility with Mr Bingley. Was he waiting because he did not intend to ask for Jane’s hand in marriage?

Mr Darcy seemed, when not looking at her, very intent on watching Kitty’s behaviour.

Kitty seemed uninterested in the rest of the party once they started eating, instead talking in a low tone with Lord Ashbourne and occasionally addressing a comment to Miss Darcy.

Lizzy now had the leisure to properly observe Mr Darcy’s cousin. She could see little of his brother in his countenance; she saw more of Mr Darcy. Both were dark and tall and could have a rather forbidding expression. Not that there was much of that at present, she saw more of the
Colonel when he smiled and laughed. It was impossible not to notice how handsome Lord Ashbourne was, and what an attractive personality he appeared to possess, though Lizzy was not setting much store at the moment on first impressions.

No matter how handsome and attractive he was, Lord Ashbourne was Mr Darcy’s cousin and both he and the Colonel had spoken of the importance of prudent marriages. Similarly, when the Colonel had made reference to his brother when at Hunsford it was in terms of such reserve that Lizzy was convinced Lord Ashbourne would never act in any matter contradictory to his own interest and that he was not above amusing himself.

Lizzy watched in something approaching horrified fascination when Kitty slapped his lordship’s hand away when he reached for the last apple, and when he persisted tried to restrain his arm, all the while laughing and giggling.

Lizzy felt much like she had felt at the Netherfield Ball, by the way her mother, Mary and Lydia (and perhaps even her father) had displayed themselves. She tried to exchange glances with Jane who was quietly drinking and intently listening to Mr Bingley talk about something.

The viscount, seemed intent on teasing her sister, cutting slices off the apple and taunting her with them. He finally offered her one of the slices, speared on a knife, which Kitty ate straight off the knife which was still in his lordship’s possession.

“If you cut yourself, Kitty, I will show you no sympathy,” commented Clara mildly.

“I will not cut myself!” retorted Kitty. “Besides, there is no more fruit!”

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After eating the party was more convivial and walked off quite happily in groups to explore the surrounding landscape as the servants packed the carriages.

Darcy had known he would not enjoy this outing. At least he had the comfort of speaking to Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. Georgiana seemed out of spirits and Darcy attributed to it something that Miss Kitty had said. After all it was only after she returned from a walk with Miss Kitty that she had suddenly become withdrawn.

Darcy also thought it was likely that perhaps Georgiana had been coerced into coming back to the picnic so that Miss Kitty could remain with his cousins.

Darcy blinked and walked towards the water’s edge; was that the truth, or just his damnable pride?

He had never been one for self reflection; beyond the typical self questioning – Would studying the classics be a good idea? Would dancing with this young lady be a good idea? – which invariably lead to him answering himself in the positive. The only time he had ever thought strongly about his own character had been the incident in Ramsgate.

That was a little over six months ago and to receive another attack to his pride, his character, his very being, in such a short time, was unsettling to say the least.

“…your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others …”

He could hear those words and that voice still ringing in his head. He hoped he had explained himself and acquitted himself adequately with regards to Wickham. Though he knew there was no explanation he could give that would appease Miss Elizabeth when she considered what he had tried to do to her sister.
Darcy was not a fool, he could see **now** it was more than just liking on Miss Bennet’s part. He believed Elizabeth and he believed his own eyes.

Miss Bennet was acting just as a young lady in love should act, her sister on the other hand! Darcy could not tell if she was simply amusing herself with a flirtation or had like a string of young ladies before her fallen head-long into love with his cousin.

What Ash felt; Darcy had no idea, and was unlikely to find out.

Elizabeth was entirely likely to blame *him* if Ash broke her little sister’s heart.

Whether that was possible Darcy did not know, but he was trying to think better of the Bennets and their relations.

Darcy was not going to remain blind to faults that had been so vividly pointed out to him by not only Elizabeth but by Wickham too.

Indeed, the Gardiners appeared to be thoroughly respectable, and Mrs Sutton reminded him far too much of Lady Matlock, and her cronies to be anything but a complete lady.

“And what are you thinking of, sir, so secretly?”

Darcy turned and nodded at Miss Bingley.

“Are you finding this picnic a complete bore? I own that your cousins are amusing enough, but I am all out of patience with the Bennet sisters monopolising their attentions. But to be sitting and talking to persons such as Sir William Lucas and his insipid daughter who were so taken with the rug. The rug, Darcy!”

Darcy gave a tight smile in response.

“You are not angry with me for laughing at you?”

Darcy turned. “Of course not, Miss Bingley. I would have laughed at me, if I were somebody else.” There was a pause. “Besides, the party is not so tedious. The Gardiners seem excellent people.”

“If you like that sort of person.”

Darcy thought it best not to say anything more on that score. “I gather I am to soon wish your brother well?” *It should have been me.*

“Yes,” sighed Miss Bingley, “he seems determined, and neither Louisa nor myself would wish him unhappy. I had hoped that she would fall in love with somebody else, but she is very constant! Ah well, sometimes we do not achieve what we would hope for. Louisa and I talked on our little stroll, just then, and have decided we must separate Jane from her family. Then there will be little to complain about *her.*”

“Apart from her complete lack of fortune,” remarked Darcy. “I said before the Gardiners seem respectable, and Miss Elizabeth – “

“No, there is little to judge in Miss Eliza, though I find her impertinent. But her other sisters! I dare say you have heard how many young gentlemen enjoy the particular *attentions* of Miss Catherine! And her parents!”
“There is little material fault there…” After all Darcy tried not to be a hypocrite he could hardly fault Mr Bennet for his lack of control over his daughters, when he himself had almost lost irrevocable control himself! Though he did fault Mr Bennet’s lack of attempt.

“If one could keep one’s distance certainly, but as for the aunt…”

“Mrs Sutton?”

“Yes, oh you do not know do you? I had thought Louisa would have told you by now.”

“Know what?” Both Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst had poured out grievances to him since he arrived home, but nothing of great import.

“Mrs Sutton owns Netherfield, only I hear for her lifetime, which makes her massive debt, no doubt from gaming – you have heard Miss Catherine has been prominent in the card rooms at all the balls she’s attended, Sir Christian Montgomery has played with her, I think that tells you all – anyway what was I saying? Yes, which makes her massive debt inexcusable! “

“Mr Bennet will – “ Darcy stopped, Mr Bennet would in all honour have to pay his sisters debts, but with his own land entailed….

“So you see? My brother does not know what he will gain when he offers for Miss Bennet, but we tried explaining that to him before! But I do not think even Charles would be enough! So you see we must separate Jane from her family!”

Darcy’s head was spinning; certainly neither Miss Bennet nor Elizabeth could know of their aunt’s debts, but surely Miss Kitty would have to, unless she was blind and stupid. Before, he would have easily attributed those faults to her, but now he was not so sure.

“Did you say Sir Christian Montgomery?"

“Yes, she played for him at a soiree, quite putting him out of countenance I heard! She asked him to sing a song he learnt the night before, and you know of him too well to guess where he had been the night before. She seemed inordinately pleased with herself that night so she could hardly have not known where he had been!”

Darcy said nothing, glaring at the water.

“I do not think she is very significant, she is only a silly girl, who thinks she is accomplished enough to flirt with all the young men in town and marry your cousin!”

Miss Bingley laughed. It was a ridiculous notion.

Darcy curtly nodded to her as he stalked off, looking in a foul temper.

Miss Bingley furrowed her brows. What had she said to put him in such a passion? He was friends with Charles, but surely he saw the affection between him and Jane, and that Charles stood in little danger of being forced to tow Mrs Sutton out of the river Tick. It was the only time she had ever been grateful Charles was not richer! Also Charles needed that money to buy his own estate, and since he had practically promised their father he would do so, it was unlikely his conscience could allow him to substantially reduce his principal to save his wife’s father’s sister!

It could of course become unpleasant with constant applications certain to happen, but between herself, Louisa and Darcy they could bring it off, and allow Charles to marry what appeared to be his love. She derided his choice and would have chosen for him better, but he was her brother and she wanted him happy.
Perhaps Darcy was worried that some other gentlemen would become entrapped, and be used for his fortune? There was a difference between Jane marrying Charles for love, with the bonus of his being wealthy, and one of her sisters trying to land a fortune.

Miss Bingley shook her head. Men confused her! She could think of no one that Darcy would care about; he cared for so few people, that there was no one who would be in danger that he would possibly care what happened to.

In fact no one was in danger, except for perhaps that Mr Fancot!

It was a mystery and not one that taxed Miss Bingley’s brain for long; as long as he was not upset with her, he could be upset with an entire army for all she cared.

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Chapter 30

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If I were you, my dear brother-in-law, I would come down immediately to Whites because there is such a sight to be seen! Make haste! I do not know what happened today at Richmond, but I have never regretted lying to my wife more, because if this is the result! Now I shan’t tell you directly what it is, for that would be spoiling a very good joke, but it involved a close friend of yours and what appears to be a lack of ability to keep his drink or his thoughts in his head. Yours etc. Hurst.

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Mr Hurst sent the young servant boy away with a quick wave and a promise that Mr Bingley would reward him handsomely for the prompt delivery of the note.

He was in a prime position, while Darcy was in a private room, where Mr Hurst sat allowed him to see through the partially closed door. But even if he could not see, he could still hear. While Darcy was alone and pacing about most dreadfully he occasionally uttered words aloud. Mr Hurst could only hope that soon someone with whom Darcy would actually converse would appear on the scene, whatever had put him in such a rare taking would obviously be a far superior story to the ones Mr Hurst was reading in the newspaper.

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As for Darcy, he was feeling wretched. He could not indulge in any of this behaviour at home, for Georgiana was there and would ask him questions, ones he would prefer not to answer. Especially to her. Not that she appeared to be speaking to anyone at this present time.

He had ridden all the way home, in front of all the carriages, thinking. Well his mother would have called it stewing; she always told him it was not healthy to wallow in thoughts too much. It was the one maxim of hers he could always remember; his beautiful but pale and fragile mother, saying, “You think too much, my darling boy. You start out with one drop of water and end with an ocean.”

His father’s maxims he could much more easily remember the exact moment and manner in which he delivered them. There was much to uphold in a family name; one is important; one should control one’s path; vanity is a weakness and pride is not, for we have much to be proud of.

Darcy had felt deceitful when he had attempted to conceal Miss Jane Bennet’s presence in town from Bingley; he was speaking the truth when he told Elizabeth he felt that deception was beneath him.

He prided himself on bluntness and frankness; it was what had made him offer marriage to her. He could not stand by and watch her without revealing his intentions. But to find that her family seemed adroit at deception and subterfuge angered him. To pretend to be what they were not! To pretend to be what they were not!

He had worked himself up into an anger that perhaps was not justified if he was honest with himself, but to allow oneself to be open to gossip from society was just ill mannered!

“Darcy?”

Darcy turned to see his cousin had entered the room, had closed the door firmly behind him, and was looking troubled.
“Richard, is something wrong? Georgiana…?”

“No, there is nothing wrong with Georgiana, though she is upset …I did not grasp this morning why she was upset, but I think I understand now.”

Darcy snorted, he knew why she was upset; her friend had behaved badly to her.

“Did she tell you? …She would not talk to me this afternoon.”

“No, but at Richmond, she was vehement that she was no longer a child and did not wish to be treated like one. I am afraid I made it worse by pretending to humour her.” The Colonel looked at the back of his hand, “She slaps like a woman at least!”

Darcy ran his fingers through his hair. “I know she is not a child! I just wish she still was, so I did not have to worry…”

“You are not the only one with that wish, but I think she has changed much these past months. I do not think she was materially….changed…by what happened at Ramsgate. It is the influence of Miss Bennet, I am sure.”

“An influence that is likely to do her more harm than good in the long term! If she was so – “ Darcy failed to find a word that described his sister’s behaviour at the picnic, if she had slapped her cousin! – “then I cannot find it a good change!”

The Colonel frowned, he did not agree that the change in Georgiana was not an improvement; he thought her behaviour might be more to do with his and Darcy’s protectiveness. It was they who had to change their behaviour!

Darcy poured himself another brandy and screwing up his face, drank it fast and poured himself another.

The Colonel wondered how to bring up the painful conversation he had had with his brother upon their return from Richmond. He was infinitely grateful to Miss Catherine Bennet, for employing whatever method necessary to prevent their conversation at Richmond.

He had a feeling that he would have been nursing a sore face, and the impossible task of explaining such a face to the rest of the party, if they had both given into their anger then and there. Of course it was possible that Ash would have been in the same situation, but since his elder brother had several inches and pounds on him, not to mention a predilection for training at Jackson’s, the Colonel put no reliance on that.

As it was, the Colonel had certainly not come out the victor of their verbal sparring.

But the Colonel was not sure that Darcy was quite up to hearing of what had occurred, especially since there was something clearly weighing on his mind. He had not seen Darcy imbibe so much brandy in public since…well…he did not even do so when his father had died.

“Darcy, what is wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“You have not been yourself since that last day at Rosings. I beg you would tell me what happened to …put you in such a mood.”

“She refused me!”
“Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“Yes. You knew?” Darcy looked alarmed.

“I had a feeling you felt something for her, but it was only my very good knowledge of you that made me realise it. I doubt anyone else would, unless your behaviour while at Netherfield was marked?”

“I insulted her.”

“While you proposed or while at Meryton?”

“Both.”

The Colonel sat down, and watched his cousin pace around.

“I know, what you are about to say Richard, I have behaved abominably.”

“I would have said stupid. If you want a young lady to marry you, abusing her is not the best plan.”

“Well she abused me as much as I abused her. And I cannot, sometimes, think but what I said was correct. She has no connections! Why should I not be concerned about that? Her family! Why should I not be concerned about their behaviour?” Darcy took a deep breath. “And she dared say that I had wronged Wickham! Of course I had no course but to tell her the truth about him! She may apply to you to make sure it is the truth…”

The Colonel saw his opportunity. “She may not be the only Bennet who knows about Wickham…”

“Well of course I expect her to tell her elder sister …”

“I meant that….Georgiana has confessed all to Miss Catherine…and to Ash….and to Lady Matlock….”

Darcy looked thunderstruck. “She did what? Her? Why? Did we not try to keep this betweens ourselves, for her protection and she tells a – a – a – “The fact that it had spread beyond Miss Catherine Bennet did not register with him.

The end of this thought was not voiced, because the door opened. It was Mr Hurst and Charles.

“Ah there you are!” Mr Hurst said jovially, he had been very disappointed when Colonel Fitzwilliam had arrived and closed the door, thus preventing any further overheard utterances. Charles’ arrival however allowed him to open the door again, for the benefit of those logically congregating outside the door.

“Would you like to join this bet that some of the fellows have put up?”

Charles just looked confused, but the Colonel tried to shoo Mr Hurst away.

“You see, even though it has to be a very secret bet for obvious reasons, we have put money on whether Miss Bennet will get her man!”

Charles stared – “You cannot put money on Jane!”

“Oh not that Miss Bennet!” laughed Mr Hurst. “You would not even get odds Charles! I meant that little pretty one! What’s her name – Cathy? Catty? Kitty? Catherine!”
Charles felt less annoyed, though he was sure Jane would insist he keep her sister out of betting books.

“So, what will you put on her becoming Lady Ashbourne within the next couple of months? After all you would know him best? Likely to come up to scratch?”

Darcy looked furious. “Marry her? Marry a girl like her? Marry a family with no fortune, no connections and no concept of how to behave in society? A girl who has a virtual harem of suitors? Who knows what she has promised them! A girl whose aunt is quite happy to show her face in society when she is so far up the River Tick, that she is at point non plus. My cousin would be a fool to saddle himself with such a millstone around his neck. And you know my cousin is not a fool! Marriage! As though he would thinking of that.”

Mr Hurst looked startled. “I shall put you down as a monkey on ‘no’ then shall I?”

Charles gaped at his brother-in-law and since he knew that look in Darcy’s eyes meant that Hurst was a split second from receiving a punch in the jaw, hurried him out of the room. Sadly, his prescience did not allow him to think it wise to shut the door.

“Darcy, was that wise? I know you may be angry with all Bennets at this present moment but…”

Darcy sat down in a high backed arm chair and sighed. He had disclaimed to having any true character faults to Elizabeth that time at Netherfield, but perhaps he should have confessed one – the fact that his mouth should remain resolutely shut when he was in a passion.

The Colonel took a breath, “And there is someone I know as well as you, that I know his feelings on this matter…”

“Why would you be angry with all the Bennets?” Charles looked confused and one step behind the conversation.

But Darcy had no time to answer that question, as another gentleman arrived.

“Mr Darcy. A word.”

Darcy blinked at the newcomer who, realising that Darcy did not know who he was, passed over his card.

“Mr Fancot. I would say I was at your service but I, most assuredly, am not.”

Lizzy looked at the stockings, they seemed of reasonable quality and quite a bargain.

But not even an innocent shopping expedition could distract her attention from her troubles. Kitty had asked her directly as they parted the afternoon before, if something had occurred between her and Darcy.

She had evaded the question, but if Kitty could perceive that something was amiss, then it was not long before others did. She did not know if Kitty had jumped to the right conclusion, but others certainly would manage to hit on the correct notion!

What if her mother found out? She had been so vocal in her disapproval of Lizzy’s refusing Mr Collins, that her displeasure at her second child’s refusal of yet another proposal would be great. She would not understand that nothing but the very deepest love could induce Lizzy into
matrimony. She knew that she could not marry someone penniless, she would have to marry to please her family in that respect, but she would not marry someone just for their fortune.

But even she had to realise Darcy had more good qualities than just his fortune. He was a devoted brother, and those close to him had nothing but good to say of him. Perhaps it was their total blindness, but Lizzy was more likely to attribute it to the fact his bad qualities were more easily seen by those who had nothing to excuse them with.

The bazaar was crowded and Lizzy had lost sight of both her sisters, then she heard a laugh she could distinguish as Kitty’s and moved towards the sound.

Kitty was standing with Miss Darcy and a taller dark haired young lady.

“Oh Lizzy, you must meet Lady Annabelle. Belle, this is my sister Lizzy.”

“It is very good to meet you, Miss Bennet,” smiled the young lady. “My brother has done nothing but sing your praises.”

Lizzy had thought that she was a Fitzwilliam, but now she knew. “Your brother is too kind.”

“I know both he and Darcy enjoyed having other people at Rosings this year. My aunt’s sole company can become trying.”

Lizzy turned to try and see Jane. “I am sorry, but I have lost my sister!”

“Oh let us not see if we can find her! It should not be too hard, she is so very beautiful!”

Lizzy found herself being led in a direction by Lady Annabelle leaving Kitty and Miss Darcy to whisper amongst themselves.

“Are you enjoying London?”

“Well I have not seen that much of it.”

“I am sure you will! Both your sisters are much admired, so no doubt you will be too! I find it fascinating that all of you are so different from each other!”

Lizzy nodded, while craning her neck to try and spot Jane.

“Is there any gentleman that you particularly like in London?” Lady Annabelle sounded coy, so Lizzy was suspicious. “Oh, do not be offended, it is just my brother, the Colonel, is quite sure my cousin admires you.”

Lizzy tried not to choke. “I am sure that would be quite an honour,” she put as much emphasis on that last word, assuming that Darcy’s family would feel the same as he did.

Lady Annabelle laughed. “Of course it would not be! If it is true, and you chose to admire him, then really, he should be honoured! My cousin is not a very…I suppose perhaps you should be honoured, though I would not use that word, if he was to unbend in front of you, for he is always so very stiff and formal in company. But I should not like such a man as my beau.”

Lizzy tried not to look as though the topic affected her in the least.

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Miles tried to keep awake. He had arrived at Ash’s lodgings to accompany him to Mantons but
Ash had unexpected business to attend to. In fact Ash appeared to be in a mood; Miles had a fair idea what was troubling him, but knew better than to ask.

Though he had to admit sifting through old magazines was far more pleasurable than listening to his mother beg him to recant his engagement. This morning she had told him perhaps he was insane, and that was a good reason for not marrying Belle.

Miles had a fair idea just who was sane and insane in that conversation.

“Why do you keep all these papers!” exclaimed Miles as he unearthed an 1804 edition of the Sporting Magazine which was lying beneath an 1805 edition of the Gentleman’s Magazine.

“Historical Integrity,” replied Ash as he signed another paper.

“It’s not because you are constitutionally lazy then?”

“You should not complain; if you are not careful next time you call there will only be Fordyce’s sermons to read.”

“You are an appalling host.”

“Well I said I would follow you onto Mantons, you did not have to remain here.”

Miles smiled. “But then I could not annoy you thus, could I?”

Ash rolled his eyes and turned back to his next letter.

There was a knock at the door, and presently Ash’s valet appeared at the door.

“A gentlemen to see you, my lord?”

Ash looked up, “Who is it?” He looked vaguely annoyed, having told his valet to deny him to anyone who asked for him. It was difficult enough to concentrate on these papers with Miles present let alone anyone else.

“A Mr Fancot, he said you would see him.”

“Of course, show him in.”

Miles raised an eyebrow. “Now I am glad I did not go to Mantons. Shall I be witness to considerable entertainment?”

“I doubt it, Fancot and I understand each other.”

“That we do.” Miles looked up to see Fancot had entered the room, in time to hear Ash’s statement.

Ash greeted him and offered him something to drink.

Fancot indicated he would get it himself.

“That is, if you can find it!” laughed Miles.

Ash re-seated himself but faced the room instead of his desk, lazing back in the chair, playing idly with a quill. “So to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Your cousin, Mr Darcy.”
“Darcy? What …” Ash paused. “No, I will not ask pointless questions for I am sure you will explain yourself.”

“Last night at Whites, your cousin was present, holding a private conversation in a room with your brother.”

A grimace passed across Ash’s face.

“Seems straightforward…” commented Miles.

“Before your brother arrived, Darcy was occasioning some interest from other members. He seemed agitated so there was quite a congregation outside the room.”

“Naturally,” said Ash.

“Naturally,” echoed Miles, “would have liked to see it myself!”

“So while the Colonel had closed the door, the gentlemen amused themselves by opening a bet on a subject that I am quite sure is one you would not like to see as the subject of bets.”

Ash nodded.

Fancot seemed to find it easier to focus on an etching of a horse that hung above the mantelpiece than look at either of the other occupants of the room.

“Of course, Hurst took the opportunity to take the book to find out whether Darcy or your brother would bet.”

“Clever way of finding out the odds!” smiled Miles.

“Yes, but Darcy decided to give his decided opinion of the young lady in question. “

Ash leant forward and looked interested, “And?”

“And, if I had any right to do so, your cousin would be currently picking his seconds.”

No reaction was forthcoming from Ash; he merely leant back in his chair observing his guest.

“Perhaps an unwarranted reaction, but I would have felt it necessary.” Fancot’s voice was tight.

“As much as I am sure it disgusts you, I would like to know exactly what he said. But first,” said Ash indicating the bottle of port hidden under yet more papers, “if I were you, I should actually have that drink.”

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“So, Jane, did you find the lace you needed?” Kitty finally managed to ask her sister as they reached Gracechurch Street. Lizzy had been walking close alongside Jane and whispering to each other all the way home. Though Lizzy would have called it talking in a low refined tone; Kitty would have called a spade, a spade.

“Yes, I did.” Jane showed her the packet, but prevented Kitty from opening it. “Patience!”

“I have none!” retorted Kitty.

They entered the Gardiners’ door almost immediately and Lizzy cried out “Papa!”
For there stood Mr Bennet.

There was some confusion as he kissed all his daughters and teased them, in differing ways.

“You gave us no notice of your coming!”

“Perhaps I did not wish to warn you!”

“Why have you come?”

Kitty sat down quietly, hoping that her father was not about to announce that he was here to take them all home, but fearing he was.

“Well I thought it about time that my house was full again!”

Kitty felt like crying. So this was it, everything that she wished and hoped might happen would not and…she was going back to Longbourn where there was nobody there that even…came close.

“But then I received a most alarming letter from my cousin, announcing that two of my daughters were to be most advantageously married!”

Kitty looked up, confused, in time to see Lizzy blushing almost bright red. Perhaps Georgiana’s assumption was not so silly?!

“While I know the identity of Jane’s lover, who is the lucky gentleman, Kitty?”

“Me!” exclaimed Kitty. “No – no one,” she stuttered. Why on earth would Mr Collins be writing of her!?

Mr Bennet laughed. “I am disappointed! But I expect Mr Bingley will avail himself of my presence in town very shortly!”

Kitty did not know what to think.

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Darcy sat quite still in his study. His cousin had arrived that morning to continue their discussion from last night in a more rational manner. But Darcy was not in any state to hear him.

Charles was barely speaking to him, having comprehended that Darcy while encouraging him to break all contact with Jane Bennet, had proposed to Elizabeth!

Darcy had a feeling he had almost been challenged to a duel by some gentleman called Mr Fancot last night.

It was probably for the best that he stay quite still in his study for some time more. He had time to reflect on his outburst of the night before, he knew it was uncalled for. He should be glad his sister was recovering, and that …no he could not be glad for that, for all it would do was torment him further. He would be related to her.

The knocker sounded and Darcy groaned. The Colonel, who had been reading near the window, gave a low chuckle.

“Too much brandy eh Darcy?”

The door opened, and Ash strode in.
The Colonel stood up, while Darcy merely winced at the door banging behind his cousin. With interest and perhaps some dread, the Colonel noted Ash’s pistol case.

“Going to Mantons? I think I’ll accompany you, Darcy is terrible company.”

Ash threw the case down on the table, causing Darcy to jump.

“Give me one good reason, Darcy, why I should not put a bullet through you right now.”

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Chapter 31

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...Please find enclosed your vouchers for Almacks, I have included them for all three of your nieces, though I take your word for the behaviour of the second, not having an opportunity to examine her myself. I feel it necessary to say that while neither I nor any of the other patronesses believe any of the rumours circulating about yourself, in fact we know it to be untrue; it does not do your nieces any good in finding husbands! In other words, my dear Clara, while I understand your reticence or should I say lively sense of humour that keeps you quiet, I would do your utmost to squash such rumours! Yours etc & Sally Jersey. P.S I apologise that these reach you the morning of our first ball, but so much to do!

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Clara rolled her eyes. She had not mentioned the balls at Almacks to Kitty, in case for some reason the vouchers had not come. Clara had no dependency in her former friends not believing some of the gossip was flying about town. It had been ten years and she knew how rapidly circumstances could change. And she knew how jealously the patronesses guarded Almacks’ supremacy as a Marriage Mart and as having a most exclusive membership.

But it was most vexing because of course her three nieces were currently across town and hardly in the proper state of mind to even think about going to Almacks! After all one social misstep in Almacks…! And it was so easy to do so; Almacks was like stepping back fifty years when one entered its doors, fifty years ago with bad food and drink. They would have to have a hearty dinner.

Clara wondered if Mr Bingley had access to Almacks; Jane would suffer from his non-attendance, but the lack of Mr Bingley would be made up infinitely by the lack of his sisters.

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Darcy had stood after his cousin’s outburst, blinking almost owlishly at him, but it was the Colonel who spoke.

“Why,” he said with a laugh in his voice, “would you need to put a bullet through Darcy?”

Ash raised his eyebrow, “I would have hoped that as my brother you would be more astute than that. However, my conversation is not with you.”

“Well, if you think I am going to leave the room while you are in such a mood, you are mistaken! I know you too well!”

“Do you, dear brother?”

Darcy thought it best to intervene, “What precisely have I done?” Darcy had a feeling he knew what that was, but how Ash had found out…

No, that was a silly question to ponder; everyone knew everything in London, which was part of his frustration.
“Perhaps I should refresh your memory, it was only last night, but I have been informed that you may not remember it…”

Darcy stiffened.

“…though I would expect you would remember telling the whole of Whites your very commonplace opinions.”

“I did not tell the whole of Whites!” exclaimed Darcy. “Neither do I have commonplace opinions.”

“Perhaps I should rephrase, a large number of gentlemen who are members of Whites were privy to your comments, whether you told them directly or not. “

“Yes,” replied Darcy, tersely, “I am sorry for that, but my opinion on the subject remains unmoved.” Which was not entirely the truth, but Darcy was not going to eat his words.

The Colonel looked wary; Darcy was too proud for his own good. “Darcy has suffered a disappointment; you cannot expect a man to behave rationally after that!”

Darcy glared at the Colonel.

“A disappointment? I am glad to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet has taste,” smiled Ash.

Darcy clenched his fist, but his cousin was not finished yet, “after all I expect she questioned your motives. I know I would considering you seemed so determined to separate her sister from your friend. Are your objections to this family entirely rational, Darcy?”

“Rational? Of course they are rational! You could hardly say they were of our sphere…”

“And I thought marriage was about respect. Very respectful, Darcy.”

Darcy glared. “Damn you.” Then he turned to the Colonel. “And Damn you too. That was private information.”

“Ah yes, you do seem very concerned about private information, Darcy.”

The Colonel’s eyes widened, he had not managed to make sure that Darcy had comprehended last night that more than Miss Catherine Bennet knew about Georgiana and Wickham. He tried to warn his cousin with very speaking hand gestures that he was about to dive into even murkier waters, but Darcy was not watching him.

“Of course I am, do you expect me to wish to see my private affairs gossiped about?”

“You have no problem advertising mine to the world?”

“I was hardly doing that!”

“You were. I would not have minded if you were just talking to Richard; after all what else are family for?”

“I am glad for that,” said Darcy ironically, “I would be gutted indeed, if I could not speak to anyone.”

“But it does occur to me, that perhaps one should rely on one’s family during times like these.”

“Of course,” Darcy was confused at sudden change in tack.
“Unless, of course, one thought ill of one’s family. Thought that perhaps they would judge harshly and unnecessarily? I hope you do not think that of me? Or perhaps my parents?”

The Colonel could see where this was going and groaned, but nobody took any notice of him, and he did not quite know what to say that would not inflame the situation.

“No, I have always trusted your judgement, and that of your respected parents. I will confess I would not admit my Aunt Catherine into my confidence, but you would understand the reasons for that.”

“Yes I do. So you have no quarrel with me? I am glad to hear it.”

“No. You are my cousin. I have always admired and looked up to you?” Darcy was well and truly confused now.

“I think, perhaps we should all have a brandy now that we understand each other so well,” said the Colonel, desperately trying to catch his brother’s eyes, but it was pointless; Ash was out for the kill.

“So your lack of disclosure about Wickham and Ramsgate was what? Feelings of shame? The realisation that you were such a poor guardian? Or was it you were ashamed of your sister? “

Darcy felt as though he had been punched, how did…? Then he remembered the Colonel’s words that had barely registered with him of the night before.

“You just said you trusted and respected me, so it must be one of those reasons, Darcy. Which is it?”

Darcy felt anger well up inside of him, but felt unable to speak.

“I think you are being quite harsh,” the Colonel tried to interject.

“Harsh? Why was my cousin even at Ramsgate, alone with a woman who you were deceived in? Why were you deceived in her? Why was Wickham, a known scoundrel, even allowed within ten miles of her? You thought that a fifteen year old girl did not deserve to know some manner of the truth about him, and about other men such as him? And if you thought she should be protected from such knowledge you should have made damn sure she was protected. And where is he now, in a town where your beloved lives, and who, no doubt, was forced to associate with him? With other young ladies, who could be equally deceived in him, or were they not worth your attention because they are not of your sphere …”

Ash was cut off at this point by Darcy’s fist which he easily blocked. He returned the punch, managing unlike Darcy to connect. It was all Darcy needed to attempt to hit his cousin again.

After getting one lucky punch in, Darcy stumbled back, after receiving another blow, into a small table. The vase placed on it crashed to the floor as did Ash’s pistol case. It was at this point the Colonel managed to intervene.

“For god’s sake! In the study? With my cousin in the house!”

Ash felt his cut lip and just snarled, “Hit too close to the bone did I?”

Darcy was unable to respond as at that point, Georgiana, his butler and an interested maid and footmen almost burst into the room.
“I beg your pardon sir, has there been some accident?” The butler surveyed the room; it was not impassively, because unlike other butlers he was not used to his master brawling in the study.

“Fitzwilliam?!” shrieked Georgiana looking at her brother’s bruised face and the Colonel standing with both arms outflung as if to keep Ash and Fitzwilliam apart.

Ash calmly retrieved his pistol case and bowed ironically at his host and brother.

“Goodbye, Georgie,” he said with an air of finality, kissed his cousin on the cheek and left the room.

“Ash?” Georgiana forgot the fact she was only sixteen, that she was angry at both the occupants of the room for treating her like a child, and that she had almost shamed herself terribly by eloping with a scoundrel. “If somebody does not tell me what happened, this instant, I will be most seriously displeased!” She had never sounded like her brother more, although he would not have recognised it, instead only feeling distinctly like his Aunt Catherine was in the room.

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Clara rolled her eyes at her brother. It was very like him to sneak up to London and surprise them all, very dramatic.

However, it was very like him to be so inconvenient, poor Mrs Gardiner was giving her pleading looks that clearly showed her worry of how to fit Mr Bennet into an already bursting house. Well that Clara could fix not to mention it would be wise to have Thomas where she could see him.

“You will of course be staying with me, Thomas.”

Mr Bennet looked startled. “No, no, I could not deprive Edward and Madeline of my company!”

“You would leave me, your sister, alone without male protection in my house?”

Mr Bennet looked trapped. “You have managed it quite well until now…”

“Yes, but I was being brave. Now I have no reason to be because you will be in the house and I’m quite sure you could use that blunderbuss that Aberton keeps in the house.”

Mr Bennet looked almost fascinated. “Would I have to use a blunderbuss?”

“Well, there would be two single ladies, in the house, one of whom I needn’t remind you is your daughter?”

Mr Bennet knew when he was well and truly caught, and Clara took pity on him. “Besides we have hardly cleared all of dear Mr Sutton’s books out of the attic yet! Now that is quite sorted, and I do hope you do not mind, Mrs Gardiner?”

“No, not at all.”

“After all it is very uncomfortable when an unexpected visitor comes for a long stay,” smiled Clara.

“A long stay?”

“Of course, Thomas, you are not considering taking any of your daughters back to Longbourn yet, are you? They have just all been invited to Almacks tonight!”
Kitty, who had been playing with one of the chair fringes, trying not to let her feelings of disappointment at seeing her father show, sat bolt upright. “Almacks!”

“Oh we could hardly go tonight, Aunt; Papa has just arrived,” said Lizzy. “And perhaps we would like to go home to Longbourn?”

“Nonsense, not go to Almacks! I was told, Elizabeth, that you liked to study human folly? I can inform you that there is nowhere in the world where you are more likely to find it than at Almacks. And go home to Longbourn, where what exactly is awaiting you?”

Lizzy had to smile at her aunt’s comments. It was true there was nothing awaiting them at home, especially for Jane. Though Lizzy still felt would be a good thing if Jane and Mr Bingley were to continue their relationship away from the prying eyes of London. And perhaps it might do Kitty good too.

No, she was probably just being selfish; she did not want to see Mr Darcy, and he was in London.

“Well, I am sure I can bear one night at Almacks!”

“Good,” smiled Clara. “And I warn you, Jane, it is doubtful that Mr Bingley will be there.”

Jane blushed, “I am capable of enjoying myself without Mr Bingley, ma’am.”

“I am very glad to hear that.”

She made no comment to Kitty, who was looking as though she had received a particularly fine present.

Kitty was feeling ecstatic, but her feelings were tempered by the knowledge of the rumours and gossip circulating about her from all sides. But it was a ball, and there would be dancing, and not all her friends had deserted her.

“Of course, I am sure we can alter one of Kitty’s or Jane’s new dresses to suit you, Elizabeth, by tonight! And I am also sure I needn’t tell you how particular everybody is at Almacks, so you shall all be on your best behaviour!”

Kitty hardly listened to her Aunt’s strictures; she knew them all by now and was fairly good at following the important ones, well most of the time at least.

It was not long before Clara shepherded her charges out of the Gardiners’ house, telling her brother she expected to see him in the morning. She had hoped to talk to Thomas about his daughters and his lack of parental care of them that night, but Almacks came first.

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It was fair to say that most of the party was disappointed with Almacks; the thing that had to be known about it that it was the people that made it, not the place.

It was important to be seen and to see, not what was offered in regards to refreshments, or the state of the card room.

Lizzy was however enjoying herself; she always did in a room of people that she could surreptitiously observe. The obsequiousness, the utterly ridiculous mannerisms! The obvious matchmaking, which she could enjoy in this setting with no mother embarrassing herself and her family; Aunt Clara seemed disinclined to match make, though she also seemed disinclined to
interfere in behaviour that Lizzy found to be far too obvious and flirtatious.

Jane too was enjoying herself, despite the unlikelihood of Mr Bingley’s presence. Jane had found in London several young ladies, who like herself were shy and retiring and preferred the country and thought the best of everyone. Sitting on the couches and talking quietly to them and perhaps being asked to danced once or twice, afforded her every enjoyment.

Kitty, however, was not enjoying herself. It was eleven o’clock and nobody, not even a Duke, could enter Almacks after eleven. Why had he not come? She knew that Almacks was considered tedious by almost all gentlemen, but his mother was here, his brother and sister were here. Almost all of her other friends in London were here, bar the iniquitous Sir Christian, so why had he not come?

She had thought she was behaving quite sensibly and rationally, but she was overcome by a desire to be quite childish and throw the glass of punch Mr Sopperton had fetched for her across the room. Perhaps he had heard all those petty rumours and believed them?

No, he could not do that, he had seen Aunt Clara’s papers for himself. Unless her aunt was concealing the truth from her, or perhaps he believed that she too had a comfortable fortune. No she could not think that of him.

Maybe, it was the other rumours that concerned him. She could believe that of him. After all, he would not wish to…

Kitty did not know why she was being quite so irrational; it was not as though this was the first time, but there was no explanation or excuse he had not told her he was not going to be here, and surely someone would have told him she was going to be here.

She felt tears pricking at the back of her eyes and felt wretched and stupid. It was wrong that anyone or anything could make her feel like this. And she was helpless; it was not as though she could demand an explanation from him. It was certainly not what one did! Even if she did it in private, she dreaded the answer and knew she would not be able to even ask.

“Miss Bennet?”

Kitty turned at Giles’ voice, she had hidden herself half in a corner when she had realised she was likely to make a fool of herself. She knew she must look blotchy even if she had not actually cried; being upset did that to her. It was most unfair, Lydia could cry and have perfect tear drops run down her face without marring her complexion.

“Kitty?” Giles sounded concerned, stepping close to her.

“Oh it’s nothing, Mr Fancot, I am just a little hot.”

Giles looked disbelieving.

“I am surprised to see you here, sir; I did not think your set enjoyed it. Also did you not say you were avoiding marriage? If so very stupid to be hiding in plain sight.”

Giles smiled. “I would not be here, if I wasn’t charged with giving a message to you.”

Kitty looked curious.

“I am bidden to relay to you Lord Ashbourne’s regrets at being unable to attend this evening.”

Kitty felt astounded. Why on earth would Giles be talking to Ash? It seemed impossible and
entirely stupid to her – though men were such different creatures.

“He has met with a slight accident.”

“Accident?” Kitty could not keep the horror from her voice.

She thought she could see a slight look of pain cross Giles face before he continued. “I should have phrased that better…” he seemed to be looking for the right words, “he has misplaced a very important document, yes, that is what has happened, business. Unfortunately it sometimes gets in the way of pleasure. Though what pleasure there is in outrunning a group of harpies disguised as mothers I do not know.”

Kitty smiled and chided Giles for being so unchivalrous. “But you said misplaced something? I would have thought him to be very organised.”

“So would I, but his rooms are an absolute mess; I would not have credited it.”

“You have been to his rooms?” Kitty looked astonished.

“Er…yes…yes I have on a matter of …business. Very good man for ideas about crop turning…” Giles looked slightly glazed. Kitty didn’t believe a word of what he was saying beyond the fact that Ash had asked him to make his apologies.

Kitty giggled, both at the absurdity of Giles and at the idea of Ash being surrounded by mess.

“Papers everywhere!” laughed Giles, glad Kitty wasn’t going to interrogate him.

“Oh, you should not tell that to people. I am sure he hates to be teased.”

“Really? Well, it is such a pity that I have told all of my acquaintance already.”

“Oh surely not? I would have wished to tell some of them myself. “

Kitty felt much happier. Something was going on, but whatever it was, and she would find out, it did not seem to be anybody’s desertion.

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Chapter 32

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There was a time when in catering for our subscribers in this department, a very few words would suffice; in those times a dull uniformity pervaded their habiliments, a sombre colour dealt out a universal monotony; dress reigned in all frippery of gauze and powder, and our task was comparatively light and easy; but now that the couturiéres have availed themselves of the Grecian costume, the true standard of taste; now that they have had recourse to the artist and the antiquary, who have not disdained to render their assistance, what elegance has appeared! Unconfined even to the statues of antiquity, the genus of dress roves in endless variety; she steals her hues from the rainbow, and the whole habitable world is ransacked for bodily adornment. The wool of Cachimere, the turban of the east, and the plaid of the north, lend their assistance, while the Turk, the Pole, and the Indian, lay their treasures at the feet of the fair…

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In the lady’s withdrawing room, Lizzy eyed the magazine that had been smuggled in by some young ladies who surprisingly did not enjoy Almacks. That was because, as they told both Jane and Lizzy, they were quite sick of being forced to associate with uninterested gentlemen and then be scolded by their mammas for wasting their first, second, third or even fourth season.

Lizzy rolled her eyes at the magazine that the girls were hunched over; the editors would not, she suspected, know a Pole if they fell over him or her. Jane had retired to pin up a flounce that one of her partners had stepped on and torn. Lizzy had accompanied her to avoid her partner who reminded her strongly of Mr Collins.

She left the withdrawing room with her sister and rejoined the young ladies who were seated on couches; they would hardly be left alone for long. The Patronesses of Almacks were too nice to allow that.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kitty and Mr Fancot talking intently in a corner. She frowned, wondering what they were saying.

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Giles laughed at some piece of gossip that Kitty related to him animatedly.

“I should stop; I shall turn into my mother.”

“Would that be such a bad occurrence?”

Kitty looked shocked, “you would not say that if you had met my mother. Her heart is certainly in the right place, but…”

“Very much like mine then I presume.”

Kitty smiled; Giles had never spoken much of his family.

In fact, the thoughts of his family seemed to make Giles suddenly lose some of his good humour.

“What is it?” Kitty looked alarmed. “Are your mother and sisters unwell?”

“No, it is just…I had thought that and…” He looked so at her that Kitty knew to what he was
referring to.

“I thought that we were…I thought that we were friends?” Kitty replied awkwardly.

“We are. It is just, since yesterday, or maybe for much longer, I have been thinking about myself and my situation in a quite in-depth manner and I have come to some sobering reflections.”

Kitty kept silent, having a feeling that if she spoke Giles would shy away.

“Do you know what I was doing yesterday, before I went to Whites…” Giles froze. Kitty noted it and in her head mentally made Whites an important part of the mystery…” I was betting on cockroaches. And it’s not the stupidest thing I have done. “

Kitty smiled. “It is very silly, yes, but hardly…”

Giles waved a hand to shush her, “When I could not defend - ahem- when I had no right to do so, I thought of those I do have the right to defend, and the responsibility to protect. My father died when I was twenty-one, leaving me with lots of sisters, a mother and an estate.”

Giles had mentioned his father’s death before, so that came of no surprise to Kitty, but she felt moved to offer her sympathies again.

“Thank you, but I have been quite awful at my responsibilities, preferring to laze about town. I would not have the first clue about running an estate…my father, I believe, thought he would have longer to teach me, and sent me away to school for most of my childhood…”

“I expect that is why you asked Lord Ashbourne about crop turning?”

Giles blinked confused and managed to stutter out a – “Y-yes of course.”

Kitty pursed her lips at the confirmation that Giles was indeed bending the truth in some way, not to mention the comment about not having the right to defend somebody.

“And my sisters must hate me.”

“Why would they hate you? I am sure you are an excellent brother; you are an excellent person so how could you be otherwise?”

“An excellent brother would not allow his sisters to languish in an obscure part of Dorset when they should be making their appearance in the world.”

Kitty blinked. She had always formed the impression, from what little Giles had said of them, that they were quite young.

“Arabella is at least two years older than you,” said Giles ruefully. “And my mother has not the means to come to town herself, nor are the local assemblies very convivial to finding acceptable husbands apparently. I have neglected my duties, to do what? Amble about town with Blaketon, Bradford, the Kirbys and the like…doing what precisely?”

“You have not neglected your duty to your aunt! And most men and women do spend their time in town doing nothing…”

Giles smiled, “No, but I admit she is my favourite aunt, so even that is selfish. As to doing nothing, it is one thing to amuse oneself but it is possible to both do that and discharge one’s responsibilities.”
Kitty was at a loss as to why Giles was being quite this hard on himself and said as much to him.

“Well? Because I thought that I could take a wife, while I cannot read one of my estate manager’s letters and understand its meaning or import! Nor would any woman wish to be saddled with a home full of sisters.”

Kitty rolled her eyes; “Any woman that truly loved you the way you deserve to be loved would not care a jot.”

“But she wouldn’t be a woman deserving of my love if she didn’t care that I was irresponsible.”

“Well I cannot believe that you are irresponsible! Shamelessly neglecting your duties? You?”

“Perhaps not shamelessly, but I do have responsibilities which until now I have not paid as much attention to as I should.”

“So pay attention to them!” Kitty grabbed his wrist, shaking it slightly before dropping it. “See solved!”

Giles let out a breath he had been half holding with a laugh. “This is why I am very glad you are my friend.”

“Any more silliness like tonight’s and I shan’t be your friend for much longer!” she smiled in return.

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Lizzy swiftly walked over to where Mr Fancot and Kitty were standing. She did not know how many people had seen Kitty impetuously grab Mr Fancot’s wrist, but their intimacy could not go unnoticed. It would not be long before she exposed herself to ridicule. Not to mention Mr Fancot could hardly be appreciative of being the subject of gossip and innuendo.

“Kitty, Mr Fancot,” she greeted them and tried to sound disapproving.

“Lizzy! Are you enjoying yourself?” Kitty turned with a broad smile.

“My aunt wishes to speak to you.” Lizzy looked at Mr Fancot with a smile, “I am sure Mr Fancot wishes to speak to other people.” Lizzy looked pointedly at Kitty.

“I could not think of anyone in the world I would rather speak to, but if I must give you up, I must.” Mr Fancot grasped both Kitty’s hands and brought them to his lips. “Thank you, for being a very good friend.”

Kitty just laughed. She reclaimed her hands, and slipped one into Lizzy’s. “Well Lizzy, where is Aunt Clara?”

They walked back across the ballroom towards Clara, but were stopped by Lady Maltock who was talking to a group of matrons.

“Ah Kitty, Miss Elizabeth!” cried Lady Matlock, introducing them both any of the group that did not already know them.

“So, Miss Bennet, you do not like your younger sister being quite the centre of attention?” said a turbaned dowager looking pointedly at Lizzy, “Though I too would fetch my sister away without reason, from so attractive a man as Mr Fancot, so I can hardly blame you.”
Lizzy coloured at the implication and indeed direct accusation. She had not thought her interference between Mr Fancot and Kitty would look suspicious. After seeing his reaction, she had thought she might have made a mistake in her suppositions, but she had acted in what she thought was everybody’s best interest.

“Lizzy, jealous of me? Never!” cried Kitty, laughing, “I promised to introduce Lizzy to Lord Ffourkes, and I have been shamelessly remiss in my duties as a sister!” Kitty paused smiling, “Of course you realise why I have been so remiss! My jealousy of Lizzy!”

Lady Matlock smiled, “Yes, such fine eyes and a pleasing figure are most likely to turn a man’s head; you are quite right to try and sabotage your sister. This is why sisters should only be brought out one at a time!”

Kitty giggled before excusing them both.

“Why did you tell me Aunt Clara wished to speak with me? I did not see her speak to you?” Kitty asked in a low tone, as they walked towards a sofa. “I know it isn’t any form of jealousy!”

Lizzy blushed. Perhaps it was a form of jealousy! Seeing her younger sister so admired and liked, and seeing her free and easy manners seemingly liked well enough by society.

Perhaps it was Mr Darcy’s influence! She was seeing faults when they were not there.

“I – I do not wish to see you hurt, Kitty. Men, are such …especially gentlemen of fortune…who think that their money allows them…I would not wish someone to be …”

Lizzy stopped; she was making a mull of it all. It was true; she did not want to see Kitty hurt. Kitty had always been more sensitive and delicate than her, and while Mr Darcy’s manner of proposal had hurt, indeed more than she admitted, she had coped.

“You mean, you worry when the ton discover I, or indeed any of us, have little fortune to recommend us?”

Lizzy nodded.

“Ah well, you are behind! There is already a rumour that Aunt Clara has lost all her money and is in debt; so everyone already believes it, well not everybody but …”

Lizzy smiled ruefully. “I know! One advantage of living in a small town is a healthy appreciation for how gossip and rumour work!”

“You need not worry for me, Lizzy! I know I am not elegant like Jane, or manage to be as frank as you without causing offence, but I do not think I behave very badly! I won’t shame you.”

Lizzy’s heart sank. How could she have been so stupid? Kitty wasn’t a child, she wasn’t Lydia. Of course she would notice her disapproval. How could she take away her enjoyment of town, simply because she was hurt over the disapproval of a man she did not even like! And was overly worried that her favourite sister would be crushed because of her family’s behaviour.

There was the crux. Her favourite sister! Jane had always been her favourite, they were close and shared everything; she had hardly recommended herself to her other sisters, preferring to decide they were silly and ignorant.

There was nothing to reproach in her Aunt’s behaviour or Kitty’s, both were open and frank creatures and were well liked for it, it was nothing more than Lizzy’s own hurt and self-righteousness.
To think that she had even thought of begging her father to take them all home! She would not mind leaving London, but she could not deprive Kitty of her enjoyment. Or Jane of the opportunity to discover love with a man who truly esteemed her!

“Lizzy?” Kitty sounded worried.

“Oh, forgive me.”

“Of course, but let us not dwell on such things, because I see Lord Fourkes has escaped Miss Bassingthwaithe and I did promise to introduce you!”

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It had been decided that after Almacks, since it was such a late night and they had no male escort that it would be best if they all stayed at Cavendish Square.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Lizzy? Your first true London party?” Jane teased gently as her sister sat on her bed brushing out her hair. “Did all the gentlemen admire you as they ought?”

“Jane!” Lizzy laughed, “I did enjoy myself, but I dearly wish I had been a better sister to Kitty.”

“She is still your sister…”

“I have discovered I do not have the first idea about what is going through her head! Or what is acceptable London behaviour!” Lizzy put down the brush. “Believing Mr Darcy was my first mistake!”

“I did see you hurry over to Kitty and Mr Fancot. Mr Fancot is a gentleman, truly, Lizzy! We have spent much time in company, and in conversation!”

Lizzy raised an eyebrow at Jane. “Was this in the five minutes you have been spared from Mr Bingley’s side?”

Jane who was seated at the dresser turned and frowned. “Be serious, Lizzy!”

“I am serious! Who are we to know his intentions! I have discovered that gentlemen may not be transparent about those!”

Jane giggled. “Did you have no idea that Mr Darcy liked you so very much?”

“None! I had no idea of his intention when he surprised me in the grove, after I parted with Colonel Fitzwilliam! He should, of course, have picked his timing better…”

Lizzy stopped. She had not told Jane of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s telling her that Mr Darcy had been congratulating himself on separating Jane and Bingley. Lizzy at that point had only silently been laughing at the idea of Mr Darcy congratulating himself far too pre-emptively. But then she had seen him and he had said such things and …it had all dissolved into quite a scene. Accusations flying on both sides!

Jane had seen the amusing side of it, when Lizzy had related the tale, the idea of both her and Mr Darcy arguing in a field for all the interested flora and fauna to see. Lizzy just hoped there had not been any one able to communicate what they had heard and seen, skulking abut in the hedgerows! Jane’s voice brought her back to her present concerns.

“I should not worry, about Mr Darcy or Kitty. Kitty has never been alone with any young man
while she has been under my aunt’s care! Unlike even myself or indeed you!”

Lizzy sighed. “Perhaps…”

“No, Lizzy, I know what you are about to say and we can hardly force a confidence from her! If she wishes to tell us anything, she will.”

“Then let us think of better things! Like when Papa will receive a visit from your Mr Bingley.”

**&&**

Clara was the first one up in the morning; she was surprised not to see Lizzy at the table, she had always thought of her as a morning person.

Though, she thought as she bit into a piece of bread, it did no good to make assumptions about people without knowing them!

She heard a sharp rap on her door, and was unsurprised to find her brother ushered into the room.

“Thomas! Have breakfast with me!”

Mr Bennet was not so stupid as to think it was a question, plus he spied some Gooseberry Fool. His favourite dish!

He served himself and waited for his sister to speak.

And waited. And waited some more.

“You are not going to tell me of the lace on some lady’s dress and who my daughters danced with?”

“Would you be interested?” Clara was surprised.

“No, but I do not expect that matters! Mrs Bennet never lets a thing called interest get in the way of a good gossip…come to think of it, she does not let the truth get in the way of a good gossip either!”

Clara put down her tea. “Thomas, I am thoroughly uninterested in lace thus I am sorry to deprive you of it. As for your daughters, I am unable to furnish you with the particulars of all the young gentlemen they danced with, but if you apply to them, I am sure they can satisfy your thirst for knowledge.”

“You do not know who danced with them!” Mr Bennet was astounded.

“You think me a poor guardian?”

“Of course I do not, dear sister; I am just surprised you show so little interest in the fortunes of your nieces.”

“Well I am surprised at how little interest you display in your daughter’s interest! I am quite interested enough in the fates of my nieces, thank you, I just do not see the point in chronicling their every move! Far too many mothers do that, and the result is girls who will jump at a shadow!”

“They are silly and ignorant girls! Lizzy and Jane a little less so than the rest but what should my interest be in them?! Imagine what would happen if I went to assemblies; planning a wedding
every time a young man spoke to them!"

“What would happen if you went to assemblies and observed your daughters without your cynical lens would be that you would see that you have daughters who deserve parental support, advice and love!?”

Mr Bennet made a harrumphing sound and ate his Fool.

Clara decided she had scolded her brother enough today, but only partially changed the subject.

“What do you intend to say, Thomas, to any young man who asks for your daughter’s hand, considering that you do not know any of them?”

Thomas looked up confused. “Well there is only Mr Bingley, surely? And he is an amiable man! Of course every servant will cheat them! They will be so generous as to exceed their income! No, he is an excellent choice for my Jane and I do hope that it does not come to nothing. But of course if a young man came asking for my Lizzy I would of course expect to know about his family and his situation in life…and his character.”

“You would of course seek my opinion on the matter?”

Mr Bennet blinked. “Seek your opinion? Of course I would, Clara, you know more of the young men in town than I do!”

Clara smiled into her tea cup. She noticed her brother had not mentioned Kitty and wondered if he was going to be in for a shock.

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1 This what appears to be the opening of the Lady’s Monthly Museum for April 1812. The month the story is currently in, I could not stop giggling, so I could not, *not* use it, word for word. The text is taken from here, which is part of this site, which is an excellent resource, but the links are sometimes dead and very wilful. Anyway remember ladies (and gentlemen) that the Grecian costume is the true standard of taste.

Back to story

***&&***
Chapter 33

***&&***

Corporal Punishments in the Army.

Captain Bennet rose to make the motion of which he had given notice. He began by observing that the mode of punishment in the army by what was called flogging, was most debasing and degrading to the soldiers on whom with such cruelty and inhumanity that it was obliged to be inflicted in holes and corners. (A cry of hear, hear, from the Ministerial Bench.) He repeated that those who inflicted it were compelled to do it in holes and corners – by which he meant that they could not attempt it in open day; for it they did they must have an army to protect their executions from the enraged feelings of an indignant public.

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Mr Bennet smiled. “Look, my dear! A Bennet standing up for what is good and just in this world.”

Clara peered at the paper. “Well, he cannot be related to us!”

Mr Bennet turned to the beginning of the paper. “Are you attending this masquerade tonight at the Argyll-Rooms?”

“A Masquerade? A Public Masquerade?” Clara stared at her brother. “How glad I am that I am taking charges of your daughter’s introduction to polite society!”

Mr Bennet put down the paper. “Is there something wrong with a public masquerade?”

“Certainly, if a young lady wishes to gain a husband! Of course no man worth his salt would think any less of any of the girls for going to one, because of course they could hardly be suspected of any improper behaviour! But it would allow every jealous matron in town a reason for calling your daughters fast!”

Mr Bennet digested his sister’s words. “Such a minor infraction…?”

“When you have beautiful daughters who have little more than a penny to their name, you do not take chances, Thomas. I would have thought you would have realised that by now.”

“Then why, my dear, is Mr Collins…”

“Who?”

“Our cousin, who is to inherit Longbourn?”

“Oh, Kitty told me he was an odious man. He was the one Elizabeth visited, was he not?”

“Yes, but as I was saying, Clara, why then is Mr Collins writing to me of Kitty saying she is nearly engaged, when she denies any such thing?! She says there is no young man!”

Clara raised her eyebrow. So he had heard rumours about Kitty and gave little credence to them. “You gave enough authority to these rumours to ask Kitty about them?” she asked mildly.

“Well Mr Collins claimed they were from my Lizzy! It, of course, turns out that what Jane wrote to Lizzy has been interpreted by firstly Mrs Collins and then Mr Collins!”
“Ah, well, then that explains it.”

“Yes it does; my daughters tell me Kitty is in the company of many gentlemen, enough certainly to raise the expectations of one as intellectually vacant as Mr Collins!”

“Certainly that is very true. Though I hope you do not mean to censure Kitty as a flirt; she is a very well behaved young lady!”

Mr Bennet blinked, he had not even thought of censuring Kitty, after all he expected behaviour of a most – there he paused. Should be expecting such behaviour from her? Should he have censured flirtation and other unbecoming behaviour in his daughters? If he did that Lydia would most certainly be locked in her room seven days out of eight! And if one extended that principle to one’s wife!

“Well, Thomas?”

“No, of course, I do not mean to censure her. Perhaps you are right and I should show more attention…”

“Perhaps you should, so at least if any young man does call to ask permission to address her you would at least know your daughter’s inclination! That of course goes for your other daughters too.”

“Does Kitty have an inclination?” Mr Bennet was intrigued. Kitty had declined all knowledge of any gentleman!

“Of course she does.”

“And is this inclination returned?” Mr Bennet did not bother to ask for a name; his sister was being enigmatic.

Clara simply sipped her tea.

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“Lizzy?” Jane stopped her sister in the hallway and drew her into her room. “I feel that last night’s conversation ….I do not think that was all you had to say?”

Lizzy sighed. She had not passed a restful night. “It was not.” She sank down on the bed. “I did not give you a full account of what passed between Mr Darcy and myself.”

“You did not?”

“No, I have hardly had a chance to speak with you for any length, or in any semblance of privacy! And with him so near! My thoughts have all been confused. And you telling me how sorry you felt for him…”

“Well, would not anyone? With all the goodness on his side and all the wickedness on Mr Wickham’s? That is, if he was so very bad. And the appearance of goodness and wickedness being reversed!?”

“Yes, but I cannot so easily forgive him his insults towards myself and my family! Or his interference!”

“His interference?”
“Colonel Fitzwilliam, not knowing he was speaking to someone so intimately involved told me 
that Mr Darcy was congratulating on lately saving Mr Bingley from a most imprudent marriage. 
Of course with your letters full of Mr Bingley, I found it more amusing because his scheme had 
had no effect, but I was insulted on your behalf…”

“And on your own…” Jane added shrewdly.

Lizzy smiled. “Of course! And then as soon as I parted from the Colonel there was Mr Darcy with 
his ‘ardent admiration and love!’ I noticed he made no mention of respect! His torture over loving 
me! When I refused him, as you already know, he wished to know why and I explained my 
reasoning to him! He spoke intemperately of Wickham, for which I now forgive him, but he did 
not confine his feelings just to that subject. He spoke of our disparity and of my family’s 
behaviour. He mentioned Kitty then, and returned to her in the letter.”

“But there is nothing wrong in her behaviour!”

“Yes, I know that now, but for me to read his letter explaining his thoughts about Wickham and of you…I could not…”

“See that he made some fine points? I expect he spoke of my appearing serene and untouched. I 
do think he was justified there, I do hide my feelings well, so that if someone did not know me…”

“So why should I not think of what he said about our family? He is right in the respect of Lydia’s 
wild manners and Mary’s wilful misunderstandings of appropriate ‘place and time’ for such 
discussions and exhibitions! And our mother! And even dear Papa…. But is this so very bad? 
Cannot it not be rectified in part? Certainly Kitty’s behaviour is better than it was, and even then, 
was it bad behaviour or a lack of guidance and true friendship?”

Jane was silent for a moment before she spoke. “Well, I think it shows we must, as you said last 
night, be better sisters to Lydia and Mary as well as Kitty. We should not wait for some breach in 
conduct…”

There was a knock on the door. “Are you coming to breakfast?”

Jane and Lizzy looked at Kitty. “Yes, we are just coming.”

“Who are you discussing so secretly here? Was it Lord Ffourkes? He is very handsome, Lizzy!”

Lizzy laughed. Her sister was incorrigible! “No, it was not Lord Ffourkes though he seems a very 
charming young man; you must teach me your method of cultivating such acquaintance.”

Kitty giggled but Lizzy thought she detected a slight wilting in Kitty’s expression.

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Kitty wondered why her father seemed so intent on looking at her while she was at her breakfast. 
Clara seemed to find it amusing so Kitty could hardly pass it off as her imagination.

“Have I done something to upset you, Papa?”

“Upset me? No!” Mr Bennet smiled in such a way that Kitty was unconvinced in his denials. 
“Well, did you all enjoy the ball? Was the fine Mr Darcy there? I expect he found it rather more to 
his taste than Meryton Assemblies.”

“No, he was not there,” replied Jane serenely, barely looking at Lizzy.
Kitty noticed this action of Jane’s and it made her wonder even more keenly whether there was something more happening with Lizzy and Mr Darcy than first appeared. The more Kitty thought about it, Mr Darcy’s absence was strange. Almost all his family had been there and certainly he could have no excuse like the ones he gave for his incivility in Meryton.

“Mr Bingley?”

“No, Papa.”

Mr Bennet tried to think of any names that had been excitably communicated to him by his wife as she fluttered over letters from her three daughters. “Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

Lizzy smiled. “Yes, Colonel Fitzwilliam was there.”

“Ah, now I am getting somewhere. Is he as personable as his cousin?”

“Papa, surely I wrote to you of the Colonel’s character!” scolded Lizzy.

Mr Bennet looked contrite. “Mrs Bennet does the reading, I just hear her interpretation.”

Clara gave a snort. “Well, you have not changed, brother, even when we were children you would not bother with correspondence! Now I have always thought that talking of past events indicated that the dearth of future ones and that is surely not the case, you must know of my dinner party.”

“Is it to be a large party, aunt?” asked Lizzy.

“A very large party!” replied Jane who had helped both Kitty and Clara send out the invitations. Kitty’s birthday was the week after the dinner, but both Clara and Kitty had decided that nothing was stopping them having more than one party! So this was not to be a celebration of anything in particular.

“Yes and your arrival, brother, has made my table uneven; I shall just have to hope one of the gentlemen cannot come! Otherwise you may have to eat in the kitchen!”

Kitty thought her father would not mind that if it meant he could have all the Gooseberry Fool he wished and be able to avoid company.

Lizzy was interested, “Who have you invited?”

“Well, all those present, of course. The Gardiners, Lord and Lady Matlock, Lady Annabelle and both her brothers, Mr and Miss Darcy, Lord Upton, Mr Bingley and Mr Fancot. As you see that makes nine gentlemen and eight ladies!”

“So who, Clara, would you wish to see suddenly become ill?” smiled Mr Bennet.

Clara refused to answer, but Jane replied for her, “Papa, I do not think anyone here wishes anyone any ill, simply to make up table numbers!”

However, both Lizzy and Kitty were thinking of the expendability of the same man.

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Lizzy looked out the window of the carriage as it bounced over the cobblestones, she had been wondering how to bring up such a delicate subject; it was the perfect opportunity for it with both Jane and her alone with her aunt.
“Aunt?”

“Yes, Elizabeth?”

“Why does your owning Netherfield not seem to be a general point of knowledge?”

“Have you been in town so long as to know this?” Clara smiled. The girl had been in town four days!

Jane interjected, “We have discussed it in letters, as I too find it strange, though I think recently that it has become more widely known.”

“Well those who need to know certainly know; I do not see that puffing off my consequence is necessary. You would surely not like people to like you solely for having a childless aunt with property at her disposal?” Clara sighed. “But do not fear, any real harm to your reputation will soon be squashed by me!”

Jane then spoke quietly of her surprise at the level of intrigue and gossip she had discovered in London.

“You are surprised, Jane? I see nothing but an amplified form of Meryton! There, there was gossip and intrigue enough!”

“Certainly, Elizabeth, gossip and intrigue is the same everywhere. But again I reassure you that those who matter know the truth! I will warn both of you that the secret of my ownership of Netherfield is quite widely known and it has been decided that I must be greatly in debt.”

Both sisters already knew this, Lizzy from Kitty’s confidence and Jane because, despite her attentions to Mr Bingley, she was not blind or deaf.

Lizzy opened her mouth but was silenced by her aunt. “And before you speak, I shall not deny it! I should not be believed, have you not heard of never believing anything until it is officially denied?”

Lizzy smiled; she understood the reasoning behind her aunt’s decision and she did not care so much for anyone’s good opinion in town that she minded if they were deceived. For if they believed such nonsense they could hardly be worthy of her care.

The rest of the trip back to Gracechurch Street was spent in rumination by all occupants.

***&&***

The next morning, taking some time off from helping with the arrangements for Clara’s dinner party on Tuesday, Kitty smiled over a letter from Lydia. The beginning was full of recriminations over the news that Lizzy planned to stay in London. Lydia did not understand why everyone could not go to London. What she really meant was she didn’t understand why she could not go to London.

However, Lydia wrote herself out of her petulance and turned her pen to more important matters. Kitty read with interest the news from Meryton. The most interesting of this news was that in June the Militia was to depart from Meryton and spend the whole of the summer at Brighton.

Kitty was glad of that, at least that meant that Georgiana could come and visit her when she went home with no fear of meeting Wickham.

Thinking of Georgina made Kitty think of whether Georgiana would have any knowledge of
what was going on with the male members of her family. Almacks had certainly opened her eyes to the possibility that some subterfuge had occurred, apart of course from her wondering whether Darcy and Lizzy were a couple.

Kitty put aside Lydia’s letter and jotted off a quick note.

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Georgiana was attempting to listen to Annabelle’s wedding plans when she received Kitty’s note.

In between discussing dress patterns, Annabelle had told Georgiana all about Almacks. Georgiana had no desire to go to Almacks, large social occasions always worried her, but from Annabelle’s disjointed recital she wished she had been there.

Now, Kitty was writing to her about Ash.

Georgiana had been stupid enough to think that Fitzwilliam and her cousin would explain themselves to her. Of course they had an explanation but Georgiana was not stupid enough to think it was the real, or the whole, explanation.

That Ash would be angry at Fitzwilliam over the Wickham incident was hardly a surprise to Georgiana, that they had come to blows over it was. Thus there had to be another explanation.

Georgiana blamed herself; if she really was the reason for the argument, she should have told her brother herself of her decision to tell more people about Wickham. Then perhaps Fitzwilliam could have explained himself better to Ash. After all he was the best of brothers; he had had her best interest at heart. But she still wrestled with the shame of what had almost happened, and it hurt to talk of it to her brother who she had come so close to grievously injuring.

Yet, Georgiana was certain there was something more to the argument between Fitzwilliam and her cousin and the only thing Georgiana could think of was Kitty.

She knew her brother had reservations about Kitty and her family, reservations that were natural for a brother but had no grounding! Surely he would not have expressed such reservations to Ash? And if he had, not in terms that would result in a display in violence and a break in communication.

That had been Wednesday and it was now Friday and there had been no sign of Ash and her brother had not mentioned him! This was not unusual but after such a fight? And with the finality in which Ash had spoken to her!

Georgiana was not sure what to think, especially when Annabelle had told her that the reason Ash had not been at Almacks was that he had suddenly taken a journey into the country! Whether this was a decision taken before or after Mr Fancot’s revelations of ‘misplaced business’ Georgiana did not know.

It did not add up. Surely this was inconsistent with Ash having any feelings for Kitty! Or was it?

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1 From “The Times” April 16th 1812. .

back to story
Chapter 34

Mrs Sutton formally requests the pleasure of the company of ________________ for dinner, at Cavendish Square, on Tuesday the Twenty First of April.

Jane put away the invitations that Clara had printed especially for her dinner party; extras had been ordered to stave off the possibility of disaster. Jane was struck by how organised her aunt was especially in comparison to her mother. Jane wondered now, after seeing her aunt, how her mother’s parties were ever a success since she ran on nerves, flutterings and faith!

The weekend had been spent with their father, and their aunt, uncle and cousins in Cheapside. Lizzy had many friends to call upon; friends Jane was happy to call upon, feeling that she not been attentive enough since she had arrived in London.

Mr Bingley had not been near them; Jane, who would have normally attributed the best possible reasons to such an absence, was growing worried.

Perhaps Mr Bingley really had thought her flirting, although Jane had given up the attempt almost before starting…

Lizzy had reassured her that nobody could misinterpret her actions, that Mr Bingley could be in no doubt of her affections. Yet, Jane could not help but think all she had done was confirm Mr Darcy’s accusations about her.

But Mr Bingley would be there the next day; unlike a certain someone.

Kitty stared at the note that had arrived on Friday. Perfectly composed and written, all but its meaning could be admired – a sincere apology that attendance at the dinner would be impossible.

It was ridiculous that one little note could cause the shedding of a few tears. Kitty had refused to shed more than a few.

Just like she refused to remain confused! Georgiana had told her of the fight between Mr Darcy and Ash.

Like Georgiana, Kitty doubted it was entirely about Wickham, but Kitty was not naïve (or self centred) enough to leap to the conclusion that she could be the only other reason for what seemed to amount to a brawl.

With such an age gap between Georgiana and Mr Darcy, Kitty doubted they would have experiences the problems that could occur between relations of a similar age! No, there were probably hundreds of niggly little issues that had festered between the cousins!

It was hardly surprising that Ash would not wish to be at a dinner party with his cousin if they had not resolved their problem. Kitty reflected that it was one more reason to dislike Mr Darcy.

Kitty had no problem in deciding whatever the problem must be all his fault. Though why grown men could not spend an evening in the same place, even if they were arguing, was beyond her. And all the ‘send my particular regrets to Miss C. Bennet’ would not make up for it.
After all Georgiana was still convinced something had occurred between Lizzy and her brother; to
tell the truth, so was Kitty, and yet they were to spend an evening together!

Were the Bennet sisters cursed in love? Herself, Lizzy with Mr Darcy (though Kitty hardly envied
Lizzy if it was true) and now Jane with Mr Bingley! Kitty was glad Jane had not put their plan
into practice, unless she had when Kitty was not looking, for at least she could not blame herself.

It was curious though that it was the day after the picnic that everything seemed to suddenly
become confused!

“Kitty?” Jane had entered the room. “Aunt has decided on a less formal seating arrangement. She
would like our opinion.”

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Clara examined the table, “Well?”

Jane could have no complaints with the table she was placed between the charming Colonel
Fitzwilliam and, in her eyes, the even more charming Mr Bingley.

Kitty could have no material complaints either, opposite the Colonel who was sitting next to
Georgiana, and placed between her uncle and Giles; though both sisters felt moved to protest on
Lizzy’s behalf.

“Aunt – “

“Aunt – “

“You go first, Kitty,” said Jane.

“I do not think Lizzy would wish to be opposite Mr Darcy!”

“I placed her at this end of the table to be near her father!” Both Clara and her brother were seated
at the ends of the table, and she had assumed that due to the close relationship between Thomas
and Elizabeth, they would enjoy the occasion much more if placed near each other. How Mr
Darcy came into it Clara could only guess. She wondered if her brother had any idea!

“Perhaps we could move Mr Darcy? Perhaps Lord Upton would like to sit next to Lady
Annabelle?” Jane pointed out the cards.

“That would place Mr Darcy at my right hand! I certainly do not want Mr Darcy as my right hand
man!” exclaimed Clara.

Every other option had problems, even Jane was not happy to exchange the Colonel for Mr
Darcy. Now that she knew he disapproved of her love for his friend, she would be watching for
all his glances and looks and it would sink her.

“Well, so Mr Darcy stays! Are there any other problems with my arrangements?”

“It looks excellent, Aunt!”

Clara smiled and left the room.

“Well we tried,” said Kitty with a sigh.

Jane could not help but wonder if Kitty knew … “Kitty?”
“Yes?”

“Why did you think Lizzy would not wish to be seated near Mr Darcy?”

“They do not like each other!” Kitty laughed. “Though Georgiana thinks that her brother proposed!”

Jane’s eyes widened.

“Jane?! Oh my, is it true? She refused him? She must have unless they are secretly engaged?”

“Kitty!” Jane sounded scandalised.

“Well, it would be romantic!” Kitty paused. “Although it is probably more romantic if you know it is happening to someone else!”

“You cannot speak of this to anyone! Lizzy does not want it widely known! Think of the talk! Poor Lizzy and poor Mr Darcy.”

“Not a word I would associate with Mr Darcy!” replied Kitty. “Yes, Jane, my lips are sealed.”

Jane left the room to help with more arrangements, while Kitty contemplated the table.

Mr Darcy did not, to her, seem like a man disappointed. A man disappointed should not be able to come on picnics with the woman he violently loved, and not show something.

Perhaps it was a talent of his family to hide feelings?

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Darcy groaned. He wondered if he could groan some more and pretend to be ill.

In less than an hour, he was due to be at a dinner hosted by a lady whose character he had maligned. In attendance would be Bingley who was barely speaking to him; his cousin’s best friend who was certain not to be speaking to him because his cousin was not; two further young ladies he had spoken or thought ill of; Mr Fancot who wished to call him out; the lady who had refused his offer of marriage and thought of him as not a gentleman; and her father who he assumed he would see again under much better circumstances.

Oh and quite a few other people who had no idea of what was happening and …Georgie.

Georgiana had forgiven him immediately when she thought it had all been about Wickham. This preyed on Darcy’s mind because it was wrong that she should think that anything to do with that man was her fault.

While skulking at home waiting to look presentable again, Darcy had had much time to think. He had reached the conclusion that he should stop blaming others for his problems. He should also stop trying to find ways of belittling Elizabeth and her family so he could feel better about her refusal.

He was to blame. While she should not have taken Wickham at his word, what other choice did she have? He was above being pleased, he knew that now and now knew what it had cost him and almost cost Bingley.

It had taken only the work of a moment to realise how ridiculous all the accusations were, if only
they had been disclosed to him at a more rational moment.

He would have had time to reflect! Though it was entirely his fault he had believed both Miss
Bingley and Mrs Hurst, he could not escape that.

Mrs Sutton was not a gamester and nor were her nieces fortune hunters! Catherine Bennet’s
reputation was spotless and while her behaviour was free and easy there was nothing improper
about it. She had behaved at the opera and with Sir Christian much like other young ladies and
considerably less openly than his cousin, Annabelle, would have and he would hardly condemned
his own cousin! Either of them.

He was less sure of Miss Catherine Bennet’s feelings, but he was certainly not going to pry,
perhaps he might observe her behaviour and that of her eldest sister with impartiality. He owed
both Elizabeth and himself that much.

Elizabeth. There was a lady he would not be able to observe with any impartiality. Her dignity in
their trip to Richmond had only improved his opinion of her, and all reports of her at Almacks
furthered his good opinion. He had never doubted she deserved it; all his doubts had come from
her family.

“Fitzwilliam?”

Darcy turned to his sister.

“We do not want to be late.”

Darcy tried to straighten his cravat with no success. “Of course.”

Georgiana turned to leave, but Darcy called her back.

“Georgie, you know that none of this is your fault.”

Georgiana frowned her forehead creasing as Darcy walked towards her.

“I have never been angry at you. You have never been the cause of any argument.”

Georgiana hugged him. “Thank you. I don’t believe you though,“ she smiled up at him.

Darcy tried to hide his smile.

“Are you going to tell me what has upset you? Not to mention Ash.”

Georgiana pressed her cheek into his waistcoat, hoping that averting her eyes would make it easier
to tell her.

“I said something that I have no wish to repeat, it is something I regret deeply, and was taken
offence to.”

Georgiana stepped back. “Then why did you say it?”

Darcy ran a hand, impulsively, through his hair before pacing about the room. “I – “

It was clear to Georgiana that some prompting was involved. “Does it involve Miss Bennet?”

“Which Miss Bennet?” Darcy looked alarmed. His words about Catherine Bennet were not ones
he ever hoped his sister would hear. She would rightly never forgive him for insulting, on so base
a level, her friend. Darcy hoped that his words would never leave the sanctity of Whites and that
no one would believe them. If they did he was not sure what he could do to make amends. His thoughts were all disordered as he tried to think of what he could say to his sister.

“Elizabeth.”

Darcy was thrown, how could she know? That was not the subject of rumours that could easily come to her ears was it? He was not that obvious? Had his behaviour, all this time, caused him to the object of attention for others who were probably laughing at him?

Georgiana noticed her brothers’ discomfort. “You said you were bringing me a gift and you always seemed in your letters not…averse…to her.”

Darcy sighed. “Another completely separate thing I regret saying. Not of course, my proposal but the manner of it.”

The casual manner in which her brother mentioned the proposal did not fool Georgiana, but minutes before their Aunt and Uncle were to arrive was not the moment to delve any deeper!

Darcy sensed her sentiment and agreed. “Shall we discuss this later?”

“Yes. I hope we will, Fitzwilliam. You need to speak to someone.”

Darcy could not disagree; his failure to speak of many subjects had led to almost all his problems. It was time he saw his sister as an adult, after all she had experiences that many women her senior had never and would never have!

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The Gardiners had arrived with their nieces early, and were admiring the house. Clara had done wonders to it since arriving in London. Or rather her servants had done wonders, though she had not simply sat back and watched. No, she had waved her hands around and given orders!

Lizzy who had barely had time to admire the house on her previous visit took in the morning room, which was no longer such a jumbled room of many uses. The other advantage of dawdling on the ground floor was the chance to peek into the dining room.

Kitty was seated by Mr Fancot which made Lizzy pause for thought, but she wished she had stopped there when she saw who was to be seated opposite her! And Lord Matlock to her right! And Lady Annabelle opposite him! It would be an interesting conversation between the four of them and her father!

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Clara noticed Lizzy slipping into the room while the Gardiners and Thomas quizzed her on the other guests.

“Well of course Edward and yourself know Lord and Lady Matlock, but Thomas does not…”

Mr Bennet tried to remember who they were. “Mr Darcy’s uncle and aunt?” He looked hopeful. Mrs Bennet never questioned him on such matters!

“Very good, Thomas! Their son the Colonel will be here, as well as their daughter Lady Annabelle who has recently formed an engagement with Miles Carlon, the Earl of Upton. He will be here also.”

Mr Bennet blinked. “Er, and who will I be seated with?”
Clara did not deign to answer.

There was no more time to reassure anyone that the dinner party would be a complete success for the other guests began to arrive.

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The dinner party was a success as Clara had always known it would be, though the evening was still fraught with the promise of disaster for many.

Annabelle’s blithe announcement, at the start of dinner, that her brother was on business in Hertfordshire, a fact hitherto she had kept to herself, caused a mental stir for some, though it was successfully hidden from display.

Georgiana wondered if it was possible that Ash had set off for Hertfordshire not knowing that Mr Bennet was in London. What other business could he have in Hertfordshire? That Hertfordshire was a large county did not hold much sway with her. Georgiana’s romantic disposition was not to be gainsaid, even if she no longer had romantic dreams of her own.

Kitty however was not thinking at all of herself, but rather that Wickham was currently residing in Hertfordshire. It would be entirely like him to decide now to follow her directive some months ago of going and sabring Wickham. Especially if Mr Darcy’s explanation for allowing Wickham to roam free had not been satisfactory… But surely he would not do something so stupid?

To Darcy the whereabouts of his cousin was not a surprise, he had thought to go to Hertfordshire himself to speak to Colonel Forster, to right some of his wrongs, but had thought better of it when Richard had told him of Ash’s destination. Though he had not disclosed to his brother the intention of his visit, or the precise location, thus it was possible that Ash did not mean to visit Meryton at all. It was not a chance Darcy felt like taking, but he still felt a stab that someone else was doing what he should have done. He did not miss the brief change in Miss Catherine Bennet’s face and wondered to what he should attribute it.

Lizzy meanwhile was hoping that Mr Darcy was not mentally cataloguing all the faults of her family. He did not appear to be and neither did his uncle. Lord Matlock betrayed, in Lizzy’s mind, a great deal of interest and knowledge of her. He questioned her about how she had liked Rosings, and whether she thought his son was a fool for scampering about the countryside when such pleasant and pretty company was to be had.

Though he certainly was not making inquiries for the same reason his sister would make such inquires, he did appear genuinely interested. His questions about Mr Collins drew her father into the conversation, which turned from the servile nature of that gentleman to a discussion of entails and onto farming.

Mr Bennet was out of his depth on some of the legal matters but while he did not pay as much attention to his land as other men, he could certainly converse on that topic with ease.

The problems of the land drew Mr Darcy into the conversation and soon Lizzy found herself on the edge of the conversation not having much to contribute to the ideas of Young and Coke!

Instead she watched the rest of the table, interested to see that Giles paid as much attention to Lady Annabelle as to Kitty. Kitty did not neglect those around her either making Lizzy wonder if what had been whispered to her over the weekend had been correct.

Among those she had visited with Mrs Gardiner and her sister had been a family by the name of Blenkinthorpe who had talked much of Kitty’s London Triumph. Kitty had not visited them
having never been to London in her life thus having no knowledge of them, but they certainly knew of her.

The Blenkinthorpes, were acquainted with the Hicks who were certainly acquainted with Kitty. And according to them, her sister was likely to become Mrs Fancot.

Lizzy would have sworn an oath that Kitty preferred Lord Ashbourne, she had certainly done so at the picnic! But the hushed and intimate conversation with Mr Fancot at Almacks, coupled with the assumptions of the Hicks and the Blenkinthorpes confused Lizzy. Nor was observing her sister any help.

Part of Lizzy wished that instead of attending to her friends in Cheapside that she had accompanied Aunt Sutton and Kitty to their engagements, at least then she would be sure of her thoughts, having seen them with her own eyes.

***&&***
Mama claims her nerves prevent her from writing, and since Lydia declared her refusal to assist Mama on the grounds that there was nothing really preventing Mama from writing, and that she had already written one letter this week, it falls to me.

I may assure you, Papa, that all runs smoothly here at Longbourn, nothing has occurred to upset out quiet spirituality, though Lydia does her best! Mama merely wishes to ensure that you will write of any eventuality.

From this I gather she means any suitable attachment my sisters have made, she finds it surprising that Kitty can spend five months from home without discovering a young man; even more that Jane and Lizzy can spend six weeks from home without such. After all, Mama bemoans, how can six weeks in the company of Mr Bingley bring naught? Although she bids me to write that Lizzy who no doubt has the talent of attraction mixed with the ingratitude of refusal, surely must see it her duty to find a husband, one much better than Mr Collins and she would expect you to write to her of a refusal, so she may know whether Lizzy is to remain her daughter or not.

It pains me to write such words, but I promised to write faithfully to you all that she said. Her belief that she is being excluded chiefly lies with Lydia’s laughing whenever she mentions young men and London. I suggested Mama simply read Kitty’s letters but apparently this is too much effort for Mama….

Jane showed the letter Mary had sent to their father, to Clara who cleared her throat in annoyance that Mr Bennet had forgotten this correspondence that morning. Clara would have to speak to the footmen to impress upon them the notion that as mistress of the house she must know all particulars that happened under her roof.

“Do you think Kitty has written of anything to Lydia?” said Jane in a hushed voice.

“Well I should hope she has, otherwise it’s an expensive exercise to be sending blank pieces of paper across the countryside!”

“Aunt, you know what I meant.”

“Yes I do, Jane, and I am not convinced that Kitty would write anything of that nature to her sister, but it is entirely possible she betrayed herself without intending to do so.”

Jane smiled. Even she had caught herself writing far too much about Mr Bingley when she had only meant to briefly mention his name.

Clara re-read the pertinent parts of Mary’s letter and returned it to Jane, “Have you shown Elizabeth? She has just finished speaking to Lady Matlock.”

Jane took the letter to her sister, and Clara watched as two high spots of colour crept into Elizabeth’s cheeks as she no doubt read the part directed at her. Clara mused at this further proof that her surmise of what happened at Hunsford was correct.

Clara turned to observe Kitty, Georgiana and Annabelle giggling in a corner, before Kitty stood up and went to speak to her aunt Gardiner.
“Well, Clara, a delightful informal dinner,” said Lady Matlock as she moved to take a seat beside Clara.

“Of course, did you expect anything else?”

“Perhaps,” replied Lady Matlock, “though that was more to do with the guests rather than you!”

Clara smiled.

“They think I am oblivious to everything!”

There was no need to ask who ‘they’ were; ‘they’ were always the young.

“It gives us ample time to observe, I would not complain,” replied Clara, mildly.

Lady Matlock laughed, “Oh I am not complaining, I am just surprised that my daughter is the first to straighten out all life’s confusing tangles, I would not have expected it. Though I should not count my blessings of such an uneventful dinner, the men have still not returned from their port.”

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Darcy had dreaded this moment. It was difficult to sustain his calm demeanour while sitting opposite the woman he had hoped to call his. To attempt to conceal his desire just to sit and stare, lest he arouse the suspicion of Annabelle, his uncle and Mr Bennet.

But now that the ladies had left, this left no one between him and a man who had quite possibly, last Tuesday, almost called him out.

Instead of Mr Fancot moving up one place, as Mr Bennet and Lord Matlock called for the gentlemen to move closer to the port, Bingley moved around from the opposite site of the table to claim Annabelle’s vacated chair.

This left Miles to take Elizabeth’s chair and be harangued by his soon to be Father-in-law.

Bingley took the opportunity of the loud conversation between Lord Matlock and Miles, and between Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Gardiner to whisper to him.

“Darcy, I am no longer angry at you for what you did, if I was not so weak and able to be led then no harm would have come of it. I understand your feelings and while I do not agree with them I respect them, and I hope you come to realise how your own passions have clouded your judgement.” Bingley paused. “I am sorry for your disappointment.”

Darcy stared at his glass of port, unsure of what to say. “Bingley, it is I who should have come to you to apologise for my behaviour. It was not as it should have been. I had convinced myself I was protecting you, but it was only myself that I was protecting.”

“Then I have your blessing?”

“Do you need my blessing?”

“No, but I should like to have it all the same.”

“Then of course you have my blessing, just do not ask me to stand up with….”

Bingley smiled, “I would not worry; I think you have time to make amends.”
Darcy frowned. Time? Why would he have time? Surely Bingley was not going to wait to ask Miss Bennet to marry him? They were talking of Miss Bennet were they not?

However before Darcy could clarify, his cousin captured the attention of the table by asking them what they thought of the riot at Macclesfield and the latest news from Cadiz regarding the fall of Valencia, much to the disappointment of two men who had been actively eavesdropping on the conversation.

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It was Lizzy’s certain conviction that when the gentlemen returned from their port, that her Father and Mr Bingley would dawdle behind. While she knew Mr Bingley had not asked Jane to be his wife, it was possible that because of his previously being swayed from her by his friend he would wish to be correct in all his behaviour and ask permission first.

This was dashed by her father being first into the room, looking very jovial and treating Lord Matlock as if they had been friends for life.

Mr Bennet was having a much better time than he expected. He had found in Lord Matlock someone who was nothing like his nephew, an open man though one who it would not be wise to cross. He had spoken to Edward as an equal and told Mr Bennet of the use Edward had been in a recent business engagement. Not what he had been expecting from a peer of the realm; indeed Mr Darcy had interrupted to congratulate them on such a successful partnership.

Mr Bennet was coming to regard Mr Darcy as nothing more wicked than your average rich man who was used to getting his own way. And, if he had heard accurately then Mr Darcy had recently been denied his own way, which would explain any sourness of temper. Yet Mr Bennet had seen little, Mr Darcy was open in discussing his opinion of crop turning, and of the canal system. Neither he nor his uncle found being contradicted a trial too great to bear.

Perhaps Meryton had wronged Mr Darcy and, by association, his family. The Colonel seemed a sensible man, though Mr Bennet had to hold his untimely interruption against him; Lady Annabelle was vivacious and not above teasing her cousin, who he noticed bore that quite well. Mr Darcy’s sister Georgiana seemed a shy young lady, quite the opposite of the proud haughty creature she was gossiped to be!

He had also taken the time to observe Mr Fancot; he had thought perhaps this was the young man that Kitty had an inclination for but both his daughter and Mr Fancot had divided their time equally, talking animatedly to all around them. There seemed to be no particular attachment there. Despite his lack of interest in his younger daughters he did know how they acted when they fancied themselves in love!

Of course, this could be a more grown up love, where his daughter realised that it behoved her to actually recognise people existed outside her beau. Yet, if Jane had not quite mastered that, Mr Bennet had seen them at the far end of the table barely exchanging three words with anyone else, it would be a miracle that his penultimate daughter had mastered it.

In fact if Mr Bennet was truthful to himself, the only person Kitty could be in love with would be the Colonel. After all he was the only man in regimentals! Mr Bennet gave up; somebody would inform him at some time or other.

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Jane seemed unconcerned, merely happy that Mr Bingley had walked straight to her and engaged her in conversation once he entered the room.
Lizzy could not be so unconcerned. Was this not the perfect time? Under the cover of a dinner party?

Why was everyone acting in a manner so opposite to what she expected? By everyone she of course meant Darcy!

She had watched in amazement as he had conversed with her father, had borne the teasing of his cousin when she briefly joined the conversation, and had even spoken words to her when she had ventured to enter the conversation. Perhaps he did not just perform for strangers, and needed a subject with which he was conversant.

She had even seen him smile. It had been hard not to stare at such a novelty, especially when she had finally seen an attractive quality in him. More than one attractive quality – his attention to his sister! He truly was a protective and caring brother. She had seen it on the picnic but to have it confirmed again! Perhaps she should consider what other people who knew him best said? She had seen him restrain himself admirably when Miss Darcy had replied in quite a flirtatious manner to Mr Fancot who was opposite her.

She sensed he had recognised that his sister was a young lady, not a child, and had hardly meant anything by such a response, and that Mr Fancot had known as much. Indeed he should be happy that she could respond to a gentleman in that way after what had happened with Wickham.

Having no desire to sit, unattended to next to Jane and Mr Bingley, Lizzy went to help with the coffee.

“Ah, Miss Elizabeth, are you enjoying your London stay? I do hope it is of a long duration.”

Lizzy smiled at Lady Matlock. “I am, my lady. I am not sure however of the length of my visit, while my father can come to town if he misses his daughters, my mother cannot,” Lizzy paused. This was not entirely true; it was more like if they did not go home soon, their mother would storm up to town demanding to know what was happening.

“Of course, your mother will wish to hear all your news in person! Letters cannot compensate for everything.”

“No, especially if my father is an indifferent writer.”

“And her daughters choose not to say all they feel in a letter home.” Lady Matlock smiled so knowingly that Lizzy almost gave a start. Lady Annabelle had been so very blatant in her belief that her cousin was attached to her, that of course she had told her mother! Lizzy coloured.

She was prevented from replying to Lady Matlock by the presence of the only person who could make the situation worse! Darcy had upon entering the room ensured that his sister was comfortable and enjoying herself. Now he loomed over her.

“Miss Bennet – I – “

Surely he was not going to say something with his aunt standing in such close proximity! Lizzy almost sighed in relief when Lady Matlock picked up her coffee and went to talk to Aunt Clara but this was still neither the time nor the place.

“Miss Bennet – I – “

“Yes, Mr Darcy?” Lizzy was not sure whether anxiousness or annoyance showed more in her voice.
“I would like some coffee.”

“Some coffee?” Lizzy blinked at him.

Darcy indicated the pot she was holding. “Coffee?”

“Of course, Mr Darcy!” Lizzy tried not to roll her eyes at her own stupidity as she poured him a cup. “I hope you are enjoying yourself?”

“Yes, thank you I am, your aunt has a very comfortable home here.”

“I believe she has done a lot to it, since arriving in London.”

“She shows a great deal of talent in that direction.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

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Kitty sat with her aunt and Lady Matlock discussing recent gossip surrounding their acquaintance.

“Mrs Sutton, I have neglected to speak to you on a most important matter.”

Bingley drew up a chair.

“A most important matter, Mr Bingley?” Clara smiled.

Kitty thought it must be most important to leave Jane to talk to Giles!

“I had no idea, no idea at all, that it was from you I was leasing Netherfield! I only found out some days ago and I tried to think of the best way to bring up such a subject.”

“Well, this is an excellent way, Mr Bingley.”

Bingley looked slightly confused, “Is it? I thought it was quite rude!”

“I do not think you could be rude, Mr Bingley,” added Kitty.

Bingley smiled, as both Clara and Lady Matlock commented that such a handsome man could never be in fear of causing offence.

“But yes, Mr Bingley, it is my house. I hope that knowing the owner will not make you treat it worse? Or even better, because that implies you have not been treating it well!”

Bingley blushed. “I have been there so little, but I do think it is the most happily situated house!”

Kitty wondered what the most attractive feature of the landscape was to Bingley. She thought she could guess!

“I confess it has been so long, I shall have to take you on your word. It was a lovely house when I was last there, but no doubt so many things have changed.”

“I doubt it, Clara, I remember thinking of my little village in Sussex! I was sure it would be so very different, yet it had not changed a jot! Though if we came from the North, I expect we would see a great different wrought in a year, rather than a decade!”

“Perhaps you would like to come down to Netherfield, ma’am, as my guest?” Bingley paused as
he realised he had invited a lady to her own home.

“What an excellent idea, Mr Bingley! I do hope you mean to invite more than Clara?” questioned Lady Matlock.

“Undoubtedly! We could make quite a journey of it!” Bingley wondered what exactly he had just done!

“Georgiana, my child, come here!” Lady Matlock called to her niece. “I expect you would like to see Netherfield! Mr Bingley has proposed a trip, though I think that for myself and my lord, I will decline! Let it be a young person’s trip!”

“Are you accusing me of being young, Harriet?”

“Chaperone, my dear, quite a different thing, you hardly need more than one of them!” Clara thought that for such a group, more than one chaperone was certainly needed.

“Do you mean it, Charles? All go down to Netherfield? Fitzwilliam, do say we can go!” Darcy moved towards the group frowning, Kitty thought he was probably thinking of the same thing she was – Wickham.

“When would we go?”

“Oh quite soon I think!” replied Bingley warming to the idea, “Perhaps at the end of this week? Friday? We could spend the weekend or longer! I was thinking of going to Netherfield myself quite soon, so I would enjoy the company!”

The rest of the party became aware of the idea and either voiced their desire to attend, or disclaimed it. Mr and Mrs Gardiner had prior engagements; so did Giles.

“I am afraid I have made plans to go to Dorset this weekend.” Giles said placing his hands on the back of the sofa that Kitty was sitting upon.

“Dorset?” Kitty turned to him, “Are you bringing your mother and sisters back with you?”

Giles smiled. “Yes. It will only be a short season for them, but it is the least I can do, at least I am doing something.”

“Hardly a short season, Mr Fancot, the real fun has barely started!” exclaimed Lady Matlock.”

Kitty smiled and pressed Giles’ hand pleased, that instead of wallowing that he was actively doing something. He smiled at her and leaning forward to whisper to her – “Thank you.”

But apart from that, everyone desired to go, well almost everyone.

“Are you quite sure that this weekend is not too soon? Perhaps some time in the summer we could visit Mr Bingley?” said Darcy hopefully.

Kitty now knew he was certainly thinking of Wickham. She was surprised when Lizzy added her entreaties to postponing such a visit, which made Kitty suspect that Darcy must have told her of Wickham’s wickedness. This would also explain the slightly alarmed look on Jane’s face.

“The Summer! No, Fitzwilliam! I am sure the Miss Bennets wish to see their mother again, and she would wish to celebrate Kitty’s birthday with her! Not to mention that Mrs Sutton has not seen Netherfield for ten years!” exclaimed Georgiana.
“There is hardly an incentive to visit Meryton now,” commented Colonel Fitzwilliam, “It is practically a garrison town, with the militia there, I am sure it will be very uncomfortable.” The Colonel realised how silly his argument sounded especially in the face of a reunion between mother and daughter on such a special day, however he felt it was his duty to attempt to protect Georgiana.

At this point Kitty observed that Georgiana realised why everyone was suddenly thinking of reasons not to go, she did not blush or stammer or even pause; “I should like to see a garrison town. Soldiers do not scare me, how could they when my cousin is one of their number? And such a handsome one!”

“Well then it is settled!” cried Mr Bingley. “Apart of course from my sisters who may wish to come, indeed I shall need a hostess, unless Mrs Sutton wishes to take up that role?”

Clara wrinkled her nose, but whether it was from the idea of playing hostess or the possibility of Caroline Bingley making one of the party was unknown.

“I shall come back to town with Aunt though, Papa,” said Kitty hoping to forestall any idea of her returning home more permanently. She would not mind celebrating her birthday at Longbourn with Lydia, Mary and her mother. But she knew her mother would hardly pay her any attention even it was her birthday, after all she would not be bringing a Mr Bingley home, or a Colonel! Kitty knew her mother would assume the Colonel was Lizzy’s new conquest.

“Of course, you will. Thomas would not wish to deprive me of company! And I doubt Fanny would wish for me as a houseguest and I can hardly impose on Mr Bingley.”

So it was settled to everyone’s satisfaction, or at least as best as it could be. Kitty noticed that Darcy took his sister aside, no doubt to ensure that she did understand there was a possibility of seeing Wickham. Though Kitty meant to do everything in her power to prevent such a meeting and no doubt she had allies in the Colonel, Mr Darcy, Lizzy and Jane.

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Chapter 36

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Mr Bennet,

My wife has written to your daughter Lydia inviting her to Brighton in June as our particular friend. As you are from home I thought it best to write directly to you in London to ask your permission. Although you are more than likely to return to Longbourn before our departure, I believe this is a subject that does require your early attention.

I caution you, that while my wife and myself would make every provision for your daughter and provide her with the same protection she would receive at home; Brighton may not be the place for a single young lady who prefers the company of soldiers…

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Mr Bennet frowned at Colonel Forster’s letter. Writing in April! When they would not be departing until June! It seemed a waste of paper and time to be discussing it so early.

Though Mr Bennet knew the outcome; Lydia would never be easy until she had exposed herself in some public place and Mrs Bennet would not rest until one of her daughters followed the eligible young men to Brighton. He imparted as much to his sister over the breakfast table, adding his surprise that Mrs Bennet’s letter entreating his permission had not Lydia’s entreaties added to it.

“Go to Brighton? Under the care of a Colonel we know little about, and what appears to me to be a flighty young wife? Nonsense! If Lydia wishes to expose herself in a public place she can come to London and visit me. When she is older and wiser of course.”

Kitty saw her father’s surprise and wondered at whether Lydia would be happy exchanging a certain journey to a camp full of soldiers for a trip to London some time in the future. She doubted it.

“You will write your refusal, will you not, Thomas?”

Mr Bennet coughed and wished he had never brought the matter up.

Kitty took pity on her father and asked whether they would be attending the Mitchells’ ball.

“Indeed, Sir Stephen and Lady Mitchell have extended the invitation to the ball to your father and sisters, although only you and I have been granted the honour of being invited to dinner.”

“Such a grand honour, Kitty!” exclaimed Mr Bennet voice laced with amusement.

“Well it’s not actually; I went to school with her, and she has invited me purely to demonstrate that she is a Baronet’s wife, while I’m apparently moments away from …as your dear wife would put it…the hedgerows. It will consist, I am sure, of the most boring moments of my life.”

“Then, Clara, why go?”

Clara smiled at her brother. “You have a lot to learn about women, Thomas.”
He had no response to that.

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The Mitchells’ townhouse was, if Kitty was quite honest with herself, exactly what she had imagined every haunted house to look like when she was reading her gothic romance novels.

It was not in a fashionable part of town, but it was certainly still in a first class area. However Lady Mitchell had clearly seen the possibilities in her house and had dismissed all her outdoor cleaners, giving the house that authentically musty and dusty look.

Inside it was clean, but dark and imposing. Kitty did not wish to see the ballroom; she had a fair idea that it would not be decorated in the current style of flowers or silk.

Both Kitty and Clara looked apprehensively at their surroundings.

“Perhaps we should have been ill?” whispered Kitty.

Clara made no comment, but on surveying who was invited to dinner realised the extent of her hostess’ machinations. Clearly Lady Mitchell was somebody in the ton, even if it was as the latest eccentric whom everyone laughed at behind her back.

While Clara knew the reason for her invitation, she had no intention of refuting any of the gossip swirling about her, unless it seemed to be harming her nieces’ interests. At the moment refuting any gossip would serve no purpose; it would be accepted or rejected and then forgotten, it would hardly create a stir itself, and it was a stir that was needed to damage those who had been the instigators of the scandal in the first place.

“Ah, Mrs Sutton, how are you? How we have both changed since school!”

Clara smiled at Lady Mitchell and introduced Kitty to her.

“Ah, Miss Bennet, how delightful! I do hope you are keeping your Aunt company during these trying times?”

“I keep my aunt company through all times, Lady Mitchell,” replied Kitty sweetly.

“Like such a good niece. And now I believe your sisters are staying in Cheapside! With an aunt and uncle who are in trade? How delightful.”

“Is it, Lady Mitchell?” Kitty tried to ignore the insinuations.

“Well, I suppose it is for ease of shopping!”

“Indeed, Lord and Lady Matlock were just saying how much of a comfort my aunt and uncle were in helping in a recent business entanglement. I believe it was quite a successful partnership.” Kitty smiled even sweeter than before.

Lady Mitchell suddenly realised she had other guests.

“Well done, Kitty,” said Clara.

Clara was proud of her niece’s handling of the situation; a put down without being rude was a very difficult thing to master.
“Clara!” Lady Sefton sailed up to them. “I am surprised to see you here.”

“Lady Mitchell and I attended school together,” replied Clara.

“That is why I am surprised to see you here.”

Clara turned the subject, “And why are you here?”

“I unwisely invited her to dinner, and it was only polite for her to issue a return invitation and if I did not accept this invitation I would just have to accept another. Unless I wished to cut her completely and it has not come to that just yet.” Lady Sefton looked around, “But the company is not so bad, ah, look Lord Ashbourne has returned to town! There now, there is attractive *company*”

Kitty would have liked to have said she turned her head elegantly, but the truth was she had never turned so fast in her life. She was glad no response was needed from either Lady Sefton or her aunt.

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They had been almost immediately ushered into dinner, with strict protocol followed, this was no informal dinner where guests could converse across the dinner table and precedence was ignored.

Kitty and Clara were clearly then at the non-titled end of the table. Clara was placed between two callow youths and Kitty between too elderly fat men.

Kitty was proud she had spent less than a minute trying to see around a giant Epergne, the side of which was displayed to Kitty, involved a snarling tiger in the act of springing on his prey. It was impossible to see anything around something like that.

It certainly could have made dinner uncomfortable, if Kitty had given into her feelings. She had certainly seen other women do so, publicly calling to account gentlemen who had suddenly cooled in their attention. There was already enough gossip swirling around London about her, Kitty did not need to add to it by a breach of propriety.

So Kitty reasoned with herself that any feelings of anger were unjustified and that no explanation was owed to her. She did not quite convince herself, but she could objectively realise that he had done nothing wrong.

This objectivity was sorely tested by the gossip swirling about when the ladies withdrew after dinner. It had taken a great deal of will power not to attempt to make eye contact with anyone, as she left the dining room and followed the other ladies upstairs.

Kitty did not listen to the gossip about an *irreconcilable difference* between Mr Darcy and Ash. Well, perhaps she listened a little; Kitty had wondered whether that would make public gossip. It was interesting to note that Mr Darcy’s servants were not as close-mouthed as their employer might have hoped. From the ladies’ talk they were much annoyed to have to find out about it from the servants’ grape-vine instead of from their husbands, who apparently did not deign to answer their wives’ questions. As Kitty knew slightly more about the incident than they did it was amusing to listen to their conjecture, but Kitty wished to know where the husbands came into the story.

But it was not only the argument that was food for thought; the gossip appeared to be based on the fact that the ladies were certain, Lady Mitchell especially, that Ash had left town to meet with his
betrothed, a young lady chosen for him by his family. Whispers were that the young lady was the cause of his argument with Mr Darcy, as Mr Darcy was violently in love with the young lady, and that the argument had started at Mr Darcy’s club, Whites, with his expressing such violent emotions.

Kitty could not give any credence to the part about Ash’s family choosing a young lady; she knew enough of him to know he knew his own mind, but the gossip about the existence of a young lady sounded true enough. Well, not the part about Mr Darcy displaying affections for her, because even Mr Darcy could not propose to one young lady and not a fortnight later brawl with his cousin over another young lady. Unless the young lady was Lizzy, but that was stupid because Ash had met her once. Kitty understood where the husbands came in when the women talked a great deal of club sources; those that would talk of course. Kitty surmised that they must be the most hen-pecked and submissive of husbands and sons.

The talk about club sources made Kitty wish most fervently that Giles had not left for Dorset. She knew she could have wrung from him more information about Whites which she knew was a motivation for Ash’s bizarre behaviour. Though if most other men were not speaking to their wives about whatever had occurred at Whites, then perhaps she would not have wrung anything from Giles.

But why would Giles involve himself if Ash’s affairs involved another young lady? And why did she not have a name? Why were those at the scene apparently not talking? Surely they would have more exact information, like a name, that would dispel such gossip that had to be untrue?

Kitty played with the fringes on her chair. No, she must stop this; she could not, without direct application, discover the truth, and to sit and ponder on such a subject would only cause pain.

The entry of the gentlemen caused more confusion, because Lord Ffourkes and Sir Louis entered the room first and flattered her by seating themselves beside her.

Kitty reminded herself that she should be flattered. It was a sign of attention; unmistakeable attention, and a sign that both men had decided the rumours surrounding her were untrue. Kitty had noted that any cooling on the part of her gentlemen friends had ceased over the last few days and they were just as friendly as ever before. Still they, none of them, were serious pretenders to her hand.

Kitty listened to their gossip and their rattling commentary on dinner and its presentation.

“I can hardly believe, Miss Bennet, that you approve of such a style?” said Lord Ffourkes.

“Such a style?”

“Yes, the gothic style – all very well in a book, or left to those with some taste for parody.”

Kitty smiled and asked Sir Louis his opinion.

“Ah, Miss Bennet, I would wait til I see the ballroom before I make any judgement on whether my sensibilities are offended.”

“Then, Peppertree, I foresee your sensibilities will be much offended.” Kitty turned at the baritone voice and looked at its owner who had come to stand behind the sofa.

“Do you, Ashbourne?” Sir Louis looked rather ill.

“I do. I was seated next to Lady Mitchell’s cousin who took in delight in describing the visual joy we will be astonished with. Miss Bennet.” Ash bowed in Kitty’s direction.
Kitty was torn between laughing at the horror on both Lord Ffourkes’ and Sir Louis’ faces and focusing her attention on the gentlemen behind her.

Ash walked to stand in front of them, thus saving Kitty from any permanent neck strain. “I hope I am not too late to claim a dance, Miss Bennet?”

Kitty suppressed a tiny urge to claim her dance card was completely full. “No, I am quite abandoned; no one has asked me for a single dance!”

“Then I can ask for the first?”

“You can ask, but whether I will grant you a dance is not certain, “said Kitty archly. She did not mean to be flirtatious but she could hardly help it.

Ash merely smiled.

“What has Ashbourne done to deserve such treatment, Miss Bennet?” asked Lord Ffourkes.

Kitty’s eyes widened; how to answer that!?

“I am afraid, Ffourkes, that I am proof that you should never suddenly leave a lady with an uneven table. Has Mrs Sutton forgiven me, even if you have not?”

“My aunt has forgiven you and so have I. I was only teasing, my lord. After all, we did not need you at the dinner; my father came to town unexpectedly.”

“May I then have the first dance?”

“Yes, you may.”

The gentlemen on either side of her took this as their cue to ask for their dance, since Miss Bennet appeared in a generous mood.

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“Was your time in Hertfordshire productive?” Kitty asked the question as they passed each other in the dance.

“Yes.” Ash paused. “At least I hope that it is; I am afraid I may not see the fruits of my labour for a little while.”

“Labour?” Kitty smiled. She had no doubts that Ash was addicted to physical activities, but she the word labour brought to mind the very proper Lord Ashbourne with a hoe or a rake in hand.

Ash sensed the reason for her amusement. “I would have you know, Miss Bennet, that I am quite at home in the fields.”

“Without your horse?”

“Even without my horse. I would have you know I once set a record for ploughing!” The dance separated them, “But I was ten, and it was a competition with my brother.” The dance separated them again, and when they passed Ash whispered to her, “I only won because Richard cheated and was caught, and we quite destroyed the field according to my fathers’ steward.”

Kitty laughed, and it was only when they were half way down the dance that Kitty realised he had
managed to evade any further questioning of what he was doing in Hertfordshire and by the end of the dance when she had a chance to resume the conversation he had made her completely forget the subject. She only remembered it on the way home. The ball had been so crowded that Kitty had not even seen her sisters or her father, indeed she had forgotten they were even supposed to attend the ball.

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Kitty lay on her bed the next morning idly flipping through magazines and dressmakers samples. But her attention was not on the newest fashions or fabrics; she could not stop thinking about the confusing tangle London had caused her family.

Jane, it was true, was closer to becoming Mrs Bingley than she would be at Longbourn, but six weeks and still no proposal? Everyone had assumed, especially Sir William, that a proposal was imminent at the Netherfield Ball and Bingley had only known Jane a month then! He now knew her twice as long! Had something occurred to make him think Jane was not the right woman to be his wife?

Kitty picked at the embroidery on one of her pillows, glancing at the door when she heard a rap from downstairs. As no one came to fetch her, Kitty decided it had either been someone only leaving a card, or someone for her Aunt.

She resumed her thoughts, Lizzy. Kitty would never have believed Mr Darcy to be in love with Lizzy! Certainly, not enough to ask her to marry him! Kitty felt for Lizzy; it would be difficult to refuse a proposal from such a man. Before visiting her Aunt, and London, Kitty would have wondered at Lizzy being able to refuse such a rich man, but having seen the fruits of unhappy marriages based on nothing more the transaction of a fortune, Kitty would not find it difficult. If she had opened her eyes more she would have realised the difficulties of marriages based on superficiality were shown much closer to home. There was no fortune, in her parents’ case, but the ideal of that marriage had been beauty which had faded too fast.

Kitty wondered if Mr Darcy was a good man, Georgiana thought so, but she was biased. He was protective of his sister, but Kitty felt he was so protective he failed to see the trees for the forest. He missed what his sister really needed.

It was still shocking that he should be in love with Lizzy. Kitty would have thought that her lively sister would be the last woman that such a grave and serious man would wish to have as his wife. Perhaps he was not so grave and craved some lightness in his life.

Ash had told her of Mr Darcy’s mother’s constant illnesses and fragility and of his father’s long protracted death. He had not been ill with anything a doctor could diagnose or cure, but Ash told her that his death had begun with the death of his wife. It had not been romantic like in novels where couples who pledged their eternal love for each other died together. Kitty could feel pity and sympathy for a young man whose mother had passed away while he was at Cambridge, and who had been left to raise a sister twelve years his junior when he should still be amusing himself.

He should however have set his sights on someone else but her sister, if Mr Darcy wanted a biddable wife and a comfortable life! Kitty was almost tempted to think of Miss Bingley, she would be biddable if she had access to all she desired, but Kitty would hardly call a life with her comfortable. Her sharp tongue would cause all sorts of upsets. Perhaps Lizzy was the wife for him then! But Kitty was not sure what Lizzy needed in a man though. She had never discussed it with her sister and was not about to start now!
That left her. Kitty pushed her pillow away from her before she undid all the effort put into creating the design on the case. Kissing men she did not love, not kissing men she did love. It was very trying.

Kitty had not indulged in her own fantasies. Lydia and Maria Lucas had written to her of the latest fashion in Meryton which was to giggle over all the incidents that occurred between themselves and men. Both had pressed her to write to them of hers, so they could share them with the group. Kitty had no intention of doing that! Besides compared to the Goulding sisters who if what they had revealed was true, and they had been caught would have been forced to marry at least four times over, Kitty had little to recount.

What had she to tell? She could of course talk much of the men she had danced with, who had brought her drinks and talked gaily with her, that would satisfy the young ladies, but it would not satisfy her. She had tried ever since that day when she had realised so suddenly her own heart and mind, not to dwell on something she thought she could never have, but it was becoming harder and harder and what should certainly be distracting her was not doing so any more.

…Sitting on a floor looking at an atlas, discussing chimney sweeps, riding, playing cards for questions, playing the faithful attendant, flowers with playful notes, snuff at the opera, dancing, parodying a proposal, examining a signet ring, talking of fire, that moment, realisation, discussion of tactics, causing injury, eating off the knife….

A list like that would make any woman smile if she had not equal cause to think of less hopeful things; his family, his position, mystery women, everything implied nothing explicit.

Kitty was ashamed to find that she was on the verge of tears.

“Kitty?”

Kitty had not heard her aunt enter. “Yes, aunt?”

“Are you quite well?”

Kitty dried her eyes with the corner of the pillow case, glad to see that in the reflection of her dressing table mirror, it appeared she had not managed to turn red. “Of course, a little tired perhaps.”

“You have a visitor.” Clara closed the door behind her.

Kitty stretched as she forced herself off the bed; no doubt it was Georgiana, which explained her aunt’s reluctance to accompany her to the drawing room. Clara claimed giggly girls aggravated her rheumatism. They had much to talk about with regards to their trip to Hertfordshire the next morning. Kitty wished Clara had not left so fast, otherwise she would have asked her aunt to fetch Georgiana to her room.

Kitty picked up some of the samples and drawings that she had decided in her half-hearted perusal would suit Georgiana better than her.

But it was not Georgiana who awaited her in the drawing room.

***&amp;***

1 This *lovely* Epergne comes from Georgette Heyer’s ‘A Quiet Gentlemen’ my favourite GH novel.
Chapter 37

***&&***

Real Scotch Marmalade, an excellent substitute for butter at Breakfast. It is particularly recommended to Mothers for the use of the Nursery, being easy of digestion, and very nutritious. Persons of weak constitution and such as lead sedentary lives would find great benefit from the use of this marmalade, instead of that animal oil, termed butter, which never fails to create bile on the stomach, the forerunner of flatulency and its attendant evils…

***&&***

Ash felt ill; he had had butter for breakfast, now he wished he had not, though marmalade, no matter how well made for journeys, was not attractive either. This was hardly the start he wished to make!

Hearing footsteps on the stairs, Ash hurriedly shoved the paper that Clara had thoughtfully left him under a nearby cushion.

Walking to stand near the windows, Ash tried to straighten his cravat which had unaccountably become far too tight. Striding to the fireplace, where a mirror hung, Ash peered at his cravat. It looked fine, but it certainly did not feel fine, and this was hardly the moment to be in disarray.

Turning away from the mirror to look nonchalant, leaning against one of the chairs, Ash caught sight of an errant curl; turning back to the mirror he hurriedly tried to poke it back into place.

“Ash?”


She looked at him as if he had two heads. He felt as if he had two heads.

***&&***

Kitty put the samples down on a nearby table before greeting her guest more fully. Kitty was surprised not to see Clara, since she had constantly emphasised the utter scandal of being alone with a man. She decided not to wonder at why Clara had left them alone. After all, there was more than one reason for that to occur; it was entirely possible that it was for one of those other reasons.

“Are you satisfied with your appearance?” she teased, after inviting him to take a seat. Kitty was amused to see when she entered that his impassive façade had faltered. Though, she noted, he regained it remarkably.

“Of course, do you find some fault?”

Of course she did not, but she could not say that. On closer inspection she did notice a slight bruising on his jaw, something the candlelight had disguised the night before.

“Yes, I see that Georgiana was not lying.”

Ash was not thrown by her response; instead he rubbed his jaw ruefully. “I suppose it was too much to hope that the story had not got about - at least I would have hoped that the true story would not be generally known.”

“I was not aware I did have the true story.”
Ash smiled. “I fear I cannot say anything for fear of incriminating myself.”

“Mr Darcy told Georgiana that your disagreement was over Wickham.”

“Ah, I see my cousin has realised the importance of the truth.”

“But not the whole truth, Georgiana is hardly a child to be shielded from the truth, nor is she easily fooled, at least not now.”

“Perhaps my cousin is protecting someone else’s secret by concealing the true reasons for the incident?”

“Brawl, you mean, and you do realise that it would have to be your secret he was protecting.”

“I avoided your questions about Hertfordshire last night.”

Kitty frowned at his avoidance of her implication, by bringing up his prior avoidance. “I did notice, but it is of no consequence.”

To Kitty’s satisfaction there was a momentary look of surprise that flitted across Ash’s face.

“Of no consequence?”

“No, because thinking about it more, it is clear what your purpose was.”

“I should have known.”

“Ah, so you do accept that you are not as successful with being inscrutable as you think you are?”

“I have never hoped to be entirely inscrutable.”

Kitty, a little nervous, stood and to disguise her feelings focused on rearranging the household accounts that Clara had left on one of the small tables. Considering what happened last time Clara left such accounts lying about, Kitty thought it was very careless of her aunt.

But it did give Kitty something productive to do as she tried to ascertain exactly what was happening. The options were rapidly narrowing.

“Miss Bennet?”

Kitty turned. “You went to see Wickham? I had thought perhaps you were going to take my advice and sabre him. But as I see you are almost entirely uninjured and certainly not in gaol so you must have either warned him that you knew about his behaviour or warned Colonel Forster.”

Ash smiled.

“I have not finished yet,” Kitty reproved, “You must certainly have decided it was your duty to do so, whatever you did because it must have given you some pleasure to prevent your cousin from doing so himself and it gave yourself a timely excuse to leave town.”

Ash laughed. “You do know me too well. There is little that can be done about Wickham without harming Georgiana. He would be disbelieved if he told his story, but the merest whisper of scandal … I was more angry with my cousin for allowing Georgiana to think ill of herself. He kept her so very sheltered, and it is her nature to be retiring, so much so that she could not think that anyone so beloved by her father could wish to lead her astray.”
“At least her own feelings prevented her.” Kitty stroked the pages of one of the books idly. She wondered whether, if she had been presented with such an opportunity to run away with a handsome man at Georgiana’s age, or indeed not six months ago, she would have prevented herself.

“If you could not entirely prevent Wickham, what did you do?”

“Spoke to Colonel Forster in such terms that Wickham will not be able to put a foot wrong, and certainly the Colonel will warn any family with eligible daughters that Wickham appears to have designs upon.”

“Jane would say that perhaps he wishes to reform, and we should not make him desperate.”

“If he wishes to reform then he shall not have anything to worry about from a little scrutiny.”

“You do realise your argument with Mr Darcy has been given an entirely different motive…” Kitty turned her head in time to see a slight inflexibility come into Ash’s face.

“People will gossip.”

“But people are not gossiping, apart from some murmurings, and the gossip of Mr Darcy’s servants; those who were privy to any more public disagreement have been silent. The women, from these slender pickings have decided that Mr Darcy and yourself are in love with the same woman.”

“Interesting.”

“You have never found yourself in such a situation? I always do.”

“Falling in love with the same woman as my cousin?”

Kitty laughed. “Liking the same gentlemen as my sisters.”

“Then you must like Mr Bingley? Or my cousin?”

Kitty giggled. “Elizabeth, do you mean?”

Ash stood and joined her at the table, leaning against it so he could partially face her. He partially supported himself on his hands rather than subject the table to the entirety of his weight and Kitty could not help but notice how close his hands were to her own. She removed the temptation by picking up one of the ledgers flicking through it before placing it down again, this time far away from any warm hands.

“My cousin has very different ideas about what it means to demonstrate affection.”

Did he mean different from himself? Or different from most men? Kitty bowed her head briefly, before looking back up to respond to Ash. “I do not know many of the particulars; I figured it out and Jane confirmed it.”

“Richard told me. I am not sure I wish to know the particulars.”

“Lizzy does not love him, she refused him.”

“She will be in love with him. My cousin is quite tediously full of surprising virtues, just designed to surprise and entrap women.”

“Jealous?”
“Of virtues? I do not think I have quite so many surprising ones.”

“You do have many virtues that are just as attractive as any surprising ones” Kitty blushed as she realised what she had said. “But we were speaking of Wickham.”

“Were we? Such a tedious subject.”

“But not when you hear what I am about to tell you.”

“I am all ears.” Ash crossed his arms.

“We are to go to Hertfordshire tomorrow, to spend the weekend at least…it is my birthday on Monday, but I will be coming back to London with my aunt…” Kitty tried to keep the reassuring tone out of her voice, as she was not sure who she was reassuring.

“By we I assume Georgiana is involved?”

“Yes, so Wickham, sadly, becomes once more important. She thinks it will be fine; it is everyone else that is worried!” Kitty paused and bit her lip.

“Do you want to ask if I will make one of the party?”

“To protect Georgiana? I am sure that she will be well protected; what with your brother and Mr Darcy and I’m sure Lizzy and Jane also know the truth.” Kitty paused again and felt a little bolder. “I would like it if you came for other reasons.”

“Any in particular?”

“Well Mr Bingley is coming and my mother associates him with Jane, she has despaired of Mr Darcy so he is out of it that leaves your brother. The Colonel will be of course Lizzy’s new beau, a vast improvement on Mr Collins, though because he is a younger son perhaps not for my mother! If you were to come, then she would have to assume that one of the young men is my conquest!” Kitty felt slightly out of breath but rattled on. “My mother will ignore Georgiana and Miss Bingley as reasons for a single gentleman’s journey, so she is bound to think I have caught somebody!”

“Does it matter whom?”

“Not where my mother is concerned,” replied Kitty blithely.

“I meant, would it matter to you?”

“Of course it does! Imagine if she thought about Mr Darcy in that manner.”

Ash uncrossed his arms and put one palm back down on the table surface; Kitty was once again aware of its closeness to her but tried to ignore it.

“If it does not matter, then perhaps Lord Ffourkes would like a sojourn into the country?”

Kitty was powerless to conceal hurt and anger from her glance in his direction.

“Kitty.”

Kitty turned surprised. Ash brought up his free hand and cupped her face with it.

“I will come to Hertfordshire under one condition.”
“Condition, sir?” Kitty tried to sound her archest, but since she was having some difficulty breathing she doubted it sounded at all pert.

“Surely I have not been as inscrutable as that?”

“Perhaps not, but assumptions ….” Kitty could not quite finish her sentence as Ash moved his hand to cover hers on the table, his fingers slightly curling over her hand filling the space between it and the table.

“I will come to Hertfordshire, if I am not going as a single man.”

“I’m sure Miss Bingley would oblige. I am sure she even has a special licence.” Where Kitty found the ability to put words together she was never quite sure.

Ash removed his hand from the table and brought it to join his other one. “Is that a no?” he said looking down at Kitty.

“No.”

“Is that a yes?”

“That depends on the question.”

“Will you consent to be my wife?”

“Now that is a yes,” Kitty replied.

Smiling, Ash brought his face to Kitty’s and kissed her.

Kitty had no problems kissing back, and her feelings were nothing like those when she kissed Giles. Giles!

Kitty reeled back. “I can’t marry you! I love you!”

Ash looked confused. “Surely that is a not a very good reason to not marry somebody.”

“But Giles!”

“Giles?”

“You can’t marry me! I kissed Giles! Well he kissed me but I did not reject him!”

“Recently?”

“Just after Carlon, is that recently?”

“I would say not.”

“Oh.” Kitty paused. “What do you mean “recently”?"

“Well if it was not recently, I would say you were a decisive woman able to tell who you – er – liked – loved and thus why should it matter?”

Kitty was not convinced; there was a slight furtiveness in Ash’s eyes. “You knew.”

“Perhaps…I may have…”
“May have what? Had a conversation with Giles about the women he kisses?”

“No gentlemen speaks of such things, unless the lady has given him permission.”

“Is Giles not a gentleman, then?” Kitty had turned and faced Ash and stood almost glaring into his cravat. She hoped she would not have to stamp on his foot.

Ash looked slightly sheepish, he held up one hand – “I may have coerced him, but just a little.”

“Into telling you?”

“Well, confirming.”

Kitty felt slightly confused.

“It was rather obvious that he liked you very much, I was not quite so sure about how much you liked him.”

“Did he tell you?” Kitty looked up questioningly.

“He is a gentleman.”

“Is that all of an explanation I am to get? Nothing about what you said to each other.”

“I could not. It is not just my story to tell.”

“You are a gentlemen,” stated Kitty. “I hurt him badly. I did not even realise until it was too late.”

“Because you were charmingly – “

Kitty interrupted. “Innocent, naïve, stupid?”

“- charmingly deceived in your own self worth,” finished Ash decisively.

“So you do not mind?”

“Do you mind that I have kissed other women?”

Kitty smiled. “Recently?”

“Definitely not recently,” replied Ash.

“Then why should I mind?” Kitty reached up on tiptoe and placed her hands on his shoulders. “But truly you do not mind what is being said about my aunt? Her finances and how we girls are all on the hunt for fortunes? Or my behaviour of setting my cap at you and others?”

“The others I could have done without,” teased Ash. “I know the truth, everybody who matters knows the truth, and by wiping away one rumour with the display of truth, it tends to taint any other gossip. So do not worry. I have a far worse reputation than yours.”

“With?”

“Breaking hearts, apparently. I am not quite sure why this is so, as I have never, apart from my salad days, given rise to any such thoughts in anyone…”

“Not that you are aware of. You could be cross-eyed, with a limp, squinty eyes and a bad skin condition and your title would almost certainly label you a breaker of hearts, the causer of
declines.”

“You will save me from this awful affliction?”

Kitty answered by kissing him.

It was some time before Kitty was capable of rational thoughts, let alone rational speech. Ash ended the kiss, but left his hand under her chin, which in Kitty, stirred some memories.

Kitty reached up to catch his hand in hers. “Did you mean to kiss me at Carlon?” she said only slightly blushing.

Ash moved away from the table towards the sofa, their linked hands impelling Kitty to follow. Ash sat down and looked up at her. “I did not plan to.”

Kitty gave her best mock pout before laughing, Ash’s response was to pull her to him, leaving Kitty no option but to sit on his lap. She was surprised at how comfortable she felt; “It would have saved a lot of trouble.”

“Where is the fun in that?”

Kitty frowned. “Fun?”

“I was afraid.” Ash was as much surprised by his directness as Kitty was.

“Of me?” Kitty’s eyes widened in mirth.

“You are very scary,” responded Ash with aplomb.

Kitty laughed. “No, what were you afraid of?”

“That it would not be true, that by declaring myself, far too openly it would not be your true choice.”

“What would I be swayed by?”

“It is possible to feel more for someone because you have experienced something with them, than you truly feel.”

Kitty’s fingers were still entwined with Ash’s as she brought his to her lips. “Silly. Or course experiences play a part, you cannot love somebody you do not know.”

“It is possible. Perhaps not wise, but it is possible.”

“You did not love me the moment you saw me.”

“No, it was the chimney sweep that was the cause.”

Kitty giggled, “And I thought more of your horse than you the first time I saw you.”

“Was a horse the way to your heart then?”

“Cleopatra? But you –” Kitty paused and laughed. “Subtle. Too subtle. You wonder why I was not obvious, how could I be so? I swore after Mr Marshall, you see, not to take any signs for granted.”

Ash looked slightly bewildered. “Mr Marshall?”
“I told you I admired the same men as my sisters. It is not a pleasant experience.”

“Richard and I both liked Annabelle’s governess…she thought we were both grubby schools boys and preferred the summer master Mother had employed to teach Richard how to write properly….he has the most appalling handwriting,” Ash mused.

Kitty gave a little start, “Does that mean the gossip means me? I am the young lady that both you and Mr Darcy love? I am sure Mr Darcy loves such talk, considering what he thinks of me!”

“What he thinks of you?” Ash looked concerned.

“He does not think very highly of me and has told Georgiana so, not recently, but certainly in letters. Do you think he has changed his mind?” Ash was silent. “Ash?”

“I am afraid my cousin may not have changed his mind. Or at least not seen the wisdom of keeping his mouth closed.”

“You keep saying ‘my cousin’, why do you not call him by his name?”

“Because if I keep reminding myself of my relation to him, I might not be so angry with him.”

Kitty was not stupid. “He said something to you about me.”

Ash reached up, wrapping one of Kitty’s curls about his finger. “Something like that.” He looked intently at her. “Do you want to know what he said?”

“Did he mean what he said? Did he truly mean what he said?”

There was a pause. “Honestly, I do not think he did. A man crossed in love is liable to be quite stupid.”

“Then I do not wish to know what he said.” Kitty smiled. “Are you going to speak to my father?” Kitty did not wish to dwell on the odious Mr Darcy any longer than she had to; she was, after all, the happiest woman in the world.

Kitty giggled as Ash declared he would of course leave this very instant if he wasn’t being restrained by - he had stopped there and Kitty had challenged him to finish his sentence. He finished it without any words, which was far more agreeable to both parties.

***&&***

1 The Times, Thursday 23rd of April 1812. This is helping keep up with where I’m supposed to be day wise in my story, but I could not help it with the marmalade, they were good with the health sell even back in 1812!

Back to story

***&&***
Chapter 38

***&&***

…To more personal business, Mrs Bennet has exhausted the funds left to her on your departure to London. She and my wife, claim that it was unavoidable because of the plans they have in place for your return. She would have written to you herself of her displeasure at not being about to provide properly for Mr Bingley’s return, but she does not have the time, what with organising a dinner and dance. I would suggest some additional funds may be needed from town, along with some fortifications, I find myself low on port…

***&&***

Mr Bennet sighed at Mr Phillips’ letter which had been brought by an express rider who had been bringing business letters to town.

It was not the financial and legal disclosures that made Mr Bennet’s blood run cold; it was that his wife was apparently preparing celebrations on a massive scale. He doubted they were for Kitty’s birthday, the only legitimate cause for celebration. Mr Bennet felt a stab of sadness when he realised that Mrs Bennet would consider Mr Bingley’s return to the neighbourhood as far more important than a celebration for Kitty.

Mrs Bennet had insisted he visit Mr Bingley (well, he had only gone on Clara’s behest but…) and that had come to naught! They were still not engaged – Mr Bingley had not asked permission and Jane would not secretly be engaged! As a result Mr Bennet could only assume his wife’s plans were designed to display Jane, as well as possible, to secure a proposal.

And….if he understood Mr Phillips’ letter which continued on to detail the plans that were being hatched, Mrs Bennet had some hopes of Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lizzy. Of course Mrs Bennet assumed Longbourn would be just as much as hostess to the London Party as Netherfield. He wondered what Miss Bingley and Mr Darcy would say to that!

There was a knock on the door. Mr Bennet frowned. There were very few people in this household who would bother to knock.

“Come in.” Mr Bennet blinked when he did not recognise the gentlemen. “Er…Good morning?”

Mr Bennet stood as the stranger greeted him politely by name and handed over his card. He glanced at the owner, a tall dark-haired gentleman and then glanced at the card.

“To what do I have the pleasure…er…Lord Ashbourne?” Mr Bennet placed the name as Mr Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam’s brother and Lord Matlock’s son. There had been occasional mentions of him in Kitty’s and Jane’s letters. Kitty’s letters had been rather vague, but Jane’s had been more meticulous with chronicling events and participants. Mrs Bennet had dismissed him as irrelevant and Mrs Bennet had an eye for these sorts of things. Of course he was spoken of slightly at Clara’s dinner as well…but that was all Mr Bennet knew of him! Well, apart from what he could gather from sight, which was the impression of a fashionable London gentleman who appeared, like his father and cousin, to be slightly forbidding …or perhaps that was the result of his being stared at.

Lord Ashbourne bowed. “Mr Bennet – “before he could continue Mr Bennet remembered his manners and invited him to sit.
Strangely enough seated behind the desk, Mr Bennet felt oddly as if he was in the situation of being applied to, such as if one went to a bank or to their solicitors.

“I will come straight to the point, sir.”

“Good. Good.” Mr Bennet had no idea why the heir to the Earldom of Matlock would have any interest in private conversation with himself but tried to look interested.

“I wish to have your permission to marry your daughter.”

If Mr Bennet had been standing he would have quite possibly fallen over. “My daughter?” He hoped this would lead to a clarification, but he didn’t like to desperately say – I have five. and theoretically and plausibly since he had just been in Hertfordshire, he could mean any of them!

“Catherine…” Lord Ashbourne said patiently.

“Kitty! Why?” Mr Bennet noticed the rather unpleasant look that crossed his visitor’s face. “I mean, Why! My Goodness!... and other such exclamations…” Mr Bennet was not quite sure what he had just said, but the look on the viscount’s face was priceless.

“Yes, Kitty.” Lord Ashbourne cleared his throat, “And to answer your question, because I love her, which I think would be the kind of reassurance a father would need?”

“Yes.”

“Right and she said yes…”

“Yes.” The Viscount looked slightly taken back, “Do you think I would ask your permission if she had not?”

Mr Bennet toyed with the idea of trying to explain Mr Collins and his wife…and realised he probably did not have all day, so he just shrugged. “Well of course if she has consented, then who am I to stand in your way?” Mr Bennet paused. “Do excuse me a moment.”

Clara peered out of the dining room; she could see Kitty not so very successfully loitering just before the bottom of the stairs, leaning over occasionally to look at the closed morning room door.

Clara jumped back when she saw Thomas almost run out of the room, and head towards the dining room.

“Clara!”

“Yes, Thomas?”

“I have a Lord Ashbourne in the morning room asking to marry Kitty….”

“And you have left him there?”

“Well I gave my permission…I mean how could one not…quite an imposing fellow like his
cousin…but then I remembered that you instructed me to ask you?”

Clara stared; she had not thought Thomas would take her so literally. “Ask me what?”

“You didn’t specify; you just said to ask you if any strange young men asked to marry my daughters.”

There was a cough behind them.

Clara rolled her eyes; it was Ash looking rather amused. “I had not thought I was strange.”

Thomas made a strangled noise.

“Oh for heavens sake! Did I wander into a farce?” Clara threw up her hands. “Ash may not be a perfect gentleman. “ Clara gave him a hard glare, to which Ash responded with a hand to his heart and a wounded look. “But there is nothing too fundamentally wrong with him.”

Thomas seemed to look relieved but then a startled look crossed his face. Clara tried to suppress a giggle, she had not seen Thomas so startled since Elizabeth and she had told their governess that he was in love with her, and she had ‘had a word’ with him.

Clara did not have any more time to reflect on their childhood pranks, when Thomas pulled her aside and whispered. “I assume he knows that my estate is entailed and so forth?”

Clara snorted, “I am sure he is well aware of your inability to provide for your daughters.”

Thomas looked offended. “Well is he aware of my extravagant wife? Not to mention Lydia and to some extent Kitty.”

“I am not extravagant!” exclaimed an indignant voice. Clearly Kitty had tired of loitering on the stairs.


“Are you? In that case I would like…” Kitty got no further in her planned list of extravagances because Clara thought it would be prudent to congratulate the couple in case such overt teasing turned out to be the death knell of her brother.

Thomas took the opportunity to hug his penultimate daughter. Clara could not tell what he whispered in her ear but her niece and brother excused themselves from the room.

“Happy?” asked Clara.

“Supremely.”

“May I ask then why you felt compelled to play the ‘increase love by suspense’ card? My dinner party? Hertfordshire? Last Night?”

Ash smiled. “Last Night? I am surprised your Butler did not tell you that I did call here first.”

“Ah. Acceptable.”

“You question my motives now? You had ample opportunity when I arrived.”

Clara smiled. “I question your method; I never questioned your intentions or your motives. They were rather clear.”
Ash frowned. “I had hoped to be subtle.”

“I am afraid Men do not do subtlety.”

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“Kitty, my child, are you happy?”

“Of course, Papa.”

Mr Bennet looked keenly at his daughter. “It is just … I am surprised.” Kitty did not know whether to be offended at that remark, but her father realised his error and clarified. “I meant when you and Lydia liked a young officer we would hear about it constantly … for days … weeks even, and now you are accepting a young man you barely mention in your letters?”

Kitty looked down at the floor before answering her father. “Perhaps my lack of openness proves my feelings?” To Kitty it did, she wished to protect herself and more importantly to protect him.

“Perhaps it does but you have placed me in a difficult situation!”

“I have?”

“Your mother!”

Kitty tried to stifle a groan. She had wished to avoid her mother’s matchmaking, but would it be worse now? The shock and surprise might silence her mother but … on the other hand, it might not.

“So, of course, you must tell her and explain why it is such a surprise.”

“But Papa!”

“No buts, Kitty.”

“But” continued Kitty stubbornly, “whoever tells her will be in her good books for months. I shall be anyway because she has always wanted a daughter married.”

Mr Bennet frowned at the excellent point, his wife would be pleased with him and peace may ensue. No! What was he thinking: his daughter was engaged to the heir to an earldom, there would be no peace!

“Either way Papa, we need not think of it til tomorrow; we shall wait until we arrive.”

“Shall you tell your sisters today?”

Kitty paused. “I shall tell everyone together! Easy! Lizzy and Jane are farewelling their friends today and I do not think a note is very sisterly.”

“I could tell them.” Mr Bennet sounded hopeful.

“Papa, you do not wish to stay here and dine with us? I am sure Ash will stay and you would wish to speak to him more.”

Mr Bennet looked trapped. He could hardly refuse. Part of him wished to fly to his favourite daughters’ side and have them explain things to him, but part of him did genuinely wish to stay and ensure his daughter would be happy in her choice of husband.

He stayed and by the end of the evening was certain he had made the right decision. He found his
new son-in-law just as easy to converse with as his father. Clara invited the Earl and his family to take pot-luck with them. Mr Bennet was surprised by their acceptance under such short notice; he suspected that the declaration was not a surprise to them.

Mr Bennet felt a pang when he realised how Kitty appreciated and was appreciated by the Matlock family. To prefer to share her happiness first with them then her own family!

But he had no one to blame but himself and nothing to do but promise to himself to be a better father.

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Kitty stared intently out of the carriage. Ash was riding near the carriage looking stolidly ahead, not far behind him was his cousin doing the same. Men!

Kitty turned back to the occupants of her carriage, she had been disappointed when Annabelle’s grandmother had demanded her and Miles’ presence in town for the weekend, but she could hardly be disappointed that she would get the chance, at least, to show Georgiana her home.

Georgiana was sitting next to her asking constant questions about the countryside as they drew closer to Mertyon. Kitty had never seen anyone so excited about the prospect of seeing Mertyon!

Jane and Lizzy were unusually silent. More often than not Lizzy was staring out the window at a certain gentleman on horseback which made Kitty smile, and then she received a frown from Jane who was watching her watch Lizzy.

How could Kitty help it if her sister was so obvious about her clearly conflicted emotions regarding that gentleman?

Indeed there were many secretive glances in the carriage, with Georgiana giving Kitty knowing smiles, as well as directing some speculative ones at Lizzy.

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“'I am surprised Fitzwilliam would not come with us tonight!’” exclaimed Georgiana as she removed her coat and hat in Kitty’s room.

Kitty forbore from commenting that perhaps Mr Darcy did not wish to meet either the young lady he recently insulted or his cousin. Georgiana would not take her brother’s behaviour well, and Kitty had no intention of removing Georgiana’s rose coloured view of her brother. There was one way, certain to work, of distracting Georgiana.

“I received a proposal this afternoon.”

Georgiana’s eyes widened then she screwed them shut. “You are not going to tell me this and then in a moment tell me how poor Lord Ffourkes is disappointed are you?”

“No!” exclaimed Kitty, laughing.

Georgiana opened her eyes and shrieked throwing herself at Kitty. “We shall truly be sisters!”

“Georgie!”

Georgiana released her. “Obviously not real sisters, but cousins and that is close enough.”

Kitty breathed a sigh of relief, even though her fear had been ridiculous. “I do not wish to even
think of marrying your brother!”

“It does not seem as if any Bennet girl does!” Kitty paused waiting for Georgiana to continue. “My brother told me. I am sure he did not tell me the whole story, as I am now sure he did not do over the fight with Ash. I am now convinced that that did have something to do with you.” Kitty turned her head away to blush. “But it is not your secret to tell me is it? I am not even sure I wish to know anything about my brother if it is so very bad. “

Georgiana sat down in an unladylike fashion on the bed. “Why he had to be such so unromantic in his proposal, I despair of him. He told me that even if it had been the most romantic proposal in the world your sister should still have refused him due to a misunderstanding, as well as his boorish behaviour. What am I to do with him?” Kitty giggled at the put upon look on her friend’s face. “Oh! Here I am talking about my brother, when there are far more important things to talk about? Was it romantic…my proposal was not very romantic. It was at the time, but now it ….”

Kitty hugged her friend before Georgiana could continue her train of thought. “It was not very romantic. I interrogated him about Hertfordshire.”

Georgiana giggled. “I do not believe it; well I believe you interrogated him, I do not believe it was unromantic.”

“I spoke of Giles.”

Georgiana groaned and pouted. “It is a sad day when Annabelle is the only person of my acquaintance to receive a romantic proposal and even then you and Ash sullied it with your theatrics.”

“Well you may go downstairs and take it up with your cousin.”

“I do believe I shall!”

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Darcy saw his sister constantly leaning to look out both windows of the carriage and smiled at her impulsiveness. He was glad to see that her natural curiousness, though tempered by shyness, had not deserted her.

He had overslept that morning and had barely managed to have his horse brought around in time, and they were the last to be collected. He had not even had a moment to look at himself in the mirror.

The gentlemen, apart from Mr Bennet who was riding in one of the carriages with Mrs Hurst, Miss Bingley and Mrs Sutton, had all taken their positions on the horses.

Darcy felt slightly off kilter when Bingley dismounted to help Georgiana into the carriage, oversee the strapping of the bags and reproved him for making them late.

There was no chance to speak to either of his cousins, though Darcy wondered if it was a good sign that, as they set off, Ash indicated that Darcy’s cravat was a shambles.

Georgiana was his source of comfort at the moment. The day after Mrs Sutton’s dinner party he had poured out all his feelings to his young sister. He had edited his remarks at Whites, partly out of protectiveness of his sister’s innocence but mostly out of selfishness that he could not risk having someone else desert him.

But everything else he had laid bare. He had rendered Georgiana speechless. It had humbled
Darcy; he had never seen his sister look at him as if he was just a man. However, Darcy could only be happy in it, for it did no one any good to make an idol of anyone else.

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“Fitzwilliam!” Darcy looked up from his book as he heard his sister pelt up the stairs. She had not stopped to take off her pelisse or bonnet.

“You should have come tonight.”

“I do not think I would have been welcome.”

“Well if you are not whose fault is that?” retorted Georgiana. “But, listen! Ash and Kitty are engaged!”

Darcy closed his book. “I am very happy for them.”

“Though you must not tell anyone, for Kitty wishes to tell her mother before it becomes more generally known, but since Aunt and Uncle are not coming to Hertfordshire…”

“Georgiana!” exclaimed Lady Matlock huffing into the room. “Gracious, did you think we were to drive off the moment we stopped outside the house? The way you leapt out!”

“Aunt,” Darcy stood to hug his aunt. “I trust your evening was enjoyable.”

“I am to gain a daughter! And since I soon shall gain another son, I am waiting for my last son to give me a daughter! And then I shall wait for you to give me a new niece!”

Darcy rolled his eyes. “You cannot be happy with two children soon to be married?” Lady Matlock laughed. “It is a pity that you are not coming to Hertfordshire, for I see you would have more in common with Mrs Bennet than I supposed.”

Lady Matlock frowned. “You are determined to be displeased?”

Darcy shook his head. “No, you misunderstand me. I meant that what I thought was strange behaviour in Mrs Bennet was simply motherly behaviour. Of course I am pleased.”

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And Darcy meant it; he was pleased. If his cousin was happy that is what mattered. Neither was Mrs Bennet the harpy he had thought her, she expressed her feelings differently but her feelings did not make her a lesser person.

It was a thought he held onto very strongly when they drove up to Netherfield. The Bennets would then go on to Longbourn, but apparently Mrs Bennet could not wait she had come to meet the carriages.

Mrs Bennet looked the gentlemen all over speculatively, before spying her prey.

“Mr Bingley! How good of you to come!”
Chapter 39

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I am afraid my London acquaintance is scant with the details on the young gentleman accompanying your daughters. No doubt they prefer not to become gossips, which of course is a noble decision. I am unsure anything I may impart to you would not be already known. Colonel Fitzwilliam is the second son of the Earl of Matlock. The Earl holds extensive lands in Derbyshire, as well as lands in West Riding and Lancashire; there are many other smaller holdings in the South, acquired over the years. The Earl believes in diversification and owns business unattached to land in the North, and has an estate in India managed by a cousin. However the Matlock fortune is entailed, so no part of this can go to the Colonel, whose future support will depend on his brother, a legacy from an elderly cousin or his marriage. The elder brother, Lord Ashbourne, is sadly not of a sickly disposition, so Colonel Fitzwilliam’s prospects are poor, despite his many other attractive qualities. Neither is his family likely to support such a match, like the Darcys they are known for their pride.

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Mrs Bennet sighed. Lady Lucas’ note which had come that morning did not contain a scrap of information that Mrs Bennet could not have discovered herself. Not wishing to gossip indeed! It was more like Lady Lucas’ ‘London Acquaintance’ did not move in such circles and thus knew nothing. Mrs Bennet ignored the fact her own acquaintance was equally as ignorant.

Neither could Lady Lucas ferret any information out about Mr Bingley and his failure to propose! It was most vexing. Of course Lizzy would insist upon having the Colonel and living as poor as a church mouse with him. She could not ever be practical that girl. Never mind what his family wanted, if Lizzy wanted something she invariably got it.

Mrs Bennet sat in the parlour, one of the parlours, at Netherfield as boxes and trunks were brought in around her. Mr Bingley had very graciously invited her inside and had seen to her every comfort.

Clara on seeing her sister-in-law, declared, before even setting foot on the ground, her desire to remain at her own home, instead of joining the crowded carriage to Longbourn.

“Ma’am, are you quite comfortable?” asked Mr Bingley, solicitously bringing Mrs Bennet a cup of tea.

“Thank you sir, now this is my idea of gentlemanly behaviour. I wish I had brought my girls!”

“Mama!” exclaimed Lizzy. “It is almost a mad house already!”

Mrs Bennet’s eyes narrowed. She had greeted and welcomed all her girls equally, well in her eyes she had; in reality she had fawned all over Jane and complimented her good looks. But Lizzy was proving as objectionable as ever. Why must she spoil all her mother’s plans?

“I am sure Lydia or Mary would not have added much to the confusion,” soothed Jane.

“There, you see, Lizzy?” replied Mrs Bennet, before she eyed the new young lady.

Miss Darcy was slim, tall and young. She did not seem in any way to be a rival to Jane, though
given how she clung to her cousin the Colonel, Mrs Bennet wondered if Lizzy was not to have what she wanted after all.

“Miss Darcy, what do you think of my sister’s house? Very fine is it not?”

“Mama,” hissed Lizzy to her right.

“It is very lovely, exactly how it has been described to me,” answered the young lady in her soft voice and Mrs Bennet had to be satisfied.

“I am not so old and crotchety that I must have you fussing over me,” exclaimed Clara as she finally entered the room on the arm of the last stranger, whom Mrs Bennet did not know as he had not been on the proposed guest list.

“But, Ma’am, you insisted,” exclaimed the gentlemen.

“You have a lot to learn, Ash!” replied Clara in an exasperated voice. “If a women of my years asks for assistance you must humour her and make her believe she does not need it.”

Mrs Bennet’s ears pricked up. Ash? Lord Ashbourne. Well, here was a turn up! Ignoring Lady Lucas’ note that had warned of the Fitzwilliam pride, she wondered which daughter would please the viscount. Previously she had dismissed his lordship, he did not seem to feature prominently in any accounts from London and certainly appeared to hold himself aloof unlike Kitty’s in-depth commentaries on other gentleman like Lord Fforkes and Mr Gilmore. But if he was here in Meryton then surely one of her daughters, under their mother’s guidance, should take a chance.

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Kitty pulled off her bonnet and looked at her old room. Sharing with Lydia, again. But it was home. And she would miss it.

Miss it! Kitty sat down on her bed and let out a deep breath. She had no time to think since yesterday afternoon, little time alone….she was engaged and she was the happiest person in the world.

But she would have to leave Longbourn, and as much as she never thought she would miss it, looking at even the walls of her room, she realised that she would. Not having Lydia to giggle with, not having Lydia tell her she looked plain in everything, not having Lydia monopolise every man in a twelve mile radius’ attention, perhaps she would do well without her!

“Kitty, child, where have you gone?” shrieked her mother.

“Here, Mama!”

Mrs Bennet bustled into the small room, followed by Jane, Lizzy and Lydia. “Now what a to do!”

“Mama…” started Lizzy.

“Shush! I must think. Now obviously this new gentleman - A lord! Gracious! - will make my table all uneven!”

“Table?” asked Jane.

“Oh yes, Mama is having everyone to dinner tomorrow night and then there is the ball,” laughed Lydia.
“Ball?” exclaimed Lizzy.

“I organised one, a Meryton Assembly for Saturday Night; Sir William was most happy to oblige when I told him it was for Mr Bingley.”

“Tomorrow? A dinner and a Ball?” exclaimed Kitty. Tomorrow was her birthday! Her other sisters, apart from Lydia, looked aghast that their mother would plan a ball for somebody else, especially since Mr Bingley had not mentioned a Ball.

“Hopefully we shall have something to celebrate!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet.

“Mama!” said Jane, looking concerned.

“Your engagement with Mr Bingley!”

“Mama!” chorused Jane and Lizzy, both mortified. Kitty just felt a sense of emptiness at the fact her mother seemed to have forgotten her birthday, she expected it but to actually have it occur!

Lydia sat down on the bed and groaned. “Stop bleating ‘Mama!’ every five seconds! Gracious!”

“Yes, I have worked my fingers to the bone so we shall not all be turned out in the hedgerows and no one respects me! Even if there is no engagement tomorrow I know that Mr Bingley will have a dinner for us all on Monday, so the Ball will be your chance, Jane!”

This, thought Kitty, would be the moment to announce her engagement, but she felt so angry at her mother that she did not wish to reassure her; neither did she want her engagement to be sullied by the idea of securing the family’s fortunes.

By this time Lizzy had sat down as well. “Mama, we shall not be turned out into the Hedgerows. At the very least, Charlotte would not let that happen.”

“Charlotte! Do not talk to me of those artful Lucases. I wrote to Lady Lucas asking her most politely if she could provide some information about the Colonel and ….” Mrs Bennet threw up her hands. “Most likely she wishes to catch him for Maria!”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, Lizzy, do not be dense, of course one of the other gentlemen would be a much better match for you but if your heart is set on the Colonel what am I to do about it; your Charlotte told her mother about your little walks together! Walks! And not even engaged.”

“Mama!” exclaimed Jane, causing Lydia to flop back on the bed theatrically.

“Do not ‘Mama’ me, Jane, you spent weeks in London! Weeks! And are you engaged? No! Why did God give me such unresourceful and undutiful girls! And Kitty! Months away and no proposals whatsoever, surrounded by eligible gentlemen and nothing!”

Kitty who might have been tempted to assure her mother that one of her daughters was not undutiful, bit her tongue. She wanted her mother to be proud of *her* irrespective of any gentleman. It was unlikely to occur but Kitty held onto her hope.

“Now, since none of you pleased this Lord Ashbourne, then it must be Lydia.”

Lydia sat bolt upright and smiled.

“Lydia?” exclaimed Kitty, looking in horror at her sister.
“Why not me, Kitty?” asked Lydia innocently.

“Yes, why not Lydia?! My outgoing girl! I am sure she could capture any man’s attention.”

“Of course, I could, Mama!” Lydia bounced on the bed. “I should like to be Lady Ashbourne.”

Kitty stared, incapable of speech, at her sister and mother. Lizzy and Jane merely rolled their eyes and excused themselves, no doubt to talk about how they could protect the party at Netherfield from such unmannerly displays.

“You must wear your new dress and shoes….” Mrs Bennet trailed off, “What am I talking of you shall know just what to do, it is Jane I should speak to! That girl does not know how to display herself.”

Once their mother had left the room Lydia turned to Kitty. “How romantic, I bet he falls in love with me on sight. And charges off with me on his beautiful Andalusian mount, emerald signet ring blazing in the sunlight, to the romantic parts of Derbyshire.” Lydia laughed. Kitty ground her teeth. “Oh do not be angry Kitty, you are far too obvious.”

“Obvious?”

“Honestly if I had to hear one more word about your darling Lord Ashbourne I may possibly have wanted to chew off my own foot. I do hope he is as handsome as you say.”

“I did not speak …” Kitty stuttered, she had purposely not spoken much of her gentleman friends, especially of Ash.

“I am not stupid. You very carefully did not speak of him in your letters to Mama, but in your letters to me…”

Kitty frowned. “I am sure I did not.”

“I am sure you did. You may of course renamed him, but only a fool would have been misled. Your romantic hero Mr Fairfax, very different from the original story but very clearly based on a real person….” Kitty rolled her eyes. “Now of course if you cannot managed to attract him then of course I shall set my cap at him; after all if he is such a paragon…”

“Do not you dare, Lydia!” Kitty lunged at her sister who slipped out of her grip.

“Why should I not, Kitty?”

“Because, ‘hissed Kitty, ‘as your elder sister, I say so!’”

“Bah! That will not dissuade me.” Lydia picked up Kitty’s discarded bonnet and placed it on her head. “How fashionable, but I look far better in it.”

“Lydia!” Kitty was this close to resorting to the childish technique of either chasing her sister around the room or tackling her to the ground.

“Now, Kitty, you should not stand in your sister’s way.”

Kitty suddenly realised how absolutely ridiculous she was being. “Fine. Do not make a fool of yourself.”

Lydia stamped her foot. “Kitty, you were supposed to tell me to stay away.”
“Stay away.”

“That is better. So has he proposed?” Lydia looked impishly over her shoulder where she was still admiring herself in the mirror, having pulled a cloak from Kitty’s trunk.

Kitty now knew she would not miss this. Well she would, but she certainly could cope. “Yes.”

“Really? Of course you will invite your favourite sister to come stay with you in London.”

“Yes, Mary would enjoy the concerts.”

Lydia rolled her eyes as she pawed through Kitty’s trunk discovering the white boots.

“I thought you wished to go to Brighton.”

“I think perhaps Lords are better than soldiers,” replied Lydia. “Plus everyone fawns over Wickham, when anyone can see what sort of man he is! I should not have been fooled by him even without your warning!”

Kitty was not so sure. “You will not tell anybody, will you, Lydia?”

“About your invitation to London? Or about Wickham?”

“No, and I haven’t and I won’t! I meant my proposal. And Wickham.”

“Is it a secret?”

“No, my engagement is not a secret, I just have not told Mama yet, only Papa and Aunt Clara know.”

Lydia shrugged and then smiled; she liked a secret.

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“How shall we endure it!” cried Lizzy.

“Lizzy, there is little to endure; our mother means well, at least she has not…”

“What? Decided to match me with Mr Darcy? I could possibly bear that more.”

“I thought you could not…”

“Jane, at least I would know that he would know and he would know I would know how silly it all is!”

Jane sat down, “Lizzy, you are making little sense, sit down, I am sure it will not be as bad as you think it will be.”

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“I am sure it will not be as bad as you think it will be,” reassured Bingley as they rode towards Longbourn.

Darcy rolled his eyes. They had left Netherfield in a shambles. Caroline and Louisa had made it plain that they had had to be dragged to Netherfield, they had let out their frustrations the minute the Bennets had left; ignoring the fact Mrs Sutton was still present.
He felt bad about abandoning Georgiana to them, but Mrs Sutton had indicated they would go for a walk around the grounds.

Darcy should have gone with them. The Colonel was clearly having difficulties with his loyalties, to his brother or to his cousin; Bingley was engrossed in the desire to be near Miss Bennet again, but also distracted by something else Darcy could not quite place and Ash was looking supremely unruffled, even though he had met Mrs Bennet.

“I am not thinking anything, Bingley, I am just wondering if visiting not more than three hours after we arrived is mannerly. I am sure after being away for so long …”

The Colonel laughed. “It cannot be any more of a mad house than Netherfield! And Longbourn does have more attractive features than Netherfield.”

“Five of them!” said Bingley, jovially and then remembered and mouthed ‘sorry’ at Darcy.

Great, thought Darcy I am an object of pity. They all pity me because I have to sit in the same room as a woman who despises me. No…more than one woman who despises me.

Mrs Bennet had made it clear in her conversation that morning that she desirous of her daughters’ marriages as much as she ever was, but Darcy was left out of those desires. He had blotted his copy book, and somehow he could have coped better if she was throwing daughters at him, than being regulated to a gentleman not worth her daughters’ attentions.

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“Sit up straight, girls! You should have worn your blue dress, Jane! Lizzy, sit still!” Mrs Bennet quite theatrically shushed herself as the door opened.

“And here are my daughters…and my wife,” commented Mr Bennet ushering the four visitors into the room. He had been unsurprised at the haste in which the gentleman had arrived at Longbourn; he had spent the day in the carriage with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.

“Mrs Bennet, I do not think introductions were done quite properly at Netherfield, may I introduce you to Lord Ashbourne, and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Lord Ashbourne, Colonel Fitzwilliam, my wife. My daughters you know, apart from Mary and Lydia.”

Once the introductions were all done, the gentlemen sat at Mrs Bennet’s bequest. “I do hope you all come willing to dance! A Meryton Assembly will be held tomorrow, and you of course are all invited to dine here beforehand.” Mrs Bennet smiled knowingly before continuing. “I expect some of you will be quite desirous of attending.”

Ash gave Kitty a questioning look, to which Kitty had to shake her head and try to surreptitiously indicate Mr Bingley.

“Kitty, child, what are you doing, shaking your head at me.”

“I was not shaking, Mama, my earring became caught,” said Kitty while her mother frowned at her.

Mrs Bennet went back to smiling at Mr Bingley. “It is so nice and we are so crowed in here that perhaps you may all go for a walk?”

Mr Bingley, who had barely lifted his eyes from Jane, nodded his ascent vigorously.

Mrs Bennet accompanied her daughters, and the gentlemen to the door trying to direct the party
into little groups. “Jane, I expect Mr Bingley would like to see the Hyacinths, they were not in bloom when he was here before and they have just started.” Mrs Bennet knew that Lizzy would not listen to any instruction from her, but was pleased to hear the Colonel offer her his arm and ask for directions to the Hyacinths. “Mary, I remember Mr Darcy speaking of his rose garden and Lydia, my love, I am sure Lord Ashbourne would wish to see our pretty little wilderness.”

“Oh yes, my lord, I expect you do wish to see our wilderness.”

“I came into Hertfordshire with no other intention, Miss Lydia,” responded Ash, earning a beaming smile from Mrs Bennet. Lydia grabbed Ash’s arm and marched him off in the direction of the walled garden. Kitty sighed and turned to follow.

“Kitty!” hissed Mrs Bennet. Kitty turned back to face her mother. “Come inside!”

Kitty rolled her eyes and picked up her skirts to run after the couple.

By the bemused look on Ash’s face, Kitty could guess what her sister had been saying, but did not expect what she heard.

“So you see, I would make a much better wife. After all, Kitty likes soldiers, I am not so fussy.”

“Lydia!” spluttered Kitty. “Who is it that likes soldiers?”

“You.”

“I think Denny, Chamberlayne, Sanderson and Carter would name somebody else!”

Lydia turned and put her hands on her hips. Kitty glared at her sister.

“Ladies, please! Have you forgotten, my dear, that I too am…was…a soldier, so you may like them as much as you please.”

Kitty laughed. “As many as I please?”

Ash frowned. “That I did not say.”

Lydia groaned and went to sit on one of the stone benches. “Well, I shall play propriety and be chaperone.” Lydia laughed at this, as if she realised the ridiculousness of her playing chaperone. “But I shall face the other way.”

“Well, my lord, how many soldiers may I like?”

“This many,” replied Ash, kissing Kitty fiercely. Kitty smiled and wound her arms around his neck and was glad when he lifted her off the ground as standing on her tiptoes was not conducive to comfort.

Lydia turned and sighed, torn between disgust at such a romantic sight not involving herself and admiration that her sister, who Lydia had always thought would not amount to much, had caught herself such a man, any man even!

Lydia had been surprised that he was as handsome as Kitty had described. When Harriet Harrington had fallen in love with a visiting curate, Mr Bobbin, or Robbin or Tobbin or something, Lydia had paid little attention, she had told all the young ladies of Meryton that he was incomparable. When the curate had presented himself at one of the parties thrown by the officers’ wives, Lydia had been surprised by his short, stout and thoroughly gouty appearance. Love certainly had blinded Miss Harrington, until her friends had laughed heartily at her stupidity.
Lydia would not have been surprised at Kitty doing something similar, but apparently she had not, at least not on the outside. No doubt there would be something wrong with him. Lydia had found, after learning of Wickham’s inconsistency that there was always something wrong with men. It just depended upon a woman’s being willing to overlook the faults. She suspected Lord Ashbourne’s fault would be a teasing disposition, over-protectiveness and a desire to know everything. Lydia was sure Kitty could cope with that! Lydia was even certain that Lydia could cope with that.

“Any particular reason you have not told anyone of our engagement.”

Kitty did not lift her head from Ash’s shoulder. “Have you met my mother?”

“She seemed quite reasonable to me. If a little overzealous in the direction of Bingley, which is not surprising! Whatever is keeping the man?!?”

Kitty did lift her head to look at her fiancé in surprise. “My mother…reasonable?”

“Did you wish me to find your mother unreasonable? Comparatively to mothers she is reasonable. Perhaps a little unsubtle, but then with unsubtlety you do know where you stand.”

“Then why do you not practice unsubtlety?”

“Why practice what you preach?” asked Ash innocently.

Kitty rolled her eyes.

“A man after my own heart,” laughed Lydia, shamelessly eavesdropping. “Should we not return to the house? Mama will be pleased to know you have asked me to dance, Lord Ashbourne.”

Kitty’s hands clenched in Ash’s coat.

“Of course, it would be very impolite not to dance with you.”

Lydia left the walled garden, skipping down the steps as she went.

“Your sister is a shameless and heartless minx,” said Ash with a smile.

Kitty smiled. “You realise this from one meeting? Are you sure you did not meet her when you were in Meryton for the Colonel?”

“I was incognito. I met no one but the Colonel and the inn keeper who directed me to him.”

“Meryton is a very suspicious place.”

“Are you doubting my abilities?” asked Ash in mock annoyance.

Kitty ignored him, “Lydia wishes me to invite her to London, that is if she cannot steal you away from me.”

“Maybe that would be wise, or perhaps Darcy should invite her, he would probably keep a far better eye on her, better than she gets here.”

“Darcy and Lizzy? Or Darcy and Mary?” questioned Kitty pointedly, “And how shall you ever know if you do not ever speak to him again.”

“I have spoken to him. I said I disliked his cravat. It is now up to him to make the next move.”
Kitty, who had her arms around him, squeezed. “Stop being so silly.”

“I have been told that it is impossible…unless I change my sex.”

“Who told you such a thing?”

“Young aunt, right after she told me men can never be unsubtle.”

Kitty laughed, even happier she had not answered his question about her opinion on his abilities at being incognito. “I wish Aunt Clara was here, she would know how to tell Mama, but I should wait until after the ball, perhaps Bingley and Jane will become engaged; even if they do not then at least you will be spared any undue attention from the entirety of Meryton society.”

“I am not Darcy, I am sure I could stand it.”

Kitty smiled ruefully. “But I could not.”

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Chapter 40

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Settlement made previous to the marriage of Horatio Fitzwilliam, Viscount Ashbourne and Catherine Bennet; April 1812

First Party: Thomas Bennet of the Parish of Longbourn, Hertfordshire, Esq.
Second Party: Catherine Bennet, fourth daughter of (1).
Third Party: Clara Sutton of Cavendish Square, Middlesex, widow. (widow of Fredrick Sutton, deceased)
Fifth Party: Frances Bennet, wife of (1)
Sixth Party: Edwin Fitzwilliam, Earl of Matlock.

Covenant by (1) to assign to (2) the one fifth share of the sum of £5000 payable upon the death of (5). Covenant by (1) to pay an annuity of £100 in trust for (2) during the lifetime of (1).
Arrangements for the securing or payment of the sum of £10 000 by (3) to (2). Covenant by (2) to assign all monies to (4) in trust for (2) on the decease of (4) for the use of (2) and any children....

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Ash’s eyes glazed over as he reached the complicated provisions relating to the period during and after marriage, especially with regards to children and property. He had attempted to read it last night; he had blamed the candlelight for the density, now he just blamed the lawyers. He would understand it, but it was not necessary to do so quite yet. Clara had brought it to him, her lawyers had clearly moved fast, perhaps even pre-emptively.

But at the moment Ash would rather escape the house. Miss Bingley had been no less sour during dinner. It was clear she resented leaving London for Netherfield, but would have never let her brother come on his own, or probably more accurately, she would have never let Darcy come on his own.

Taking less care than he usually would with his clothing, after all it was rather early in the morning and he would be tramping through the countryside, Ash dressed. He had no idea what was taking Bingley so long to propose to Jane Bennet. It was not as though he was not in love with her. It was also not as though his sisters (or Darcy) were putting up any real opposition, they had all but given that up.

Running down the stairs of Netherfield, surprising a few maids, and out onto the drive, Ash was surprised to see Bingley already up and talking in-depth with some gentlemen, who he recognised as belonging to the house and its lands.

“Bingley?”

“My lord!” exclaimed Bingley. “You are up early.”

“So are you.”

“Yes, well, lord of the manor, well, renter of the manor!” Bingley looked a bit fidgety.

Ash turned at the sound of footsteps on the gravel.

“Bingley, I think it would be best to – “the gentleman stopped short. “Ash!”
“Sir Christian,” replied Ash baffled by the baronet’s sudden appearance. “Forgive me, but I did not know you were … familiar with this part of the country, or were planning to become familiar with it.”

Bingley looked slightly sheepish. “I have asked for Sir Christian’s assistance on a matter of some…delicacy.”

Sir Christian smiled in a fashion that ladies would deem roguish; Ash thought he looked pleased with himself.

“I was not even aware you knew Sir Christian, Bingley? He is certainly the man for delicacy. Gentlemen.” Ash bowed. He did not know what Bingley and Sir Christian were up to and he really did not want to know.

“It is really nothing of import!” cried Bingley. “Nothing to speak about!”

“Then I shall not speak of it to anyone,” called Ash over his shoulder.

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Kitty looked at the ceiling. If she knew her sister, any sort of movement in the room would cause great distress to Lydia, and Lydia’s great distress tended to be spread liberally.

Today was her birthday! Eighteen! Her excitement would explain her early awakening; she could hear no other rumblings in the house. Of course some of the maids would be toiling away, but none of them would come upstairs until a more reasonable hour.

Or was it her fear that caused her early awakening? A dinner and ball was not something to fear, but as Kitty closed her eyes the night before, the spectre of Wickham had arisen. Certainly Ash had warned him, and the presence of Darcy and the Colonel would certainly deter him, well it would deter her, who knew what went on in the head of such a man, but that did not mean her mother had not invited him and that he would not accept.

Kitty knew she should simply go and tell her mother of her engagement, but it was not quite as simple as that. After the gentlemen had left the previous night, Kitty had tried at every opportunity to bring up the subject. But Kitty had been sent rushing all over the house to iron out details of the dinner, and been reprimanded at every turn. Not that this was behaviour particularly levelled at Kitty; Jane and Lizzy had been equally reprimanded and been subjected to a lecture about their joint effort to break their mother’s heart. Kitty would have spoken up, the tirade was directed at her as well, but every time she did her mother would shush her.

It was too frustrating. But at some point today she had to find a way to tell her mother.

On a good note, the weather seemed almost perfect, Kitty smiled as she looked out of the window. Someone had opened the shutters which was probably what had awoken her. A ladder loomed, but Kitty turned over and snuggled back into her pillow hoping that whoever was washing windows at this hour knew better than to make the slightest amount of noise.

Thunk.

Kitty groaned and tried to pull the covers over her head, when the noise predictably made Lydia sit bolt upright in her bed and look murderous.

“Who is making that noise?” Lydia said petulantly. “How am I supposed to entertain the officers today if I cannot get a wink of sleep – “ Lydia paused in her rant. “Kitty, I think it is for you.”
Kitty pulled down the covers and blinked at Lydia before turning towards the window. Meanwhile Lydia had almost leapt out of bed, pulled on her dressing gown, and thrown Kitty’s at her.

It took Kitty a moment to realise that Lydia was not excited to see a gardener on top of a ladder, but Ash.

“Should you be climbing into naked women’s rooms?” asked Lydia pulling the sash up and leaning on the windowsill.

“Naked?”

“Well, as far as you are supposed to see, yes. You should have seen Mr Collin’s reaction to seeing me in my shift. “

“I have a great desire to meet Mr Collins,” replied Ash.

By this point, Kitty had pulled on her unfashionable but warm dressing gown, “I can assure you that you do not wish to meet Mr Collins.”

Ash shrugged instead of answering he held out his hand. “Come with me.”

“Are you eloping?” asked Lydia in interest as Kitty found her slippers.

“No!” exclaimed Kitty, trying to look disapprovingly at her sister, but realising doing this yet still climbing out of a window with a man who was not your husband was most definitely not consistent.

“I am glad” replied Lydia. “Because it’s not very romantic.”

Ash looked quizzical.

“Well, where is the carriage with six white horses? And what are you wearing?!!”

Kitty saved Ash from having to reply to this aspersion on his fashion sense and romantic tendencies by climbing out the window.

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They made it to the rose garden without being seen, or at least Kitty hoped they had but as there were no shrill shrieks and demands for smelling salts it had to be assumed they had.

Kitty half expected some sort of admonishment for the fact that they had to meet in secret, but Ash said nothing but wish her happy birthday. It was most likely only Kitty’s guilty feelings that made her feel thus.

“Is Netherfield so very bad that you had to escape so early in the morning? Or am I so very hard to part from?”

Ash looked as though he was thinking quite intently about the answer before smiling, “Both? I have not seen either Mrs Hurst or Miss Bingley this morning but their behaviour at dinner last night was nothing less than excruciating.”

“They are not still attempting to sway their brother’s feelings are they?” Like Ash Kitty was at a loss to explain Bingley’s reticence in asking for Jane’s hand.
"Nothing but sly comments, designed I expect to make my cousin think more highly of them. Though, I think Bingley had his mind on other things, so much so that he forgot he was host a number of times. Richard had to hunt down a footman for port himself…"

"Was he thinking of Jane do you think?"

Ash frowned, "Last night I would have said so but this morning I am not quite sure."

As Ash went on to describe his curious meeting with Bingley and Sir Christian, Kitty felt something tingle when she realised she was not just anyone, for Ash would not break his word.

"Any thoughts?"

"Well I have no idea what kind of business Mr Bingley would need Sir Christian’s advice on…unless it was a gaming parlour?" mused Kitty.

They both mused on the rather interesting image of Bingley opening up a gaming parlour with Jane running the EO tables.

"I just wish he would propose! Jane cannot wait forever!"

"And perhaps that would give you the courage to speak to your mother," countered Ash.

"Tonight…after the ball, my mother will make such a fuss…” Kitty paused, “and do not take that as a compliment, she was all a dither over the prospect of Lizzy marrying Mr Collins!"

"I wish I had gone to my Aunt’s at Easter…I see now I have been denied the prospect of meeting a truly great man."

"But then you would have never met me!" cried Kitty. "You would have instead fallen madly in love with Lizzy and fought a duel with Mr Darcy over her."

"Your sister, charming though she is, has one very grievous fault I would find hard to overlook."

Kitty rapidly mentally listed her sister’s faults, even those she had in small doses; her prejudice, her temper, her being quick to judge, her teasing nature, her self-righteousness… all faults indeed but surely not grievous!

Before Kitty could ask exactly what Lizzy’s fault was, Ash kissed her. "She’s not you," he whispered drawing back only slightly. Kitty laughed, her laughter vibrating in her throat as she was being kissed again.

"Happy Birthday, but I expect you should be getting back. I am surprised your sister has not raised the alarm. After all she is an excellent chaperone."

"You did not get me a present?"

"Am I not present enough?"

"You have a sister and you must ask this question?"

Ash reached into his jacket and pulled out a small packet. Inside was a pendant. The pendant was made of the same gemstone as Ash’s ring. Kitty looked on the back and engraved there was a ‘K’ and an ‘A’ intertwined. "You must have had this made before …"

Ash smiled; perhaps it wasn’t only Clara that had moved pre-emptively. “I was going to tell you it stood for, I don’t know…”
“Amazing Kitty?”

“Something like that.”

Kitty smiled. “I should go; I expect most of today will be preparing for the dinner this evening and the ball.”

Although it was some time later that Ash watched her safely climb back into her room.

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“Girls! Girls!” Mrs Bennet cried much later that evening as they were trying to dress for the dinner and the Ball.

Lizzy attempted to block her out as she gazed at herself in the mirror. Had it really been less than six months since she sat preparing for the Netherfield Ball? Her mother telling her she would never be as pretty as Jane but she looked very well and Lydia admonishing her for planning to dance all night with Wickham!

How things had changed and yet had not! Her mother was still worried about Jane’s prospects and sidelining her other daughters in order to capture Mr Bingley but Lizzy would have to be paid all the money in the land, and perhaps even more than that, to dance with Mr Wickham!

Lizzy was surprised Lydia had not come to tell her that since she had been away that Wickham was rightfully hers to dance with. Not that Lydia had paid any attention to such claims of precedence at Netherfield!

The whole party from Netherfield was expected. In addition to Longbourne’s residents this would certainly be enough to expect for dinner! But Mrs Bennet insisted on squeezing as many people into her dining parlour as it could hold and had invited some gentlemen to make up her table.

To be specific, her mother had invited the officers to dinner; Colonel Forster (whose wife was indisposed), Captain Carter and Lieutenants Denny, Sanderson and Chamberlayne. Her table had been evened up by Wickham sending his particular regrets.

Lizzy could not believe that Wickham had intended to inflict them with his presence, leaving it til the last moment to send word that he would not be able to attend. No, now she thought of it more she could believe it of him.

The officers were clearly invited to entertain Lydia, to converse with Colonel Fitzwilliam, to distract Miss Darcy from any of the gentlemen her mother had reserved for her daughters and if Lizzy knew her mother at all to annoy Mr Darcy. Lizzy could only hope it was not a recipe for disaster.

“Lizzy?”

Lizzy turned to see Jane looking radiant in a cream gown. “You look lovely, Jane. You will quite outshine all of us!”

Jane shook her head. “Lizzy, you know you are very pretty yourself!”

“Not as beautiful as you! I shall be spinster Aunt Lizzy teaching ten very radiant children to play their instruments extremely ill!”

“That all depends on my receiving a proposal, Lizzy.”
Lizzy could have bit back her words when she saw Jane’s fallen expression.

“I am sure he has a reason for not proposing,” she attempted to reassure her sister.

“That he does not love me? That he thinks I am a flirt?”

“No, Jane, no one who knows you could think you anything less than an angel, and I have heard Mr Bingley himself describe you as such!”

This sisterly conversation was brought to a close by their mother insisting they come down stairs to greet the guests.

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“I told you, Mr Bingley, all those months ago that you should dine with us!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet.

“Well I am a man of my word, Mrs Bennet,” replied Bingley.

“Are you a man of your word? I am very glad to hear that!” cried Mrs Bennet, making Bingley’s face crease with confusion.

“Stop confusing the gentlemen, Fanny,” interjected Clara, “I am sure Mr Bingley would prefer to speak to one of the young ladies, not one of the ancient ones…”

Bingley took that opening and beat a retreat, not before hearing Mrs Bennet exclaim sharply, “Speak for yourself!”

While he did not make it to one of the young ladies, he did make it to the relative safety of Darcy who was standing in the middle of the parlour. Despite the crowded nature of the room, he was an island of space.

“Darcy!” Bingley dropped his tone. “Why are you not speaking to anyone?”

“No one is speaking to me,” replied Darcy sullenly. Bingley winced; Darcy had been in a sullen mood since returning from his walk with Mary Bennet the previous afternoon. She was a rather serious young lady, but surely nothing she could have said would have affected Darcy so!

“Well…I am sure you had a conversation with Miss Mary yesterday, perhaps you would like to continue it?” Bingley knew he was grasping at straws but he could not help it.

“A conversation about the evils of pride?”

Bingley winced. Mary Bennet had chosen her homily well. He was unsure of what to reply to this so he remained silent. Some moments passed before he realised how ridiculous and how rude he and Darcy must have looked standing in the middle of a gathering not speaking a word to anyone…or each other.

“Mr Darcy,” Bingley turned in gratitude to see Miss Kitty. “Perhaps you would like to sit on the sofa?”

Darcy bowed his acquiescence and allowed himself to be guided to the sofa. Bingley followed as he was too much of a gentleman to abandon a young lady to Darcy in one of his moods.

“I think this is shaping up to be a lovely evening,” said Kitty but Bingley thought he detected a false note in her tone.
“Yes,” replied Darcy shortly. Then he seemed to shake his head as if to clear it. Clearing his throat he continued. “I mean yes, it does. I am sure dinner will be excellent and the ball also…with such company how can I be anything less than very happy.”

Kitty raised one eyebrow, in a manner very familiar to Bingley but he could not quite place it. “If this is you in a happy situation, Mr Darcy, may I beg to see you in an unhappy situation?”

Darcy, instead of glaring as Bingley expected, actually had the beginnings of a smile. “I am afraid I am poor company.”

“You seem to me to be always poor company,” replied Kitty and Bingley had to turn his head not to laugh. It would not do to laugh at his friend so lately suffering a disappointment, no wonder he was poor company!

“Perhaps I have my reasons,” replied Darcy shortly.

“Your sister is being very well taken care of; you can have nothing to worry about there.”

Darcy looked intently at the young lady by his side before turning his gaze to Georgiana who was with Colonel Fitzwilliam and one of the officers. “Then I am just naturally bad company.”

“I have been told by others that you are not.”

At this point Bingley chimed in, “Yes, Darcy! A Ball, a nice dinner and such pretty company, what more can you ask for? I know you can be satisfied by that!” Bingley hoped his tone conveyed his plea for his friend to act more sociably despite his heart-ache. Darcy could be satisfied by such he had seen be so him before!

“And if you are not satisfied by that then you know who to speak to,” replied Kitty before excusing herself.

Bingley blinked after her, wondering if that meant Darcy’s heartache was known generally.

***&&***
Chapter 41

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TO be LET with immediate possession a desirable FAMILY HOUSE, Purvis Lodge, in good repair situated not five miles from Meryton, Hertfordshire, containing two sitting rooms, seven bedrooms, kitchen, dairy, pantry, cellars, large attics together with large garden and well stocked fruit trees. Apply by letter, post paid, to Mr Thomas Carter, gentlemen, Meryton Hertfordshire.

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Somebody had cut parts of the paper out and pasted them onto the walls of one of the antechambers at the Meryton Assembly rooms. Normally Darcy would have made some comment about the bucolic nature of such a way of passing information, but it gave him something to read as he hid.

And....he noted with some amusement that the house he had heard Mrs Bennet so eloquently pressing onto her sister-in-law, in order not to make Bingley homeless, should she decide to return to her home county was being advertised as having large attics, when Mrs Bennet had held forth for several minutes on their being dreadful.

He had been trapped at dinner between Mary Bennet and Mrs Sutton. He had hardly wished to speak to Miss Mary in case she continued her stern lecture on what befell people who gave in to the base sin of pride. He was already well versed on what befell such people – they were considered contemptible by the woman they loved and shunned quite rightly by their family and everyone else!

Mrs Sutton however had been unable to prevent herself from being drawn into Mrs Bennet’s rather loud conversation, and thus could not converse with Darcy either.

There had been an amusing interlude as she had hissed at him, “I do not know why she seated me so close to her! She knows we have nothing polite to say to one another!”

Darcy had been unable to prevent himself from saying, “Perhaps she wishes to keep an eye on you?”

Strangely Mrs Sutton had laughed and asked “If so, what have you done to warrant needing to be kept an eye on?”

Darcy had been unable to answer her. He doubted Mrs Bennet had any plan when he seated her between her daughter and her sister-in-law, merely that there he could not interfere in any planned matches. He had been after all placed some distance from Miss Bennet and Bingley.

By design or by luck Darcy could not help but notice Kitty and Ash had been seated together and spent the entire dinner talking closely and laughing, with the youngest Miss Bennet joining in when she could spare her attention from the lieutenant on her other side.

He was quite sure that their engagement was still not general knowledge; Mrs Bennet would surely not have remained silent on that matter but surprisingly she had not seemed to notice the obvious attachment and regard and had insisted that Miss Lydia be the first led out onto the floor by his cousin.
Darcy did not quite know what to make of Kitty’s strange conversation before dinner; he did admire her for her frankness. After all he could not love it in her sister and hate it in her, and she had been far more circumspect than he could or should have hoped for! In fact it was good of her to speak to him and attempt to save him from the officer’s gossip that he did in fact think himself above his company.

“Mr Darcy – I – I “ Darcy turned to see he had been joined by Lizzy. “I did not know anyone would be in here – “ She turned to leave.

“Please do not leave on my account, Miss Bennet. If you wish to be alone, please let me leave…”

“No. I should not want to – “

“Forgive me.”

Lizzy looked startled as if she did not know precisely what Darcy was asking her to forgive him for, but before she could answer someone passed closely by the door. Suddenly realising the impropriety of being alone in a room with him she gave a quick curtsey before fleeing.

Darcy tried to restrain the feeling he should hit his head against the wall and after a discreet interval left to try and be sociable; he had too many people to atone to, to spend the rest of his life hiding.

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“What is your friend about, Darcy?” asked Colonel Fitzwilliam, “and more to the point where have you been? You have not danced once!”

“Which friend?” asked Darcy.

“Bingley. But never mind him, I am sure he is just working up the courage, but you should dance, Darcy. A ball passes a lot quicker if you dance!”

“In a society such as this? One that I am sure does not wish to inflict me upon any of its daughters?”

“Buck up man, you still have £10 000 a year; I am sure there will always be families willing to have you inflicted upon them.”

“I feel very reassured.”

“Well I do not think I should be reassuring you because I do not understand this behaviour!”

“He had no way to make up for it, that is the problem,” came a third voice as Ash joined them.

“Is it?” replied Darcy calmly.

“Well, how to prove to everyone you are not as arrogant as they think? There are no damsels in distress, nothing for you to come to the rescue for; you shall have to prove yourself far more prosaically.”

“I know.”

“Then do it, “chorused the brothers. Darcy rolled his eyes, it was not the first time his cousins had spoken in chorus but he was surprised Ash would wish to give him any advice considering his behaviour.
As if he had read Darcy’s mind Ash spoke, “I do want you to know that I am acting purely selfishly. You are my cousin and I do not wish to have a bad one. I have not forgiven or forgotten.”

Darcy sighed, and watched the viscount’s retreating back. “It’s not only Mertyon society I have to prove something to.”

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Clara tried to look interested. She had a feeling it was not working. She had attempted to corner Colonel Fitzwilliam in order to speak to him. Well what else would she corner him for… though, she mused, he was not precisely handsome but he had a charm about him! She had attempted to corner him alone so she could speak to him about his cousin. Mr Darcy was clearly not speaking to Ash, or indeed anyone else and he seemed to either gaze at or studiously not gaze at her niece, Lizzy. Clara had thought there was some attachment there but now she was certain of it, and it was up to her to interfere before Fanny did.

However it had not gone to plan; Colonel Forster had decided it was imperative he speak to his counterpart on military matters. Other officers had joined him and where other officers went apparently so did half the young ladies. Clara found herself hemmed into a corner with little chance of escape without appearing abrupt and rude.

She would have gladly been abrupt and rude, but Lydia had made one the party of girls and Clara wished to observe her youngest niece properly.

“So you are to go to Brighton for the Summer?” asked Colonel Fitzwilliam of Colonel Forster.

“Yes. Yes. I have given my officers here some good training in society that will stand them in good stead when we are encamped there! I am sure there will be balls enough to satisfy them and with experience found here they will not shame his majesties government.”

“I hope they have not forgotten their primary duty of protecting the populace, Colonel!” replied Clara acidly.

“Of course not dear lady!” laughed Colonel Forster.

Clara was certainly about to say something rude, when one of the officers broke in to ask some inane question about the regulars and the Horse guards.

Lydia, who had been listening to the men talk, moved to Clara’s side. “I have decided not to go to Brighton.”

Clara turned her head sharply, “And why not?”

“If this is what the men are like when one new officer comes amongst them, what will it be like with a whole camp full of new officers? What do I care of the Horse Guards? As long as they defeat the French and wear such handsome uniforms?”

Clara was distracted from saying anything, especially voicing her surprise that her niece was not a complete ninny, by a commotion at the door.

Sir Christian Montgomery had graced them with his presence. This was strange, Clara had no idea what charm Meryton would hold for him, but what was stranger was Mr Bingley immediately greeting him and appearing to be hissing at him sotto voce. What on earth was the man up to?

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“Sir Christian! What are you doing here?” hissed Bingley.

“You expected me to stay in the Inn?”

Bingley was rendered momentarily speechless as he opened and closed his mouth trying to think of what to say.

“I have just been assaulted by a woman!” added Sir Christian.

Bingley looked horrified. “You did not assault her first….??”

“Oh of course I did not, Bingley! She ran into me and then after I solicitously asked after her health she hit me with a book! Who brings a book to a ball! When you asked me to come I did not expect – “

At this point Bingley shushed Sir Christian and drew him out of hearing distance.

Ash rolled his eyes and tried not to notice his previous conversationalist was now staring curiously at the odd couple in the corner. It allowed him to look around the room at leisure and as a result put out an arm to restrain Darcy who with a confused look on his face looked like he was about to approach his friend.

“Should you ask questions I am quite sure you do not want to know the answer to?”

Darcy stared at his cousin. “But what on earth is…”

“I ask again do you truly want to know?” It was Ash this time who manoeuvred himself and his cousin away from curious onlookers.

“He could be spending time with Miss Bennet and yet he is….doing…talking…!”

“It is best not to plumb the minds of others too far, Darcy…”

“She would say yes, and yet he will not ask?”

“Why do you not tell him to hurry up?”

“I have decided that giving advice is not my place.”

“Very wise.”

“Are we speaking again?”

Ash glared at Darcy. “If you are asking whether this conversation is a figment of your imagination then no, it is not; if you are asking if I have forgiven you the answer has not changed since half an hour ago! I am merely trying to be civil. I have not and I will not forget the aspersions you cast on both myself and my future wife. How you could forget yourself in such a manner is beyond me! How you could assume such a thing of any young lady is beyond me? I must say I have wondered where you picked such notions up? Who have you been associating with, Darcy?”

With that Ash walked off and Darcy sighed. Ash was certainly being slightly childish, but he had not himself apologised for suggesting Kitty was a fallen woman or that Ash himself would offer a carte blanche to a gentleman’s daughter.
Despite her mother appearing not to have noticed that eighteen years ago precisely she was in what appeared to Kitty’s knowledge to more than likely be a very uncomfortable position; Kitty’s birthday was going swimmingly.

All of her sisters had brought her presents; Jane’s practical new housewife, Lizzy’s pretty fabric, Mary had been shocked that Kitty had actually appreciated Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologica and Lydia had given Kitty her old bonnet back, though embellished with ornaments that actually suited Kitty.

Even her father had caught her in the mad rush to finish organising the dinner and given her a leather bound copies of all of Shakespeare’s plays. He had whispered confidentially that he was sure in one of her fiancé’s many houses there was a similar collection but that she deserved her very own copy and indeed Kitty’s name had been embossed in the opening leaves. Her father must have had it done in London and Kitty was touched. Though seeing her name gave her a twinge that she would so soon be resigning it!

The servants had given her their tokens and in what Kitty could only describe as the result of mind reading Hill had told her that for her present she would engage to collect some cuttings for ‘the young miss to take to her new establishment.’ Hill had winked at this and just as Kitty was about to grab onto this lifeline and question Hill she had been called away by her mother. Kitty still did not know if Hill had been referring to her new establishment with her aunt or her new establishment. And if it had been the latter, how did Hill know? More importantly how would Hill break it to her mother if it were her?

Though Kitty suspected Hill would not have given an answer to that question beyond a – Lud Miss, I break it to your mother that I be getting married? She would think it very odd as I am married already!

There had just not been a moment to break anything to anyone, well apart from stopping Sarah from breaking the good china! Not to mention upsetting her mother’s nerves even in a positive way did not seem a wise idea considering the tense feeling of the household.

It was much better now that they were at the Mertyon Assembly Rooms. Easy to avoid their mother’s machinations and Kitty could see that Lizzy especially was wearying of it even though she played little role in it beyond being encouraged to speak with the Colonel and Kitty did not see that as a hardship!

“Kitty! There you are my child!” Speak of the devil, Kitty turned to her mother. “I saw you dancing with Lord Ashbourne!”

“Yes Mama.”

“Did you speak to him of Lydia? Did he speak to you of Lydia?”

Kitty rolled her eyes and looked to the dancefloor where Lydia was doing her best to flirt shamelessly with Ash. But what to say to her mother? “I do not believe we spoke of Lydia!”

“Kitty!” wailed her mother despairingly. “I gave you the gift of life…eighteen years ago and you cannot do this one thing for me?”

Kitty blinked, her mother remembered her birthday? It was so like her mother to remember but it to be incidental to her daughters’ marriage!
“All my girls! I have a daughter who is twenty-three and is she married? Is she any where near being married?”

”Mama!” Kitty did not know what to say.

“I mean what is my business in life? My daughters! Their happiness, their futures! But I cannot be expected to do the thing all by myself! What does Jane wish me to do walk up to the Altar myself!”

Kitty sighed. “Mama, we know you love us but sometimes it is very difficult…”

“Difficult to what?” Mrs Bennet looked agrieved.

“Difficult to help you when you are so…” Kitty tried to think of a word “ Mama, you should not be so forward.”

“Forward!!?”

“Ordering this Ball…everything…” Kitty could see her mother was about to exclaim so she cut her off, “Surely you know how men are, they need a nudge but they need to think it’s their idea. You are very good at the nudging, perhaps a little too much.”

Mrs Bennet looked outraged but then a thoughtful look came across her face, replaced by another outraged look. “Men!”

Kitty tried not to snort.

“If only I had been able to have sons! Then I would have no problems!”

Kitty was not sure whether this meant that her mother would have understood men more, or been able to breed perfect men…or what …but she just nodded.

Mrs Bennet looked at the clock. “There precisely eighteen years ago my fourth undutiful daughter was born!”

Kitty hugged her mother impulsively. She was after all her mother and somehow the ‘undutiful’ seemed almost a carressing adjective. “You remembered?”

“When you have children you too will remember the exact moment!”

Kitty laughed. It was on the tip of her tongue to blurt out to her mother how happy she suddenly was when Lady Lucas and Mrs Long swarmed up.

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Chapter 42

My dear neighbour, I cannot tell you how delighted I was at the ball tonight! I am so very glad your wife made the suggestion of holding it. Our little society quite excites at a ball and with such company! Such very superior dancing is not often seen. It is evident that our friends from Netherfield belong to the first circles. Allow me to say, however, that your fair daughters do not disgrace you, and that I must hope to have this pleasure often repeated, especially when a certain desirable event, or perhaps should I say certain desirable events, shall take place. What congratulations will then flow in. And they are most certainly well deserved, my dear sir! 

Mr Bennet smiled at the note from Sir William. Sir William was such an affable man and Mr Bennet wondered if he had been perceptive enough to notice that there was more than one desirable event on the cards. No doubt he had, but whether he, unlike Mrs Bennet and the wives of Meryton, had made the right connections in his head, was debateable.

Mr Bennet had noted quite clearly the attention that his daughters were receiving, and not just from the young men, but also from those whose daily sport was watching young men giving attention to young ladies. He trusted they would not be disappointed, by last night’s festivities or by any revelations that might come from it.

But while he was sanguine his wife was not.

She had risen from her bed clearly not recovered from the exertions of the ball and was being most petulant towards her daughters especially Jane.

But her monologue was neither as piercing nor as critical as he would have expected. He saw her glance at Kitty several times which made him wonder if his daughter had taken her mother to task. She clearly had not divulged her own engagement for he doubted Mrs Bennet would think twice about Mr Bingley if presented with a Lord Ashbourne.

“Mama!” injected Lizzy, “If we do not make haste we will be late for church!”

Mrs Bennet opened her mouth to make some blasphemous statement such as ‘Hang the Church’, when she reconsidered. Her absence from church would be food for the gossips and she would not have it said that Mrs Bennet was repining for her daughters’ failures!

She dared anybody to say, to her face, that her daughters were failures!

Only she could insinuate that!

Jane as the centre of her mother’s worry was unconcerned. Well, she was perhaps not unconcerned, but she had not expected a proposal at the Ball.

She did, however, in general, at some point in time, obviously one convenient to Mr Bingley, expect a proposal and while Lizzy had soothed her worry and Mr Bingley’s kind and solicitous attention had pushed her fears further away, she could not help but think she was destined to be a spinster. Especially when even she could not explain the sudden appearance of Sir Christian and his seeming closeness to Mr Bingley – everyone had expected her to know the answer, but he had
not confided in her!

But she should not be thinking such things in Church. She should be attending to the sermon not the back of a gentleman sitting several pews in front.

Lizzy was more concerned for her sister and so very confused about the ball she could hardly keep it out of her mind.

Mr Darcy had seemed so different when she had met him in the alcove. His whole manner had changed and she had felt so unequal to being in his society. She wished that feeling would vanish; she had felt it ever since she had read his letter. The heartfelt words of a man spurned, perhaps bitter in parts, but he spoke so much of the truth that Lizzy had found herself reading his letter again and again.

His words about her family, her feelings about them; it was all so disordered in her head that she was not sure what to think. But she was certain that she should be paying more attention to the sermon.

And when Jane and Lizzy were determined they were determined; so Misters Bingley and Darcy were forgot.

Until of course they exited the Church.

“Miss Bennet,” smiled Mr Bingley, walking over to their party, “I am very glad to see you are all so well recovered from the ball.”

Lizzy laughed. “Are we such delicate creatures to be tired from a little dancing then, Mr Bingley?”

“Well my sisters are unwell, indeed so very knocked-up they could not attend church!”

Lizzy bit her tongue which was itching to ask in a very caustic tone if this meant Mr Bingley compared them to his sisters!

So she turned to the Colonel, “Colonel Fitzwilliam, do you think us such paltry creatures?”

“No, indeed I do not. You know that I have heard so much of your intrepidness to think you equal to anything!”

Lizzy could not help but glance at Mr Darcy and then blush when she realised Colonel Fitzwilliam was looking at her so very intently.

The awkward moment was broken by Mr Bingley. ”Darcy and I rode here,” started Mr Bingley looking at the assembled party, “and Mrs Sutton came in a phaeton, perhaps we should go for a little tour of the Park? It is such a fine day, I feel we should not waste it.”

“Oh yes indeed!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet turning from Mrs Long, who had stopped to talk of the ball. “It would be nothing to go and fetch horses for the girls!”

Lizzy disclaimed any desire to ride and was offered a seat in the Phaeton with Miss Darcy and Aunt Clara.

There were not enough horses, or indeed suitable horses, in the stables for Lord Ashbourne or the Colonel, as they too had come in the Phaeton, so they were to return to Netherfield and meet the party in the Park.

Lydia claimed the last seat in the carriage, as Jane was helped onto Nelly and Kitty rode a fidgety
horse named Phoebe.

The party set off at a leisurely pace, with Mrs Bennet heard exclaiming that if only Mr Bennet would call for their farm horses, who could not be wanted on the farm on a Sunday, then she too could enjoy a drive.

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Georgiana was glad for Mr Bingley’s suggestion; although she wished to speak to Kitty about the Ball, she was happy enough to exchange Kitty for Lizzy.

With Kitty she would have to speak in low tones and riddles in order not to reveal Kitty’s secret. Yet, with Lizzy, Georgiana felt she could have some fun, just how Georgiana did not know.

Georgiana had been allowed to attend the Assembly but had danced only with gentlemen that she knew, allowing Clara and the Bingley sisters to inform people that she was not properly out. She hoped none of the Meryton men thought that she thought herself above her company! But to dance with those she did not know still made Georgiana uncomfortable, especially if they were officers who knew Wickham!

Though as Fitzwilliam and Cousin Richard had made very clear, in their separate dashes across the ballroom, Sir Christian did not count as one of the gentlemen she knew!

Georgiana thought it a pity because while Sir Christian could be very warm he was also very amusing.

Georgiana had been happy enough to watch the proceedings and took particular notice that, for however brief a time, Lizzy and Fitzwilliam had been alone in the same room! Both had exited looking flushed! Georgiana knew it was for reasons of embarrassment but it still amused her that her brother could be so dense!

Above else the ball afforded her the pleasure of knowing that her brother was beginning to see her as an adult and treating her as such! One of the pleasures of feeling like an adult was finally seeing her brother without the filial layer. Six months ago Georgiana could not conceive of thinking her brother dense, or wishing to see if her suspicions about the young lady of his choice were correct.

But Georgiana had never felt better.

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“Should we not slow down, Aunt? Jane and Mr Bingley have quite fallen behind!”

Clara looked at Lizzy witheringly. Clara was not Mrs Bennet but she was not above pushing people together!

“Indeed,” exclaimed Georgiana, looking behind them, “I cannot see them at all!”

“I am sure Mr Bingley will be looking after Jane very attentively.”

Lizzy frowned, but turned her head away.

“Lord, Lizzy do you not want Jane to become engaged? How can Mr Bingley ask her if they are not alone?”
Lizzy blanched and turned to ensure Mr Darcy was not in hearing distance, she looked relieved when she realised he was some distance from the carriage.

“Lydia, you should not speak of such things, “said Clara sternly.

“Are you to tell me that no one else is thinking such a thing!”

“I did not say that, Lydia, but thinking is very different from saying.”

“That is just hypocrisy!”

“No, hypocrisy would be saying we did not think such things. No hypocrisy in simply knowing that we are all thinking something!” retorted Clara.

Lydia frowned, but Georgiana broke into the conversation. “Indeed I shall risk Mrs Sutton’s displeasure and say I was thinking of such a thing! I do hope Mr Bingley proposes soon because it is so obvious he thinks the world of Miss Bennet and she of him.”

Clara smiled at Georgiana and squeezed her hand. “I think we are all of the one mind in this carriage!”

Georgiana saw that her brother was still riding some way from the carriage and smiled. “Do you not think my brother is a fine rider? I envy him for I am terrified of horses!”

The ladies turned to observe their gentleman escort.

Georgiana continued, “Miss Elizabeth, do you not think he has a fine seat? My uncle says he has one of the finest seats of any man! Though my uncle does not include my cousins in that saying for he thinks it would be improper to praise his own sons, but indeed Fitzwilliam rides extremely well.”

Clara tried not to smile at the blush that spread across Elizabeth’s face. Clearly she was thinking a little too much about seats.

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Indeed Lizzy was. She could hardly respond to Miss Darcy’s question without looking closely at Mr Darcy’s riding and now that she had she found she could hardly look away.

She did not know what she felt, but she this morning thought about Darcy and how strange it was that he had allowed his sister to attend the Assembly. Miss Darcy had danced only a little and was never without the company of one of her party, but she had attended.

Darcy had allowed his sister to attend a provincial ball and he towards the end of the evening had even condescended to dance. But it was cruel to call it condescension, after all he had looked uncomfortable during the early parts of the ball, not proud, almost as if he was afraid he would be refused if he had asked any young lady to dance.

She was not blind to Darcy’s virtues now. How could she be? But she was not blind to his faults either – oh she did not know what to think.

Her admiration of his fine form was suddenly terminated when he hared across in front of the carriage and a shriek from Lydia made her turn her head.
Kitty’s horse that had been plodding along behind the carriage had suddenly been spooked and had taken her down an embankment.

“Stop the carriage,” commanded Aunt Clara.

The occupations watched as Kitty came to an abrupt stop at the bottom of the hill. She did not fall, but it was clear she remained in the saddle quite tenuously.

Darcy reached her, and after dismounting he lifted her clear of the horse and set her on the ground.

Lizzy could almost make out what Kitty said to him as she was helped down – “Darcy, my hero.”

Lizzy was glad her sister appeared to have suffered no hurt, but was quite unable to account for the sudden stab in her chest even after it was clear Kitty was fine. Surely it was not that she wished Darcy would catch her around the waist?

No, what she was feeling was mortification that most likely Darcy would feel offended by the liberty of Kitty’s words.

Lizzy shook her head. They had been speaking of hypocrisy and it would not do to lie to herself, even in her own head, she was suddenly and inexplicably hurt by her sister’s ease with a man, and a man that Kitty must know did not esteem her, while Lizzy could barely be in the same room with without feeling overwhelmed by conflicting emotions.

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“Darcy, my hero,” laughed Kitty as he dismounted to help her off her horse.

He did not speak until her feet were back on the ground.

“You have taken no hurt?” He looked at her searchingly.

“No, except my pride! I have clearly become the worst kind of female rider, one who feels she is excellent but is merely passable!”

Darcy clutched the reins of both horses in his hand as he ran his other through his hair. “Thank God.”

Kitty was taken back at his vehemence.

“My cousin would have me killed if you had come to any harm!”

“Oh no, replied Kitty with a placidity she did not feel, “I am sure he would have paid you the complement of killing you himself.”

Darcy turned sharply to her. “I have offended you? I have! And I have tried so – “

“Could you expect any less, sir? I would give you some advice if you would let me.”

Darcy did not respond and Kitty took that as an affirmative response.

“You should not save young ladies from harm only to make them feel as if the only reason you felt they were worth saving was because of the fear of losing your own skin!”

“I did not – “ Darcy paused. “Of course that was not the only reason. I would have acted the same towards any young lady, but my impassioned outburst would not have transpired. Surely you realise it could not have been motivated by you, I barely know you. I do know and respect my
cousin however.”

It was a halting speech but Kitty followed it well. “Indeed, sir, perhaps you will be so good as to help me back up to the carriage? I am not sure Phoebe wishes for me to ride her anymore today.”

Kitty turned to walk up the hill but Darcy’s voice made her turn back.

“I have behaved extremely ill to yourself and your family. I know this. I do not know how to amend for it, apart from what I shall say now. I do not know how much of this you know but I have spoken of you in an abominable fashion – “

“I did know that, Mr Darcy. I do not know the particulars, but I do know that Ash knows you did not truly mean what you said.”

Darcy paused. “He thinks this then why – “

“Perhaps because it is worse to say something you do not truly mean? That you should learn from your mistakes before you are forgiven them?”

“I - I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper.” Darcy smiled, “I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit.”

Kitty’s eyes widened, she wondered what Darcy’s definition of a good principle was if he claimed to have always followed such principles however badly carried out. Though, she reflected, he seemed to often act from a motive of protection; protecting his sister, his cousin, even a failed proposal to Lizzy could have been motivated by protection though who Lizzy needed protecting from Kitty did not know. So perhaps his motivations and principles were not so very bad after all.

“Unfortunately an only son, for many years an only child, I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves, my father, particularly, all that was benevolent and amiable, allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world; to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. “

Darcy drew breath, “I do not understand how I came to even contradict that! To think meanly of my own family circle - a cousin who I have looked up to! But I have learned from it I assure you. I think you and Eli – your family – have been almost designed to teach me my faults!”

“We all have our faults, sir, yours make you no more grievous than the rest of us!” Kitty had caught his almost reference to her sister and realised his feelings ran far deeper than she could have imagined. Impulsively she caught his hand, “I certainly forgive you even though you have not asked it, and I know you have only to ask it to receive it from Ash.” Darcy shook his head at that causing her to stress again that he would, ”I promise you that, and then you have only to forgive yourself.”

“That will not – “

“Not bring forgiveness from my sister? It will be a start.”

“But I must speak to her to satisfy myself, you said so yourself, or perhaps you meant my cousin?”

“I meant neither! I meant yourself!” exclaimed Kitty. “Do you intend to figure yourself as a hero out of a gothic romance? You should not be telling me this!”

“I know you have just given me your forgiveness, but I must have you know that I am not a
villain no matter how I have presented myself! I forgot myself in a manner that will always shame me to recollect, but I know nothing I said was true. I am sure at the time I knew it was not true, and any feeling I have had towards your family was clouded by my faults, not by yours or your family’s. I cannot even claim I was afraid by my feelings or any other such nonsense, because I was not. Even when I proposed to your sister, I guess that someone has told you of that, I was thinking of nothing but myself and even then I thought I could have Elizabeth without her family. I started off by asking you to think of me not as a villain, but I think I must have been one to think I could do such a thing not to mention my poor advice to Bingley! I could go on! – ”

Kitty squeezed his hand to silence him. “I do not think you are a villain, and I am to be your cousin and I am sure we shall deal very well together. But I will not have you say my family is without fault? After all you have met my mother!”

Darcy smiled. “I have known worse and Ash likes your mother.”

“Ash has a great desire to meet Mr Collins,” retorted Kitty, causing Darcy to openly laugh, and laugh a great deal more when he realised the subject of their exchange was riding down the embankment. They dropped hands to turn towards him.

“You are not hurt?” was the viscount’s first words as he jumped off his horse.

“No, I am unhurt. You however are not.”

Ash looked at Kitty and Darcy, confused.

“Your mind is disordered, cousin,” replied Darcy, before his cousin could retort he continued “Miss - er – Kitty has just informed me you wish to meet Mr Collins! The first sign of a truly disturbed mind.”

Ash rolled his eyes. “Nothing you say will dampen my curiosity of such a man; he has you all talking! Now I think it might be best to return to the carriages.”

Kitty took Ash’s arm, allowing Darcy to lead the three horses, but then she started – “carriages?”

“Yes, my dear.”

Kitty looked up. Her mother had been successful in bringing their carriage; there she was seated with Mrs Phillips and Mrs Long. Jane and Bingley had also clearly caught up with the party.

“Luckily we are quite out of hearing, but I am afraid your mother has just spent the last five minutes watching you clasping Darcy.”

At that Kitty at last placed the look on her mother’s face and suddenly felt a great deal of dismay.

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1 Mainly Austen’s words, but I had a little fun with them.

back to story

2 Mainly Austen. Oh dear Darcy has used his great speech up before he has reconciled with Lizzy, but I could not help it :)

back to story again

***&&***
Chapter 43

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Lawks, you will never guess what I just saw now! It shall be soon all over the village, I dare say! Kitty Bennet just now almost fell off her horse, but she was rescued in such a dramatic fashion by….you will not believe it I am sure, but it is true, she was rescued by Mr Darcy! Mr Darcy of whom none of us had any expectations! They stood there quite riveted by each other –

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Mrs Phillips had no chance to write more as her sister whisked the note out of her hands, causing the pen to leave a trail of ink quite spoiling it all.

“Sister!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet who had surprisingly not, as Mrs Phillips expected, fallen into the vapours. “You would slander my dear girl?!”

“Well, it is not slander! We saw it with our own eyes and you know the outcome! The inevitable outcome!”

Mrs Bennet ignored her sister and swept up the staircase.

Her penultimate daughter had stayed silent in the carriage ride home, and it was only Clara’s stern glare that had kept Mrs Bennet from questioning her daughter there and then. But nothing could stop her now!

Kitty had changed out of her riding habit and was calmly brushing her hair. Three of her sisters had joined her and only Lydia looked unconcerned.

Mrs Bennet had been too late; both Jane and Lizzy were remonstrating with Kitty.

“Kitty, you must understand it was most improper of you!” said Jane firmly.

“I do not understand it,” replied Kitty.

“But you must! You were alone – “ Lizzy, to her mother’s ear sounded rather emotional.”

“We were not alone!”

“You acted as if you were!” Lizzy paced up the room. “To be allowing any man such liberties!”

Mrs Bennet saw Kitty give a small smile, and Mrs Bennet recognised that smile, she was not her daughters’ mother for nothing, it said that Kitty had more than likely allowed such liberties before!

“There is nothing for it!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet. “You must marry!”

“Mama!” cried Lizzy. “I do not think – no it is not – no!”

Even Mrs Bennet was taken back at Lizzy’s forcefulness; she would have thought Lizzy would be the one insisting on such a course taken to protect their reputation as a family.

“There is nothing to be done, Lizzy; I will not have my family – “
“But Mr Darcy does not want to marry Kitty!” exclaimed Lizzy, causing her sisters and mother to stare at her.

With a smile Kitty rescued her, “Mama, I am to be Mr Darcy’s cousin. He was merely offering his congratulations on my engagement and ensuring that I was perfectly safe; after all I am to be a member of his family.”

“Of what are you talking child!? I do not have the pleasure of understanding you!” Mrs Bennet sat down on Lydia’s bed.

“Lord Ashbourne,” replied Kitty. “Lord Ashbourne proposed to me on Thursday and I accepted him. Papa gave his permission and I was just trying to find the right moment to tell you. Of course, Mr Darcy has already been told and he had not found the moment to offer his sincere congratulations.”

Mrs Bennet was, for once in her life, speechless.

“Oh I am so happy…” cried Lizzy, “…for you!”

“How wonderful!” said Jane, so happy that the misunderstanding had been so neatly solved.

Kitty laughed. “Thank you. I already know how Lydia feels on the subject.”

Lydia rolled her eyes, “I expect an invitation to London!”

“But Mama? Are you happy?”

Mrs Bennet blinked at her daughter. “Happy? Happy? Good gracious! How could I not be happy! ? Lord bless me! Only think! Who would have thought it! And is it really true? Oh my dearest girl! How rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! He will be an Earl! I am sure his father’s life is not worth much purchase – Oh Mr Bingley is nothing to him -- nothing at all. I am so pleased -- so happy. Such a charming man! -- so handsome! so tall! -- A house in town! Everything that is charming!”

“Mama, you should not speak so of Lord Matlock!” admonished Kitty.

“No, no, you are quite right, being a viscount is nothing to sneeze at, and I am only assuming he is rich, after all these titled people sometimes run through all their money, though I am sure your father would have checked such a thing!”

“Mama, I am sure that…” Jane’s calm words were cut off.

“He does know how we are situated, does he not?” said Lizzy still sounding quite distant.

“And how are we situated?” asked a new voice. Clara had, after disposing of the gentlemen and Miss Darcy in the parlour, and ensuring Mrs Phillips and Mrs Long were confined to another room, come up to see her nieces and sister-in-law

“£1000 pounds in 4 per cents is all we can ever aspire to! Is that something an Earl’s family would accept?” said Lizzy.

“Well, my dear,” smiled Clara, “you do have a wealthy aunt with neither chick nor child of her own, where do you think she will leave her money?”

Everyone stared at Clara.
“You expected me not to share my fortune with you all? Of course I understand bequeathing you £10 000 each is not considered a great deal and I do hope you will forgive me that – “

“Aunt!” said Jane, voicing the astonishment in the room.

“Clara, I had no notion you were worth quite so much…” said Mrs Bennet looking faint.

“I have had little to do with my money these ten years, so it has accumulated; it is certainly not a paltry sum and would be quite acceptable to most,” replied Clara calmly.

“Lord!” exclaimed Lydia, “Wait until I tell the officers that I am worth £10 000!”

“Of course, I should not count on it; I would have to approve of your suitors. So do not think you can throw yourself away on some lowly officer, Miss Lydia!”

“Oh, nothing but a Marquis will suit me now!” cried Lydia.

Mrs Bennet cried with happiness before racing downstairs. Her daughters made to follow but Kitty, who had finished tidying her hair, stopped by her aunt.

“Aunt, I am so very grateful.”

“Hush, there is nothing to be grateful about! You are my family and of course I wish to see you happy.”

“It is just that I hope that – “

Clara guessed what Kitty was thinking. “The man was in love with you from almost the first, and you know him too well to think any amount of money or lack thereof would have stopped him having what he wanted!”

Kitty smiled and kissed her aunt.

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Mr Bennet was attempting to make conversation with his guests, but the conversation was stilted as he was consumed by curiosity with what was happening upstairs.

“I am very glad that Kitty sustained no injury! I should of course have realised that Phoebe was far too fidgety to be anything but a farm horse!”

“Yes, I am so glad that Fitzwilliam was with us!” said Georgiana.

“Yes, Mr Darcy, I am very grateful,” echoed Mr Bennet.

The object of their praise looked very embarrassed. “She was really in no danger. If you do not mind, Mr Bennet, I shall see what is keeping my cousin with that drink.”

Darcy slipped out of the room and made off in what he hoped was the direction of the library. He certainly hoped he would not run into Mrs Phillips who had spent the ride back to Longbourn staring at him. He knew that stare and it was an unwelcome one unless of course it related to Lizzy and himself.

Ash had volunteered to fetch them all a drink upon returning and had not been seen since. Perhaps he had fallen into the clutches of Mrs Phillips or, worse, Mrs Long!
But he was safe, merely browsing Mr Bennet’s eclectic library.

“Ash.”

“That would be my name.”

“I must apologise.”

Ash turned at that – “For?”

“For?” Darcy looked startled; was there more than one thing to apologise for?

Ash sighed. “I should not play games with you, should I? But you will have to be more specific.”

“You mean I shall have to own more fully to my mistakes? Very well. I apologise for my insupportable behaviour towards yourself and Kitty.”

“Kitty?” Ash raised an eyebrow.

“I have already apologised to her.”

“So I gathered. I did not really expect you were making advances to her in a field. Although you do have a habit of doing so with Bennet girls.” Ash put down his glass, “Did she accept your apology?”

“Yes.”

“Am I to assume it was a longer apology than the one you just offered me?”

Darcy felt like loosening his cravat, “Yes it was, and I shall not repeat it to you.”

“I do not need it repeated.”

“Then I do ask you forgive me. I have behaved appallingly for quite some time.”

Ash looked startled at Darcy’s speech. Darcy continued, “Indeed for all of my life!”

“I should of course have forgiven you long before this and I would have if the insult had just been directed at myself. But I expect that is my fault. We do all have them, Darcy.” Ash paused, “And you have not behaved appallingly for all of your life, there was that one time you stole my toy soldiers, but apart from that you led an exemplary childhood.”

Ash looked so earnest indeed that Darcy laughed. “I am truly very sorry.” There was a pause. “But I have not expressed to you properly my regret. I did not explain this to Kitty not because I do not think she would understand, but because it should have been said to you first. I was very angry with myself for saying such things. But you did not make it any better, especially since your words to be about Georgiana were so true. I did not protect her as I should. I did conceal from her family what had happened because I was ashamed that I could not protect her! I should have of course told you about it.”

“No, you should not have.”

Darcy frowned, “But was this not what the argument was about?”

“Darcy, I was angry that I was not consulted. Again, my besetting sin! But I was more worried about your pride affecting Georgiana, and if you had acted solely for her best interest then no, you
should not have consulted me!”

“You trust my judgement then?”

“Yes. I do trust your judgement; I always have. Apart from that situation and the last months, you have had impeccable judgement. Wickham, and I believe he was part and parcel of this situation also, is an irritant to your character Darcy and you should not let him be so.”

Darcy allowed his cousin to pour him a glass of brandy. “Believe me when I tell you that if I was ever brought to point non plus, I would certainly turn to you.”

“I should hope you would before you came to an untenable situation; after all I would not rely on me to bring you about – but you are a Darcy I suppose you would not ask for help until you had to.”

Darcy sat down on the sofa, sighing with relief. “I am so very glad that you have forgiven me, and Kitty has forgiven me and Georgiana has forgiven me and Bingley has forgiven me…now if only….”

Ash blinked at the amount of people Darcy had been requiring forgiveness from. “Well, with all that practice how could it be otherwise?”

Darcy laughed. “From your lips to God’s ears!”

“My lord!” Mrs Bennet burst through the door. “My lord!”

“Mrs Bennet!”

“Oh!” Mrs Bennet did not quite know what to say. Luckily her husband arrived.

“I think what my wife means to say is she is very happy to welcome you to the family!”

“Indeed, I am, sir! Indeed, I am!”

“It is I who should be happy at joining your family.”

“Oh no, you are too kind!” Then Mrs Bennet broke off and seemed to recollect something! “Oh gracious, it is such a pity that it is Sunday, otherwise of course you would stay for dinner!”

“I am sure – “ started Darcy, earning him a surprised look from Mr Bennet, but Mrs Bennet cut him off.

“Oh it is for the best for there is not a bit of fish to be got!”

“Indeed, ma’am, and I believe Mr Bingley has invited you all for dinner tomorrow night. I am sure it would be much pleasanter for you not to have to be thinking about planning, instead being able to enjoy the evening.”

Mrs Bennet beamed at her future son-in-law. “Oh it would! Plus it is so much nicer at my sister’s house!”

Clara entered the room to be surprised at being hailed as a sister. “Mr Bingley’s house, sister,” she corrected.

“Well it is not Mr Bingley’s house! He has only leased it!”

Mr Bingley walked in to hear this and looked in some confusion as to how he had become the
centre of the conversation.

Mrs Bennet did not look mortified that Mr Bingley had heard her, for that good lady had probably never felt true mortification in her life, but she certainly felt flustered. How would Jane catch him? But then, with Jane’s £10 000 she could do better than Mr Bingley’s £5000 per annum! Then Mrs Bennet reflected on how much time and effort she had put into promoting the match with Mr Bingley and how taken Jane was and realised it was better to put the effort into finding good matches for her other girls.

“We are so glad that you have invited us for dinner tomorrow, Mr Bingley, especially now that we have such an event to celebrate!”

“A celebration?”

“Yes, did you not know? My dear Lord Ashbourne has offered for Kitty!”

Mr Bingley could not have been happier if it were he that was to be married and offered his congratulations and offered his condolences that it was a Sunday and no fish was to be got. The party left shortly afterwards, but not before Mrs Bennet insisted on the engaged couple being left alone in the library.

Kitty threw her arms around Ash. “How I could kiss Darcy!”

Ash laughed. “Should I be jealous?”

“If not for him being absurd and hateful I should never have been able to tell my mother, and be able to be alone with you in this way!”

With that they both found something more agreeable to be doing than talking of Darcy.

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“Brother! Miss Darcy! Gentlemen! Where have you been?” Caroline Bingley’s voice pierced through the conversation in the entrance hall.

“Where is Mrs Sutton?” asked Louisa as she entered the room.

“Mrs Sutton chose to remain at Longbourn, after all they will be coming to dinner tomorrow.”

“Oh,” was all Caroline could bear to say on that subject. “But this does not explain where you have been practically all day!”

“We went for a ride with the young ladies from Longbourn, “ replied the Colonel.

“Oh and there is such news!” exclaimed Bingley.

“News, brother?” asked Louisa as she helped shepherd the group from the hall.

“We shall be celebrating a wedding tomorrow!”

Caroline froze. Charles had proposed?

“Well not the actual wedding,” continued Charles, “but the announcement of such! I could not be more delighted if it were my own.”
Caroline breathed a sigh of relief. Charles had not proposed. So who had? Darcy? No he was still looking as stern as ever surely he would not look like that if he had proposed – unless he realised what a mistake he had made – but who on earth would he propose to?

No. It must be some man – Caroline hesitated to say gentleman – who had proposed to one of the younger Miss Bennets. Kitty Bennet had thrown herself at enough men in town for it to be her.

“I look forward to wishing them very happy!” Caroline smiled.

“Well you can wish Lord Ashbourne happy now if you like!” cried Charles.

“Lord Ashbourne?” said Caroline faintly. She of course never really expected Lord Ashbourne to ever look her way, but it was still a blow to hear that he was engaged but – Caroline paused her train of thought, but, but….he could not have offered for one of the Bennet girls? Could he?

“My rogue of a brother has marched before everyone and snatched Miss Catherine Bennet away from, I dare say, a score of disappointed gentlemen!”

Caroline felt the blood drain out of her face. “Miss Catherine Bennet?”

“Indeed, Miss Bingley,” said Mr Darcy. “Perhaps you would like to call for some refreshments so we could make a toast.”

“You are – happy with this news, Mr Darcy?” asked Louisa.

“Of course I am. He is the best of cousins and she is the best of women.”

At this pronouncement Caroline Bingley did the only thing she could think to do in such a situation. She fainted.

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1 Mainly Austen’s words. Mrs Bennet is so hard to write without going too far to one side of the pendulum that I had to resort to the master’s hand.

back to story

***&&***
Chapter 44

***&&***

My dear Lydia! I have heard the news; it is swirling around Meryton as we speak! £10 000! I wish someone would have died and left me £10 000! All the officers are violently in love with you! Not that they weren’t before, my dear, but now of course they speak of it openly. Wickham has quite cast off Mary King, because who could like such a nasty freckled thing when you have money, my dear? I do hope that you shall come to Meryton and satisfy the officers, they have been bemoaning your loss! And do pass on my sincere congratulations to your sister! To catch a viscount would have taken work indeed. The officers have all claimed they are violently in love with her too, and I dare say would offer her some distraction if marriage is found to be too boring…

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“What a hateful woman!” cried Kitty, reading Mrs Forster’s letter over Lydia’s shoulder.

“Well, she hasn’t seen your viscount, otherwise she could hardly suppose you would ever be bored with him!” replied Lydia.

“But to write such things to you! It’s grossly improper!”

Lydia looked at her sister, “Are you going to forbid me to speak to her again?”

“I should!”

“Well I shouldn’t listen!”

“You would if you thought a trip to London was at stake!”

“No, I wouldn’t!” retorted Lydia. “Besides, I am sure following your lead, Jane will soon announce her engagement and she is too kind to refuse to invite me to London!”

Kitty sat down on her bed; the previous night she had no chance to talk to any of her sisters as her mother had babbled at her right until the moment Kitty fell asleep and that moment came sometime after Kitty had feigned sleep.

“Do you think Mr Bingley will propose?”

“Why would he not? He has no reason not to propose?”

“Then why has he not proposed!” exclaimed Kitty.

Any response Lydia might have had was not uttered as one of the subjects of their conversation entered the room.

Jane smiled at Kitty. “Mama gave me no chance last night to truly congratulate you! You will be very happy!”

“I am very happy!” laughed Kitty.

Jane sat down on Lydia’s bed and looked at her sister complacently. She was very happy for Kitty. She had always wondered if Kitty had always preferred Lord Ashbourne, and for Jane there was no wondering at any one admiring Kitty!
Lizzy sat down next to Jane. “But Kitty you must tell us all about it, after all I had no notion—“

“Lord, Lizzy, no notion? She could speak of nothing but the man!” cried Lydia. “But perhaps that was only in her letters to me.”

Kitty frowned at Lydia’s clear attempt to ensure her elder sisters knew that they had not been part of her confidence. “I did not write of nothing else in my letters!”

“I am sure you think that you did not!” replied Lydia.

“Well, it would hardly be surprising if you did!” said Jane smiling.

“Are you quite sure you have accepted him for the right reasons, Kitty?” said Lizzy suddenly.

Kitty could sense that Lizzy was comparing her strength in refusing Darcy despite his wealth, or possibly thinking she had made a mistake in not accepting Darcy!

“What are the right reasons, Lizzy?”

“That he will make you happy, that you love him?” replied Lizzy.

“Well, I can certainly say I have accepted Ash for the right reasons.” Kitty could have gone on to explain her courtship in more detail, but that was private and since Lizzy had not shared hers then Kitty saw no reason to do the same.

Lizzy gave a wan smile.

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Ash sat at the breakfast table, and politely inquired of Bingley whether his sister had recovered.

It had been his brother’s unenviable duty, as the closest gentleman, to catch Miss Bingley as she fell and to carry her to her bedchamber.

“Yes, her maid and Louisa tell me she is quite recovered. I have never seen a ball knock her up so!”

Richard coughed, earning him an amused glance from Ash and a confused one from Bingley.

“You think my sister’s indisposition was not a result of the ball?” queried Bingley.

Darcy entered the room on this question and looked enquiringly at Richard to see how he was going to answer such a question, a question that Bingley thought was completely innocent.

Richard’s response was to look pleadingly at Ash.

“My brother, I believe, thinks… as I think … that your sister was more likely to be overwhelmed by my graceless brother’s announcement last night of my engagement to Catherine Bennet than the ball.”

“You think Caroline is displeased that you are engaged?”

Ash paused before answering, so Darcy answered for him with a blunt – “Yes!”

“You do? I would understand if it was Darcy, after all I believe she – esteems him.”
Darcy looked uncomfortable at the idea of Miss Bingley esteeming him but remained silent.

Indeed, none of the party wished to open Bingley’s eyes to his sister’s character. She could hardly be unmoved by the fact that a person she had been slandering all over London would be advantageously married and would be in a close familiar relationship to Darcy though not the one that she hoped to attain herself.

“To change the subject slightly, speaking from my new position, I must ask you, Bingley, what your intentions are towards Jane Bennet.”

Bingley blinked and coloured. “My intentions?”

“Your intentions, sir, are we to become brothers-in-law?”

Bingley was rendered speechless for a moment but then recovered, “I am not sure that it is your right to ask such a question….my lord.”

“You doubt it is my right?” replied Ash recovering his military command voice that he had resigned some time ago.

“W-well, I fully intend to marry Jane!”

Darcy sighed. “I do not think we ever doubted that, Charles! Well perhaps recently we may have, considering your very odd behaviour!”

“Odd?”

“Sir Christian!” exclaimed Richard.

“Sir Christian is not odd!” said Bingley defensively.

“There are many who would disagree with you!” shot back Darcy, enjoying having Bingley being the one cross-examined for once.

“Discounting your strange behaviour with Sir Christian, you have had ample opportunity to secure your interest with the young lady! Or were you perhaps waiting for an announcement from her aunt regarding her fortune?” Ash wiped his fingers on a cloth napkin and calmly looked at Bingley.

He made a direct hit, Bingley’s spine stiffened and he looked outraged. “Are you implying that I am only interested in whatever Mrs Sutton chooses to leave Jane?”

“Are you denying it?” Ash asked smoothly.

“Not only am I denying it; I am within an ames-ace of calling you out!” Bingley had gone red in the face.

“Pistols or swords?” responded Ash blithely.

Bingley who had risen from the table, looked startled and then gave a laugh, “Neither, I know your reputation too well.”

“Oh I assure you Darcy is a better fencer than I!”

“I shall not risk it!” Bingley sat back down, “But that was offensive!”

“Of course it was; at least now I know you do intend at some point to come up to scratch, and that
you do not covet wealth, now I just have to discover what precisely is keeping you.”

Bingley looked at his hands.

Darcy looked at Bingley, “Well it is not the result of my former opinion!”

“No, no!” cried Bingley.

“Then what is it?” asked Richard.

Bingley looked as though he was going to confess, when the ladies joined them.

There was a flurry of activity as everyone asked after their health, especially Miss Bingley’s.

“Thank you for your concern, there is no need I am feeling much better this morning!” said Miss Bingley, with a note of falseness in her gaiety.

Ash noticed the smile threatened to fall off her face when Georgiana asked him if they would be going to Longbourn that morning.

“Oh but they are coming here this evening!” said Miss Bingley.

“And they are coming quite early!” said Bingley, “I insisted upon it!”

Ash did not miss the defiant note in Bingley’s voice or the look that accompanied it. He smiled.

“I think you have your answer, Georgie!” he said lightly.

“Well, if they are coming early then that is acceptable!” she replied smiling.

“I hope you are not regretting your decision,” said Miss Bingley suddenly.

Ash’s forehead creased. “Regretting my decision?”

“Mrs Bennet is very effusive.” Miss Bingley sipped her tea. “She has probably informed the entire village of her very good fortune! In fact she has probably informed them twice, and will not scruple to speak of all the intimate details.”

“I hope she speaks of my very good fortune,” smiled Ash.

“Your good fortune?” Miss Bingley attempted to give a look of artless confusion, “She is, I daresay, a very good sort of girl, but well for a young lady of her condition to be marrying you – I am quite sure her mother and herself hold themselves very lucky.”

Ash formulated a very cutting response in his head, but again Darcy interceded.

“But, Miss Bingley, I know you consider £10 000 an acceptable fortune for a gentleman of my, or my cousin’s, position. You have told me so often.”

Miss Bingley choked on her tea. “£10 000!”?

“Miss Bingley, it was you who told me of Mrs Sutton’s owning Netherfield; surely you must have expected such a thing?” Darcy, in Ash’s opinion, looked extremely smug.

“But it is entailed!? In use for her own lifetime!”

“No such thing!” responded Bingley.
“She is in debt! I saw her books!”

Bingley looked sharply at his sister. “Caroline, what do you know about reading estate books? And it is very improper to read private papers!”

Ash buttered his toast. “I have seen her estate books, and she is not in debt, far from it. I do hope you take my word for that, Miss Bingley. I hope you do not think I do not know how to read estate papers?”

Miss Bingley at this state had turned red – “But – But – I – “

“You what, Caroline? You have not shared this faulty information with others, have you?” Bingley might be naïve, but he did know his sister well.

Miss Bingley turned white. “I – I – I have £20 000! I told you £20 000 was an acceptable sum for a gentleman of your position.”

The rest of the table stared at Miss Bingley, including her sister who looked alarmed at her indiscretion.

Darcy smiled. “I forgot, I apologise, but I have rarely considered your financial situation. And what is half such a sum when a man makes such a cake of himself over the young lady he loves?”

Miss Bingley turned to stare at Darcy in horror, she was not a fool either; that statement was not restrictive to Ash, indeed it could apply to three of the gentlemen sitting at the table in relation to Bennet sisters.

It was no surprise that Miss Bingley unsteadily excused herself from the table, her sister rapidly following her lead.

When they had departed, Darcy turned to his friend, “I apologise, Bingley, that was uncalled for.”

“No, I do not think it was!” responded Bingley. “I think she has been spreading malicious gossip! It is all her friends ever speak of; they come to my town house and sit around slandering people, and when one of them fails to show, they slander her!!”

“Excuse me!” said Georgiana looked affronted.

Darcy started, having apparently forgotten his sister was present, then recovered himself enough to smile, “Are you implying, Georgie, that you are Miss Bingley’s friend?”

The affronted look did not leave Georgiana’s face, but she was forced to laugh after a moment or two.

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Miss Bingley unsurprisingly chose not to grace anyone with her presence that evening, until absolutely necessary and was so unfailingly polite to everyone that Lizzy was forced to whisper to Jane that Miss Bingley was clearly ill.

Fortunately this had been during one of Mary’s concertos, so Jane’s giggle had been obscured.

“That was excellent, Mary!” cried Mrs Bennet, when it was over. “It is such a pity that Lydia was feeling poorly this evening, otherwise I dare say she could have given us a performance, too! Indeed it is funny that I mention Lydia, because, my lord, you may not have noticed, but I did think perhaps she would please you! I did not know then that you had your eye on quite my
favourite child!”

Kitty stared at her mother, quite taken back at this sudden elevation in the family pecking order. Jane did not look as if she minded her descent.

“In fact, I must be persuaded that you are good enough for my darling girl! Do come sit by me and tell me all about your family!”

Jane hid a smile at Kitty’s look of horror as Mrs Bennet proceeded to interrogate Lord Ashbourne. She also had to hide another look of amusement when Mr Darcy kept interrupting to tell their mother of some exploit or other of his cousin, Lizzy’s eyes had practically leapt out of their sockets! Lizzy even moved closer to the group to watch him!

Mr Bingley had been called away from the room for a moment and when he returned he had with him Sir Christian Montgomery.

“Er – “ Mr Bingley looked as though he would rather be somewhere else.

“Good evening! When Bingles – you don’t mind if I call you Bingles? – said he was having a dinner tonight, and that my dear singing partner was to be the guest of honour after announcing her engagement to the viscount here, how could I not attend?”

Kitty stood to greet Sir Christian. “Indeed how could you not? I am sorry I had no chance to speak to you at the Assembly the other night!”

Sir Christian glanced at Bingley, “Well I could tell when I was not wanted!” This brought a snort from the direction of the piano! “Ah if it isn’t my favourite Bennet sister! Though you were quite naughty not to tell me your name after hitting me with that book, though you see I have discovered it!”

Everyone stared at Mary, who for the first time in her life went a shade of crimson.

“Sir Christian,” said Darcy in an exasperated tone, “what are you doing here?”

“Attending Bingles’ excellent party! I missed the dinner on purpose as to not put his cook out!” Sir Christian paused, “Or do you mean what are we doing here? In which case I cannot help you as I did not pay attention to philosophy at Cambridge – I was too busy with – “

“Yes, yes!” injected Mrs Sutton. “Only a fool could think Darcy wished to engage in a theological and philosophical debate with you!”

“Well, Bingles invited me! He wished to take more control of his business affairs don’t-you-know! Organise things…for when a certain desirable event takes place.”

Sir Christian turned to kiss his hand at Jane, who tried not to burst out laughing at the chagrined look on Mr Bingley’s face.

“Sir Christian – I had not – I have not – “

“You have not asked her? What are you waiting for?” cried Sir Christian. “We have worked everything out perfectly! Even found someone upon which to turf those lamentable siste’s of yours – good evening, Miss Bingley! Mrs Hurst! – so your angel would not be upset by their behaviour!”

“Sir Christian please!” cried Bingley before turning to Jane. “Miss Bennet may I beg a moment of your time, if that would be acceptable, Mr Bennet?”
Mr Bennet gave so sign of disapproval, in fact Jane thought her father looked as though he had never had so much fun in his life.

Jane calmly stood and followed Mr Bingley out of the room, but not before catching Mr Darcy whispering to Lord Ashbourne – “Was this your idea?”

To which Lord Ashbourne replied – “My idea? I have no idea of what you speak, my stroll this afternoon definitely did not take me anywhere near the inn!”

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Bingley had never felt so nervous in his life. “Jane?”

“Yes, Charles,” replied Jane sitting on the sofa in his library. She had her hands folded primly on her lap and was giving him the most searching look.

“I – I –I….”

“Was what Sir Christian implied untrue?”

She sounded so calm, but it did little for Bingley’s nerves.

“No! Of course – I have admired you from the moment we first met – I – er – “

“Do you not want to marry me, Charles?”

Bingley’s voice stuck in his throat.

“I would very much like to marry you!” Jane looked at him directly.

“Would you by jove? I would very much like to marry you? Will you be my wife, Jane?” Bingley sank onto the sofa next to Jane and unclasped her hands to clasp them himself.

Jane looked down at her lap and then back at Bingley. “Yes, I will be your wife.”

Bingley took this as his cue to kiss her, something he had wanted to do from the moment he first laid eyes on such a serene and beautiful angel.

“Charles?” Jane asked softly when she felt that if she kissed Bingley any more she would really be breaking the rules of propriety. “Can you explain what Sir Christian meant when he was talking of you?”

Bingley sighed. “Darcy tried to tell me that you did not care for me, and I believed him! I was weak and allowed myself to be persuaded away. Do not think too badly of him because he was trying to persuade himself away from your sister, and when I discovered his behaviour I realised just how…weak I had been. I decided I needed to take control of my fortune, my business and my life.”

Bingley took a breath. “I realised what Darcy had done and why he had done it after he spoke ill of – well I shall not repeat what occurred – but it was at Whites and I bespoke myself a glass of port and took a seat near Sir Christian. I may have had too many glasses of port and before I knew it I was pouring out my story to him. So he decided to help me after I decided I could not ask you to marry me until I had straightened myself out! “

“I see, “said Jane, “But why were you so secretive of it?”
“Well, Sir Christian for one! I own he is a very good sort of man, indeed I would say bar one thing, the very best of men, but I will admit he is not a person one should introduce to ladies! I could hardly claim an acquaintance with him and not introduce him to you – or my sisters! My sisters were my other reason for not wishing to speak until everything was a fait accompli. I think they like me to be beholden to Darcy, not to mention I do not think Caroline, or Louisa for that matter, will like the idea of having to set up their own establishment and not rely upon me. I know it is my duty as their brother, but I cannot allow myself to be – “

“I understand Charles,” said Jane quietly, “But I do wish for you to know how worried I was that – “

“Worried?” Bingley looked upset.

“I thought perhaps I had upset you? That I had flirted too much or…”

“Jane, no! You could never upset me!” Bingley took a deep breath, “I am so sorry, Jane! It is just I could not ask you to marry me, after I had been so easily persuaded, if I had not convinced myself I was worthy of you, that I would be able to support you, that I would not expose you to – “

Jane squeezed Bingley’s hands. “I understand. You wished to make things perfect, but Charles… you forgot one thing?”

Bingley looked curious.

“I only need one thing for my life to be perfect; you!”

Jane might think that kissing Bingley any more tonight would constitute a grave breech of societal mores, but it was clear Bingley did not have such scruples!

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With the exception of Bingley’s sisters, and they were far too shocked by recent events to say little more than whispered congratulations, everyone was delighted with Jane and Bingley’s engagement.

It added the celebratory feel to the night, and it was well into the morning before any of Longbourn’s residents found their beds. Indeed, Kitty stumbled into room without so much as a candle and barely undressed before falling into a deep sleep. After all, she had promised to accompany Ash on a walk the next day.

It was barely still morning when Kitty awoke to an empty room, Lydia having most likely gone into Meryton, or was with Mrs Bennet, who no doubt was keeping to her room and acting with all the pride and pomp of a lady with two daughters very well engaged. As Kitty went downstairs it looked as if only the servants were awake, which was understandable: if Kitty had not made a promise, she would still be abed!

Kitty enjoyed a long ramble, laughing as Ash, now that they were alone, divulged what had occurred at the breakfast table the previous day to make Miss Bingley so very quiet and red-faced.

She had never felt quite so happy before in her life. It was well into the afternoon before they pair made their way back to Longbourn, only to be greeted by a distressed Hill.

“Oh miss!” cried Hill.

“Hill, what is it? Is my mother ill?”
“Oh…” Hill looked cautiously at Ash. “I think you had better come in, Miss.”

Ash frowned as he followed Kitty into the parlour.

Most of the family was gathered there, including Bingley, Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Strangely, to Kitty, Colonel Forster was also standing by one of windows. Mrs Bennet had sunk onto one of the couches.

“It is all your fault!” she gasped glaring at her sister-in-law, who must have arrived with the gentlemen from Netherfield.

“My fault?”

“You teased my poor girl with your money! Teased her! She would never have done such a thing if she did not think she would ….”


Mrs Bennet merely began to sob.

As Mr Bennet looked grave, Kitty turned to her sisters, “Lizzy, Jane? What has happened.”

“Lydia,” said Lizzy looking devastated, “has eloped with Mr Wickham.”

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Denny,

I do dislike to leave in such a rush, but certain circumstances beyond my control have arisen. Some person, no doubt some gentleman upset with my talents with the ladies, has informed on me to the Colonel. Colonel F has been watching my every move over the last week, and I do not doubt he has discovered actions, while perfectly acceptable you understand, that he feels might undermine the position of the regiment. I will of course reimburse you for the money I borrowed from you. Adieu until some later date, my dear friend.

Wickham

P.S Do not fear that I shall be lonely on the journey I have amply provided for that eventuality.

“But it is impossible!” exclaimed Kitty clutching the note that Colonel Forster had either found before Lieutenant Denny, or that gentleman had handed it over to his commanding officer.

“My dear girl would never have acted in such a way if she had not been provoked!” wailed Mrs Bennet.

“Mama, please!” cried Kitty looking at Ash who looked equally confused. “I would like to hear the particulars! Why does this note mean that Lydia has eloped?”

“She is not in the house,” replied Jane, sounding more distressed than Kitty had ever seen her.

“She is never in the house! She is most likely in Meryton buying the most outrageous puce bonnet to wear at our weddings!”

“No, Kitty. She went off to Meryton yesterday, and was gone for most of the day, did you not find that strange?”

“She had a letter from Mrs Forster! A grossly impertinent and rude letter, but when has Lydia ever minded that!” Kitty then realised she had spoken so in front of the grossly impertinent and rude letter writer’s husband. “I do apologise Colonel, but it was an exceptionally impertinent letter!”

“Please do not apologise, I have no doubt that it was,” replied Colonel Forster in the tone of a man who has long realised he married a stupid woman. “However, my wife says she did not see Miss Lydia yesterday.”

Kitty blinked. “Well that does not mean – “

“I must say I found it strange that Lydia did not wish to come to Netherfield,” commented Bingley. “I always thought she enjoyed parties immensely.”

“She had the headache!” replied Kitty.

“Lydia never has the headache,” injected Mary in a moralising tone.

“I am afraid Kitty that Wickham was seen departing, in the middle of the night, with a female companion,” said Darcy gravely; looking grateful he had left Georgiana still asleep at Netherfield.
“Who says it was Lydia!” replied Kitty heatedly. Lydia would not elope with Wickham; she knew what kind of man he was! She knew! Lydia had her sights set on a lord – a marquis! – and Lydia never lowered her standards!

“I am afraid, Kitty, that she does.” Mr Bennet handed to Kitty a note that was clearly written in her sister’s hand.

At any other moment, Kitty would have been overjoyed that she was so trusted and included in family affairs. Before her engagement, no perhaps it was more before her visit to her aunt, she would have been considered too childish and silly to be included in such discussions.

Kitty sank down on an unoccupied sofa, not before shooting a desperate look at Ash, who had walked over to confer with the gentlemen.

She turned her attention to the note.

*My dearest sister, you will laugh when you read this! This morning my darling hero, darling, darling Wickham, he is so handsome in his red coat, you know how I admire it so! I also love his way with ladies. He is so thoughtful and kind, always thinking of others and how to divest them of worries that weigh so heavily upon them. But I digress, my darling hero, while I was calling on the officers, dragged me into a linen closet. Upon this action I fainted, to receive such harsh and firm treatment from my love! Once I revived he begged me, for the sake of his life, to fly to the border, in the wee hours of the morning, where we would throw ourselves over the anvil and be wed! To be blunt, we would become man and wife and live in a cottage and raise pigs. (which I of course would name after my dear brothers-in-law!) Wickham assured me, he had always felt me quite above his touch, and he was cast into agony upon hearing of my Aunt’s bequest, but he realised then that he had always loved me and he did not care tuppence about the difference in our station. You can imagine what I felt on such an occasion! I felt quite faint, but I rallied my spirits and asked him – why be married? Mary Wollstonecraft did not feel bound by such archaic institutions with Gilbert Imlay! And so I told Wickham, if we love each other, we need only ourselves and the pigs to be truly happy! He shall farm the land and I shall wander through the forest, randomly reciting poetry to the small fawns that shall follow me everywhere!*

The note was incomplete. Kitty stared at it for a moment. “Of all the fustian nonsense! You did not take this seriously?”

“Seriously? Our sister has eloped!” cried Lizzy.

“She has not eloped!”

“Well where is she?” said Colonel Fitzwilliam reasonably.

“I do not know, but she has not run off with Wickham! Why would she do that?”

“She is a foolish, foolish girl. I who might have prevented it!” Lizzy strode to the window hugging herself.

“Oh, who will stand by my girls now!” cried Mrs Bennet, who had been rendered almost inanimate, and was only Mary’s waving harts-horn under her nose. Mrs Bennet sat up only to grasp Bingley and Ash’s hand looking at them imploringly.

Both of the gentlemen immediately reassured their future mother-in-law.

“This has not been broadcast further than the occupants of this room, I trust?” said Ash calmly.
“Lieutenant Denny knows of Wickham’s flight, and I daresay a dozen or so others of the officers, but none of them knew the identity of the lady, not knowing that Wickham was even to fly until the deed was done,” replied Colonel Forster.

“Your servants are to be trusted, I assume, Mr Bennet?”

Her father looked pale and old and Kitty’s’ heart went out to him. “I believe only Hill knows our sad news. The rest of the servants think Lydia is out walking.”

“I should keep it that way if I were you, Mr Bennet,” replied Ash.

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Lizzy looked out of the window, wishing the awful feeling pooling in her stomach would disappear but it would not.

She had barely, the night before, come to terms with the fact that so far from disliking Mr Darcy that instead her feelings – she did not quite know when but they had undergone some change.

All she knew was the feeling of jealous that occurred when Darcy had lifted Kitty from her horse and stood there for quite some time in close conversation with her. And the, at the time, unidentifiable and uncontrollable feeling that had overcome her when her mother had insisted that Kitty marry Darcy!

She had not been able to stem her words, so insistent was she that Kitty should not marry Darcy!

Lizzy did not know precisely what it was that had changed her opinion of the man, it was so subtle. The discovery of the fact that she had wronged him, the fact that he was a good brother, seeing him in the company of his family, his friends! Even seeing his discomfort here at the Longbourn dinner and seeing his constant glances at her, and knowing his discomfort was more to do with her presence than any feelings of disgust he had for her family. His actions last night in teasing his cousin and willingly conversing with her mother!

More so, even though she had had the irrational urge to charge down the hill and pull Kitty away from him, the way Darcy had clearly treated Kitty like any member of his family.

However, it was not as though if Darcy threw himself prostrate on the floor, telling her once again of his ardent love and emotion that she would accept his advances. Lizzy was still unsure of that. It was that she wished to know him better. By being better acquainted with him she felt she had grown to know him better, and she had no desire for that to stop.

But now it would inevitably stop. How could she expect him to continue a courtship with a lady when first he did not know she would now welcome the courtship and second that lady’s family was suffering under a grievous reverse of fortune. Stupid, stupid Lydia!

Lizzy turned to look at the room. Mary and Jane were hovering over Mrs Bennet, who while not loud managed to fill the room with her murmured fears. Her father sat in a chair looking as if he did not see what was in front of him. The gentlemen were conversing in low tones, no doubt about the situation and what was to be done.

Kitty was sitting staring at her sister’s letter, and their aunt was examining it over her shoulder.

Kitty! Jane! Oh selfish Lydia, she had ruined more than her own reputation! She had heard the gentlemen’s reassurance to her mother, but she could not hope to believe it.

Bingley was not likely to abandon Jane, but she did not know Lord Ashbourne; she had met him
at the picnic, and now that he had come to Longbourn. An acquaintance of four days! While she prided herself on first impressions, a talent that had been severely rocked by both Wickham and Darcy, she had not the least notion of Lord Ashbourne’s character.

He was a nobleman and a gentleman. Lizzy would not dispute that, but he was also the heir to a title and a position in society. Kitty was a gentleman’s daughter, she was not a nobleman’s daughter, did that constitute quitting her sphere? Lizzy did not know. A couple of months ago she would have had difficulty imagining Kitty as the mistress of any household, but now she thought Kitty would manage, but to manage such a large household?

Would he marry her if her family was ruined, which indubitably it was?

Kitty brow furrowed looked up from the note, and rushed out of the room. Lord Ashbourne followed her and Lizzy looked away out of the window.

She was sure wherever Kitty had gone, it would be a painful scene, and she who could have prevented it! She who knew Wickham’s character, knew that he was in Meryton spreading the most vicious gossip about Darcy’s character! She knew he was a fortune hunter! She knew!

Lydia who had nothing but love, flirtation, and officers in her head! How could Lizzy blame her for for falling for his charm and seductions when she herself could not see his true character! She who prided herself on such things!

It was too much to be borne. Lizzy had to leave the room which had become too stifling.

***&&***

Kitty looked around her bedchamber. She threw upon the closet and opened the trunks. Nothing had been taken.

Lydia would not elope with nothing. She might think she could buy better clothes once married, but she was not so featherheaded as wish to make a flight to Scotland, or wherever, uncomfortable by having no change of clothes. And she would hardly trust a gentleman to provide her with clothes. Lydia did not think highly of anybody else’s sense of fashion – man or woman!

“Kitty.”

Kitty turned to see Ash. “She has not eloped!”

“You are certain of that?”

“She is my sister! I told her Wickham’s character. She would not! She has not taken anything but left this letter!”

Ash took the letter from Kitty and glanced at it. “I can see why you think this is a faradiddle! Pray why is your sister the heroine of one of Radcliffe’s novels? That one with the forest and the tedious fainting female? She randomly sang to fawns…”


“She really is a tiresome girl.”

“Adeline or my sister?”

“Both!” replied Ash.
“Well I am afraid that letter is my fault! I started it!”

Ash looked quizzical, so Kitty went to her trunk and pulled out Lydia’s letters to her, and found in Lydia’s dresser Kitty’s letters to her.

Leafing through them, Ash raised his eyebrows. “I think you both have a talent, one I am afraid you will waste as my wife. I really cannot have my wife writing gothic romance novels!”

“Would you forbid me?” Kitty challenged him.

“Once we are married you will have to obey my every command,” replied Ash. Ash expected a sharp retort to this; instead he got an armful of Kitty. “What is all this?”

Kitty mumbled into his coat, but Ash could make out the sentiment. He made her look at him while keeping one arm around her, “Do you think I would not marry you even if your sister had eloped? I would not care if your entire family suddenly became traitorous spies for the French!”

Ash idly looked at one of the letters more closely as he held Kitty close. “His magnificent steed mounted the Pyrenees with ease. His hair flowed in the moonlight - What the devil? I was never near the Pyrenees…especially at night!”

Kitty giggled, wisely not remarking on Ash’s assumption she had been speaking of him. “Lydia said my letters were boring, so I made them more interesting!”

“Are you implying my Army tales bored you? They bored your officer loving sister?” Ash was outraged.

Kitty giggled into his shoulder.

“What else have you written in here?”

There was a knock at the door; it was Darcy. “Ash.”

Ash released Kitty and followed Darcy into the hallway. “You were right. I handled Wickham incredibly ill, and now the Bennet family is paying for my mistakes.”

“Kitty does not think Lydia has eloped, indeed Kitty told her of Wickham’s character and while she is a shameless minx, I am unsure she is that much of a shameless minx!”

“Well where the deuce is she if she has not eloped? She was most certainly not here last night! Hill assured us her bed had not been slept in!”

“Clearly we must look for her then.” Ash paused. “Were you asking for my help?”

“You have more right in this situation than I!” replied Darcy. “But yes, I was asking for your help.”

Ash smiled.

Darcy returned the smile, glad that he had truly made peace with his cousin. “But I have been such a fool!”

“I have known you for a fool these past twenty-eight years!” Ash laughed, “It is not I you should be confessing this to!”

Darcy rolled his eyes, but allowed his cousin to lead him downstairs to consult with the other gentlemen.
Her father’s library was empty and cool. There Lizzy could sit and reflect. But it was not to be, she did not know how long she sat there before someone knocked and entered.

“Miss Bennet?”

Lizzy looked up. “Have the gentlemen decided upon a course of action?”

Darcy closed the door behind him. “Apart from shooting Wickham on sight? No, there has been no positive witness to your sister eloping with him, so we are to look for her.”

“No witness? Her own words!” Lizzy tried to hold back a sob. “I who could have prevented it! Wretched! Wretched mistake.”

“No, Miss Bennet!” said Darcy forcefully. “It was my mistake. I wished to conceal my failings as a brother, as a man! I told myself I wished to protect my sister, but I protected her above all other costs when there certainly were ways of exposing Wickham’s character to the world. This is my wretched mistake!”

Lizzy looked at Darcy with some surprise. She had never expected him to speak so openly on such a subject.

“You are surprised at my candour?”

“No, I – “ Lizzy found she had not the words.

“No, you are surprised at my candour and I can hardly find it within myself to blame you. I have made many mistakes. I was brought up with so much love, but with so much pride also! I was a conceited fool and you do not know half of the abominable things I have said and done! You are not to blame for Wickham’s actions and you are not to blame for mine! There is one thing Wickham and I have in common – “

“No!” exclaimed Lizzy. That any gentleman should compare themselves to Wickham was repugnant! That Darcy should compare himself was even more so!

“It is true, Miss Bennet. We both have the incredible power to be our own enemies, destroying our lives with our own actions.”

Lizzy turned away from Darcy. He was being so open to her when now she would most likely never see him again!

“Miss Bennet, please look at me!”

“I cannot, sir!”

“Why not?” Darcy sounded pained.

Lizzy stood, unsteadily, “Sir, my sister has most likely eloped, and Wickham cannot be trusted to actually marry her, my aunt’s fortune or not! Indeed Aunt Clara has made it clear she will not bestow her money on the unworthy! My family is ruined! You do not want to ally yourself with a family of which Wickham, if found, will have to be a part!” Lizzy paced around the room.
“Are you – You are too generous to trifle with me. Would you accept my feelings now? Elizabeth speak to me!”

Lizzy turned to him. “I cannot – my feelings are quite the reverse – but I cannot! In this situation how could you – “

Lizzy got no further before she was caught up in a highly improper embrace. It was some moments before Darcy released her saying thickly, “I love you! I have loved you from – almost – the first moment I saw you! A hundred Wickhams would not prevent me from loving you if you felt the same way!”

Lizzy laughed. “This is an unexpected side of you, sir.”

Darcy made no response but to kiss her again. Neither noticed the door opening.

“Mr Darcy! Lizzy!”

The couple broke apart in confusion. Mr Bennet looked as though someone could have knocked him over with a feather. Mrs Bennet, who had followed her husband, shrieked.

“If it is not enough that Lydia has run away, but that you Lizzy should be kissing a man in my library! My nerves!”

Lizzy flushed a deeper red than she had ever had in her life as everyone, following her mother’s voice, walked into the library to stare at her and Darcy.

“Darcy?” said Colonel Fitzwilliam, sounding amused.

Lizzy was sure Lord Ashbourne was stifling laughter as well.

They all stood frozen in tableau until a voice broke through the silence.

“What is happening? Did I miss something?”

They turned. Lydia stood in the door way looked upset. “Why do I always miss the interesting events?”

“Lydia! Where have you been?” said Mr Bennet sternly.

“Mr Sacking’s daughter-in-law gave birth last night! I went to mind her sons and to keep Mr Sacking entertained! He is so happy that he has a granddaughter again!”

“But you wrote a note saying Mr Wickham… proposed… to you!” said Jane.

“Oh yes, what a joke, Wickham asked me to elope! When he found out about Aunt Clara’s money, of course! I told him I would meet him, so I sent Chamberlayne in a dress! What a laugh! I should have loved to see Wickham’s face when he realised what had happened!”

It was too much for Kitty, she burst out laughing and hugged her sister close.

***&&***
I understand your betrothed’s family have a very small park. Indeed Mrs Collins describes it as a prettyish kind of a little wilderness. But this is not the subject of my letter. As you know my character is celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, so I shall be frank with you. This report, one of a most alarming nature, reached me two days ago when your father gave me some hint of it in his last note, but he is such an appalling correspondent that I was for some hours under the impression you had offered for Clara Sutton! I knew of course that must be a scandalous falsehood, so I instantly resolved on setting off for London to make my sentiments on that score known!

I may tell you frankly that Catherine Bennet is a much better choice! I have it on good report that she is not as impertinent as her sister, and indeed is a great favourite with your mother which is always a good thing for a girl to be! Of course if you do marry this girl, you will have to be censured and slightly by Clara Sutton, indeed she knows no other manner of action! I remember our last meeting and am sorry that you, my nephew, will have to be subject to such overbearing behaviour.

Yet Clara Sutton is of a good family and any smell of the shop died with her husband, god rest his soul I sincerely pitied the man to have to live with such a controlling creature! Back to Miss Bennet, I will admit that a man of your noble line could have looked as high as you liked for a bride, if your father does not object then I can have no say in the matter. It will not disgrace you, and if the dear girl needs advice with running a household she need only apply to me. …”

Ash entertained the family party by reading out the letter his aunt had sent him.

He looked at Clara amused, “Your last meeting with Lady Catherine?”

“But Aunt, when I mentioned Lady Catherine all those months ago you barely remembered her name!” exclaimed Kitty.

Clara smiled, “I did barely remember her name and I have no notion of what meeting she means! I did forget she married Sir Louis de Bourgh and it did not help that I knew her as my Lady Disdain! My private name for her you understand!”

Darcy looked amused that someone could forget anything about his formidable Aunt, much less that his formidable Aunt could find someone else controlling and overbearing!

It had been a week since Miss Lydia’s ‘elopement’ and the only scandal to arise out of it was Darcy’s behaviour with Elizabeth.

Since only the family had witnessed such actions, luckily Colonel Forster had been slow to arrive, it had been decided by an equally angry and amused Mr Bennet that no forced engagement would take place, as long as the understanding was an engagement would occur some time in the future.

Darcy was content with this, he was fully aware that he would not have made such overtures or declarations and that Elizabeth would not have welcomed them without the emotional atmosphere of fear for Lydia’s virtue. Elizabeth assured him that she would accept them, but would prefer a more lengthy courtship and acquaintance.
He also had a feeling Lady Catherine might be less accepting of the announcement of his engagement, after all she had never planned Ash’s engagement to anyone. Lady Catherine was still, Darcy was sure, planning a wedding between Anne and himself, despite neither being so inclined.

All in all Darcy was a happy man. Apart from Sir Christian; since his helping Bingley had been revealed he had decamped to Netherfield and drove Darcy to distraction by flirting shamelessly with every woman in sight.

Ash and Fitzwilliam told him that he only did so when Darcy was around, but since Darcy could not, not be around himself, he had to witness such actions!

***&&***

Lizzy helped Jane cut some lavender. Everyone else was inside, still discussing Lady Catherine’s letter, but Jane had seemed to wish to talk privately.

“Jane? Is there something wrong?”

“Not with me,” replied Jane.

“Then with who?”

“You,” said Jane firmly.

“How?” Lizzy looked surprised, “But Jane there is nothing wrong…do you mean Mr Darcy?”

Lizzy would later swear she saw Jane roll her eyes. “Yes, Lizzy, Mr Darcy. I had no notion you liked the man so much! Indeed I had no notion you liked him at all!”

Lizzy re-arranged the cuttings before looking at her sister. “I confess my feelings changed so slowly. It first began with his letter, and then seeing him in London with his family, and seeing him here in Mertyon and his actions when we thought Lydia had…I cannot explain it at all well! Cannot my feelings change?”

“Of course they can Lizzy, but the situation – I do not understand at all how you came to ….”

Lizzy had wondered why Jane had discussed this with her earlier but the house had been all in uproar due to three daughters being engaged or so close to being engaged that Mrs Bennet saw no difference. Of course Jane had more likely been waiting for Lizzy herself to discuss it, but Lizzy still did not know quite how to put her feelings into words, and she felt so protective of them even with her sister.

“I do not know Jane, but I do not regret it! I regret a great deal of things but not that! And you Jane?”

“Do I regret anything?” Jane smiled, “No, I know what you mean Lizzy and I am the happiest woman in the world! Even happier since Aunt Clara has said she would like to reclaim Netherfield at some stage!”

Lizzy’s brow furrowed.

“Oh Lizzy has love dulled your senses? If Aunt wishes to have her house back, Charles and I shall have to move elsewhere…perhaps somewhere near Pemberley…close to you and far away from mother!” Jane looked contrite. “Not that I shall want to be far away from Mama, but at least in Derbyshire she will have three daughters she can visit!”
Lizzy smiled, “Yes I am stupid today! Do you think Kitty is also the happiest woman in the world?”

They had finished filling the baskets so turned to walk back to the house. “I had much more time to observe Kitty, Lizzy, and while I was distracted with my own wishes, I did always think she preferred his lordship over every man, including those with red coats and he was always so solicitous of her. So I am sure they will be very happy.”

“Ah yes, and she has the approval of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, I dare not imagine how Kitty will go on when she meets her! No doubt she will create a better impression than I!”

Mrs Bennet had wished for a day where she could give three of her daughters away in one lavish ceremony to show every mother in the village just how accomplished Mrs Bennet was! That was until Mr Bennet pointed out that why have one lavish ceremony, if you could have three?

But Mrs Phillips very unwisely commented that it was very commonplace to have one wedding per daughter, to rectify this Mrs Bennet broke with convention and decided to marry her daughters in order of their engagements. With three daughters engaged so close together they should have been married according the precedence of the daughters, but this way Mrs Bennet could sandwich the lesser wedding between the two greater ones.

Jane suffered with complacency the fact her marriage, which would have been, less than a year ago, the grandest wedding and feat her mother could dream of accomplishing, was now deemed a lesser event. It meant at least she was not being hurried and harried by her mother every moment of the day.

Jane wished Lizzy would follow Kitty’s lead and be supremely unruffled in the face of such vigorous assault, but Jane suspected Kitty’s calm stemmed partly from the fact she had a fiancé that could say ‘yes’ with ease to everything Mrs Bennet suggested, yet still have everything planned exactly how he and Kitty would like. Mr Darcy had not quite mastered that social art, but he was learning.

Not that Mr Darcy had actually proposed, Mrs Bennet was taking it as a given. When Jane could forget that she was Jane, and thus not likely to laugh openly at anyone else’s misfortune, she was always tempted to giggle at Mr Darcy’s chagrined face. It was if he was torn between disliking Mrs Bennet’s easy assumptions and at the same time liking the assumption he was already part of the Bennet clan.

Jane looked out at the bright morning, it was exactly a month since Lord Ashbourne had proposed and now Kitty’s wedding day looked to be perfect, as far as the weather was concerned at least!

Mrs Bennet had been concerned when the Prime Minister had got himself so foolishly assassinated, but the speedy trial and execution of the assassin almost before the week was out, meant as far as Mrs Bennet was concerned the wedding of her daughter and the heir of Matlock would serve as an event to put that shocking one out of everyone’s mind.

Georgiana was practically hopping with delight.

“Oh how pretty you look, Kitty! I hope I shall look as pretty on my wedding day!”

“I am sure you shall,” replied Lizzy who was helping the maid arrange the flowers Kitty would
“How pretty you shall look, Lizzy!” smiled Georgiana.

Georgiana had been upset that everyone had kept Wickham’s misdeed from her; indeed she had had words with Fitzwilliam, both of them, about it. But she did understand it stemmed more from the speed of the incident rather than any thought she would be too young or fragile to cope.

After all, Georgiana would have told them that Lydia knew of Wickham’s perfidy.

But if they had not thought Lydia had run away then Fitzwilliam would have never expressed himself so candidly to Elizabeth and she to him, so it turned out to be a good thing in the end.

Georgiana was to get a sister, who was not Caroline Bingley, a new cousin and a reprieve from matchmaking – that is matchmaking that involved her! She would not have to suffer through the Bingley sister’s attempts to pair her with Bingley, nor would she have to see her brother’s looks when he too thought nothing could be better than to pair his sister with his best friend.

Georgiana could have not thought of anything worse!

Not, she reflected, that there was anything wrong with Bingley it was just however rather trite, to marry your sister to your best friend.

But why was she thinking of such things!

“How like Kitty thought Georgiana as she smiled at her friend. Such moments did make her wish that she was the one to walk down the aisle.

“Kitty! Georgiana is not yet out!” said Lizzy with a laugh.

“Do not speak nonsense!”

“Indeed,” smiled Kitty. “After all you have 30 000 pounds, I am afraid they shall like you too much.”

Lizzy stiffened at this allusion to fortune hunters and therefore Wickham but Georgiana smiled. “Lucky then I know how to spot a dishonest man from 100 paces!”

“And that you shall have three formidable young matrons looking after you.”

“Do you count Jane as formidable?” said Lizzy finishing the bouquet.

“Oh yes,” said Kitty, “Any man who could do wrong in front of her risking upsetting that rose-coloured vision of hers would have to be very brave!”

“Or very foolish.” Mary had entered the room. “You look very nice, Kitty.” Mary paused. “I brought you a present.”
Thank you, Mary.” Kitty took the present from her elder sister and looked at it. It appeared to be a box.

“I helped Mary with it!” came an imperious voice as Lydia flounced into the room. “I told you that material would look very well on you Kitty, not as well as me of course, but you do look very well!”

“Is the fashion for everyone to tell a bride how pretty, nice or well she looks?”

“Well you have to say it to a bride, even if she has buck teeth and spots,” replied Lydia sitting on the bed. “Not that you have buck teeth or spots,” she said generously.

Kitty rolled her eyes and made no comment.

The sisterly meeting was made complete as Jane entered to say the carriage was to be brought round to the door in a matter of moments.

“Hurry up and open our present!” said Lydia.

“Lydia, let Kitty open our present as she chooses,” admonished Jane.

“Oh did you all have some part in this?” replied Kitty looking at Lizzy.

“A small part each yes.”

Kitty undid the ribbon that held the box closed. She opened the lid with some trepidation, anything that Lydia had been involved with required some degree of caution.

What was inside the box caused Kitty to feel the pricking of tears. “Oh, it’s lovely.”

Anyone else looking at the small box would have seen nonsense – items worth nothing but to be put on the scrap heap, but to Kitty and her sisters it meant more.

There was the soft rag doll that Kitty had always envied Jane and they had played with together even when Jane had been a grown up young lady of twelve. The book Mary had used to read to her when Mary had known how to read and she had not, was nestled with the apron she and Lydia had played house with. Lastly the mask that Lizzy had worn when imitating all the gentlemen in the district to her sisters after Jane and herself had been out, and able to meet such gentlemen.

Kitty did not know what to say so she simply hugged each of her sisters in turn and begged them to visit her as soon as possible.

“We gave this to you before the wedding instead of at the breakfast because I knew you would be upset to part with me as it was, so we shall say our goodbyes now,” said Lydia as Kitty gave her a fierce hug. Kitty giggled in her ear. “Yes Lydia it will be very difficult to part with you, but I shall write to you, but you must promise not to let your letters fall into the wrong hands again.”

Lydia clutched at Kitty’s back, and Kitty knew she was trying not to cry. “I promise.”

***&&***

Kitty waited patiently in the carriage. They had ordered it early but Mrs Bennet refused to have the party arrive early in case it threw off all her plans.

Everyone else had been permitted to get out and walk into the church, but Kitty had been
informed that her mother would never speak to her again if she let anyone catch sight of her before her walk up the aisle. So Kitty was trapped in the carriage.

She did not notice anyone walking up to the carriage so the sound of the door opening made her start.

“Mama said she would never speak to me again if I let anyone see me, and I have a feeling that that counts for double if I let you see me.”

“But you are not letting me do anything. If your mother discovers us I will assure her that I overrode your most fervent attempts at repulsing me.”

Kitty smiled as Ash sat next to her on the small carriage seat.

“Lady Ashbourne, “said Ash looking at her in a way that always melted her heart.

“Not yet.”

“Are you intending on leaving me at the altar?”

Kitty pretended to think about it before grasping his hand and kissing it, “No.”

“Good because if you had said yes I would have had to abduct you.” Ash paused and brought his face closer to hers so their foreheads touched. “Thinking about it, we are both in a carriage it is not too late to elope,” he whispered.

“My mother would catch us before we left the village, and then you would sincerely be sorry.”

“When are you going to believe, while I respect your family, nothing they can do or say will ever prevent me from doing what is best for you.”

Kitty craned her neck, “then believe me I do not wish to elope.”

“Good thing, since I do not have enough money on me to get us further than Grantham.”

“I think Grantham would be far enough,” smiled Kitty.

There were a few moments of companionable silence.

“I love you, “said Kitty, moving closer to him. “I always will.”

Ash kissed her then pulled back, “I think I have always loved you.”

“Always?” Kitty laughed.

“Always,” repeated Ash emphatically.

***&&***

It was definitely one of the weddings of the season. The day which promised such beautiful weather delivered. The guests were all well behaved and nothing untoward spoiled the ceremony. Not that either Miss Catherine Bennet or Lord Ashbourne would have noticed as they only had eyes for each other.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

A great deal of the fun I had with this story was writing the letters, and seeing people sometimes have to guess who wrote what. The epilogue deliberately tests that.

***&***

..... I am very glad that you are happy with the governess I sent you, though how could it be otherwise? I am particularly proficient in picking governesses, and so too would Anne if her health had permitted. I have allowed Anne to have the little season in town with her cousins, Lady Ashbourne assures me nothing untoward shall happen and I believe her. After all she has managed to cure my nephew of whatever was keeping him from making his proper visits to me. Although he seemed particularly taken with visiting the parsonage for some unknown reason. Lady A and Richard said it would be best not to inquire, so I shall not. Speaking of nephews, thank you for telling me of Mrs Darcy’s ball. It sounded very respectable, though why he had to marry such a woman when my Anne was waiting for him, I shall never know, but she shall catch a very eligible parti in no time; she is not my daughter for nothing…

***&***

.....I hope she is happy with him. I dare only hope; after all, he is such a man! I write to you to warn you of his treachery. After all, a man that can refuse his father’s dying wish is not a man to be trifled with! I only ask you to put in a word with the Colonel so I can return to the regiment. I find that Darcy’s lies have spread far and I cannot gain access to any creditable employment! Although, I daresay you might be in disgrace with the Colonel as well, for attending me on my journey. Lydia Bennet’s duplicity did shock me, I own, but now I reflect, I must congratulate her on her choice, my dear Chamberlayne…

***&***

..... Lydia Bennet, I am sure, is rueing the day she turned down my offer to come to Brighton! I hear she is confined to her bedroom and her aunt makes her read Fordyce’s sermons every night! Whereas as we dance and be merry every night with as many officers as we please! It is a pity that Wickham is no longer with the regiment for he would have made everything far more jolly; I hear he has gone to try his luck in America and I wish him joy of it. But as for L, did you hear that even her sister, the plain one, you remember she sang most exceedingly ill, has a suitor. You see, she has been allowed a season, well the little season at least, and to everyone’s surprise is making the most of it! A handsome gentleman I hear, a little wild even! But of course she does have £10 000. I hope she does not marry him only to have him leave her within the month! But it is all too likely to happen with her Friday-face…..

***&***

….I have heard from my brother. He and his wife had some silly notion that my niece could not really love her husband! What a joke, as if it would matter! She is a lady now – Lady Ashbourne. But apparently they are satisfied now that nothing is amiss and indeed fill quite the letter with their satisfaction. Indeed, three of my nieces are mistresses of fine establishments, and Phillips and I, of course, intend to visit in the near future. Especially as a certain desirable event for my niece
Ashbourne draws closer. I do hope it is an heir…

***&&***

… the neighbourhood has been ripped of all its jewels! None of the Miss Bennets are at home; I speak of the Miss Bennets as including those who have just left behind that name. I do hope to see all of them at St James, indeed I do believe Lady A, Mrs B and Mrs D will be presented at court quite soon. Indeed I believe Lady A has recovered well from presenting her lord with two pledges of her affection, an heir and a daughter. Mrs S makes plans to return to Netherfield as soon as Mr B will resign it and Miss Lydia will be her chosen companion. Miss Bennet, it is believed, will soon be engaged…

***&&***

… Mrs Bennet is intolerable. She has quitted the neighbourhood to fuss over her daughters but all that brings is letters. She takes no notice of the fact my Charlotte is a proud mother, and shall soon be so again! It is of course quite natural that she should be so giddy of the fact that one of her daughters has done what she could never do – deliver an heir – but to talk of it incessantly! It is not to be hoped that Mrs B and Mrs D will not soon be in the family way! And when such events occur there shall be no bearing the woman. Mr Collins counsels me often not to feel such spite, which only makes me wish my daughter had not married such an imbecile…

***&&***

….. I do beg you to bring more port from town, it shall be most welcome. Perhaps one of your many sons-in-law could find an acceptable drop in their cellars? It is very comforting that I can watch my nieces’ progress in the newspapers now! I do not have to pay for the convenience of a letter, although of course I expect they could find someone to frank it for them! Mrs P is most excited to hear that Miss de Bourgh has become engaged to a mere Mr. Maynard! She does worry that that name sounds vaguely French and hopes that he is not a spy…

***&&***

…..yes, Mrs F is doing exceedingly well, a fine son we have and of course I find him the finest and stoutest child that ever lived. I have not heard from Mr Wickham since his letter to me informing me of his departure for the America. I believed he hoped that I should offer him an out, so he could avoid such a perilous journey. We have however here in our encampment been much amused by the arrival of a party from London. Our little encampment here is not very fashionable, far removed from Brighton and more like our former station at Meryton. Indeed the party contains some of those we did meet at Meryton. I speak of Miss Bingley with Mr and Mrs Hurst. I understand that during the little season in London Miss Bingley found herself quite without friends, the gossip she spread being proved false and nothing but her own malicious tongue. Apparently the fine ladies do not like being laughed at, and so have come here…

***&&***

…. I know how improper it was of me, Kitty, but I assure you I could not help it! I was abducted! In broad daylight! I understand now why you tried to ensure that I read from the circular library. If I had read such novels, which I previously thought to not contain anything for the edification of the mind, I should have known how to act and should not have found myself married with a false license! I have attempted to impress upon the mind of Sir C the wrongness of his actions by reading to him from Fordyce, but he threw it out the window! But Kitty, I cannot believe you did not tell me how agreeable it is to be married; I do not have to answer to anyone and can do as I
please! I do not count my husband for I find I can manage him quite well, though do not ask me how I achieve that, it may make you blush…

***&&***

…of course, Clara, I have smoothed over as best I can the uproar of Miss Bennet and Sir Christian Montgomery’s elopement. Not that there was much uproar, we have expected something like this from the young man for some years now. It is to be congratulated that he was so circumspect about it and the choice of his bride proves his interest in the matter; she is not what any of us expected. Everyone, bar some parties of course, will fully accept the story that it was a quick but completely approved marriage. I believe, anyway, that, as much as the young man would wish it otherwise in order to keep his reputation that was actually the case! The only person I would not wish it to come to the ears of would be Lady C., and I know how much you care for her opinion! Not to mention she is busy trying to convince her daughter not to marry a mere gentleman!...

***&&***

…I beg you, my dear brother-in-law, to send me some port. To be abandoned in the backwaters is tiresome. To be here with no decent wine is hell. I would have thought The Gentlemen would have managed to get some decent bottles ashore, but I suppose not with the militia about. Caroline and Louisa wish to quit this place due to the militia’s presence, but I have told them that it’s either here or London. You see, I too am capable of taking a stand, though I did hope they would pick London! Widgeons the pair of them! If they could dish out such unsavoury gossip they should be able to reap the rewards! And surely by now some other popinjay is the centre of London’s derision! You have found your estate, I hear; surely an invitation to your sisters is not out of the question? If it could be seen that you and your dear wife have forgiven them, as well as Mr & Mrs D and so forth, then I could at last have some peace…

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…I hear Lady Upton’s ball is likely to be the ball of the season! Kitty invited me to stay, but Mama was of two minds about it. On the one hand London is where all the young men are to be, but while Kitty is back in society, Mama says she is unlikely to be able to take the time to properly find me a proper young man. I did think that Mr Fancot who came to Lizzy’s wedding was a proper young man and he seemed more the particular friend of Kitty’s than Lizzy’s! Now that I say that, I wonder why he did not come to Kitty’s wedding? Anyhow if Mr Fancot is any indication, Kitty does know proper gentlemen. I think Mama is jealous that Mrs Bennet now has two fine gentlemen and two noblemen as sons-in-law. I think a baronet counts as being a nobleman but I am not sure. Sir Christian is, however, a prime example of perhaps why Mama would think that Kitty would not know proper gentlemen. But I thought he was very handsome. In fact all of the gentlemen are very handsome! I wish I could marry a handsome man, but I have no aunt who will leave me £10 000 when they die! Oh I did not get to the other hand! The other hand is that Mama does not wish to be beholden to Mrs Bennet in my getting a husband. So I am to go to the Ashbournes in the summer, after I attend Charlotte, I shall just have to hope that handsome young men are of the party!...

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…My darling Charlotte is bearing up quite well; the visit from her sister soothed her agitated nerves. I do not know why but with this olive branch she has become most vexed. I attempt to distract her by asking what should I do now that Lady Catherine has been robbed of her brightest ornament? I shall not repeat, dear sir, the remarks your daughter made – I do not think that Lady Catherine would know of such a place let alone enter it. But Miss de Bourgh has left us forever;
her mother became reconciled to the marriage only after realising to hold out against the wishes of a most beloved daughter would be unchristian. Colonel Fitzwilliam came to take his leave, he has been called to serve either in our gallant attempts against Napoleon or the Americans, I cannot remember which. Lady C is devastated; she feels the likelihood the Colonel will find a proper bride in either place is very slim…

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…Caroline, I do feel you should have journeyed to Oakenthorpe. Charles and Jane are as welcoming as ever. Indeed, there is no mention here of any of Charles’ and that awful Sir Christian’s plans to banish us! Nor is there any mention of why we were shunned so last year. I do believe it has all been forgot or felt that least said best mended! Little Frances is only some weeks old yet but I see a resemblance to Mama, though she has Jane’s placid nature. It makes me quite yearn for my own child. You cannot stay in the wilderness forever! Any husband you find there would be most unsuitable. You cannot still be pining for the loss of Darcy. Mrs Darcy is in her confinement, but Darcy has ridden over twice during my stay here and he looks well. (Mrs Bennet stays, praise the Lord, with her daughter; this may explain Darcy’s visits!) Georgiana was all talk of her season in town. She was not a hit, sadly, but certainly far from a failure – if you come back for the little season I am sure Georgiana would happily see you invited about. Better than that, Lady Ashbourne graciously asked if I would be available for her drum party. See, if the injured party in our gossip asks us to call, I do not see what anyone else can say!…

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… I see Robert Southey has been named Poet Laureate. My husband, oh how I like saying that, is very fond of his work. Mama however thinks lowly of him for condemning flogging, or whatever he was expelled from Westminster for. It is one of the many thinks my husband disagrees with Mama on; it is quite refreshing to see them argue. We have returned to Rosings, quite sooner than we expected because I realised that I did not pay Mama the respect she deserves. I feel once she knows my dearest Maynard she could not help but love him. It is also my duty to ensure that no blame rests on Cousin Kitty for introducing me to him! Mama was so hoping for a marriage between Cousin Richard and myself, after Darcy so disobligingly married Cousin Elizabeth…

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….Lady Catherine claims it is not to appear unchristian, but I think it has more to do with the fact she had Mr Maynard followed for some months and came to the conclusion that he is either an exemplary figure or a very good actor. I think he has to be both to wish for such a harpy for a mother-in-law. Both he and the charming Mrs Maynard are at Rosings, perhaps having realised that Lady C could leave the estate as she chose! Though Lady C would leave her property to none but family and who does that leave? She tolerates Darcy’s wife, meaning she would hardly leave it to Darcy to benefit her. She thinks Lady Upton flighty (though I understand the doctor has ordered complete bed rest so where she would fly to…!), and Lord Ashbourne has never sought to ingratiate himself with her. Though considering the actions of those of her family that have bowed to her wishes perhaps that would be seen by her, now, as a positive! No, it would have to be the Colonel. I do hope the war ends soon so such a charming man could be restored to our society! Oh by the by did you hear the charming Lady Montgomery has become quite a toast? The Gunn sisters have nothing on the Bennet sisters and there is still another one unaccounted for. That blasted Roche woman has written another ghastly book….

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… I have as requested been thinking on the state of Netherfield, or rather the question of Netherfield. One solution would, of course, be to sell Netherfield and thus divide the profits or indeed to give Netherfield to one deserving member of your family. The first solution brings the
problem of where you should reside during the summer months when London is inhospitable but your married nieces could amply provide for you. The second requires choosing one of your family above the others. You could of course, if you feel you will predecease her, leave Netherfield to Mrs Bennet. I understand, ma’am, the amusement of thinking of Mrs Bennet lording it over her neighbours but I cannot think you would think this would outweigh the idea of Mrs Bennet as proprietor of Netherfield. I cannot, you see, provide you with a definitive answer, except to say that the alterations you requested made to the house in Cavendish Square have been made, and all the preparations for your and Miss Bennet’s season are well in train…

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… her name is Sophia. She is a school friend of Arabella and Susan. I met her first in May of last year, but I was in no condition to see her worth, though I do see it now. She is a princess amongst women. If I were a better man I could say that I had not truly loved anybody but her, but that would be a lie. Not to mention degradation of my prior attachment who is also the best of women. It is base to rank one’s loves when they are all so different and have so different a purpose! Sophia is to be my wife and with her by my side my life will have meaning and purpose! Her counsel is as wise as her face is fair. I shall not bore you with my raptures. You shall meet her when we come to London in April; I believe you did not cross paths last season. I sensed in your last letter you were hesitating to accept an invitation to the Ashbournes’ ball. I do hope that is not on my account. His lordship meant no disrespect in calling me a fool last November. It was foolish of me to think of allowing Sophia to brave her second London Season without being sure of my affection! Not that she needs my protection, it is I who need hers…

***&&***

… I do not think the Duke would say Napoleon winning all these battles was vexing. I think he would use rather stronger language. There is some word that the Prussians are nearing Paris, but here we remain in the south of France. I am happy to hear that little Charles Darcy is such a stout little boy. I do declare however that Darcy’s letters of his exploits at such a young age are flights of fancy. Although I will credit him with the name; Charles is a good name, much better than the mouthful of Fitzwilliam the Second! I shall pretend to be deaf to the entreaties of your last letter that it is your only wish to see your last son married with children. Cannot you satisfy yourself with Annabelle’s confinement and little Max and Cathy? I could of course marry a gypsy woman? Would that satisfy you? I should not provoke you so for your letters always provide me much amusement and comfort! I am sad to hear that Anne’s marriage may not be prospering; I wonder at their keeping to Rosings. My aunt’s dictums on the marriage state would drive any man to distraction, they would be better to hire a house for the season…

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… I am kept busy here, Lizzy, with my two darling boys. With Ralph and Charles of an age we must make sure we do not become competitive mothers! At least we cannot match them in their cradles! I find I am calmer with Ralph than I was with William! With William, I was mortally afraid the maid would drop him! Or that Mr Collins would! Speaking of my husband, he is often at Rosings attending to Lady C and Mrs Maynard, although I believe both ladies will leave soon for London. Maria has contracted a most eligible engagement with a Mr Warboys, a parson who was visiting with Lady A’s parson when Maria visited. Kitty is a most accomplished matchmaker! I hope that your mother’s presence, despite your reservations, is soothing. I found myself even this time wishing that Mama could have attended me…

***&&***
...I am so very glad we decided to remain in the {blot}; there is nothing more charming than the country. Oaken{smudge} is exactly as we should wish and our {blot} can visit us here if they so choose! I am no Darcy or Ashbourne that my presence is required in the {smudge} I find being the master of a country estate just to my liking. Everyone is so amiable and {blot}! I do not find at all that we are behind in the {smudge} Indeed I heard quite before Mrs {splotter} that Lady Upton had been deliveried of a {blot}. Mrs D intends to remain in London until after the season as she and Darcy have high hopes of Georgi{spot} becoming {smudge}ed. Not that they would wish to part from her! Mrs Bennet of course writes to us of her wish that Lydia will fulfil her last earthly desire. Jane and I hope that Mrs B is {blot} speaking literally and will {spot} leave this world the minute Lydia becomes engaged!...

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... Lady Harriet is, like her grandmother, a formidable character! From her crying I can assure you that she received the strength of voice from her mother! Belle is recovering but there is to be no trip to Town this year, which means, on her orders, she begs me to write to her dearest brother (by that you can tell the depths of Belle’s despair) that he must relieve her with all the news from town. I have already told her of Mr Maynard’s flight back to France now that Boney has abdicated. Will Richard make one of those remaining to see order restored in France, or is he returning to our shores? Lady Catherine, I believe, hopes he shall find Mr M in Paris and make him return. I shall now spend the rest of my letter comparing my daughter very favourably, as she is clearly a genius, to your children...

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...Mrs Bennet has been busy this last year and has left us to attend to Mary. Mr Bennet remains with us and, while he would deny it vehemently, I believe he is more the proud grandparent than his wife. I do not think anyone whose name is not Maximilien, Catherine, Frances or Charles registers with him! Georgiana we are happy to say is engaged to Sir Thomas Carbury from Somerset. I could list his faults meticulously, but they are only those that could be found by an overprotective brother. He makes her happy and while I feel she is still my baby sister and therefore too young to me marrying anyone she assures me that she is not and I must believer her! Lydia I believe will not be long single, she has much improved these past two years and despite her avowed determination to marry a Marquis is apparently much taken with the younger son of Lord Wettenhall, a Mr Oliver Yeates. Mr Yeates, a sober man, is recently returned from India and quite a painter. I do not pretend to understand the whims of my sister, but as long as she does not elope as Mary did (though even I have to admit the benefits of that relationship) she heartily has my blessing. Of course she would retort she did not need my blessing! I know the temper of a Bennet!...

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...If I do not find a husband this season, my mother will quite despair of me! She is disheartened by the steady stream of gentlemen that have this season called upon Mrs Sutton. They have of course called upon Miss Bennet; I do not pretend to see the charms in her! At least, Lady Ashbourne was never brash and brassy! Mr Bradford is married and so now too is Mr Fancot! The others have sworn off the married state! Lady and Lord A attended Mr F’s wedding – you could have knocked me over with a feather – no one seemed to think it at all amiss! Miss Bingley has returned to society, of course her family and that set have treated her with all courtesy, no mention of those vicious rumours! Indeed the way she talks of her dear sister Jane, dear Mrs Darcy and dear Lady A., you would think she had never spoken an ill word of them! She has high hopes of Sir Horace Warbleblatt. He is a corpulent, older man, who has been through two wives already; it shows her desperation! Although I was sure Sir Horace thought me quite pretty ....
…Lady M. is delivered of a girl, Clarissa. Richard writes that he is returning with a surprise. Harriet is fearful that Richard will make true his promise of a gypsy wife; my sister is convinced it is Mr Maynard, hopefully in some torture device. Anne seems calm about the possible return of her husband, in fact she appeared sanguine in the face of her husband’s desertion. If I was a betting man, and you know of course that I am not, (My wife does read my letters, you know!) I would lay you odds that Anne was behind her husband’s ‘desertion’, after all my sister is promising to never interfere in their marriage again, if only Mr M would return and stop the scandal! We had assumed that Georgiana would be the next of our circle to marry but Lydia Bennet dragged her young man to the altar with unseemly haste! Apparently she discovered that his small estate in the country was quite cottage-like and pigs were involved. This caused great hilarity amongst the younger members of our family and I sense some backstory I do not know!...

…Georgiana wishes to be married from Pemberley. I cannot disagree with her when she says she has never seen a place so happily situated. My aunt and uncle Gardiner spent August touring the grounds in a little phaeton drawn by ponies; G. has decided she wishes that to be her wedding carriage. Fitzwilliam jokes that this is so she can soothe his nerves by making a very slow departure! He has also been studying the roads between here and Somerset and I have told him that I shall start to worry he thinks more of his sister than of me! It shall be nice to have Pemberley to ourselves. Although with my father’s constant visits and Kitty, Jane and the Matlocks living so close by, we shall hardly be lonely! I do believe, my dear Mary, that I am the happiest woman in the world, and I say so to allow you contradict me by declaring yourself so! Though I suspect the happiest woman in the world is truly our mother, who has lived to see all her five daughters so happily married...

…My dear Thomas grows dearer to me everyday! I know my brother was horrified to hear that he intended to take me to Paris for our honeymoon, but he had business and I should not like to have left him! We shall be here for some months and I know no one but it gives me an opportunity to practice my French! I find myself quite capable of standing on my own two feet, and welcome the challenge! I am so glad to hear that Kitty is safely delivered, although I know you are funning in your outrage that she called the little girl Clara instead of Harriet! I might as well be offended that she did not call her child Georgiana! What though shall we do now that we are all married? We shall have nothing to do but talk of children! Indeed, you did not mention it in your letter, but Jane did in hers to me that Louisa Hurst has had a boy! I should dearly like to see Mr Hurst as a father! Is that wicked of me? Caroline Bingley, I understand, is planning a November wedding for Sir Horace? Sir Horace is a native of Northumberland, I believe, and the possessor of a ‘drafty old pile’? That is what Thomas tells me at least! I do not believe he likes Sir Horace! I hope however for Caroline’s sake that he makes her a good husband! No matter her previous sins she deserves that much!...

…I believe I should simply ask Mr Collins and his many progeny (I believe there is a third in as many years, I would not believe it of Mr Collins) to move into Longbourn! I spend so little of my year there anymore! Clara’s Mr Morris is an excellent organiser of a great many things; indeed his choice of Mr Thadds is far more interested in the workings of Longbourn than I ever was! I am now, after cooing at my latest little granddaughter, off to see what shall henceforth be known
as The Cottage in Norfolk. It seems ironic to me that my son-in-law the artist should reside in a
country famed for its miles of unvarying undulating hills. Though Lydia has admonished me and
claims that the countryside is quite varied. Indeed that she has more than four-and-twenty
different views from her house! Col F has provided me with some amusement on this stay with
Kitty, having brought his French bride home. Miss Clemence D'Angerville as was. I am not sure
what offended Lady Matlock most, that her son married without her presence, without her
knowledge or that he married a French lady who seems to have inherited a temper to equal her
fiery hair! Though the new Mrs Fitzwilliam seems quite at home stirring up all her new relations,
I have no fear that Ash will ensure that Mrs F. does not upset Kitty...

***&&***

…My brother has been bewitched by a French harpy! At least Mr Maynard is a gentleman! Miles
says that I am just annoyed that I am no longer the Fitzwilliam with the shrillest voice! But I dare
say she would throw a tantrum, unlike myself, if she did not get her way! How we shall celebrate
Christmas together I do not know! My only comfort is that Richard does seem to love her; I only
wish I could see what he sees in her! Perhaps she is already with child? That would explain it. My
only other comfort is that she is more than a match for Aunt Catherine, who is most disappointed
to see Mr M return. I believe she had suddenly formulated some plan for his death allowing Anne
to marry Richard, but of course she did not expect his marriage! …

***&&***

…Pickering Manor is not exactly as I hoped. Sir Horace bought the place from the Pickerings,
and I am sure I do not need to tell you why he did not remain it Warbleblatt Manor! So Pickering
Manor it remains. It requires extensive renovations, and I am quite up to the task of organising
them, as funds permit. What I did not realise was that Sir Horace would require me to remain
here in the wilds of Northumberland to oversee the work until it was done! I shall die here in the
North! So I expect a steady correspondence of all the doings of his season, not that I believe we
know any of the young ladies making their come out! I feel quite old; it is very disheartening.
Louisa, I should not be the lady of Pickering Manor! No, I am not harbouring murderous
intentions towards Mrs Darcy, but I should not be here! You may remember I once made
comment about Mrs Collins and her choice of husband; I now understand such a choice, but I do
not have her character to bear it…

***&&***

… Last Christmas was spent surrounded by all my dear daughters, but this Christmas we decided
to spend it with all our old friends in Meryton. After all, it does not do to look as though one is
above one’s former company! Lady Lucas may have two master Collins and one Miss Collins, but
I have a future earl, two ladies, the heir of Pemberley, a daughter of Oakenhurst and a daughter of
Montgomery! Little Master Fitzwilliam, sadly he does not get a title, should marry little Clarissa!
Little Master Darcy should of course marry my dear Frances! I am sure it would be the wish of
their mothers in that case! And I know that secretly Mr Darcy wished for his family to be joined
with that of Bingley’s! Of course I do not know who would be good enough for my Cathy and
Clara. Certainly not the Collinses! Clara, not the little one sadly, is in residence at Netherfield and
has thrown a ball for all the young misses of the neighbourhood. It is most kind of her, and of
course I attract some attention for being the mother of such fine girls and my advice is sought on
so many matters by the hopeful mothers and daughters!...

***&&***

…I apologise, Miles, for the jam that appears to have seeped onto this letter. I am afraid that
...Charles tells me not to worry but I cannot help it! That beast has escaped from Elba and marched into Paris! I am sure that even you, Lydia, have heard the news. Georgiana is still in Paris with her husband! Well I am sure that they fled Paris when they heard Napoleon was advancing, but with Georgiana’s condition! Oh I should not be alarming you, my dear sister, in your condition either! But I do not wish to alarm Lizzy with my fears. Not that I expect they would have treated English in Paris so very bad. And Richard must return to fight, and his wife insists upon going with him! I believe it is my condition that is making me so nervous! So many of us in an interesting condition and the state of England in such an interesting condition! My dear Lydia, pray write to me of some good news, I do long to hear it!...

***&&***

...I shall take back everything I ever said about Clemence. She is an angel. I did not believe that she loved my Richard, but she must! We have finally heard news from Brussels! Napoleon has been defeated, but with such a loss of life and the news that poured into London! And in such a way! A loss! A victory! A loss! I hear more than one person withdrew their fortune to save it only to realise that leaving their money where it was would have gained them their fortune twice over! But my Richard, we believe, was injured at Waterloo. Not severely, but that does not matter to my heart! But Clemence assures me in her letter that she will engage to bring him back to me, whole and safe! As well as shepherding Georgiana, Sir Thomas and little Fitzwilliam back to us! Of course they should have left Brussels as soon as they arrived there but Sir Thomas did not think it safe for Georgiana to travel and she has always been delicate, the poor dear. Now if only Clemence would attend to her own health...

***&&***

...Your wife is quite my favourite sister! She allowed me to throw things at my husband at the crucial moment! I would write to you of his magnificence and so forth, and my son’s lustiness, but I do find myself quite tired, I do hope you are not disappointed that I leave off my gothic tendencies. Of course I have nothing much to do because I am a married lady now! A mother too! We have called him Oliver after his father who despite my displeasure that it is not he who, has to go through so much pain, is quite, I find, the love of my life. I cannot make fun of that! I am glad to hear that your brother is recovering, it is a pity that his wife bore a little son otherwise since they are of an age – some days apart I believe - I would be quite tempted to say they were made for one another. See, is that not gothic? Planning unions in their cradles?!! If I look out my window and see fawns I shall take it as a sign that I should be so controlling of my son’s life, but I fear the pigs
would take offence, what a lot is mine! I should never have thought it to be so when I was but fifteen and thought of nothing but officers! Now I have to care about Olivers and pigs!....

***&&***

…Mrs Maynard had a little daughter, Anne, and is still quite poorly. The doctors are quite sure she will recover but it would not be wise for her to have another child. Mr M is quite distressed that his wife had to go through so much pain! I am so glad that you did not suffer any permanent ill, Georgie, from your adventure! See, if I allow you to step foot out of the country again! I can be just as protective as your brother. Aunt Clara has told me in her last letter she has almost decided what to do with Netherfield! I cannot help but wonder if it has anything to do with her recent visit with my Brompton cousins? Or perhaps due to the charms of a certain gentleman! But I shall have to wait until she chooses to reveal all to me! I do hope her revelation is not solely about Netherfield. I cannot help but think that perhaps my Aunt is an angel, for I wonder what my life, indeed what all of our lives would have been if she hadn’t quarrelled with Aunt Elizabeth and sent for me? I should probably not have my own comfortable home, my many, many friends (by the by, Giles has had a daughter and scolded me for my choice of book that I sent little Sophie!), my three dear children and my husband...although considering he is currently being a bear to scare the children I should like to return him! He is quite ruining the rug! Though it really is an ugly rug, yet it was a Wedding gift from Lady Catherine... Georgiana I must go, I attempted to scold him for destroying our furnishings and the result is that I am being attacked by a bear!...

***&&***

…Fanny may never forgive me, but I could not choose one of my family to leave Netherfield to and it is really too large for me. Mr Morris is quite right, it would be possible to live in Cavendish Square and then impose myself on my relatives. So I have decided to set up some sort of school or charity at Netherfield. I expect Fanny should like a school for girls to allow her some scope for her matchmaking ways, but this would mean I would inflict such girls at some point to the preaching of Mr Collins! Not that I expect my brother to leave us at any moment. So my dear, Kitty, I have quite decided to impose myself upon you! After all, I quite planned your marriage! Indeed I should like to take credit for all your marriages! I engineered yours quite easily, and quite obliquely I will take some credit for Jane and Lizzy’s! I see your face, Kitty! You should believe your aunt! After all, who did you think introduced Sir Christian to that Bishop? Who promoted Mr Yeates to continue with his intriguing poor painter routine? Or did I mistake that face, Kitty? I quite believe that you are just as skilled as I am. Mr John Tremore did not appear in my life for no reason! I did not understand the reason for your looks this season until he arrived in Worthing this summer! My sister Elizabeth was quite shocked that I should have a gentleman caller! I told her that quite my favourite niece told me that age is no barrier to happiness. So I do hope that you are up to the task of arranging a final wedding in our little family circle…although I am not sure Mrs John Tremore is very exotic. I will probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment’s solitude, but I shall be happy, Kitty. Adieu, Clara.

***&&***

The End Proper

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