i'll write you harmony in c

by magneticwave

Summary

“Mum, the fact that Lydia was the first of us to end up barefoot and pregnant is honestly a source of continual surprise to me.” // As it turns out, Mary Bennet’s internal checklist to Being a Good Person—go to medical school; join Médecins Sans Frontières; save lives—is a somewhat oversimplification of matters.

Notes

Oh god. Um. So. Pride and Prejudice AUs are my kryptonite, and I’ve been toying with Mary as a narrator for ages, and then suddenly I had bitchy Lydia hovering over my shoulder, offering her hilariously awful opinions. Before I knew it, half of Austen’s heroines were enrolled in Girton and the cast of Mansfield Park had shown up, and the rest just sort of happened on its own.

Story title and section names are from Metric’s “Sick Muse,” without which this bundle of insanity would never have been written.

i. \pull your little arrows out

When Mary later hears about the events of that spring—and of course she hears about them, she in fact does little but hear about them, ad nauseum, for her first three weeks home—what most
concerns her, out of the host of things she doesn’t give a flying fuck about, is that no one in her family had thought to sit Lydia down and have a discussion with her about safe sexual practices.

“What do you mean?” asks her mother, squinting at Mary over her morning coffee. “Safe? Lydia knows that.”

From the other end of the table, Kitty points out, “Lydia’s been fucking anything with legs since she was thirteen.”

To Mary’s left, her father looks like he dearly wishes to be somewhere else. He’s just at fault as the rest of them, though, so Mary refuses to give him an out—he can suffer like a man. “Just because Lydia’s had sex with a remarkable number of unsavory gentlemen doesn’t mean she knows anything about protection. Because, let’s be honest, what I know about sex I learned after I left for school. Mum, did you talk to her at all?”

It’s mostly a rhetorical question: Of course her mother hadn’t talked to Lydia. Why would she? Her other four daughters had managed to cobble together a reasonable simulacrum of a sexual education, and she always talks about how fast a study Lydia is (to which Mary only has to say: HA).

“I can’t believe you,” says Mary, although she can. She has very little trouble believing the shit her family pulls. “Mum, the fact that Lydia was the first of us to end up barefoot and pregnant is honestly a source of continual surprise to me.”

“Don’t talk to me like that!” says her mother shrilly. “I am your mother!”

“Then act like one!” Mary shouts, rising slightly out of her chair. “Ever since I got back, all anyone’s been talking about is how great Charlie and Will are and how wonderful that they got Lydia to come home and how shiny everything is now that they’re marrying Jane and Lizzie. Mum, why did they have to get Lydia back in the first place? Because she probably learned about how babies are made from Animal Planet!”

Mary is not proud of how loud her voice is by the time she’s finished. Still, in for a penny, in for a pound, and it’s not like it’s possible for her mother to turn even redder. “Mary Louisa Bennet,” her mother begins in a shrill voice, “don’t you dare take that tone with me—”

“Mum,” interrupts Lizzie from where she is standing, naturally, with Jane and their pair of perfect fiancées in the door leading from the garden, “please don’t.”

Even as Lizzie is making desperate, pleading eyes at their mother not to make a scene, she looks happy and glowing and bloody fucking ridiculous. She and Will—they’re holding hands—look like one of those couples in a John Lewis commercial buying their first set of living room furniture. Not that Lizzie will ever buy anything from John Lewis again; Mary knows exactly how much Will Darcy is worth per annum, thanks to (a) her psychotic mother, and (b) the gossiping cats with whom she goes to school.

“It’s okay, I’m leaving,” says Mary, standing up and stuffing the rest of her toast into her mouth. “I’ve got to get going or else I’ll be late for work.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you?” asks Charlie. His natural state is one of extreme affability; it’s fairly nauseating. “It’s easy enough.”

“I’m fine, but thanks.” Mary gives him a pat on the shoulder as she leaves. Out of the pair of them, she likes Charlie a little bit more, mostly because he smiles all the fucking time and it’s hard to distrust someone who looks like he cuddles puppies when he’s not kissing orphans or staring into
Jane’s eyes. Mary wouldn’t trust Charlie to have her back if she was being mugged, though, but she has a feeling Will Darcy would be right at home with a penknife in one hand. “Ta! Kitty, we’ll talk when I get home.”

“I know how to have sex, Mary!” Kitty shouts after her. Mary doesn’t have to be turned around to know that Kitty immediately blushes after this. “I mean—that is—”

Hopefully someone kind-hearted (Jane) stops Kitty before she has an aneurism. Mary doesn’t have the time—she really is going to be late for work. She vaults over the fence leading out of the garden and unlocks her bike, trying to swallow the last of her toast, wishing she’d thought to pour some tea into a thermos.

Ah, well. If wishes were gorgeous men, Mary would also be having acrobatic unprotected sex every night.

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Nine hours later, after Mary has helped Agnes, the clinic’s senior admin, close up shop and lock the bars over all of the windows, she gets back on her bike and pedals home as slowly as possible without actually drifting backwards down the street. Mary knows exactly what’s waiting for her: a spot of yelling from Lizzie, a lot of hurt silences from her mother, and probably Kitty will still be dying of embarrassment for having mentioned the world ‘sex’ in front of Will and Charlie.

In retrospect, it is a bloody miracle that none of them got knocked up before this. Mary remembers the first boy she ever dated, back when she was at St. Simian’s in the fifth form, and the night he’d convinced her that halfway didn’t mean she was losing her virginity. Mary has never been particularly attached to her virginity as a construct, but she was very interested in not getting pregnant before she got into Cambridge (or Oxford, or St. Andrews; when Mary dreamed in those days, it was mostly about the U.K.’s most prestigious medical programs). Of course halfway hurt, because she was, in hymen-related terms, losing her virginity.

Luckily, Peter was a moron and a pathetically eager one at that, and he came mostly against Mary’s thigh instead of anywhere very dangerous; but still. Her entire first year at Cambridge, Mary would wake up in a cold sweat from a dream where she was holding a little Peter Jr., scrubbing floors in a small flat while she waited for Peter Sr. to come home from working part time at their local to make ends meet.

Whole parts of this dream were nonsensical—for one thing, Peter Sr. came from a long line of the same thing and had a series of Roman numerals after his name to prove it, so there was no way in hell that, had he actually gotten her pregnant, he would’ve been working part time anywhere other than his father’s firm—but it still made Mary terrified, in an abstract sort of way. When Mary was a first year at Cambridge, struggling to figure out what from a large buffet of knowledge she wanted to make her own, the worst future she could imagine was one where her only option was no knowledge at all.

Feeling a little cold dribble down her back, Mary shivers and hunches over the handlebars of her bike, speeding up to take the last hill before her parents’ house. There’s no point in thinking about Peter, since it’s only going to make her angry and defensive, and Mary knows that, among her myriad personality flaws (tendency to lecture; stubbornness), one of the worst is that she gets vicious when she’s angry and defensive.

Mary is saved from having to reflect on her any more of her flaws because her mother is kind enough to do that herself the second that Mary finishes securing her bike to the garden gate. “Mary!” her mother shrieks from the kitchen door. “Get in here, I need your help with dinner.”
Her mother needs Mary’s help with dinner like the rest of the family needs botulism, but Mary knows that this is the only way her mother can think to punish her for embarrassing the Bennet name in front of two future family members. “Coming, Mum!” Mary says, pausing for a second to take a few breaths and return to equilibrium. She thinks of what her yoga instructor had said last term: don’t hold the air, simply cycle it deep within yourself. If you can’t hear yourself breathing, you’re not doing it right.

Mary can hear herself breathing, all right, but it doesn’t appear to be doing much of a difference in terms of wanting to strangle her mother with her bare hands. She settles for tugging at her hair with a few vicious yanks as she walks across the (mostly dead) garden.

Her mother’s back is turned as she stirs something spicy-smelling on the stove. “Chop those tomatoes,” she says.

“Are we having curry?” Mary asks, for conversational purposes. She dutifully rinses off her hands and begins to chop the tomatoes.

Her mother sniffs. “Yes,” she says, and bangs her spoon down on the lip of the pot. Mary is still not forgiven, then. It’s hard to be sad about that when she knows that she’s right, from practical experience if nothing else, so Mary lowers her eyes and dutifully finishes with the tomatoes, after which she starts on the chicken cutlets.

As further evidence of her disapproval, Mrs. Bennet doesn’t set aside part of the curry for Mary before she adds the chicken cutlets. “Oops,” she says, scooping the dregs of the chicken juice in after the cutlets Mary has just spent a lot of time sacrificing her pride to cut evenly. “You can just have rice, dear.”

Mary has no trouble whatsoever seeing exactly wherefrom Lydia and Lizzie have gotten their passive-aggressive bitch faces. “MUM,” she shouts, and then she sucks in her breath, turns on her heel, and stomps into the living room, where Will is doing a good impression of a man not hating every moment of his existence as he plays chess with her father. “This is your fault,” she says, pointing at her father. “If you hadn’t played favorites, Mum wouldn’t be a raging lunatic.”

“I’m afraid your mother was a lost cause long before we ever had children,” her father says, moving forward one of his knights to sweep Will’s bishop off the board. “Checkmate, Will.”

Gnashing his teeth, Will refocuses on the board in front of him. “How did you—!?”

“Da’s a bit of a chess prodigy,” says Lizzie, looking up from her magazine. Every time her eyes land on Will they sparkle and shoot out little hearts. “Don’t antagonize Mum so much, Mary, and she won’t antagonize you back.” Even the way she says this trademark bit of utter nonsense is soaked in affection.

“How is not wanting to consume animal flesh antagonizing Mum?” Mary cries. “You’ve seen pictures of chicken farms!” She knows Lizzie has, because Mary has shown them to her. “Besides, if Mum was buying local chicken, it would be one thing. I don’t think Mr. Lucskai even knows how to mistreat a chicken. But it’s big corporation chicken!”

“A truly inspiring tale of woe,” says Mary’s cruel father. “It makes my heart weep, dear.”

“I can’t believe you just said big corporation chicken,” adds Lizzie, putting down her magazine to stare at Mary. “The hair was shocking enough, but you really are turning into a little eco-terrorist, aren’t you?”

“Oh, shut up!” Mary snaps, resisting the urge to run her fingers through her short (blue) hair.
“There’s nothing wrong with my hair, and you’re all going to die of cancer in forty years.” She looks at Will and her father. “You two have a 70% chance of contracting prostate cancer before you’re 60. I hope you’re happy then.”

“I’m already 59,” murmurs her father. “No hope for me, I suppose.”

Lizzie jumps in, “You’ve got about 30% of a hope, according to Mary.”

Mary stops talking to everyone in her psychotic family in favor of eating her (plain, thanks MUM) rice and glowering at her wine glass. Because they’re supposed to be acting particularly perfect in front of Will and Charlie, Mary spends a lot of dinner kicking Lydia every time she opens her mouth.

“How is your internship going?” Charlie asks over dessert. Mary is stuffing her face full of baklava because she is hungry and her mother wrote the book on passive-aggressive behavior, so she has to swallow a mouthful of pastry before she can answer.

“It’s really great,” she says, happy that someone is paying attention to her extremely prestigious internship. “I knew, theoretically, that I wanted to go to medical school and work for Médecins Sans Frontières, but the clinic has confirmed it for me. There’s nothing else I want to do.”

Lydia rolls her eyes so strongly Mary is surprised her face doesn’t fall off from the effort. “Yes, Mare, please, tell us more about the homeless orphans you nurse back to health with your tears of joy or what the fuck ever.”

The baklava somehow tastes even better through a red haze of anger, so Mary is plenty fueled for a knockdown with her bitchy little sister after her next bite. “I’m sorry that my doing something worthwhile with my time is somehow offensive to your worldview, Lydia.”

Kitty, bless her heart, tries to subtly move out from between them and succeeds in almost knocking one of the candelabras off of the table. Will and Lizzie both go to catch it before the tablecloth goes up in flames; they smile at each other as their hands touch.


Mary privately agrees, but even she’s not such a brat that she’ll voice her opinions out loud. Lizzie has no such compunction, though. She reaches out and tousles Lydia’s hair, which automatically guarantees everyone in a five-block radius the privilege of hearing Lydia shriek about personal space for the next twenty minutes.

“I have boundaries.”

“I think current events would indicate otherwise,” Lizzie points out.

Kitty giggles and almost chokes on her baklava. “It’s awfully boring without you and Jane and Lizzie around,” she tells Mary. “No one baits Lydia any more, and she always gets what she wants.”

“That’s not a different state of affairs from when we are around,” replies Mary drily. “Lydia’s going to be a brat as long as Mum spoils her rotten. How on earth did she not get kicked out for this?”

“Will interceded,” Kitty admits. Mary looks across the table at Will Darcy, awkwardly impersonating a cardboard person, and feels a modicum of respect. Meanwhile, Lydia is still shrieking and Mary’s mother is still trying to calm her down.
“I don’t know why Mum’s even bothering.” Mary gestures with her elbow. “Will and Charlie aren’t going anywhere. Look at them. They’re goners. We could all get offensive tattoos on our faces and Lydia could turn into *more* of a chav and they’d still be coming here for visits every other weekend.”

Lydia has ears like a fucking bat; she immediately stops going on about her hair to demand, “*Who are you calling a chav?*”

“Be nice to your sister!” trills their mother, in reference to God knows what. It’s like she hasn’t been here for the past fifteen years worth of dinner conversations.

That’s when Jane—sweet, perfect, wonderful Jane—knocks over the other candlestick.

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“The leftover curry literally erupted into flames.” Mary blows out her cheeks and gestures with her hands to frame empty space about the size of a beach ball. “It was beautiful. Naturally, my practically perfect in every way sister apologized until she was almost crying, but it was definitely on purpose. I knew she had unplumbed depths—hard not to, when she shares a gene pool with me and the rest of my sisters—but it was fantastic.”

Harry and Catherine are both riveted. “What happened next?” Harry begs. “*Please* tell me someone shoved Lydia’s face into the fire and burned off all of her hair.”

“Sadly, no,” says Mary with a sigh. She uses her toe to push her swivel chair into a half-circle. “Charlie dashed for the fire-extinguisher in the kitchen and put the whole thing out. You could tell Lizzie was thinking about it, though. She had that gleam in her eye.”

Catherine has tears streaming down her face. She gasps for breath and, heaving, says, “Your family is *perfection*. I don’t even care that there wasn’t a new *Misfits* on last night, this is better than anything E4 could’ve pulled off.”

With an approximation of a serious face, Harry opens his mouth, no doubt to say something devastating and witty, but he’s interrupted. “I’m glad to see that you’re all working hard to live up to the promise hinted at in your letters of reference.”

Catherine shoves her face into a pile of paperwork and Harry picks up the receiver of the telephone he’s supposed to be manning. “Hello, Northanger Clinic, how can I help you?” he says industrially.

That leaves Mary to crab-scuffle her chair around so she can launch herself out of it and fall on her sword. “I’m sorry, Dr. Fitzwilliam. It won’t happen again.”

It would be easier if Dr. Fitzwilliam was old and ugly and bald with a big red nose (Dr. Eisner) or cold and haughty and impeccably dressed (Dr. Sacheti), but he is, in a word, *gorgeous*. He makes Mary’s eyes hurt to gaze upon his splendor and other nauseating shit. Her heart constricts in her chest whenever he speaks to her, which is inconvenient because he’s her supervisor.

“I’m teasing,” he says gently, smiling at Mary from behind a pair of distressingly attractive frameless glasses. He makes that guy in *Love Actually*, the one who wants to fuck Laura Linney but never gets a chance, look like a gargoyle.

Mary gargles a half-laugh in her throat. She can feel her face attempting to burn off the top layer of skin out of sheer embarrassment. “Ha, ha. I, um, knew that.” Faced with Dr. Fitzwilliam, Mary feels like her three years at Cambridge have done nothing. She knows, from practical experience, that she no longer resembles herself at fifteen (either physically [thank God] or emotionally), but
it’s really hard to remember that when staring into Dr. Fitzwilliam’s gentle grey eyes. “What have you got for me today?” she asks, hopefully breezily and professionally.

“We’ve got a lot of first trimester check-ups today,” says Dr. Fitzwilliam, flicking through the schedule in his hands. “Help Claudia in the morning and then come shadow me on some of the appointments in the afternoon.”

“Oh, okay,” says Mary, probably too breathily. She blinks and curls her hands into fists, letting the cut of her nails into the flesh of her palm bring her back to her hard-earned maturity. “Of course. I’ll come find you after lunch?"

Dr. Fitzwilliam’s smile could cure cancer patients. They’re incredibly lucky that most of the women coming through the clinic are already pregnant, or else there’d be a riot on their hands. “Have a nice morning. Harry, Catherine.” He gives them both friendly nods, and off he goes.

Catherine stops pretending to be sorting paperwork. “Mary, you need to breathe or else you’re going to faint onto my desk.”

“You’re so adorable,” coos Harry, reaching forward to pinch her cheek. She half-heartedly slaps his hand away. “Oh, getting cross, are we?”

“Oh, fuck off, you tossers,” says Mary, laughing, as she goes to find Claudia at the nurse’s station. It’s hardly the first time she’s helped the nursing staff with incoming patients, and she takes temperatures and blood pressure and in the lulls sorts boxes of supplies with the ease and boredom of long practice. Unfortunately, although the work occupies her hands, it leaves her brain free to wander. The treacherous organ immediately flops over at Dr. Fitzwilliam’s feet and starts waxing rhapsodic.

Mary makes herself sick. It’s a problem.

After she spends her lunch loitering on the fringe of the car park, eating from a bag of crisps and suppressing the urge to bum a fag off of Harry, she squares her shoulders and reminds herself that she is a future medical practitioner and, unlike her crazy sisters, she isn’t ruled by her hormones and she can do better than drool over her supervisor.

This resolution lasts until they get to the third patient. “I’ll be in in a moment—why don’t you go in and introduce yourself?” suggests Dr. Fitzwilliam.

Mary smiles back—it’s impossible not to smile at Dr. Fitzwilliam, it’d be like intentionally hitting a baby gazelle with a car—and knocks on the door to Exam 5. “Hello,” she says as she glances down at her clipboard. “How are you doing today, Ms.—LYDIA?”

“Oh my fucking god,” says Lydia, almost dropping her mobile in shock. “No fucking way. Go away!”

“I didn’t know you had an appointment today,” says Mary. “Well, thank god someone reminded you that regular doctor’s appointments are necessary.”

“Ha!” says Lydia. Most of her attention is diverted back to her mobile; she is typing with far more industry than Catherine had shown that morning at her computer. “Will and Lizzie stuffed me into her car and dumped me off at the front of the building. I didn’t exactly have a choice.”

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out? For insubordination or general dislike or whatever?"

“I work here. And if you embarrass me in front of Dr. Fitzwilliam, I will destroy you.”

Almost the second the words are out of her mouth, Mary recognizes her tactical error. Sixteen years of almost constant warfare should’ve prepped her better than this, but in her defense, the girls at Girton aren’t nearly as sneaky as Lydia and she’d lost valuable practice.

Lydia’s eyes narrow. “Oh, Dr. Fitzwilliam, is it? The brilliant one? The one you wouldn’t shut up about for weeks and weeks?” She adopts a savage, excited expression. “Oh, Dr. Fitzwilliam,” she flutters breathily. “I think I need your attention—in my vag.”

It’s really just icing on the cake then that when Dr. Fitzwilliam walks into Exam 5 with his trademark cheery expression, it’s to his intern beating one of their patients over the head with a clipboard. “Mary!” he thunders.

“I’m telling Mum!” Lydia squawks into the sudden, embarrassing silence. Mary is frozen, arms above her head, clipboard held aloft. Is it possible to die of shame? She might be the first person in human history to do so. “For fuck’s sake, you’re such a psycho, Mare. Is this how you treat all of your patients?”

“Not all of my patients are my sociopathic little sister,” Mary hisses. She lowers the clipboard and points threateningly. “I swear to the God on high, Lydia, if you open your mouth during this appointment to mention one single thing that is not medically relevant to you or my future niece or nephew, I will personally ensure that your future is very bleak as well as being confined to a five-foot radius around Will and Lizzie’s futon.”

Lydia blanches. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would! I so would. You haven’t even heard everything I know about your school holiday with Hugh Cunningham.”

Lydia shuts up. It’s an effective threat because Mary has been saving it for a special occasion; not getting embarrassed in front of Dr. Fitzwilliam is a special occasion, although now that he’s seen her physically abuse a patient, it may not really matter.

“I’m sorry,” she says to Dr. Fitzwilliam. She forces herself to make eye contact. It’s difficult from his expression to tell if he’s going to fire her immediately or wait until there aren’t any witnesses around to verbally flay her and then give her the boot. “This is my sister, Lydia Bennet. Lydia, this is Dr. Fitzwilliam, he’s my supervisor and you’re lucky to have him as your doctor.”

Face still inscrutable, Dr. Fitzwilliam comes forward to shake Lydia’s hand. Despite having been hit three or four times with a clipboard, there isn’t a single hair out of place on Lydia’s head, no doubt due to egregious application of hairspray. “A pleasure, Miss Bennet.”

Lydia laughs at this. “Um, right, yeah,” she says, disbelief dripping from every word.

Mary pinches Lydia, subtly, on the back of the neck. “Manners,” she says mildly. There is nothing subtle about the little jerk and glare that this rouses in Lydia, but she grudgingly offers at least a halfway polite greeting. There is now a 60% likelihood that Dr. Fitzwilliam doesn’t think Mary and her sisters were raised in a barn by wild goats.

As she hasn’t got a choice in the matter, Mary corners Dr. Fitzwilliam by the tongue depressors and says in a hurried undertone, “I’m sorry about the lack of professionalism. My sister brings out the worst in me.”
After a long pause, Dr. Fitzwilliam’s face melts from stony inscrutability to wry acceptance. “My brother and I don’t particularly enjoy one another’s company, either,” he says. He gestures for Mary’s clipboard; Lydia’s file hasn’t been damaged despite its impromptu service as a blunt weapon.

Over Dr. Fitzwilliam’s shoulder, Mary can see Lydia open and close her mouth in what is presumably an impersonation of a lovesick Mary. Ooh, doctor, she mouths, take me now. Mary settles for narrowing her eyes threateningly.

Talk medically to me. I want to hear about the lives you save with your big, strong hands, Lydia continues. She opens her mouth and mimes a sloppy kiss. Based on the sight, Mary has no idea how Lydia ever managed to find someone to impregnate her.

“Well, let’s a take a look,” says Dr. Fitzwilliam.

Lydia immediately adopts an expression of innocent interest. “Oh yes, Dr. Fitzwilliam, let’s.”

The second that his back is turned on Mary she mimes drawing a knife across her throat and points at Lydia. I know what you did last summer, she mouths.

The remaining twenty-two minutes of Lydia’s appointment go much more easily. She’s just ending her first trimester and her stomach is beginning to take on the aspect of a small pillow beneath her vest. Lydia has always been tallest and best-endowed of the Bennet sisters. Being pregnant makes her breasts—already insultingly large, compared to Mary’s pittance—egregious. She seems well aware of this fact.

Due to Mary’s careful maintenance of a veneer of barely sheathed venom, Lydia meekly answers all of Dr. Fitzwilliam’s questions and submits easily to his tests. Perhaps most gratifying of all, her eyes are glued to Dr. Fitzwilliam’s bum as he exits at the end of the appointment. “That man’s arse,” says Lydia as the door falls shut, “was carved from marble by Jesus fucking Christ himself.”

Mary knows better than to pray that Dr. Fitzwilliam doesn’t hear; Lydia is always loud about her most embarrassing opinions.

~

Miraculously, for the remaining ten weeks of her internship, Dr. Fitzwilliam shows no sign of holding Mary’s little sister against her. He’s as affable and kindly as ever, which only serves to increase Mary’s enthusiasm for her future in the medical profession. On her last day, which is also Catherine’s last, although Harry is staying on because the clinic is only about thirty minutes by the Northern Line from King’s College, Claudia and the rest of the nurses come by to give them their best wishes and a bottle of wine each.

“Best of luck, yeah?” says Claudia, enfolding Mary in her damp and powdery-smelling embrace. “You’re back to Cambridge?”

Mary had fought for that position with a savage enthusiasm that would’ve shocked her sisters (probably not Lizzie). “Yes!” she says. It’s hard not to let her pride leak all over the single word; she doesn’t succeed.

“Oh, shut it,” says Harry, laughing. “Rub all our noses in it, why don’t you? I’m stuck here, filing with Agnes and Betty until the end of days, while you’re off to continue your education in one of the most prestigious programs in the fucking U.K.”

“In the world,” corrects Catherine, reading the label on her bottle. “Fuck, you’re going to turn me into a wino.”
As that seems to be the entire purpose of the nursing staff, to judge by the parties Mary has barely survived this summer, they laugh cheerfully. "The last year’s the hardest," Paul replies. "You’re going to need that."

Catherine stuffs the bottle in her bag and grins. "I’ll save it for my first exam, then?"

"Doubt mine’ll last that long," Mary says. "One more week at home with Lydia the shrieking whale and I’ll be drowning my murderous instincts in alcohol. Mark my words."

"No one in this room would blame you," Catherine assures her.

"Don’t know what your parents were thinking, having five daughters," Paul leans a hip against the front desk where they are loitering and folds his arms across his chest. "This isn’t exactly the 19th century."

"My family has never heard of birth control," says Mary darkly. "As I have told you many, many times before, Lydia being the first of all of us to find herself unwed and pregnant is a miracle of truly biblical proportions. Lizzie and Jane are rather sensible and I did my own educating from trial and error at Cambridge, but Kitty and Lydia are as daft as a pile of sticks when it comes to men."

Quieted slightly, Claudia murmurs, "Where is he? The bloke who knocked up your sister."

"Lizzie’s fiancée ran over him on the M25," Mary says.

Gyu Won, the youngest member of the nursing staff, has a sister of whom she is almost unnaturally protective. She says, "Well, good riddance to him, then." Were anyone on the nursing staff capable of committing violence in the name of beloved family members, it would be Gyu Won, whom Mary has seen face down a six foot seven brute who liked to beat his girlfriends. (Gyu Won, of course, won.)

"He didn’t actually," says Mary apologetically. "Will really just got him fired and apparently went with his cousin to threaten Wickham with physical and financial ruin if he didn’t make himself scarce for the rest of his life. It was rather brilliant, if less fatal."

Gyu Won’s face takes on a terrifying aspect at the news that Wickham hasn’t been divested of his testicles. "Er," interrupts Catherine, "shall we be off, then? You owe me two rounds for taking the last hour of your shift last week."

Mary tells herself not to feel disappointed that Dr. Fitzwilliam hasn’t stopped in to say good-bye. She hadn’t expected a visit from Dr. Eisner—who tended to confuse Catherine and Mary—or Dr. Sacheti—who gave no fucks—but she had sort of hoped Dr. Fitzwilliam might wish her the best. Such hopes are best not spoken of; Mary hugs everyone in the room twice, promises to text Harry over the weekend, and links her arm with Catherine’s as they leave through the staff entrance in the back.

"Sad that Dr. Pinch My Arse didn’t bestow on you a good-bye embrace?" Catherine asks at the end of the alley. She’s less annoying than Lydia about Mary’s hopeless crush, but only by virtue of being a less annoying person in general.

Mary punches Catherine in the arm. "Shut up about it, already."

"You are," squeals Catherine. "Oh, Mary." She wrestles Mary and, purely through the twenty pounds of muscle she has against Mary’s twiggy arms, succeeds in crushing Mary to her chest. "Don’t cry, my darling, you’ll find love again.” She pauses dramatically. “One day, perhaps, in
“Let go of me, you psychopath!” Mary shrieks, trying unsuccessfully to kick Catherine in the shins.

Catherine continues, “O, mi amor.”

“That’s Spanish,” says Mary crossly.

“Perhaps in Barcelona, then.” Catherine sways back and forth, Mary helpless in the face of her batshit monologuing. “Venconmigo, a la ciudad de los amores juvenitos.” Her accent is atrocious.

“Your accent is hideous,” Mary says, voice muffled by Catherine’s shirt. “My ears are bleeding.”

Catherine kisses the top of Mary’s head with a loud smack. “Oh, love, you need to abandon the eminently fanciable Dr. Fitzwilliam and focus on someone who is likely to actually give you a good shag in the next decade.”

Finally, Mary succeeds in planting her hands in Catherine’s armpits and wresting her head free.

“It’s not—I’m not—Catherine, shut up. If I needed a shag, I could find someone. Lydia’s put me off sex.” This is at least half true. If Mary wanted, she really could find someone willing to shag her at Cambridge, and it probably wouldn’t even be very difficult. However, just because she could doesn’t mean she wants to. Lydia’s foray into parenthood really has made Mary’s libido shivel up and want to die.

“I have faith in your ability to properly apply a condom,” Catherine says.

“We’re not talking about this,” Mary says. Her entire face feels like one big sunburn.

“I thought you had inappropriate sisters,” continues Catherine, guiding Mary out of the back alley and towards the main street. “Aren’t you used to this?”

“My inappropriate sisters have no interest in my sex life, only advertising their own,” mutters Mary. “That’s why they’re inappropriate.”

Catherine’s expression turns sympathetic. “Oh, babe,” she coos. “I can listen. I’m a great listener.”

Although it’s inadvisable to let herself sink into a funk, Mary nevertheless lets herself be steered towards the clinic staff’s local. “The last person I shagged,” says Mary gloomily as they settle at the bar, “was my biochemistry practicum partner after our final exam of Lent term. It was mostly driven by hatred.”

“Of the subject?”

“Of each other. He’s a legacy student with a pedigree out his arse with half a dozen landed titles mixed in. I wanted to pour hydrochloric acid all over his face.”

“That sounds healthy,” says Catherine encouragingly. “Very therapeutic, yeah?”

“Not really,” says Mary. “We got off and then immediately started arguing about the qualitative analysis on the final exam and I ended up kicking him out of my room and throwing his trousers out of the window.” She drops her head and rests her forehead against the surface of the bar, which is surprisingly clean and slightly cool. “He deserved it, the fucking entitled prat.”

Ever sympathetic, Catherine begins to laugh. “You didn’t seriously throw his trousers out the window, did you?”
Mary sits up and accepts her pint from Jake, who has worked the pub on Fridays for the entirety of Mary’s internship and introduction to alcohol poisoning. “Yeah, I did. They landed on one of the girls from the college and she started screaming. I have no idea how or if he got them back.”

Catherine giggles helplessly. “You’re just as bad as Lydia, Mary.”

Mary stopsdowning her Tennents to give Catherine a stink eye. “Blasphemer. Take that back.”

“You have hidden depths, Mary Bennet.” Catherine lifts her glass and clinks it against Mary’s pint. “If someone asked me seven weeks ago which of you and your sisters had the biggest pole up her arse, I would’ve said you.”

“That’s kind of you,” Mary says. “Thanks for that, Catherine.”

Catherine holds up her hand and explains, “But after these seven weeks, I have been forced to eat my words. Who would know that the girl who so earnestly lectured me about the vegetarian, low-impact lifestyle would also be capable of having hate-sex and throwing the bloke’s trousers out the window when they were done? You are truly worthy of the Bennet name.”

“Oh god,” says Mary, but Catherine’s on a roll. She raises her glass.

“To the Bennet sisters,” she intones. “Fucking blokes and taking names.”

“Oh, Jesus,” hisses Mary through her teeth, but she dutifully raises her lager and drains it swiftly.

“To the Bennet sisters.”

Catherine shivers and smacks her lips. “Right, we need some shots. Jake!”

ii. | all the blinds are fantasies

The first day of Michaelmas term, Mary wakes up early, pours coffee down her throat, and has begun her reading for her clinical course by 9am, listening to the entire body of work of Metric to get her into the mood of studying for 18 hours of every day.

Her position of solitude underneath her chosen tree is invaded midafternoon by a long-limbed shadow. “Do you mind?” asks Mary, not looking up. “I’m attempting to read and your body is inhibiting that.” She hates the new first years.

Mary’s headphones muffle the reply of the irritating person in question, so she rips them out and demands, “What?”

“I said, nice to see you out in the sunlight. I wasn’t aware vampires could brave the outside at this time of day.”

Of course. “Go away, Crawford.”

“I see you’re still stuck on your hostile setting,” he continues, settling down next to her. He immediately leans into her personal space to read the title of her textbook. “Is that for McDaniel’s class? I’m in that.”

Mary recoils from him, vaguely appalled. “Why the hell did they let you in? It’s a specialized seminar.”

“I believe my grades were acceptable and I wrote a truly superb email to McDaniel about my
academic qualifications.” Crawford preens, but it’s slightly ironic. Mary hadn’t known that Crawford was self-aware enough for irony; she finds it disturbingly attractive.

“Yes, well, I’m sure you can reflect on your perfection somewhere that’s not here.” Mary makes a shooing motion. “Don’t you have a room in King’s where you can think about it?”

“This level of sun-kissed beauty isn’t possible without constant maintenance.” Crawford shows no sign of going away, and in fact rearranges his limbs so that they are even more akimbo and more pointedly invading Mary’s personal space. He tilts his head against the tree trunk and closes his eyes.

Mary’s fingers spasm against her textbook. “Crawford.”

“But I want to enjoy a pleasant October afternoon. I promise not to antagonize you if you’ll just shut up and read.”

“Ha!” huffs Mary, but after carefully examining his expression she can’t see any indication that he’ll go back on his word. “Fine.”

She hates Crawford, but she’d rather carve out her own eyeballs than show him any weakness, so she reopens her textbook and finds her place. It’s difficult to concentrate with his arm pressed against her thigh. His skin—which, sadly, does indeed deserve the qualifier “sun-kissed”—is warm through the thin linen of her pants. Whenever she tries to focus on her the words, all she can feel is the long line of Crawford’s arm against her thigh.

“Don’t think so hard,” he says abruptly. “You’re still annoying as fuck, Bennet.”

She makes an offended noise high in her throat and snaps her eyes back to the two-page figure she’s ostensibly studying. “You’re one to talk, Crawford.”

He peels open one eyelid long enough to display an iris almost blinding in its blueness. It is remarkably unfair how compelling he is, considering that Dr. Fitzwilliam is about 40 times more traditionally attractive. “I’m not the one who tosses my bedmate’s clothes out the window.” He closes his eyelid and tilts his face so the sunlight streams over the crooked line of his nose. “After receiving some truly stellar cunnilingus, no less.”

Mary gives up on serenity and hits Crawford in the chest with all the force her puny arms can muster. With the weight of the textbook added, it’s an impressive effort, but Crawford has rowed for the last three years and is built like a gorilla; he absorbs the blow with only a small grunt. “Trust me,” she snarls, “that was not the most impressive cunnilingus I’ve ever received.”

She says it to have words coming out of her mouth, the necessary back-and-forth that keeps her head above the water in conversations with Henry “My Grandfather Is a Marquis, You Know” Crawford, and it’s not until she finishes that she realizes it’s true. She has had better cunnilingus, from the girlfriend that her mother is never going to hear about.

Smelling her honesty like a bloodhound, Crawford’s eyes snap open. “What?” he says.

Mary shrugs. She’s won, so there’s not much point in sticking around. She clammers to her feet, smoothing the folds and blades of grass out of her pants, and says, “I suppose I can’t avoid seeing you in class tomorrow. Please do me a favor and don’t engage me in conversation.”

Unfortunately, Crawford and Lydia attended the same school of advanced war tactics; he comes in the next morning—and the one after that, and after that, and the clinical practicum they apparently also share, as well as a frankly useless literature seminar that makes Mary want to peel out the relevant sections of her brain and set them on fire—and takes a seat next to her, slingi
his leather satchel onto the table and crossing his feet at the ankle, lounging negligently.

“Heya, Bennet,” he says casually.

The pencil that Mary is holding groans right before it breaks in half. The girl sitting next to Mary stops staring at Crawford long enough to get a slightly frightened look on her face and she promptly gathers her belongings and moves down a row.

“Crawford,” replies Mary, lethal and low.

“I was thinking,” he continues, “that we were rather remarkable partners last year, and maybe we should revise our arrangement.”

“I am going to fuck you when hell starts crying kittens,” Mary assures him.

Crawford grins and bites the end of his pen. It would be devastating if Mary cared, which she doesn’t, because he’s an arsehole and a prick with daddy issues and she wouldn’t suck his mangy, inbred cock if she were poisoned and his semen was the antidote.

“But how will I improve?” he purrs. The girl now a row down from Mary audibly sighs. “I need your tutelage, clearly.”

“I don’t know where your mouth has been,” Mary tells him. “For all I know, you’ve been sticking it into anything with a clit for the past six months.”

Thankfully, McDaniel chooses that moment to swirl dramatically into the room, white hair whipped into a frenzy above his rumpled suit. “Students!” he bellows. “Welcome, welcome.”

Mary is distracted by scrambling to open her notebook, so she almost misses how Crawford leans forward and whispers in her ear, “Fighting’s only foreplay, sweet.”

DO YOU KNOW WHAT ‘NO’ MEANS? she writes in the upper corner of her notebook.

BECAUSE THIS IS HARRASSMENT.

Crawford doesn’t reply during class—McDaniel is too terrifying for that—but as Mary pushes her way out of the room at the end of the seminar, she finds a note crumpled in the pocket of her cardigan. You’ve never told me to stop. Say it and I will.

~

It’s stupid. It’s so stupid.

But Mary crumples up his note and throws it away and she lets the sexual tension leak all of her memories of the eminently fanciable and completely unsuitable Dr. Fitzwilliam out of her head. Henry Crawford is a bad idea the same way that no one telling Hitler about the quality of Russian winters was a bad idea. Still: He’s got gorgeous eyes and he’s the second best sex she’s ever had, after Marianne her second year, and there’s no rule saying she can’t fuck someone she hates.

This is probably how Lydia ended up pregnant.

Well, sex is definitely how Lydia ended up pregnant, but Mary consoles herself with the fact that she is never going to be blind to Henry Crawford’s faults the way that Lydia was to George Wickham’s.

At the beginning of November, as midterms loom threateningly in the close future and Mary’s studying reaches such a frenzied pitch that she turns off her phone and locks down Internet access
on her computer, she accepts Crawford’s invitation to study together. It’s inevitable that they end up in the back of the library, in a rarely dusted section devoted to the Portuguese naval influence on the Napoleonic Wars, with Mary’s legs locked around Crawford’s waist as he licks his way up her neck.

“Fuck,” she mutters. “This goes against my moral code.

“Bennet,” Crawford mouths into the slick skin of her neck, “shut the bloody fuck up.” To accentuate this, he bites her so hard that she arches off of the shelf onto which she’s propped herself. He’s now holding the entirety of her weight with twin palms pressed on the bottom of her thighs, but it’s apparently not too much for Rowing Champion Crawford.

“I’m going to accept your challenge,” he says, licking the spot of his bite, “but not right now.”

It has always been one of Mary’s more sordid dreams to be thoroughly fucked in the abandoned stacks of the UL, but she hadn’t exactly expected Henry Crawford to be playing a starring role. For one thing, she hates him. It’s hard to remember why when he’s devoting most of his energy to getting her off, but the relevant data returns as Mary twists her hand in the back of his jumper and the expensive cashmere slides as slickly as Crawford’s two fingers inside of her.

Right. He’s an arsehole whose entire existence can be summed up by his sister, who married the third-richest man in Britain with a title, excluding the Prince of Wales and his offspring.

“Oh, Christ,” Mary moans, “Crawford, you’re getting better at this.”

“Practice, Bennet,” he says. “And it’s easy when you’re so fucking enthusiastic. I should’ve guessed about the books.”

It would embarrassing that he can tell how badly she wants him, but Mary decided two years ago to stop being embarrassed by her enthusiasm for sex, right around when she found herself snogging Marianne Dashwood after a pro-con discussion of the use of menstrual cups. “Crawford, if you don’t—” Mary’s threat dies unspoken in a thick, high keen that Crawford smothers with a warm, wet kiss, his fingers tight across the back of her neck.

~

“Still room to improve,” Mary gasps when she has her breathing under control.

Crawford rolls away and tries unsuccessfully to brush the dust off of his slacks. “Oh, pull the other one, Bennet.”

The sight of his finger shaking on his zipper imbues her with enough confidence to raise an eyebrow and lazily lift herself to her elbows. “Crawford, just because you know what a clitoris is doesn’t mean you’re a god of sex.”

He stops fussing with his slacks and glares at her through narrowed eyes. “Oh, really?”

~

Through a system of mutual goading and orgasm denial, the sex rapidly becomes fantastic. It’s too bad that Crawford’s personality is nowhere near fantastic. Other than being charming and having a Neanderthal-like strength that is strangely appealing, he’s still a gigantic prick and clearly only set on becoming a doctor to eventually practice expensive surgery somewhere that will keep him in bespoke suits and supermodels for the rest of his life. When he’s not setting all of his focus on becoming the best shag Mary has ever had, he’s still annoying as fuck.
They don’t have an exclusivity clause because they’re not dating, but the other girls at Girton seem to think that Mary’s just in denial about the seriousness of their relationship. Through Girton’s impressively vast gossip network, they give her details about Crawford’s movements that are akin to a particularly obsessive Twitter feed.

“He’s laying siege to Maria Bertram,” Isabella Thorpe tells Mary in the corridor between their rooms on a Thursday afternoon in late December.

“I don’t care,” Mary throws over her shoulder, occupied in half-scanning an email update on things in Finchley from Kitty. “He’s not my boyfriend and I don’t interfere in his affairs.”

Mary honestly follows that philosophy—she’s too busy for a boyfriend, and she doesn’t care what Crawford does with his free time as long as they use protection during their biweekly hate-shag sessions—until Shreya Govindarajulu stops her before their literature review seminar and says in a low voice, “He’s dropped Maria Bertram for Fanny Price.”

“Jesus, Crawford,” Mary says, slamming her books onto the table that they still share. “Fanny Price? She’s a saint and everyone knows that she’s in love with Edmund Bertram, the blind git.” Crawford, surprisingly, colors red and then purple.

“It’s not like that,” he blusters. “And keep your voice down, Bennet.”

Mary sinks into the seat next to him. “I can’t believe you,” she hisses. “I don’t give two fucks about Maria, as everyone is well aware of the state of her morals, but Fanny Price thinks everyone is as kind-hearted as she is. And, I reiterate, some day very soon Edmund Bertram is going to get his head out of his arse and make Fanny very happy. You just have to look at them to know that in three years they’re going to be married with a throng of nauseating infants.”

“Why should she have to wait?” Crawford’s voice is oddly pitched, more frustrated than the situation would seem to warrant. He can’t actually want Fanny, can he? Charming pricks like Crawford aren’t built to appreciate saints like Fanny Price, although they can probably seduce them with enough effort. He avoids making eye contact in classic textbook fashion, fixing his gaze on his pen and employing some Olympic-grade fiddling.

Mary finds herself, strangely enough, overcome by sympathy. “Crawford, you don’t deserve Fanny Price. You’re a terrible person.”

Crawford frowns and straightens, finally looking at Mary. “My sister says that a good woman will be the making of me.” The tightness in his mouth and tension in the corner of his eyes tell her that Crawford is upset, and for some reason he apparently thinks Fanny Price will soothe the tremors of his soul.

God, he’s so much of a moron that it’s rather breathtaking. “That will only work,” Mary explains gently, “if you’re willing to become a better person for Fanny. Pretending to be nice doesn’t cut it.”

Mary makes it clear that if he’s pursuing Fanny Price she doesn’t want to see any sign of his arse, sun-kissed or not, until after the matter has been resolved. Crawford laughs it off, but he must be serious; he doesn’t text Mary again about meeting to deplete the stress that McDaniel’s seminar builds in their bones, and she occasionally sees him in town, framed in the front window of Fanny’s favorite teashop, earnestly discussing Fordyce or whatever it is people reading theology spend their time doing.

Of course, the whole situation is going to blow up in his face. Edmund Bertram is quiet and reading theology but that doesn’t negate that he plays rugby and has fists the size of dinner plates.
Exactly two days before the end of the term, the entirety of Girton pours out onto the green to watch Edmund Bertram plant a facer on Henry Crawford over the honor of Fanny Price.

“This is beautiful,” Isabella says when Mary joins her. “Look at his form. We haven’t had anything this riveting since George Nguyen throttled Elton for trying to molest Emma in the backseat of his car.”

Since no one in Girton has any sympathy for her or her antics, Maria Bertram, disheveled and half-dressed, is crying alone off to one side of the green; on the other, Fanny Price is wringing her hands and looking confused and apologetic. Mary doesn’t need Isabella’s blathering to infer what’s happened. “You’re a moron, Henry Crawford,” she says under her breath.

For a few long seconds, as Edmund Bertram grips Crawford’s collar and lifts him clear off of the ground, she contemplates not intervening and leaving everyone to their assorted fates. It’s Crawford’s own damn fault that he got bored with Fanny Price and decided to fuck Maria on the side.

Mary has no obligation to clean up his mess. Mary chants in her mind, *It’s his fault, he shouldn’t have so thoroughly pursued someone he was going to end up hurting,* and still finds herself elbowing her way to the front of the crowd and waiting for a good moment to latch onto Maria Bertram’s half-bared shoulders.

“You should go and apologize to Fanny,” she says to Maria.

“What the bloody hell—” begins Maria, but Mary cuts her off.

“Trust me, Crawford is going to drop you the second that he peels himself off of the grass. If you want any chance of saving your relationship with your brother, you should do it through Fanny.” Mary turns Maria’s frail shoulders so that she is pointed towards Fanny. “Look at her. She’ll forgive you in half a second if you’re at least 70% sincere.”

“Oh, fuck off,” says Maria, but she squares her shoulders after wrenching them out of Mary’s grasp and goes to stand next to Fanny. She waits for her brother to reel backwards from Crawford’s swing to his jaw and then begins a conversation that is so awkward Mary can smell it from eighteen feet away.

Once Edmund Bertram has finished wringing a good quantity of blood from Crawford’s nose, he collects Fanny Price from the clammy embrace of his teary sister (79% sincerity; she’ll be fine) and they disappear in the general direction of Corpus Christi, where Fanny will presumably soothe his ills with her sweet loving. The rest of Girton loses interest and returns to their rooms for revision. Mary, who commits 100% when she wants to do something, stands above Crawford’s crumpled body and says, “At the risk of sounding like a cunt, I want to say: I told you so.”

“Fffufuf,” says Crawford through what is definitely broken zygomatic arch.

“We better get you to A&E,” Mary says. “Up you go, come on. Christ, Crawford, you’ve got at least seventy pounds of muscle on me, you need to give me a hand here.” Crawford drunkenly scrambles to his feet and sways dangerously before achieving stable footing.

Getting to the hospital takes forever with Crawford listing heavily away from Mary and blinking blood out of his face. After he’s been plugged into an IV and the A&E doctor has signed him up for a surgery date, Mary nicks his mobile and calls his sister, whose entry in his phone’s contacts is *BITCH SISTER FROM HELL.* “I can’t possibly come out now,” she tells Mary. “Nicky’s got a very important appearance tomorrow that I can’t miss.”
“I have final exams,” Mary explains in a voice that she hopes is friendlier over the phone line than it sounds in her head. “I can’t possibly stay with him.”

“He’ll be fine alone,” says Crawford’s sister. “I’ll be up on Friday. Tell him that.”

Mary hangs up, more shocked than she should be that there is a meaner Crawford sibling than Henry, and returns to Crawford’s bedside. “Your sister can’t get away until Friday, but she’ll come as soon as she can.”

Crawford snorts derisively and immediately regrets it, to judge by his low moan of agony. “Of course she can’t. Right. Well, off with you then. Have you still got any exams left?”

“Two,” Mary admits. She slowly pulls on her coat, lingering by his bedside, and wonders why she feels like a tremendous prat. “Oh, bugger it. I’ll go get my things and be back.”

Crawford’s broken and bloody face is a parody of shock. “What? Bennet—”

“Shut up. You should be out of surgery and doped up on prophylactics by the time I grab some dinner and my notes. Don’t die or something else inconvenient, Crawford.”

It’s not that she’s in love with Crawford—oh god, she’s definitely not in love with Crawford—so much as Mary is incapable of imagining a scenario where she broke a bone and her family didn’t descend en mass to gather by her bedside and weep over her limp body or, in the case of her father, say mean things to goad her back to life.

She feels bad for Crawford. It’s such a weird sensation that, when Mary recognizes it midway across the King’s green, she pauses and savors it. Rich, beautiful, successful, charming Crawford doesn’t have something (other than human emotion) that Mary takes for granted every day.

How…startling. Mary frowns and muses over it, as she is wont, as she makes her way to King’s and proceeds to call everyone in her mobile directory until she finds a resident willing to let her in. She unlocks the door to Crawford’s room and swings inside. Despite their numerous shags, she’s never seen Crawford’s inner sanctum; it was always easier to find somewhere to shag in one of the back corners of the UL or the medical library.

All of his belongings are flung across the room and it takes Mary twenty minutes to find him a clean change of clothes and a hairbrush and other things she perceives to be necessary to the maintenance of Crawford’s vanity. Then she sorts through the pile of books on a shelf over his desk. Out of disgust she avoids the Hemingway and Heinlein—of course Crawford favors misogynistic classics, she’s not surprised—and has to decide between a well-thumbed Henry IV and a collection of Yeats with a broken spine and some of the pages missing. She picks Shakespeare in the end because she doesn’t want Crawford dwelling over the tragic end of his ill-advised tryst with Fanny Price.

She stops to order some takeaway curry on the walk back, but Mary’s stomach is choosing to exhibit what she assumes can only be latent finals stress and refuses to settle enough to makes eating advisable. Back at the hospital, she settles outside of the room assigned to Crawford and waits for the staff to return him from surgery. Over the course of three hours, she revises half of what she should and answers four phone calls. Two are for her, both from her mother about some minutiae related to Jane’s pending nuptials; two are for Crawford, the captain of his rowing team and a mate looking for company.

The captain of his rowing team takes his injury seriously, and he ends the call after apologizing for swearing a blue streak up and down the line. His mate remarks that Mary has a rather sexy voice, and would she like to join him at the pub? Mary tells him she’d rather eat a newt.
Crawford wakes up around three in the morning. Mostly by lying through her teeth and looking sad and pathetic, Mary is still in his room. It helps that his sister’s name is Mary and her place on his emergency contact paperwork is still under her maiden name; through judicious application of crocodile tears, Mary has secured extended access.

“Bennet,” Crawford croaks. “What are you still doing here?”

“Watching over your arse like a bloody guardian angel,” Mary says. The fingers of her less dominant hand are trembling slightly as she reaches for the bag at her feet. “Look at this, I braved your sty of a room to get your things.”

“I knew you liked me,” he rasps. The bandage taped to his cheek ruins his attempt at a charming grin.

“Don’t do that, you look ghastly,” says Mary reprovingly. “Go back to sleep, I’ve still got to figure out how you’re going to repay me for lying about being your sister and sitting at your bedside while I should be back in my room, studying.”

Crawford peers at her through narrowed eyes. It’s the first time she’s seen him exhausted, or anything other than annoying and randy. “Bennet, are you exhibiting concern for my person?” He slurs his words.

Mary nails her eyes to the corner of her textbook. “Don’t be an idiot. Go back to sleep.”

“I knew you cared.” Crawford closes his eyes; a smile teases the corner of his bruise mouth.

“I care about whether or not I have to explain to your family why Edmund Bertram felt compelled to break your face.” Her voice, rough from stress and exhaustion, shakes. Mary knows better than to show Crawford weakness. “Now, shut up.”

Mary passes her last two exams by the skin of her teeth. She pulls her weary body to Crawford’s hospital room the morning before her train home, only to find him surrounded by his rowing team. Other than Ed Ferrars, who Mary knows from CUSU LGBT and can be described only as elfin, or maybe the only boy her age Mary knows who is smaller than she is, the room is packed with giants with the wingspans of dinosaurs and biceps bigger than Mary’s upper thigh.

“Bennet,” says Crawford, “what a pleasant surprise.” His voice is still half-wrecked from the impressive ring of bruises Bertram left around his neck, but he’s back in high form. “What can I do for you today?”

The giants part like the red sea in front of Mary. She decides not to be intimidated and walks to Crawford’s bed, raised so that he can survey his loyal subjects like a king. “I’ve decided on my repayment,” she says. “Make sure to pack for three days in London. You’re going to need a suit.”

Crawford freezes. “Bennet—”

Mary smiles so brightly her teeth hurt. “You’re going to my sister’s wedding on the 12th, Crawford. Chin up, it’s only going to hurt for the first seven hours or so.”

iii. | you wrote the song i wanna play

“This was dumb as hell,” Mary tells everyone in the car, which includes Will (driving), Lizzie
(passenger’s seat, calling the hospital), Jane (backseat, still in her wedding dress), and Lydia (backseat, in labor). “Why did you let Mum blackmail you into getting married so close to Lydia’s due date?”

“Oh, shut it,” says Lizzie. “Like you’ve ever been capable of standing against Mum in one of her moods. She threw that box of hair dye at your head and you caved in seconds.”

“I understand Jane’s desire not to have her wedding photos festooned with my blue hair, as I am a marvelous sister. However, I think the fact that I’m at Cambridge and not married to Peter Aster shows that I am, in fact, capable of standing up to Mum.” Mary turns her attention from arguing with Lizzie to Lydia, who is being exceptionally shitty at measuring her contractions. “How long was that, Lydia?”

“I don’t know, a fucking age and a half,” Lydia moans. “How long is this going to take?”

“I bet twenty hours in the pool,” says Mary. “You’re six weeks early, so this’ll be interesting.”

“What do you mean, interesting, you cunt?” Lydia yells. “I am dying!” Mary tries not to take the insult seriously and begins to time the contractions on her mobile’s stopwatch function.

“You’re not dying, darling,” says Jane, rubbing her hand in circles over Lydia’s lower back. “It’s okay, we’re almost there. Aren’t we, Will?”

Will neglects to answer in favor of gripping the steering wheel more firmly and taking a roundabout in a truly lethal fashion. If Mary had been unsure about Lizzie’s being pregnant, Will’s behavior confirms it. Of course, Lizzie probably is waiting to announce it until after Jane’s wedding (technically now), but Mary didn’t spend most of her summer holiday working with pregnant women only to be unable to recognize the look of it in her own sister.

“You’re at twenty seconds,” says Mary. “Don’t worry, they’re still pretty short.”

Lydia curls her fingers into claws and aims them towards Mary’s face. “I am going to rip all of your stupid hair out!”

“That won’t make you feel better,” Mary promises her cheerfully. “Besides, if you touch my hair I’ll set your head on fire. It’ll be easy with all of that aerosol spray in it.”

“Mary,” says Jane. She’s not very good at threatening, but she’s far more accomplished than anyone else genteelly disapproving. “This is very hard on everyone.”

“Probably hardest on Lydia,” Mary agrees. “That one was 25 seconds.”

“Oh my bloody fucking god,” Lydia shouts.

“You’re such a wimp,” says Mary, leaning forward to tweak Lydia’s nose. “Listening to you, you’d think the baby was coming already. You’ve got hours left, and this is only the very beginning of the pain. It’ll get much worse.”

“Throw her out of this car,” Lydia says to Jane. “I’m serious.” She turns to Mary and says, her voice thrown into a higher register than Mary had thought possible, “This term turned you even more insane.”

“It’s probably that boyfriend of hers,” Lizzie comments. “I’m sure when his face doesn’t look like ground meat he’s quite a catch.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Mary says by rote.
Lydia sucks in her breath and says, “NO. Mary, you didn’t?!”

“What, are you the only Bennet sister allowed to have inadvisable sexual relationships?” asks Mary. “You’re holding at 25, that’s good.”

In the front seat, Lizzie holds her hands over Will’s ears. “Will doesn’t need to hear this.”

“Listen to Lizzie getting prudish,” says Lydia. “You’d think she never—”

“If you finish that I will end you,” Lizzie promises. “Now isn’t the time to be airing out the past. Especially when the present is so much more interesting.”

“What, Mary’s not-boyfriend?” asks Lydia. “Oooh, fucking cunt fuck.” She flops her hand around and settles it on Mary’s bicep, which she proceeds to squeeze with a grip that could bend metal.

“I meant your impending birthing event,” replies Lizzie drily. “You know, the reason why we just fled Jane’s wedding.”

Bless perfect, beautiful Jane; she blushes and says, “The most important part was over. I’m sure everyone will enjoy the wedding breakfast just fine without me.”

“Please, half of the party’s going to be showing up at the hospital.” Years of pipetting in lab practicums have strengthened Mary’s right thumb to the point where it is actually bigger than her left one, but even it is beginning to flag under the constant exertion of using her mobile’s stopwatch function. “Twenty-seven seconds.”

Lydia’s ugly false nails dig further into Mary’s arm. She is paler and trembling slightly. Even though Mary rarely feels sympathy for the most irritating of her sisters, she can’t help the tender feelings that Lydia’s state seems to inspire in her. “Crawford’s the best shag I’ve ever had,” she says abruptly.

Lydia’s grip on Mary’s arm loosens slightly. “Better than Marianne?”

“Not in the beginning, but he improved with practice.”

Will begins to chant under his breath. It sounds a little like the remaining street directions to the hospital.

Lizzie twists in her seat so she can see her three sisters. “I thought you were too busy mooning over that doctor at your clinic? The one with the great arse?”

Her sisters’ knowledge of her inner workings would be more depressing if Mary didn’t know all the facets of their lives in exchange. “What’s the point in that? I’m never going to see him again. Crawford might be a cretin with entitlement issues and an inbred genealogy, but he’s not ten years older than me.”

Jane says absently, “Richard’s only five years older than you, Mary.”

The car falls into silence. Lydia’s shrieking dies huffily, so that Mary’s sudden descent into cardiac arrest is fully audible. “WHAT,” she yells. “What did you just say, Jane?”

Jane stops petting Lydia’s hair. “Oh,” she says faintly. “Oh, dear.”

Lizzie turns treacherously pink, so Mary turns the full force of her shock and anger on her. Lizzie promptly folds like wet cardboard. “Richard is Will’s cousin. I had met him last spring, but when Will and I took Lydia to one of her doctor’s appointments last month, we found out that he had
been your supervisor over the summer.”

“I CANNOT BELIEVE ANY OF YOU,” Mary says. She can hear the capitols in her own voice, but she seems unable to stop them. “HOW COULD YOU?!”

Will is now audibly talking to himself, but he’s three months from marrying Lizzie, so he doesn’t get a pass on this. Mary grabs a handful of Lizzie’s hair and shakes her. “You’re all awful! I hate you. Did you say anything?”

“No,” says Jane hurriedly. “Of course not.”

“Shut up unless you were there, Jane,” Mary advises her. “Here, time Lydia’s contractions while I rip Lizzie’s head off. Her baby can incubate without the contents of her head, I’m sure, since she never seems to use them.”

Any potential violence that Mary could perpetrate against Lizzie is lost when Jane and Lydia both begin to talk over each other. A rapturous “Oh, Lizzie,” overlaps with “You’re pregnant!? Not fair, I’m pregnant.”

“No for long,” Mary states drily. “Oh for god’s sake, give me back my phone, Jane. You clearly have no idea what you’re doing.”

The occupants of Will’s expensive midsize car pour out into the hospital parking lot while still yelling; a nearby nurse takes one look at them and grabs Lydia. “Have you been timing your contractions?” he demands.

“They’re thirty-two seconds in length,” Mary says over Jane embracing Will and Lizzie and laughing in the middle of the A&E entrance.

“You are the birthing partner?” the nurses asks, wheeling Lydia inside the hospital and down towards the maternity ward.

Technically they’ve all been trained and Kitty is the closest to Lydia, but she’s also likely to crumple like a toddler at the first sign of Lydia’s disapproval. “Yes,” says Mary.

“Oh god, over my dead body,” moans Lydia.

“So you’d prefer Mum, then?” asks Mary.

Lydia glares at Mary as the nurse executes a perfect turn and guides her wheelchair backwards into the elevator. “You’re such a cunt, Mary.”

“Which is why I’m the only one who can stand you, Lyds.” Mary and half of her psychotically dysfunctional family pack into the part of the elevator left unoccupied by hospital patients.

She leaves Will to watch Jane and Lizzie have meltdowns in the waiting room and goes to scour herself to an approved level of cleanliness before donning the scrubs that have been set out for her use.

Lydia gets predictably bored and whiny the more time that passes that the baby doesn’t show, and Mary occupies her by engaging in one of their favorite arguments, namely whether Lydia could be termed ‘home-wrecker’ for facilitating the end of the marriage of her calculus teacher.

Mary maintains, like she always does in this argument, that ‘home-wrecker’ is insulting and, as with most names for females in control of their sexuality in a patriarchy, ignores the fact that the two people capable of ruining a marriage are the two people in the marriage. Lydia, taking as
much pride in her seduction of her teacher as she does in the perfect marks that she achieved in
calculus through application of her brain (her seducing her teacher was an added benefit), takes
the opposing point.

Even someone as argumentative as Mary cannot have the same debate for more than two hours, so
eventually she opens the Sudoku app on her mobile and hands it over. Lydia fills out a Sudoku
board like most people fill out multiplication tables; she’s unlocked the expert level in twenty
minutes and wanders in circles up and down the room, eyes fixed to Mary’s mobile.

Mary is a reasonably intelligent person; she has no excuse for why it shocks her that when the
door opens, it’s Dr. Fitzwilliam—Richard, Will’s bloody cousin—who steps through it. “Heya,
Lydia. Mary,” he says. Lydia grunts and taps at Mary’s mobile. Mary has a hard time tearing her
eyes from his face; she’s rewarded by a smile, tired and stunning. “Let’s take a look,” Dr.
Fitzwilliam suggests after a few seconds.

“Lydia,” Mary interrupts, shaking herself free. “Give me that, you can break all of the records on
it later.”

“Shut up, I’ve got one—yes, there it is.” Lydia hands back Mary’s mobile, which is blaring a
tinny trumpet noise as pixels of rainbow confetti fall across the screen. Mary turns it off and puts it
down somewhere behind her as she helps Lydia onto the bed that has been left, until now,
unoccupied.

Dr. Fitzwilliam makes encouraging noises as he measures Lydia’s dilation and tells her about how
the next few hours will proceed. Mary realizes that underneath his scrubs he’s wearing the remains
of a dress shirt and nice pants—Jane must’ve invited him to the wedding. It makes sense, if
Charlie and Will’s families are so close. She hadn’t seen him in the church, but most of her
attention had been focused on keeping her mum from interrogating Crawford about the nature of
their relationship.

“Can I talk to you for a moment, Mary?” Dr. Fitzwilliam asks.

Mary retrieves her mobile and hands it to Lydia. “I’ve installed some sort of numerical hangman
game.” Lydia’s eyes light up greedily.

“What’s up?” she asks when she and Dr. Fitzwilliam have retreated to the hallway.

“I wanted to check that you’re prepared for how the next few hours will likely go,” he explains.
His face is just as beautiful as it was three months ago, unfortunately, and most of the authority
that he used to exude is gone; in its place, he’s just an attractive guy that Mary wants to sleep with.

“We all did a workshop,” Mary explains. “My sisters and I, at least. I’m the one least likely to
cave under Lydia’s repeated verbal abuse. Other than Lizzie, of course, but it’s probably
impossible to peel her out from Will’s protective grip at this point.”

Dr. Fitzwilliam’s eyes flick to over Mary’s shoulder, where her family is clumped and loudly
talking over one another in the waiting room. “Those are both valid points,” he agrees. His quick
grin is just as charming and lethal as Crawford’s best before Edmund Bertram made the innards of
a Cornish pasty from his aristocratic features.

“And only a madman would let my mother into a stressful situation considering how fragile she
maintains her nerves become.” Mary briefly lifts her eyes towards heaven to convey how she feels
about that.

Dr. Fitzwilliam laughs outright. “I see that you’ve thought this through.”
“Lydia may be the most annoying person on the planet,” with the possible except of Henry Crawford, “but she’s my baby sister.” Mary’s family is vitally important to her, the way that her career in medicine will never be. She must relate this in her expression; some remaining aspect of Dr. Fitzwilliam’s expression softens, and suddenly his face is approachable in its attractiveness.

“Since we’re soon to be family of sorts,” he says, offering his hand, “you must call me Richard.”

Considering that it’s just a handshake, it’s pretty fucking criminal how much sexual tension is passed between them in the single moment of contact. Mary can’t be the only one who feels it; something hard flashes in Richard’s eyes before he swallows it back.

The knowledge that he’s no longer her boss and actually only five years older than her flares between them. Jesus. “Well,” says Mary. “I better get back to Lydia before she dismantles my mobile out of boredom.”

She’s turning to do that, trying not to do something especially stupid like walk into a doorframe, when Crawford says from behind her, “Bennet! You aren’t seriously expecting me to sit with your family for the next fourteen hours, are you?”

“Oh, stuff it, Crawford. I loitered by your bedside for how many days, exactly?”

Crawford prowls forward, hands stuffed in the pockets of his trousers. Whatever expensive starch he’s had used to press his suit must be worth it; the creases are still crisp and if it weren’t for his wreck of a face, he’d look just a fresh as he’d had earlier that morning.

“Hello,” says Richard.

“Oh, right,” says Mary quickly. “Richard, this is Henry Crawford. Crawford this is Dr. Fitzwilliam, he’s attending to Lydia.”

“Fitzwilliam,” drawls Crawford. “Your supervisor from this summer, Bennet?”

Mary is surprised enough to gape. “Where the hell did you pick that up, Crawford?”

“Despite your persistent belief otherwise, I’m not a total idiot.”

Richard shakes Crawford’s hand. It’s as they’re standing next to each other, Richard towering a good six inches over Crawford with that Fitzwilliam family gift of height, that Mary realizes she can trace the same aristocratic features in both of their faces, although Richard’s aren’t currently broken. Her usual jibe of ‘inbred’ seems horrifyingly relevant.

“Are you a schoolmate of Mary’s?” Richard asks politely. His face has adopted its former mask of pleased ambivalence.

“That I am,” Crawford agrees. “She blackmailed me into attending this circus.”

Mary elbows him immediately, practice making it easy to avoid his bruised ribs. “It’s not blackmail if I call in a debt. Besides, up until my sister went into labor, you were having a perfectly fine time.”

“There was alcohol until your sister went into labor,” Crawford points out.

“Go talk to my da,” she says, putting both hands on his upper arm and pushing him firmly down the hall. The move has no effect unless Crawford allows it; he resists for a moment and then acquiesces. “Trust me, he’s just as unhappy as you. Don’t you have a chess app on your mobile? Play with him, he’s a shark.”
“If your mother asks me one more time how long we’ve been dating, I’m going to break out some stories about the UL that will make her toes curl,” Crawford finally says, breaking from whatever weird moment had fallen over their section of hallway.

“Why don’t you try,” Mary hisses. “When we get home, I’ll make sure to share the delightful anecdote of how your zygomatic arch came to be broken. I did tell you what happened to the guy who knocked up Lydia, didn’t I?”

“Keep fighting dirty, Bennet, and one day someone’s going to take you up on it,” Crawford comments mildly as he turns on his heel and saunters back towards the waiting room.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Mary says, moving her attention back to Richard. “Were you the cousin who went with Will to threaten Wickham?”

Richard smiles faintly. “No, it was our cousin, Anne de Bourgh. She works for MI-6. Or so we assume, at least. It’s not as if she can tell us.” He gestures at a height about three inches below his own; it’s over six feet, at least. “Anne’s about this tall and thin as a reed, but she has a particular expression that conveys how easy it would be for her to break all 206 bones in your body.”

“How useful,” says Mary, trying not to seethe with jealousy.

“It really is,” Richard agrees. Whatever he’d revealed earlier has been bottled up behind professionalism. “I need to go check on some things with the staff. Why don’t you join your sister?”

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At sixteen hours of labor, a girl, and four pounds seven ounces, Will cleans out the pool. It’s the first time Mary’s father has ever lost the birthing pool since Lizzie, at age eight, took him to the cleaners for Kitty’s birth, but he takes it with good enough grace. “It’s about time I had some competition,” he says with a gleam in his eye. At six weeks early, the hospital want to keep the baby for further examination, but she’s apparently healthy—surprisingly so, considering the genes she has to work from.

Mary appropriates Charles’ car and drives Kitty, Crawford, Jane, and Charlie home. The little house in Finchley is not really prepared to take on all the houseguests that are bound to be flooding in, so Mary sends Kitty out of their joined room to use Lydia’s one—it’s empty, so someone might as well use it—and pours Jane and Charlie, finally exhausted from their wedding and a dinner composed entirely of champagne from the reception and the prawn crackers from the Chinese takeaway Will had ordered four hours into Lydia’s labor, into Jane’s bed in the room she and Lizzie used to share.

Crawford, still mostly doped up, is surprisingly malleable as Mary forces him into her tiny twin bed. “Joining me?” he asks, waggling his eyebrows, but his spirit isn’t really into it.

“You’re at your sexiest when you’re tired and drugged,” Mary assures him. “I’m having a hard time keeping my hands off of you. C’mon, shoes off.” Awash with déjà vu from the first time Lydia overdid vodka cranberries, Mary wrestles with Crawford’s dress shoes and then prods him into a sitting position so she can work off his jacket and waistcoat.

“You smell like hospital soap,” Crawford says into her shoulder. “It’s rapidly becoming a familiar scent.”

Mary guides his elbow through the proper hole in his waistcoat and tries not to find him charming. It’s not as easy as she would have expected. “Trust me, hospital soap is preferable to what I
smelled like two hours ago.”

Crawford falls silent as Mary leans him against the headboard to pick at his necktie. “I’m a little bit impressed, Bennet. I knew from the first day of biochemistry practicum that you were a swot, but you’re going to be a rather smashing doctor, aren’t you?”

“Thank you, Crawford,” says Mary drily, “for validating my career aspirations.” She manages to loosen his necktie and decides that if he strangles himself in his sleep, it’s his own damn fault. “Go to sleep before you say something embarrassing.”

“I’m never embarrassed,” he says as she pushes his head into her pillows. “I’m Henry Crawford.”

Mary rolls her eyes heavenward and suddenly has no trouble finding him annoying again. “Good night, Crawford.”

Although Kitty’s bed looks mighty comfortable after the—oh God—twenty-three hours that Mary has been awake and assisting in Jane’s wedding and Lydia’s labor, Mary is well aware of her responsibilities as the only conscious Bennet. In the guest bedroom, she unfolds the guest sofa and makes the bed with new sheets so her grandparents have somewhere to sleep. On her last rounds, checking all of the locks on the doors and making sure a pile of towels and extra bedding is on the couch for anyone else sleeping over, she flicks on the coffee maker and sets out things for tea.

Finally, Mary crawls upstairs and sort of arranges herself so that she falls in some vague arrangement of limbs onto Kitty’s bed. Even Crawford’s snoring doesn’t keep her awake for more than a microsecond.

When she wakes up, fuzzy-mouthed, it’s an immediate, full-body experience. She realizes after a few hazy seconds that her vision is blurred because her glasses have fallen off; when she fumbles for them, an outline in the doorway says, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

It’s Richard. “What is it?” Mary asks, shoving her glasses onto her face and wincing as the light in the hallway sharpens. “Is there something wrong with Lydia? Is the baby okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, they’re fine,” Richard says. “Lizzie sent me upstairs to check on you; everyone just got back from the hospital. Your mum stayed with Lydia.”

“What time is it?” Mary looks towards her wrist before remembering that she isn’t wearing any timepiece due to the tasteful elegance of Jane’s wedding and Mary’s mother’s insistence that a plastic wristwatch did not honor the proceedings.

“A little after eight in the morning,” Richard says. His voice is low and deep; Crawford continues his snores, which seem to be particularly awful due to his broken face. “Go back to sleep.”

Mary wants, rather desperately, coffee and some sort of food. Her stomach loudly complains that the last time it ate was two days previous. Like a proper doctor, Mary wants food more than she wants seventeen more hours of sleep. “No, I can go for a little bit on three hours of sleep. Please tell me someone picked up breakfast.”

“The baker dropped off the rest of the wedding cake. It’s all anyone seems interested in eating.” Mary rolls herself out of bed and winces at the sight of dress, wrinkled from witnessing the birth of her new niece and being slept in. Richard leans against the doorway and adds, “I never told you—you were very good. With Lydia.”

Feeling like she’s at least sixty years older than she is, Mary hobbles out of bed to the wardrobe on her side of the room. “Lydia and I have had sixteen years of constant warfare. At this point I can survive just about anything she throws at me.”
“She’s rather vicious.”

“I won’t say she means well, because she doesn’t, but Lydia lacks an understanding of where normal people draw boundaries.” From the depths of the wardrobe, Mary unearths a jumper too ugly for Cambridge and a pair of particularly ratty jeans. “She doesn’t quite get that her behavior is offensive. Besides, Mum spoils her.”

Crawford’s snores stop, and Mary turns to check that he hasn’t accidentally smothered himself with her quilt. He looks fine as she gives him a quick once-over, her clothing held to her chest, and the bruising on his face appears to have gone down in the past few hours of rest. “At any rate, I’ve got the thickest skin, so I can deal with her. It helps that I also have the most blackmail material on her.”

“Apparently that talent extends further than your sister,” says Richard, tilting his head towards Crawford. “Did you really blackmail him into accompanying you?”

“Of course not. Crawford is a terrible human being, but even his paltry conscience balked at the idea of not repaying me for carrying his bloody corpse halfway across Cambridge to get him medical attention.” Satisfied that he won’t be dying anytime soon, Mary straightens and joins Richard in the corridor, pulling the door shut with a low snick behind her.

“I would ask why you had to do so, but I don’t actually care.” Ignoring conventions of personal space, Richard hasn’t moved from his original position, which puts him about six inches away from Mary. “As long as you don’t have an arrangement with him that bars someone else from interfering?”

“Crawford will dictate the details of my personal life the day that Kitty says six sensible things before breakfast,” Mary says. She suddenly appears to have lost all of the air in her lungs. The seconds that he spends staring at her feel stretched thin and long; after an aching moment, he curls a hand around the back of her head and says, “I’m sorry, but after waiting seven months it seems ridiculous to waste another second,” and slants his mouth across hers.

Every nerve ending in Mary’s mouth has a conniption and dies. Her lips tingle from the synaptic misfire, and then she drops her clothes onto the carpet and uses her free arms to press herself closer. Her neck should ache from accommodating the difference in their heights, but all she can think about is getting closer, closer, and she steps on his feet and goes up onto her toes.

About ten minutes later, Mary comes back to herself pressed against the wall outside her bedroom, legs tangled in her tragic wreck of a church dress, trying to climb Richard like a tree. The only reason she surfaces at all is that she hears rustling to her left; when she reluctantly turns her head, she sees Jane and Charlie tip-toeing down the hall. What they lack in subterfuge they make up for in effort.

Richard laughs and buries his head in the curve of Mary’s neck. It’s a closer reach than it should be because he has her six inches off the floor, pinned with his hips and one hand plastered over the curve of her breast. “Dear God, that was unsubtle,” he says. His hand curls and he brushes a careful thumb over her nipple, standing to attention under the cool silk of her bodice.

“We Bennets have many talents, but subtlety is not one of them,” Mary replies, volume strangled out of her voice by his touch. “If you want to eat any of that wedding cake, you’re going to have to let go of me. Otherwise, we’re going to kick Crawford out of my room and—”

Richard cuts her off with another kiss. It might actually burn the top layer of skin off of her lips; it
certainly feels that way. “Don’t tempt me,” he rasps. “It’d be terribly impolite, and Will would probably skin me alive.”

“Will is hardly the gatekeeper to my bed,” Mary says crossly. “If this is what having a brother is like, I don’t want one and Georgie can keep him to herself.”

Richard laughs again and Mary allows herself one long moment where she locks her legs around his hips and pushes herself against him, letting a lengthy kiss spin out, before she untangles her legs and steps out of his arms. “I’m going to change. I’ll see you downstairs?”


It startles a laugh out of Mary; she’s still smiling like an insane person as she rubs her make-up off in the bathroom and pulls on her change of clothes and she tiptoes into her room to deposit her dress in the hamper by her wardrobe.

“What time is it?” asks Crawford groggily from the depths of her bed.

“It’s quarter of nine. You can go back to sleep.”

“Right, good,” mumbles Crawford and pulls the quilt further over his face. “Shut the curtains?”

“I’m not your maid,” says Mary, tugging the curtains closed.

“Wake me at half two, my train’s at four.” The words are barely intelligible, but Mary gets the gist of it.

“Not your maid, Crawford,” Mary says, but she’s too happy for the words to have anything approaching acceptable venom. “Oh, bloody hell, yeah, I’ll wake you.” She pats him on the head as she crosses the room—a bruised location, to judge by his responding moan—and she practically skips out of the door and down the stairs.

The kitchen is packed with her family scarfing down the remains of Charlie and Jane’s wedding cake, although Kitty and their grandparents appear to still be asleep. “Morning,” says Mary, making a beeline for a plate with an unclaimed piece of cake. “Is there coffee?”

“Just made a new pot,” says Lizzie. “How in God’s name are you vertical right now? I know we all got some sleep at the hospital, but you certainly didn’t.”

“They train you for this sort of thing in medical school. It’s the same course where they teach you how to write illegibly and sleep standing up.” After three gigantic forkfuls of cake, Mary feels moderately more human. Her blood is electrified from the remarkably pleasant experience of having her mouth ravaged by Richard Fitzwilliam, M.D., but the cake gives her a nice extra kick. “Mmm, this is delicious. Nice choice, Jane.”

“I hope it made up for us bolting right after the ceremony,” says Jane fretfully. “Do you suppose we should write letters of apology to all of the guests?”

There are times where Jane is so bloody English that Mary suspects she bleeds tea. “It’s not your fault Lydia was just as early giving birth as she was doing everything else. She was the fastest of us to walk, after all.”

“And started talking the earliest,” Lizzie adds, since their mother isn’t around to do so.

“And she took to maths like she was born to it,” Kitty says from the doorway. “Oh thank god, coffee.”
“So why shouldn’t Lydia hijack your wedding in order to have her baby?” Mary finishes around her last bite of cake. “It’s perfectly in character. Is there more of this?”

Richard pushes the decimated cake platter in her direction. From the way he’s looking at her, Mary’s surprised that the rest of her family hasn’t started whispering. They’re probably all too tired, and Mary decides not to feed the gossipy beast; she keeps her eyes securely locked on the cake and cuts herself another generous slice.

“I’m back to the hospital to relieve Mum at noon,” Lizzie says. “Is anyone coming with me?”

“I’ll come,” says Kitty. “Oh my lord, Jane, this cake is just as perfect as you are.” Jane blushes and sips her tea, her left hand looped securely around Charlie’s. If the cake doesn’t give Mary diabetes, they might.

“We’ll take a shift tonight,” says Charlie, but he’s immediately overruled by everyone in the room insisting that he and Jane take their wedding trip as planned.

“I can drop you off if Lizzie lends me her car,” Mary says. “I have to take Crawford to Paddington anyway.”

“Make sure to put in more petrol,” says Lizzie, fishing into her pocket and tossing her car keys to Mary. “It’s running on fumes after that dash to the hospital we did yesterday.”

Although Mary has never been the most coordinated of her sisters—Kitty’s the football star—her hand-eye coordination has been strengthened by multiple dissection practicums, so she snatches Lizzie’s keys out of the air and stuffs them in the pocket of her jeans, where they promptly fall through a hole and onto the floor.

“Jesus,” mutters Mary under her breath. “All right, so, I should probably change my pants.”

“We need to finish packing. I hadn’t thought—” begins Jane, and Charlie tugs her by the hand towards the stairs as she outlines all the things she’d hadn’t somehow managed to foresee by virtue of being beauty incarnate.

As the kitchen settles down into whatever facsimile of calm the Bennet family has gotten used to snatching out from under the hand of fate, Kitty takes a gigantic mug of coffee and her plate of cake into the front parlor so she can watch the telly. Lizzie and Will can’t go up to Lizzie and Jane’s room with it so obviously being occupied by the newlyweds, so they take seats around the kitchen table and divide up the Sunday Herald. “Make sure to save the Sudoku for Lydia,” Mary reminds them from her hunched position over the counter.

“I’m not sure I’m emotionally prepared to read the paper,” says Lizzie. “Do we really need to know what stupid thing Clegg has said in the hearing of reporters in the past twenty-four hours?”

Will has disappeared behind the business section, presumably to ensure that the financial world is still firmly under his thumb and unlikely to wrest itself free any time soon. “Where’s Da?” Mary asks. Every cell in her body seems to have realigned itself to maintain constant awareness of Richard is at any point in time. She’s afraid that when they’re alone she’s going to plaster herself across the front of his body and just never let go, like some sort of limpet.

“He’s checking on Gran and Gramp. They’re very enthused about their first great-grandchild, even though Gran keeps remarking that she’d prefer such a gift come under the blessing of wedlock,” says Lizzie. “Thanks to your inability to shut your giant gob, she’s been dropping hints the size of a small country about Will and I moving up the wedding date.”
Mary rolls her eyes. “Lizzie, you’re glowing and Will is, if possible, more protective than he was when Wickham attempted to seduce you. Anyone with half a lick of sense can tell that you’re breeding.”

The newspaper rustles as Will forcefully shakes it out. “Thank you, as always, for an enlightening analysis of the situation, Mary.” He sounds adorably grumpy. Once he probably would’ve seemed stiff and proud, which was how he’d presented himself, but in addition to a different haircut and a move to Glasgow, Lizzie had also talked him into a better personality.

Mary finishes her religious experience with her coffee and eyes the clock over the stove. “I’m going to take a shower before everyone else in this house has the same idea, then I’ll take a quick nap. Will you make sure to wake me up before you go to the hospital, Lizzie?”

“Go,” says Lizzie. “You’ve got the most legitimate claim on the shower, but that doesn’t mean Kitty won’t shank you for it.”

Halfway up the stairs, Mary realizes that she should probably talk to Richard about their ill-timed but nevertheless lovely liaison in the upstairs corridor. Apparently thinking the same thing, Richard is at the base of the stairs when she turns around. “We should—” he begins.

“—talk, yeah,” Mary finishes for him. “Um, can it be at a time when I’m not literally itching for a wash?”

“Let me buy you dinner,” he says. It’s not a question, which is rously autocratic. Mary hadn’t realized she found that sort of thing attractive.

“Wednesday,” she answers. “After Lydia’s out of the hospital and my grandparents are gone.”

“Wednesday,” he echoes. “Great. Yes. Three days.” He makes to return to the kitchen and then, rapidly, takes the seven steps between them in two big steps and kisses her. “I’m finding it rather difficult to stop doing that.”

“I can’t think of a single reason that you should,” Mary tells him. He tastes like chocolate and coffee, as does she, but it’s a different sensation when she curls her tongue against his like a handshake. Mary’s wrapped her arms around him and is humming in the back of her throat before she has a chance to think about it. “Fuck,” she says stupidly, pushing him away as much as she pulls herself free. “Wednesday. Right.”

Any chance of her coming across as smooth and not a moron having now been decimated, Mary peels her limbs free and flees ignobly up the stairs to the bathroom.

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Crawford and Mary are incapable of sharing a space for any period of time without descending into sniping at one another, so Mary does the responsible, adult thing and lets Jane and Charlie coo in a lovesick fashion at one another for the drive into central London. In order for such a state to be maintained, however, Crawford would have to be agreeable.

“I think I have diabetes,” Crawford whispers.

“Shut up,” Mary hisses back. “Don’t be rude.”

“They aren’t listening, they’re too busy staring into each other’s eyes.” Mary focuses all of her attention on the road and refuses to be tempted into peeking at Jane and Charlie in the backseat.

“They just got married. I’m sure if you ever undergo brainwashing and fall in love, you’ll do
something similar the morning after your wedding.”

“If I ever get married—thanks for the hint that I’m incapable of love, you’re always such a darling, Bennet—I’m not getting out of bed for three days afterwards.” Crawford leans back in his seat and crosses his feet at the ankles. “I heard it’s better when you’re married. You get to do the weird stuff.”

“Oh, Mary loves that show,” says Jane suddenly. Mary jumps and almost steers the car into oncoming traffic.

“Does she?” Crawford drawls. He and Mary rarely discuss popular culture unless she is defaming his interest in a particularly egregious aspect of it. “I thought hell would freeze over the day we liked the same thing, Bennet.”

“You have the collected works of Robert Heinlein, how was I supposed to infer from that that you’d like Joss Whedon? For one thing, he understands the power of the female.”

“So does Heinlein,” interrupts Crawford with an exaggerated leer.

“Ugh, go stick your face in a blender,” says Mary.

“Edmund Bertram did that for me already,” replies Crawford cheerfully. “I’m afraid my magnificent profile will never be quite the same.”

Mary’s grip on the steering wheel eases back from murderous territory. “We weep for your loss.”

After years of being a Bennet, Jane has a sixth sense for an impending argument and the best way to diffuse it. “I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk very much over the course of your visit. You and Mary seem to be very close.”

In a flash across Crawford’s face, Mary can see the four (lewd) responses he considers and then rejects. “We study together often,” she says. “We share a few courses.”

Crawford is clearly laughing at her; his eyes crinkle and rise in the corners. “Bennet means that she’s using me to get to the top of the class, and once she’s there she’ll slit my throat in my sleep.”

“Nonsense,” says Mary briskly. “If that was my aim, I’d be spending all of my time with George Nguyen.”

“But why would you want to?” Crawford asks. “He has a face like a donkey.”

“George Nguyen,” Mary tells Jane, “could probably make a living posing next to Kate Moss if he wasn’t so set on becoming a neurosurgeon. Crawford, stop being jealous, it’s unattractive.”

“I don’t understand why you’re all so enamored with him,” Crawford mutters. “He’s insufferable.”

“He’s desperately crazed about Emma Wu,” Mary translates for Charlie and Jane’s benefit. “Girton’s tangled love affairs are about three tragic speeches from becoming a Shakespearean comedy. We’ve already got the fisticuffs in Act Two thanks to Crawford.”

“Please, refer your gratitude to Bertram.”

“And last term,” she continues, “we had that hilarious case of mistaken identity with Jenny Fairfax and Frank Churchill, may his name live on in infamy.”
“Churchill’s an arse,” comments Crawford. “I would know. He’s an incurable reprobate.”

“I didn’t know you knew was ‘reprobate’ meant,” Mary says.

“I make it a point to look up all the loving terms you fling my way, Bennet,” Crawford says. “I think you just missed your turn.”

He’s right. This entire enterprise is reminding Mary why she hates driving in London, beyond global warming and the congestion tax exacerbating the already sorry state of her personal finances. “Blast it,” she says, and signals to take the next turn. “I hate driving in London.”

“Thank you so much for doing this.” Jane reaches forward to place a soothing hand on Mary’s shoulder. “It’s always such trouble, taking the Underground with luggage everywhere.”

Mary has never tested this hypothesis, but she feels confident stating that it is a physical impossibility for a person to remain angry when Jane applies her ‘soothing’ voice. “Oh, it’s all right, Jane. I’m just crotchety.”

“Did you just apologize, Bennet?” Crawford gasps theatrically. “I think Bertram might’ve given me brain damage; I must be hallucinating.”

“Oh, I’ll give you brain damage,” snaps Mary, and she takes advantage of a red light to reach across the gearshift and twist Crawford’s ear.

“Jesus, Bennet, are you trying to give me a matching set of fractures? I’ve been slapped with less force than that.”

“By an irritated paramour,” Mary points out.

“And such a title clearly doesn’t apply to you,” Crawford says. “Violence is not an attractive trait in a lady.”

Jane exhales loudly; she knows before Mary opens her mouth what’s coming. “Fuck your stereotypes.”

Crawford snorts. “Learn another song, Bennet. At this point it’s becoming monotonous.” He presses his palm against his injured ear and winces. All of the (annoying) flirtation has been leached out of his voice and replaced by snippiness.

Mary refuses to feel bad. Why should she? Crawford’s an arse and twice the reprobate that Frank Churchill is. The tickling in the bottom of her spine is clearly just her own nurturing nature, which hates exerting violence to anyone, even cads.

“What are you doing while you’re home?” Charlie asks, kindly and slightly desperate. Maybe he and Jane have decided that leaving Mary and Crawford to their own devices will end in bloodshed. “Caro’s got a party on Wednesday—you could bring Kitty? I’m sure she’d love to have you.”

Caro would enjoy hosting the Bennet sisters at one of her posh Belgravia house parties on cold day in hell, but Charlie’s naïveté is probably one of the reasons why Jane loves him; it is a trait Jane herself had in spades. “I’m having dinner with Richard on Wednesday,” says Mary. This time, she manages the turn and promptly gives Crawford a triumphant smirk.

Unsurprisingly, Crawford appears unimpressed. He frowns and opens his mouth, but before he can speak Jane says, “Oh, Mary,” breathily. “That’s wonderful!”
Reminding herself that she is twenty-one, not fourteen, and she’s successfully conducted relationships in the past without bringing embarrassment to either party, Mary suppresses her native desire to squeal. “Yes,” she says as stately as possible. “It is.” She then ruins her stateliness by giggling.

“Where’s he taking you? Somewhere nice?” demands Charlie. He’s clearly begun to take his brotherly duties very seriously.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” replies Mary cheerfully. Thank God for the signs that direct traffic to Paddington; she’d have gotten them lost by now. Luckily enough, she can see the station taking shape across the bridge. “I don’t really care.”

Had Lizzie been in the car, she would have undoubtedly pointed out that Mary always cared about first dates—she’d rejected four potential suitors on account of where they’d suggested taking their first date. Mary dislikes zoos, Tories, and lectures at the LSE, and she sees no reason to be ashamed of that.

Lizzie is not in the car, so Crawford says in a snooty voice the likes of which Mary hasn’t heard in two years, “You’re one of the most judgmental people I’ve ever met, Bennet. Of course you care.”

Stung—judgmental has always been one of Lizzie’s faults, never one of Mary’s—she slams on the brakes outside of Paddington and says tightly, “We’re here.”

Jane and Charlie unload their bags, give Mary a quick hug and kiss each, and dash off to catch the express to Heathrow. Crawford loiters, hands in his pocket, as Mary throws his bag at him. He catches it in his arms and stands there, staring at her, with a peculiar expression on his face.

“What?” she demands, crossing her arms over her chest.

Since he’s being rude, she considers it perfectly acceptable that she returns the favor. The longer she stares at his face, the stranger his features become. Even discolored courtesy of Fanny Price’s honor, his bones are sharp and fine, framed by a tousled cap of blond curls. He’s hardly conventionally attractive, but he’s not a troll, either.

“You look very normal,” he finally tells her. “With the brown.”

It isn’t until he says this that Mary realizes he has never seen her natural hair color. “I’m blonde,” she reminds him with a delicately raised eyebrow. He should know that; he’s in possession of intimate evidence as to the truth of that.

Crawford’s eyes darken from grey to blue. In two seconds he’s dropped his bag and has her pinned to the passenger side of the car, his hands on her shoulders. “Jesus, Bennet,” he rasps. “Why the fuck are you going out with that prick?”

Before Mary can form a response to that non sequitur, Crawford has apparently deemed any reply unnecessary and he slants his mouth over hers, the wide palms of his hands trailing up her neck to the back of her head. He takes a large handful of her dully colored hair and tugs, guiding her in the direction he wants.

To what will be her future embarrassment, Mary responds to his kiss without much input from her higher brain functioning. She rises up to her toes and grips the collar of his shirt and gives as good as she takes, which is fairly good. Crawford groans into her mouth and rips his head back, his eyes glazed.

“What are you on about?” Mary demands. It takes her a few seconds; she can’t seem to speak
“You’re a moron,” Crawford snaps. He runs his thumb along her lower lip and watches it carefully, as though it will give him the answer he wants. “If you really wanted your supervisor hero, you’d have slapped me.”

Mary rears back, but as she’s currently up against a car, there isn’t really anywhere for her to go. “This, from the king of undefined relationship statuses?”

“You don’t want him,” he continues, as though she hasn’t spoken. His thumb rubs against the corner of her mouth as if something is caught there. “He’s old and he doesn’t have the faintest idea what you’re like.”

With no other recourse, Mary stomps on Crawford’s foot. His reflexes are too good for that; his foot slips out of the way in half of a millisecond and then he uses his stupid rowing Neanderthal strength to lift her bodily off of her feet. This is rapidly becoming a trend of which Mary is not fond. “Put me down,” she hisses.

“Give me a chance,” says Crawford. The queer expression comes back into his face, now that lust is fading. “I mean it, Bennet.”

This is unconscionable. It’s also inconceivable. Crawford? In a relationship? “You never mean anything,” Mary says. “I’ll eat my socks the day you commit yourself to monogamy.”

As far as Mary is aware, Crawford doesn’t know how to take anything seriously. In the years that she has known him, through classes and ill-advised recreational shagging, Crawford has floated through his life with only a minimal, bemused interest in his affairs. She’d only ever seen him get really passionate about Fanny Price, and that had ended poorly enough that his hospital bill would’ve made Mary’s mother swoon.

Even if he was serious—which he’s not—Mary is too smart to throw herself into Crawford’s arms and expect anything other than heartbreak and other maudlin, weepy emotions.

“You don’t trust me,” he observes.

Mary sighs and gives up on touching the ground any time soon. “Of course I don’t trust you. I barely know you. I don’t think anyone really knows you, Crawford. Isn’t that the point?”

Finally (finally) Crawford stops staring at her mouth and lifts his eyes to hers. The honking and crying and general bustle outside of Paddington sort of fades into the background, a kind of generalized humming that echoes what is buzzing under Mary’s skin. “Most likely,” he finally says fuzzily.

Taking advantage of his confusion, Mary tries to slip out of his arms. They tighten around her immediately, a band of muscle that speaks to his privileged youth spent rowing up and down rivers on people’s private estates. He licks his lips and speaks slowly, maybe even nervously, although that’s unheard of in Mary’s dealings with Henry Crawford. “I have no idea why, but I really like you, Bennet.”

“That’s encouraging,” says Mary snippily.

“Shut up,” Crawford has given up on eye contact and is now speaking exclusively to her right eyebrow. “Richard Fitzhubert isn’t who you want, and you’d either kill him or dominate him within a week of dating. When you find out that I’m right, and he’s not who you made him up to be, you need to give me a chance.”
Mary has a hard time imagining that Richard won’t be a lovely human being. If anything, it will be Mary who falls far short of his expectations, whatever they might be. “Crawford,” she begins, suddenly aware that he has emotions (like a real boy!) and for some ridiculous, unknown reason, they appear to be tied to her. “I think you need to take some time and figure out why this business with Fanny Price has messed with your head—”

“Forget about Fanny goddamn Price,” Crawford shouts. In a sudden rush, all of the noise falls into their pocket of space. The horns sound louder, the shrieks of small children more piercing, and a few surrounding whispers particularly pointed. “This is not about Fanny. It was always about you, Bennet. Even Fanny was about you.” He releases her and she drops to the ground, stumbling as she suddenly regains her footing. Her knees feel a little numb.

“I,” says Mary. It is the first time she can ever remember being struck speechless. It is a distinctly unpleasant sensation.

“Because I am a mature adult,” says Crawford, being to pick up his abandoned bag, “I’m going to give you until the start of Lent term to figure out that you’re only in love with the idea of you and Fitzhubert saving Malawi orphans.” He sounds snotty but detached. She sincerely believes in this moment that he is the grandson of a marquis; only a dozen generations of breeding could have created that pristine enunciation. “Then I’m going to convince you to date me if it kills us.” He slings his bag over his shoulder and gives her a frosty smile. “I expect it might.”

Mary doesn’t know how long she stands like a moron in front of Lizzie’s car, cradling the keys in her left hand, staring after him as he’s swallowed by Paddington’s mass of holiday traffic.

“OI. GET OUT OF THE WAY YOU DAFT BINT,” someone bellows at Mary.

“Fuck off,” she says. It lacks heat and volume, so she gathers the shreds of her dignity and confusion and piles her limbs back into the car. It takes her four tries to start the car; her hands are shaking.

On the way back, she misses her turn onto the A41 and drives in a weird daze until she finds herself in Hackney Marsh, waiting for a light to change. “What the fuck,” she says to herself, hoping that her voice will help ground the situation. She looks at herself in the rearview mirror and sees that she is flushed, slightly glassy-eyed, her brown, wedding-approved hair mussed into a fuzzy halo around her head. She looks only two steps above thoroughly ravished, like a cross-dressing Shakespearean heroine.

“Oh my god,” she whispers. “He was serious.”

iv. | we looked at them eleven ways

With Crawford’s words rattling around her skull like the bells from Notre Dame, Mary barely survives to Wednesday. If not for Mary and Lydia’s charming blend of verbal abuse and sisterly affection, she probably wouldn’t have even been ready for dinner with Richard. As it is, she weathers Lydia’s bitching about her useless charcoal-based organic eyeliner without any comments beyond zombie-like single-syllable responses.

“You’re like a doll,” says Lydia disapprovingly as she and Kitty push Mary down the stairs to the kitchen. “Look at you. Flopping around.”

Kitty, bless her, catches Mary’s elbow before she walks into the doorway to the kitchen. “What is wrong with you? Lydia’s been at you all afternoon and you haven’t said a thing.”
“I’m fine,” says Mary robotically. She’s having a hard time seeing properly—thus the doorframe—and she comes into herself long enough to blink forcefully. “Is our kitchen normally so lopsided? Shit, Lydia, I think you gave me the wrong contacts.”

At the stove, a fuzzy Lizzie asks, “I thought you didn’t own contacts? Aren’t they bad for the environment, along with microwaves and all other modern conveniences?”

“Right,” agrees Mary, shaking her head, trying to work out the cobwebs left by Crawford’s rant. “Of course I don’t. Why the fuck am I wearing them, then?”

“Your prescription is basically Mum’s,” says Lydia dismissively.

“I can’t see, which indicates that it is not,” hisses Mary.

Lydia flops onto one of the counter stools and pulls out her phone. “Trust me, you look great.”

“Bit difficult to judge, as I am currently blind,” Mary points out. She can at least confirm that she is wearing her sexiest trousers, tight and navy with grey pinstripes, but beyond that she can’t speak as to the rest of the presentation; she was too disengaged in the process.

To her right, Kitty pats her elbow. “I’m not Lydia’s brand of slutty, and I promise that you’re gorgeous. Richard’s not going to know what hit him, up until he decides to skip dinner and just shag you in the back of his car.”

“Car sex is awkward,” Mary, Lizzie, and Lydia reply in muddled unison. Will clears his throat aggressively and hands Lizzie a bowl of chopped onions.

“Damn,” mutters Kitty. “I hate always being the last to know.”

“The last will undoubtedly be Jane,” Lydia tells her, head bent over the screen of her phone. “Vanilla darling that she is.”

“I’m sure Jane and Charlie are having plenty of lovely adventures,” says Lizzie loyally.

“Gah, it’s like trying to imagine Charles and Camilla,” mutters Kitty. “All proper and wot. You wouldn’t think imagining two attractive people having sex would be off-putting, but it really is.”

“Well, thank God this family has some sense of propriety,” Lizzie declares. “I was worried for our eternal souls.”

All of her sisters present in the kitchen take a moment to convey via their faces how they feel about that spot of nonsense. If there were a book open in Ladbrokes about the status of the cumulative Bennet family’s chances of getting into heaven, even Jane’s pristine soul isn’t enough to save the rest of them. “Right,” drawls Lydia after a protracted pause.

Mary forces herself to stop fussing with the hair that she can’t see and grimly folds her hands in front of her. She rolls through a few of the yoga breathing exercises she can still remember, which is not a lot of them, and then she settles in an awkward bird-like pose on one of the kitchen stools. “Why did I let you dress me?” she asks Lydia blankly. “The last thing I really needed for this entire farce was to be blind and poured into uncomfortable clothing.”

“You love those pants, so stop bitching,” Lydia says lazily, snapping her gum. “Ungrateful brat.”

“Yes, because you’re definitely one to talk,” Mary snips back. Things are showing definite signs of descending into outright anarchy before Lizzie tips part of the tomatoes into the open flame of the stove and suddenly everyone becomes occupied in keeping the house from burning down.
around their ears.

After what feels like half a minute, Mary hears the wheels of Richard’s car on the gravel outside of the garden and, terrified and trembling, she’s pushing her hair out of her face and hurriedly having Kitty examine her for any sign of the soot that had poured out of the poor, decimated tomatoes. “You look fine,” Kitty assures her. “Here, a bit more of the lippy—”

Then Mary’s being thrust on unstable heels in the general direction of the door to the garden, lipstick shoved back into her purse and her purse slung over her shoulder. “Good luck!” Lydia and Kitty chorus, followed by Lizzie’s more sedate, “Have a nice evening,” and Will’s silent nod.

Mary catches her heel in the doorframe and almost face-plants into the withered remains of one of her mother’s potted petunias, but she’s upright and moderately presentable when Richard climbs out of his car and comes to take her hand. “Heya,” he says softly. He can probably see all of her sisters with their ugly faces mashed up to the kitchen windows; he kisses her lightly on the cheek and helps her to the passenger seat of his car.

Everything is distinctly classy and grown-up, which is a bit of a switch from Mary’s previous romantic interludes. After all, it’s not like Mary and Crawford have ever had a reason to go out for dinner in a context other than curry and lager after a particularly brutal exam, and the last person Mary had dated before Crawford had been on campus in Cambridge, where no one has a car or money to be spending on dates.

“This is nice,” says Mary inanely. “I like your, um, car.” Mary hates cars in general and on principle, but it seems like a pleasant thought to share.

Richard grins at her and guns into reverse. JESUS CHRIST, Mary’s brain screams, and she clutches at her safety belt with white-knuckled fingers. “It’s not mine,” Richard tells her casually, as though he often drives as if he was hired as an extra in one of the Jason Bourne films. “It’s my cousin Anne’s, but she’s out of the country for a few months and left it in my care. It’s one of those cars that have to be driven occasionally or else the engine will cry.”

“Ah,” says Mary shakily. Now that she’s looking for it, she can pick out design features that seem to indicate that this car was made to be driven excessively fast. She’s almost too scared to look at how high the speedometer goes. “I didn’t realize that cars were like that.”

“Good cars are like good pearls,” Richard says. “Or so my father tells my mother when she complains about his automotive purchases.”

It would not surprise Mary in this moment to learn that Richard is related to Crawford; that little bit of nonsense practically has generations-old nobility scrawled over it. “I didn’t know that,” she admits. “I don’t know anyone that owns a string of good pearls. Or a good car, now that I think about it.” She pauses and reflects. “Actually, it would not surprise me to learn that Will’s given Lizzie some expensive bit of pearly frippery.”

“Very astute of you,” Richard observes. “He’s giving her our grandmother’s sapphires for Christmas, in fact. You didn’t hear that, of course.”

Fascinated in spite of herself, Mary asks, “Oh god, do they have a name? Like, the Darcy sapphires?”

Richard laughs and changes gears. Mary’s stomach abruptly falls out onto the road; she can’t tell if it’s the effect of his smile, which is dazzlingly brilliant, or the car attempting to break a dozen traffic laws. “Not quite that distinguished, I’m afraid. They belonged to our grandmother before she married our grandfather. She left them to her eldest daughter, Will’s mum, and now they’re
It’s odd to contemplate Lizzie as someone’s wife. She has always been just Lizzie, the most argumentative of the Bennet sisters and Da’s obvious favorite. Now that Lizzie works for a fabulous solicitor’s office in Glasgow and gets to argue with people for a living—and Will for fun—she’s not only going to be a wife, she’s going to be doing it in Scotland.

“They’re going to look fabulous on Lizzie.” What Mary doesn’t know about expensive jewels could fill a thousand years’ worth of encyclopedias, but she knows the theory behind what blue gems do to beautiful girls with blue eyes, and no one’s ever accused Lizzie of being unattractive. Will aside, of course, but he was clearly undergoing a brief surge of brain fever due to overexposure to Caro Bingley’s personality.

Richard’s face softens slightly. “She’s brilliant for Will.”

No, Mary thinks, some of the blood draining out of her head. No. Absolutely not. Because everything else in her life has turned out to be an absurd farce, she forces herself to look at Richard from a slightly more abstract plane, like a stranger. He’s not pining for Lizzie, is he? Mary’s the most like her, admittedly, but never were there a set of five siblings quite so different as the Bennet sisters, so most like is a nebulous concept.

He doesn’t look like he’s pining. It’s a tough call to make, especially now that Mary knows that Crawford has apparently been acting the lovesick fool since the beginning of Michaelmas term right under her nose. “They’re good for each other,” she says, testing the ground before her stomach has a chance to rise angrily out of her throat. “They soften each other’s unfriendly aspects.”

There is nothing in Richard’s bearing that indicates that he wants to be the one softening Lizzie’s edges. “I’m just glad Will’s not moping any more. After your sister turned him down and he found out about Jane and Charlie, he spent two months in London sort of listlessly floating in and out of rooms like a Regency heroine.”

It’s hard to imagine Will doing anything listlessly, not with all of his fierce pride and a fairly hefty set of daddy issues that Mary can see like a blinking light hovering over his head, but Mary makes an agreeable noise in the back of her throat. “He’s definitely not anymore,” she points out. “The only bit of Will that’s like a Regency heroine now is the lovesickness.”

“And the profligate spending,” Richard adds.

Mary’s in her comfort zone; thanks to Jane and Kitty, she’s read her fair share of purloined bodice rippers. “I thought Regency heroines were usually poor as church mice?”

Richard holds up a hand as if to fend her off, which is one less hand controlling his snarling beast of a car. Mary bites down on her instinctual shout to watch the goddamn road. “I see I’m in the presence of an expert.”

“Hard not to be, with four sisters,” she explains. “I’m partial to science fiction and fantasy, myself, but Lizzie loves anything written between 1750 and 1950, and Mum’s pile of ‘80s Mills & Boon novels might be bigger than Da’s collection of Socratic philosophers.”

“The Socratic philosophers have the disadvantage of incomplete preservation.”

The rest of the evening is like a recipe for Mary’s perfect date. Richard parks his demon car in a car park across the street from what turns out to be an incredibly posh vegetarian restaurant, and they split two entrees and spend hours lingering over their glasses of wine, talking about Mary’s
classes and Richard’s clinic work. He’s incredibly well read about current events, and Mary has to tamp down her desire to leap onto the table and shout, “I have actually found a perfect human being.”

As he—slowly—drives her home, the conversation begins to die a gentle, comfortable death, and buoyed by three glasses of red wine, Mary isn’t inclined to push things. “Are you going to stay at the clinic?” she asks him, resting her head against the seat and closing her eyes. She can feel the soft glow of the streetlights as they roll across her eyelids.

“No, it was never intended to be a long-term arrangement.” When Richard changes gears now, Mary is almost attenuated to the sensation. Her stomach is filled with the best tortellini she’s ever eaten, and she just wants to bask. “I’ve actually enlisted.”

“For what?” asks Mary. She wonders suddenly if he’s interested in doing medical work abroad. The thought makes her feel with fluttery, bright feelings. At least twelve unsuitable fantasies come to mind. In the back of her head, she can hear Crawford’s dry, you’re only in love with the idea of you and Fitzhubert saving Malawi orphans, and fuck him. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to save Malawi orphans. The education as to the spread of AIDS through breast milk in that area is abysmal.

“RAMC,” he says.

It takes Mary a few seconds to work through, as acronyms in the medical profession are heavy on the ground. She thinks for a second that she hasn’t heard of that organization, and then: RAMC. Royal Army Medical Corps.

“I’m sorry, what?” She sits up so quickly that she almost brains herself on the ceiling of the car. “You’ve—enlisted? In the Royal Army Medical Corps?”

Richard’s face tightens. “I. Yes. I know that I should have mentioned this before, especially because of—everything. But I wanted us to have a nice evening.”

Oh my god. Oh my god. Mary gapes, like an idiot, until she realizes how rude she’s being and she snaps her jaw shut so quickly that it clicks. “When do you leave?” she asks breathily. What she really wants to ask is how the hell he’s justifying, as a medical professional, going to war, but Mary knows that her feelings about pacifism are naïve, even if she can’t shake them.

“February.”

The temperature in the car drops by a few degrees. “You’re leaving in two months?” Mary won’t even be done with Lent term by the time he leaves.

All of the distance between them is suddenly, starkly emphasized. Mary stares at the padded interior of his cousin’s hugely expensive panther of a car, at his hands on the wheel. She had spent months fantasizing about those hands, how gently they’d cradled newborns and guided her and Catherine in simple procedures, the way that his competency had been reflected in them.

She looks at his hands on the steering wheel, and it’s like a thousand miles are already between them.

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The next morning, as Mary sips at a mug of coffee and has a marathon of Cracker on for the background noise, her father disengages from the crowd of furiously whispering family members in the kitchen and comes to the living room. “Out of all of my daughters,” muses her father in the doorframe, “you were the last one I expected to find stringing along two gentlemen at the same
“Da!” Mary exclaims, shocked out of her fugue state, but he doggedly persists.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” he asks, nailing her with a quelling look. “Mary, I thought you were too ethical for this.” He sits in his favorite chair catty-corner to the couch and uses the remote to turn down the volume on the telly.

“I’m not stringing anyone along!” Mary protests. She flushes at the memory of Crawford’s insistence that she make up her mind. “I have told everyone many times that Crawford and I aren’t dating. He wouldn’t’ve shagged Maria Bertram if we—” Belatedly, Mary remembers that she is talking to her father. “Er, that is.”

“Ah,” says her father. He leans back in his chair and steeples his fingers. If Mary had been asked three hours ago if her father was capable of looking crafty, she would’ve laughed hysterically; but now he’s got a look about him, one of Will on the verge of making a devastating acquisition for his financial empire. “I see. So you’re upset because he wasn’t faithful.”

Desperate, Mary clarifies, “Fidelity wasn’t part of our arrangement, Da. It was just—it was very casual.” God, she is explaining her casual sex agreement to her father. “My doubts about Crawford are based entirely on the fact that he is an awful person.”

“In what way?” he prods. “Is he cruel?”

“No,” admits Mary. “But—he’s greedy and prideful and he hasn’t got a set of morals to guide a housefly, let alone a human being. He likes sexist literature and he barely knows Nelson Mandela from Idi Amin and when I told him about wanting to work for Médecins Sans Frontières, he laughed.” Her voice has begun to rise, both in volume and in pitch, until she finds herself shrieking.

“Not a very pleasant man,” her father says agreeably. “I don’t know why you’re friends with him at this rate, Mary.”

Helpless, Mary spreads her hands in front of her and shrugs. “He’s—charming, I suppose. It’s a bit like Lydia. Selfish, charming people always manage to have friends. And although he can’t make a decision in his personal life without picking the worst option, he’s moderately intelligent.” She can’t quite put into words the way that Crawford’s biting commentary makes her feel, as it’s an entirely separate sensation from her evening with Richard the night before. With Richard, everything had been smooth and easy; with Crawford, it is as though her skin has electric wires running beneath it.

“Let us summarize,” suggests her father. “In review, his sins: greed, pride, selfishness, and a certain ethical laxity. In his virtues: charm, intelligence, and enough self-awareness to value your friendship and the debt he owed to you.”

“The last one shouldn’t count,” Mary interrupts. “He only owed me a debt because he got bored with the girl he was pursuing and slept with her cousin.”

Behind his glasses, her father blinks slowly. “Ah,” he says drily. “I see.”

“I told you he’s not a nice person,” Mary says desperately. “Not as nice as Richard.”

“Richard,” he says gently, “is leaving, Mary.”

Mary’s hands clench into fists by her sides without any conscious input from her brain. She still can’t quite stomach it. “I know,” she says, with a stab at reasonable. “He’s going to be gone for a time.
long time.”

“Do you want to wait for him?” he asks.

It’s a perfectly acceptable question. It is, in fact, a question that has been running through Mary’s head in the many hours since she’d numbly climbed out of Richard’s car and stumbled her way through the garden, into the kitchen where she’d stared into a cup of chocolate until it had gone cold and slimy.

“I,” begins Mary, and then she bursts into big, hiccupping tears. “No,” she sobs. “No, no, Da, I don’t.” Faintly alarmed but unsurprised, her father leans forward and pats her on the shoulder, which only makes her cry harder. “I’m such a terrible human being,” she wails.

Her father fishes a handkerchief for her out of the pocket of his cardigan and hands it over. “You don’t have to be ashamed of that, love.”

“What’s wrong with me?” she demands wetly. “Why can’t I be okay with this?”

After a few seconds, her father pulls her glasses off of her face and begins to clean them with the hem of his shirt. “To wait for a man to return from war,” he says thoughtfully, “you must love him very much. It’s a hard task, one meant for a strong woman.”

“I’m s-strong,” blubbers Mary.

“You are,” agrees her father. “It’s the loving very much part that’s the problem.”

When her father puts it that way, it seems so much simpler than it had in Mary’s bird’s nest of a brain. “What’s wrong with me?” she whispers.

“You’re young,” her father says, slightly unsympathetically. “People your age are always melodramatic.”

“He’s just so lovely,” Mary says sadly. “So kind and wonderful. And he wants to do what I want.”

“Life is full of people who want the same things as you,” he tells her. “Sharing dreams doesn’t mean you’re meant to share your lives, Mary.” He smiles and, now that her tears have begun to die down, hands her back her glasses. “You should go to him honestly and explain your situation. He seems a reasonable sort.”

Thinking of the way that Richard had looked as she’d numbly pulled herself out of his car, she thinks that Richard already knows perfectly well her situation. It’s distressing to realize that you’re not good enough for your dream man; without Mary’s consent, the flow of her tears accelerates.

“Oh, stop with that, kitten,” murmurs her da. He hasn’t done so in years, but he reaches and pulls her onto his lap, where he folds her into his arms and lets her soak his second-favorite cardigan. “He’s not all bad, your Henry Crawford. He’s got a natural affinity for chess. Almost got me during our second game.”

Mary couldn’t give fewer fucks about chess than she currently does, but she tries to laugh for her da’s sake. “I don’t think this is a case of deciding between them,” she tells the buttons on his shirt. “I don’t deserve Richard and I can’t wait for him, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to wrap my heart up for Crawford so he can break it. He’s a rat.”

Slowly, her father says, “We’ve seen some rats in this family, Mary Bennet. I don’t think Henry Crawford is a one so much as he’s used to thinking that he’s one.” He closes his arms more firmly
around her for a long final hug. “After Lydia, he should be a piece of cake.”

It’s nice of her father to think that, but rather shockingly naïve. Henry Crawford is four times more difficult than Lydia. Mary would almost rather spend the rest of her life helping at the birth of little Penelope Bennet than fight against Crawford’s wandering dick.

This is not the sort of sentiment one should share with one’s parent. “Mm,” Mary replies, out of a desire not to lie to her father. Reluctantly, she untangles herself from his embrace and struggles to her feet. “I should go—I’m relieving Mum’s shift at the hospital.” She leans forward and kisses him softly on the temple. “Thanks, Da.”

“I love you, kitten,” he says seriously, adjusting her glasses where they sit on her nose. “We all do.”

“I know,” she tells him.

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As proof that the universe wants this done with and buried, Mary runs into Richard during her shift with Penelope. She does it literally, in fact; as she’s turning a corner, juggling one of her texts for next term and a cup of hideous vending machine coffee, she almost head-butts him in the chest.

“Jesus,” Mary hisses, leaping back and narrowly avoiding permanently disfiguring herself with her beverage. “Oh! Richard.”

He steadies her with a hand curled around her elbow. His touch, despite their impending painful conversation, still drags a finger of warmth down her spine. Part of Mary feels immoral for still being attracted to a man to whom she is about to give the boot, but that part is drowned out by the much, much larger part of her that feels immoral for giving the boot to a man who is about to be shipped overseas to stick scalpels into dying soldiers.

“Hello, Mary,” he says neutrally. He’s dressed in a fine blue sweater, which highlights the beautiful depths of his eyes under his frameless glasses. He is a criminally unfair person. “Are you here to visit with Penelope?”

“Yes,” she says, clutching her textbook to her chest. His hand is still at her elbow, his fingers burning into her skin. “But—I think we should have a chat.”

His mouth thins. “I think I know what our chat is going to entail.”

“We should probably have it anyway,” Mary points out. She reviews, briefly, the many aspects of their shoddily haphazard relationship that have lead to this moment: seven months of quiet pining, twenty minutes of rabid, oxygen-devouring snogging, the best first date she’s ever had, and the RAMC.

Mary has been attracted to plenty of people before; it’s the fate of the human race to do stupid things for sex. It’s also the fate of the more intelligent members of the human race to do their best to distance themselves from stupidity and further the evolution of their species. Mary is sharp and clever and very conscious of her ethical framework; she has a responsibility to be honest with Richard.

“I do casual shagging,” Mary tells him once he’s found them a spot in one of the empty waiting rooms. “But I don’t do casual dating, and it’s not fair for me to say we’ll take this one day at a time, only to decide once you’re overseas that this isn’t going to work out.”
Finally, Richard releases her. He nods once, briskly, and says tightly, “That's very sensible of you.”

Mary gets the impression that he wants to say more, so she waits and takes a sip of her egregious hospital coffee—an action which she immediately regrets, as the cup tastes of lukewarm despair and plague.

“I like you,” Richard continues after a long pause. “I rather—like you a lot. I think you’re brilliant and funny and sexy as hell.” Without conscious input, Mary feels a little bubble swell in her chest at this assessment. “And, to be honest, I’m not sure that this wouldn’t work out. Part of me wants to get on my knees and beg you for a chance.” He shrugs jerkily. “But I’ve got a lot of pride.”

“Don’t beg,” Mary says. A lump appears to have grown in her throat; she takes another swallow of coffee to dissolve it, and only succeeds in almost choking. “Richard, muddling through this with me in school and you in—bloody hell, what, Afghanistan?—would be an epic disaster. It didn’t matter how many naughty emails we sent, we’d both be hellishly miserable.”

Richard flashes her a pale imitation of his usual charming grin. “Are you particularly skilled at naughty emails?”

“I’m very forthright,” Mary replies, “which is nice if you don’t like beating around the bush. So to speak.”

This chokes a laugh out of him. “God, Mary.”

“Momentarily putting aside innuendo, surely you know I’m right.”

The most unpleasant aspect of this experience, beyond the pain that is clear in Richard’s bearing and the fact that Richard is a perfect human being and Mary not holding onto him tightly with both hands is an obvious sign of her mental instability, is that she could very well be wrong. Mary is not, however, prepared to put him through hell in six months on the grounds of a guess.

“Of course I know you’re right. It’s a question of whether or not I feel like being sensible.” Most of the humor leaches out of him, leaving behind the starkness of his aristocratic bones, the weight of his recent shift on his shoulders.

“People like us,” Mary reminds him, “are very good at being sensible.”

He doesn’t smile at this. “I’m having a hell of a time letting you go.”

Trying to be understanding rather than irritated, Mary says, “You didn’t exactly have me, Richard, which is sort of the point.”

This time, he does smile. It just about breaks Mary’s heart, and she hadn’t been aware she was at risk for that happening. Her usual modus operandi of casual shagging grows more and more appealing the longer she is forced to witness Richard’s flagging strength. Knowing that she is responsible for this, Mary reaches out to him. She doesn’t know if it’s to pat him on the shoulder or take him into her arms—she hasn’t really decided—but it ends up not mattering, because he steps to the side neatly, out of her reach.

“Give me some time, yeah?”

Mary bites back a reminder that they haven’t got much time, and nods instead. For the second time in twenty-four hours, she’s at risk for bursting into ugly sobs. This business of severing their not-relationship is gut-wrenching and faintly sickening. It’s as though she’s stabbing seven months of hero worship in the face.
“Yeah,” she accedes gruffly, wrapping her arms around her midsection. “Yeah, of course.”

Richard nods at her and rotates on his heel. He disappears out of the waiting room and down the hall, his footsteps clear and ringing and a shade too fast. Mary dumps the remaining dregs of her devil coffee into a nearby potted plant and folds herself awkwardly into one of the uncomfortable chairs lining the walls of the waiting room. The chalky, impersonal walls of the hospital press down on her lungs.

Mary had expected to feel at least some relief at the resolution of an untenable situation, but if she’s currently feeling relief it’s buried under a massive amount of self-loathing. She isn’t sure if it’s her fault because she let her fantasies guide her into this entire scenario or because she broke something inside of Richard—or both—but mostly Mary wants to kill herself and put the world out of the misery it clearly derives from her continued existence.

Instead of doing something rash and stupid like crying again, Mary spends twenty minutes staring at a fuzzy landscape hanging on the opposite wall before she leaves to stand in the windows of the NICU and watch Penelope’s small chest expand and contract with the force of her tiny breaths. Little Penelope, the Bennet sort of a miracle: the beautiful result of shitty decision-making and unprotected sex.

“You’re going to know all about condoms,” Mary promises her goddaughter, pressing her fingers to the Plexiglas divider. “And STDs, and our culture’s perpetuation of the virginity myth, and why slut-shaming is bad. And also perfect use versus common use birth control statistics.”

v. | everybody just wanna fall in love

In a magnificent further display of the universe’s general opinion re: Mary Bennet, Fanny Price knocks on the door of Mary’s room at Girton about three seconds after Mary finishes dragging her weary body inside. “Heya,” she says quietly. “Can I talk to you?”

Mary stares at her for what feels like a very long time, but is probably only a few seconds. “Of course,” she says when good manners kick her in the arse. “Come in. I was just about to plug in my kettle. You want some tea?”

Nervously pulling at the hem of her cardigan, Fanny nods. “That would be lovely, thank you.”

Fanny Price is one of those people whose sheer existence makes Mary feel like a complete tosser. As far as the sliding scale of morality goes, Mary is leagues beyond Crawford and anyone who doesn’t recycle, but Fanny Price has tested into the 99th percentile of People Likely to be Sainted and she practically glows with the force of her beneficent purity. If she was humorless or pinch-faced or preachy she would be downright unbearable, but Fanny is small-boned and has a lot of curly yellow hair that makes her look like a spunky Disney princess and she’s just so damn nice.

Until she’d enrolled at Girton and met Fanny at the mixer the day before Michaelmas term began, Mary hadn’t thought that anyone in the universe could out-Jane Jane Bennet, but Fanny Price takes the cake in that arena. It is physically impossible for Mary to dislike or resent Fanny because of her resemblance to Jane.

“How was your Christmas?” Fanny asks, still fiddling with her cardigan. Mary knows for a fact that Fanny knit it herself because she’d seen Fanny carting around carefully wound balls of green yarn for months.

Mary pulls a pair of mugs out of the cabinet where she stores her food stash and dumps a bag of
Earl Grey into each. “Very nice, actually. My sister gave birth, so now I’ve got a niece at home.”

Fanny begins to glow more forcefully. “Oh, how lovely!” she exclaims, and she really does sound enthused. “What’s her name?”

“Penelope Francis Bennet.” Speaking the words makes a little ball of light grow in Mary’s stomach. Penelope’s not even her kid but Mary’s still wrapped around her stubby little infant finger. “A sure tyrant, what with my sister Lydia as her mum.”

Fanny beams as the electric kettle hisses and turns off with a loud snick. “Congratulations. That’s a beautiful name.”

Mary hands her the tea. Apologetically, she adds, “I haven’t got milk or sugar about, sorry.”

“No worries,” says Fanny. She transfers her fiddling to the rim of the mug, which she traces with her left index finger. “I just wanted to, um, discuss a matter with you.”

Beyond Girton business, there’s only one matter that Mary and Fanny Price have in common. “Christ, he’s not bothering you again, is he?” Mary asks, exasperated. “You’d think after Edmund bashed his face against a tree he’d have learned his lesson.” She tries not to let bitterness creep into her soul, but she can’t fight it, not with that awful memory of his face, battered and frustrated, as he stomped off into the bowels of Paddington. Of course Crawford’s abandoned his idiot quest for her heart already.

“Oh, no,” says Fanny quickly, and cuts off Mary’s dour imaginings at the knees. “That was awfully unkind of Edmund.”

“It was awfully stupid of Crawford to sleep with Maria Bertram,” Mary says dryly. “Anything that results from that can be laid at his door and his door alone.”

“ Violence will only beget more violence,” replies Fanny earnestly. She’s adorable and entirely serious, like a Jehovah’s Witness crossed with a forest sprite. Were Mary Crawford and obsessed with the future state of her immortal soul, she’d probably imprint on Fanny Price, too. “But I’m not here about Edmund and Henry’s fight.”

Mary raises an inquiring eyebrow and gestures with her mug. “Do you want to sit?” The only available options are her desk chair and her bed; Fanny sinks backwards onto the bed, folding her hands in her lap and balancing her cup of tea on her knee.

“Thank you,” says Fanny absently. She sharpens immediately afterwards, honing in on Mary as she sprawls in her desk chair. Fanny’s face is round and moon-like, pale, set off to glorious effect by her wild curls. When Mary’s hair had been its natural color and a more respectable length, it had never achieved such a winsome look. “Mary,” Fanny says firmly, “I think we ought to talk about why Henry sought me out.”

“Salvation for his wounded soul?” Mary suggests, not really kidding.

Fanny’s curls shiver as she shakes her head. “Please—don’t joke about this. Henry is good at hiding his feelings, but he hurts. Desperately.”

Slight unease prickles the base of Mary’s spine. She wants to say something about Crawford’s emotional unavailability or that he couldn’t act his way out of a sack, but when faced with the force of Fanny Price’s goodness, she can’t make the words come out. Mary Bennet is never speechless; abstractly, she hopes Fanny appreciates this rare sight.

After a deep sigh, Fanny sips her tea. “I knew exactly what Henry was like when we started
spending time together. His sister is rather friendly with Edmund’s brother Tom and I’d heard about—you know. All of the girls, the parties. I had no idea why he suddenly thought I was the most interesting use of his time, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt.” Fanny’s voice drops into a slightly tortured register. “He’s so unhappy, Mary.”

Of all people, Mary would have thought practical Fanny Price would be able to see through the bullshit of Henry Crawford’s Poor Rich Boy persona; but apparently not.

“He didn’t want me, you see,” she continues. “The entire time we were—seeing each other, I suppose—he never once tried anything. Not even a kiss. And to be honest with you, after so many years of being ignored, I gave him plenty of opportunities to steal one.”

Mary’s stomach tightens. Philosophically speaking, she’d had no problem with Crawford sleeping with other girls during their tenure as shagging buddies; but she doesn’t want to think about Crawford being steadily reeled in by Fanny Price’s delicate innocence. “Sounds like he really fancied you, frankly,” Mary comments, surprised by the croak in her voice. She can’t quite muster up the energy to be elated about being right: Crawford isn’t over Fanny.

“He treated me like a sister,” Fanny says gently. “Better than a sister, considering how much he dislikes Mary. I don’t think he had any interest in kissing me, which is why he didn’t try. If Henry had fancied me, I have a feeling nothing in the world would have prevented him from doing whatever he wanted.”

She’s right in that—Crawford feels no compunction about reaching out for what he wants with both hands outstretched. He does it differently from Mary, who stretches for what she wants because she has four sisters and her parents haven’t any money. Crawford believes that he deserves what he wants, so he asks for it. Or, failing that, he simply takes.

“So, your pseudo-relationship with innocent on both sides,” says Mary, trying for brisk and falling short. “Is that what you wanted to tell me? I wasn’t shagging Crawford when he pursued you—it didn’t seem fair.”

Taking her lower lip between her teeth, Fanny stares into her cooling tea as though she wants it to do the next bit for her. Mary, too twitchy for a hot beverage, pushes her mug further away on her desk. “He talked—about you, Mary.”

Mary’s thighs tense. “How much he regularly wants to strangle me, I’m sure. Bad form to be talking about another girl on a date—shame on him.”

“About your head, actually. How much went on inside of it, what color you’d recently dyed your hair. And what you thought about things, like Cameron and Clegg and the independence of Scottish Parliament and—” helplessly, Fanny shrugged “—stupid things, like Adele and the second series of Sherlock. I don’t even watch Sherlock.”

“How do you not watch Sherlock?” Mark demands, before she can help herself. “It’s brilliant.”

“I haven’t got a TV,” Fanny says.

Mary scoffs. “Who are you, my gran? Just watch it on your computer—it’s on BBC iPlayer, if you’re desperate not to be tainted by illegality.”

“I had more conversations with Henry about television shows I don’t watch and musicians I don’t listen to than I did about anything else. It was like he couldn’t help himself. Every other word out of his mouth was about you. Until he—until he went to Maria, I thought you two were dating, secretly, and he was just being friendly.”
Weirdly, Fanny’s words are having a worse effect on Mary’s composure than Crawford’s manhandling of her person at Paddington. “He doesn’t have a friendly setting,” says Mary. “He’s only got shag and bromance.” Immediately afterwards, however, she thinks through her statement. He’d been friendly with her family—kind, even, to play chess with her father and stick out fourteen hours of labor with people he’d only met that day.

Correctly interpreting her expression, Fanny smiles. “That’s not quite true, is it?”

“Regardless,” Mary says, shaking her head slightly to loosen her thoughts, “I’m going to be honest. I don’t really understand why you’re here, telling me all of this.”

“I want you to forgive him,” Fanny replies, inching forward so that she is peering, earnest again, into Mary’s eyes. “I want you to forgive him for Maria Bertram and take him back.”

Exasperated, Mary leans forward and speaks clearly. “There is no ‘back’ to which I could take him, Fanny, as we weren’t dating.” As this is a point that has penetrated no one’s skull, not even her sluttiest sister, Mary feels that her rising frustration is understandable. “Fanny, Crawford didn’t owe me a thing, and we loathe each other tremendously when we aren’t shagging. He’s a misogynist pig and constantly tells me that I’m self-righteous. Does that sound like a healthy relationship to you?”

“It sounds to me like two confused people who haven’t figured out their feelings,” Fanny tells her. When she’s filled with sympathy, her eyes tilt up in the corners—Mary knows, as she currently has a first row seat to the phenomenon. “I recognize the signs.”

“I didn’t think you were physically capable of hatred,” Mary says.

Fanny’s smile grows minutely. “The signs of people who hurt each other,” she explains, gently, the same way she cradles Mary’s mug as though it hadn’t been picked out of bin at an M&S clearance sale for £2. “I let Edmund ignore my feelings for many years, and all it brought me, until I gathered my courage, was sadness and pain. I’m fond of Henry, and I like you. I want you to be happy.”

If they all lived in the sunshine world where Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram frolick through fields of wild flowers quoting Wordsworth at each other and making nauseatingly sweet love on a bed of buttercups, Mary is sure that she and Crawford could be happy together. But as she and Crawford aren’t idealistic young lovers, the likelihood of that seems somewhere between incomprehensible and the heat death of the universe.

“I’m happy,” Mary says. “I can’t speak for Crawford after your boyfriend broke his face, but he’s at least a little bit happy, I’m sure.”

“He’s miserable,” Fanny corrects her. “I can’t claim to know your feelings, but I don’t quite believe that you’re happy, either.”

Of course Mary isn’t happy; she’s just broken things off with a specimen of perfect manhood and everyone of her acquaintance that she considers of equal, if not higher moral rectitude, seems to be insisting that she hand Crawford her heart and a little penknife he can use to stab it.

“I’m happy,” Mary repeats through her teeth.

Still looking skeptical, Fanny places the half-drunk mug on the floor and stands. “I only wanted to tell you that. Thank you for listening.” She tucks a particularly tenacious curl behind her ear and smiles. “I’ll see you about, then.”

After Fanny closes the door behind her, Mary sits in her desk chair and stares (broodingly; she’s
surely giving Will a run for his money in this sphere) at her bed. After their biochemistry lab practicum final, she’d dragged Crawford into that bed, laughing into his mouth as she licked his teeth. They hadn’t had sex in a bed since, perhaps cursed by the moment that Mary let her anger get away from her and she threw his trousers out of the window. Normally the memory of Crawford, open-mouthed and shocked, watching his wool trousers float genteelly towards the ground, fills Mary with goodwill towards all mankind, but she doesn’t feel up for goodwill of any sort.

Her skin itches against her bones, so Mary tucks her wallet into the back pocket of her jeans and walks to the chemist three blocks away, where she carefully surveys her options before deciding that she hasn’t dyed her hair purple in an age and she feels, frankly, like purple will suit her current mood and not look as hideous with her complexion as black would.

By now, Mary’s a veteran at dyeing her hair; every term she’s called to help at least four first years in the College who want do something radical and shock their parents but can’t figure out how not to blind themselves with bleach. She applies the beach evenly and thoroughly and then sits on her towel on the windowsill with both door and window open, to properly ventilate. As she reads and occasionally checks her wristwatch, various other residents of the College stop by to say hello and ask about her hols.

Thanks to Girton’s massively efficient gossip network, Mary hears within two hours everything of debatable interest that has happened since the end of Michaelmas. Emma Wu and George Nguyen have gotten engaged (unsurprising); Fanny and Edmund have been spotted necking in four places on campus (also unsurprising); Maria Bertram is giving Peter Rushton the time of day again (slightly unexpected, although Maria can’t go half a week without being admired).

When Mary goes to wash out the bleach and apply the purple dye, she finds Frederica Vernon cowering outside of the bathroom, clutching her phone to her left ear and repeating “Mm-hmm,” and “Of course, Mum,” in a terrified voice. Mary holds up the bottle of purple and mouths, Do you want the extra? Bleach in my room.

Freddie considers a curl of her thick black hair, hums, “You’re very right, Mum,” and mouths back, Yes, please. After a long pause, she rolls her eyes and, covering the base of her phone, whispers, “This’ll be a while. Start without me.”

Of the current crop of first years, Freddie is Mary’s favorite—closely followed by Harriet Smith for sheer entertainment value—and her mother has achieved the status of urban legend in the halls of the College. The boys who’d seen Susan Vernon help Freddie move in the first day of Michaelmas had all immediately sworn to her a vow of eternal devotion. “She has a perfectly symmetrical face and figure,” George Nguyen had explained over shared chips that evening. “Her arse is a work of art,” Emma had promptly translated for him. “She looks like a more beautiful Gina Torres. Stop hogging the vinegar, George.”

Over George’s exaggerated insistence that he wasn’t hogging anything, Mary had observed, tapping a chip against her lower lip, “I wasn’t aware there could exist anymore more beautiful than Gina Torres.”

Mary still hasn’t personally witnessed the Aphrodite Incarnate that is Susan Vernon, but she personally finds Freddie tremendously attractive and thinks that her mother is likely to be a she-devil. Even with her head in a sink, Mary hears Freddie’s long-suffering sigh when she enters the bathroom. “What’s up with your mum?”

Sounding aggravated, Freddie mutters, “She’s thinking about divorcing my stepfather. Apparently she met some 25-year-old hedge fund manager at a New Year’s party she attended and latched
onto his dick like a limpet.” Mary shuts off the sink and gropes for her nearby towel. “At any rate, let me help you with the back of your head, and then you can return the favor, yeah?”

Twelve minutes later Mary is seated at her desk chair as Freddie enthusiastically scrapes purple goo onto the hair behind Mary’s ears. Offhand, Freddie asks, “What’s this I hear about Crawford, then?”

Mary jerks her hair to the right and almost yanks half of her hair out of her scalp. “Where the hell did you hear about anything with me and Crawford?” she demands. “Bleeding fucking Christ, I think I just scalped myself.”

“You’re fine,” Freddie says after a second of careful perusal. “Nary a hair removed. So I’m guessing you don’t want to talk about whether or not you and Crawford are dating after you dragged his arse to your sister’s wedding?”

After a moment’s consideration, Mary groans. “The rowing team.”

“You can tell everyone that thinks to mention it that I am not dating Crawford,” Mary informs her in the snootiest voice she can manage; it’s improved dramatically over the length of her acquaintance with Will. “And tell the rowing team that if they keep spreading that information about, I’ll castrate the lot of them.”

~

The threat would be more effective were Mary not smaller and spindlier than 99% of the team. Even Ed Ferrars, the 1% of the team who is smaller and spindlier than Mary, isn’t at all convinced by her cease and desist demands. “Listen, Mare,” he tells her at the first CUSU LGBT meeting of the term, “I get that you don’t want it to get around that you’re now compromising your morals and dating someone who couldn’t pick out Darfur on a map, but honestly, it’s the most fucking hilarious thing that’s happened in Girton since Nguyen almost broke his hand wringing Elton’s neck.”

Ed punctuates this by taking a long swill of his lager.

Mary abruptly changes her tactics. “If you stop making shit up, I’ll introduce you to Eli Dashwood.”

Ed chokes on his lager, no longer looking casual. “W-what?”

“I said,” Mary enunciates, “that if you stop pretending to be a 13-year-old girl and shut up about my non-existent relationship with Crawford, I’ll introduce you to Eli. He’s over there, chatting with Marianne.” Mary doesn’t have to point; Ed’s eyes drift towards Eli like a compass needle. “Swear you’ll stop.”

Ed, bless him, knows better than to bluff her about this. “I’ll stop,” he rasps. “Shit—how do I look?” He immediately tugs at the bottom of his shirt. “I look like a prat, don’t I?”

“Better he finds that out now,” Mary says under her breath, and she grips Ed around the upper arm and drags him to Eli and his sister, who are doing shots. Well, Marianne is doing shots and Eli is watching, disapproving but affectionate. Thank god Mary and Marianne had had a mutually amicable break-up, or else this would be awkward as hell.

With an enthusiastic and well-snogged Ed on her side, Mary plugs up the leak from the rowing team but can’t undo their damage. This is emphasized three days later, when Mary walks into her
last class of the week and finds out that she shares it with Crawford, who is sprawling at their usual table, his legs crossed at the ankle. She stops in the doorway, hovering and uncertain for the first time in her life, and she can’t think for a moment on how to proceed. All she can think about is Crawford, loose-limbed and mostly healed, his head bent over his notebook.

A solid wave of lust washes over Mary, slamming into her chest and almost knocking her back on her heels. She wants to do lots of unspeakable things to Crawford, which is not an unfamiliar state; but they haven’t been together since before the Fanny Price/Maria Bertram mess, and it’s been months.

“Chin up,” she whispers to herself. “Don’t be an idiot.” Shreya Govindarajulu, filtering into the room behind Mary, gives her a strange look and pushes through to the front of the room. As she places her books on the table and slides her bag off of her shoulder, Mary tries to come up with something to say—something just witty enough to indicate that she’s thought of his ultimatum and finds it full of shit—but all she can manage through her dry throat is, “Heya.”

Crawford says, neutrally, eyes fixed on the lecture podium in the front of the room, “Bennet.” His fingers tighten on his pen and he rustles through his things, making noise and avoiding contact with her. There’s no hope that any amount of wit is going to rescue this situation. At least three girls in the back row are whispering and pointing at them; how do they all know?

Mary drops guiltily into her seat. Embarrassment prickles her skin and she shrugs her shoulders, trying to shift the wool of her jumper into a more comfortable configuration. She can feel herself begin to turn a flustered, frustrated red. “Jesus, Crawford,” she says abruptly. “It’s not like I murdered your pet.”

Crawford replies tightly, “That’s a comfort to me, Bennet. Not the issue.”

“Oh, grow up,” she snarls under her breath.

“How’s Robert?” Crawford continues nastily. “Still completely wrong for you?” Now that she’s broken the spell of perverse shame, he has no compunction about nailing her to the floor with a particularly angry glare.

“My relationship with Richard isn’t any of your business, and I would appreciate it if you’d just shut your gob and concentrate on this incredibly important class we’re currently sharing.” Mary stabs him in the back of the hand with her pencil. “We’ll talk about this afterwards, all right?”

Crawford swears and bats her pencil away. “Jesus, fine. And you say I’m the psychopath.” He rubs at the skin along the back of his hand and swears again as the professor loudly clears her throat.

“Good morning,” Professor Jennings shouts. “Shut up you lot, pay attention.”

At the end of class, Mary can’t say for certain that she’s digested more than 13% of the material, but she also hasn’t stabbed herself or Crawford in the eye with a pen, so she’s willing to mark it up as a success. “Let’s get a coffee,” she says to Crawford, exhaling loudly as Jennings sweeps out of the room, trailing a small posse of devoted students behind her.

Crawford finishes returning his designer notebook to his bag and says, “Great, I’ll host,” and locks his hand around Mary’s forearm. He then proceeds to bodily drag her across campus, grimly silent and with a horrifyingly severe expression affixed to his face. Most of the bruising has gone down and after six more weeks his zygomatic arch should be as good as new, although things can be tricky with facial injuries.
“How are you feeling?” Mary asks before she can help herself. “Are you taking your medication?”

“I’m fine,” says Crawford shortly. The King’s College green is thick with snow and Crawford, taking a turn too quickly for someone of Mary’s lesser weight class, almost flings her into a nearby drift.

Jesus, Mary thinks. *He’s completely lost it.* This would probably be romantic to the kind of person that finds abusive *Twilight*-esque relationships endlessly dreamy, but Mary has never been that kind of person. “Slow down,” she says, “you’re going to wrench my arm out at this rate.”

“Sorry,” Crawford snarls, and speeds up. He takes the stairs to the third floor two at a time and uses centrifugal motion to fling Mary into his room as he pulls the door shut. “Not up for a polite chat, I’m afraid.”

“I can tell,” Mary gasps, out of breath from their stupid dash up the stairs. “Fuck, Crawford, I might actually hack out one of my lungs at this rate.” Wheezing, she doubles over and pounds on her chest with her fist. “Do you have coffee, or were you going to drain my blood and drink that?”

Crawford pulls a Nespresso (of course he has a Nespresso, Mary isn’t even surprised) out of his wardrobe and plugs it in by his desk. “Har, har,” he says. “Brilliant, Bennet. Go fill this up.” He shoves the container that holds the water into her hands and directs her towards the floor’s kitchen. “Get.”

When Mary returns, it’s apparent that he’s tidied up some of his desk since last term. Now that his coats aren’t just flung on top of his stuff, Mary can see that he’s got even more books piled on the back half of his desk than he does on the shelf. “Is that *Mists of Avalon*?” she asks before she can help herself. “Are you serious, Crawford?”

“Shut up,” he says, wrenching the water out of her hands. “Not a word, Bennet.”

Mary ignores him. “That’s the seminal nineties feminist take on the Arthurian legend! *Crawford.* You didn’t buy that because of me, did you?” But as soon as she says it she knows that it can’t be: The book’s binding is almost completely destroyed; it’s been read at least two dozen times over the course of many years.

“I like science fiction,” says Crawford dismissively.

“That’s fantasy,” Mary points out.

“Science fiction and fantasy are always shelved in the same area of bookstores,” Crawford says, like Mary’s going to believe that he bought *Mists of Avalon* because he thought it was science fiction and then he read it thirty times by mistake. “My reading tastes are unrelated to the point at hand, Bennet.”

“They’re related,” Mary promises him absently. She moves forward and squints as she tilts her head to the side, her glasses sliding against her nose. “Are you secretly a romantic, Crawford? Because that looks like the works of Sara Douglass—*Wayfarer Redemption* and *Troy Game* series?”

Crawford pulls his jumper over his head and throws it over the books, obscuring their titles. “I’m serious,” he says tightly. “We need to talk.”

“It’s not that my entire opinion of you as a person is going to change because you happen to own a copy of *Darkwitch Rising*, but that one’s my favorite of the Troy Game boo—”
“It’s my favorite, too,” says Crawford repressively. “Not the point.”

The Nespresso machine beeps to indicate that it’s finished, so Mary swipes the first cup of coffee and leaves Crawford to growl with frustration and stuff another capsule into the top. “I don’t know,” says Mary. “Considering that I’ve judged you in the past on your obsession with Robert Heinlein, knowing that you also read a lot of Marion Zimmer Bradley is a new step for us.”

“I like Robert Heinlein,” Crawford says through his teeth. “What I don’t understand is why you won’t date me because I read him.”

“He’s a misogynist arsehole.”

“So’s James Bond,” Crawford points out, “and that didn’t exactly stop you from suggesting we watch Casino Royale last term, did it?”

“Vesper Lynd is the greatest female character ever invented for the Bond series,” Mary says, as she had said last term when they’d torrented a copy of Casino Royale and watched it on her laptop with a shared pair of headphones. “Eva Green was a revelation.”

“You,” says Crawford, “are a snob and an intellectual arsehat. For some unfathomably reason I find that devastatingly attractive. But I’m not going to let you continue to shove me into your handy categories if it means you won’t admit that we should be dating.”

The Nespresso machine beeps again. Crawford ignores it, but Mary uses her foot to unplug the machine; it’s one of those habits years of watching global warming documentaries has instilled in her bones.

“You’re the snob,” she finally says, when Crawford shows no sign of continuing, simply breathing heavily and clenching and unclenching his fists. “You’ve got your rich family and your lovely trust fund and a truly appalling amount of expensive clothing and because of that, you haven’t the need to regulate your behavior.”

Crawford reaches up and mimes strangling her. “Bennet, I know who Nelson Mandela and Idi Amin are. The fact that you still bring that up just tells me that your sense of humor is hideous.”

“All we do is fight,” Mary bellows at him, catching herself before she gestures expansively and pours coffee over everything. “All! We! Do!”

“Because you think you want a relationship where you’re morally superior, and the only way you can prove that is by picking fights that support your claim,” Crawford shouts back. “I’m not a beast, Bennet! I give money to Save the Children and I made that joke in admittedly bad taste about East African dictators because getting you riled up is hilarious. And, just because I enjoy reading about sixties-era space espionage does not mean that I actually believe that women should be one-dimensional breast implants while their male lovers explore the great frontier.” While yelling, Crawford’s face turns slightly purple and the flushing shows where the bruising in his face has not entirely healed. “I was willing to let most of it slide because of that aforementioned hilarity, but since you insist on judging me, I’m not going to let you anymore. Making me out as a horrible person doesn’t make you a better one, Bennet!”

Mary rears back; this time she does manage to spill her coffee, but most of it splatters onto his bedspread and not onto her. “Excuse me!” she gasps, like a parody of an offended lady of the manor. “What the hell, Crawford?”

“Do you ever listen to yourself?” he asks her, in a lethally level voice. “When it comes to women’s rights and CUSU LGBT and God fucking damn Médecins Sans Frontières I don’t
know anyone who is more invested or active than you. But in terms of interpersonal relationships, you are a sorry mess of a person.”

For a very long series of seconds, Mary feels like everything inside of her skin has been crumpled up and stepped on. Even the bits of her that are being fueled entirely by anger suddenly feel delicate and bruised, like the inside of Crawford’s face. “In that case,” she says, “and you are wrong, I think we’re rather done with this parody of a relationship, aren’t we? Clearly you don’t respect what I value, and clearly I have no way of telling whether you’re joking or are actually being an insensitive arsehole.”

“Shit, no, Bennet,” says Crawford, deflating as the purple—and every other color—drains from his face. “I didn’t mean that.”

“You should get that phrase tattooed on your knuckles,” Mary suggests, slamming the mug down on his desk. “Considering the frequency with which you must have to say it.”

Crawford, still pale, shoot out a hand and props it against the doorframe, almost hitting Mary in the nose as she attempts to leave. “You don’t get to run off.”

“Why not?” Mary fires back. “You did!”

“You’re the more mature one, remember?” Crawford smiles without a shred of humor. “Bennet, I’m sorry that I said that. I just meant—”

Mary counts to five in her head, and when he’s yet to finish his sentence, she offers, “You meant that I’m shite with relationships, didn’t you? This is, of course, coming from the man who, as far as I’m aware, has yet to go two weeks without shagging something in a skirt.”

“I have never been unfaithful to a monogamous relationship,” says Crawford tightly. “That thing with Fanny; it wasn’t what everyone assumed.” Crawford could be lying about his history of fidelity, but as far as Mary is aware, he’s never lied to her or to anyone else she knows. One of the many screws in her chest loosens slightly.

Mary has nothing to do with her hands, and looking at his fingers as they dig into the wood of the doorframe doesn’t seem very practical. “I know,” she admits. “Fanny came and told me. About your—friendship, I guess.” But she still wants to know: “Were you in love with Fanny? That whole making you a better man, changing yourself business—was it because of Fanny?”

Crawford relaxes his grip on the doorframe. As it turns out, it’s so he can shift, using his proximity to push Mary back into his room, away from the door and an easy exit. “No, Mary. I wasn’t in love with Fanny.” There’s just enough humor in his voice that Mary jerks her head up. “It’d be a bit difficult for me to have managed that, because I was crazy about you.”

His eyes are sparkling, like Lizzie’s do when she stares at Will when she thinks no one will see. Mary’s read about this phenomenon, but she’s never actually seen them happen in the context of herself; she’s never looked twelve inches away and seen someone’s eyes light up and dance, the way that Crawford’s are at this very moment.

Faintly, Mary is aware that her proximity to a copy of *Mists of Avalon* is making her unforgivably saccharine, but she can’t seem to push down the odd feeling in her stomach. “You have an odd way of showing it,” she says. “Since you just called me a snob and an intellectual arsehat.”

“I told you,” he reminds her, “that I found both of those things very attractive.”

“You also find *Maria Bertram* attractive.” Mary makes a face to show how she feels about fucking Maria Bertram. “Jesus, Crawford. If you were so crazy about me, why were you fucking
“Are we seriously going to have a discussion about the disconnect between romantic expectations and reasonable parameters of poorly-defined casual relationships?” Crawford asks. Mary recognizes his sentence, because it’s lifted verbatim from a text she sent him during Michaelmas term.

“Cute,” she says sourly, meaning *fuck you*.

“I’m not going to apologize for Maria,” he says.

Mary growls, “Well, *I’m* not going to apologize for Richard!”

“That’s completely different,” Crawford begins, and Mary points an angry finger at him and interrupts with a loud, “HA! Who’s the hypocrite now?”

Exasperated, Crawford says, “I never called you a hypocrite.”

“No,” Mary agrees, the anger beginning to build again, throbbing at her temples. “You just told me that I’m incapable of forming rational judgments of people. Well, of you, I guess. But while we’re talking about that, you in fact spent the end of last term talking about how you were going to become a *better* person, and then you just told me off for essentially agreeing with you. *Jesus, Crawford*!”

“I’m not great by your standards, Mary,” says Crawford, and Mary wants to interrupts, Don’t say my name, not like that, not like I’m breaking your heart, but he barrels on, “but that doesn’t mean I’m unforgiveable. You see me as an absolute, in this case absolutely horrible, which is I assume why I’m only good enough for casual shags. But I’m not, you know.”

“You do a very good job pretending to be,” Mary replies. “All of those jokes, the girls, the rowing, your infamously trashy parties with your rich friends. What was all of that? Did you make that up?”

Awkwardly, Crawford explains, “It’s easy.”

“Oh, that was beautiful,” Mary says. “It’s easy. Right.”

“Mary,” says Crawford through his teeth, “please shut up and let me explain.”

Mary would much rather crawl back to Girton and lick her wounds in the peace and quiet of her own room, but she folds her arms across her chest and says, “By all means.”

“Thank you.” Crawford rubs at the line above the bridge of his nose, sighs, and rubs it again. “Being who I am—you know, my grandfather’s title and my sister and her wretched husband and the rest of my family, of whom you are so witheringly disdainful—it’s much simpler to be exactly what’s expected. But there’s not a single human being on this planet who can exist on just one shallow plane of existence.”

“Are we getting existential now?” asks Mary snippily.

“Shut up, Bennet,” growls Crawford. “You asked me at the train station if anyone really knows me. The answer is no. But I’d—like it to be you.”

Part of Mary wants to ask if he’s imprinted on her like a baby duck, but she’s not quite cruel enough to do that. Reasonably (she feels), she points out, “You seem to find plenty about me frustrating. Maybe you should try someone more like Fanny.”
“What are you so afraid of?” Crawford demands. “Every time I try to move beyond a casual shag, you run full tilt in the opposite direction. There’s no way you have intimacy problems, not with your crazy family.”

“I’m not afraid,” hisses Mary, stung. “I’m practical.”

“That’s an utter load of shit,” says Crawford flatly. “You’re terrified. What, that you’ll actually like me? What will it say about Mary Bennet, one of the most vocal members of Cambridge’s social justice organizations, that she’s romantically involved with Henry Crawford, general cad and bounder?” His voice hardens over ‘vocal,’ and Mary scowls at him. She wishes she was still holding the coffee mug, just so she could have the pleasure of throwing it at him.

“Thanks for that incredibly flattering analysis of my personality and completely incorrect assumption, seeing as how, thanks to your rowing friends, everyone’s already sure I’m ‘romantically entangled’ with you, and not a single one has impugned my honor.” Three milliseconds after she uses air-quotes Mary already regrets them, but she moves on. “God, I can’t believe that I missed you. I must’ve had brain damage.” She slips out from under the hand that he lifts to stop her and in seconds is pounding down the stairs and erupting into the green, which is turning even more white because it’s begun to snow, the clouds angrily spitting out wet clumps.

As she stuffs her hands into the pockets of her coat, there’s a loud shush from above her and she hears Crawford’s slightly tinny voice. “Bennet!” he shouts. She looks up before she can stop herself, and he’s leaning like a lunatic halfway out of his window, getting snowed on. “We wouldn’t have to spend all of our time fighting if you would just accept that you like me.”

“I don’t like you!” Mary reminds him. She has to squint because the snow that lands on her glasses is melting into her eyes. “We just had a fight, you moron! Go sulk inside your room before you catch hypothermia.”

Crawford leans further out of the window. “Have dinner with me.”

“You just called me a sorry mess of a person!” Mary shouts. “You arse!”

“Seven-thirty,” Crawford counters. “Kashmiri Palace.”

Whatever he sees on Mary’s face makes him throw back his head and laugh. “You drive me nuts, Bennet,” he calls down to her. “I bet you feel the same way.”

“Of course I feel the same way,” Mary says loudly. “Because you’re clearly suffering from some kind of personality disorder!” Crawford just continues grinning. For once, the sight of it inspires a part of Mary’s brain not devoted to murderous impulses. Oh god, she can’t actually like him, can she? What’s happened to her self-preservation instincts? “What are you smiling at me like that?”

“Because you missed me,” he says. “Seven-thirty, Bennet. Don’t forget.” Before Mary can do anything—remind him that she hates his guts, offer to remove his spleen, and throw a snowball at his head all come to mind—Crawford ducks back inside his room and slams the window shut.

“You’re criminally insane,” she yells, just for the hell of it, and a group of first years coming up the walk behind her immediately scatter like chickens at the outburst.

vi. | watch out, cupid

Twelve minutes before Lizzie’s supposed to be in the ballroom slicing cake in front of the 300
people Will’s insane aunt had insisted be invited, Mary finds her camped out with Lydia on the
stairs leading to the east wing, drinking from a bottle of 2007 Gaja Barbaresco.

“This is exceedingly classy,” Mary notes, leading across the banister and swiping the bottle to
check that its contents are nonalcoholic. “It suits your very posh wedding.”

“Oh god,” says Lizzie blankly, staring at the mirror at the base of the stairs, her hands still formed
around where the bottle of wine had been. “Did you see what his aunt is wearing?”

“Oscar de la Renta: Fall Collection for Hags?” replies Lydia. “It was hard to miss, what with her
gigantically awful hat. If she doesn’t shut up about her luncheon last week with Wills and Kate,
I’m going to stab her with my shoe.” Lydia wriggles it in the air for emphasis.

Lizzie buries her head in the crook of her arm and moans, “Who am I kidding with this charade?
Me? Mrs. Darcy?”

“That’s you,” agrees Lydia drunkenly, elbowing Lizzie in the side. “Mrs. William Arthur
Pemberly Darcy! Is there a reason why is one of his names is the same as this stupidly large
house?”

Mary takes a mouthful of the contents of the bottle, which are ginger ale, and then returns the
bottle to Lizzie, who clearly needs it most. “I thought this is an estate?”

“It is,” Lizzie says. She gulps down a fourth of the bottle and wipes her mouth with the back of
her hand, smearing some of her lipstick into the corner of her mouth. “Have you been sent to fetch
me for something?”

“Mum was yelling about the cake, but Da was pouring her another glass of champagne as I left, so
she’s probably not yelling about anything anymore except how beautiful all of her daughters are.”

“Dear thing,” says Lizzie. She begins to look slightly teary-eyed and the tenor of their staircase
interlude shifts in the maudlin direction. “Oh god, I’m going to have a baby in a few months in
this cavern.”

Swooping down the stairs, Jane says, “Oh, darling,” as Lydia points out, “It’s at least four
caverns, Lizzie.”

Mary rescues the bottle of ginger ale as Jane pulls Lizzie into a tight hug, crinkling the back of
Lizzie’s hugely expensive dress with the force of her affection. “We love you so much,” Jane says
into Lizzie’s hair. “Were you checking on Penelope?” Mary asks Kitty, who is trailing down the
stairs after Jane.

“Yeah.” Kitty rolls her eyes. “Out like a light. If only Lydia had been this perfect. Is the cake done
yet?”

“Waiting for Lizzie’s waterworks to end,” Mary replies. “Ginger ale?” She offers Kitty the bottle,
and her sister accepts gratefully. Kitty raises an eyebrow and tilts her head inquiringly towards
Lizzie, blubbering like no one has ever blubbered before. “She’s upset about Lady Catherine’s
couture.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Kitty wrinkles her nose. “Old hag. Might as well have hung a sign around
her neck, ‘I’m the poshest tosser here, bite me.’”

“You wouldn’t be able to get anything out of her,” Lydia says critically. “She’s like a leather
handbag that’s a kazillion years old. Lizzie, stop crying, or else you’re going to be puffy when
you cut the cake, and we’ll have to burn all of those photos.”
“Puffy,” Lizzie wails. “I'm puffy.”

Jane and Mary both turn evil eyes on Lydia. “Shut it,” Mary advises her. “Or else none of us will ever be getting cake.”

“Boring,” mutters Lydia under her breath, turning the word into two long syllables.

Thank god for the best adjusted of the Bennet sisters. “Lizzie,” Jane coos, running her hands over Lizzie’s head, “you’re going to be a wonderful mother, because not only have you got years of experience from watching Mum, you have the best partner to help you do it.”

Kitty jokes, “Who, Jane, you?” and all of them laugh, even Lizzie. “You have to admit,” Kitty continues, “he’s a teensy bit frightening.”

“Please, he’s going to fold like a bad hand of poker the moment Lizzie puts his daughter in his hands,” Mary predicts. “They always do, you know. And the ones that don’t aren’t worth marrying or procreating with at all.”

“Was that supposed to be encouraging?” Lydia inquires sweetly. “It wasn’t.”

Mary kicks her in the ankle. “Oh, shut it. We all know that Will is the good sort. He hasn’t killed his aunt yet, which is a sign of impending sainthood, and his best friend is Charlie. You couldn’t get a better character reference than that.” Jane blushes as she releases Lizzie and hands her a white linen handkerchief.

“Why are we vetting him?” Lizzie asks as she dabs at her eyes. “I’m already married. It’s too late.”

“It’s never too late,” says Lydia gravely, which is hilarious coming from a seventeen-year-old.

Mary props her elbow on the banister as Lizzie chokes on a laugh. “There’s nothing you need to worry about,” she tells Lizzie quietly. “The baby is healthy, you’ve married a man that is, incongruously, one of the richest, handsomest, and nicest in the entire U.K., and you don’t have to worry about seeing any of our sorry faces any time soon because you and Will’ll be back in Glasgow before you know it.”

“Actually,” says Lizzie bashfully, “Georgie’s graduating at the end of this year. Once she’s out of the Royal Conservatory, there’s no reason for us to stay in Glasgow. So I’m transferring to the firm’s offices in London.”

For half a second, silence descends on their deserted staircase, before Kitty shrieks and launches herself at Lizzie, taking Lydia in with her. “OH MY GOD,” she yells. After a few seconds of flailing, she manages to hook Mary around the neck and drag her into their lopsided hug-pile. “You’re coming home!” Kitty squeals.

“Mum’s going to go insane,” predicts Lydia from under Kitty’s armpit, but she sounds like she’s trying to smother her pleasure. “And Da’s going to be happy that his favorite will be back home.”

“I’m not—” begins Lizzie, but the rest of them drown out her half-hearted denial.

As they’re picking themselves up, Georgie appears from the direction of the ballroom where the wedding guests have been stowed. She’s so adorable that Mary wants to pick her up and protect her from the rest of humanity, not in the least because she’s so nice to Penelope even though her biological father had tried to seduce Georgie the same way he’d succeeded with Lydia. “It’s almost time for the cake,” she says quietly. “Are you ready, Lizzie?”
“Yes, yes.” Lizzie checks her make-up in the mirror and pushes a few strands of hair back into her pins. “As ready as I’ll ever be for getting cake smashed into my face, I suppose.”

“It’s institutionalized humiliation,” Mary tells her. “Go on then, give us a show.”

Lizzie affixes her best queenly expression and sails out with Georgie, closely followed by Jane, and then Kitty and Lydia, bickering about something stupid and useless. Mary tells herself that she’s being shallow but she still ducks in front of the mirror and checks that her hair, which is too short for her mother’s tastes but dyed to a color found in nature (blonde, if more honey than her own natural color), is in at least some semblance of order.

“Vanity’s a sin,” Henry says from behind her.

Mary gives half a shriek and whirls around, her bridesmaid dress fluttering as madly as her nerves. “Jesus. You prat! You gave me a fucking heart attack.”

He grins lazily, hands in the pockets of his nice suit trousers as he pushes himself off of a doorframe. “If you’re done with your preening? Let’s go back. I’m only here for the cake, after all.”

Mary scoffs before shepherding him into the same corridor down which her sisters had disappeared moments earlier. “Have you seen that five-layer monstrosity? There’s no way it’s going to be palatable. There’s a law about wedding cakes, and it’s all about how the fancier the outside is the more the inside resembles cardboard.” The halls of Pemberly haven’t much changed since the house was built 500 years ago, so Mary counts four suits of armor as they make their way out of the residential east wing to where the wedding reception is being held towards the front of the house.

“I’m sure you’re a wedding expert,” agrees Henry, crowding against her the further they travel down the corridor. “What with your vast experience of—what is this, the second wedding you’ve attended? And you missed this bit of Jane’s, didn’t you?” He catches up to her and casually links her hand with his, his warm fingers gentle as they curl around hers.

“Yes, because you’re much more qualified,” Mary says, eyes fixed straight ahead. “What’s this, your third? Your sister, my sister, and now my other sister?”

“Fourteenth, actually,” he replies as they come to one of the side entrances of the ballroom. “I’ve got a lot of cousins. Gentry, you know.”

Mary can finally hear the faint, teasing thread of his voice. She gives a loud, overdramatic sniff. “Aristocrats. Inbred, the lot of you.”

Right before he tugs her through the doors to dart behind a pair of potted palms so her mother won’t catch them returning and not socializing with the party guests, he turns to her and smiles. The expression provokes something in her belly, making it tighten pleasurably and spill out onto her face through her eyes and mouth. After a long second, he says, “Oh, all right. I’m here for the cake and to finally beat your father at chess.”

“Ha!” Mary says. “That’ll be on a cold day in hell.”

“Mary, dear,” observes Henry pleasantly, drawing her closer with an arm around her waist, “You need to stop issuing definitive statements like that.” He nips her bottom lip, and then tilts his head and slides his mouth across hers. He tastes like champagne, now slightly flat, and the strawberries from the cheese plate that had been served after dinner. Mary inhales deeply and curves her arms around his neck as he pulls back slightly. “We can’t have you being wrong,” he says. “After all,
Mary Bennet is *never* wrong.”

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