the weak noise of her eyes

by satterthwaite

Summary

This is a story of girl meets boy - a story of pride and prejudice, of misjudging and reconciliation. A story of how Caroline Bingley lost hope, and found her dreams.

"my girl’s tall with hard long eyes (...) and the weak noise of her eyes easily files my impatience to an edge"

Notes

This is a work in progress - the tags referring to the possible trigger warnings will be added as the story goes on, and I'll post a note at the beginning of each chapter to warn you about them!

Chapter title from "England", by The National
We must be somewhere in London

She always walks a little faster along Grand Union Town Path, before turning into Granary Square and inside the building. A chill draught comes in with - there is no Indian summer this September, at least not yet. She keeps her hopes up - she bought a new skirt last week, she’d like to wear it when the weather gets warmer - if it does. Nothing is ever certain when it comes to whimsical London. How do the lyrics go - "we must be loving our lives in the rain" ? That's it.

She tried to make an impression, with a yellow duffle coat bought on Portobello Road - the label bore the mention "real vintage", she was in love -, couple with French marinière and high-heeled boots. Perhaps she could have gone for a more sophisticated look - she keeps that for another moment, when it is time to prove her worth, when it is time to show she is the best.

She spots another splash of yellow in the crowd gathered in the hall, she frowns - she isn't here to make friends, she reminds herself.

Stand-offish could come out as the first adjective to describe her - perhaps as well as haughty and cold. Only a few would dare to go as far as calling her a bitch upon first meeting, but it has been heard. The first time, it quite took her by surprise when she was told about it - she'd never thought she came out looking like this, when she was but kind and quite the funny type - but now it was no surprise anymore. With her tall and slim figure, the face curtained by short dark hair cutting our her cheekbones, she bore no kind of smile when amongst strangers or walking alone. She'd never be the one to grin for no reason and perhaps there was shyness behind the cold facade she gave strangers. There had been a time where people's opinions of her had mattered more than anything else - first impressions, diplomatic behaviour, unerring gentleness. She learned the hard way that to be loved by everyone was impossible, and she stopped caring. She wouldn't bother for people anymore, and what was the point ? Someone would always bad mouth you, there was no way to win.

Perhaps she envied effortlessly popular girls, those only spoken of in admiring terms, where she had had to work her way up the ladder, and there she stood finally - entering her dream school after the chaos of sixth-form college and the harshness it brought in her life. She would not be crushed by someone else, ever again. Her only enemy would be herself - her only friend, too. She would not be denied. She was going to paint the world the color of her thirst, of her fiery passions, and show them who she truly was - the bitch, or the girl behind closed doors.

Rain in January was always of the worst kind - cold, getting bone-deep under her skin until she took a hot shower. A damp grey wing sprawled over London, the sky was pouring onto her as she ran across Camden Town's High Street to the small flat she shared with another student, Jane Bennet - the girl in the yellow coat. She wasn't in the fashion section, and she wasn't the kind of people she would have befriended - what she was, however, was the first person to have replied to her ad to find a flatmate to rent a small but nonetheless expensive studio. She had looked at the blonde from head to toes - interior design babbled in introduction - and had decided she would do. A handshake later they moved in together, the small spaces arranged as well as possible by the slightly maniac Bennet girl, while the Bingley one would lay pieces of fabric everywhere. The cohabitation had its ups and downs - when Caroline would forget the dishes in the sink, when Jane would come home with a bunch of cupcakes and they'd stuff each other's faces while watching a Hugh Grant movie - but neither of them would give it up.

"I'm home !" Caroline cried as she removed her plexi slicker coat - transparent pink, which had earned her some judgmental looks from Jane the first time she had come home with it.
"Bathroom!" came the girl's voice in the background. The brunette took her boots off - the only rule that could not be violated in any case -, before tacking between their old couch, Jane's models and works in progress, and the ungodly amount of cloth pieces gathered in the same place, before reaching the door's knob and entering the bathroom, currently hidden behind a veil of mistiness. The warmth was pleasant enough for a frozen-to-death Caroline. Her roommate stood naked but for a pair of knickers, brushing her teeth and smiling at the newcomer, leaning against the doorframe. "I never understand your motivation to brush your teeth before having dinner..." Caroline chuckled. The blonde mumbled something rendered unintelligible by the strawberry-flavoured foam in her mouth. "Can I use the shower?"

"Sure" came the reply after a good spitting in the sink, and Caro pulled her jumper over her head. Modesty and nudity was something they were quite over of, and it was always nice to have someone to talk to when under the shower. Caro also remembered a night when, drunk upon coming back from a party, they had compared bosoms and elected Jane as the winner.

"Are you doing anything tonight?" the blonde inquired as she was dressing up.

"Apart from working on that skirt again - no, nothing." she replied, washing her hair and trying to be as quick as possible, before she ran off of hot water as their boiler was somewhat capricious. "Sarah might pop in later, she wasn't sure yet when I saw her earlier. She said she would text me - you don't mind?"

Unseen, Jane wrinkled her nose. "As long as you didn't invite her to stay..." Sarah was Caroline's closest friend, and the two didn't really get along - Jane was more the "stay-at-home" kind while Sarah was an outgoing extrovert who like partying until dawn and almost always managed to end up in troubles, and since the accident the Bennet girl didn't really assent that kind of influences in Caro's life.

"Don't worry" the brunette replied, wrapping a towel around her, water dripping from her hair and running down her sharp shoulders, "she just wants to show me her work and get some advices." She knew of that silent feud going on between her roommate and her best friend - she had tried to step in once, only to get a disapproving look from Jane, saying 'everything was fine', and a mere shrug from Sarah, who was far better at complete disdain of people's opinions than Caroline could have ever hoped to be. After all, they both were adults and could sort things out by themselves.

"And you? Anything interesting planned?"

"At all - you want me to cook tonight?"

"Please" Caroline sighed in relief, "I'm dying for your Cajun-spiced chicken."

Jane chuckled. "You're doing the shopping then" and before her friend could protest she had left the bathroom. Caro wiped the mirror with her hand, looking at the wet reflection facing her - dark hair and blue eyes, thin lips and cheekbones cutting her face away (a strong one, with an harsh jawline and maybe too prominent a nose it had taken years to love). You would not call her pretty at first glance - not like Jane was pretty (no - beautiful), with curly, honeyed hair falling mid-back, her wide green eyes and her pouty, pink lips like a rosebud. Caro was never that pretty, something too odd about her standing five feet ten, the somehow gawky way she walked, all bones and leg - but she had that something about her people called charm, the same way Cleopatra had charm, and an infamous nose. There was nothing Egyptian or Greek about hers, but Caroline liked to call it "the Bingley nose", since her brother shared it and so did their mother. Louisa had been blessed with their father's genes, blonde hair and cute nose - Charles only got the blonde and Caro was always their mother's most faithful portrait.

She dried her hair in a towel, putting on some wool tights under a dress, before joining Jane in
their living room. "You do realize you're making me go out under this awful weather?" she whined, sinking in the couch next to the blonde.

"You want that chicken or not?" she teased.

"Yes, but-"

"No chicken without an actual chicken to cook..."

Caroline sighed, resigned and beaten. "The supermarket is only 5 minutes away" Jane asserted "you can do it!" Now she knew her friend was only starting to mock her and there was nothing to do but comply - unhappily.

Grabbing her umbrella and with plastic boots on, she braved the cold drizzle covering the city in damp blankets of grey, low clouds. The walk was even quicker than usual, her pace made hasty by the wetness getting into her skin. In 10 minutes she was back home, a record Jane promised to mark down as she offered a plaid to frozen Caroline, who immediately curled up in a ball in the couch, slightly shaking. Her phone vibrated and she picked it up, expecting it to be Sarah.

"Charles wants me to come to yet another of those Law students parties..." she groaned as she threw her head back. "When is he going to understand I'm not interested in those kind of persons anymore?" There was a time where she had literally run off after those kind of boys - generally rich, with excellent social standings... until one of them had made it clear for her she wouldn't be enough of a "well-born" girl to get them interested, and she had stopped chasing dreams, more out of hurt than self-esteem. It was altogether even worse that this man would also happen to be her brother's best friend. "If I was sure he wouldn't be there, I'd probably go because it's my brother... But sometimes it seems to me that Charles simply can't live without him or something. They're like Siamese twins" she grimaced, and Jane chuckled, perhaps because she didn't actually know how deeply he had hurt her and how close he had hit to her friend's heart that she still felt the sting in her chest whenever his name was mentioned.

After dinner, and without any sign of life from Sarah ('out partying again, probably'), they got into Caroline's bed, which had also become Jane's since she had insisted not to let Caro alone after the accident. The brunette had remained skeptical at first, but her friend had argued they could turn the now spare room into a work space for the both of them, and she had had to agree.

It was Bennet's night, which meant she got to choose what to watch, and of course she settled for the typical romantic comedy - the blonde was a dreamer at heart who saw the man of her life in every of her boyfriends, a kind of innocence the cynical Caroline sometimes envied.

"Perhaps you should go to one of your brother's friends' parties next time..." The suggestion came as the hero was trying to win over his love interest who obviously wasn't so interested in him.

"Jane, please..." Caroline rolled her eyes.

"But maybe it'll do you good!" she argued, "seeing new faces, meeting new people..."

"Trust me - it's the last kind of people I want to meet" she replied. "Now, keep quiet, I'm trying to follow..."

"No, you're not!" Jane elbowed her in the arm. "You wanted to watch yet another 60's French drama - you're not in the least interested in a cliche American movie, you're trying to avoid this conversation."

Caro sighed, turned to Jane who would not let her go until she gained satisfaction - and won the argument. "Okay, fine - I'll try. Perhaps..." she eyed her smiling flatmate whose contentment was
far too visible for her own sake.

"What is it, party homework?" she mumbled, sinking into bed with a giggling friend besides her, encouraging her to watch the end.

"Fuck you" she groaned from under the covers, before falling asleep.
Caroline stood in the corner of the kitchen, eyeing her half empty cup between her hands and debating whether a cigarette was worth braving the early February cold. There was a longing in her for this sweet pain of heat alongside her throat, the warmth between her fingers as the shining end was getting closer and closer. She was downing what remained of her whiskey cola when Charles broke into the room and disrupted her peaceful haven.

"Hey, the party's not here, Lili!" he shouted as he stumbled towards her, cheeks reddened and sparkling eyes - and anyways he must have been really drunk to use her childhood nickname.

"I don't really want to mingle with those people, Charles" she sighed as she poured herself another whiskey - without any soda to dilute it this time.

"Come on, lil sis!" he slapped her shoulder. The need for a fag suddenly became urgent and she reached for her clutch bag.

"You're older by 5 minutes, Charles - nothing to brag about. I'm going out." She quickly escaped his grab, leaving him speechless and surprised.

Despite having drunk what she considered a great deal, Caroline felt incredibly sober - way too sober to be tolerating, let alone enjoying, the party she had reluctantly accepted to attend. As she crossed a living room full of cheerful and passably drunk people, she cursed Jane for having maser her do it and not coming with her ("homework to be done"), before escaping through the front door. Despite the cold there were some people gathered in this part of the yard, mainly couples looking for a few minutes of intimacy away from the crowd. She rolled her eyes and rummaged through her bag in search of her cigarettes and lighter, hopping from foot to foot in a vain attempt to stay warm. As smoke filled her throat and lungs, she spotted Darcy not so far away, and she felt her heart clenching. He was in deep conversation with a girl and had not noticed her presence. Caroline squinted her eyes and focused on his partner - so this was what a girl with proper social backgrounds and standings looked like, dress going under her knees and probably water in her plastic cup. In the darkness it was hard to single out her features, but from the plain brown of her hair and her dark-circled eyes, she seemed to recognize Anne de Bourgh, one of Darcy's relatives, and part of English aristocracy, Caroline supposed. She groaned and clenched her teeth, turned her face away and took another puff.

"It's bad for your health, you know."

The sudden stranger voice startled her and she almost dropped her cigarette.

"Gosh, you frightened me!" she breathed and turned to face the young man standing besides her. With a quick look, she surveyed him: around 20, neat clothes, clean haircut and everything that came with the "perfect Law student from wealthy family" kit. She bit her lips.

"Anyways I don't need your health advice." she shrugged as she kept on suckling on her fag.
"Well I'm giving it anyways" she heard him chuckle, and she refrained a nervous laugh from her lips.

"Let me guess" she started, bitter and slightly annoyed, "of course you're doing Law - you come from a very posh family and want to follow in your daddy's footsteps, right? So you're this brilliant student - or not, but it doesn't matter since you've got the money, and whatever you do makes your mummy so proud - is she a duchess or a countess? Wait, I don't care. If you're looking for girls to hook up with, I suggest you stay in your social class, like a good boy with a 19th-Century like mind. Good evening."

He opened his mouth to reply, but Caroline was quicker to turn on her heels before stomping on her still alight and half-smoked cigarette, making her way towards the house once again. As she crossed the threshold she bumped into her giddy twin brother. "Caro!" he exclaimed "I see you met Rich!" he went on, looking over her shoulder towards the young man who had followed her. She quickly spun around, glaring in his direction, before Charles seized her shoulder with his arm, ruining every plan she had formed to escape this new confrontation.

"This is Richard Fitzwilliam" he spoke cheerfully as they were joined by the man in question. "Rich, this sulky girl is my twin sister, Caroline!" She watched the Fitzwilliam boy grin - him, too, obviously past the state of tipsy, before he bent over in some kind of curtsey.

"Pleasure to meet you, Caroline."

"Pleasure not shared, mister Fitzwilliam" she breathed through clenched teeth, before Charles squeezed her shoulder.

"Caro, please - do you know Rich's father has a seat in the House of Commons?" Her brother seemed overjoyed to tell her about what seemed to be a news of capital importance.

"Then my aiming is getting better and better." It was her turn to smirk triumphantly as he now bore an embarrassed look.

"And his mother is one of the best cardiac surgeons in England!" Charles continued, obviously in awe of his friend's family and being very proud of counting him amongst his acquaintances.

"No duchess or countess?" Caroline inquired mockingly.

"Afraid not" he replied curtly.

"Too bad." she shrugged, wrenching herself free of her brother's hold on her shoulder. "Anyways, I'm sticking to what I said earlier - go play elsewhere. I'm not royalty enough for you."

She left him in company of her brother, who seemed much more enthusiastic to share a conversation with him, but she could feel his glance lingering on her back as she headed back to the kitchen to find some peace until it would be time to drag Charles back to his place.

She found her haven now invaded by some beer pong contest among roaring students and decided she wanted no part of it. Lost, she retreated back in the hallway she had just crossed, and decided to get upstairs to try and find somewhere where she couldn't be disturbed, either by her brother or anyone else.

Sitting on the floor, her back to the wall, she quietly sipped at her whiskey, cold and burning her tongue and throat. As she had predicted, the party was pure disaster - as soon as they had arrived Charles had abandoned her to go and meet his friends, and despite his recurrent invitations for her to join them, she had declined each time. She didn't want to be acquainted with those people, she didn't require their judgmental looks when she told them the kind of studies she was pursuing, and
if it was the kind of things Charles could put up with, she couldn't, not anymore. So she would rather avoid them like the plague, minding the cracks in her self-esteem they brought every time they asked "but what can you do with that degree?". She swallowed hard as the gulp she took was bigger than the other ones.

"I'm sorry if I was rude earlier" the now familiar voice came from a few steps below her.

"My God, you never give up?" she complained, turning towards him and resisting the urge to pour the remnants of her drink over his face.

"I just wanted to apologize, that's all."

"Well, I don't want to - so, conversation over."

"You seemed like a nice girl and I wanted to get to know you..."

"Listen here, buddy." she placed her hand on his shoulder. "I know your kind - you're the ones who call art students "weirdos" and think most of us will end up homeless beggars because our degree offers no job whatsoever. And you're entitled to your opinion, fine - but I'm entitled to mine that you're probably just another "white rich boy" kind of a prick." She gave him a cold smile, before getting up and walking past him, going downstairs to try and find her brother since she had had enough of this party.

"She found him dancing with some girl, and she quickly pulled him away by the arm as he protested.

"Your little sister is tired and wants to go home."

"My little sister is a grumpy bitch who should learn how to enjoy herself." he replied with heat.

"I know how to enjoy myself - with the right people" she answered with a calm that surprised even her as she was dragging him towards the front door. "Come on, Charlie - it's almost 3am, you had your fun." As they crossed the front yard, she saw Darcy coming up to meet them, probably to talk to his best friend.

"Back off, Fitzwilliam" Caroline warned, "the boy is mine and I'm taking him home now." She felt his cold glare falling upon her but never raised her eyes to meet his own muddy brown ones.

"See you, Will!" Charles cried out as he was forcefully drawn away by his eager-to-leave sister.

"So, how was the party ?" Jane joyfully inquired the next evening over a plate of spaghetti Bolognese.

"Don't mention it" Caroline groaned, taking another mouthful of pasta. "Charles insisted I befriended all of his friends, of course... I swear, Jane, why can't this boy befriend the people he actually go to class with ? I bet those classics students aren't as insufferable... Darcy must have cast a spell on him."

"Like he did on you before ?" Jane grinned, her smile vanishing when meeting the cold glare Caroline gave her. "Anyways, don't tell me you didn't meet anyone or you might send me to despair..."

"Well, there was this guy..." she started, interrupted by her flatmate's loud "Ah ah!"

"... who was a complete dick." Caro went on, crushing her friend's expectations.
"And what did he do to deserve your mighty wrath?" she teased.

"Just being your average upper-class, twenty something boy, giving unwanted opinions and pursuing you like he's not used to rejection - which I'm sure he isn't."

"So you rejected him?"

"Three times !" she exclaimed. "Gosh, I thought I'd never get rid of him ! Charles seemed to appreciate him, but my brother cannot be trusted in his choices of friendship..." She frowned her eyebrows for a second, thinking. "I guess you could say he was kind of handsome... but the stuck-up kind of handsome !" she quickly added when she noticed her friend's suggestive look.

"Anyways, you know how they think - their choice of studies is the only good one and all the rest are shitty or weird, and I decided not to let my self-esteem and life's choices be undermined by this kind of persons anymore."

She got to her feet to help Jane with the washing up.

"But he did appeal to you, didn't he ?" she shyly questioned with her arms deep in hot water and foam.

"Jane, please !" Caro splashed her, half-annoyed and half-amused at her friend's attempt to play matchmaking.

A minute later, the kitchen was turned into a battlefield.
The next time that I caught my own reflection, it was on its way to meet you

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "Crying Lightening" by Arctic Monkeys

"Okay, Richard - spill it all!" Elizabeth chuckled on the phone as she was working on her computer - a project due soon for which she was already being late.

"Nothing exciting, really..." he started, himself doing his own homework, with the difference of being earlier than his friend. "I went to Williams' party last Friday, as you know."

"So? Anything interesting happened?"

"Apart from getting attacked by some girl?" he laughed, "no, nothing. My life isn't very interesting."

"Who's the harpy who didn't find my teddy bear friendly?" Elizabeth inquired, half-surprise one could not get along with Richard Fitzwilliam.

"Charles Bingley's sister - Catherine, Caroline?"

"Are you kidding me?" She didn't know if she had to laugh or be utterly shocked - though the girl had never struck her as very sympathetic, despite Jane's opinion on the matter.

"What, you know her?" Richard sounded as surprised as one could be, and perhaps with a hint of hope in his voice.

"I do" his friend teased, letting her interlocutor linger at the other end. "She's my sister's flatmate" she finally spilled.

"You're joking!" he exclaimed in disbelief - what were the chances, really?

"I'm not! Ask me anything about her!" Elizabeth must have seen the girl several times and had not really bothered to get to know her, but Jane often shared their stories with her sister.

"What does she look like?" The test was feeble, but himself didn't know much about this girl he had met a few days before and with whom he hadn't really share a conversation.

"Dark hair cut short, deep blue eyes, standing five feet ten, with arms and legs like sticks. She wears almost only black, always very fashionable. Little to no make-up. Bra cup size is..."

"Too much information, too much information!" Richard cried out as his friend laughed. "I believe you. Is she a nice girl actually or does she jump at people's throat all the time?"

"I don't really know her - my sister Jane tells me she's one of the nicest girls she knows, but the few times I saw her she rather seemed cold and haughty. Anyways what did she do to you?"

"Well, I might have been rude - just in an awkward way, as you know me. And she started a really long speech about how she knew my kind, how I was just another pretentious rich boy and thinks like that. Seemed to hold a grudge against me without knowing me... Strange. Anyways I
tried to apologize but she wouldn't hear about it."

Elizabeth sighed and rolled her eyes. "She seems to be the stuck up one, really."

"Yeah, she looks nice, though..." Richard reflected, and his friend coughed.

"Okay, what do you want to do about it, then ?"

Caroline was sat in the classroom, attending her "history of costumes" class, which turned out to be focusing on Regency era gowns and used fabrics, when she felt her phone vibrating in her bag.

"What the hell ?!" she exclaimed much louder than she intended, and half the auditorium turned their heads towards her with shocked and annoyed looks. She blushed and almost plunged under her desk to reply to Jane's text.

"i s2g your sister is dead. talk to you later xxx"

She fidgeted in her chair, now eagerly waiting for the break so she could escape and get back home to tell her flatmate about all the good she thought of her flatmate's sister and her ways of dealing with people she barely knew.

"I am going to kill her !" Caroline roared as she jumped to her feet as soon as Jane crossed their front door.

"Hmm yes I had a good day, thank you Caroline..." Jane whispered, taking her shoes off and shooting glances at her friend pacing up and down their living room - quite an achievement considering the mess gathered in such a small place.

"Who does she think she is, giving my phone number to people ?! And how come she has it in the first place ?!"

"I -err, gave it to her when we moved together." Jane confessed shyly, "you know, in case of emergency..." She raised her eyes and met Caro's deathly glare.

"Anyways, it isn't hers to give to people, no matter how close they are ! I swear, the next time I see her she's going to hear about what I think of it !"

"Well, I can understand your anger..." the blonde carefully spoke, "but has he texted you already ?" she asked, trying to get the subject off her own sister, who didn't hold her friend in high regards.

"... no." Caroline was forced to admit she hadn't heard from that Fitzwilliam guy... yet. "But I'm sure it's just a matter of time before I'm drowning under messages from him, probably asking me out multiple times until he eventually gives up."

As she spoke a flash of light in the corner of her eyes caught her attention. "Speaking of the devil..." she groaned, reaching for her phone, which indicated she had a new message.

"Hell has been unleashed." she finally said, sighing and handing her phone to Jane for her to see.

"Hi, it's Richard, the 'rich prick with the 19th-century mind' - Elizabeth Bennet gave me your number. I was wondering if you'd agree to go and have a coffee with me one of those days ? To make up for any shitty behavior."
"Well, he seems nice enough" Jane shrugged, handing the cellphone back, "and if he's Eliza's friend he must be a decent lad."

Once again, Caroline's glare pierced through her - she thought she might as well start counting them and taking bets.

"You must be kidding." Caro replied coldly. "Just give me one good advice so I can skip the part where he texts me everyday and go straight to the one where he actually forgets about me."

"Say yes." came Jane's simple reply.

"What ?!"

"Say yes - accept his invitation, so there won't be any other. And then you can tell him in person you're not in the least interested... or just be your disagreeable self like you can so easily be" she teased, and this time the brunette only seemed half-offended by her friend's comment.

"Well, this could work..." Caro thought for a moment, biting her lower lip. "Okay, I'll give it a try."

Her fingers quickly ran along her phone's keyboard, typing her answer.

"Fine. Covent Garden's Starbucks, next Saturday, 2pm. I hate late people."

"Aren't you afraid to sound too nice ?" Jane mocked, shot down once again by Caro's angry looks.

"What is it, the Bennet and Fitzwilliam's plot ? I swear to God, you are being annoying..."

"Come on, I'm just teasing ! Perhaps you'll find out you'll like him..."

"Perhaps I'll drop dead in my sleep."

Now it was Jane's turn to look fiercely at her flatmate, a hint of sadness showing in her green eyes.

"Sorry" Caroline muttered, lowering her eyes and head - she knew it wasn't funny and she shouldn't have mentioned it. "It'll be fine" she patted the blonde's shoulder, before taking her in her embrace.

"Don't joke with that ever again." she mumbled against her friend's shoulder, biting back the tears welling up in her eyes.

"I won't, I won't" Caroline whispered, rubbing her friend's back and holding her tighter.

She slower her pace as she got into the flow of tourists that invaded Covent Garden all days of the year, holding on tighter to her wool coat and bag. She was in advance, as always with her. She had tried to convince herself it wouldn't matter if she was late (it would only contribute to the great scheme of making him dislike her), but in the end she had had to leave way to early and had arrived 30 minutes before the appointed time. Being late was almost a visceral fear in her to be late, which related to her primal fear of people disliking her - something she thought she had gotten rid of but which could so easily show up again at times like these, when it came to appointments and meeting people.

"You weren't joking about punctuality."
She was interrupted by the voice as she was about to enter the infamous café, and she quickly spun around.

"And I see you took my threat seriously" she commented.

"Well, after being insulted several times by you, I'm taking you very seriously" he chuckled, and she allowed herself half a smile. Small victory, he thought as he held the door for her.

"I'll go and get a table. Hot chocolate for me, please." she quickly assessed before disappearing in the crowd to go and find some place for them to sit, leaving him alone and startled. This girl was quite a phenomenon, and he wasn't sure whether he liked her straightforward manners or hated them with a passion. Anyways, he was left there to queue.

By some God's miracle one of those comfortable couches was free, and Caroline jumped on it before anyone else could, before realizing they'd have to sit side by side if she chose to stay there. She debated whether he was as unbearable as to give up the comfort and warmth of the leathery sofa, and she found that he wasn't. Waiting for him to come back, she opened her bag and got her sketchbook out, as well as a recently sharpened pencil. Being on a date (was it really a date ? She shivered) didn't mean she would stop working, especially when she found herself being late on this homework. Contemplating the half finished drawing and chewing on the end of the pencil, already severely marked, she didn't notice him coming back with their drink.

"What is it ?" he asked, peering over her shoulders as he sat down next to her.

"Work" she quickly replied, her eyes focused on the paper as she drew what seemed to be a random line, before erasing it.

"So you do work in art school ? I thought it was only a legend" Richard teased. Caroline gave him one cold look who made him swallow his laugh as she picked up her beverage and took a sip of it.

"Yes, we do" she replied icily. "This assignment is about recreating an iconic piece of cloth from the 60's and I decided to work on the baby doll dress, making Jane watch an insane amount of 60's movies when it's Bingley night and..." she interrupted herself when she realized she was babbling things out of nervousness. "Anyways, you probably know nothing about those things."

"On that point I'll have to agree with you" he confessed, since he had absolutely no clue what a baby doll dress was, and judging from Caro's sketch, it wasn't something he could see any sane woman wearing. The last comment he kept to himself, however. "But do you actually like that baby thing ?" he timidly asked, trying to make a decent conversation.

"Not really - 60's fashion isn't my cup of tea. I'd rather create something more into the 20's fashion spirit, or along the lines of Yves Saint-Laurent's infamous women smoking suits. I'd find it much more inspiring."

Richard vaguely pictured what a 20's dress must have looked like - he had watched "The Great Gatsby" with Georgiana a week ago, but he couldn't possibly imagine what those Yves Saint-Laurent suits might have looked like.

"I see I've lost you" Caroline smiled, eyeing Richard's puzzled look from the corner of her eyes. "Anyways I give up ! Inspiration is not going to come in this noisy place and in such company - no offense" she added with a hint of mischief.

"None taken - I'll just remember to bring my own due works next time" She raised an inquiring eyebrow - so he was suggesting there would be other times ? She had accepted precisely for it not
to happen again, though she was forced to admit this was going better than she had expected it to be, or perhaps intended it.

"I'm sure I would have you puzzled with all the law talk..." he joked.

"No doubt" she spoke, putting all her things back in her bag. "What field of law are you doing?" She had never been interested in those things but she still knew there were different branches - just like in fashion.

"I want to specialize in Medical Ethics law" he replied, observing her reactions to see if he could get her as lost as she had - victory.

"That sounds... interesting." she half smiled, not having the faintest idea what it was about nor that it existed in the first place.

"But let's not talk about studies - I want to know about you."

"There is nothing to know about me" she bit back, instinctively defensive when people tried to break in.

"Ah, come on - you made a lot of assumptions about me the first time we met."

"I did" she admitted, feeling a hint of shame for the first time - perhaps she had misjudged him, after all.

"Let's start with your parents, since that's what you chose first."

Caroline froze in her seat.

"Since you seem to have a grudge against aristocracy and people born with it, I'm guessing you don't come from money and your parents had to work hard to afford yours and your brother's education, right?"

She didn't reply, sitting still.

"I know Charles is your twin brother, but I bet you were the favorite child, and your dad still has a special place for his little art student, while your mum likes Charles best, because she loves Latin and greek, perhaps a teacher herself? Anyways they never show preferences, except when you and your brother fight and they take sides..."

"My parents are dead." Caroline suddenly interrupted him. "Thanks for the chocolate. I have to go."

She quickly got to her feet, feeling dizzy and nauseous, leaving behind her a half drank beverage and a thunderstruck Richard, mumbling too late apologizes as he watched her go.

In the tube back home, Caroline cried.
"Tonight, no one is gonna spoil my fun!" Caroline raised her tequila glass to the ceiling, before dowing it and grimacing at the warmth going down her throat. She put it back on the counter, alongside its two predecessors, and she winked at the bartender to get another.

"Err, Caro, don't you think three is enough? Why don't you settle down for something less strong?"

"Jane" her friend sighed, putting her arms around her shoulders, "tequila is the only alcohol that won't make me sick tomorrow morning. Also it gets me drunk quickly and that's exactly what I need after the week I've had." After the disastrous date with Richard, her teacher's reviews for her 60's re-creation work had not been either good nor encouraging, and she could feel the waves of anxiety hitting her again, and that great sense of impending doom that only a good night out with friends could help chasing away.

"So here I am, with you, enjoying my evening so far. Everything's good." After the fourth glass she started feeling the usual lightheadness, and she looked around the place for anyone who looked like a possible flirt for the night.

She spotted him in the corner, looking at her and noticing her presence, a smile showing on his face. As he got up and headed towards her, Caroline gritted her teeth and grabbed Jane's arm.

"This is an emergency" she breathed, before leaning forward and kissing the Bennet girl.

Her lips were soft ones, and though her flatmate, surprised and shocked, stood stiff against Caro, she could feel her slowly giving in as Caroline's hands crept up to her face and cupped both her cheeks. The kiss was a sweet one and before they knew it they found it enjoyable.

Caroline opened one eye, saw Richard standing near, mouth agape and a look of utter shock on his face. He had stopped in his tracks upon watching the two kissing, and was now slowly backing away towards the corner he came from. The girl smiled and pulled back from the embrace.

"What the hell was that?" Jane whispered, aghast at her own behaviour and Caroline's.

"Come on, don't tell me you've never kissed a girl?" Caroline rolled her eyes and grinned - but upon seeing Jane's frown, her smile vanished. "Oh. You hadn't."

"Are you telling me that you...?"
"Sarah is a very good kisser" the brunette shrugged, "also went out with a girl in highschool - it was fun!" She wasn't sure her flatmate shared her point of view, or if she was too shocked to mouth a reply.

"Anyways, what was that for?" Jane asked, leaning against the counter. Caroline and girls? She had a hard time picturing it, but she had to admit her friend's skills when it came to kissing - she had been a much better kisser than most of the boys she had known. She found herself lightly passing her fingers over her own lips, absentmindedly.

"I was trying to chase someone away" she replied, surveying the bar to see if he had retreated to a safe distance.

"Don't tell me it's that Fitzwilliam guy again!" Jane exclaimed, slightly annoyed at her friend's attitude. Following her gaze, she spotted him as well. "Is that him? He's rather good-looking..." she commented.

"Jane!"

"What? I'm sure the poor guy is trying his best to be nice to you and you are just being cruel to him!"

"Oh please" Caroline whined, "he acted without thinking on our date and I don't want to retry that experience actually. This was a bold move but I do hope it will keep him at large."

"Bold indeed..." Jane whispered, rolling her eyes.

"Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it" Caroline teased, a mischievous grin on her lips. "Because I did."

The blonde was left with an open mouth as her friend laughed. "It's not a matter of whether I enjoyed it or not!" she scoffed. "I think he deserves a chance!"

Caroline stared at her friend coldly, and without a word of reply, ordered herself another shot of tequila.

"Caro!" a joyful voice came from afar, and she spun around to see her brother entering the bar, waving his arms to salute her.

"I'm not there!" she whispered before hastily heading towards the toilets - an evening with her brother getting drunk was the last thing she needed at the moment, and she would avoid it at all costs. Before Jane could protest, the dark haired girl had disappeared from her side, leaving her alone with her twin brother, puzzled to find the Bennet girl by herself when he could have sworn he had seen his sister just seconds before.

"Do you mind the company?" he asked, his usual cheerful smile on his face, which Jane returned with as much joy and sympathy.

"At all" she replied and he ordered them both a drink. She didn't really know Charles Bingley that well, having only met him a few times before, but she had often reflected on how different he seemed from his twin sister. While Caroline was often cynical and spent a great time criticizing people (and mainly their sense of fashion, or rather the lack of it, according to the brunette), Charles seemed to find good in everything and everyone, much like Jane, and the few times they had met she had found him to be always good-humoured and ready to have a good time, and without being really acquainted with him, she had to admit he was someone she could easily like and befriend.
Caroline locked herself in a stale, only to find out she had forgotten her bag and drink with her friend and was now empty-handed and feeling thirsty. She sighed and cursed herself, cupping her cheeks and landing her elbows on her lap.

She thought back on Jane's words - was she really being too cruel towards him? After all, he had done nothing wrong... except bringing her parents into the conversation, a subject about which she was still very sensitive. Apart from that, he had been nothing but nice and kind and warm to her, and perhaps she had misjudged him, and perhaps if Louisa was here, she'd tell her all this running away hid something else... She quickly chased the thought from her mind. There was nothing more, and he would probably turn out to be of the same kind as the others, just like Fitzwilliam Darcy. Wasn't he nice and kind to her brother? That didn't prevent him from being harsh with her, making her understand he tolerated her because she was Charles' sister and that nothing else could be expected from their so-called friendship. It might have just been a silly crush of a sixth-form girl looking for glamorous lifestyle, but the words had been enough to crush her and any dreams she might have fostered about her brother's best friend.

Richard Fitzwilliam had nothing to do with this story, but he was facing the consequences of it all the same, since in Caroline's eyes, all boys coming from wealthy families probably shared the same mind and ideas. Why was he bothering to go after her, if only to give her false hopes and rejecting her eventually, since she was not royalty, only a fashion student with little to no future prospects if she didn't make it to the top, already as a student.

Jane was kind-hearted, willing to see the good in everyone and giving them every chance to be kind. Caroline was not - she was a disillusioned, cynical girl who wasn't keen on giving second chance and wasn't as open-hearted as the Bennet girl. Her parents' death only had her shutting herself a little bit more, like an oyster, and she wasn't sure if anyone would even bother to try and open her up to see whether there was a pearl to be found.

As thirst was taking over her and there was angry hammering on the door, she finally exited her getaway to get back inside the bar. Bumping into Richard.

"Oh, hello" she breathed, lowering her eyes and slightly blushing as she remembered what she had done, and having no way to escape him.

"I saw you were rather busy earlier..." he said with an awkward laugh, not knowing whether the kiss had been some kind of stratagem to shoo him away, or a genuine, loving one. "I didn't know you were that close to your flatmate..."

Caroline gave a clumsy smile, biting her lower lip, feeling embarrassed at having to face him. "You could say that" she finally replied, any witty come back or comments having apparently left her.

"Seems like she's busy with someone else, now" he commented, turning around. Following his gaze, she saw her friend engaged in a making out session with her twin brother, and blushed furiously. "Oh my God!" she breathed, not quite believing what she was witnessing, her eyes growing wide with shock and surprise. "I need some fresh air or I'm gonna throw up" she groaned, quickly heading for the entrance, followed by a laughing Richard.

The cold air of February sent shivers down her spine, and she clutched at her bare arms, hopping from feet to feet. She approached a stranger, asking for a cigarette.

"You haven't given up on your bad habit" Richard commented.

"You haven't given up on following me around" Caroline quickly replied with wit, but less coldness than usual. To her surprise he let out a little laugh and she eyed him suspiciously. "What
"You want from me?"

"I just - want to be friends" he admitted.

"You're weird" she spoke, "you want to be friends with a girl who is rude to you, leaves you in the middle of a date and snogs a girl in front of you."

"Well, if you put it like that..." he grimaced, "but every time we meet, you come up with those snarky comments and haughtiness and well - I want to know you better. Without making mistakes."

"I see..." Caroline's tone didn't seem convinced yet. "Well, I might give you a chance. Maybe..." she finally said, throwing her cigarette's butt away, and watching as a contented smile lit up his face. "You have Jane to thank for this - she has a good effect on the cold-hearted bitch that I am."

"Caro said she'd be working late" Jane told the boys, still amazed her friend had agreed to go out with her, her brother and Richard. Coming back from their night out the other day, her flatmate had given her speech along the lines of "I can't believe you kissed my brother" and "if you break up, which side am I supposed to take?" Jane had had to reassure her there was absolutely nothing serious, but she'd like to see him again because he had found him quite charming - at which Caroline had grimaced and mumbled something along the lines of "my own baby brother and my flatmate" and the Bennet girl had rolled her eyes.

When Charles had called her to arrange a date, the blonde had let her matchmaking heart speak, and proposed him to also invite both Caroline and Richard, since the brunette had confessed to having been kind to him, which Jane saw as a great step in their possible relationship. Charles had accepted, so did Richard (more than happily, she had noticed) and the little apprehension she might have had went away when the Bingley girl had agreed with a shrug and a nonchalant "why not".

"My sister's always working" complained Charles, before spotting the tennis tables in the hall. "Care for a challenge?" he winked at Richard, who accepted while Jane sat down and took out a book.

"So Caroline is dedicated to her work?" Fitzwilliam asked her brother.

"Caroline is obsessed, you mean. If she could, she'd forego sleeping to work all around the clock. She can't settle for anything less than perfect... even if it means neglecting her brother" he pouted playfully.

"So she is a perfectionist?"

"Yes, very. She was always the best student of the three of us, sometimes making herself sick with stress over exams and homework - I mean, there is a reason why she is so thin! She just worries all the time about how good she is and how better she could be. I hope for you she isn't the same when picking up boyfriends..."

"What are her boyfriends like?" Richard inquired with caution.

"Hmmm a bit like you? I mean, until sixth form. After that, I don't know if she had one. She just had flings from time to time, but nothing serious... Are we going to play or talk about my sister?" Charles protested.

They had times to dispute 3 games (all won by Richard, who later revealed he had played tennis table when he was younger) before Jane checked her watch and suggested someone go look after
"I'll do that" Richard volunteered, "so you can already go to the pub and we'll join you later."

Charles was more than pleased to agree, while Jane was a bit reluctant to leave her friend alone with the Fitzwilliam guy - who knew what she could come up with? Charles reassured her by saying he trusted the man to convince his sister to stop working for a while.

Alone, he got lost in the hallways, before finding the room where the sewing machines were stocked - the lights were on, and the ticking sound of the iron point stitching fabrics together was coming out in a jerky rhythm. Coming in, he saw her back bent over a table, disappearing under what looked like miles of clothes.

"We're all waiting for you downstairs" he spoke as he walked towards her.

Caroline jumped on her chair, startled at the voice interrupting her work. "Jesus fuckin Christ !" she swore, turning around to see who it was. "This is the last time you scare me to death while my fingers are close to a moving pointy thing ! You want me to sew them or what ?!"

"Sorry" he apologized with a smile. "I came up to fetch you."

"I'm not finished yet' she groaned, turning her back to him and resuming her work.

"And will it be long ?" Richard inquired, taking a seat next to her and examining the pieces lying there, unable to figure out what they were supposed to be.

"Well, my work was deemed "plain" and "uncreative" so it'll take the time it needs to be perfect."

He frowned his eyebrows, thinking about how Charles had not been wrong about his sister's quest for perfection.

"Then I suppose you don't want to go to the pub anymore ?" he questioned. She stopped for a moment, wiping the thin film of sweat shining on her brow.

"Sorry" she smiled, only half-apologetic. "This work is really important and I can't keep pushing it back... Anyways, it was Charles and Jane's thing to begin with, but you can still go if you want to, I'm used to staying alone."

"It's okay, I can stay with you. We can have a working date" he joked, making her smile before she resumed her stitching.

Richard found a vending machine and provided them both with coffee for him and Diet Coke for her. He stood a few hours by her side, looking at her working - how she furrowed her brow and puckered her lips together when concentrating, how the glasses she used when working would slowly slide down the bridge of her nose and how she would put them back with one finger. How she hesitated between two patterns which looked exactly the same to him, how she spent minutes feeling fabrics between her fingers, sometimes rubbing it against her cheek. And even though he didn't understand half the things she was doing, or why she was doing it, he found some fascination in this work he has often overlooked as futile. With Caroline, her dedication and concentration got him interested in something he never thought he would.

"Done !" finally came the victory shout as he was taking a turn around the room, looking at pictures of famous designers who had attended the school. He turned around to watch her holding her dress in front of her. "Pff" she sighed, falling back down in her chair, looking at the clock on the opposite wall. "Almost midnight" she grimaced. "That's too late to go out... I'm sorry I kept you..."
"It's alright, really. It was quite an interesting evening all the same."

"I feel a bit guilty for spoiling your fun" she bit her lower lip between her teeth as she folded the dress and all the unused pieces of cloth. "How can I make it up for you?" she demanded.

"Just let me walk you home?" he proposed, and with a nod she agreed.

When they exited the building they found it was once again raining cats and dogs, and neither of them had thought of bringing an umbrella.

"Well..." Caroline sighed, "I don't live that far" she reassured him.

They walked quickly, side by side, Richard having taken off his coat to put it over both their heads, their arms intertwined. When they reached Caroline's flat, she hurried them both inside and offered him a towel to dry himself, which he used to wipe his dripping hair.

"The least I can do is offering you some hot tea" she told him as she put the kettle on the cooker, before emptying the couch of all the mess lying there. "Make yourself at home!"

As he looked around, he could easily guess Caroline's and Jane's different characters by the way the small flat was arranged. Caroline's clothes were thrown randomly around the place, in a big mess of colours and tissues, while Jane's models and works were neatly arranged in order to gain as much space as possible.

"There you go" Caroline announced as she handed him the hot cup, taking place besides him. "Thank you for keeping me company tonight" she softly spoke as they sipped at their tea. "I don't really like staying alone at school this late" she confessed, "even though it must have been boring for you. I promise next time I'll make an effort!" she added playfully, and Richard smiled.

As the time was nearing one o'clock, the law student decided it was time for him to go back home.

"Well, it was fun" he said as they stood on the doormat, and she grinned.

"I'll try and make it more fun next time" she promised, and without really knowing why, she leaned forward and lightly brushed his lips with hers, before closing the door behind him. "Text me when you're home."
The first thing Caroline noticed when she woke the morning after, was that the big bed was empty and Jane hadn't come home. She groaned, chasing from her mind the thoughts of her flatmate and brother together, before getting up and checking her phone. After Richard had left, she had crashed into bed and fallen asleep within minutes. She saw he had indeed texted her to tell her he was safely home, wishing her goodnight, and she smiled. She didn't know how he had done this, but Caro could feel herself slowly warming up to him, and the brief kiss they had exchanged had been as surprising to her as she imagined it must have been to him. Still, she didn't regret what she'd done - and if it gave him expectations, well perhaps he wasn't that wrong.

The Bingley girl was starting to think she had seriously misjudged him. He had stayed with her all evening long without complaints, never made comments on wealthiness, social backgrounds and all those things she thought would be the most important things for him. And after so much kindness on his part, she started feeling guilty of having been so cold towards him, and that perhaps it had been her who was riddled with prejudices and pride.

At the thought she blushed, but quickly regained contenance as she dressed and went to the kitchen to make herself some coffee. She texted Jane to know when she'd be home - Saturdays were usually girls afternoon, where they would either go shopping or settle in a cafe somewhere to talk about all things and what they had done when not together. The blonde replied quickly that she would drop by Elizabeth's place before coming home, and knowing the sisterly love they shared, Caroline knew she was in to be alone for most of the day, and she sighed. With her work finished the night before, she had some free time before her, and since she knew her uncle had given her her pocket money (since he was the one providing the rent and taking care of the money her parents had left), she had hoped to convince the blonde to go shopping with her. The prospect of going alone did not really sit well with her, and was soon resigned to be spending the day inside, watching movies and tv shows - perhaps she'd let herself be tempted with Chinese takeaway for dinner... The pouring rain outside finished to convince her that spending the day under blankets with chocolate biscuits would be the best idea.

She was in the middle of watching a recording of the Great British Bake Off, feeding herself on Belgian chocolate Louisa had sent her after her trip to Bruges, when her phone rang again.

"Cara D. @ the club 2nite. be there xxx"

She frowned at Sarah's text - if Cara Delevingne was indeed going to the same club as they used to, it would be a great opportunity to wear her own clothes and get them noticed. On the other hand, she felt exhausted and wasn't sure if she was ready for another night out - even though she had not really enjoyed herself last night.
"Will see - text you later xxx"

She replied, typing away, before resuming watching her show. When her phone rang again, she expected a reply from Sarah, trying to convince her.

"What did you do to Richard? Poor lad is super sick!"

She was surprised at Charle's text - how come Richard had told him he was sick and not her? Were they closer than she thought?

"Not guilty."

She sent her reply, and decided to call him herself to get the news from him.

The phone rang a few seconds before a husky voice could be heard at the other end of the line.

"Hey's, it's Caroline" she spoke almost shyly.

"Yeah, your name came up on my screen" he joked before coughing.

"You sound poorly" she commented.

"I am - a bad cold. Shouldn't have walked 2 miles under the rain last night."

"Two miles!" she exclaimed, "you should have let me call a cab!"

"You idiot" almost escaped her lips but she thought perhaps he had had his share of insults from her.

"It's fine" he reassured her before another coughing fit seized him.

"Still, I feel guilty for letting you go home now..."

"Don't worry, my mother came and practically strapped me to my bed" he laughed. "It's a bit embarrassing..."

She couldn't help letting out a smile as she imagined a renowned surgeon getting fussy over a cold, but she realized she was just being overprotective, like her mother would.

"Then I imagine you're in good hands."

"The best - well, the best if your heart suddenly stops or whatever, which I hope won't happen."

Caroline chuckled, before thinking back on Sarah's text.

"Hey, if you feel better, how about going out tonight?" she asked, and Richard was slightly surprised. It was the first time she was initiating the date, and not the other way around.

"Well, if my mother lets me... or I might have to escape by the window."

"What are you, 15?" she teased, grinning, and she heard him laugh.
"Anyways, let me know you. You can invite Eliza, if you want, I know she's your best friend, and I'll ask Jane and Charles."

"Alright" he grimaced - he had hoped that perhaps this time, they could have a real date that would go fine.

"Good - talk to you later. Bye." she hung up, biting her lips.

Surprisingly enough, she didn't feel ready to really spend time alone with him, especially after the brief kiss they had exchanged the night before (mentally she thanked him not to have mentioned it on the phone). Having friends with her was the only defense she had thought up, and if things should not turn out as planned, she could always count on them. She texted Jane, who would still be at Elizabeth's, and Sarah, to confirm she'd be there. The next step was to find what to wear tonight, and that would not prove to be the easiest.

"I must say I was quite surprised when Jane told me I was invited as well" Elizabeth told Richard after she ordered them both a pint of Lager as they waited for the others to arrive.

"And I was disappointed you accepted..." he pouted, before his friend elbowed him.

"And you call yourself my best friend ?!" she exclaimed, amused shock in her voice. "So you really like her ?" she asked, more serious.

"I think so..." he replied, slightly blushing, which made Elizabeth smile.

"Well, I hope she's worth it, and if she ever hurts you..."

Richard chuckled, pleased to see his friend happy for him.

"Ha, here comes Darcy !" He waved his arm towards his cousin, showing him where they were.

"You invited him ?!" she inquired, a tone of disbelief in her voice.

"Why yes, he's my cousin and almost like a brother to me. And there needed to be an even numbed of men and women." He found it strange his friend was surprised to see him while she was aware of the friendship the two shared since their childhood spent at Pemberley.

"Well, don't you know ?"

"Know what ?"

"Well, Jane told me Caroline had a massive crush on him in sixth-form and he wasn't really tender to her..."

If he had wanted to stop making mistakes when it came to try and be nice to Caroline, it would not be for this time, and he bit his lip. He could not possibly tell his cousin not to come now he was there.

"Hey Will" he greeted him, now slightly embarrassed, which Darcy didn't fail to notice, and frowned.

"Am I still invited ?" he questioned.

"Of course you are !" Richard exclaimed.
"It's freezing out there!" came a voice from the entrance, and he saw Caroline over Darcy's shoulder. She wore a little black dress, which turned out to be more complicated then it looked when seen from afar, and which uncovered most of her bare legs, which he had never noticed to be that long, almost like skyscrapers, going on and on in milky tones and firm skin. Over it she wore but a thin trench coat which couldn't possibly keep her warm. She bore more make-up than usual, mouth a dark red and black eyeliner on her lids.

He found her absolutely stunning, and had to concentrate not to keep his mouth open as she approached.

"Gimme a bit of that!" she required, bending over his lap to take a gulp of his beer to warm her up. "Oh, hey" she added coldly upon noticing Darcy, cursing herself for having told him he could invite whoever he wanted. "My brother and Jane should arrive soon" she spoke, trying to make some conversation as they all awkwardly looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

Almost as soon as the words were uttered, the company was joined by the two, hands in hands - at which Caroline gave them both a judgemental look, which Charles pretended not to notice and which Jane replied to with a happy smile, knowing she would not escape her friend's speech about it all.

"As soon as you're ready, I'm ready!" Caroline announced, excitement in her voice.

They exited the pub, the brunette frantically typing away on her phone;

"By the way, what is this party?" Charles asked, sounding as excited as his sister, since whenever going out was mentioned he went on overdrive.

"It's the usual place I go to with my college friends. It's a bit expensive but my friend Sarah told me there would be Cara Delevingne tonight and she just texted me swearing she just spotted Jourdan Dunn. So I'm wearing a dress I made - every opportunity to get into business is good to take!" she giggled like a joyful little girl.

"Oh God, does she only ever talk about dresses and models?" Elizabeth mocked, turning to Richard, and the smile vanished from Caroline's face.

"Oh sure, you're so much more interesting. Why don't you go back home to talk about, I don't know, the religious implications of the Israelo-Palestinian conflict?" she replied with bitterness and anger.

"What? You're jealous I can hold a decent conversation and you can't?"

When Caroline threatened to choke Elizabeth by throwing herself at her throat, Charles had to put his arms around his sister's waist to prevent her from clawing at the Bennet's girl face.

"You know what? Fuck you all! I'll go alone!" she spat once calmed down, pride in her voice, before she spun her heels and started walking away.

"Caro!" Jane called, but the only reply she got was a raised middle finger in their general direction.

"There's no use" Charles sighed. "When my sister's pride is wounded, not even me can do anything, and I'm her favourite person."

"What a charming girlfriend you've got there" Elizabeth sarcastically commented. "What are you doing?" she asked when Richard followed Caroline.
"There is no way I'm letting her walk alone at this hour" he simply said, leaving them behind and quickly trotting to catch up with the fast walked ahead of him.

"Go back to your friends" she curtly said when she heard him behind her. "Aren't they more interesting?"

"Caroline, please..."

"What?!" she snapped, quickly turning around to face him.

"At least let me walk you to the club, please."

She groaned, then "fine", before spinning around and walking as fast as before, not paying any kind of attention to Richard.

"I'm sorry about Elizabeth" he spoke to break the uncomfortable silence settling between the two. Caroline didn't reply. "She can be harsh at times but she's really lovely, trust me."

"Good for you." The tone was as cold as the air they were breathing, and he was losing hope by the minute.

"Since you've come all the way up here, you... want to come with me?" she asked as they reached the club, her voice warmer than what it had been. After all she'd been the one to tell him to invite Elizabeth, she was the one to blame, not him. Besides he had done absolutely nothing wrong, and she felt it wouldn't be fair to stay angry at him.

"Hmm fine!" he replied, thinking that perhaps, he was getting the date he had wanted.

Apparently she knew the bouncers and was quite accustomed to the place. As soon as they were in, he saw a jumpy, petite blonde girl making their way towards them, shouting for Caro.

"Girl, look at that selfie!" she proudly brandished her phone towards her friend's face, showing a rather blurry picture of a vaguely familiar face to him.

"So she's really there?" She couldn't quite believe it.

"Does your old Sarah ever lie?" tease the blonde, before taking Caroline's hand and dragging her towards the dancefloor, just in time for her to mouth "Tequila" to Richard, before being swallowed by the crowd, leaving the man alone and somewhat lost. He headed for the bar, ordered the tequila and a beer for him, and started looking for some place to sit down. He spotted a table which seemed empty and hurried towards it, trying to catch Caro in the haze of loud music and strobes.

"Pinch me Richard" she suddenly said, and her voice startled him. "I just met Cara Delevingne in the line for the bathroom and she totally told me I could be a model and she liked my dress!" She bent over to grab her tequila and drank it in one go, grimacing. "Okay, come on now!" Caroline got to her feet and without waiting for an answer, reached for his hand and led him to the dancefloor, throwing her arms around his neck as she danced close to him, her hips grinding against his. In the slight trail of his perfume as her face was closer to his neck, in his hands on her waist, almost like a ghost touch, in the way everything around her seemed like fast moving pictures, she forgot all the night's troubles and let herself be overwhelmed in the feeling of his arms around that wouldn't let her go as easily as that. For the first time in month she felt safe.

"Oh shit, Sarah" she breathed between gritted teeth as she witnessed her friend bending over a line of unmistakable white powder. "The girl's crazy, I swear." she sighed, trying to tell herself she wasn't her mum and it wasn't her job to watch over her.
"Did you ever do that?" Richard grabbed her arm and looked her in the eyes, a worried and serious gleam in them.

"Look at this" she pointed at her nose. "That's the Bingley nose, the 8th World Wonder and there's no way I'm gonna deteriorate it with shitty things like coke."

"Good" he replied, relieved.

"Not all fashion students are junkies" she joked. "On the other hand, all of them are on the verge of alcoholism, so get me another drink, stud" she pressed a finger on his chest, and he laughed.

They stayed and danced for a couple of hours more, before Richard started feeling the effects of his cold on him, and Caro took pity on his running nose and puffy eyes.

"Let's go, you can sleep at my place tonight" she patted her shoulders. "On the couch, of course" she smirked. "Don't get your hopes up."

They took a cab home, Caroline comfortably lying against Richard's chest on the backseat. At home, she offered him tons of blankets (made of unused clothes sewed together in random order) and pillows, bidding him goodnight with a kiss on the cheek.

His first vision in the morning was that of Caroline, towering over him with a smile on her face and coffee in her hands, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he noticed she was wearing nothing but a light kimono tied at the waist, revealing the long legs he had admired the night before. At first glance it seemed to him she was wearing nothing underneath - at second glance, he could spot the outlines of a bra under the silk fabric.

"Good morning, sleepy head." She handed him the coffee cup, which he accepted gladly.

"Careful, it's hot" she warned as he was about to take a sip of it. "Did you sleep well?"

"Hmmm" he groaned in approval.

"Good!" She headed for the kitchen, leaving him in the couch to drink his hot beverage. "I'm making eggs - you want any?"

"Please" he muttered, and she could still hear the remains of the bad cold he had caught.

As he heard the frying sounds coming from the tiny kitchen the two girls shared, he sat up and looked around him. In the clear light of grey London mornings, he could see their flat had been cleaned up since the last time - he presumed Caroline had had too much time on her hands with Jane away and the sky still pouring all of its water on the capital, and he approved of the decision she had taken. The tiny flat suddenly looked much bigger without all the mess... He got up, still wearing his trousers from the evening, but having taken his shirt away to sleep more comfortably. As the brunette had his back on him, he presumed she wouldn't mind him going around the place shirtless for a little while, and he asked her where the bathroom was.

"Go through the bedroom!" she indicated him, concentrated on the eggs she was making for the both of them.

As he did so, he noticed how the stuff lying there seemed to belong to both girl, and that left him with a puzzled look on his face. As he returned to the living room, he couldn't help but ask Caroline about it.

"Jane and I share a bed, yes" she replied, turning around, the pan in one hand. "Hmm, can you please put your shirt on? It's... distracting" she asked, biting her lip.
"Sure!" he quickly spoke, putting down his cup and slipped his shirt on as the Bingley girl made the eggs slide on a plate she put down on the coffee table.

"Bon appétit!" she joyfully spoke, and bent over to attack her breakfast. He decided it was best to leave the subject for as long as they were eating, but once the plate appeared empty, he turned to her once again.

"Why do you sleep in the same bed? Isn't there another room for her?"

"Well, err - it's complicated. Stuff happened." she replied, elusive.

"What stuff?" he inquired, getting more and more curious, remembering the kiss he had witnessed between the two and seriously questioning himself on the true nature of the friendship between the girls.

"I don't want to talk about it." she replied quite curtly, cleaning up the table and leaving the plate in the sink.

"Caroline, please - I just want to know you better. I just - want to be friends! I don't want all those secrets between us, I don't want mysteries. It's tiring to hear about you and your life through what others have to say about you. I want you, your version of events, your history."

"Alright, alright!" she quickly said. "I made mistakes. I acted foolishly."

"That's not..." he began, sighing. "That's not very helpful."

"I popped a bunch of pills one day and almost died, okay?!" she snapped, her voice loud, before she grew silent, and Richard was left astonished.

"What... what happened? What made you do that?" he asked softly after a while, almost as if speaking to himself.

Calmly, she came back towards the couch, and sat down next to him, looking at her hands which were furiously nervously fumbling on her lap, twisting her fingers in every way. She bit her lip, and took a deep breath.

"As you know, my parents are dead. They died last November, in a car crash. You know - one of those silly days when it's raining so hard, no one dares to go outside." She let out a nervous laugh as tears started welling up in her eyes. "I was watching TV with Jane, and my phone rang, and at the other end of the line, there was Charles, sounding so calm - you know how it's impossible to have Charles sounding calm -, telling me how Mum and Dad had had an accident on their way to Kent, to visit my sister Louisa. And at first, you don't believe it. You just stay speechless on the phone, with your friend besides you asking you what's wrong, and you can't reply, of course you can't, because it feels like you whole body is being crushed in iron fists, and at one point you stop breathing, and you go into a panic attack."

She stopped and quickly wiped her eyes, clearing her throat and resuming her story. "It was just the beginning - the beginning of a long month of going down, and down, and down and just wondering 'when will this end? when will I hit rock bottom?' But you don't reach the bottom, it only seems to go on sucking you down, this whole impending sense of doom taking over you every morning when you wake and every night when you go to bed. You try to go on, but every day the same question hangs to your lips - what's the point? And what was the point?" She breathed slowly, her hands gripping at her knees and her knuckles going white. "I was at the bottom of a bottomless well, and I felt like I was nothing. Every day at college I saw all those talented people, and I thought I wasn't one of them, that I would never amount to nothing, and
even if I did, who would be there to tell me they were proud of me, and the woman I had become?" She bit her lips hard, cursing herself and the tears slowly going down her cheeks.

"So one day, I told Jane I was not feeling well, that I would not go to school. And when she went out, I took all those pills, and just waited. If she hadn't come back and hadn't found me passed out in my bed, I would have died. Since that day, and the shock it caused us both, she has refused to let me alone for too long, insisting on sleeping with me and spending as much time with me as possible. If it weren't for Jane, I don't know where I'd be today."

Richard looked for words to tell her, words of comfort - but not finding any, he simply took her hand in his, and squeezed it gently, and upon feeling the warmth of his touch, Caroline looked up, and smiled at him. "Thank you for telling me" he softly spoke, and leant forward to kiss her.

She didn't know what took over her - perhaps the emotion, perhaps simply the love she felt from him in this moment -, but her hand went up to his neck, pulling him to her, deepening the kiss at once in a clash of tongue and teeth. A moment later, she rolled over him, her legs straddling his lap as she towered over him and tore his shirt open in one blow, not once breaking their embrace. Pulling away, she quickly got rid of her kimono, sending it flying away across the room, revealing nothing but her underwear. She felt intoxicated in the feel of his hands going over her bare skin, of his kiss awakening something in her that had been asleep for too long, a self-confidence she thought long gone and which raised again as he stripped her bare and she tugged at his trousers, abandoning every fences she had tried to build between him and her, between what she wanted and what she could allow herself. This was not a matter of pride or prejudice now, as he laid her down on the couch and covered her tall and thin frame in burning kisses, and she breathed his name almost as if a prayer.

This was a matter of survival, of overcoming her own fears, and letting the past go.

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