The Inheritance

by sixbeforelunch

Summary

Charles Bingley inherits an estate.

Notes

This story is unfinished and may remain so. Chapters 1 through 20 are done. I will be uploading chapters as I find the time.

That said, if you were reading at AHA or the DWG, you should probably start over at the beginning as I've made some changes to the text to clean up the plot and make things more straightforward in the hopes that I will one day find my way back to it.
Chapter 1

Three girls were gathered in a sitting room, pale faced all. The youngest, Kitty, had collapsed onto a sofa, red-eyed from crying with a grief that was real, but tinged with the habits of someone accustomed to being dramatic about everything. The two eldest were seated by an open window, more contained in their anguish.

"You must be joking," Elizabeth said to her older sister, reading over her shoulder.

Jane closed her eyes and set the letter on her lap.

Kitty lifted her head to ask, "What does it say? Is he coming?"

Jane cleared her throat and began to recite.

"To the Misses Bennet,

"Please accept my deepest condolences on the death of your father. You are no doubt aware that Longbourn was entailed upon me. I will leave Lancashire this morning and will very likely arrive at the estate in the early afternoon of the 2nd, if not before. I hope this letter will reach you before I arrive.

Yours, &c," Jane trailed off. "It is signed."

Kitty stared at her. "That is all he wrote? Four lines?"

"Four very sloppy lines," Jane said, with uncharacteristic censure in her voice.

"But he was so kind as to send his letter before him," Elizabeth said, pacing the length of the room. "It is a wonder he was not waiting here with a land-surveyor and a draughtsman when we returned from the funeral."

"We should be prepared to leave as soon as possible," Jane said. "No doubt Mister--" It seemed even Jane could not bring herself to say his name. "It seems that the new owner of Longbourn wishes to take possession and I do not believe we should stand in his way."

"I can be ready by the morning," Kitty said, and then let her head flop back down.

Elizabeth sighed. With unusual affection for her younger sister, she crossed the room and knelt beside her, resting her hand on her head. She even smiled fondly as Kitty pressed her face into the couch, scrunching up her face in the process. "No, you cannot. No matter how much we might all wish it, it simply isn’t possible. But I do believe we should leave as soon as possible. I am sure he would prefer it."

"But what if he throws us all out when he gets here?" Kitty asked.

"Your uncle and I would be happy to take all of you in," said Mrs. Gardiner. Mary, another of the sisters, trailed behind her as she entered.

Jane nodded. "If so, we will not impose upon you for very long. We are not entirely without funds. If my uncle will only assist us in finding a place to lodge, we can find something that will suit our needs, I am sure."

"Needs and wants are so often confused," Mary said. "If we only insist upon what we need, we
will easily find a home." It was a wise saying from a generally unwise girl.

"I only just took off my mourning clothes for mama," Kitty said.

They sat in silence for a long time. Elizabeth, more for the sake of serving as an example to the younger girls than for herself, took some tea and ate a piece of buttered bread.

"I think I hear a carriage," Kitty said.

They gathered at the window to look but there was nothing until Jane saw a man coming down the drive. From far away little could be discerned except that he was carrying a portmanteau and was thin but not tall.

"Could that be him, do you think?" Elizabeth asked.

"On foot?" Mrs. Gardner sounded skeptical.

Kitty cried, "Oh, I will not meet him! I will not say one kind word to him and no one can make me!" She rushed from the room to be as hysterical as she liked with her sister. Lydia, the youngest of the five girls, was the only one in the house who had nothing to say about self-control in the face of trial.

Mrs. Gardiner stood, poised and erect, just out in front her nieces, as if she could by her mere presence shield them from what was happening. The only outward sign of the distress of Jane and Elizabeth was their tightly joined hands.

Mary was looking out the window. "He does not look so very bad," she said. “But then, appearance is often deceiving.” Having found her moral, she returned to her seat.

There were footsteps, the heavy tread of a man, and then Mrs. Hill opened the door to the sitting room. "Mr. Bingley."

Mr. Charles Bingley was a man of one and twenty with delicate features and a fair complexion. He was dressed respectfully in a dark brown coat with a black crepe armband signifying his mourning for his very distant cousin. The elbows of his coat were shiny, and there was a hole in his stockings by the ankle. He stood looking uncomfortable at the door. "You are the Misses Bennet?"

"They are, and I am their aunt, Mrs. Gardiner."

Mr. Bingley stepped inside and bowed to the room.

"I am Miss Bennet," Jane said, "and these are my sisters, Elizabeth and Mary. My two youngest sisters are upstairs at present."

"Miss Bennet. Miss Elizabeth. Miss Mary." He bowed again and again, appearing slightly ridiculous as he bobbed up and down in quick succession.

Elizabeth broke following awkward silence by saying, "Mrs. Hill, please see that Mr. Bingley's things are taken upstairs to the master's chamber."

"No!" He had turned red in the face. "Please understand that I--I know what--I know how I must appear to you, coming like this so soon after the death of your father. If I had not been without--" He cleared his throat. "Please put my things in one of the guest rooms. It is not my intention to be unkind or to chase you from your home. I beg you will stay here as long as--indefinitely!"
Mrs. Gardiner said slowly and thoughtfully, "It would not be proper for the girls to stay here indefinitely. Your house has no mistress. But you are very kind."

"Still, I hope you will not allow me to chase you from your home. We are...family. We are very...very distant cousins."

"It is your home," Elizabeth said. She spoke slowly, as if she were puzzling over something. "I think it behooves us all to remember that. But I do thank you for your kindness."

"How was your journey?" Jane asked, to avoid another awkward silence. "You did not come by carriage?"

"I came by stage, and walked from the coaching inn."

"You must be tired out."

He shrugged. His shrug contained more artless grace than his stiff bow. "It was no great distance and I--I must put my things away."

"That was not what I expected," Mrs Gardner said when he left them.

"Nor I," Elizabeth said. Jane only shook her head.

At dinner, they were all afforded the opportunity to wonder at Mr. Bingley. Kitty and Lydia were not impressed by his shabby dress, or his red hair, though they allowed him to have a good figure and a not unpleasant face. His manners were, during this second meeting, less awkward, though too early to declare anyone easy.

After dinner, they gathered in the sitting room. Mr. Bingley took a chair by the open window where he could enjoy the cool evening breeze. The hour was advances, but the light was only beginning to fade.

"Have you any other family, Mr. Bingley?" Mrs. Gardner asked.

"Two sisters, both married and settled in Cheshire."

"Do you see them often?"

"I see them hardly at all."

"Are they well?"

"I suppose so. I have no bad news of them, so I assume all is well."

"You do not write?" Jane asked.

"Very little, and not without good reason. We are not close. My sisters were raised by my grandmother, but I was with my father. Will you tell me of the neighborhood? Is there much company?"

"There is not much company," Elizabeth said. "We dine with perhaps four and twenty families."

"So many!"

Lydia giggled at him. Elizabeth gave her a quieting glance.

Mr. Bingley blushed. "I have not often had the chance of being in company. I do enjoy company,
however. I enjoy it very much."

"You shall have it," Jane said. "You will find the society here open and friendly. Sir William Lucas will be glad to make your acquaintance. Longbourn and Lucas Lodge have long been intimate."

Elizabeth added, "Sir William will call as soon as propriety allows, I am sure."

"There are frequent dinners," Jane said. "We dine out—we did dine out very often. I am sure you will meet with the same hospitality."

"There is a good deal of shooting, if that is your preference," Elizabeth said.

"I have never shot before, but I think I would enjoy it."

"And there are dances," Lydia said, "though not as many as there should be."

"I do not dance," said Bingley.

"You will not make friends that way," Elizabeth said.

"I do not know how."

No one could think of anything to say to that, and so the subject was changed.

Mr. Bingley was, naturally, an object of curiosity. From the maids they discovered that he had come with little in the way of clothing or comforts. Mr Holt, the steward, said with a shake of his head that he was wholly unprepared to be a country squire, but owned that he might prove teachable. His manners were good. He was inclined to be amiable and outgoing. He visited the tenants, and he was generally well reported on in public, and only a little disparaged in private.

The first caller to come was not Sir William Lucas but Mr. Phillips, who had the advantage of family ties which allowed him to have the first glimpse of the man who had ignited a great deal of curiosity in the neighborhood. He met with Mr. Bingley alone, in the old library.

"How do you find Longbourn?"

"It is a very fine house," said Mr. Bingley. "Very grand."

Mr. Phillips chuckled. 'Grand, do you call it? I hardly think it that. But it is fine. 'tis nearly 100 years old now. Old Mr. Bennet, by which I mean great-great-grandfather of the girls, rebuilt the house after a fire. It was about then that he instituted the entail, the one to which you owe your good fortune."

Bingley smiled tightly.

"I am sorry for the girls, but the entail saved the estate from their grandfather. If what I've heard of the man is true, he would have mortgaged the house and aliened the lands 'till there was nothing left, had he been able. Mr. Bennet had more sense, but his wife, sadly, did not. He would not have hacked up his inheritance as his father might have, but more than once I thanked Providence that he had not the option of mortgaging this or selling that to pay for a new carriage or some improvement to the house that Mrs. Bennet thought absolutely vital for her comfort and continued existence." He pressed his lips together. "You, of course, being the last person specially called in the tailzie, have the estate on...different terms."

"I am aware of my privileges."
"Privileges they are, but ones that come with no little responsibility."

"I have no plans to alien the land."

"You sold a good deal of livestock last week.” When Bingley did not reply Mr. Phillips said, “I hear from Mr. Holt that you are a man versed in the ways of business, if not land."

"My father was a knowledgeable man, and I had ample opportunity to learn from him,” Bingley said.

"Mr. Holt speaks highly of you, though he is still not pleased with you for selling--"

"Will Mrs. Phillips call soon, do you think?"

Mr. Phillips gave up. "I believe she may. She is eager for an introduction."

"I should very much like to meet her. I should very much like to meet all of my new neighbors."

"Your new neighbors are equally as eager to meet you," said Mr. Phillips, and indeed they were. They came as soon as propriety allowed.

Sir William thought him the most capital man he had met that week. Mr. Long begged him to come shoot with him, assuring him that his lack of experience would not in any way diminish their pleasure at having him. His faults were, that he was too quick to defer to the opinions of others, and that he was hospitable to the point of making his callers uncomfortable. Still, the fault of trying too hard to please will never be ranked so high as that of not trying at all. By the end of a fortnight, Mr. Bingley had endeared himself to nearly all of his callers and, by extension, some of their wives.
Chapter 2

One afternoon, after the hour had become too advanced for calls, Jane came upon Mr. Bingley in the library. Mr. Bennet had always kept the door closed when he was in his library and, seeing it wide open, she had thought the room empty. Instead, she found Mr. Bingley asleep in a chair with a translation of Euthydemos open upon his chest. He blinked awake.

"Miss Bennet, forgive me."

She shook her head. "I did not mean to wake you."

"I am a very light sleeper." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Please, join me." Setting aside his book, he said, "You see I am trying to improve my mind, but my mind is not grateful for the assistance. This is a very fine library, yet I fear it will not have the admiration or use it deserves. I am no great reader. I prefer newspapers to Greek philosophers."

"If that is a failing, sir, I think it is a very common one."

Bingley smiled. "Nevertheless, if you will join me I will be very grateful. You seem to me a better companion than the Greek philosophers." Jane smiled. "Your father was a learned man."

"He was."

"I knew nothing of him until I learned of my inheritance. I would have liked to meet him."

"You would have liked him, and he you."

"He was surely intelligent."

"Oh, yes. Lizzy alone of all of us has his quickness, though Mary has his love of study and reading."

"Do you like to read, Miss Bennet?"

"Some, yes. I am fond of Shakespeare, and there are a few novels that I care for. In general, I must own that I am not a very good reader."

"If I can see the practical in something, I will read it, but of what use to me is some philosophy written four thousand years prior, which I must strain my brain to understand, or a poem which is all very pretty, but has no meaning in it?"

Jane laughed. "Yes, exactly! And there is so much else to do."

"What do you do, Miss Bennet, with the time you do not spend reading?"

"A great many things. I have a love of needlework, and I am told I am skilled at it, and there is always some new baby in the neighborhood, or a young lady in need of something for her trousseau, and if there is not that, there is the poor box to sew for, and of course my own sisters. I have been accustomed to being mistress of Longbourn--" She paused, but Bingley did not appear to her to be annoyed with the allusion, and she forged on. "I suppose that whenever my sisters and I move to our own establishment, I will again take that position, though in a different way."

"And what do you do that is not for the benefit of others? What do you do for your own sake?"
"I love the theater, though that is a pleasure I am afforded only in London. I ride, nearly every day when the weather is fine."

"Do you ride for your health, or for pleasure?"

"Both, I suppose, though more for pleasure."

"I have never seen you ride since I have been here, and the weather has been very fine."

Jane blushed. "I do not wish to seem--the horses are no longer mine to--I was going to ask if you did not mind, but I have not yet had the chance--"

Bingley understood her at once. "But of course you may take the horses out! Any you like, whenever you like. You need not even ask."

"Thank you," Jane said quietly. "You are very kind." The conversation lapsed again for a moment, but again it was a natural and amiable silence. "And you, sir? What are your pursuits?"

"I have very few, I am sorry to say. I am not accustomed to my time being my own. This business of being a gentleman of leisure will take some getting used to."

"Do you call it leisure? You seem to me to have a great deal to do."

"Only because I am so ignorant. Mr. Holt has been good about teaching me, and I must read over all of your father's papers, which means I must find all of your father's papers. It is all so disorganized. Oh, but I do not mean to--"

Jane shook her head. "No, no, 'tis the truth. Lizzy says there is order in his desk, only it is an order that no one but my father could ever understand."

Bingley smiled. "With all of that, I nonetheless often have whole hours of time to myself, and nothing to fill them with. So in consequence, you found me in a less than dignified state just now. But...I like cards very much."

"Do you play whist?"

"I have, but I so rarely had anyone to play with. My father and I played piquet, until he could no longer hold the cards. I have created a great many games that can be played by oneself."

"Have you? Will you teach me some of them?"

"They are mostly very silly."

"Will you teach me anyway?"

He found a deck of cards and began to show her the games he had made up for himself until they were interrupted by Mrs. Hill, who came to say that dinner would shortly be served. They were both shocked to find that they had been nearly an hour and a half in one another's company without the least awareness of the passing time.

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It was some weeks before any of them could begin to understand Mr. Bingley. He spoke as a gentleman, his manners were those of a gentleman, and his dress, though far from fine, showed him to have a proper concern for his appearance. His education was not extensive, but neither was it lacking. He was not wrong in thinking himself no great scholar, for, excepting his skills in
business and arithmetic, and a certain fascination with the bloodier battles and more gruesome executions that had stained English soil, none of his learning had come to him by his own desire; still, he spoke some Latin and less French, and he had general knowledge of history, of mathematics, of literature, of science, and of philosophy.

Despite all of this, there were certain gaps that could not at first be accounted for. He not dance, nor ride, not shoot. He had never driven any cart or carriage. He had little knowledge of balls, and he had never been to any such thing, though he spoke of them with excitement and longing. He viewed even routine calls carried out with the most mundane or self-serving of motives as great kindesses. He looked upon a plate of cold meat as a delight. He found it worthy of remark that more than one candle burned in the sitting room after the sun went down.

There was to be a dance at Lucas Lodge. Kitty and Lydia protested greatly upon being informed that they most certainly would not attend. Lydia especially had now begun to allow her selfishness to overshadow her grief. She knew only that a dance would lift her spirits to overshadow her grief. She knew only that a dance would lift her spirits, and she thought nothing of how her attendance would reflect upon her family, nor how it would act on the feelings of her sisters to see merriment so soon after the death of their father.

Mrs. Gardiner succeeded in, if not swaying the minds of Lydia and Kitty, at least expressing to them the impossibility of their going in such strong terms as to make them give up hope, if not complaint.

"I do not see why there must be all these silly customs," Lydia said. She was slumped down in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest, in a childish and unbecoming posture. Mary sniffed into her book.

"Lydia, you know full well that even if you were permitted to attend, you would not dance. You are not yet fifteen years old and you are not out." Elizabeth turned from her sisters to Mr. Bingley. "Will you be attending, sir?"

"Oh, no. I do not dance, and I would not like to leave you all behind and make merry while you are at home."

Lydia's misery rejoiced in company, but the rest of her sisters were not so eager to see him suspend his pleasures.

"There is no reason at all for you to stay at home," Jane said. "Sir William would be sorry if you sent your regrets."

Mr. Bingley said that he was sure he would take no pleasure nor give any by standing about in a stupid manner all night.

"You cannot be forever avoiding the dance floor," Elizabeth said. "Surely you have danced some in your life."

Bingley's past experiences with dancing had been few, and hardly anything that the Bennets would have regarded as proper. They had been brief escapes to inns and barns. There had been assemblies, but he had not often danced at them. He had been a poor man before the death of Mr. Bennet, and mothers were careful to keep their daughters away from him once they saw the dangerous combination of his poverty and personal charms. After the third time the Master of Ceremonies had returned to him with a polite smile and slight blush and told him that he would not have the pleasure of introducing Mr. Bingley to Miss So-And-So for she was already engaged for the evening, and her mother did not wish to tire her out with too many introductions, Bingley had stopped asking.
"I have taken no lessons."

"Why, you need only practice," said Mrs. Gardiner, and was about to suggest that his cousins would be happy to oblige him when she saw the potential to mortify both him and her nieces with such a statement, and checked herself.

Bingley was quiet. He had many times watched the carriages of the great families in his neighborhood going to balls with no small amount of longing. A man who continued to attend the public assemblies even after it became clear that he would spend much of his time standing by the wall watching the merriment rather than participating in it was not a man who could be indifferent to the idea of attending a dance. After a few minutes, he found his resolution.

Jane, nearest to him, and his favorite of his cousins, received the application. "I wonder, Miss Bennet, if you would stand up with me. I will be a very poor partner, but I will trod upon your toes as little as possible. You must promise only to afterwards give me your honest opinion as to whether or not you think I will do for the ladies at Lucas Lodge."

Jane gave him her hand at once. He was in some ways more agreeable for having learned, not with a stuffy dancing master standing over him, but at the instruction of other young people. His steps were not always exactly correct, but he was lively and easy, and he never came close to stepping on her toes. He was assured in the warmest terms that he would more than do for the ladies at Lucas Lodge. A few more days and a bit of practice and instruction settled it. He would attend. He could not dance every dance—the minuet in particular gave him much trouble, but that was almost certain not to be played, and he would in any case be unkind to rob the ladies of the pleasure of his attendance.

Thus was Mr. Bingley introduced to the whole of the neighborhood, and thus did he win over the ladies as well as the gentlemen. If he was not polished to a high gloss, he was agreeable and well-mannered. Better still, as the owner of Longbourn, he was among the principal men of the area. Not a few matrons came away from Lucas Lodge thinking that it would be a good thing if the Bennet girls were shortly removed from Longbourn, and Mr. Bingley left to his own devices.

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Those same matrons would have been very sorry to have seen the goings on the following day. Having satisfied Kitty and Lydia with his account of the dance, he walked out to find Jane preparing to ride. Without entirely intending to, he walked toward her.

"A fine day to ride."

"It is," Jane said. "Will you not join me?"

"I do not ride."

"If you do not ride as you do not dance, I am sure you will shortly be leaping stone walls."

Bingley laughed. "I have not the least experience in this, I assure you." He eyed a tan and white stallion cautiously, but with no small measure of curiosity. "Will you teach me?"

"I? Oh, no, I could never teach, certainly not a gentleman." She called to Jeb, the groom, who was obliged to defer his many duties in order to teach his new master how to ride. The stallion was set aside for a time when Bingley had greater skill. A tame mare was chosen instead, and they all went out to a field.

Jane sat upon her horse and watched, offering occasional instruction and much encouragement and Bingley, at last mounted and having learned to move the beast in roughly the direction he
desired, was rewarded for his efforts by riding with her. Jeb followed close behind them with an
eye toward making sure his master did not fall from the horse and crack open his head.

They rode along the edge of the property, Jane pointing out local places of interest.

"That is Netherfield," she said, as that great house came into view. "It is the grandest house in the
area. Mr. Maydestone is the owner, but his gout is very bad and he is never seen. There has been
some talk of his removing to Bath, and then I suppose the house will be let."

"Have you ever been?"

"Yes. When Mrs. Maydestone was alive, they entertained often, but she has been dead many
years, and they have no children. I thought it a very nice house."

"The principle estate where I grew up was called Whyting. The owner of the estate was a
genleman from Derbyshire, but the manor house was let to Mr. Branwhaite. Most of the
surrounding area was owned by that same gentleman. We rented from him."

"Was it a nice house?"

"It was called a cottage, but it did not deserve the name. It was near to the houses of the laborers."
He smiled without humor. "My father was very particular that his house be known to be the house
of a gentleman, though we had scarcely seventy pounds a year to live on. I was not allowed to
play with the children of the common farmers and laborers, though of course we were not
welcome in the society of the gentry."

"You must have been so lonely."

He didn’t look at her. He was still staring at Netherfield, or at something that only he could see. "I
was at Whyting Hall just once. I can only suppose that the invitation was extended by some
accident. It was clear I was not welcome, especially after Miss Branwhaite seemed to take a bit of
a fancy to me." He broke off, surprised to have spoken so much. On leaving Lancashire he had
thought to put the whole of his life there behind him, but he was learning that it was not so easy to
cut his past away from himself. He glanced at Jane, afraid that he would see derision in her eyes,
but there was nothing of the kind.

They returned to the house speaking of other things, of the landscapes they passed and which
seasons they each found the most enjoyable. Bingley dismounted with little grace, Jane with a
great deal of it. They entered the house together, and parted in the front hall. Jane caught herself
missing him almost as soon as he had left, and was near to being vexed when he sat apart from her
that evening after dinner. She was quick to chastise herself for such silly feelings, however, and
had soon satisfied herself both on her not having any tender feelings for Mr. Bingley, and on the
need for her to remain vigilant against cultivating any such thing.

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A month after his arrival, Mr. Bingley called Mrs. Gardiner into the study. He was peering down
at some letters of business which Mr. Bennet had saved, trying to puzzle out if there was are
reason they had been saved, or if Mr. Bennet had simply never bothered to discard them. He rose
when Mrs. Gardiner entered the room. A breeze from the open window blew the papers and Mr.
Bingley set them under the paperweight. He gestured to the wing chair which had been a favorite
of Mr. Bennet, taking the edge of the desk for himself.

Polite nothings followed but at last he came to his point.

"It is my intention to marry one of Mr. Bennet's daughters."
Mrs. Gardiner was not wholly surprised by this, though she had not allowed herself to think seriously about the possibility. She asked which of the girls he had set upon.

"Whichever will have me," Mr. Bingley said with a laugh which turned into a sigh. "Miss Bennet as the eldest is the natural choice, and I confess a preference for her."

Not much surprised by this either, Mrs. Gardiner said, "Jane is a beautiful young lady."

"She is, and she is mild, and kind, and--" He coughed. "I want to do right by the Misses Bennet, and I would never give Miss Bennet, or any of my other cousins, a cause to regret their choice. I hoped--if you will go to her, to them, and forward the matter, and Miss Bennet, or one of them is agreeable... I want to do right."

Mrs. Gardiner pressed her lips together so as not to smile. Mr. Bingley was gifted with a handsome and open face, and pleasing manners. Mrs. Gardiner was not a woman who was immune to such charms. She did not, however, lack prudence. She acknowledged the good motives that led to his desire and assured him that she would do what she thought right.

It cannot be said that she tarried in carrying out her promise, but she had too much good sense and too much affection to be hasty. She wrote to her husband to beg his advice and then she set about watching and waiting.

The extent of his preference for Jane was not difficult to determine, though he was careful not to pay excess attention to any of his cousins. On Jane's part, however, any symptoms of love or even regard were hard to discern. Jane was always smiling, always kind, and always spoke highly of everyone.

Mrs. Gardiner had quickly determined, however, that it would be Jane if it was any of them. Lydia and Kitty were too young and foolish to make good wives, Mr. Bingley seemed, and indeed was, not at all fond of Mary; her he treated with nothing more than polite familial regard, and it was only his good breeding and concern for others that prevented many a sarcastic statement after her speeches. Elizabeth was not interested by Mr. Bingley. Mrs. Gardiner did not doubt that she would marry him, if asked, for the sake of her sisters, but there was no sign of love there, nor did Mr. Bingley seem the least excited by her.

Jane alone of all her sisters had taken the time to learn to knit. Mrs. Bennet had not pushed the skill, thinking it unnecessary and certainly less interesting to gentlemen than the more showy accomplishments of the sewing and embroidery needles. Jane enjoyed the rhythm of it and the feel of new wool through her fingers. Bingley, always eager to be of use, most especially Jane, needed no persuasion to sit across from her and hold the skein with his hands as she wound it into a ball.

"Have you never seen a play, Mr. Bingley?"

"No. Are you fond of them?"

"Oh, very. I am as much at Drury as I can be, when I am in London."

"I have never been to London, though I have often wished to go."

"Were you never able to get away? Just for a short time?"

"I had no money to travel, and my father could not have spared me even if I had."

"What was your father like?"
"He was ill almost the entire time I knew him. When I was four he left us in the care of our grandmother and went away to India in the hopes of making his fortune there. He did not succeed. Five years later he came back to us a very unwell man." He quieted for a moment, then forged on. "There was no money to hire a nurse to care for him. My grandmother was happy to keep my sisters with her, but she said I was too much of a trial upon her nerves. I was sent to live with my father."

"Was it only the two of you then?"

"Yes."

"Had you the burden of caring for him all alone? From such a young age?"

Mr. Bingley only nodded.

"That must have been very difficult."

The yarn ran out. Mr. Bingley, in aiding her to catch up the last of it, brushed his fingers against hers. To what extent the action was deliberate, and with what feelings the lady received it, the author will leave for the reader to determine.
Chapter 3

Mr. Gardiner came to Longbourn as soon as his business allowed.

"What think you of him?" Mrs. Gardiner asked her husband when he had had several days to observe the heir to Longbourn.

"I am not entirely certain. There is a certain sadness in him at times, though he hides it well."

"Yes, I have seen it too. I do not think he is naturally melancholy, only I doubt he has had an easy life."

"He is not unintelligent. He has a natural quickness where business is concerned, though he is too reluctant to come to a decision. He would make a poor manager, but I would be glad to have him as a clerk."

Mrs. Gardiner hid a smile. "And what think you of him as a husband?"

"For you or for one of the girls?"

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head and Mr. Gardiner sobered. "Upon the basis of our short acquaintance, I see nothing objectionable. I would prefer more time to form an understanding of his character, but given the circumstances..."

Mrs. Gardiner could not bear to be separated from her children for very much longer, and the girls could not stay at Longbourn without the presence of their aunt. Had Mr. Gardiner seen in Mr. Bingley any great defect of character, he would have taken the girls under his own roof without a further thought, but he did not deny the inconvenience and cost associated with such a plan.

Mrs. Gardiner, while admiring Jane's upright character and good heart, had a greater respect for Elizabeth's understanding.

"Mr. Bingley confesses a preference for Jane," Mrs. Gardiner said, once she had acquainted Elizabeth with his intentions.

Elizabeth sighed. "Yes, I have seen it."

"See you any signs of regard in Jane?"

"I think she likes him, but Jane likes everyone."

"He is not a bad sort of man. Jane finds good wherever she goes and in whomever she meets. If Mr. Bingley be only respectable, she will be content. If he be kind, she will be happy."

"Perhaps she will, and yet I want for Jane something more than a marriage forced upon her by circumstance and duty. I want her to know love."

"Love can grow in time. I think she will know it. And, what's to be done? Your uncle and I would gladly take you in, but--"

"But you have children of your own to care for. We are not so selfish as that. But we are none of us fit to be governesses. Jane and perhaps Mary have the temperaments to be companions, but they would not be happy. To live, all five of us, on two or perhaps three hundred pounds a year--no prospects beyond our small circle--no chance to mix in society--very little chance of marrying
respectably...Will you take the matter to Jane?"

"I will. I have no intention of pressing her, but..."

"She will press herself. She feels her duties acutely, and her feelings will not matter at all once she has determined marrying Mr. Bingley to be her duty." They were seated in the drawing room, side by side. Mrs. Gardiner guided Elizabeth to lay her head upon her shoulder.

"Dear Lizzy, do not make more of this than it is. Do not assume Jane has your same feelings."

"Perhaps I might do as well for Mr. Bingley."

Mrs. Gardiner pressed her cheek. "I should be far more concerned to see you wed to him than Jane. I know your feelings, Lizzy. You are too nice, sometimes, and you will not be content with any man whom you do not hold in the highest regard."

"I have some regard for Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth said. "He is not a complete fool, which is more than can be said for most of the world."

"Jane is the eldest. She is the natural and wisest choice. But Lizzy, I must ask something of you. I must ask that, once Jane has made her choice, once it is done, do not attempt to sway her from it. You will only cause her pain if she sees you are unhappy with her."

"I could never be unhappy with Jane, and for her sake, I will pretend to be happy for her," Elizabeth promised.

Mrs. Gardiner did not promptly go to Jane, but allowed a few more days to pass. Had she known Jane's true feelings, had she known that Jane was every day growing fonder of Mr. Bingley's company and had now begun to dread the day when she would be removed from it, she would have settled it all immediately, but she did not know it, and delayed from unneeded fear. She delayed, in fact, just long enough that her interference was no longer needed at all.

Jane had gone out early to walk in the garden. She came upon Mr. Bingley in the kitchen garden, raiding the strawberry bush.

"If you do not leave enough for preserves, the cook will be very unhappy."

Bingley jumped up, looking like a naughty child. "Good morning, Miss Bennet."

"Good morning, sir," Jane said, attempting to hide a smile as he wiped juice from his chin.

"I--ah--" He held out his hand, a few berries to tempt her, and Jane carefully removed off her gloves and took one.

"They are not so sweet as they were last year. I most look forward to the blackberries, but we will not have those for some time."

"I have not had berries in such quantity since I left my grandmother's house. I was forever raiding the garden there, and getting a sore backside for the trouble."

Jane laughed. "This being your garden, I think your backside is safe."

He sat down on the edge of the low wall. "How are you this morning, Miss Bennet?"

"I am well, thank you, sir."

"I am very glad to hear that," he said, too earnestly. He looked down at this feet. "I mean, I...it is
my wish that you all be happy and well."

"We are," Jane assured him. "You have been kind to all of us."

"After imposing myself upon you so soon after the death of your father, it was the least I could do. But you do seem well today. You look..." She looked radiantly beautiful in the morning sun. Her black mourning clothes overwhelmed her delicate features, but the clear air and clean light of the morning eased the effect. "You look well."

"Thank you."

He stood and begged her to walk with him. She took his arm and they left the kitchen garden, moving to the flowers and bushes.

"How do you like Longbourn, now that you have had time to know it?"

"I like it very well."

"Will it soon feel like your home, do you think?"

"It does already, in some ways."

"I am curious...you have not yet moved from the guest room." He looked away and Jane said, "I overstep myself, forgive me."

"Not at all. I confess I...I do not want to give offense."

"You could not possibly give offense by doing that which you have the right to do."

He stopped abruptly in the middle of the walk. Jane, startled, looked at him. "Will you marry me?"

Jane had not allowed herself to hope that he had any inclination toward her. To have such a proposal thrust upon her left her speechless.

"Oh, that was awful, too blunt. I am sorry, Miss Bennet. I am so terribly...there are times when an idea flies into my head and I simply seize upon the impulse of it. What I meant to say--" He stopped, and took a breath. "I know that Longbourn is mine, but it is also yours, morally, if not legally. It was my intention from the first to marry from among Mr. Bennet's daughters, and having discovered you whom I would admire under any circumstances, the eldest and the most natural choice-- Forgive me, I am assuming that you will have me. Only, please know that I do not ask only because of circumstance. I do--I do love you."

The world swam for a moment, and Jane thought she might faint. "Love?"

He nodded.

"Mr. Bingley, I--I do--" Bingley was growing quite nervous by her lack of response and, seeing this, she forced the words, "Nothing would make me happier than--yes--indeed I am so--"

A brilliant smile broke out upon his face. "Then, let me ask you again, properly this time." He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Miss Bennet, having established that I am no great orator, I will attempt to impress upon you how deeply I admire your beauty and your charm and your good sense and your kindness and everything about you. I love you, Jane, and I am humbly asking you to do me the great honor of being my wife."

"Yes," Jane whispered and then, louder, "Yes, I will."
He pulled her into an embrace, lifting her up off of her feet and spinning her around and poor Jane, who was already giddy and lightheaded, was nearly overcome. She was very glad of the support of his arms. Her legs felt uncertain under her. She leaned her head against his shoulder, breathless as if she had run for miles. Bingley's hands trembled against her back. He had always been of an affectionate nature, had been apt to desire attachments to women even when his circumstances had made such highly imprudent. He had been sure that, if he found only a little beauty and an agreeable nature in one of the Bennet girls, he would be happy to take her as his wife, but he had not expected this.

When they had recovered themselves, they began walking again, her arm in his. They were both too happy to speak much, but at last Bingley said, "I want to thank you for accepting me. I do not know if you feel as I do--"

"I do," Jane said. "I do, indeed I do. I have been trying so hard these last weeks to stop myself from loving you, for I did not know if you had any inclination toward me, but now I know that you do and I may...I may love you."

"You may," Bingley said, laughing. "Love me, Jane. Love me as madly as I love you."

Jane blushed and shook her head, feeling herself in danger of being undone by her own happiness. Bingley saw, and fell silent, satisfied with having her arm on his. They walked all of the garden paths twice before Jane felt fit to return to the house.

Mr. Bingley went immediately to Mr. Gardiner, emboldened by Jane's acceptance and his assurance of her feelings. Jane found Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth in the sitting room. She was in such a state of agitation that she could at first not speak properly. She sat, stood, paced the room, and went to the open window, hoping to catch her breath while Elizabeth and her aunt watched with growing concern.

"Jane, whatever is the matter with you?" Elizabeth asked.

"Mr. Bingley has asked me to marry him."

Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth's first thoughts were the same, and that was, to be angry with Mr. Bingley for going to Jane before Mrs. Gardiner had spoken to her. But another moment swept that thought away. Jane turned back from the window. "I wish the whole world could be so happy as I am at this moment. I have never known such happiness. I can hardly speak for joy."

Elizabeth, when she had recovered herself, said, "Then, do you mean to say that you...have affection for Mr. Bingley?"

"I love him! I have been trying not to and now I may and it is all bursting upon me at once. Oh, Lizzy, is he not the finest man you have ever known? He is so kind, and good, and I can speak to him about anything. His manners are so easy and he is so handsome and--" She laughed and pressed her hands to her mouth. "Forgive me, I shall be rational again very soon, I promise you."

Elizabeth laughed. "If this is your irrationality, I hope you never know reason again." She pulled Jane into an embrace and caught her aunt's eye. Mrs. Gardiner merely shrugged her shoulders, wondering anew at Jane's self-command that had hidden all of this from those who knew her best.

Mr. Gardiner and Bingley entered soon after, and, everyone coming to an accord that things could not have turned out more perfectly, Jane and Bingley were permitted and encouraged to behave as proper lovers, and had soon isolated themselves in a corner of the room to speak in raptures of the perfections of each other.
With the matter settled, only the details remained. It was thought unnecessary for Jane to be completely out of the blacks before the wedding, but even under the circumstances, too much haste would be unseemly. They set a date of eight weeks hence.

Mr. Bingley had assumed that all of the girls would remain in the house after the wedding, but the greater experience of the Gardiners quickly won the day.

"A newly married couple needs peace and time to themselves," Mrs. Gardiner said. "I propose we take one of the girls back to London with us. Kitty, I think, would suit best." She privately wished to have Elizabeth in her house, but Elizabeth would be of the most use to Jane. She had long desired to take Kitty away from Lydia's influence and hoped to instill in her a more serious character by such a removal.

"I do not see why Kitty should get to go to London and I must stay here," Lydia said.

"Kitty is the elder and has a greater affection for children," said Mrs. Gardiner easily. She turned to Kitty who was smirking in a very unseemly manner at Lydia. "It will not be all balls and parties and plays, Kitty. You will help me with the children and I am sure there will be many other duties for you to attend to."

Kitty's face fell and it was Lydia's turn to smirk.

Mrs. Gardiner's next plan was to visit Mrs. Phillips.

"It is my hope to leave no more than two of Jane's sisters at Longbourn," Mrs. Gardiner said, sipping her tea.

"Oh yes, sister!" cried Mrs. Phillips. "That is a very good scheme. I think Elizabeth should return to London with you."

"No, no, I will take Kitty back with me. I think a change of scenery will do her much good. Elizabeth will stay at Longbourn as a help to Jane. But that does leave Lydia and Mary..."

Mrs. Phillips loved Lydia almost as well as Mrs. Bennet had. "Why Lydia can come to stay with me!"

"I confess I had hoped that one of them might come to live with you. Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bingley would of course give the girl a stipend. I wonder, though, at your preferring Lydia to Mary."

"Why should I not?"

"Mary is so much quieter, so unlikely to cause trouble. And she is older, and likely to be more of a help to you." She sipped her tea. "She is also a good deal...cheaper to maintain."

Mrs. Phillips loved Lydia almost as well as Mrs. Bennet had, but she loved her income and having a peaceful home more. Mary it was to be.

"I hope you will not take all of Jane's sisters away from her," Bingley said, when the decisions were explained to him.

"No, Elizabeth must stay with Jane, and Lydia also will be best served by the company of her two eldest sisters."

Preparations for the wedding began and the news spread. Mr. Gardiner returned to London, to return with the children until the wedding. Jane's trousseau was prepared, a new gown of white
muslin with a green sash was purchased for her by her uncle.

"And what of you?" Jane asked Bingley.

"What of me?" Bingley asked.

"Will you not have a new coat?"

He shrugged. "I have no need of one."

Mr. Bingley had, so far as anyone could tell, two coats. He wore a brown one every day, and a green one to church on Sunday. Neither could be said to fit him properly. Jane moved to sit beside him, glad that the room was empty of all but the two of them. She did not want to embarrass him.

"I think you should have a new coat for the wedding."

"I can wear my Sunday coat."

"I would very much like to see you in a new set of clothes for the wedding."

"If you wish it, of course I will."

"I do appreciate that, but I would hope that you would do it for more than my own sake. You are the owner of Longbourn, a squire and a gentleman. Your appearance should reflect that."

"I have what I need. The estate's money--"

"Charles, your appearance reflects your rank. And it is not the estate's money, it is your money. Can you not accept that? Can you not bring yourself to take for yourself the luxuries to which you are entitled?"

He laughed. "I am not accustomed to thinking of myself. I will buy myself a new set of clothes for the wedding. I may go mad and buy two sets."

Jane smiled. "I would be very glad if you did."

Bingley did, in his own opinion, go a bit mad. Mr. Gardiner was the very good friend of a respected London tailor who, at his friend's request, journeyed to Longbourn to attend Mr. Bingley. It was a service that was routinely given only to clients who were of far greater consequence than Bingley could ever hope to be, but Mr. Bingley was not familiar enough with the ways of the world to be cognizant of the honor he was receiving.

Mr. Hawkes spread out before him wool and silk of every shade and hue. He was soon caught between a deep blue wool and a green silk.

"May I ask, sir, what you presently have in your dressing closet?" Mr. Hawkes asked. He glanced with barely repressed distaste at the coat Mr. Bingley now wore, taking in with the critical eye of an expert, not the shine on the elbows or the botched repair near the bottom, but the badly cut lines and poor fit.

"Two coats and a few shirts. Cravats. Some inexpressibles."

Mr. Hawkes did an admirable job of suppressing his horror. "Have you a full dress suit? Riding attire? A morning suit? Ah, sir!" He pointed to a swatch in his book of samples. "Red velvet, proper for full dress. I recommend it with a satin waistcoat in yellow, with red embroidery. The blue wool is appropriate for every day wear. Two waistcoats to be made for this, one in a
matching fabric, the other in..." He considered the samples. "The other will be of silk, pink and white stripe. The green silk you may wear in afternoons or to informal dinners. Each coat to come with a matching set of inexpressibles, all but the blue wool. That, I think, you ought to wear with a dark tan. Now as to riding attire--"

"I do not ride often enough to be in need of that," Bingley said quickly. "As for the rest." He ran his hand over the swatches. "You do not think it is too much?"

"Too much?" Mr. Hawkes sighed. He had not come to the house unwarned, but he had not thought Mr. Bingley so unschooled as this. "Sir, for a man of your standing, it is not enough."

"May I have them lined? I have never had a lined coat."

Mr. Hawkes sniffed. "I never sell unlined coats. Now, let us discuss buttons. I have some fine specimens in stock, but I feel custom buttons to be a must."

*
Chapter 4

Bingley paled at the sight of the tailor's bill, but Jane only commented that Mr. Hawkes had been very reasonable. He needed also a new great coat, but this he purchased from the local tailor at the suggestion of Elizabeth, who was more cognizant than any of them of the advantages of maintaining the goodwill of the local merchants. New shoes, new boots, two hats, four pairs of gloves, five pairs of drawers, a silver toothpick, and several pairs of silk stockings rounded out the purchases he made at local shops and garnered him as much goodwill as Elizabeth could have hoped.

The personal effects of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, all that was not included in the entail, had been left to their daughters. Jane had received her father's pocket watch. The case was of solid gold and dated from the early part of the century, having belonged to Jane's great-grandfather, though the internal components had been replaced only a few years previous. She bestowed it upon Mr. Bingley despite his protests. When his coats were finished, she gave him also a gift of several linen shirts and cravats of both silk and linen.

"Jane, this is too much! Where did you get them?"

"I made them," Jane said. "Yours were in shabby condition, full of darns and mending, and badly done mending too!"

"I am a poor excuse for a tailor," Bingley said with a smile.

"Did you mend your own shirts?"

"As well as I could, which was not very well at all. These are very nice. I will look like a dandy when you have had done with me."

"You will look as you ought to look," Jane said.

He did not look like a dandy, but he did cut a very fine figure in his blue coat and tan inexpressibles, with kid gloves upon his hands and his new beaver hat upon his head. He wore still a black crepe armband in honor of Mr. Bennet, and would until the girls were out of mourning.

Mrs. Gardiner set about the last task which she thought necessary for Jane's comfort. The master suite had lain empty since the death of Mr. Bennet, cleaned out and rarely visited. Many of the things the girls did not want had been sold, others given away to servants and tenants. Mrs. Gardiner proposed to redo the bed chamber and the two attached dressing closets. It was to be their wedding present. Jane and Bingley together protested, but the Gardiners would not be swayed.

"My dear Aunt, you have done so much for us already. How can we ask for more?"

"You have not asked, Jane, I have offered. I have more than offered, I insist. We will do this for you."

"It is not necessary," Jane said. "The rooms are comfortable and in the modern taste."

"They are in your mother's taste, not your own." Mrs. Gardiner sighed and put her arm around her. "Jane, I will leave you after the wedding. You will have many duties to care for, many demands upon yourself. Elizabeth and Lydia are to stay with you, and there will be children. I want you to have this room for you, and for Mr. Bingley, as a place where you can go and be
alone, and think only of yourselves. You are both too apt to neglect yourselves and give all of your time and effort away to others."

It was settled. Green damask replaced pink flowers upon the walls, the floors were refinished to a darker shade, green and blue curtains were hung upon the windows and the bed frame, and new linen sheets, imported from France and embroidered with green scroll at the edges, were put upon the bed. A velvet sofa with silk pillows was installed in front of the fire. The Enraged Musician, a favorite of both Jane and Bingley, was hung on one wall, a landscape upon another, small botanical prints above the fireplace.

Mr. Bingley was convinced at last to move into the master's apartment as soon as it was done. It seemed silly to delay any longer with the wedding but two weeks away. The atmosphere at Longbourn became gay and light, as befitted a wedding, but none of them could forget that they had been a house of mourning not so long ago. Bingley found Jane crying in the garden one afternoon.

He sat down beside her, slipping his fingers into hers, and waited.

"I am sorry you have seen me like this," Jane said, when she had collected herself well enough to speak. "Please do not think me unhappy or ungrateful. You are so good and so kind and I am so glad to be marrying you. It is only that my uncle will walk with me on Friday, and it should be--I wish so much that it was to be my father."

Bingley had too much experience with grief to offer anything other than a gentle press of her hand.

"My mother died not so very long ago, and now my father. I am so weary of grief. When your father died, did it--does it end?"

Bingley looked away. Jane would have retracted the question, cautious as she was of ever intruding upon others' private thoughts, but he began to speak before she was able.

"It has not yet. I still miss him every day, which I confess I did not expect. It was such a relief when he died. His suffering was so great, and for so long, and his condition was so wretched... I was devastated by my loss, despite everything. I had--forgive me." He pressed his handkerchief to his eyes. "I cared for him each and every day. It was...wearying. His loss was so long in coming and yet a such a blow when it did come."

"It was much the same with my father. He lingered for so many months following his injury. Yet we had nurses to care for him. It was only you and your father. What was the matter with him?"

"That is a question to which I never was given a satisfactory answer. His limbs failed him, but not always. Some days he could walk and some days he could not. Some days he could feed himself and some days he could not. As time went on, the days in which he could grew less and less and the days in which he could not grew more and more. The last two years he was all but helpless, and the last six months--nevermind that."

"You had no help?"

"A maid of all work, but she was always hired on the understanding that she would not have to care for my father. Each day I woke him, washed him, dressed him, moved him to his chair, fed him, read to him, prepared his medicine, spoke with him... He could still speak. His words were slurried, but his mind was there. I have yet to decide if that was a blessing or a curse."

"To have taken all of that upon yourself..."
"There was nothing else to be done. I was not without friends, of a sort. The owner of the estate where we lived was charitable to us. He--I thought he was very kind, until..."

"Until?"

Bingley looked away. Jane had already learned that the set of his jaw meant he was finished speaking.

"Will either of your sisters be able to attend the wedding?"

"No. Caroline is in expectation of a confinement and Louisa is not of a mind to travel so far."

They heard boots on the gravel path and saw Elizabeth returning from a walk. She would have turned back toward the house and left them to themselves had they not begged her to join them. She did join them, but was careful of not seeming to intrude. There was little she would not do to forward intimacy between her sister and the man who was to become her brother. She was conscious of her place in this new arrangement, aware that she would henceforth no longer be the person of utmost importance to her sister. That the thought pained her cannot be doubted, but that she was more than glad that Mr. Bingley would succeed and exceed her in her sister's esteem must also be certain.

They walked the garden paths together, Elizabeth watching all the time. Though Bingley walked between them, he was most often turned toward Jane, and Jane toward him. Incivility was never so well received.

They returned to the house at last, and Elizabeth went upstairs to attend to her sisters. Kitty's things were being sent ahead of her to London where a room, which she would share with her eldest cousin, was prepared for her.

"It's hardly fair that you are to stay here and have your own room while I must go off and share a room with a little girl," Kitty was saying as Elizabeth entered the room.

Lydia, who had become more and more reconciled to staying at Longbourn as she came to realize that Kitty would not be attending a ball every night in London, said, "Oh, la, Kitty! Too bad for you. I do not know what I will do with all of the room."

"What room do you think you will have?" Elizabeth asked.

"Why all of this! With Kitty and Mary gone, I will have all the room in the world."

"Kitty and Mary are going, and I am coming," Elizabeth said.

"You! But..."

"The room that Jane and I now share is to be a nursery."

"They haven't any children!"

"Not yet, but they very likely will, and soon. Better that we learn to live together now than wait until we have no choice."

"There are two other rooms!"

"Those are guest rooms," Elizabeth said patiently. "Are you really so averse to sharing a room with me?"
Lydia huffed and Kitty grinned. Elizabeth would insist upon Lydia picking up her own mess and would not allow her to waste candles by staying awake until all hours of the morning. Elizabeth was hardly more pleased at the prospect than Lydia, but had a more pressing motive than any she had expressed to her sister. Lydia's conduct did not sit well with her. She had been too long indulged in too many things. If Mrs. Gardiner wished to instill a more serious character in Kitty, Elizabeth hoped to instill at least a respectful one in Lydia.

The day of the wedding now seemed to speed toward them. Mr. Gardiner returned, the children in tow. Preparations were finalized, certain details finally decided, and the etiquette of providing a happy wedding for Jane and Bingley while respecting the mourning period was puzzled out.

Mrs. Gardiner pulled Jane aside one morning and had a certain quiet conversation with her. She was glad to find her less ignorant than she had feared, and more sanguine than she had hoped about the prospect of her marriage bed. Mrs. Gardiner had only to correct a few misconceptions and answer some specific questions. The conversation between Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bingley was of a somewhat different sort.

Mr. Gardiner had had no plans to speak to Mr. Bingley at all. Gentlemen, in his experience, most often knew a good deal more than they should about the ways of men and women before they reached their wedding night. His only concern in that area was that Mr. Bingley might have prior experience with a class of women whose behavior had nothing at all to do with what one ought to expect from a lady. But as Mr. Bingley did not seem to be that sort of man, and as he treated Jane with respect in every other aspect of their relationship, he thought it unlikely, and he was content to let the matter alone. That Mr. Bingley had no experience he entertained as a dim hope. That he had no knowledge never entered his mind until Mr. Bingley came to him.

"I was wondering," Bingley said, "if I might not ask you about a certain subject on which I seem to lack essential understanding."

Mr. Gardiner raised his eyebrows and, after a pause sufficient for him to process his surprise at the application, and to determine the best way of making the poor young man less wretchedly mortified, said, "As you are currently redder than the fabric of my waistcoat, I am going to assume you are referring to something other than the current state of relations between France and Germany."

Bingley nodded, managed a small smile, and appeared one degree less embarrassed.

"Sit down, son, and take a breath before you faint."

Mr. Bingley did as he was commanded.

Mr. Gardiner cleared his throat. "Now what is it, precisely, that you need to know? Or perhaps I ought to ask you, what do you already know?"

"When I was fourteen my father had a conversation with me, but it was not a very informative one. We talked about...he quoted quite a lot from Leviticus and then he gave me some strenuous admonitions against...paying too much attention to self, and I never quite understood what it was he was telling me I should not do, and that was all. I was told things by other boys, much of which I found highly suspect, and Mary Martin would let you see her bosom for a shilling, but she wanted five to allow you to touch it and I never had the money to spend on something like that. I have heard the talk of men in taverns, but that can hardly form a basis for the way one should treat a woman one loves. And I have seen dogs and horses, but I am not a dog or a horse. It is not the essentials, only the...this is Jane. I fear...I fear degrading her. How can I impose upon her?"

"You assume that she does not wish to be imposed upon."
"Jane is so modest, so proper."

"A woman's modesty is a strange thing. It is not so rigid as you might suppose. The proper expression of the desires that both of you have is not degrading to either you or her."

"And how do I--I know--but I do not know--I have never--"

Mr. Gardiner had not yet reached the point of having this conversation with his own sons, but he had long ago decided that frank openness was the best approach in such a situation, and so, despite the hot sweat of embarrassment that broke out across his shoulders, he looked Mr. Bingley in the eye and told him all that he needed to know, answering his questions without reserve.

By the time they had finished, Bingley had nearly returned to his normal color and was drumming his fingers against the arm of the chair. "I do not see what would have been so hard about telling me some of that when I was fourteen. It makes a blasted well better bit of sense than half of the things I had come up with."

Mr. Gardiner chuckled and dabbed his temple with his handkerchief. "When your son turns fourteen and you must have such a conversation with him, do be sure to write and tell me how easy you find it."

Mary was moved into the home of Mrs. Phillips in the space of half a day, and most of Kitty's things were sent to London. Exactly one week before the wedding, Elizabeth and Jane sat up late. The moon was full that night and they sat by the window, with no candles or fire burning.

"How strange it all is," Elizabeth said. "How quickly everything is changing."

"Mama died not much more than a year ago," Jane said, mostly to herself. "And now Papa is gone, and now I am to be a wife. Mary is already gone. Kitty will follow."

"Are you scared?"

Jane pulled her knees up to her chest. "Some, yes. I love him. I think in some ways that is more frightening than anything else. It is so different to love a man. To love him in this way, I mean. It is not like loving a father or an uncle."

"I should think not," Elizabeth said.

"It is but two doors down the hall and I feel as though his room" (for it was now Mr. Bingley's room in all their minds though he had occupied it for far less time than their parents) "is far across a wide sea. Oh, how silly!"

"A woman about to be married to the man she loves may be as silly as she likes. Tell me of his eyes, Jane. Speak of them at length."

"Lizzy, you are too much! His eyes are blue. There is nothing more to say about them, except that they are kind and when he smiles they become very bright and I never saw him smile more than yesterday when we were playing with the children. He will be such a wonderful father--" She broke off and looked at Elizabeth who was barely repressing her laugher. "Oh, hush, Lizzy. We will see how rational you are when you are in love."

They sat in silence for a time, looking out over the moonlit grounds.

"He kissed me."

Elizabeth had wondered if he had, but had not dared to ask.
"Yesterday, in the library. He kissed me. It was very nice. I want him to kiss me again. I want him to kiss me," her voice dropped to a whisper, "everywhere." Elizabeth gasped. "I feel so wicked for saying such a thing, but I do!"

"In a week's time, he may. In a week's time you will be sharing a bed with Mr. Bingley, who is the object of so many of your desires--" Jane blushed. "--and I will be sharing a bed with Lydia, who snores." Elizabeth leaned her head against the window. "I begin to envy you, though not," she hastened to add, "Mr. Bingley. He would never do for me because I would never do for him. I am too contrary for such a character as his."

"Oh, yes, I am sure you are right," Jane said and sighed. She had stopped listening, and Elizabeth, perceiving this, smiled and teased her and allowed herself to feel just a little bit sad.

The next day, the adults were gathered around the breakfast table. Mr. Bingley sat nearest to Jane, who had not yet taken the space at the end of the table, though she would soon enough. Kitty was playing with her food. She could not lament going away to London, for London must ever be more exciting than Meryton, even if she would have to do mending and help with the children, yet as the date drew closer, she could not but be sorry to leave Longbourn. It was a quiet breakfast, but the peace was shattered by Mr. Holt bursting in upon them.

Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bingley came at once to their feet. Mr. Holt held in his hands a letter and Bingley, perceiving what it was, turned red in the face.

"How dare you?" Mr. Holt said. He was all but spitting in his rage.

"Sir, what is the meaning of this?" asked Mr. Gardiner, but Mr. Holt's attention and his fury were all for Mr. Bingley.

"Have you no decency? To do it at all! But to hide it 'till it was all but done!"

"Do you make it a habit to poke about in papers that are not yours?" Bingley asked quietly. He was holding onto the back of his chair, his head down, his eyes down upon the floor. The ladies were still seated, all but Jane who had stood up and had her hand on Bingley's arm.

"Mr. Holt! I ask again, what is the meaning of this?"

Mr. Holt took a breath and said, as calmly as he was able, "Mr. Bingley is mortgaging Longbourn."
Kitty and Lydia frowned curiously at each other. They knew what a mortgage was, in a vague sense, but had no understanding of why it might be of so much concern. Elizabeth, Jane, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner felt the full impact of the words, however.

Elizabeth spoke first, saying, "I do not understand. How can he...Longbourn cannot be mortgaged."

"Longbourn could not be mortgaged," said Mr. Gardiner, "because your father had only a life tenancy of the estate, but Mr. Bingley is the end of the entail. He owns the estate outright, and he can do as he pleases."

Mr. Holt muttered an angry sentiment under his breath that only Mr. Gardiner was close enough to hear.

"You overstep yourself, sir," snapped Mr. Gardiner. "Your place is to discharge your duties to the satisfaction of Mr. Bingley, his is not to satisfy you."

Mr. Bingley, shocked to find himself defended, was quiet for a long moment. At length he asked, "Did you open my mail?"

Mr. Holt drew back, offended. "I did not. Your banker assumed me to be aware of the matter, and sent some routine communications, addressed to me."

"I see," was Bingley's only reply.

"Perhaps," Mr. Gardiner said, "we should withdraw to the study."

"I am mortgaging," Bingley said, when they had gotten to the study. "but I am not mortgaging the entire estate, only a portion of it. I am taking two thousand pounds."

"For what purpose?" asked Mr. Gardiner.

"I would rather not say."

Mr. Gardiner pressed his lips together. "That is your right, but I do wonder..."

"You may wonder, sir, but 'tis still not your concern."

"I am about to leave three of my nieces in your care. It is very much my concern. I have seen too much of you to think you intend to do nothing more than finance your own pleasure, but I must insist upon knowing that you understand what you are about."

"I understand," Bingley said quietly. He took from the desk a sheet of paper, covered in calculations and estimations, all to the purpose of determining both how best the estate could support the cost and the quickest way of clearing the mortgage. "I...dislike debt," he said, and his mouth twisted as if he had drunk sour milk. "Barring unforeseen occurrence, I intend to be free and clear within six years."

Mr. Holt took the paper from Mr. Gardiner and shook his head. "You'd best find yourself a new steward, sir. I'll not work blind and stupid." With that he tossed the letter and the paper down and left the room.
Mr. Gardiner sighed. "I will speak to the man. Heaven knows you have too many responsibilities to be finding a new steward in addition to them." He pinned Mr. Bingley with a stern gaze. "I do not like or respect your decision to do this, and most especially not to do it in secrecy. I can see that you have, or think you have, no choice, but I will remind you that you have chosen to take for yourself a wife, and her dependent sisters. You have no longer the privilege of conducting your affairs without reference to others."

"I have never known such a privilege, I assure you, but in not revealing my motives for needing my money I suppose I have, this once, chosen to be selfish."

Mr. Gardiner had no reply for this, and quit the room. When he had gone, Bingley stood with his head tilted up toward the ceiling. Mr. Gardiner had closed the door behind him. Bingley opened it just slightly, and opened the window to allow some free flow of air into the room.

Jane, thinking the door was latched, knocked. It swung open. Bingley had seated himself, and had his head in his hands. He looked up, and Jane thought his eyes looked faintly red.

"I beg your pardon, I thought the door--" Bingley shook his head and waved her into the room. "My uncle has spoken to me, and told me all you said. Will you not...I do not want to overstep myself, but I wonder if you cannot tell me why...we are to be married, and it is your right not to tell my uncle or your steward, but if I am to be your wife, can you not tell me?"

"Will you end the engagement if I do not tell you?" Bingley asked quietly.

Jane drew back, angry and hurt and shocked that he would even say such a thing. "I--would you tell me, if I threatened to do so?"

"Yes."

He said it so simply and plainly that she saw what he was about. He would not tell her, but he was offering her a way to force it from him. It was unkind of him even Jane could see that. She stared at him. His eyes never left hers. She crossed the room at last and took his hand. "No, I will not. I love you, and I have faith in you. I wish that you had faith enough in me to tell me--"

"It is not that, Jane, I promise you it is not that. There are some things that hurt to speak of. If I tell you why, I will have to tell you all, and--I will tell you, only, only to speak of it is so hard and--"

She knelt before him and pressed her hand first to his mouth, and then to her own lips. "Then do not speak of it. Do you know what you are about?"

"I believe so, yes. I have looked at it from every angle."

"Is the two thousand all? Do you need nothing more?"

"Nothing more," Bingley said. "Soon it will be settled."

Jane said no more about it, and when Mrs. Gardiner questioned her about it, she only raised her chin slightly and replied, "Charles and I have discussed the matter. I am confident that he has acted properly."

Mrs. Gardiner raised her eyebrows and saw that she would not be swayed.

The next morning, they sat together on the sofa in the parlor. Their hands were joined. They were a picture of demure courtship, but pictures are not always accurate and when Mr. Gardiner excused himself, Bingley stole a kiss. He liked it so well that he stole another. He kissed her cheek, then her neck, then, when she turned to him, her lips. Jane had learned that he was far from
disapproving of her when she saw a reason to take initiative, and gave attention the spot behind his ear, a patch of skin she was rather taken with. They broke apart at last when they heard the children run through the hall.

"I love you," Bingley said. "I love you so much, but I think perhaps we should not be in the same room right now."

Jane, mortified by her behavior, slipped from the room and went upstairs by a back staircase. She was so fortunate as to avoid any of her sisters, but was seen by her aunt before she could reach her room. Mrs. Gardiner looked her over. Some of her hair had escaped the pins and her face was red, not only from embarrassment.

Jane stammered. "I--we--we certainly did not do anything--"

Mrs. Gardiner sighed. She remembered only too well the final days of her engagement, and she had not even been forced to live in the same house with her future husband, "Wash your face, dear, and then I recommend a very long walk."

Jane preferred riding to walking, but she did take her aunt's advice with respect to the length of the exercise.

A few days more brought the wedding, with all its bustle and excitement. The lady wore white muslin, the gentleman wore his blue coat, the vows were exchanged, and no few people cried. The servants moved the last of Jane's things into the master's bedroom, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner left for London, their children and Kitty in tow.

Mr. and Mrs. Bingley also went to London for two weeks time. They stayed in a hotel, which was a new experience for them both. There they discovered that Bingley loved the theater even more than Jane and that neither of them much cared for the opera. There Jane was permitted to do all of the things that a young, unmarried lady might not do, but that a married woman in the company of her husband could not be censured for. There she visited coffee shops and walked through the London streets at her leisure. There Bingley reveled in pretending, for this brief space of time, that he had no cares or responsibilities but making himself and Jane happy. There they stayed awake in their hotel room sometimes until the sun rose, talking and doing as they liked, with no more restraints on the intimacy of their speech or actions.

And then they returned to Longbourn, to begin the business of being a family.

* 

Jane had been the mistress of the house since her mother's death nearly a year previous, but there was something different in being Mrs. Bingley. Miss Bennet had clung to the ways of her mother, fearful of imposing the slightest change upon a house reeling from the death of one parent and the infirmity of another--for, indeed, the carriage accident which had killed Mrs. Bennet almost instantly had also, in time, carried off Mr. Bennet. Mrs. Bingley's first act was to sit down with her housekeeper and review all of the accounts, as well as the procedures of the house.

Mrs. Bennet had kept no housekeeping book which, with the constant comings and goings of servants, caused no small amount of confusion at times. Jane determined that it was necessary to create such a book, and enlisted Elizabeth to aid her in the task.

"With all respect to our dear mother," Elizabeth said, eying the ledger severely, "she had not a mind for economy."

"There is not very much waste in the housekeeping," Jane said. "Only I am concerned about the
laundry. Two of Charles' cravats have begun to yellow and they are hardly worn at all. Much too much starch is being used there. Two dishes have been broken in the last month, and another is dreadfully scratched. And I find that the library is not being properly cleaned."

"That is because our father would not allow the servants to touch the library. Do you recall when one of them put a book out of place? I have never seen him so angry."

"Well, Charles is not so particular. I must see that it is done regularly. One of the new maids waxed the mahogany table. The housekeeper must be better about seeing that it is properly cared for." Jane leaned back in her chair. "What do you think of new calico dresses for the maids?"

"I think you will choose a calico that is much finer than you ought and make them very happy," Elizabeth said with a smile.

They were interrupted by Bingley, who had just escaped from a very long meeting with Mr. Holt and was not in the mood for any ledgers for the time being. He came to stand beside Jane. She had found that, rather than diminishing his power over her, marriage had only heightened the effect. She stared down at her papers, determined to focus on them and not the slight warmth she could perceive next to her, nor the faint smell of him. He had been out walking the fields early that morning, and he smelled of sweat and the earth.

"How do you get on, Jane?"

Jane wore a simple lace cap trimmed with pale green ribbon. A few curls peeked out from the front of it, and one stubborn curl always managed to fall out the back. Bingley had a penchant for playing with it, which Jane found sometimes delightful, sometimes vexing, and always maddening. She bit her lip as he twisted his fingers round and round.

"Jane?"

"Yes?"

"How do you get on?"

"Very well, thank you."

He brushed his thumb under the edge of her fichu and Jane stood abruptly and crossed to the other side of the room under the pretense of correcting the arrangement of the statues on the mantle. She looked significantly first at him and then at her sister who was still shaking her head over her mother's past failures of economy. Bingley gave her a very unapologetic smile in return.

A door closed too hard announced the return of Lydia from Mrs. Phillips, where she had taken to spending part of almost all of her days.

"Oh, la, Maria! There's no need to stand upon ceremony. Bingley lets me do as I like."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. Maria Lucas, weak-willed and easily led, had supplanted Kitty as Lydia's companion of choice. In Elizabeth's opinion she was an even more dangerous friend for, while Kitty had taken as much pleasure in seeing Lydia foiled as in seeing her succeed, Maria seemed to be entirely at Lydia's service.

The two girls came into the room, their bonnets hanging from their arms by the ribbons. Maria had some awareness, at least, and made very polite and respectful greetings to everyone, while Lydia only fell upon a sofa.

"Lord, I'm so knocked up. We walked all the way to Meryton and back."
"Is there any news?" Elizabeth asked.

"Mr. Maydestone has quit Netherfield. They will let the house," Maria said.

Jane hoped Bath was kind to him and aided his health, Elizabeth wondered at his not having done it sooner, and Bingley mused on who might let the house.

"I hope it is a handsome young man, and very rich," Lydia said.

"Perhaps it may be," Elizabeth said, "and perhaps he will come with his lovely wife."

"For his sake, I hope he does," Bingley said. He had removed himself from the speculations of the local matrons almost before he had begun to be thought of, but he remembered well the few hungry glances he had received before the engagement had been announced.

"I do not care who he comes with, so long as he has a taste for balls," Maria said.

"Oh, yes!" cried Lydia. "I long for a ball. And I will be fifteen in three month's time, and so I may soon go to as many as I please, and dance with whoever I like."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. Lydia was wild enough, Elizabeth did not think it proper for her to be out so young. But, as all the other Bennet girls save Jane had come out at fifteen, Elizabeth could think of nothing to delay it.

Maria, after the space of fifteen minutes, prepared to take her leave, but Lydia would have none of it. "Oh, you must stay. Elizabeth and Jane are no company at all. Bingley, tell her she may stay."

"I have no objection," Bingley said, "but I think she does well to return home, if she does not know for certain her mother will not miss her."

Maria did not know for certain that she would not be missed and took her leave, though reluctantly. After she had gone, Lydia put her feet up.

"Lizzy, play something, won't you? I am so bored."

"I am busy at the moment. If you wish the pianoforte to relieve your boredom, you might think of taking it up yourself."

Lydia harrumphed as mightily as her tender age would allow.

"Would you care for cards?" Bingley asked, always eager to smooth over a disagreement.

Lydia shook her head. She had propped her elbow on the arm of the sofa and placed her chin on her hand. She silently watched Jane and Elizabeth at work. Bingley had taken up The Gentleman's Magazine. They were all interrupted from their pursuits by Lydia who said, "May I wear my pink ribbons at last when we all go to Aunt Phillips?"

"It is too soon for pink ribbons, I think," Jane said. "Black and white do very well for now."

Bingley frowned. "Is Lydia joining us on Friday?"

"Why should I not?"

"You are not out."

"Oh, la! As to that, we are only going to Aunt Phillips, and she gave me her particular invitation,
"It does seem hard to make Lydia stay home from an informal family party," Jane said. "And she will be out very soon."

Bingley wanted to observe that simply because Mrs. Phillips was holding the party, it was not necessarily an informal family gathering, but he felt himself out of his experience. If Elizabeth and Jane did not object, neither would he. Shrugging, he returned to his magazine.

The next days and weeks went by with the enervated rapidity of every day life. There was much to adjust to, and many calls to make, but on the whole the days blended one into the next with little to distinguish them. Jane finished her housekeeping book, and set her eye on redoing the downstairs sitting rooms. Bingley worked slowly but steadily at making sense of Mr. Bennet's odd organization and this business of being a land owner.

It was six weeks after the wedding that Jane first spoke of her suspicions.

"The prince has not come," she said, as they were getting into bed.

Bingley blinked at her. "What?"

"It has not come."

"What has not come?"

"The monthly...indisposition specific to women. It has not occurred since we married."

"I have not the first clue what you are speaking of."

Jane blushed. She had not imagined that she would have to explain. "A woman becomes...indisposed once each month. Have you never noticed that Lydia and Elizabeth sometimes take to their beds for a day or two."

"I thought they had the head-ache."

"No."

"So what is wrong with them?"

"They...a woman..." Jane found she could not speak aloud, she whispered it to him instead.

Bingley pulled back. "You are funning with me."

"Upon my honor, I am not," Jane said, unable to repress a laugh at the expression on his face.

"That is horrific."

"It is not. It is only uncomfortable at times, and messy."

Bingley stared at her, his expression caught between incredulity and horror. Jane only waited patiently until he had recovered himself. "And this...indisposition has not come, since we married. Is that bad? Are you ill?"

"It is not bad. It may mean nothing at all, but is may mean that I...am...with child."

Bingley's face lit up and all discomfort at this new fact about women which he wished he had not learned fled from his mind. "A child!"
"Yes," Jane said, grinning herself, for his delight was contagious.

"How soon will you know for certain?"

"Many weeks at least," Jane said. "If the prince comes, then I will know I am not breeding. If it does not, then there are other signs to look for."

"What signs?"

"Oh..." Jane rose from the bed and took out the letter from Mrs. Gardiner. "My bosom may be tender, I may be tired, I may be irritable, I may be sick at times, I may have heart-burn...it is all full of maybes. I will not know for certain until the quickening."

"But that will be months!"

"Yes..."

He sighed. "A child would be such a delight."

Jane joined him in the bed. "Are you very glad? I hoped you would be. I hoped you would want this as much as I do."

"I do! So much so."

"We must not be too hopeful. Things are yet very uncertain."

"I will be as hopeful as I like, thank you, Jane," Bingley said with a grin. "I will speak of it as a certainty. What shall we name it if it is a boy?"

"Do you find blind optimism serves you well?"

A shadow fell over his eyes. "There have been times in my life when blind optimism has been the only thing that kept my spirits from dying out entirely." His face brightened. "Now, I am partial to Charles, as it is a name that has served me very well all my life, and I should like to bequeath it on another generation. What say you, Jane?"

Jane could only laugh and let him draw her into his arms. They spoke of names and nurseries until they fell asleep.
Chapter 6

From them on, babies were an obsession between Jane and Bingley, but it was an obsession they limited to their rooms. No one else was to know of it. Jane did not even whisper it to Elizabeth. As each day added mounting evidence, Jane grew more and more certain that she was with child, but she knew that the risk of a loss was greatest now. If they were to be disappointed, they would be disappointed in private.

As Maria and Lydia had became so close, it became routine for both of the Misses Lucas to call together at Longbourn in the morning. Elizabeth and Charlotte would often walk out with them, but Maria and Lydia frequently went their own way after a few short steps, to run off to Meryton or call upon another young lady.

"How is Jane?" Charlotte asked on one such walk, with a note of interest in her voice that told Elizabeth it was not simple a polite question.

"She is very well," Elizabeth said. "She and Mr. Bingley are--they are very much in love."

Charlotte smiled sadly and Elizabeth caught a shadow of her feelings.

"I am seven and twenty today," Charlotte said. "I think I may now safely say that I will never marry. At least, it is very unlikely."

"You are not romantic, though, Charlotte."

"Romance I can very easily do without. It is only the command of a house of one's own that I envy. The freedom of a married woman is something I do desire."

"Do you call it freedom? A married woman is so much under the control of her husband."

"A married woman must please her husband, but an unmarried woman must please the whole world."

"Yet an unmarried woman may own her own property, and carry on business without the permission of her husband."

"What business might I or you carry on? Might I go to my father and ask him to give me my dowry that I may invest it, or open a shop with it? I would not wish to even if I could."

"Nor I," Elizabeth said.

"To be mistress of my own house is all I have ever wished. I want the freedom to redo a room or plan a menu without regard for what my mother would like." Charlotte shook her head. "Forgive me, Elizabeth. I am only very tired of living in my parent's house."

Elizabeth linked arms with her and pressed her hand.

"For myself, I am...I could live happily as only Jane's sister, I think. I do not need a house to preside over. I should like one, but I am content without one. I do envy Jane a loving husband. I should very much like to experience such a complete comparability of spirit as they seem to have."

"Such a thing is very rare. Even a happy marriage may exist without it, and a happy marriage is far from certain upon entering the state."
"Is this from you, who have been just praising the institution?"

"I say only that marriage is preferable to spinsterhood. I do not think it a panacea for life's ills."

"It is certainly not that, and I say, if one cannot have a happy marriage, one had better not have one at all."

"Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. One never really knows what one has until it is too late to change one's mind."

"Oh, Charlotte, that is too much. Jane knew exactly what she had in Mr. Bingley."

Charlotte did not choose to address this, but said, "If he had not been what he was, if he had been dull, or unintelligent, if he had not shared any of her diversions, had been uninteresting, and inattentive to her, might she still not have married him, given her circumstances?"

"She might," Elizabeth said with a shudder. "But I would have thought her very wrong for doing so."

"And I would have thought her perfectly right," Charlotte said. "Provided a man is not cruel, provided he is not violent, or a drunkard, or an excessive gambler, or irreligious, I think a woman must make the prudent choice."

"And prudence to you means marriage."

"In the world in which we live, yes," Charlotte said. She sighed. "But I ought not to speak. I am unlikely ever to have the choice."

Elizabeth, wished to say more, but perceived her friend's unhappiness. She changed the subject.

They returned along the back lanes. The weather was still warm, though it was the end of September and the leaves had begun to turn. They heard the commotion before they saw it: a shout of anger, a girlish yell, a giggle that sounded suspiciously like Lydia's.

Lydia and Maria rushed out through the trees, gasping and red-faced, followed close behind by Bill Jarman, one of the local yeoman farmers. Bill was known to everyone round about for his height--nearly six foot five inches--and his appearance. He was excessively handsome and had an excellent figure that could not be hidden even by the shabby cut of his work clothes.

Today he was also dripping wet and wearing nothing but his inexpressibles, and those clearly put on in great haste. His less than polished state did not detract from his appearance.

"What do you wenches think you're doing?"

Maria was hiding behind Charlotte, but Lydia stood boldly in front of him. "We were doing nothing more than taking a walk. I am sorry we stumbled upon you, but what do you mean to be bathing where you might be seen when it's not even summer?"

"It's hot as August out here! A man works from the sun rise bailin' hay in the blazing sun and wants to wash off, he ought to have that right! He shouldn't have to worry about a couple of idle wenches with nothing to do but skitter around in bushes! And it's my blasted pond! You were on my property!"

"We were taking an innocent walk. I am very sorry if we lost our way," Lydia said. A fine blush had begun to spread over her features, as if even she could see the horrible impropriety of her behavior.
Elizabeth stepped forward. "Mr. Jarman, please allow me to apologize on behalf of my sister. I am sure she did not mean to inopportune you in any way."

Bill shook his head. A few stray drops of water dripped from his hair onto his shoulders, momentarily distracting all of the ladies in the group but Charlotte.

"I am very sorry," Maria said, softly.

"As am I," Lydia said, when Elizabeth pinched her.

"I hope," Charlotte said, "we can keep this unfortunate and embarrassing incident from reaching any more ears."

Bill snorted. "You think I want this spread around?" He turned on his heel, back toward his property.

They parted ways, Charlotte to drag Maria home and Elizabeth to lecture Lydia with as much zeal as she could muster. Lydia did not attend.

"I am going to tell Mr. Bingley about this as well."

"Oh, la! Bingley is much more fun than you or Jane."

"I wish you would not call him that. You are not his gentleman friend."

"It is better than calling him Mr. Bingley all the time. And he does not mind."

Elizabeth had seen his looks and discerned, correctly, that he did mind, but now was not the time to quarrel over modes of address. She took hold of Lydia's arm, not gently. "Do you not understand how serious this is? Do you not understand how indelicate your behavior was? If news of this gets abroad, your reputation will be seriously compromised, and our entire family will be called blamable."

Lydia waved her hand. "Who will tell if we do not? Bill Jarman never will. You should have seen his face! He was so embarrassed!"

When they returned to the house, Elizabeth ordered Lydia to her room and asked after Jane and Bingley.

"Mrs. Bingley is in her room, ma'am, and indisposed," said the new maid. "Mr. Bingley is with her."

"Thank you, ah--" Elizabeth groped for the girl's name.

"Matty, ma'am, Matty Evans," the girl said, and dropped into a curtsy. "I was at Netherfield, 'till Mr. Maydestone left, and they cut the staff down almost to nothing."

"Thank you, Matty," Elizabeth said.

She arrived at the door to the master's chambers just in time to hear the sound of someone being wretchedly sick. Cringing, she turned and left, thinking that her report could wait for a time.

Elizabeth met the post that day, and, partly as a reason to check on Jane, took Bingley his letters. Jane was sitting up by then, her head in her hand. She smiled when Elizabeth entered and answered her questioning look with, "It is nothing too serious, Lizzy. I am already almost better."
Bingley took his letters and flipped through them casually, but paused when he came to the next to last. He glanced at Jane and her sister. Elizabeth was occupied with Jane, and Jane was occupied with her stomach. He carefully tucked the letter in his coat pocket, sure that he could not read it without some reaction. The next few minutes seemed an eternity, but at last he felt he could excuse himself. He half-ran to his study and tore open the letter, his eyes flying over the words so quickly that he had to read it three times before he got the sense of it.

*Dear Sir,*

*As regards your letter dated 17 September of this year--*

*I have reviewed your case with my colleagues. We are of the opinion that there is some merit in it, but urge extreme caution before any legal action is taken. A great deal more evidence must be gathered before any sort of allegation can be made, and you are no doubt aware that the gentleman in question is a man of wealth and connections. I advise great prudence. Please advise how much you are prepared to spend in pursuit of your case. I warn you that your outlay may equal or exceed what you will recover, if indeed you recover anything at all. The papers you provided are being copied and will be returned to you as soon as is possible. I am,*

*Your Servant,*

*J. Gelding*

Bingley swallowed hard and closed his eyes. It was neither as good as he had hoped nor as bad as he had feared. He put the letter away and began to pace the room, only to take it out again and again, his mind spinning with ideas and emotions all jumbling together and making little sense. He pulled a fresh sheet from his desk and began to write.

*Dear Sir,*

*I have received your letter and advise that I am prepared to*

Here he stopped, pen in hand. What, he wondered, was he prepared to do? There was a part of him that wanted to fly ahead without regard for anything, but Jane came into his mind then. Jane, who carried his child inside of her... Whatever his personal feelings, he could not risk her security and happiness to satisfy his own lust for--he called it justice. It might have been revenge.

He dipped his pen.

*spend a reasonable sum in pursuit of my case. I will not name a specific amount at this time but I give you leave to charge up to one hundred pounds to my account before inquiring after further expenditures on my part. If this is insufficient to move forward I will cease pursuit of this matter, but I hope it will not be. I am aware of the wealth and connections of my adversary. I will not be cowed by them.*

*Yours,*

*Mr. Charles Bingley*

He hesitated for a moment and then scrawled Esq. after his name. He felt sick as he folded the letter.

Jane, my reader has no doubt deduced, had reached the sickening stage of her pregnancy. Her sickness struck like clockwork in the late morning each day, and stretched into the afternoon. Her constitution was good, and she did not suffer anything out of the ordinary way, but two weeks of this took its toll on her.

She lay on her bed, contemplating whether rising would be wise or only result in another bout of
sickness when Elizabeth knocked softly and entered.

"I brought you something to eat," she said. Setting down the tray upon the table, she turned to her sister and said, "Jane," in such a way as to make it clear she knew everything.

"Oh, but I wanted to tell you myself!"

Elizabeth sat down on the side of the bed. "You must not be too hard on Mr. Bingley. I was very severe with him for not being more worried about you, and I could see he was hiding something. I forced it out of him."

Jane sat up. Her stomach lurched, but did not rebel. "I am so very happy, Lizzy. Sick, tired, and sore, but very happy."

Elizabeth laughed and hugged her gently. "So, in some months time, I will be Aunt Lizzy. Or will I be Aunt Bennet? No, I think Aunt Lizzy suits."

Jane smiled. "She will be Anne Elizabeth, if it is a girl. Anne, for Charles' mother."

"And Elizabeth for the Virgin Queen?"

Jane did not trouble herself to reply. Elizabeth, perceiving how tired she was, said, "Well, you must rest now, and try to take some of this toast, if you can. Worry about nothing, think about nothing but the child that you will soon be able to hold."

Jane closed her eyes. "You are all so good to me," she said softly.

"No more than you deserve, dearest sister," Elizabeth said, and left her.

With the matter all but certain, anxiety began to be mingled with the hope and excitement. They all looked forward with great joy to the arrival of the baby, but no one was unaware of the risk to Jane's health. The arrival of Mr. Trumpington, an accoucheur trained in London and settled so as to serve Meryton and the surrounding towns, was very welcome by all but Bingley.

"I am so glad," Jane said. "I had hoped to have a trained man attend me. Mr. Jones deals only in emergencies, you know, and Mrs. Brook—"

"Old Mrs. Brook has no claim to the title of midwife but that of being so fortunate as to survive the births of all sixteen of her children," Elizabeth said.

"I hope to have Mr. Trumpington visit me as soon as he is settled, so that I may meet him, before the actual event."

"It is such a good thing, his arriving here now," Elizabeth said.

"I am not so sure of—a man, Jane? Do you really want a man to attend you?" Bingley asked. He was not at all sanguine about the idea.

Jane flushed slightly. "I would perhaps be more comfortable with a woman, but I would infinitely prefer a trained man to Mrs. Brook, or to no one at all."

"It seems something better left in the hands of women," Bingley said.

"Perhaps it is," Elizabeth said. "But unless they begin admitting women to the medical colleges, Jane is better off with a man."

"I would be much more comfortable with him to attend me," Jane said, and thus ended the
argument.

Mr. Trumpington came and spoke to Jane and Bingley, declared Jane to be in excellent health, and had nothing to suggest but that Jane take care to have some exercise each day and that she avoid warming liquid.

"Tea, coffee, and strong spirits are all very warming. Wine or ale are fine, but here in the country where we may drink water without fear, I always suggest it above other things, with some mint or other herbs, if you prefer. Light meals, and remember my admonition to partake of exercise. A short walk in the garden each morning will suffice."

Jane obeyed, and was out with Elizabeth and Lydia on a short walk when they all ran into Bill Jarman. Jane was prepared to walk by him without taking notice. They had never been introduced and they were certainly not of the same circle. But Lydia giggled, Elizabeth blushed, and Jane saw Bill duck his head and keep going with a determined look on his face.

The matter of Lydia and Maria's misadventure had, on account of Jane's indisposition, never been communicated to either Jane or Bingley. Too many days had passed, Elizabeth had not been able to find any way to introduce the topic. At last, she had let it rest. But Jane now noticed, and Elizabeth saw no choice but to enlighten her.

"Lydia, how could you do such a thing?"

"We lost our way," Lydia protested. Not even Jane was fooled by this.

"Such indelicate--such improper--poor Mr. Jarman, how embarrassed he must have been."

"It is all in the past, Jane," Lydia said, unconcerned. Elizabeth pressed her lips together in annoyance. "May I go call upon Aunt Phillips? Mary is always complaining that we never pay her any mind now that she does not live with us."

Mary did no such thing, and quite enjoyed being in a situation where she was not continually in company with her sisters, and thus mortified by comparisons between them and herself, but it was a convenient excuse for Lydia, and it worked on Jane's guilt at not spending very much time with Mary. Elizabeth and Jane continued without her.

"I must tell this to Charles. I cannot conceal it from him. I wish you had not concealed it from me."

"It was not intentionally concealed," Elizabeth said. "Still, I should have told you. I certainly should have told Mr. Bingley. I will tell him myself, if you would prefer."

"Oh, no Lizzy, I am sure you acted with best intentions. I will speak to him,"

Jane intended to make the communication that very day, but several things prevented it, and it was deferred until the next day, when they were all to attend a party at Lucas Lodge. Lydia had once again managed to get for herself a particular invitation.

Elizabeth was specific about Lydia not dancing, and about her acting with all the propriety due to a young lady not out, but Mrs. Phillips was there, and Mrs. Phillips could not bear to have Lydia denied any diversion. She wished to dance. Elizabeth objected that it was improper for her to dance at a formal party at her age, and said that Lady Lucas would surely object, but Mrs. Phillips would have none of it. Mary would play a jig and surely some young man would oblige her. Lady Lucas could hardly stand against her in the face of all of this, and Lydia had her way.

Bingley was for much of the party too much engaged elsewhere to attend to any of this, but when
he was tired out from dancing, and when the heat and press of the room--for the windows were all closed--drove him outside for a moment, he had the matter thrust upon him in a very unpleasant way.

Standing in the shadows, he overheard two men.

"Aye, Green, she's a prime article, and not a day over fifteen, I'm sure."

"Indeed! I would have guessed her sixteen or seventeen at least."

"Miss Lydia has always been tall, and her figure would be the envy of many women. She is very good natured."

Green laughed. "I had that impression. But she is a lady, is she not?"

"I suppose so. Her brother-in-law is the master of Longbourn. Her mother's family was low, I believe, but the old woman managed to raise herself by marriage. I suppose the vulgar strains were not bred entirely out. Still, they are a handsome race, the Bennets."

Green sighed. "I should not let my thoughts wander in that direction. 'tis too dangerous to indulge oneself with a girl of any rank. Brothers and fathers and uncles have notions of honor, and soon enough one finds oneself in court, or at the alter."

Bingley slipped away before he heard anything more. His heart was beating quickly in his chest. When he returned to the room, he took up a corner and watched Lydia. She was still dancing. She was trying to convince one of the men servants to stand up with her, but this not even Mrs. Phillips would allow.

"What, pray tell, are you looking at so intently, sir?" Sir William asked him.

"Lydia," Bingley said, absentmindedly.

"Such a sweet, good natured girl. So much spirit!" said Sir William. Through an agreement between Charlotte and Maria, neither he nor Lady Lucas had been enlightened as to Lydia and Maria's indiscretion.

"Perhaps a little too much spirit," Bingley said.

"A young lady can never have too much spirit."

"She is not even out," Bingley said, but cut off before he was tempted to add more. A few months' acquaintance had made Bingley understand that Sir William was not to be trusted with a confidence.

Bingley was silent and grave on the ride home, so much so that even Lydia noticed. They retired to their chambers almost immediately. Jane was tying the strings of her nightcap when Bingley called to her from his dressing room. He was standing over the basin, patting his face dry.

"Jane, would your father have approved of Lydia's behavior tonight, do you think?"

Jane had rarely seen him look more serious. "I do not think he would have witnessed it. My father disliked parties such as tonight's."

"And your mother?"

"She always was fondest of Lydia and rarely saw anything to disapprove of. Is something
"It does not matter what they meant, Jane. It matters that Lydia's behavior makes her vulnerable to such talk." He stripped down to his shirt and left his clothing lying around the room for the maids. Living for many years with no servants to speak of had not done anything for his habits of tidiness. "This is not something I feel fit to judge, but tell me truthfully Jane, do you approve of Lydia's behavior?"

Jane bit her lip and looked away, which was all the answer Bingley needed or expected. He was somewhat surprised when Jane said, "She is such a sweet girl, and can be very good, but...her behavior is not always proper." She told him then of what Elizabeth had revealed to her.

Bingley shook his head in dismay. "This is too much. The girl needs to be checked before she runs entirely wild. I am going to write to Mr. Gardiner and ask his advice. Do you think that the proper course?"

"I do," Jane said, somewhat relieved to be excused from the duty of any more judgements against Lydia.

Mr. Bingley did write to Mr. Gardiner and received a reply that was, if anything, more supportive of his concerns than he would have liked.

Dear Bingley,

Your letter has caused myself and Mrs. Gardiner much concern. We had hoped that separating Kitty and Lydia would do as much for Lydia as it has done for Kitty, but Lydia has a more decided character, and has suffered the greater evil of excessive indulgence from an early age. I cannot account for her having grown worse--do not start at that, yours is not the only letter I have on this subject. Lizzy has expressed the opinion to her aunt. They spoke about Lydia before we left you, and Lizzy said she would do what she could, but Lizzy is young herself and Lydia does not always mind her as she should.

Something must be done, and soon. My first suggestion is that she not come out at fifteen, as almost all of her sisters so unwisely did. My second is that she be kept at home far more, and made useful to her sisters. The proverb is true: the Devil can make use of an idle hand more easily than he can take up any other tool.

Discipline is more distasteful to administer than to receive, but only cowards and the indolent shrink from it when it is necessary. I do not think you are either. Play the tyrant if you must, but do not forget that she is a young girl. Do not forget that she is an orphan. Do not forget that she was not properly checked by either of her parents--God rest their souls. You have the support of myself and Mrs. Gardiner in this.

B. G.

Bingley showed the letter to Jane first.

"Not come out at fifteen! No, Lydia could never take such a blow!"

"You did not come out until you were sixteen," Bingley pointed out. "And many young ladies survive far longer."

"But Lydia is so looking forward to it and--"

"Once she is out, she will lose whatever little restraint she has. It is the only good course."
Jane only shook her head. Elizabeth had even less reservations about the scheme than Bingley.

"Poor Lydia is such a sweet girl--"

"No, Jane, she is spoiled and almost wild. She seemed to improve a little after our mother died, but she is now becoming far worse than she ever was under our mother's care. She leads Maria Lucas about as if the girl were on leading strings."

"But to deny her the pleasure--"

"Not deny, only defer."

"It just seems so unkind."

"And so it is, but not to Lydia. The unkindness is all toward ourselves." Jane did not understand her until Elizabeth added, "Enjoy the current quiet, Jane. I doubt very much we will have a moment's peace for six weeks together after Lydia finds out about this."
Chapter 7

Bingley would not suffer anyone to break the news to Lydia but himself. It went about as well as Elizabeth had expected, which meant it went badly. Lydia raged. She cried. She threw herself into hysterics.

Bingley had always hated conflict, and despised making anyone unhappy. Somehow, though, he stood firm against the pitiful tears. Lydia fled at last to her room. Elizabeth with a shake of her head, escaped to a walk. Bingley collapsed in a chair as soon as they were gone, drained. Jane shared his feelings, and sat beside him in silent commiseration until he had recovered.

"Well. The worst is over, I daresay. She will cry herself out, and then she will become reconciled. Sixteen is not so very far away. You were sixteen when you came out."

Jane nodded, and was hopeful, but the worst was not over. Lydia did not become reconciled. They were brutish and horrible, no girl in any romance had ever suffered as she did. Mr. Bingley was seen as the instigator of all her troubles, and was thus the object of her hatred. In vain did Elizabeth and Jane attempt to disabuse her of this notion, and Bingley himself would allow her to keep it.

"Let her hate me," he said. "She must hate someone for all of this, and I am the best choice."

She did hate him. If he entered a room, she left it. If he spoke to her, she ignored him. She showed such flagrant disrespect that Mr. Gardiner, on learning of it through Elizabeth, wrote to him imploring him not to tolerate it. Yet, Bingley would tolerate it. He would not yield on the essential point, but he would not force her to pretend to like it, or him.

He knew that Lydia's suffering, such as it was, had only begun. She would not come out until she was sixteen. This she saw as the greatest evil ever inflicted upon anyone. Yet, there was worse to come. They would no longer tolerate her acting in such a manner as to make her being out or not not a moot point. She would stay at home when they went out. She would no longer fly about to the houses of her friends. If she was permitted to attend a party, and such permission was not likely to be given for some time, she would not dance, or speak to whomever she liked. She would sit with one of her sisters and behave herself.

"Why are they being so mean to me?" Lydia asked when she had fled to Mrs. Phillips.

Mrs. Phillips wrapped her arms around her. "Poor, dear Lydia."

"I think Mr. Bingley is a very hard man. I do not like him. I hate him. Why can you not make him see reason?"

"I did ask Mr. Phillips to speak to him, but he would not, and he has said that I must not either."

"The whole world hates me!"

"Oh, Lydia, never think that."

Mary, returning from an errand to her Uncle Phillip's office, saw Lydia seated on the sofa crying into Mrs. Phillips arms. "You should not make an unseemly display. Remember what we are told in Hebrews. 'No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.'"

"Be quiet, Mary!" said Mrs. Phillips and Lydia together. Mary went to her room.
"Poor Lydia, they just do not understand you. You are so much like your mother, you have so much spirit." Mrs. Phillips, though she had been maneuvered into taking Mary into her house, delighted in Lydia. She was the most like the late Mrs. Bennet, who in death had been washed clean of all fault, at least in the eyes of her sister.

"Oh, Aunt! Make them understand me! Make them be kind to me!"

As Lydia would accept no definition of kind that did not allow her to act as she liked, this was beyond Mrs. Phillips' power.

Lydia, now at home more than abroad, was determined to make her presence there as miserable for the others as it was for her. She hardly spoke, and when she did it was only to say something cutting. She would not lift a finger to aid either of her sisters in their tasks. She read magazines and the gossip pages of Mr. Bingley's newspaper, and she wrote poetry expressing the tragedy of her existence. She did nothing else. This was tolerated until Bingley left one morning while Jane was at work hemming curtains and returned home in the late afternoon to find her in the same place, at the same work.

"Have you been at this all day?"

"I took a few short breaks. I did not neglect my exercise, and I have taken meals." Jane rubbed the back of her neck with her hand.

"Can you not enlist a servant to help you?"

"They are at the ironing today, and this must be done as soon as possible. There are no curtains in the back parlor at present, and we will have company on Wednesday."

Bingley rubbed her shoulders, and Jane smiled gratefully. He could feel the tension in them, and he could see that Jane was squinting in the way that she did when she had a head-ache.

"I wish you had not worked at this so long."

"It must be done, unless you would have us entertain with naked windows. There--" She cut her thread. "Nearly done. I have but one more side to do."

Bingley took the curtains from her hands and instructed her to do something other than sew for at least an hour. He looked at Lydia who was seated by the window, doing nothing. "Are you incapable of holding a needle?"

Lydia looked at him and then wordlessly lifted a book in front of her face. Bingley knew he should not tolerate the disrespect, but he shrank from the conflict, and bit back his anger.

The curtains were done, and without Lydia's help. The next time he came upon them, Jane was seated at the table working on the menu for the following week.

"Lydia, will you fetch me The London Art of Cookery? You must ask Mrs. Hill where it is."

Lydia did not respond. Jane sighed and began to rise, but Bingley put his hand on her shoulder.

"Lydia, fetch the book for your sister, please."

He could see that she had heard them, but she would not attend.

"Lydia!"
She jumped a little at the harsh tone, but steadfastly stared out of the window.

"Very well," Bingley said. "I will fetch you the book, Jane, and Lydia will not be dining with us tonight."

This got her attention. "What?"

"If you cannot be bothered to fetch a book for your sister, I see no reason why you should be rewarded with the dinners she prepares. You may have some broth in your room."

"I'm to be starved now too?"

"You will not starve."

Lydia got up and stomped out of the room. She returned several minutes later with the book and threw it down onto the table. It slid and fell onto the floor. Jane picked it up with a sigh.

"That does not change what I said. You'll not dine with us tonight."

"I fetched the book."

Bingley did not reply, but his expression silenced Lydia. She did not dine with them. No place was set for her, and the servants were not permitted to give her anything. She had broth and tea in her room and that was all. This show of strength led to a few days of increased civility on Lydia's part, and Bingley hoped, perhaps foolishly, that they had seen the worst of it.

* *

"I only think that any man who chooses to make such things his life's work must be very odd indeed," Bingley said. He had been included in a small card party at Haye-Park. William Goulding, John Robinson, Thomas Harrington, and Bingley made up the whist table.

"So he must," said Robinson. "But the women will have these man midwives attend them, and what are we husbands to do but nod our heads and pay the bill?"

"Better left to women, I say," said Mr. Harrington. "It's meddling in the affairs of nature when a man sticks his nose into it."

"Precisely!" cried Bingley.

Goulding, unmarried and not of a mind to discuss such things, said, "How does Miss Lydia fare? She has not been often in Meryton of late."

"She is more at home lately. Mrs. Bingley needs additional help now that she is in a delicate condition." The extent to which any of his friends believed such a statement was questionable. Mrs. Phillips was well acquainted with Lydia's situation, and what Mrs. Phillips was acquainted with, the whole neighborhood was soon to be acquainted with.

Mr. Harrington said, "Such a good girl, Miss Lydia Bennet. But not so much of a girl, I daresay. The young men of the neighborhood are sorry to be denied her company, or do I mistake Mr. Goulding’s motive in asking?"

Goulding shrugged his shoulders. Bingley frowned.

Robinson laughed. "Lord, Bingley, do not get missish over Miss Lydia. If your daughters are half so handsome as their mother, you will spend the second half of your life glaring at every man
within twenty miles."

Bingley did not reply and rose to refill his glass.

"Stay, Bingley. No more brandy, I have something far better planned for this evening," said Goulding. He rose and took up a bottle. "Irish whiskey."

"I make it a general rule to never trust anything that comes out of Ireland," Robinson said.

The half-Irish Goulding glared at him, partly in jest, partly not. "Do be careful, sir."

He poured them all glasses. Bingley sipped his carefully, and without much enthusiasm. Goulding sighed happily. "Best liquor on the planet, Irish Whiskey, and no one makes it better than my grandfather. What do you think, Bingley?"

"It...ah..." Bingley took another sip.

"It tastes like something you would take to induce a vomit," Robinson said.

Bingley laughed, then choked, then grimaced as the whiskey made its way up into his nose. His expression sent the table into roars of laughter.

"By the by, Bingley," said Mr. Robinson when the table had quieted, "something very odd happened today concerning you. I met a certain Mr. Alfrey in Meryton. He works for a solicitor. He has a good many questions about you."

Bingley's stomach dropped, but he admirably kept his countenance and said, "I do hope you were kind."

"Kind enough," Robinson said. "It was very odd is all."

"I am involved in a minor legal dispute. Mr. Alfrey will not find anything that will be of use to him, I am sure of that."

Goulding snorted. "You? A man would be hard pressed to find anything to use against you."

Bingley smiled, but his heart beat fast in his chest and his stomach could handle no more whiskey.

He finally came face to face with Mr. Alfrey in Meryton. He entered Inwood's shop and heard Mr. Inwood say, "I'm not a man who goes about telling his customers business to all and sundry. I wouldn't have many left if I were. On what terms I extend credit to Mr. Bingley is no business of yours."

Mr. Inwood hissed as he saw Bingley enter. He was a gruff man, not given to displaying affection for any of his customers, but he rather liked Mr. Bingley. He was sorry that he had not thrown the offensive Mr. Alfrey out of his store before Bingley had entered.

Mr. Alfrey turned and nodded politely. Bingley took off his gloves and twisted them up in his hands. At first he could barely speak, but he began to see that Mr. Alfrey would not open his mouth and said, "You seem to have an interest in my affairs, sir. I must wonder if it is merely a personal curiosity or if your interest lies elsewhere."

"I make it a rule never to take a personal interest in anyone. Now, professional curiosity..."

"You are being paid."

"Yes, sir."
"Tell your employer that his conduct does not befit a gentleman."

"I shall do that, sir."

"If you aren't here to purchase my goods, I'll have to ask you to leave," said Mr. Inwood to Mr. Alfrey. "I'm not in the business of providing a spot for idle talk."

Mr. Alfrey bowed. He paused by the door and said, "Mr. Inwood, you are quite right that the terms on which you extend credit are your concern alone. I admire your goodwill and faith in mankind. It is not every merchant who would so freely extend credit to a man who lived in a debtor's prison."

Bingley winced as the bell rang to announce Mr. Alfrey's exit. He swallowed hard and forced himself to meet Mr. Inwood's eyes. Inwood muttered something under his breath and then said, "What can I get for you today, sir?"

"I hardly remember," Bingley said with a small, nervous laugh.

"Well, look around if you please. I have some new snuff in, though I recall that's not your pleasure. Whatever you like, sir. Your account is good here."

Bingley smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Inwood."

Inwood grunted and, being of that class of man who is often ashamed of himself for acts of compassion, snapped at his son to finish his sweeping rather than responding.

Bingley knew that he must tell Jane. If the good people of Meryton did one thing well, it was gossip and he could not bear the thought of her learning of his past from Mrs. Long or Lady Lucas.

They sat together on the sofa by the fire. "Are you very angry with me for not telling you before now?"

"No," Jane said. "Not angry. I am sorry that you thought you had to conceal it from me."

"I wanted to tell you, sometimes, but I was ashamed. Sometimes just the thought of those months is too much to bear. Speaking of it seemed impossible."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"My father and I were conned. We believed in a man, we thought he was a good man, because his father was a good man, but he is not his father. We, that is, my father borrowed one hundred pounds. We were told that the loan was a formality, that if we were unable to recover our money we would not have to pay, but...it bothered me because it was not put quite properly in writing, but then my father asked me what to do and I...I encouraged him to sign. I wanted--I was so selfish, I wanted there to be money and I told him to sign the papers and he was so sick by then..."

He cleared his throat.

"The long and short of it is, though we were told that we were being helped to recover some money which my father was allegedly owed, we were in fact simply amassing more debt to a man to whom my father already owed a great deal of money. When we recovered no money, when we could not pay, my father was thrown into debtor's prison, and I followed him there, and I nursed him until he died there."

Jane began to cry, silently, as he paced the floor.
"I lived for about six months in a debtor's prison, with my father, and I left when he died. It is not something I like speaking of."

Jane shook her head and held out her hand to him, but he was lost in his own thoughts and turned toward the window.

"Forgive me, Jane, but I think I would rather be alone now."

She touched his shoulder, felt the tension there, and left him without another word.

*

Bingley gave Jane leave to tell her sisters, asking only that she would be as sparse as possible with the details. To Lydia she said only that Mr. Bingley's father had amassed a debt, and had been imprisoned for it, and Mr. Bingley did not want to speak of it further. To Elizabeth she was hardly more explicit, though unlike Lydia, Elizabeth perceived that some of the story was being held back.

The gossip mongers worked with their usual efficiency and the news made its way around Meryton with due haste. Bingley endured nothing worse than a few glances and the sure knowledge that people were talking about him. On the whole, it was not very interesting news. Had not Sir William's nephew come very close to a similar conviction? Could not any man find himself in such a state with a peculiar run of bad luck? In any case, Mr. Bingley was not his father, and he was certainly not a spendthrift.

When Mrs. Long's niece was thought to have developed a tendre for a shopkeep, the gossip about Bingley's unfortunate past was all but forgotten.

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Chapter 8

Lydia's fifteenth birthday came and went very quietly. The Bennets had never celebrated birthdays with any regularity, and Bingley had never thought of celebrating his. Lydia certainly could not bear to have hers marked with anything less than her appearance on the Meryton social scene.

Lydia's behavior had become better of late, but it was still not ideal. She was as much with Mrs. Phillips as she could be, and there she was indulged and flattered into good spirits, and commiserated with on the hardness of Mr. Bingley, and the meanness of his rules. In fact, Lydia was enjoying a great deal of freedom. She could call on her friends, and go to Meryton accompanied by her sisters. She could go to smaller parties and even dance there. She was required to do very little at home, her chores being limited to helping Jane or Elizabeth when they asked for her assistance which, truth be told, was not very often. Lydia's help was often worse than none at all. None of this, however, made up for her not being properly out.

There was to be a winter assembly in Meryton that November. Having left their mourning clothes behind, there was a deal of bustle about gowns and feathers. Lydia would at last be permitted to wear her pink ribbons. She could not dance, but provided she stayed close to Jane and acted properly, they had no objection to her going.

For a time, Lydia seemed to be easy with these rules, but a few days before the assembly, her mood changed. She was no longer content with going as a girl, she wished to attend as a proper lady and dance and flirt. Elizabeth and Jane tried to reason with her, but Lydia would not be reasoned with. She glared sullenly at Bingley that evening at dinner and when Elizabeth tried to rouse her spirits by asking her about her gown, she simply said, "It does not matter, I'll not attend."

"Not attend?" Jane asked. "But why? Surely you wish to go."

"If I cannot dance, I see no reason to attend."

Jane was prepared to attempt to cheer her, but Elizabeth said only, "Well, you may stay at home then. Do you mind if I leave you my torn petticoat? I have not lately found time to mend it, and I am sure you will be in want of something to do."

Lydia stormed from the room.

When the camel collapses under his load, it is often hard to locate the precise straw which did the deed. The weather had turned bad and they were confined indoors for much of the day. Worse, the chill in the air meant the windows must all be closed. Had he slept alone, Bingley would have left them open despite the cold, but he had to concern himself with Jane. He slept poorly in the shut up room.

After a few day's respite, Jane's condition had once again left her in a sickly state. She sat in the parlor, exhausted, and unable to attend to her duties. Mrs. Phillips had not extended any invitations to Lydia for some days, and Lydia had no where to go to be doted upon as her mother had once doted upon her.

Bingley had taken up Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and was reading quietly to Jane. Rain beat at the windows, hard, then soft, then hard again, and though it was midday, the clouds were so thick that the sun could hardly make itself known.

Lydia sat down at the pianoforte and began to tap at the keys. She made noise, not music. Lydia hated silence.
"Please do not," Jane said, but Lydia either did not hear or did not attend. Jane, acutely aware that everyone's nerves were very raw, said nothing more, but Bingley saw how she closed her eyes and pressed her temple.

"Your sister has a head-ache," Bingley said.

Lydia's hand paused for a moment. She did not hate Jane as she hated Bingley, but to yield to any request of Mr. Bingley seemed too great a concession. She played on.

Bingley set the book down and stood.

Jane, seeing that he was really upset, sought to remove him from the room and said, "I should very much like some peppermint water."

She made so pathetic a figure that she spoiled her own plan. Bingley sat down beside her and took her hands in his, looking her over anxiously. "Fetch the peppermint water for Jane."

"I do not see why I should fetch and carry. I am not a servant."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Lydia!" Bingley snapped. He looked at Jane and forced his voice to a lower volume. "I am sorry you dislike my rules, and I am sorry you dislike me, and I am sorry you were not able to come out when you liked, but must you really be disagreeable every moment of every day?"

"Yes, I must," Lydia said. "If Jane wants peppermint water, she can fetch it herself. Or perhaps you would like to get it for her. It's not as though you had nothing to do with her condition."

Bingley started at the indelicate speech. Elizabeth entered then, carrying peppermint water for Jane. Jane took it and supposed she had to drink it, though she had not even wanted it in the first place.

"I do not care if I am disagreeable," Lydia continued. "What reason have I to be anything less when you all hate me?"

"We do not hate you," Elizabeth said. "I wish you would stop saying that. You did not come out because you showed yourself to be unready, and all that is required of you now is what should have always been required of you."

"No! You are all mean and cruel to me and no one cares for me anymore. My mother loved me and my father was not unkind and you are horrible to me!" She turned to Bingley. "I hate you most of all! What right do you have to come here and say bad things about me?"

Bingley dropped Jane's hand and stood. "What bad things have I ever said about you? What have I ever asked but that you pay some small measure of respect to my authority?"

"You have no authority over me! You are nothing but some man who came here, and took our house, and married my sister, probably for no reason but that you wanted her in your bed!"

Jane's mouth dropped open.

"Enough!" Bingley shouted and they all jumped. He crossed the room. At fifteen, Lydia was as tall as Jane if not a hair taller. She stood only a few inches below Bingley. "I will stand for many things, but I will not brook you insulting my wife or my marriage."

"You're nothing but a--a--a Miss Molly!" She didn't know quite what a Miss Molly was, but she knew men did not like to be called one, and that you could go to prison for it.
Bingley slapped her. Lydia staggered back and stared at him, then ran sobbing from the room.

The rain picked up again, beating the at the windows while the wind made mournful noises in the trees. The room was so still, they could hear the maid cleaning the fireplace two rooms over and the tick of the clock in the hall.

Jane recovered first. "Charles--"

"I need air," Bingley said, slamming the door behind him.

Jane burst into tears. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her, whispering comforting nothings while she cried.

"Oh, Lizzy, do not pay me too much mind. 'tis this matter of being with child. The smallest things will undo me." Elizabeth touched her cheek. "What did that even mean?"

Elizabeth's brows raised. "I--I could not say," she lied, since she did not want to make Jane cry again, and she surely would if she found that Lydia had called her husband a sodomite.

"I think I should go up to Lydia."

"No, Jane, stay. That girl--" Elizabeth shook her head. "Let her cry herself out. You will do no good going up to her now."

"Poor Lydia."

"Do you still say that? I have no sympathy for her when she acts as she did just now."

"Oh, but Lizzy, think. We are all of us always scolding her and telling her she may not do things which she has always been permitted to do."

"Things she should not have been permitted to do."

"Nevertheless, think of how hard it must all seem to her, and she is so young..."

"Precisely why we must be strict with her. Should we wait until her character is fixed? Should we wait until she exposes herself so severely that nothing will repair the damage? Her misadventure with Bill Jarman...Jane, if that had gotten abroad, think of the damage to all our reputations! Not to mention the mortification to the poor man himself."

"I know," Jane said. "Only, I cannot help but feel for her."

"That, dearest sister, is because your heart is too kind for this world."

Bingley was a long time under the portico despite the rain wetting his stockings whenever the wind shifted. The Longbourn estate stretched out in front of him. He could see smoke from the chimneys of the tenant houses, the horses and cattle in the fields, and the muddy lane which led down to Meryton. Looking out over his holdings did not give him the pride or self-satisfaction that it might have given another man. Responsibility did not sit easily on his shoulders. He thought only of how many people's lives were now influenced by his decisions. He pitied them.

He returned to the house at last and went straight to his room, passing maids who gave each other exasperated looks as his wet feet made marks on their newly washed floors. He changed out of his wet clothes and went as if to walk down to the parlor, but paused as he passed by the room Elizabeth and Lydia shared. It was silent inside. He knocked twice, got a muffled reply through the door and, after a second of indecision, entered.
Lydia was sprawled out on the bed. She sat up when he entered. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, and her hair was all down around her shoulders. Her face was wet and pale where it was not red and splotchy, and her nose had run all over her upper lip. She sniffed and wiped at her nose with the back of her hand.

Bingley offered her his handkerchief. She shook her head.

"May I sit down?"

"If I say no you will only hit me again."

"May I sit down?"

She nodded.

Bingley sat on the chair by the window. The rain eased for a moment, and then a sharp wind blew against the house, rattling the window. "Do you even know what you called me?"

Lydia shook her head.

"It...it does not matter, I suppose, but if you ever said such a thing to anyone else... Have you no concern for your own reputation?"

Lydia shrugged. "It does not signify. Nothing signifies." She pulled her knees up to her chest. "I want my mother."

"I know."

"If she were here, none of this would be happening. I would be out, and no one would be mean to me. I want my mother and father back. I do not see why you had to come here and change things. You act as though you know everything and Jane and Lizzy do whatever you want and you have no right. You have no right to tell me what to do."

"Lydia, your legal guardian placed you under my care. I have more than a right. I have a responsibility. I am not trying to be your father, but I would like to be a proper brother to you, if you will let me."

"You hit me."

"Yes, I did."

Lydia stared at him and he forced himself to meet her eyes calmly. She dropped her eyes.

"God knows that I have not the first clue--I am trying. I am trying to be a good husband and a good brother and a good landowner. I do not pretend to perfection. I do not even pretend to competence. I wish for all your sakes that your parents were still here. Certainly they would be making less of a muck of things than I am. But they are not here. I am, and I must try to do the best I can. If you think I am severe on you, that is because I have seen parts of the world that you have not. I have seen men, bad men--"

"When you were in the gaol?" Lydia asked.

Bingley grimaced. "Yes, and in other places. I have been in company with men who think nothing of taking advantage of a girl like you. A good reputation is one of the few protections afforded to a young lady, and even that... It isn't fair, but it is the way of the world." Lydia was staring resolutely out the window. "Would you like anything? Tea? A glass of wine?"
"No."

Dinner that evening was a quiet affair. Lydia was subdued. Bingley was carefully polite. The conversation didn't go beyond what was needed to get potatoes from one end of the table to the other.

After dinner, Jane, Elizabeth, and Bingley played cribbage while Lydia sat and watched the fire. When she rose to go to bed, she roused herself to say goodnight to Mr. Bingley, which was a good deal more than he had expected from her so soon.

* 

The Gardiners were held in London that year, and unable to come in December as was their custom. Instead, Mr. and Mrs. Bingley, and Elizabeth and Lydia, went to London for a brief visit. Mr. Gardiner was eager to see Mr. Bingley in person again. Bingley's letters, though frequent, were short, badly punctuated, and sometimes illegible. A conversation, he was sure, would give him a better understanding of the state of both the man and the estate.

Mrs. Gardiner was just as eager to pull her favorite niece into a tete-a-tete. "Well, Lizzy, what think you of your new brother? Is he still not a complete fool in your eyes?"

Elizabeth laughed. "He is not a fool. I like him well enough, and even if I did not, he makes Jane happy. He is not always decisive, and he is easily swayed. Those are his greatest faults."

Mrs. Gardiner laughed. "Yes. I have often wondered at how quick he is to appeal to your uncle for advice. I admire his modesty, though I think he would do well to learn to trust himself. Still, one must make allowance for inexperience, and for age."

"Two and twenty is not very young."

"You think so because two and twenty is not yet something that you can look back on. At this age, I like him as he is. Give him a few years to come to know himself. He seems to have wisdom enough to choose good advisers. How does Lydia fare?"

Elizabeth was silent for a time, considering her answer. "I cannot say, exactly. She seems more respectful. She does more for Jane, and she does not dare to act impertinently to Mr. Bingley. He seems to have earned her respect, or at least her fear."

"It is not a bad thing if she does fear him. I am sorry that Lydia's character requires such strong measures to check her, but so it is."

"That is what I do not like. She behaves herself because she is forced to, not because she has acquired understanding. Kitty is materially improved."

"I am surprised by how well I like having her. She is a great help to me, though we do not always get on very well. How is Mary? I am surprised she is not with you."

"She would not come. She said she had no interest in London. She has made new friends in Meryton. I cannot say I entirely approve of them—no, do not be concerned. They are not in any way badly behaved, but they are below her in rank. They are the daughters of shop keeps and the sisters of farmers."

"You have never shown excessive concern for such things."

"I do not show it now. I do not object to her friendships, and I am truly glad to see that she has made them. It is only...oh, I do not know what it is. I should be glad that she has friends. I will be
glad. She is the daughter of a gentleman. She is able to be principal among them. I am sure that greatly increases her desire to be among them, and their desire to be with her."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Gardiner.

They were interrupted by the entrance of Jane and Kitty. Mrs. Gardiner rose to speak to Jane, and to congratulate her again on her impending motherhood. Elizabeth said, "I beg all of you will excuse me, but I am struck by one of my occasional urges to pretend that I am a woman of great accomplishment in music, and I intend to visit a shop to further this deception."

She declined all offers of company. She was of a mind to have a morning to herself, and was soon ensconced in her uncle's carriage with only her aunt's abigail as chaperon. The music shop was in one of the more fashionable areas of town, and Elizabeth was amused to see how the clerk looked over her to discern her rank and fortune by the cut and quality of her gown. Having come to his judgement, he nodded politely and greeted her, but declined to leave the side of the handsome woman that he was then assisting.

"Indeed, your ladyship, it is a fine instrument, worthy even of your expert playing, I am sure."

Her ladyship ran her hand over the harp, a thoughtful expression on her face. Elizabeth crossed to examine some sheet music, but could not help looking at the woman by the harp. She was clearly a woman of great wealth, perhaps three or four and twenty, with a tan complexion and shockingly blue eyes. Her features were symmetrical and elegant, and her figure was much like Elizabeth's own, small and slight, but pleasing.

A mulatto woman, Elizabeth assumed her to be her ladyship's maid, stood by the window watching the bustle on the street.

"Yes, fine, it will do," said her ladyship at last with a sharp nod.

Elizabeth saw the woman by the window shake her head and mutter something under her breath and could not help smiling. The clerk, turning over the final transaction to some underling, began to turn his attention to Elizabeth, but the bell rang again. A tall man of about thirty, finely dressed, entered. There was a great resemblance between the man and the woman, though she was handsome and he was rather plain. Her complexion was brilliant and clear; his had been marked by the smallpox. Elizabeth's suspicion of their being related was confirmed by the familiar manner with which he addressed the woman.

"Mary, are you done yet?"

"Andrew, you are horrifically rude and for that bit of impertinence, I will be here another twenty minutes at least."

"You most certainly will not," said the woman by the window. Elizabeth looked at her with surprise at her commanding tone. "My daughter is quite finished," she said to the clerk.

Elizabeth looked again and saw that the woman she had assumed was the maid was dressed in a mauve silk gown with a shawl of the finest quality upon her shoulders. She was in half mourning, in widows weeds. She was not so handsome as her daughter, nor so plain as her son.

The clerk bowed low. "Of course, Lady Buxton. If I may say, it is always a privilege to have your family in my shop."

Lady Buxton condescended to nod, and the younger woman thanked the clerk for his time. The man did neither, and appeared to be interested in nothing but a loose thread on his coat. At last this family of quality left, and the clerk was able to turn his attention to Elizabeth.
Elizabeth purchased only some sheet music. She was not yet inclined to return to Gracechurch Street, and wandered in and out of shops, making occasional small purchases and taking as much pleasure in looking at the people as the merchandise. She saw the same family again in a book shop. Lady Buxton was examining a book of poems and asked her son, "Would Richard like it, do you think?" She spoke with a slight French accent.

"You would do better to ask the scullery maid what Richard would like. I am sure we never had a similar thought in our entire lives," the man replied.

Elizabeth, taken with curiosity, turned to a clerk and asked if he knew of the family. The clerk replied that he did, with some evident surprise that she did not. The older woman was the widow of the second Earl of Buxton, and the man was her son, the present Earl of Buxton. The younger woman was Lady Mary Fitzwilliam, soon to be the Marchioness of Huntly. Elizabeth took care to memorize the details of their clothes, sure that Lydia and Kitty would press her for every detail of her brief brush with such a great family.

Lady Buxton took up two more books. "Is it certain that England will send more troops into Saint-Domingue?"

"Nearly so," replied Lord Buxton. "It is too valuable a territory to pass over."

Lady Buxton sighed and set the books before the clerk. "These will give him some joy, I think."

"Certainly they will," said Lady Mary. "You fret too much, Mama. Richard is quick and strong. I am sure we will have a letter from him soon."

Elizabeth felt rude for listening to a private family conversation, though it was held in public, and turned away. She failed to notice that Lord Buxton had moved closer to her in order to examine a book until she turned at the same time he was stepping to the side. He stepped on her foot.

Elizabeth cried out more from surprise than pain. Most of the shop turned to look at them. Elizabeth begged his pardon for bumping into him. Lord Buxton stiffened and walked away without a word. Elizabeth stared after him. She met the clerk's eye, who shrugged. Lady Buxton and Lady Mary left the shop, but as Elizabeth was paying for her book, Lord Buxton came to her and said, "I am sorry for stepping on your foot earlier."

Elizabeth looked at him, wondering at his choosing to say something five minutes after the fact. She could not know that it had taken him five minutes to work up the courage to speak to an unfamiliar person. "Quite alright," Elizabeth said.

"I was not attending and I--you were right there--both our faults, really--I--well, yes. So sorry."

Elizabeth stared after him as he left. The clerk shrugged again. "A man with twenty five thousand a year can be as queer as he likes, I suppose," he said.

Elizabeth laughed. She was quick to relate her adventure to her younger sisters when she got home.

"A lord! An Earl! Stepped on your foot!" Lydia cried. "What was it like?"

"Like having my foot stepped on," Elizabeth said.

"Was he handsome?" Kitty asked.

"No, not at all. Nor charming nor polite nor especially interesting in any way. Hardly worth
thinking of, really, except for his being so rich." Elizabeth would have been very surprised to find
that this brief brush with one of the foremost families of England would not be her last.

*
Chapter 9

Sir William Lucas was in town for a brief stay, and greatly desirous of introducing his good friend Mr. Bingley to all of his best connections. They went to a coffee shop together one afternoon. Lord Buxton, entering and taking his customary place by the window, would have left had he seen Sir William. He had been unable to escape an introduction some years previous, and had no desire to give more opportunities than strictly necessary for Sir William to impose upon the connection.

But he did not see him, did not see him until it was much too late, at any rate, and Sir William strode up crying, "Lord Buxton, what a capital meeting!"

Buxton pressed his lips together and nodded coldly, hoping he would be rebuffed, but Sir William would not be swayed. "Please, you must allow me to introduce you to my very good friend, Mr. Bingley."

"I am not of a mind for introductions at present," he said and rose to leave.

"Ah, but I am sure you will be glad of this one, Mr. Bingley is a capital young man, and I did promise to introduce him to my finest friends."

Lord Buxton flinched at the word friend, and turned to leave, but seeing that Mr. Bingley had turned crimson and was attempting to hide himself in the crowd of patrons, he was struck with an odd and unusual sympathy for the man and, though he despised introductions in general and Sir William in particular, nodded his acquiescence.

"Capital!" cried Sir William and took him over to Mr. Bingley, making the introduction with great flourish.

Mr. Bingley bowed, Lord Buxton nodded, and Sir William ran off to speak to someone else. Lord Buxton stared at the wall just over Bingley's left shoulder, cursing Sir William for placing him in the mortifying position of now having to make some minute of conversation with a man he did not know.

"Sir William is a very good man," said Mr. Bingley, "but I must occasionally class him with that category of friend who negates the need for having enemies."

Lord Buxton smiled and became easier. "Have you been long in London, sir?"

"About a week. It is my second visit. I like London very much."

"I despise it. I would much rather be in the country." Mr. Bingley fell silent. Lord Buxton, no matter what his relations accused him of, was not a man who took pleasure in offending the whole world, nor a man who was deliberately contrary. "But then I may be wrong."

"About disliking London?"

Buxton fell silent. He glanced at Mr. Bingley, but did not find in his eyes that silent laughter that characterized so many conversations he had with others, nor even a quizzical lift to his brow. He tried again. "Are you married?"

Bingley blinked at the abrupt and personal nature of the question. "Ah, yes, recently so."

"Do you like her?"
Bingley did laugh then, but checked himself quickly. "Yes, I like her very well."

"Children?"

"Not as yet."

"I suppose like Sir William you live in Hertfordshire. He called you a neighbor."

"I do."

"Your accent is from the north."

"I lived in Lancashire for most of my life."

"Your accent is a bit low."

"Ah--"

"Not very low, and only occasionally. I have never been to Hertfordshire."

"I had never been there either, until I inherited my cousin's estate."

Lord Buxton looked at him, still expecting to see some sort of mocking derision in his eyes, but Bingley's expression was open and amiable, and only a little amused.

"My seat is at Kentridge, in Derbyshire. It is larger than your estate, I imagine."

"I do not doubt it."

Lord Buxton stiffened even more. He was so tense that his back hurt. He wondered why he had said something so stupid. "I did not mean…it does not matter…well, of course it matters, and I am very rich, but..."

"Do you like cards, my lord?"

"Cards?"

"They are small pieces of paper with printing on them, frequently used for games, often with wagers involved, but sometimes not."

Lord Buxton drew back, prepared to be offended by the sarcasm, but there was an easy humor about Bingley that forbore offense. He was much surprised to find himself amused. "I do not like cards."

"The theater?"

"No."

"What do you like?"

"Insects, books, and boxing."

"I am glad you added the last, or I would have thought this a very unproductive conversation. I only care about insects when my wife calls me from bed to chase a spider from her dressing closet, and there are scant few books to which I pay proper attention."

"Spiders are not insects. I hate spiders."
"Quite."

"Do you like boxing?"

Bingley, who about five minutes previous had given up any thought of following the threads of conversation, and was simply taking the twists and turns as they came, said, "I have never tried the sport, but I have seen a few matches. It is enjoyable to watch."

"I box and fence. I prefer fencing."

"I have never fenced. I think if I were to choose, I would rather try boxing."

Lord Buxton fell silent. He had never before been in company with anyone who did not make him feel defensive or uncomfortable. Even his own family was sometimes a trial to his nerves, but there was something in Mr. Bingley which made him feel at ease.

"27 ---- Street, second floor."

"What?"

"27 ---- Street, second floor, Friday at 2 PM. If you would like to try boxing." Lord Buxton tossed a few coins on the table and left. "Good day."

Bingley stared after him. "Good day."

"What were you and Lord Buxton speaking of?" asked Sir William when he came back to Bingley's side.

Bingley shrugged helplessly.

He did not mention to Jane or anyone else the odd invitation issued by Lord Buxton, but when Friday came, curiosity would allow him to do nothing but duly present himself at 27 ---- Street and see what came of it. He was met at the door by a butler who asked for his card. When he presented it, the butler went inside. He returned a few moments later with instructions for Bingley to come upstairs.

The room he entered was large and open, with light flooding in through windows that stretched from floor to ceiling. There was a stage in the center. A man with a rough face was instructing two younger men who had their hands in mufflers. There was an odd atmosphere in the room, not the relaxed, idle air of a club or party, nor the intensity of a boxing match. The room was filled with men who were at their leisure, but who preferred to spend their leisure beating each other about the head a bit. It smelled of sweat. Servants could be easily spotted by their neat dress. The gentlemen wore nothing but their shirts and inexpressibles. Some had not even their shirts.

A few men glanced at him curiously. Bingley felt out of place. At last, he spotted Lord Buxton who was standing near the wall. A servant came and took his coat.

"Do you have a second?" Buxton asked without any sort of preamble of polite greeting.

"No," Bingley said. He never would have thought of bringing another person with such an odd invitation.

The Most Honorable The Marquess of Huntly, the future brother-in-law of Lord Buxton, was called on to perform this task, Buxton making a careless sort of introduction and Lord Huntly accepting it with bad grace.
"Are you a friend of Lord Buxton?" Bingley asked, when Buxton had excused himself.

"Buxton does not have friends," Lord Huntly said. "He has people he has materially offended and people he has not."

Bingley smiled. "You, I suppose, belong to the latter class."

"I do not," Lord Huntly said. "I am marrying his sister." He shrugged. Bingley's smile wavered a bit. "I have not met his sister. What is she like?"

"She is a Fitzwilliam," Lord Huntly replied, as if that were all the answer needed.

Fortunately, Lord Buxton returned then, and they went up onto the stage. Graves was the name of the trainer, a man who had spent many years as a professional fighter. He now spent his time training bored noblemen. They played by Broughton's rules. No hitting a man who was down, nor grasping him below the waist. If the second did not bring his man to the square within half a minute of a fall, his man was beaten. A man on his knees was reckoned down. In addition to those rules which were followed by all true sportsmen, this stage had its own. A man was not to fall to his knee and take a rest. That was unmanly. It was bad form to strike the face with intent to do real harm, and mufflers were always worn. They were not men who could go about looking like ruffians.

Graves took Bingley through the basics and then set him at Buxton. Bingley found himself being parted from the rails by Lord Huntly before he was even aware that they were fighting. Buxton was quick and strong. It was entirely over in five rounds and then Bingley was seated by the windows nursing bruised ribs and drinking ale.

"How do you like it?"

"Very well," Bingley replied.

"You may come back any time you like. Come back with me, rather. They'll not let you come here on your own merit. You have not the rank or fortune to belong here, but as my--my friend, you may come." Buxton looked at him oddly and then looked away.

Bingley hid a smile behind his glass. He decided to pass over the insult--perhaps better thought of as a tactlessly put truth--and the odd, defensive way that Lord Buxton had of speaking.

"You are very kind, my lord," Bingley said, and watched the Earl of Campbell fall into the rails.

Bingley had no intention of telling Jane about his choice of diversion or his sore ribs, but wives have a way of finding these things out, and she soon knew all.

"Boxing?" Jane asked. She was not, as he'd feared, concerned. Merely confused. "Why ever would you take up boxing?"

"It is...diverting."

Jane had the ability to raise one eyebrow. It was not a skill she often displayed, not being the sort to quiz others, but she exercised it now. Bingley only shrugged and climbed into bed. "I was with the Earl of Buxton. Only, pray do not tell anyone that part. People can be so strange about these things."

"Lizzy saw Lord Buxton in a shop some days ago. How odd. The world can seem very small sometimes."
"Well, I suppose that is part of what makes it interesting," Bingley replied. He shifted so that Jane's weight was not against his ribs and fell asleep almost as soon as he'd closed his eyes.

* 

They set out for home on the third of January, and two days after arriving, Mr. Bingley had a most surprising call.

Mr. John Hammond was a short, squat man, not handsome, a clerk for Mr. Phillips. Bingley had never paid him the slightest mind, nor had he been introduced to him, but Mr. Hammond had come on business, not socially.

He was a painfully shy man who spoke in such a low tone that Bingley had to lean forward to hear him. "Yesterday, I asked your sister, Miss Mary Bennet, to be my wife and she has agreed. I have come to ask your blessing on the match."

Bingley stared at him, stricken dumb for some time. When he recovered himself, he said, "I--ah--you will forgive me, I am surprised. I was not aware of any *tendre* on Mary's part, nor of any relationship between you. And I know nothing of you."

"Miss Mary has been much at Mr. Phillips office. We have been in company there. I can appeal to Mr. Phillips as a reference to my good character. I am the eldest of nine, moral, temperate, religious."

"I do not doubt it. Mary would have nothing else. Do you love her?"

Mr. Hammond hesitated. "The principled love, agape, the love of the scriptures--"

"I feel that for the widow Mrs. Higgins, who sends me flowers from her garden every time she pays her rent as thanks for my consideration after the death of her husband. I hardly consider that alone to be a basis for marriage."

Mr. Hammond sighed. "I do love her. Not passionately, but I am not one for passion. Neither is she. We understand each other very well."

"You know that I am not her guardian. The ultimate choice will be that of Mr. Gardiner."

"Yes, but Mary asked that I come to you first. She respects you very much." Bingley was surprised and it showed on his face. "I believe it is because of your handling of her sister. She has often expressed to me an admiration of your willingness to stand fast against her."

Bingley's brows rose, but he did not reply directly. Instead he said, "Well I certainly do not object, but I hope you will understand if I defer giving my blessing to the match until I have spoken to Mary and had time to know you."

Mr. Hammond did understand, and they shook hands when he left. Bingley said nothing of it to Elizabeth or Lydia, but did tell it to Jane who was quick in pulling Mary into a confidential conversation.

"Are you certain, absolutely certain?"

"None of us in our mortal, imperfect state can be certain of anything."

"Do you love him?"

"He is precisely what I want."
"But do you love him?"

Mary simply lifted her chin. The Bennet women all had a stubborn streak in them that came out at the oddest times. She was determined to have him. Neither her sister's desire to see her in a more passionate match nor her brother's tactful reminders that Mr. Hammond was beneath her in rank and was unlikely to ever be more than a clerk would dissuade her. At last, Bingley, after watching them and seeing that Mr. Hammond, though far from passionate or amiable, was not a hard or unkind man, wrote to Mr. Gardiner with his recommendation that they be allowed to wed. The wedding was set for early February.

The time of the engagement was perhaps the most gratifying of Mary's life. She was for scant weeks able to be in company with beautiful Jane and witty Elizabeth and good natured Lydia and still stand above them. They could not be more interesting than her while there was a wedding to speak of.

"Soon there will be two of us married," said Elizabeth to Jane as Lady Lucas pressed Mary for details of her gown. "Poor Mama, that she did not live to see it, though I cannot imagine she would have entirely approved of Mary's choice."

During this time, Jane felt the first fluttering of new life stir inside of her. At first they were so slight that she could not be sure of them, but they grew in frequency and the sensation was at last so certain that shortly before the wedding, she was able to tell her husband, "I have felt the quickening."

They were seated on the sofa before the fire where they often sat up talking before bed.

Bingley laughed. "Have you?" He put his hand on her belly where it had just begun to swell.

"There, did you feel it?"

"No."

"I suppose it is too soon for you to feel it, but it is there. There is a child, Charles, our child, making itself known to me."

He ran his hand back and forth across her belly. Jane took his hand away and shifted herself so that she was lying down with her head in his lap. She held his hand in her own.

"I am scared," she said.

"Of what?"

"Of many things. I am scared of how much I already love this child. Mrs. Robinson lost her son last week. I do not think I could survive it if-- And I am so very terrified of my lying in."

There was nothing Bingley could say that would not be a lie. Children did die, and he was terrified of her lying in too.

"I suppose...I suppose we must have faith. The Lord does not allow us to be tried without giving us the strength to endure it."

Jane kissed the knuckles on his hand. "The ladies tell such horrid stories. I wish they would not. I am frightened enough as it is. I do not need to be told gruesome tales." She looked up at him. "Can we go to bed? I feel safe when we are together. It seems as if all of my concerns are far away."
He took her to bed and made her forget, for a brief span of time, her worries and fears. After, she slept in his arms. Bingley lay awake. It was black as pitch with the bed curtains drawn up all around them, but he felt her breath on his chest, the beat of her heart, the silk of her hair—un-plaited and loose, she would surely be unhappy with it in the morning—on his shoulder.

The thought of losing her was almost too much to bear and yet his own mother had died in the child bed. It was very possible.

Jane rolled over. He gathered her into his arms. Her hair tickled his chin. His life had left him incapable of taking any blessing for granted. He pressed her tight to him. Whatever might befall them tomorrow, tonight he had her in his arms.

*
Chapter 10

Jane has a baby in this chapter. Having babies is messy and unpleasant. Please use discretion if you think this might bother you.

In April, Mr. and Mrs. Hammond announced their intention to move to Bath, where Mr. Hammond had found more lucrative employment. Whether Mary had been material in the decision to move or was simply gratified by its having been made was difficult to discern, but by early May, Mary was taken away from Meryton, away from constant comparisons to her sisters, and was all the happier for it.

Jane was heavy with child then. In late May, they were told to be in expectation of her confinement, though Mr. Trumpington refused to give any sort of time frame. "Most likely by the start of July," was all they could get from him.

There was some fright that Mrs. Gardner might be unable to attend Jane, but at last matters cleared up so that she might do so and she arrived a few weeks before the actual event. Their room was prepared according to Mr. Trumpington's directions. Jane had at first intended to be confined in the East Room, but she had mentioned in passing that she thought she would be more comfortable in her own room, and Bingley had insisted that theirs be used and he would take to the East Room until she was recovered. The nursery was made ready and a nurse was arranged for and soon there was nothing left to do but wait.

Jane sat with Mrs. Gardiner in her private dressing room. The weather was warm and the sun was bright with the sunshine of the morning. Jane wore only her dressing gown and chemise and had her hair in a low plait. She was reclining by the window. Mrs. Gardiner sat in a chair by the empty fireplace.

"Now we are alone, Jane, and you may tell me truly. How do you get on?"

"As well as can be expected, in my state. I am grown so large, and I am often made uncomfortable by my condition. I am eager for it to be over, and yet--" She ran her hand over her belly. "The women of the neighborhood have nearly undone me with their stories. Tell me truly, is it so bad?"

"Every child is different. My first was the most painful. I do not mean to say that first children are always the most painful, only that it was so for me. I had the most horrible pains in my back with Sarah. My second child was born so quickly and with so little trouble that before I even thought of summoning the midwife, it was done. My third was a long, grueling ordeal. I wept from exhaustion when it was over. My fourth--Samuel presented a hand and had to be turned, which is something I hope never to experience again. I'll not dissemble and say it is easy. It will hurt, at times very badly, but it is a different sort of pain, I think, than you have experienced before. There is purpose in it. When you hold your child in your arms, the pain will be forgot." She smiled ruefully. "Well, not quite forgot, but it will no longer signify."

Jane spent her time busy with housework and sewing, walking and working in the garden. She found tending her small flowerbeds relaxing. She was determined not to fret excessively. She was also determined that she would not be one of those women who drug poor Mr. Trumpington from his bed for no reason. When sharp pains overtook her in early June, she would not allow him to be
called, only laid on her bed and breathed through them. She was quite right, for they soon passed away.

Two weeks later, however, she began to suffer pains that came and went with regularity, which did not pass away after a short time. She took to her room and declined to join the family for dinner. About ten, Mrs. Gardiner came in to check on her and found that Jane could no longer talk through the pains. She sent for Mr. Trumpington.

"I hardly think that necessary," Jane protested. "I should like to be sure before I disturb him. This may not even be--perhaps this will be a false start as well."

Mrs. Gardiner knelt before her, Jane being seated on the edge of the bed. "You are frightened, I know. It is time for him to come."

"I want my husband."

"Of course."

Bingley sat beside her while they waited for Mr. Trumpington to arrive. "What do you need?"

"Tell me everything will be fine. Tell me how well it will all turn out. Tell me--" She closed her eyes as another pain came on.

Bingley took her hand in his and urged her to rest her head on his shoulder. "There will be a child, our child, and it will be beautiful and healthy and its mother will be healthy and well. It will grow up happy and loved and handsome."

"With red hair, like its father?"

He kissed her cheek. "Let us hope not."

Mr. Trumpington arrived. His entrance nearly sent Jane into a panic. It seemed so real now that he was here and his bag was here. He handed a clyster syringe to the nurse and Jane buried her face in Bingley's shoulder. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest.

Mr. Trumpington pulled Mrs. Gardiner aside. He said quietly, "I must perform an examination. Have the nurse administer the clyster, then be so good as to prepare Mrs. Bingley for me. I will talk to Mr. Bingley and return in about a half an hour."

Bingley carefully and reluctantly disengaged from Jane and went out of the room. Mr. Trumpington applied himself to giving Bingley every expectation of a good outcome, to encourage him to sleep--it would be a long night, and the child was unlikely to arrive until morning--as best as he could, and to admonish him not to lurk around outside of the door. "You shall only work yourself into a state if you stand about listening to her scream. Now, if you would go downstairs. I will join you in a bit. Some coffee for us both, perhaps?"

Mrs. Gardiner, meanwhile, was attempting to calm Jane. All of her characteristic reserve and stoicism fled when the nurse had entered the room with the clyster prepared.

"No!" Jane cried. "No, I do not like clysters and I do not want Mr. Trumpington to test a pain. I want him to go away."

"Jane..." said Mrs. Gardiner, gently.

"Take that thing out of here," Jane said to the nurse. "I will not let it near me. And send Mr. Trumpington away. I have no need of him."
"Jane Margaret Bingley!" Mrs. Gardiner said, not gently. Jane was shaking. Mrs. Gardiner sat down next to her and said, kindly but firmly, "The clyster will be administered and it will be unpleasant, perhaps, but you will be thankful for it afterward. Mr. Trumpington will test a pain and it will not be so dreadful as you are imagining, only rather uncomfortable, but it is necessary and it will be over quickly."

"I cannot do this. Truly, I cannot."

"Yes, you can."

"I want Lizzy."

"As soon as the exam is complete, she may come in."

Mrs. Gardiner bid her to lie on her side and got her into the proper position, but as she turned away, Jane called, "Stay!" and struggled to sit up.

Mrs. Gardiner turned back. "I will be with you throughout, and hold your hand. It will not be so very bad."

"No, no! I want one of Charles' shirts. I want to wear one of his shirts. In his dressing room, please. Get one of the ones upon the chair. They have not been washed."

Mrs. Gardiner, somewhat bemused, did as she asked and helped Jane change from her chemise into her husband's shirt. Jane buried her face into his sleeve as they performed the operation, and then later as Mr. Trumpington performed the exam--which was very dreadful no matter what Mrs. Gardiner had asserted. Her husband's scent calmed her.

Mr. Trumpington, having assured himself that Jane's labor was active and that the child was in the proper position, left to take a bit of coffee with Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth was allowed into the room, and Jane labored with Mrs. Gardiner and her sister to cheer her and the nurse to fetch what she needed.

It was a long night. Bingley did not sleep, but sat up playing games in the parlor. He played game after game until his eyes burned from staring at the cards. Mr. Trumpington took his shoes off and slept on the sofa in Mr. Bingley's dressing room. Lydia stuffed bits of wool in her ears and went to sleep.

Jane found she labored best on her elbows and knees upon the bed. She had survived Mr. Trumpington's arrival and his exam and her courage had returned. She was now upbeat and almost cheerful between the pains. During them, she was quiet, only rarely crying out. Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner focused on keeping her spirits up, supplying her with water and wiping her face with a damp cloth.

"There," Jane said as another pain passed away. "I shall never have to endure that one again."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. "A very wise way to look at it, my dear."

Elizabeth offered her the glass of water, but Jane shook her head. "And, each one brings you closer to your child. Do not forget that."

Jane smiled. "I will count my baby's fingers and toes and then it will all be worth it."

"It will," Mrs. Gardiner said. "I promise you it will."

Mr. Trumpington came in periodically. Jane's progress was slow. He assured them it was in
keeping with a first child and steadfastly refused to examine her again. "There is nothing worse than irritating a woman with unnecessary examinations."

Near dawn, Jane abandoned all attempts to keep herself quiet. She had moved from the bed to a chair and was in an odd position, kneeling on the seat of the chair and facing the back of it, leaning against it for support. As a very great pain overtook her, she gestured wildly to Elizabeth, but her sister could not understand her. Her aunt could, however, and got a basin under her just in time.

They helped her move from the chair back to the bed. Jane collapsed onto her back, her hand pressed to her mouth. She was trembling from head to toe.

"This is a good sign," said Mrs. Gardiner.

"It is too much."

"You are passing through the worst of it, and getting very near to the end."

Jane shook her head. Another pain came and she was sick again. Mrs. Gardiner stroked her hair, but Jane pushed her hand away. "Please do not touch me. How much more of this?"

"That I cannot say, but I will tell you that when I am sick, the child inevitably is near."

Her waters broke with the next pain. Mr. Trumpington came and examined her.

"We should prepare her for delivery," he said to Mrs. Gardiner.

They tried to dismiss Elizabeth from the room as they put Jane on her side so that Mr. Trumpington could watch over her delivery, but Elizabeth would not be moved. She crawled onto the bed and put Jane's head on a pillow by her thigh. Jane gripped her hand with such strength that they would have had to pry them apart to separate them.

By then, Jane was exhausted. She felt herself at the mercy of the pain. She could do nothing but let it wash over her, each one taking some of her strength until she felt worn down to nothing. She tried to bear down on the child, but her first attempts were feeble and reluctant, and she began to panic with the fear that she truly would not be able to birth this child.

"A bit of water?" Jane asked, breathless.

She could not drink properly, so Elizabeth dipped her fingers in the glass and wet Jane's dry lips. She sucked drops of water from her fingers.

Lydia woke late in the morning. She pulled the wool from her ears and sat in bed. A few minutes of listening to Jane crying out drove her out of her bed. She dressed quickly and fled to the garden. Not attending to where she was going, she quite literally ran into Bingley. His hand on her arm was the only thing that kept her from falling.

"Any news?" Bingley demanded.

"I don't know. I could hear Jane. I had to get away."

She stared at Bingley's hand. He was still gripping her arm.

"I am sorry," Bingley said. He dropped his hand and walked away.

Lydia watched him, somewhat uncertain. She felt friendlier to him this morning than was usual for
her. Coming to a decision, she ran to catch up with his quick steps. "It will probably be over soon. Jane will be fine, and then there will be a baby. I hope it is a boy. There are too many girls in this house, and I want a nephew."

"I want a boy," Bingley said, hardly aware that he is speaking.

"Everyone wants boys. My mother wanted a boy, but she never had one. If my mother had had a boy, you would not be here now."

They walked along in silence. Bingley often stopped and looked at the house, looked right at the window of the room where Jane was laboring. He imagined he could hear her, but they were too far away.

It was early in the morning when the child was at last delivered. Before Jane was aware of what was happening, there was a loud cry and they were rolling her onto her back. Bingley's shirt was pulled down from under her arms and the cloth that had covered her lower half was taken away. They were cleaning her, wiping off the baby, and then there was a child, loosely wrapped in white linen and still smelling of the birth, put in her arms.

"Meet your daughter, Jane," Elizabeth said.

"Anne," Jane whispered, and began to cry.

Bingley was brought in to her even before Jane had delivered of the afterbirth. Jane had imagined meeting him, serene and at ease, their baby sleeping sweetly in her arms, but instead he came in when she was still red and sweaty, when the baby was crying loudly, and before the soiled linens had been taken away. Neither of them could have cared less.

Anne was a fat, pink baby. Bingley stared at her in unabashed wonder.

"My God, Jane, she's perfect," he said and ducked his head so that no one would see him cry. He kissed her. "Thank you. Thank you."

"I am sorry it is not a boy. I know you wanted one."

"It does not signify, truly it does not. She is perfect and she is ours." She looked her over, concerned. "Are you well? I was so worried."

"I am perfectly well."

"I heard you scream."

"I do not think anyone in this house did not hear me scream," Jane said with a blush that could not be seen because of the pink flush of exertion that covered her cheeks already. "But it was nothing to signify." She touched his face. "Truly, it was not so very bad at all." Elizabeth stared at her with a look of incredulity that was nearly comical, but Jane was too busy trying to get her daughter to take to her breast to notice.

He stayed while Jane delivered the afterbirth. He held Anne in his arms, cooing and letting her suckle his finger while Mr. Trumpington examined the afterbirth and declared it sound.

"It smells like raw beef," Bingley said, and shrugged when Mrs. Gardiner gave him an exasperated look. Jane laughed, much to the surprise of her aunt and sister, while Anne fussed and drooled on his coat. He touched her cheek and her nose and her hands and kissed her belly.

Jane was smiling, beautiful and radiant.
"Are you tired?"

"I am not. I should be, but I am not. We have a baby, Charles."

He laughed. "We do." He touched her hair. "Such a beautiful baby. She will be as lovely as her mother."

"If she grows up to be half so fortunate as her mother, she will be doing very well indeed."
Despite her claim that she was not tired, Jane began to yawn. Bingley called for the nurse and had her put Anne down.

Jane settled down under the sheets and closed her eyes. "Will you stay until I fall asleep?"

"Of course," Bingely said and sat on the edge of the bed. He put his hand on her back and rubbed small circles there and Jane felt the last of the tension drain from her. "I love you." He paused and cocked his head to one side. "Are you wearing my shirt?" he asked, but Jane had already fallen asleep.

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Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

So George Wickham is a skeevy bastard who preys on underage girls. Please see the end of the chapter for a more complete, slightly spoilery, warning.

Lydia took to Anne immediately. She wanted always to hold her, was reluctant to give her up to anyone else, and would happily rock her even when she cried. Jane's recovery was good, but she was still grateful for the help. She was sore, frequently kept up at night to nurse Anne, and for a fortnight after the birth of Anne, gripped by an odd melancholy that made it difficult for her to attend to anything at all.

Three weeks after the delivery, Jane ended her confinement and was churched. That Sunday, they all sat together in the parlor. Anne was put on the sofa and Bingley knelt by her, watching her sleep.

"I want a baby of my own," Lydia said. "Jane is always taking Anne away from me."

"Jane takes Anne away from you so that she might nurse her," Elizabeth pointed out. "However well you love your niece, that is an office you cannot perform."

"I want to be a mother."

"Provided you are a wife first, I have no objection," Bingley said.

Lydia harrumphed. "I shall never be either, I am sure. There is not a man worth marrying in all of Meryton. I wonder at Kitty not being married yet. If I were in London, I surely would have found a man by now."

"Be careful, Lydia," Elizabeth said. "If you are determined to marry for the sake of being married, you run the risk of making yourself very unhappy."

"Oh, you are only saying that because you are not married yet. I do not know why."

"I have not yet found anyone I wish to marry, and I am fortunate that I am not in a position where I must do so to survive. As are you."

"When you are married, you can take precedence over all the unmarried ladies, and no one treats you like a child."

"And you have many responsibilities, and you have a husband who has great power over you."

Lydia shrugged. Anne woke up and began to fuss, but Bingley took her, and began making faces at her. She was quickly content to be in her father's hands, watching him cross his eyes and stick out his tongue for her amusement.

They had callers, of course, who desired to see young Miss Bingley and determine if she would be as pretty as her mother and whether she had been so unfortunate as to inherit her father's hair. Anne did not object to being passed from person to person. She rarely fussed, never cried without
reason.

"She is like her mother," Elizabeth said. "My mother always talked about what a good baby Jane was. I was not a good baby. I cried and would let no one hold me but my mother and my nurse."

"I was a good baby," Lydia said. "My mother always said so."

The summer passed away too quickly, as good times always do. Anne continued chubby and happy, the delight of her parents. Mr. Bingley oversaw his second harvest as the master of Longbourn.

No matter how contented a person may be, they are still able to see those areas in which their life is lacking. Charles Bingley was no different. His frequent parties and constant association made his desire for more friends wonderful, but no less true. There was no man with whom he felt completely at his ease. There was no man in the neighborhood whose conversation he held as superior. When, in the fall, Mr. Bingley met a man of superb conversation, with excellent manners, and a seemingly keen mind, he was of course eager to forward a friendship between them and invited him to dinner a few weeks after his arrival in the neighborhood.

And so he introduced Jane, Elizabeth, and Lydia to "Mr. Wickham of the -----shire Militia."

Mr. Wickham was much at Longbourn after his initial introduction there. Mr. Bingley welcomed him as a particular friend, and he found the company of Miss Bennet and Miss Lydia more than usually engaging. That Mrs. Bingley set a fine table and Mr. Bingley put out excellent port were also great inducements to him to continue the relationship.

He found a warm welcome at Longbourn. Bingley genuinely liked his company and his conversation. Jane liked him because her husband did. Elizabeth was interested in him, and Lydia thought he was handsome and especially dashing in his red coat.

The Bingleys kept late hours as a general rule, and following on party, it was near midnight before Wickham felt he even had to make a cursory mention of taking his leave.

"Oh, you may stay in the guest room," Bingley said. "It is not full moon tonight; I would not have you walk. It is too late to have Jeb take the carriage out."

"I would not like to inconvenience you."

"It is no inconvenience," Jane said.

"I wonder at you and your wife, Bingley. I have rarely met with such good souls anywhere." He looked at them. An expression that might have been called calculating passed over his face, but it was gone in an instant, before any of them might notice. "Indeed, I have in the past met with such unkindness as to make me doubt that there was still goodness in this world. I am glad to have been proven wrong." He paused just long enough to be sure that he had their interest, then said, "But really, it is best if I do not speak of that."

He was disappointed to find that no one then pressed him to tell his whole story. Lydia might have, but Elizabeth quieted her with a look.

Bingley cleared his throat and got up to refill his coffee cup. The subject was changed, first to literature, and then to botany. At last it came to parks and Mr. Wickham tried again.

"The estate where I was raised had perhaps the finest park in all of England. The man who then owned it was an excellent man and he allowed me to run and play as I liked. My father was his steward. Best man that ever breathed was old Mr. Darcy."
Bingley’s coffee cup rattled as he set it down too hard in the saucer, but no one other than Jane took notice.

"I never met a better man than old Mr. Darcy," Mr. Wickham said. "His son...his son turned out very differently."

"You speak of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy?" asked Bingley.

Wickham looked cautious. "Do you know him?"

"I know him." Bingley frowned. Whatever opinion Mr. Bingley had of Mr. Darcy, it was not favorable.

"I was the son of his father's steward. Mr. Darcy, the younger Mr. Darcy, I mean, is very prideful. He did not care to continue our association after his father died. Had he heeded his father's will as it was meant to be heeded he would have done the honorable thing and given me the living on his estate, but that I suppose—I speak out of turn. Old Mr. Darcy was a fine man, and I have such respect for his memory that it pains me to expose his son. Besides, Mr. Darcy is not here to confirm or refute what I may say about him. I should speak no more."

"I know what Mr. Darcy is. I am sorry you suffered at his hands."

Mr. Wickham looked for a moment confused, but his expression cleared quickly. "I have made a friend in you, Mr. Bingley and in your excellent family. What can a man such as Mr. Darcy signify next to that?"

Bingley stared into the fire and they all went to bed shortly after. Mr. Wickham tried several times to get the story of Mr. Bingley's dealings with Mr. Darcy, but Bingley was steadfast in his choice to not speak of it. In the end, Mr. Wickham had to be content with knowing that he had a sympathetic ear whenever he chose to malign Mr. Darcy.

It was not long before Mr. Wickham's frequent presence at Longbourn led to speculations. Everyone was sure he had a preference for one of the Misses Bennet, but which one? Lydia's sixteenth birthday came, and Mr. Wickham claimed the opening set as she attended the assembly at which she formally came out. Yet, he was most often seen in conversation with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was more handsome; Lydia was taller and had a better figure. Elizabeth was witty and her conversation was better; Lydia had more good nature. Elizabeth was more intelligent; Lydia had more spirit. One thing was certain, they were neither of them in possession of a great fortune.

"They have one thousand pounds each," said Mr. Robinson to Mr. Wickham in answer to his question. "However, it is widely known that when Mrs. Hammond, the former Miss Mary Bennet, married, Mr. Bingley gave her two thousand pounds and her uncle half as much again."

"Four thousand pounds," Mr. Wickham said, eying Lydia and Elizabeth with a speculative gleam in his eye. "Not a great fortune."

"Not a paltry one either. Do you, ah, have a preference for one of the Misses Bennet?" Mr. Robinson had a wager of twenty pounds riding on his liking Miss Lydia over her sister.

Mr. Wickham only smiled and walked away.

He was not prepared to throw himself away on four or even five thousand pounds, but when he heard it reported that Mr. Bingley had enjoyed a very good harvest, and heard it speculated that he had some investments which were performing more than adequately, he began to wonder if
perhaps Mr. Bingley might not be induced to do something more for one of the sisters whom he had kept under his own roof for so long.

He knew he could not open any negotiations, such as they were, without first setting upon one of the girls, and he was some time puzzling over which one it was to be. He acknowledged that Elizabeth was superior to her sister, but he thought it prudent to lean toward the more pliable of the girls.

Elizabeth saw the shift of his attention with only a slight pang.

"Truly, Jane, you must not concern yourself with me," Elizabeth said. Jane was rocking Anne back and forth by the window. "I will confess that Mr. Wickham interested me for a a short time, but I believe he has made it clear that his feelings are not for me."

Jane frowned. "Yes, he has been showing a good deal of attention to Lydia. She is so young..."

"Too young to marry, I think, but Mr. Wickham is hardly in a position to do so immediately. Perhaps in a few years, if the tendre remains constant on both sides, we may see them wed."

"Perhaps," Jane said. She frowned at Anne who had quieted, but was still fussing, and had not taken any food all day.

Bingley was not insensible to Wickham's attentions to Lydia, and not entirely sure he approved of them.

"Lydia is but sixteen," he told his friend. "And neither is she mature for her age. If anything, she is the opposite."

"I am well aware of that," Wickham said. They were riding together through the estate.

"Then I hope you will be cautious. Lydia is anxious to consider herself as a woman, and she could easily be carried away. Her feelings overcome her reason at times. If you have feelings for her--" He looked at Wickham who bit his lip and looked away. Bingley suppressed a sigh. "I am not saying that it is impossible, but it may be some time before you could marry."

"I know. My finances are such that... This should not be. I should have an independent living, I should be able to marry a sweet girl without regard to money."

"You have your commission," Bingley said. "That is worth a good deal. You are very fortunate that your friends were willing to purchase it for you."

"Miss Lydia has but a thousand pounds," Wickham said, not seeing fit to comment on his friends' generosity. "It...may not be enough no matter how long we wait."

"She will likely have more. Her uncle and I may be able to increase her fortune. We gave Mary four thousand pounds."

"Four thousand pounds," Wickham said. His voice was flat and dull. Noting Bingley's frown, he quickly added, "For myself, it is nothing. I do not regard it. But Miss Lydia is...not accustomed to deprivation."

"No, I fear she is not. One hopes that if a marriage does take place in the future, Lydia will be of a more settled and reasonable disposition by then."

"But to ask her to live on so little, even if she were more settled..."
"I might...perhaps...perhaps as much as five thousand could go with her. I cannot say yet."

Wickham was determined that he could not marry Lydia for a shilling less than ten thousand, but he held his peace then and said only, "By the by, Bingley, this is terribly embarrassing, but I fear I may need to borrow another twenty pounds from you."

"I thought--I gave you thirty not two weeks ago."

"Yes, and your generosity is beyond anything, however there has been a small delay in the settling of some accounts. It is all a misunderstanding, I am sure, but..." He glanced sideways at Bingley who did not look especially pleased. An instant of thought convinced him that he ought not to press his advantage with Mr. Bingley. "I am mortified for even asking. Forget I spoke at all. I shall make due, I am sure." He looked again at Bingley and saw a slight frown. He was beginning to think that Mr. Bingley was not so amiable as he had once supposed.

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Anne had been heretofore a remarkably healthy baby, but she was now struck with a cough. Jane tried not to fret overmuch. She was not very sick. She would rally in a short time. There was no fever. It was nothing to be very much concerned about. Still, Jane could not be entirely easy. She held her as much as she could, was with her more than not.

She was in the nursery when Elizabeth found her, and did not look up from Anne. "I gave her some castor oil earlier, but it does not seem to have helped. She has not her usual smiles. Does she seem pale to you?"

"Perhaps a very little bit. She has a slight cold at worst. I am sure she will be fine in a day."

Jane nodded and was persuaded to give Anne to the nurse. "Did you need me?" she asked Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, seeing that she had concerns enough, said that she only wanted to know if Jane needed anything in Meryton.

"I am beginning to worry about Lydia," Elizabeth said to Charlotte later that day as they walked the lanes near Lucas Lodge. "She is very much taken with Mr. Wickham. I have been trying to impress upon her the impossibility of their marrying any time soon, but she does not seem to be listening."

"What are Mr. Wickham's intentions?"

"I do not know," Elizabeth said. "I cannot imagine they are less than honorable, and he seems acutely aware of his situation. He must know that marriage will not be possible for some time. And yet he almost seems to encourage her affection in him."

"Perhaps he likes the flattery."

"I cannot think him so unfeeling as that. To forward the affections of a young girl with no intentions beyond making mischief? No indeed, Charlotte! 'tis unthinkable."

Charlotte was not so certain. "We none of us hate to be flattered. Lydia is a handsome girl, and men are not always so prudent as they should be when they are in company with handsome girls."

Elizabeth sighed. "Poor Mr. Wickham. Lydia is too young to marry, but if he had his independence, they could look forward to it as a certainty."
Had Elizabeth seen Mr. Wickham that afternoon, she would have been less inclined to pity him. He met with Lydia as she was walking home from Meryton and accompanied her all the way back.

"And how are you today, Miss Lydia."

"Very well, Mr. Wickham," Lydia replied. The cool October air had given her cheeks a brightness and her figure, always fine, was displayed to her particular advantage today.

"How wonderful. You look as beautiful as you always do."

Lydia giggled. "You look very handsome, Mr. Wickham."

"I thank you, madam."

Mr. Wickham looked her over. She was watching him out of the corner of her eye. A more prudent man would have waited, but George Wickham had ever allowed present desires to tempt him out of future rewards.

"Have you ever been in love, Miss Lydia?"

"Love?"

"I think you might enjoy it."

"Well of course I would. Everyone wants to be in love. Even Jane and Mr. Bingley coo over each other and act foolish when they think no one will see them, and they are the most dreadfully dull people, most of the time."

Wickham smiled. "What would you said, Miss Lydia, if I told you that I loved you?"

"I would say you have very good taste," she said with a saucy smile.

Wickham laughed. "I am sure I do." He looked earnestly at her. "I love you, Miss Lydia."

The veneer of self-assurance dropped. Lydia blushed and stammered under his gaze.

"Do you love me?"

"I think I--"

"It would be a very hard thing if you did not, you know. You have always been so kind to me. Do not be hard upon me now."

"I--I love you too, Mr. Wickham."

Wickham smiled. He would not push her further just yet, but he felt secure in his plans. "My dear, I think perhaps we ought to keep this conversation between us. Mr. Bingley is aware of my feelings, but he thought I should keep them from you. He thinks you are too young to be in love."

It was just like Mr. Bingley to think her too young for anything exciting, and to try to keep Mr. Wickham from her. "Of course. I will tell no one at all."

"Good girl," Mr. Wickham said with a wink. Though Lydia was not entirely comfortable with the way he rested his hand on her back, she smiled.  

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Elizabeth did not hesitate to enter the library, no more than she had when it had been the province of her father. Indeed, as she was the only person left in the house who read for sheer enjoyment, Bingley was forever encouraging her to avail herself of it so that the books might be of some use to someone. She did not regard a closed door. Mr. Bingley was known to prefer an open one, so she saw a closed door as evidence of his not being within. So she blithely opened the door only to find Bingley and his steward in a quiet but forceful conversation.

"--and if I may be so bold as to say so, sir, you ought to tell your attorney to stop being so soft with the business."

They both turned to her. Elizabeth begged their pardon for the interruption, but Bingley was quick to assure her that they were finished--Mr. Holt did not look quite finished, but he took the hint and left. Elizabeth could not but notice as Bingley folded up a letter with a sigh that was half-anger, half-weariness. He looked up and met her curious eye with a small smile.

"'The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.' You see, Lizzy, I have learned to quote the bard. Your father's library is not entirely wasted on me."

Elizabeth laughed, but was sober when she asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Fine. I'm just dealing with some messy business. Nothing for you to be concerned about." He looked down at his letter. "Well, I suppose I ought to write to my lawyer and give him my permission to do whatever it is he does that he sends me very large bills to do. Are you going walking?"

"No, today I intend to sit down at the pianoforte and practice like a proper lady so that I might have some small chance of not mortifying myself when next I am called on to play."

Bingley was quick to assure her that she never mortified herself when she played, and Elizabeth, who really would rather have been out of doors, excused herself from her practice after a mere half hour had passed.

*  

Mr. Wickham was kept away from Longbourn by his duties with his regiment during for some time. Lydia, though she kept silent, had their conversation much on her mind. She was not entirely sure she liked Mr. Wickham. She liked his attention, but sometimes his touch and his smiled at her made her uneasy.

She was determined to prove Mr. Bingley wrong, however. She was certainly old enough to be in love, and to marry Mr. Wickham, if he asked her, which he would. Did not marriage always follow a declaration? Lydia longed to be married. Two of her sisters were married already, and how long before Kitty and even Elizabeth followed?

Mary and Jane seemed so content being married, and they were not even married to very exciting men. Mr. Bingley was handsome, if one overlooked his red hair, and he could be amiable and charming, but he was not interesting, and Mr. Hammond! He fared even worse in Lydia's estimation as the only person in the world duller than Mary. Mr. Wickham would be a better husband than Jane's or Mary's, and Lydia thought that it would be such a joke when Mr. Bingley found out.

Anne seemed to be recovering from her indisposition, and Jane had finally allowed her out of the nursery. Lydia held her as she sat in the drawing room with Jane. Anne had green eyes like her father and her mother's light hair. Her smile spoke of both of them. Lydia adored her. She stroked Anne's hair and thought that she would very much like to be a mother. She was certain she would
be a good one. Jane was always praising her for how good she was with Anne, and even Elizabeth said she had a way with her.

If she considered whether Mr. Wickham would be a good father, it was not a question she entertained for very long.

"Jane, do you like being married?" Lydia asked, when Anne had fallen off to sleep, her head turned toward Lydia's breast. She drooled on the muslin, but it was an old dress, and Lydia did not want to disturb her.

"I do."

"I think being married is the best thing in the world. I am sure I shall never be happy until I am married."

"There are times when it is very trying."

Lydia snorted.

"There are indeed," Jane said. "When one is in constant intimate association, all of the little annoyances can easily build into something large. Charles bites his nails, which sounds like a little thing, but it is such a disgusting, vulgar habit and he does it nearly every morning. I cannot break him of it, so I must simply...live with him as he is."

"If Mr.--if a man I loved bit his nails, it wouldn't bother me in the least," Lydia said.

"It will be something, I promise you. Small clothes left lying about, muddy feet on the carpet, an insistence on having mutton even when the beef is finer and comes at a better price." Jane sighed.

Anne woke up and began to cry. Jane rang for the nurse and had her taken upstairs to be fed. She was nearly weaned and permitted to suckle only before she was put to bed for the night.

Mr. Wickham finally returned to Longbourn, full of complaints about Colonel Foster and how hard he was forced to work in the militia. "You gentlemen of leisure are much to be envied, Bingley. I should like to sit about all day and sip brandy."

Jane said, "I have often wondered at Mr. Bingley thinking of himself as a gentleman of leisure. He is so much with Mr. Holt, and talking to the tenants, and examining the price of wheat that I think he is very much occupied with his position in life."

"Mrs. Bingley is far too kind. I do nothing out of the common way. Indeed, my attention can rarely be captured long enough to attend to my responsibilities. I fly about from one thing to the next, and I can never attend properly to anything."

"Shall we argue with him, Jane? I think sometimes his self-mortification is a form of indirect boast. My brother seems sometimes rather proud of how quickly he does things, even as he acknowledges that he does some of them ill," said Elizabeth.

Jane smiled into her knitting and rocked Anne's cradle with her foot.

Mr. Wickham was careful not to pay excess attention to Lydia in company, but he was able to get her alone again the next day.

Lydia was in expectation of some form of proposal, but she was to be disappointed, though he walked with her to Meryton and was very solicitous. He frequently alluded to his former declaration, and praised her looks so excessively that after a time, even Lydia was tired of hearing
her eyes called bright and her cheeks called rosy.

He pulled her into a wooded grove on the return trip, threaded his fingers through hers, and backed her against a tree.

"May I have a kiss, Lydia?"

"I do not think that's proper." She was almost shocked to hear such words come from her own mouth. She despised the word 'proper'. Her brother and sisters were forever scolding and lecturing her about what was proper and what was not. Yet, there did seem something not quite right in allowing a man to kiss her when he had not even declared himself to her family.

"Are you turning missish, Miss Lydia?"

"Of course not!"

"I thought you loved me."

"I...do."

"Then allow me a kiss, if you do."

His kiss was demanding. When his tongue snaked into hers, she tried to pull away, but his hands tightened on her back. When it was over, there was a hungry look in his eyes that scared her.

They returned to Longbourn in silence.

* 

Chapter End Notes

While there is no explicit sex in this chapter, there is a grown man pressuring a teenage girl into physical acts that she doesn't want, and emotionally manipulating her into hiding his behavior from her guardians. Please use discretion if this is a triggery topic for you.
"What you ought to do," said Goulding, "you ought to ask Bingley for advice on how to invest the money."

"Oh no," said Robinson. "Bingley hoards his genius. The man has a Midas touch when it comes to money, yet if you ask him his advice, all you'll gain for your trouble is a suggestion to an article in *The Gentleman's Magazine* that he found very useful."

"He's just afraid of giving bad advice is all," protested Mr. Harrington, but this defense was met with snorts of derision around the table.

"Afraid of sharing his riches, more like," said Goulding. "Do you know, he cleared his mortgage last month? I have it from one of the clerks in Phillips' office who saw the transaction. He paid it in full, no mean sum, and he must have spent a hundred pounds fitting up the nursery for that little girl of his."

"Never a hundred pounds!"

"Fifty then. Gave his wife a bracelet after the girl was born too, and Mrs. Long says it's worth eighty guineas if it's worth a shilling."

Wickham dealt the cards. The conversation showed a tendency to move back to Mr. Robinson's recent good fortune in the form of two hundred pounds inherited from a distant aunt. Wickham was quick to bring it back to Mr. Bingley's financial state. "Bingley does not seem so very well off to me."

"Oh, he's not the sort to flaunt his wealth, but he is flush with money," said Goulding.

"It's that uncle of his," Robinson said. "Gardiner, the brother of old Mrs. Bennet that was. Three thousand a year they say. He has warehouses in London and Portsmouth and in Bristol too. Gardiner took Bingley under his wing when he married Miss Bennet."

"The money is from trade," Mr. Harrington said.

"Money is money," said Goulding. "The shops do not care if it's a bit tainted by warehouses and manufacturing."

"Besides," said Robinson, "Bingley hardly has to sully himself with business. He needs only sit by and watch his investments grow."

"There comes a time when a man has had just a little too much good fortune to be really amiable," said Goulding. "He inherits a tidy little estate and marries himself the prettiest girl in the neighborhood, but no one minds that so much because she comes with four dependent females and who wants that? But now he's married off the plainest of the girls, and the other two" (poor Kitty, off in London, had been nearly forgotten) "have every chance of making a good match, especially if he raises their dowries to a respectable sum." Here the entire card table glanced at Wickham, but Wickham pretended not to notice.

"Well, perhaps he will have the kindness to suffer a bit of misfortune," said Mr. Harrington. "If he be really generous, he will begin to go bald."

Robinson reached up and tried to rub Goulding's growing bald spot. Goulding smacked his hand away. The conversation moved on. Wickham lost nearly ten pounds to the cards that night, but he
went home feeling rather satisfied nonetheless.

* 

"It is a very great secret, Maria."

"You keep saying that, but you won't tell me what it is!"

The two girls were together in the parlor. Anne was with them, asleep on a blanket that Lydia had spread on the couch for her. They were bent over a bonnet that was ostensibly for Maria, though Lydia had taken over every detail of the project. Lydia, with great theatricality, went to the door and looked both ways down the hallway, then shut the door tight. She went and sat very close to Maria. "Mr. Wickham and I are in love."

"Oh, that," said Maria.

"Oh, that!"

"Well it is not as if everyone does not expect it. Are you going to marry him?"

"Yes! Maybe. I think I am."

"Has he asked you?"

"No, not yet, but he will. He told me he loved me. He kissed me."

Lydia took great pleasure in the shock on Maria's face. "He never!"

"He did indeed. It was...it was very nice."

"You'll not be able to marry for years, or so my father says. Mr. Wickham hasn't any money."

"Who needs money when you are in love?"

Maria sighed. She was flighty and romantic, and she entirely agreed, but she was clear-sighted enough to say, "Mr. Bingley will never let you marry him unless he has money, and you cannot marry without Mr. Bingley's permission."

"Mr. Bingley is not my guardian. He is not even my real brother. I cannot marry without my uncle's permission. I wish I had gone to live in London instead of Kitty."

"If you had gone to live in London, you would never have met Mr. Wickham," Maria pointed out.

Lydia shrugged. "I would have met someone. I would have met a great many someones in London." She plucked the bonnet from Maria's hands. "Not so much blue, Maria."

Maria grabbed it back. "It's my bonnet," she said, but began pulling off the blue ribbons anyway.

"We could run away to Scotland."

"An elopement! How romantic!"

"It would be very romantic, and such a joke if I wrote home from Scotland a married woman. No, I would not even write. I would only appear at the door as Mrs. Wickham, come to call on Mrs. Bingley." Lydia laughed.

On the couch, Anne began to cry. Lydia took her into her arms and rubbed her back.
"My father said that perhaps Mr. Bingley will give you the money you need to marry, which would not be so very romantic as an elopement, but then you would have a trousseau and a proper wedding, which would be very nice."

"I should like a proper wedding. I should like a pretty white gown, satin, of course, and ribbons in my hair, and feathers, and a very expensive ring on my finger."

"I do not think you can elope and have a very nice proper wedding."

"No," Lydia agreed sadly. Anne's crying eased. Lydia nuzzled her cheek with her nose as Anne liked, but Anne did not laugh. She rested her head on Lydia's shoulder and clutched at her necklace with a chubby hand.

"So which do you want more? Do you want to elope or do you want a trousseau?"

"I suppose I would rather have the trousseau, if you must put it that way. Mr. Bingley will surely let us marry. He has so much money! It would be hard of him if he did not give me a dowry so that I can marry Mr. Wickham."

"Does he have much?"

"Oh, yes! He must. He is going to commission a portrait of Jane and Anne. Oh, but do not tell anyone. It is a surprise for Jane."

"Well how much would you need to marry Mr. Wickham?"

"Mr. Wickham says he thinks it very foolish to marry on less than fifteen thousand, but that he loves me so well, he would be happy to marry for ten."

"So will Mr. Bingley give you ten thousand pounds so that you can marry Mr. Wickham?"

Anne began to cry again. She looked flushed. "I think she may be getting ill again," Lydia said and held her tighter. "I will take her to the nurse."

Anne's crying was high and shrill, and she made a strange sort of croaking noise as she breathed. Lydia walked faster and forgot all about Mr. Wickham.

* It was the croup. They could hear it with their own ears, and Mr. Jones confirmed it with a sad shake of his head. Jane was sure she had never known fear until the moment she saw her daughter struggling to draw a breath. She stayed up all night with Anne. She bathed her in warm water and applied a poultice to her neck, but she did not much improve. Mr. Jones offered Mr. and Mrs. Bingley cautious optimism. Anne was a healthy baby. He was not without hope. They must be prepared for a bad outcome, but it was by no means certain. Jane took food that was put in front of her, rest when she was taken by the hand to a bed. She could not think of anything beyond Anne and her illness. When Bingley or Elizabeth spoke to her about her own health and her need for rest, she stared at them as though they were speaking in some foreign tongue. Anne was sick. Nothing else mattered.

As night fell on the fifth day, she worsened considerably, but a clyster of asafoetida and a blister on her back seemed to do her good. Jane held her until she fell asleep and then put her down. She curled up on the bench by the window to snatch a few minutes of sleep for herself, sure she would hear Anne if she began to croak again.
When she woke up, Anne was dead.

The nurse heard Jane's gasp, and went to get Bingley. He had slept poorly that night. When the nurse knocked at door, he had been laying awake for some time, staring at the bed canopy.

The nurse curtsied. "I beg your pardon, sir, and I hate to be the one to tell you--"

"Anne died," Bingley said. He could see it on her face.

"Yes sir. I think you ought to go to Mrs. Bingley."

For a moment, Bingley did not move. It was not a complete surprise. He had known that she was not getting better, but he had not expected it to end so soon. It felt like the grief was outside of him, surrounding him, pressing at him, but not yet able to get in. It was a howling tempest outside of a poorly latched door. "What do you tell a woman whose child has died?"

"There's nothing to say, nothing that will make it better in any case. She's not of a hysterical disposition, Mrs. Bingley, but, if I may give you some advice sir--" She looked at him and he nodded. "Grieving mothers say all manner of things when it's fresh. If she yells and screams at you, don't take it to heart. It doesn't signify. It's the pain, that's all it is."

"Yes, thank you," Bingley said. He could feel his throat starting to close up. He ran his hands through his hair and forced air into his lungs, forced his legs to take him to his wife.

Bingley stood by the door of the nursery, watching Jane as she moved around the room, touching things, inconsequential things. She touched the wall and the chair and the glass of water on the table.

"Charles?" She spoke in a whisper.

"I am here."

"Charles, I need you."

He crossed the room and rocked her back and forth as she cried. Her legs seemed to fail her, but he kept her upright.

"Come out of here." She could not stay in this room. He led her to her dressing room, half-carrying her as she tried to get her legs to work. He made her sit, knelt before her, holding her hands in his own. Jane cried on and on.

"She is well now, Jane. She is well. She is with her Father--not me, not some imperfect man--she is with the Lord and she could not be safer or more loved. We had her for six months, six beautiful months, and we must be grateful for that privilege, but we must not--she is--she is--oh, God help me." He buried his face in her lap and sobbed.

Bingley had neglected to close the door. Elizabeth came into the room on soft feet. She stood unnoticed by either of them until she said, "Can I be of any use to you? If I can, tell me how. If I cannot...I will stay or go. Whatever you need. Only tell me what you need."

Jane, unable to speak, held out her hand to Elizabeth who took it and pressed it to her heart. Bingley raised his head. A last heaving sob shook him and he gave Elizabeth Jane's other hand, then rose and turned away to wash his face at the basin of water.

Elizabeth sat with Jane's hands clutched tight in her own and tears streaming down her own cheeks until the initial outburst of grief was spent. Bingley sat down on the bench near the fire.
"Lizzy, can you write the letters? I do not think I can bear to do it and I am sure Jane cannot."

"Yes, of course," Elizabeth said.

The news made its way through the house quickly. Lydia had it from the maid. She made no show of grief when she was told. She only shuddered all over and dressed and walked into the hall. The house seemed unnaturally silent. Elizabeth had closed the door to Jane's dressing room. She had meant nothing by it except to shield Jane and Bingley from the prying eyes of servants. Lydia saw it and assumed it was meant for her, assumed that they did not want her, that they thought she was too young to be with them.

She went downstairs to the parlor, and sat, statue still, staring out of the window at the clouds floating past. Mr. Wickham came to call. Lydia did not rise to greet him. She was so numb from grief she was sure she could not move at all.

"Good day, Miss Lydia. I was wondering if your brother was here."

"Anne is dead."

"Oh." Wickham cleared his throat. "I am very sorry to hear that." He walked from one end of the room to the other. "This--this is...very important. Can you fetch him for me? Or send the maid?"

Lydia looked at him in disbelief. "What could possibly be so important that I should fetch my brother to attend to you on the day his daughter died?"

Mr. Wickham was much in debt, and his debtors were becoming impatient. He had come hoping to borrow some funds, but he began to doubt how effective he would be on this of all days. He sighed and looked at Lydia. She was pale, her face set in a grim frown. He sat down beside her. "Nothing at all. I was not thinking. How do you hold up? I am sure you are much affected."

"She was the best baby," Lydia said. "She liked me. I could get her to smile, always, sometimes even when Jane could not." Fat tears dropped from her eyes onto her skirt.

He took hold of her hand, but Lydia pulled away. She looked at him. There was something in his eyes she did not like. It was the same cold calculation that had been there when he had pulled her into the grove and pressed her to kiss him.

"I think perhaps you should leave, Mr. Wickham."

"I would not leave you, dearest Lydia." He moved to touch her cheek and she pulled away again.

"I would prefer if you left."

"I could not bear to be apart from you now, dear girl. I love you."

She stood. "I do not love you. I have changed my mind."

Wickham watched her as she moved away from him, uncertain. The looming specter of his debts urged him to try to salvage his chance with her. There might yet be something in it for him. A wiser man would perhaps have retreated and returned on another day, but Wickham, though crafty, was not especially wise.

He smiled. "I know you do not mean that. You are only grieving. Come, sit beside me. Where are Mr. and Mrs. Bingley? Where is Miss Bennet? Have they left you all alone? Will you not let me comfort you?"
Lydia hesitated. He was holding out his hand to her and she took it. She sat down again beside him and let him put his arm around her shoulders.

"Put your head on my shoulder. You may cry all you like there."

She did rest her head against him, thinking that it felt nice to be held.

"You did not mean what you said earlier, did you?"

Lydia shrugged awkwardly.

"I know that you did not."

He began playing with the loose hair at the back of her neck. She had seen Mr. Bingley do the very same thing to Jane many times. She had thought it would be pleasant to have someone do that to her, but this did not feel pleasant. It made her feel uncomfortable and she wanted him to stop. She turned her face up to look at him. He took it as an invitation to kiss her.

Lydia jumped up. "Get out."

"What?"

Like her mother, Lydia Bennet could move from love to hate and back in a moment. The leap from reluctant acceptance to abhorrence was hardly anything at all. "Get out! I hate you. Get out of my house!"

"Lydia, dearest..."

"Get out! Get out! Get out! I hate you! You are horrible and selfish! I see what you are now! I hate you for making me kiss you! I hate you for ever having touched me! I hate you for being here now when Anne is dead! Get out!"

Wickham rose. "I love you, dear Lydia. It is only the violence of my passion that leads me to--"

Lydia threw a book at him. "Get out!"

George, one of the menservants, appeared at the door. "Trouble, Miss Lydia?" He eyed Mr. Wickham speculatively. He was rather hoping the man did something untoward. A bit of heroics would surely be good for a few extra shillings in his week's pay, and he had not enjoyed a good brawl in ages.

Mr. Wickham, however, chose to retreat. He bowed to Lydia and hurriedly took his leave. Lydia stood shaking in the middle of the room. The commotion had brought Bingley downstairs. Lydia, too tired and near hysteria to even think of an explanation, told him nothing but the truth, as well as she could express it between sobs, all the while expecting him to scream at her for being so stupid.

Instead, he crossed to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Are you alright?"

She stared at him in shock. His eyes were red from crying and he was so pale that she wondered at his being able to stand and he had somehow found in the depth of all that pain the ability to care about her when she did not even deserve it.

"I am a wretched person! I have been the most horrid horrid--how can you ever forgive me?"

"Lydia, please, I can hardly--" His voice broke, but he pressed his hand to his mouth and managed
to collect himself. "Come upstairs. This--all of this can wait. Jane has been asking for you. We should be together right now. I want us all to be together, if you feel you are up to it."

Lydia hugged him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. "I am so sorry for ever having hated you, Charles, Brother, Mr. Bingley."

"Any will do. Come be with your sisters. They need you and I think you need them."

Lydia followed him up and sat with them. Jane had hardly moved since the last of her sobs had eased, but she rose and hugged Lydia when she came in. Bingley crossed to look out of the window and Jane, when she had released Lydia, went and opened it for him, just slightly, just so that he would not feel confined.

Lydia was not so foolish as to tell Jane anything that had passed between herself and Mr. Wickham. She talked instead about what a good baby Anne had been, and how much they had all loved her. Jane feared that any attempt to reply would send her into a fit of sobbing, but when Elizabeth started to quiet Lydia, Jane shook her head and gestured for Lydia to sit beside her.

"I will have the letters done by the end of the day," Elizabeth said to Bingley, very quietly so that Jane would not hear them discussing the mundane business that comes of death. "Better it be done quickly. I wonder only about your sisters. Shall I write to them? We have had no previous contact."

"I will write to them," Bingley said. He rubbed his forehead. He had exchanged perhaps three letters with the two of them together since his marriage, but he had written to them after Anne's birth and he supposed that he must write to them of her death. "Thank you, Lizzy. I do not know what I--we would do without you."

Elizabeth wrote the letters in his study, but Bingley could not leave Jane. He saw her to bed, coaxed her into drinking a glass of wine, and stroked her hair until she fell asleep. He stayed in the room, sitting at the writing desk to pen notes to Caroline and Louisa. When he had sanded and folded them, he checked on Jane. She was sleeping, but restlessly. Bingley sat and watched her. The magnitude of the loss staggered him. The thought that he would never again hold Anne in his arms nor watch her grow nor give her away at her wedding made his chest seize up tight and his eyes water.

He rose then and took up another sheet.

_Buxton--_

_I do not know if Elizabeth has thought to write to you or not God knows I have not the strength to go down and ask her. I have suffered a loss since I wrote to you last my beautiful little girl was taken by the croup and now I am nothing but wretched grief. I cannot escape the image of what Anne would have been happy and such a beautiful young woman._

_This letter is stupider than even most of mine. I beg your pardon._

_CB_

As he set down his pen, he heard a soft noise and realized that Jane was awake, and crying. He got into the bed with her, held her close, and wet her hair with his own tears.

*
Chapter 13

Jane took the colored trim from all of her white gowns and tore the ribbon from her cap. She inventoried the whole house from the wine cellar to the silver cabinet. Bingley had Anne's hair set in amber and made into a ring that he wore on his last finger. His papers and letters piled up around him as he attended to them sporadically, or not at all. He did not discover that Lord Buxton had replied to him until nearly a week had passed since the arrival of his letter.

Bingley,

My Brother has returned from Saint-Domingue. He was three months there and had the Yellow Fever almost the entire time, but he is well now. He is of the opinion that we will never capture the island, that the Africans will never take the yoke of Slavery again. I see no reason to doubt him, though it serves me to keep silent in public. I would be a Revolutionary and a Traitor if I dared suggest we might not take Saint-Domingue from the Blacks and the French. I cannot even support Abolition at present, such is the climate now that we are at War. To be for England is to be for Slavery, and I of all People must tread carefully.

My Mother has gotten it into her head to marry Richard and me to--well, to someone. She is greedy for Grandchildren.

I have just now received your last letter. You have my deepest Sympathies on the loss of your Daughter. The Death of an Infant is a hard thing, but so untainted as she was you can have no doubt of her having attained to a better Life than can be offered upon the Earth. I am at your service should you so desire it.

Yours,
Buxton

Some days later, they were seated in the library, Bingley reading Pamela to Jane.

"Lady Lucas told me you are paying Mr. Wickham's debts," Jane said as he came to the close of the second volume.

Mr. Wickham had fled Meryton and the militia just days after his failed attempt to gain Lydia's affections. His debts had grown beyond even the power of his smiles and his many friendships, and without Bingley to rely on, he had taken the quickest means of escaping his problems.

Bingley looked up from the book. "Not his gaming debts, of course. Not even all of his debts to tradesmen. Only, there were a few who would have been materially harmed by the loss of money. I would not see them suffer."

"You are hardly responsible for Mr. Wickham's bad conduct."

"I promoted his good name in the community. I have done only what I feel honor bound to do."

Jane smoothed out her skirt. "We had best not mention it to Lydia. She will only find some way to make it all her own fault."

Bingley set the book aside and looked at Jane. She was too pale, and her face was thin. Seeing his examination, she rose and paced the length of the room. "I am so tired of--"

"Of what?" Jane shook her head. "Please tell me. If there is anything I can do for you, I want to know."
"I was only going to say that I am tired of...of here."

The house which had been a scene of so much joy seemed now a mocking reminder of their loss. Jane could not even get into her bed without thinking that she had first held Anne in it.

"Then we will leave."

"We cannot possibly--"

"Why not? Nothing holds us here. Let us go to--to London. It will do you good."

Jane hesitated. "I would like to go away for a little while."

Bingley touched his ring. "As would I."

Bingley planned to take lodgings in the city, but Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner would not hear of their staying anywhere but with them. A short flurry of letters in which Mrs. Gardiner and Jane battled with one another to see who could be most self-sacrificing and hospitable ensued. The end of it was, that they were to stay with the Gardiners for as long as they liked, and were permitted to repay the kindness with nothing more than their company.

*  

"I do not want to go to London," Lydia said. The room she shared with Elizabeth was a disaster of trunks and linens.

"Why not?"

Lydia only shrugged her shoulders.

"It will be something to help us forget," Elizabeth said.

Lydia threw down the chemise she had been about to pack. "I do not want to forget Anne!"

Elizabeth winced. "Nor do I. That was badly put. I mean that we cannot let the grief take over our lives."

Lydia sat down on the bed. "Will there be balls, do you think? Will we attend any?"

"It is possible."

"I hope we do not. I do not like men, I am decided."

"You have not let Mr. Wickham put you off of the sex entirely?"

"I always thought it would be nice to have a man make love to me, but it is not nice. I did not like it at all."

"You did not like it because Mr. Wickham was entirely the wrong sort of man. When you meet the right sort of man, you will like it."

Lydia sat on the bed. She rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. "Have you ever met the right sort of man?"

Elizabeth paused in her packing. "No. I have met a few with whom I could have--no, I have not met with the right sort of man yet."
"Maria says Charlotte will die an old maid. Will you die an old maid, do you think?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "How am I to know? I hope not. I am not one and twenty. There is a little hope for me yet, I think."

"Netherfield was let to a married old man. We neither of us will meet husbands if we stay here."

"Mr. Sever is three and thirty. He is not an old man. I do agree that his wife and daughters have spoiled the hopes of many a matchmaker."

"Perhaps you will meet someone in London. I can go to live with you, then, and Mr. Bingley and Jane will not have to put up with me anymore. Or perhaps I will meet someone and get married. I do not want to, but perhaps I will meet someone and then I can go away and none of you will have to see me anymore."

"Lydia..." Elizabeth put her hand on her back. "You do know we love you."

Lydia shrugged and finished packing her trunk.

*  

Lord Buxton called almost as soon as they had been established on Gracechurch Street. He had never before called upon the Gardiners, and he was taken aback by the sheer number of people as he entered the drawing room. He sat aloof, rarely speaking, until the minute hand had moved a quarter of a rotation, then he fled like a man under treat of execution. He managed at the last to beg that Bingley would be quick about returning the call and Bingley, who understood him well enough by then to take no offense at his behavior, was at Buxton House the very next day.

Buxton received him in a small sitting room, the home to his collections of rare insects, and many of his books. It was his most private room, his refuge from the world at large. The footman who led Mr. Bingley to it wondered very much who the man was, for his lordship had never before received anyone there except his brother, and that rarely.

Bingley smiled when he saw how at ease Buxton was here, sequestered from people, whom he dreaded so much in general.

"I was very sorry to hear of your daughter," Buxton said.

Bingley touched his ring. He glanced at the closed window. Buxton had a fire blazing very warm. The room was stuffy and Bingley started to sweat. He loosened his cravat. "Your brother is back from the West Indies, I recall. You must be very glad."

"No, not really. I am...fond of my brother, I suppose. We are very different. I am glad he is not dead. I only wish he were not dead somewhere else. I wonder he did not go to stay with our cousin. They are more like brothers than he and I. But I suppose I should be glad. Now my mother will have to split her matrimonial plotting between us, and I will be spared some of it."

"You do not wish to marry?"

"I do not do well with women. I have no talent for speaking to them, much less dancing with them, and I take no pleasure in it. I do not suppose you have ever known such troubles."

"I know something of not being able to approach women," Bingley said, thinking of the assemblies he had attended where the master of ceremonies could not introduce him to any of the genteel young women in the room. "But as for anxiety, I confess I rarely have it. Why would any man? A woman cannot deny you her hand unless she intends to stay seated for the rest of the
"If they agree it is worse! You must make conversation and not step on their toes and I have never been able to do both together."

"Perhaps you need more practice."

"I would prefer to die a bachelor. Let my brother's son take the title, or if not him my little cousin may have it. Oh, but I forgot to tell you, my mother is throwing a ball. You must come, I beg it of you. It will be a miserable night, for me. You may like it. In any case, the food will be good. It always is in my house. It is a week hence. You will come?"

Bingley twisted his ring. He could hardly bear the thought of a night of merry-making and dancing, but Buxton looked so terribly eager. "I will speak to Mrs. Bingley."

"I am having a dinner party soon. It is my brother's doing. It will be gentlemen only, so you may smoke and drink as you please, if you care to. It is in a few days. You will come to that as well, will you not?"

He would have rather had a tooth pulled. "Yes, of course."

Jane did not wish to go to the ball, but she thought she should. She wanted activity, and she would not deny her sisters the pleasure. Kitty, who had not known Anne and was only sorry in a general way that she was dead, was the most eager, and spoke of nothing else. Elizabeth did her best, for Jane's sake, and for Lydia's, to act as though the ball were a great thing, and to act as though she wanted to go.

There was not time for new gowns. Their best gowns were gone over, cleaned, and embellished with ribbons. Elizabeth could not help thinking that had Mrs. Bennet still been with them, the preparations would not have taken place with half so much restraint. She could almost see her mother rushing about the house with delight, almost hear her exclaiming that one of her girls would be married off to a lord 'ere long.

The night before the dinner party, Bingley dreamt of Anne. She was a child, older than she ever had been or ever would be, but he knew, with the certainty of dreams, that she was his Anne. They were in the garden at Longbourn, the two of them. Anne was playing with a very small horse, no bigger than her hand. She was trying to feed it a carrot, and Bingley kept insisting that she must stop, that horses of that size did not care for carrots, but Anne would insist that the horse should eat, and Bingley could only laugh.

Anne turned her face up to him and said that she would hide, and he must find her. He shook his head. No, no. She mustn't hide. But he looked away for a moment, and then she was gone. He searched the garden, and went into the house, which was not Longbourn anymore, but his grandmother's house. Louisa, Louisa as a girl, sat on the couch eating biscuits. She held one out to him, but he shook his head. Had she seen another little girl, as big as her, but pale-haired and green eyed? Louisa blinked at him, and shrugged her shoulders.

He went upstairs and his father was there. Had he seen a little girl? The elder Mr. Bingley put his hand on Bingley's shoulder and assured him that they would look together, and so they searched, but Anne was nowhere to be found. Mr. Holt accosted him in the bedroom with unanswered letters. He found a guinea in his dressing room. There was no Anne.

When, in his dream-world, he had worked himself into a state of panic, his eyes snapped open.

Jane lay beside him, fast asleep. He stared into the darkness. The dream slipped away and
dissipated into a fog. All that remained was Anne, and loss.

Jane was snoring. It was soft and even and rarely bothered him, but tonight it scraped against raw nerves. He rose from bed, shivering as the cold air struck his skin. He managed to light a candle without waking Jane.

It was the depth of night, but London was London. When he paused in his rambling walk, he could hear carriages and people walking past. The house was large, but still he felt the press of the walls and the confinement of the closed windows that shut out the winter chill. There was a parlor in the back of the house, with large windows facing a small courtyard. He went to that room, hardly aware of where he was going, and was surprised to find himself not alone. Lydia was there. She was seated on the couch, her dressing gown wrapped around her and her slippers discarded on the floor. She had her feet tucked up under her.

She started when she saw him, and would have left had he not told her to stay. Even with the candle he set down on the mantle, the room was so dark that all either of them could see were the shadows and the shapes of the space. Lydia sniffled.

There was a closeness between Lydia and Bingley now. Bingley turned a wing chair to face her and sat down. He rested his hand on hers. He felt as though he still had one foot in his dream. He had been looking for Anne and found Lydia instead.

"I dreamt of Mr. Wickham," Lydia said. "We were married, or about to get married, I cannot remember. I did not want to marry him, but there was no way for me to escape it. Everyone said it was done, and I was stuck with him, and it was dreadful."

"Mr. Wickham is gone. He will never touch you again."

Lydia sniffled again. Bingley moved to sit beside her on the couch and she curled up against him. "I dreamed of Anne," he said.

"I miss Anne."

"We all miss her." He felt his eyes start to burn and his throat began to ache. He touched his last finger, but he had taken his ring off for the night.

"Sometimes I think I cried more than Jane."

"You may have. Jane--Jane's grief is her own."

"Jane is perfect."

Bingley smiled. "Jane is not perfect. She snores, for one thing."

Lydia kissed him on the mouth. Bingley jerked away and leaped to his feet. "Lydia!"

Lydia jumped up after him and moved to kiss him again. Bingley caught her wrists in his hands and held her away from him. They stood, caught like that, until Lydia sagged and began to cry, and Bingley released her. He might otherwise have hugged her. Instead, he stepped away and crossed his arms over his chest, managing to appear more vulnerable than stern.

"I am married and you are my sister and..." He scrubbed at his face with his hands.

"I'm sorry," Lydia said. "I love you. I am so very..." She made a helpless gesture with her hands. "I only wanted...to kiss a man that I love."
"Lydia this...you know that was..." He caught his breath. "I love you, as my sister, but what Jane is to me is something very different. You do know that, do you not?"

Lydia nodded. Tears were streaming silently down her cheeks.

"That was very, very wrong of you."

"Are you going to send me away? You should. I do everything wrong." A great heaving sob shook her entire frame. "I make everything worse."

He shook his head. "Go back to bed."

"Please do not tell anyone what I did."

"Go to bed, Lydia," Bingley said, and left her there.

Lydia did not go back to her bed. She curled up on the couch with only her dressing gown to cover her and cried until she fell asleep.

*

Bingley passed several sleepless hours in his bed and rose early. He found Mr. Gardiner in the same parlor where he had met Lydia the night before. Without quite intending to, he had soon told him of all that had passed there.

Mr. Gardiner sighed. "Perhaps the girl could use some time away."

"I do not want her to think I am getting rid of her."

"A trip, then. Mrs. Gardiner and myself are planning to travel to the Lake District this summer. We had planned to invite Elizabeth, but perhaps we will take Lydia, or both of the girls might come together."

"The summer is months away," Bingley said. "What can be done for her now?"

He met Lydia at the breakfast table. She looked very bad, pale and tired. She would not meet his eyes. Elizabeth was trying her very best to draw her out, but Lydia would barely respond to even direct questions. Jane did not come down to breakfast at all. She pleaded an indisposition, and when Bingley went to check on her, she only said it was a slight ailment. Her face was closed and he knew from experience that whatever was troubling her would not be his to know until she chose to reveal it.

And so Bingley went to Lord Buxton's dinner party. He had not slept, he was troubled about Lydia, worried for Jane, frustrated with both of them, and his grief for his daughter was so close to the surface that several times in the carriage, tears came into his eyes and one or two even fell. Had all of this not been the case, he would have withstood what came next with tolerable aplomb, but he had been pushed and pulled and wrung out and he had nothing left.

Buxton met him almost as soon as the footman had announced him, eager to introduce him to his brother. Before Bingley had even laid eyes on Colonel Fitzwilliam, he saw a tall man, his proud, handsome face etched in Bingley's memory though he had not laid eyes on him in many years.

The other man stiffened, and bowed. Whatever the truth might have been, it seemed to Bingley a mocking sort of bow and all the more because of the arrogant arch of his brow that appeared to want to know what a man like Bingley was doing in this house.
"This is my cousin, Mr. Darcy," Buxton said, but Bingley did not, could not, attend. He spun on his heel and walked out of the room, out of Buxton house, leaving behind him a room full of shocked men.

*
Five days later, the Hon. Richard Fitzwilliam, Colonel of the 1st King’s Dragoon Guards (*Honi soit qui mal y pense*), was jarred from his sleep by his bed curtains being cast open. Bright sunlight streamed across his face. He cried out and tossed his arm over his eyes.

"Richard, you must talk to your cousin."

Fitzwilliam removed his arm, squinted, grimaced, rubbed at his face, and finally focused his eyes on his mother who stood above him, her mouth set in the stubborn line that was famous to all Fitzwilliams, even, it seemed, those not born to the name.

Fitzwilliam said something which anyone else would have found entirely incoherent but which his mother correctly interpreted as an inquiry about the time.

"It is nearly three o'clock and I think it very unseemly of you to be in bed at such an hour."

"A man is allowed to nap."

"For two hours? Really, *mon fils*..."

Fitzwilliam sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Did you bring me chocolate?"

"I am not your servant, Richard."

"Madame, if you are going to come into my room and rudely wake me from my nap, you ought at least to have the decency to bring me chocolate."

Lady Buxton tossed up her hands and crossed the room to tug at the ribbon which summoned the servants. To her mind, it was as great a concession to her son's demands as if she had gone to the kitchen to fetch the chocolate herself. When the maid had come and gone, she said, "Now, about your cousin--"

"Roderick?"

"Not Roderick! I am speaking of Darcy."

"What about Darcy?"

"You must talk to him."

Colonel Fitzwilliam tossed on his dressing gown and seated himself at his desk. The chocolate arrived in its silver pot. He ate one of the walnuts that his mother had kindly thought to order for him. "Why?"

"Andrew's friend--"

"Andrew does not have friends."

"He has Mr. Bingley."

Fitzwilliam frowned. "I will thank you not to mention that name in my presence. He cut Darcy!"

"Yes, *mon fils*. I heard of it in great detail. Andrew has gone to see him. He says that Mr. Bingley had reason for what he did."
"Nothing can excuse such abhorrent behavior. I never saw such an ill-bred, rude, uncouth, horrid action in all my life."

"You have seen much worse. Your judgement is subjective when it comes to your cousin."
Fitzwilliam could not deny it. He sipped his chocolate. Lady Buxton continued, "Andrew is...quite decided." She hesitated. "He wants him at the ball."

"That is a bad idea, I think, but let him invite him. What is it to me?"

"Mr. Bingley will not come if Darcy is to be there."
Fitzwilliam saw immediately where this was going. "Andrew will cut Darcy over my dead body."

"I have impressed upon your brother the...delicacy of the situation."

"There is no delicacy. Darcy is blood. Darcy is family. He is--"

"Yes, mon fils, but Mr. Bingley is Andrew's friend."

"Then he has poor taste in friends and ought to find himself a new one."

"It took him thirty two years to find one, I despair of his finding another before he is dead."
Fitzwilliam pinched the bridge of his nose. "Andrew says that Mr. Bingley is not an unreasonable man. He thinks that perhaps he and Darcy can work out their differences if they will only meet to talk."

Fitzwilliam snorted. "It hardly seems like something which can be worked out over a glass of brandy."

"I admit the chances are not excellent, however--"

"There is no however. I will not attempt to persuade my cousin to do anything contrary to his own comfort and interests. I certainly will not see him go to Mr. Bingley, hat in hand, as if he owed the man anything! Let Mr. Bingley call on him, if he wishes reconciliation."

"I do not believe Mr. Bingley desires reconciliation, and I am assured that he will not call on your cousin under any circumstances."

"Then I suppose the matter will stand as it is."

"You will not oblige your dear mama in this?"

"I fear I will not."

Lady Buxton sighed heavily. "I do so worry about Andrew. He has always been..."

"Queer in the attic?"

Lady Buxton frowned at him. "I can forgive him for having never yet married. You, on the other hand..."

"Your skill in turning every conversation toward my singleness is truly astounding."

Lady Buxton narrowed her eyes. "I want grandsons, Richard."

"Mary is working on that. Well, perhaps not at this very moment, but I suppose it is possible."
Lady Buxton waved her hand. "Mary will have an interesting event in the spring, but I will not see Roderick become the Earl of Buxton, and Mary cannot do anything about that."

"My little cousin does vex you. Take heart, madam. You are fairly likely to die before either Andrew or myself."

"Do you sit about thinking up ways to provoke your poor Mama?"

"Not usually, but I had so little to do while I was in the West Indies vomiting up my life's blood."

"My nerves, Richard."

"Your nerves are made of sturdier stuff than my cannons."

Lady Buxton lapsed into a silence that in a less dignified, noble personage might have been called petulant. She sighed. "Poor Andrew is so unhappy about all of this."

"He always was your favorite," Fitzwilliam muttered.

"Les mères n'ont pas de favori, mon fils," Lady Buxton said, though in truth she was at that moment speaking to her favorite child.

Their tête-a-tête was interrupted by a loud, rude knock.

"Roderick," Fitzwilliam said with certainty. Lady Buxton gave a resigned sort of nod of agreement.

"I was thinking of loading my dueling pistols and letting him play with them. Do you think he is too old to fall for that?"

Lady Buxton found it so tempting a thought that she could not bring herself to chide her son for saying it.

* 

There was a certain inevitability to the conflict. It wanted only a catalyst, and that came at last in a nail file that Jane set down in front of Bingley.

Bingley looked up at her, the nail on his third finger caught between his teeth.

"Are you at all familiar with this tool?"

Bingley spat out a bit of his nail. "I am sorry."

"Honestly, Charles, it is the most disgusting, vulgar, horrid habit."

"I beg your pardon. I was not aware that my habits were so abhorrent to you. I will tread more softly in the future, though God knows how I will manage it."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I have been walking on the tips of my toes around you for days. I do not know what it is that I have done to offend you, but I am getting a bit tired of being punished for an offense that I cannot even identify."

"Punish you? How have I done that?"
"You hardly speak to me!"

"You came home so drunk from Lord Buxton's party that you could barely stand and I nursed you through the whole of the next day! You say that we are no longer to go to the ball, you will not say why. Lord Buxton comes to the house and the two of you are in conference for two hours together, but you will not say a word to me or anyone about why or what happened."

"You are allowed to hold all of your thoughts and concerns to yourself, but I am expected to bare everything to you? I had always imagined that a man had a right to know his wife's concerns, but perhaps that is just a silly little tale told to comfort bachelors."

"What have I kept from you?"

"Why have you been in and out of bed for the last week?"

Jane blushed. "It is nothing, a minor indisposition."

"Of course," Bingley said coldly.

"You accuse me of being reserved! You were in prison and never told me!" He paled at that, and Jane felt truly sorry for having brought it up at all, but the man she loved most in the world was also the one person capable of fraying her temper beyond the breaking point and she continued,

"Was Mr. Darcy at Lord Buxton's party?" Bingley started. "I am no fool, Charles. 'A certain gentleman from Hertfordshire is said to have cut a Mr. D. from the north, a man of no mean wealth and consequence, at a small party held by the Earl of B.' It was in the newspaper."

"Well, I do so wish that your affairs made the gossip pages, though it is a sorry thing that I must wish for a third party to inform me about my own wife."

"Do you think I wish to hear of your concerns through others? Lydia kissed you!"

Bingley drew back a little and could not immediately respond. "Well, madam," he said finally, "your spies are clearly very good. Soon we will hardly need to talk at all."

"Do you call it spying that my aunt told me something I have every right to know? She kissed you, Charles."

"It does not signify--"

"How can you say that?"

"Lydia is a silly mixed up girl. She was not thinking."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"I did not want to upset you."

"So there was reason for me to be upset, then?"

"No! Not--what? Do you think I enjoyed it? Is that it? For heaven's sake, Jane, is that what you think of me?"

"Did you?"

Bingley pulled open the door to their bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Jane asked.
"I haven’t a clue, but I do not want to talk to you right now, so I imagine it will be somewhere away from here."

He slammed the door behind him, and was so intent on leaving the house that he failed to notice Lydia standing by their room looking so pale that she appeared close to fainting.

Elizabeth had also heard the conflict, though she had heard mostly raised voices and the slammed door, and little of the actual words that passed between them. Elizabeth handed her youngest cousin to the nurse and left the nursery in time to hear the front door close loudly. She peeked out of the window and saw her brother stand for a moment outside, adjusting his hat in a distracted manner before setting out down the street.

Lydia had fled the hall by the time Elizabeth got to Jane's door. She could hear Jane crying and was wise enough to leave her alone for a time. Elizabeth distracted herself by seeing to inconsequential things around the house. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were gone for the day, not to return until long after dinner. She checked on the children, but they had not been affected by their cousins' argument and were not upset by anything but Sarah's having taken Lucy's doll. Kitty was downstairs at her work, and had heard nothing. Elizabeth saw no reason to enlighten her as to what had happened.

By the time she returned to Jane's room, Jane had collected herself admirably and was knitting by the window. Elizabeth knocked softly and on being allowed in, quietly said, "I wanted to see if you were in need of anything."

Jane smiled, and had Elizabeth not been looking for the slight red around her eyes, she never would have suspected that she had only just been crying. "No, thank you."

Elizabeth closed the door. "I heard the argument."

Jane's smile faltered. "I--I did not--it was only a disagreement."

Elizabeth sat down beside her. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. There are some things that I do not want to talk about and I do not see why that is held against me."

"No one holds that against you, Jane."

Jane set her needles down and began twisting the yarn around her fingers. "I do not want to talk about it."

"Very well. Will you be at dinner?"

"Yes, of course."

"Should I set a place for Charles?"

"Yes, set one. I do not know if he will be home by then, but I would not want him to--you must set one."

"I will," Elizabeth promised. She started to rise, but Jane stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Lizzy," Jane said, too intently and almost desperately. "What am I to do when he gets home? We have never fought so before and I do not know what I am to do when he gets home."
Elizabeth settled back on her seat and pressed Jane's hand. "Well, if it were me, I would sit in a corner and glare at him until he groveled at my feet in repentance for any unkind words." Jane smiled and shook her head. "But as I have always considered my older sister to be wiser and calmer than I, I think a softer approach is advised. Perhaps--perhaps only you should remember that he is likely as discomposed as you are at this moment."

Bingley was not home for dinner. His place sat empty. Lydia hardly ate at all and Kitty cast confused glances at all of her sisters, but none of them would answer the question that was written all over her face. He came home after the Gardiners had returned, after Jane had calmly informed them that her husband had gone out and would be back very late, or tomorrow, deftly avoiding all their concerned looks until they retired to bed. He slipped into their room as quietly as he could, but Jane was awake reading a magazine by the fire.

They stared at each other awkwardly for a moment. Jane broke the silence by asking, "Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"Would you like a drink?"

"No. Thank you."

He sat down on the bed and took off his boots. His stockinged feet were chilled through and when Jane saw him begin to rub them, she stirred up the fire and urged him to take the chair by her. He did, after a moment of hesitation. Jane turned her attention back to her magazine. Bingley watched her silently. The firelight flickered on her skin. He had known she was beautiful when he married her, had thought her everything lovely and perfect, but love had settled deep under his skin, and hers, and now she was something more than beautiful to him. Now, his eyes sought out those little imperfections--the freckle on her chin, the crooked turn of her mouth--that those who simply admired her would always fail to see, but that he who had studied her had discovered by long examination.

Jane, aware of his eyes upon her, kept her gaze fixed on her magazine, reading and re-reading the same paragraph. Bingley rose to get a candle and set it near her. She looked at him curiously.

"The fire is not enough light. You will strain your eyes."

Jane opened her mouth to assure him she could see perfectly well, but thought better of it and thanked him. He sat back down. For a time, the only sound in the room was the noise of the street and the rustle of the pages in Jane's magazine.

"I cut him and left."

"Mr. Darcy. I walked into the room, saw him, cut him, and left the party. I found an unkempt little place that served gin and I got very, very drunk. It was a bad day from start to finish. I had dreamt of Anne. Lydia--it was mortifying."

"I promise you I never--perhaps I sometimes thought it, but never seriously. I know that you would not--not with Lydia."

"Not with anyone but you, Jane."

Jane felt a tension that she had hardly been aware of ease. She had never doubted him, but love is jealous, and to hear him say it was a balm.
"Mr. Darcy is Buxton's cousin."

"It must have been very awkward for you. Poor Lord Buxton!"

"Indeed."

"What are you going to do?"

"I do not know."

He rose and undressed, changing into his nightshirt and putting on his dressing gown and pulling on a pair of thick wool stockings that Jane had knitted for him. Jane was already in her nightgown. He pulled his chair closer to hers and asked, "Would you like me to read to you?"

Jane handed him the magazine. He read a handful of paragraphs of a moralistic story, but when his eyes began to cross, Jane gave him leave to flip to the poetry.

"It was my menses," Jane said, as he finished an ode to a fallen leaf on a frost covered pond. "It was nothing more than that. I had quite forgotten how hard they can be on me. I had not experienced them since we married. There was Anne and then...nursing and...but it came back at last. My indisposition was nothing more than that. I am sorry if I worried you. It was foolish of me to hide it. I was only...I had hoped that perhaps...but it is not to be yet. It was silly of me to be so upset. I did not want to talk about it."

Bingley set the magazine aside. "I am completely knocked up. Shall we go to bed?"

Jane nodded. Bingley put out the candles and gave the fire a final stir and they all but fell into bed. They were both too exhausted to think of anything but sleep, but as Bingley's eyes drifted shut, Jane whispered against his neck a promise of pleasure in the morning.

* 

Elizabeth knocked softly at Jane and Bingley's room. The door was slow in opening, but at last Bingley appeared. He was in his shirt and dressing gown. His unruly hair was sticking out in all directions. "Yes?"

Elizabeth hesitated. She was tempted to say something of little consequence and leave them in peace, but she knew she could not.

"I fear Lydia may have run away," Elizabeth said. "No one has seen her since last night."

Bingley closed his eyes. "Very well," he said, resignation rather than surprise or alarm creeping into his voice. "Give me a moment to dress."

Bingley met Mr. Gardiner in his study. He had been out already that morning to look for Lydia, but without success.

"It is cold, and I do not think she took any money. Lydia has never been without comforts. I daresay she will come home when the rumble in her belly grows loud enough."

"Perhaps," Bingley said.

"Foolish girl! I've half a mind to--to--ah, poor stupid child."

"Yes," said Bingley with a laugh that was far from amused. "I know the feeling."
There was little they could do but try to hush it up. Mrs. Gardiner mentioned in passing to her neighbors that Lydia had gone to stay with a friend. Mr. Gardiner quietly hired a few men to look for her. Elizabeth and Jane tried to think of places she would go, and Bingley went to them. He wandered around shops and through the bright and exciting parts of London looking for a tall figure and a familiar face.

Kitty simply complained. "It is always Lydia! I shall start doing nothing but make mischief!"

Mr. Gardiner put his hand on her shoulder. "I would consider it a great favor to me if you chose to refrain."

Lydia's disappearance at least settled the matter of the ball. Buxton's agonies of divided loyalty were relieved when Bingley informed him that he could not attend the ball under any circumstances. The night accordingly came and went. Kitty was allowed to attend with Mrs. Gardiner and came home full of talk of gowns and dances and having seen the Prince of Wales himself, for a moment, when he briefly stepped inside with his friend Mr. Brummel, who was every bit as dashing as they said, but even her gaiety was checked by Lydia's not being there to be jealous of her.

"Three days she has been gone," Mr. Gardiner said the morning after the ball.

"Have your men turned up anything?" Bingley asked.

"Nothing. Nothing from the river either."

Bingley winced, too aware of how dangerously impulsive Lydia could be to discount the possibility.

"I do not think I have ever been so angry at anyone as I am at Lydia," Bingley said. "Jane lost her daughter, to lose her sister on top of that..."

"Elizabeth is less forgiving than you. The great irony is that a house full of people want to find her alive so that they can beat her soundly."

"I have so little hope. Lydia is not clever. I cannot see any way in which she could survive in the world unprotected, except those things which I cannot bear to think of."

In all of Bingley's anxious ruminations about what might befall Lydia, he never once considered the possibility of her walking boldly up the steps of Buxton house.
Chapter 15

The butler, a severe and proper man, eyed the young girl in front of him unkindly. She hardly presented a respectable figure. Her gown was dirty from coal dust and the grime of the streets. Her pretty face was bright red from the cold, and her eyes were swollen until she could hardly see properly from dust and crying and sharp biting wind.

"No beggars here, girl," the butler said, and began to close the door.

"I am not here to beg!" Lydia cried. "I am here to see Lord Buxton."

The butler opened the door slightly. Lydia, who had not thought to bring food or money or even her warmest clothing on her ill-thought-out adventure, had brought her cards. She presented him with one. The butler took it with reluctance.

"Tell Lord Buxton that I am a sister of Mr. Bingley. Mr. Bingley is his lordship's personal friend. Oh! On--only, make sure that Mr. Bingley is not here. I cannot see him. I need to see Lord Buxton, I need him to do a favor for Mr. Bingley."

The butler carried the message and Lydia found herself seated in a downstairs parlor of Buxton house, huddled as close to the fire as she could bear. Buxton, who had learned of what had happened from Bingley, came into the room discomposed. He had seen Lydia a few times before, and had never talked to her directly.

"Do you have anything to eat?" Lydia asked him, before he could utter a word. "I am so hungry. I haven't eaten in days! Only once some man gave me food, but then he tried to take payment--I shall not tell you how, because I am sure you can guess--and I bit and scratched him and ran away and I have not had anything since then. My brother Bingley says you are a good man, and he is generally right, though he was wrong about Mr. Wickham, but...have you anything to eat?"

Buxton, more relieved to have something to do than anything else, ordered her some beef broth, a buttered slice of bread, and a cup of tea. Lydia fell upon it ravenously and almost made herself sick.

"Is my mother at home?" Buxton asked a servant while Lydia was eating.

She was not. She had gone to Twickenham to visit Mrs. Stanhope and planned to stay until the evening.

"Well," said Lydia when she had recovered a bit. "I suppose you see that I have run away. It is for the best. I make a muck of everything and they are better off without me. I intended to find employment, but it is very hard to find employment, and I have no money and it is very hard to be without money, but I thought of you, and you have a great deal of money, and you like Mr. Bingley, and I am sure you can see that he is better off without me, and I thought you might give me some money so that I might go somewhere and become established. I do not want to be a seamstress, or work in a shop, but perhaps I could be a governess, or a nurse. I like children very well. It would be a favor to Mr. Bingley, you see, so that he could be rid of me, and would not have to worry over me anymore."

Buxton stared at her. "I think perhaps I should have Bingley fetched. He will--"

"No!" Lydia started for the door. "No, I will not see him. I cannot see him. I've made such a mess of everything and I cannot see any of them! Not Mr. Bingley or Jane or my aunt or uncle. I will
leave right now unless you give me your word that you will not call him here."

Buxton, perhaps the most unqualified person in the world for dealing with Lydia Bennet, hastily gave her his word and then found himself at a total loss as to what to do next. Lydia was looking at him hopefully. He rubbed his hands together and did what he always did when faced with problems. He got his Bible. He handed it to Lydia who looked between him and it several times.

"You are upset. I recommend a Psalm," he said.

Then he went to get his brother.

Darcy and Fitzwilliam were at the billiards table, their coats off and draped over the back of chairs. Roderick was with them. Darcy was carefully lining up his shot, his lip caught between his teeth.

"I do not see why you will not let me play!" Roderick said, loudly, and Darcy jerked the cue. His ball skipped across the table. Fitzwilliam smirked at his cousin and calmly sank the remaining balls easily, ignoring his little cousin's whining.

Darcy said something under his breath about little boys who ought to be in school and Roderick responded by saying, "My mother says I am too delicate to be in school."

Darcy's expression said all that needed to be said about Sophia Fitzwilliam. Buxton gestured his brother out of the room and hastily explained all.

"Lock the stupid girl in a closet and fetch Mr. Bingley," Fitzwilliam said. "We have no part in this."

"I gave her my word."

"Then I will lock the stupid girl in a closet and fetch him."

"Richard!"

He took Fitzwilliam to see Lydia and found her curled up on the couch, asleep on Buxton's Bible, which was a very fine one, and his favorite. He moved to get it from her, but Fitzwilliam stopped him with a hand on his arm and an expression that Buxton had learned meant he was doing something foolish.

"She looks very bad."

"Only dirty."

"No, look at the flush on her cheeks. She is feverish. She must be half out of her mind to have come here at all, much less with such a stupid scheme."

"She said she had not eaten."

"You must get Mr. Bingley. He needs to see her."

"I gave her my word."

"Andrew..."

"I will not break my word. However, as I only promised I would not fetch Bingley or Mrs. Bingley or her aunt or uncle...she has a sister."
"Her sister then, but someone."

"If she is ill, she must stay here, and her sister. We will need to call my mother home."

Fitzwilliam ran his hands across his thick black hair. "Let us begin with the sister. We--I will figure the rest of it from there."

Buxton went himself to inform Lydia's family of her recovery, and suffered the mortification of having his hand pressed by both Mrs. Gardiner and Jane for his good offices. His insistence upon adhering to the letter of his word was not met with much enthusiasm, but Bingley thought it smart, and Elizabeth was willing to go.

While his brother was away, Fitzwilliam had engaged the skills of his sister in seeing to it that Miss Lydia's presence in Buxton House caused no scandal. Lady Huntly listened to the whole of the story with a mingling of amusement and disbelief on her face, then discharged her duties with a skill that assured all who knew them than Lord Huntly had not married his wife for her handsome face or her ample dowry so much as for her Machiavellian brilliance.

She fell upon Lydia with a great deal of hysteria, catching the attention of every servant in the house who might have been tempted to go spreading the word of the girl's presence.

"Dear, dear Lydia, darling, I shall never forgive such wretched--such horrid--left to yourself for near a day! I take full responsibility, and I only hope your brother may forgive me. I invited you here, I ought to have sent my own carriage, but you would travel by post and--oh, horrid, horrid!--my dear girl, you are flushed! Feverish, I declare it! I wish you had come to me, but I am so glad you had the presence of mind to come to my brother, though you have not seen the house above twice, I am sure! I should not have had such presence of mind, put out at the wrong place by some awful, awful post driver, and without luggage or money or anything! And now you must stay here, and do not argue, for my mother will come home and it will be very respectable and you look so very bad that I fear even to take you to Huntly House. I will call your sister to you as well, I am sure she will come soon, being in London already, I believe."

During this speech and more of the same, Lady Huntly guided a very confused Lydia to one of the guest bedrooms. Elizabeth had arrived by this time, and was quick enough to join Lady Huntly in decrying what had happened to poor Lydia before joining her in her bedroom to put her to bed and lecture her soundly.

Fitzwilliam gave his sister a fine bow once they were alone. "I applaud you, Mary. You are brilliance itself."

Lady Huntly sat down and pulled off her light green kid gloves. "Your applause is gratifying, but we will now speak of my payment."

"Of course," said Fitzwilliam. "A pound of flesh, perhaps? Or would you care for my blood? I can call a surgeon to open a vein."

"Lord Peter wants a commission in the 1st Dragoons."

"Absolutely not."

"He is very persistent, and wearies Lord Huntly exceedingly. I, as the obedient wife of my lord and master, have a great interest in seeing him relieved of this burden."

"So you think to foist the irresponsible rascal upon me?"

"I thank you not to speak so of my brother-in-law."
"I will not have him in my regiment. Name something else, anything else."

Lady Huntly smiled. "Speak to Darcy."

"No!"

"Poor Andrew is so upset about this."

"The way you and my mother dote upon poor Andrew, it is no wonder the man has no spine to hold him upright."

"Lord Peter, or Darcy. 'tis your choice. Or, I suppose I could simply hold the favor in reserve..."

"Certainly not," Fitzwilliam said with a shudder. "I learned that lesson when I was fourteen. I discharge my debts to you promptly. I...will speak to Darcy. I make no promises. He dislikes Mr. Bingley very much."

"I understand Mr. Bingley hates him. Reconciling the two of them should be quite the challenge, but I have every confidence in you, Richard. You are just the thing." She favored him with a kiss upon his cheek, donned her gloves, adjusted her bonnet, and took her leave, leaving Fitzwilliam to reflect on the simplicity of battle as compared to navigating the treacherous waters of his family.

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Elizabeth was called to meet Lady Buxton in her dressing room the next day, during her morning toilet. Elizabeth, always an early riser, was already dressed and took the seat that was offered to her by the fire. She declined an offer of chocolate, but took some coffee.

"How is your sister, Miss Bennet?"

"Her fever has abated somewhat, though it is not gone. The doctor thinks it is an influenza, but he is hopeful that it will not be very serious. We will not trespass upon your hospitality a moment longer than we must."

Lady Buxton waved her hand. "Do not spare a moment of thought about that. We have few visitors here, and you are no trouble at all." She gave Elizabeth an appraising and thorough examination in the mirror. She was shortish young lady, but not exceptionally so, with a handsome face which was set off by fine dark eyes. Her figure was good, but she was very trim. It was not the most promising start. Fitzwilliam's eye was most often turned by a stout girl. Nor was her fortune very good, and Fitzwilliam's provision as a second son had unfortunately been tied up in lands in France which had been taken over the thugs of the Revolution. Having no compunction against murdering a most beloved queen, they thought nothing of robbing a man of his estates.

Lady Buxton stiffed a sigh. A mother was supposed to fret over marrying off her daughters, but it was not her daughter who vexed her, it was her two stubborn sons. Andrew could not look a woman in the eye, and Richard was simply too nice in his requirements. She had not really worried 'till Richard had turned nine and twenty. The thought that her second son might pass thirty unmarried and that Sophia's insufferable son Roderick might actually inherit the title was simply too much. Something had to be done.

She had been silent too long, Elizabeth was growing uncomfortable. She turned to face her. "I hope, Miss Bennet, we will have the pleasure of your company at dinner tonight."

"I think I must decline, your ladyship. I have brought nothing appropriate to wear."
"I will have Cely bring out Mary's wardrobe, she left most of it here when she married. You may choose what you like. I assure you she will not miss it."

"Your ladyship is too kind. If Lady Huntly will want her gown back..."

"I assure you she has forgotten about it all. Huntly was utterly excessive in his pin money, foolish man, and I am sure she has twice as many gowns as she ever had here."

Elizabeth thanked her and promised that, her sister's condition permitting, she would join them at dinner. Lady Buxton's maid accordingly brought out the trunks which housed Lady Huntly's impressive maiden wardrobe. Elizabeth chose a simple short-sleeved muslin embroidered with blue thread which seemed as if it would be easy to alter and stood impatiently as the maid pinned it in place. She escaped at last to return to Lydia. Her sister was miserable. Elizabeth, only slightly concerned that the illness would turn serious, was not entirely sure that it was not for the best since her aches and cough and burning eyes served to take her mind off of everything else.

"Lizzy, my head hurts," Lydia said as soon as she had walked in the door and there was so much of the old Lydia in the whine in her voice that Elizabeth could not help but smile.

"I am very sorry to hear that."

"I want my draught."

"You have had it. You may have it again in three hours."

"I want it now," Lydia said and let her head flop back dramatically on her pillow, an action she immediately regretted.

Elizabeth adjusted some of the pillows that had been knocked out of place and tucked the covers around Lydia.

"Will Mr. Bingley come?" Lydia asked quietly.

Elizabeth had thought it best not to mention him, except in passing to say that he was very relieved by her safe recovery, but she could not avoid him now. "He would like to see you, but you were particular about not seeing him."

Lydia blew her nose. "I kissed him." Elizabeth started and stared. "It was wrong and stupid, but he was there and I wanted to and then he shoved me away and he and Jane fought and it was all about me, it is always about me."

Elizabeth passed her hand over her eyes, but managed to recover her aplomb. "How did running away make anything better?"

"I thought if everyone could just be rid of me--I thought I could--oh, I do not know what I was thinking! I was not thinking."

"No, you were not. You act on impulse, Lydia. You must learn to think, or you will not be happy in the long term, and you will never be respectable."

Lydia nodded, and Elizabeth saw real consideration in her eyes and thought it was perhaps the first time that Lydia had actually listened to what she had to say. She decided it best to not belabor the point.

Lord Buxton had urged her to take advantage of any diversion his house could offer, though he acknowledged that they were few. His library was impressive. He had feared it would not be to
her taste, and had offered to send his man to the circulating library, if she cared for something else, but Elizabeth found a volume that interested her and set out to find a quiet place to read it. She entered a sitting room and was nonplussed to find Colonel Fitzwilliam already there, along with a man she did not recognize on sight.

"I beg your pardon," she said, and began to withdraw, but Fitzwilliam called her back.

"Please allow me, Miss Bennet, to introduce you to my cousin, Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth could not help coloring deeply, but she managed a curtsy. Mr. Darcy hesitated. A look passed between the cousins and Elizabeth judged, correctly as it happened, that they had been talking about Mr. Bingley.

Mr. Darcy bowed. "Miss Bennet."

"I once again beg your pardon for intruding," Elizabeth said. "Please, allow me to leave you in peace."

"Not at all," said Colonel Fitzwilliam. "You may go if you like, but I beg you will not on our account. Did you find something of interest in the library?"

"Bartram's Travels."

"Do you read very often? If you do, you will have much to talk about with Mr. Darcy, for he is forever in a book."

"I do not read so often as that," Elizabeth said.

Another look passed between Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy, but Darcy would not be swayed by Fitzwilliam's imploring expression. He took his leave.

Lydia was well enough for Elizabeth to go down to dinner. It was a very small party. In attendance were only Lady Buxton and her sons, and Lady Huntly, who failed to even notice that Elizabeth was wearing one of her old gowns. Colonel Fitzwilliam, Lady Huntly, and Lady Buxton were amiable and well-bred. Lord Buxton was on what he thought to be his best behavior, but as he was well aware of his tendency to say the most impolitic things at the worst time, this meant he was largely silent.

Lady Buxton observed Elizabeth throughout. She was a witty girl, thoughtful, well-bred, and without a hint of vulgarity about her. There was nothing extraordinary in her. Sadly, her fortune was small, her connections were not great, she was not ton. Ton having failed to attract either of her sons, Lady Buxton was not inclined to complain if Miss Bennet succeeded, but nothing happened to raise her hopes that evening and Lady Huntly, on being informed of her mother's thoughts, was less enthusiastic.

"She will never do for Andrew. She is too strong, he needs a meek sort of girl, or he will be on Queen Street his whole life."

"Mary, pray do not use vulgar expressions."

"I beg your pardon, Mama, but it is the truth. I do not like her for Andrew, and Richard can do far better than some country miss with no fortune. I am determined to get Harriet Stanhope for him. Did Mrs. Stanhope say anything while you were with her? Richard needs just a little encouragement from that quarter to find himself thoroughly in love, I am sure of it."

Lady Buxton would not give up her plans so easily, but when Elizabeth joined them at breakfast,
and Lady Buxton thought she looked astonishingly pretty in her simple morning dress, Fitzwilliam gave her only a passing glance of admiration while Buxton did not look up from his newspaper. Lady Buxton hid her sigh behind a cup of tea.

Mr. Darcy came to speak to Fitzwilliam. He had no intention of staying to breakfast, but Lady Buxton was determined that, whatever Mr. Bingley's grievance against her nephew, and whatever its justness, her table would not be a battle ground. She implored him to sit down.

Surprisingly, it was Buxton who attempted to introduce conversation to the awkward gathering. "Well, you will never guess who I saw yesterday while I was leaving Tilburn's shop. It was...I am so very bad with names...not Wilson...the one we all used to play with as boys when we were at Pemberley...the son of Darcy's father's steward...Wickham, George Wickham."

Elizabeth jarred her tea cup and spilled its contents onto her plate of toast. "Wickham!"

She was too discomposed to notice the silent expression that passed between Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy. "Do you know Mr. Wickham?" Fitzwilliam asked, forced nonchalance in his voice.

"Yes," Elizabeth said softly.

"Is he a friend of Mr. Bingley?" Darcy asked, and though she could not quite read the emotion in his voice, she perceived that it was not complementary toward Mr. Wickham, or her brother-in-law.

"He is not. He may have pretended to be once, but he is no longer welcome in any house of Mr. Bingley's." She frowned severely. "Nor will I willingly admit him to my presence ever again."

Darcy said, "Mr. Wickham has the manners which allow him to make friends easily. I do not believe him capable of keeping them for very long, however."

Elizabeth met his eyes, but she looked away quickly and Mr. Darcy turned his attention to filling his coffee cup. A servant took away her ruined plate of food and put a clean plate in front of her, but she had lost her taste for breakfast. Lady Buxton found a new topic, but Elizabeth was hard pressed to rouse herself to participation in a discussion of the latest architectural plans for cottages. In any case, Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam did not stay long at the table.

Mr. Bingley came to visit Lydia. She was sitting up in bed. Not having a mind inclined to reading or thinking or other quiet, solitary diversions, and having reached the state of health where being ill is not enough to take up all of one's energy, she was bored out of her skull. Mr. Bingley's visit, however uncomfortable for her, was at least something different.

Bingley pulled a chair close to the bed. He had not gotten out two words before she asked him, "Do you hate me?"

"No."

"I made a mess of everything again, and you and Jane fought because of me."

"Jane and I did not fight because of you. Jane and I fought because...because...it had very little to do with you."

"You should hate me. Lizzy says I never think before I act and I am sure she is right, but I am so bad about it and I am sure I shall never change and--" She broke off. Bingley was smiling. "What?"

"Never change! You are sixteen years old, Lydia. If you knew what a mess of a boy I was at
sixteen, and at eighteen, and even at twenty, all impulsive stupidity and...Lydia, the man I am at three and twenty is not the man I was at one and twenty and is certainly something different from the boy I was at sixteen. I would lay odds that the woman you will be at three and twenty will be something other than the girl you are now."

"I will be worse then."

"I do not believe that."

"Perhaps I am simply destined to be a bad person."

"If you ever express such a foolish sentiment again, I will bring Buxton in here to express his thoughts on John Calvin." He said it with such an air of mock-gravity and threat that he succeeded in drawing a smile from Lydia. Quite unconsciously, he reached out to touch her hand, not having the least suspicion of the effect that such an action had on Lydia, who had been sure he would never touch her again. He left her in a chair by the window, wrapped up in blankets, commanded to do nothing to exert herself, but at least able to watch the people on the street below.

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Elizabeth was to profit from more than Lady Huntly's abandoned wardrobe. The lady being an accomplished musician, and a new pianoforte and harp being some of the items which had been added to Lord Huntly's house upon his marriage, she had left behind her a fine collection of instruments which saw little use, and of which Lady Buxton encouraged Elizabeth to avail herself.

Lydia was by then well enough to leave her room, and almost well enough to leave Buxton House, but the weather was cold and Lord Buxton was over-cautious by nature. He insisted she stay until all symptoms of her ailment were gone. Lydia was simply glad to be let out of her room. She was dressed in a pretty pink gown, more modest and simple than she generally chose for herself, and as pins caused her lingering headache to return, her hair was tied back and decorated with a simple ribbon. The effect was to make her look younger than her years despite her height and figure.

Elizabeth played a slow tune while Lydia, determined on a course of self-improvement, worked at her embroidery with a focus that she had never shown before. "Lizzy, I've gone and tangled it all up again."

Elizabeth smiled, attempting to display a patience she did not feel, and rose to fix Lydia's work. She was so focused on the mess that Lydia had made of her project that she didn't notice another person in the room until Lydia said, too loudly, "Is that him? Is that Mr. Darcy?"

Elizabeth nudged her and rose to curtsy to the gentlemen, who bowed in return.

"I hope we have not disturbed you," Fitzwilliam said. "Pray, do not stop what you are doing on our account. Darcy has only come to take some sheets of music for his sister." As he spoke, Mr. Darcy was sorting through the music.

"Lizzy was playing," said Lydia. "I do not see why he should take her music."

"If Mr. Darcy cared to take my music," Elizabeth said, with a quieting look at her sister, "I would object, but as he takes his cousin's music, I have not the least thing to say except that I hope his sister will enjoy her playing."

"Do you play, Miss Bennet?" asked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

"That depends on the meaning behind your question. If you mean to ask whether I am able to place my fingers on the keys and compress them in the proper order as I read the music, then I may confidently answer yes, but if you are inquiring as to whether in doing so I can give pleasure to an audience, I fear my reply will not be so certain."

"A modest reply," said Fitzwilliam.

"Not at all," Darcy said. "It is anything but."

Elizabeth turned her attention to him. "How do you suppose to say so, sir?"

"Your answer will naturally spur my cousin to demand a performance so that he may judge your playing for himself, and so you will be compelled to display the accomplishment."

"Your supposition is founded upon my playing being worth displaying."

"I know it to be so, for I heard you playing while I was waiting in the hall, and I have rarely met
with a young lady of talent who is not aware of her own skill and confident in her ability to please."

"Upon my word, Colonel, does Mr. Darcy suppose every woman to be so artful in her speech or I am singled out among my sex?"

"I cannot answer to that," said Fitzwilliam, "but I assure you that my cousin does not confine his severity to the fair sex. Had you been a man, he would have censured your answer just as forcefully."

"It was not censure, only a statement of fact."

"Your facts are the postulations of other people," Elizabeth said.

"And, indeed, I must disagree with my cousin for his own sister proves him to be false. Georgiana herself is perhaps the most accomplished young lady I have ever met with and yet she will hardly play for me, such is her lack of confidence in her own skill."

"Georgiana does lack that assurance which other young ladies have, but she in fact proves my original assertion. Had you put the question to her, a simple 'yes' would have been your answer, which would not have left such a perfect opening for her to be compelled to play."

"How can one argue with such powerful logic? I see that I will have to watch my speech very carefully when I am in Mr. Darcy's presence, for no careless statement will escape his thorough examination."

Colonel Fitzwilliam, seeing that she was really piqued, said, "Perhaps, Miss Bennet, you will be so kind to play for us this evening. My cousin may express his admiration of your talents, but I have no such certainty of your skill and I should very much like to hear you play. I confess that I am made all the more curious now that Darcy has heard you, and judged you very good, though he is a most severe critic."

"I said only that Miss Bennet had some true skill and talent, I said nothing of her being very good. Fitzwilliam, you know that I despise an excessive superlative."

Fitzwilliam gritted his teeth in annoyance, knowing all too well that his cousin was impossible when he had gotten himself into a mood such as this. Before he could speak again, Lydia said, "Lizzy does play very good indeed. Mr. Bingley says she is the best he has ever heard."

"What I perceive to be Mr. Bingley's knowledge of the world of fashion and taste does not lend great weight to such a statement."

"Well perhaps he might know something more of the world if you hadn't taken his money," Lydia said, forgetting all her resolutions to be a demure and discreet young lady.

Mr. Darcy turned red. "Is that what he says of me now? I have faults enough, Miss Lydia, but I promise you that among them you will not find thievery."

Elizabeth put her hand on Lydia's arm. "My sister has been downstairs quite long enough, I think. It is time for her to rest."

"I ought to counter-sue the man for slander," Darcy said when they had gone.

"I beg you will not," said Fitzwilliam. "Or, if you must, wait until I have gone overseas and can have all intercourse with my family through the blessed remoteness of letters."
Darcy paced the length of the room. "Whatever could have induced your brother to form an intimate friendship with a man such as Mr. Bingley is truly beyond me."

"Notwithstanding that I hate Mr. Bingley for his slander against you, I must say that his friendship with my brother seems genuine. Andrew speaks most highly of him, and whatever my brother's other faults, he is not prone to exaggeration." He hesitated and added, "I do wonder what did happen between you."

"He and his father were tenants on one of my estates, and not of any rank or status whatever his present claims of being a gentleman. I certainly never laid eyes on him before this season. My father and his had some business dealings together, and his father owed mine some five hundred pounds which my father, for whatever reason--he never spoke of it to me--was very forbearing when it came to payment. Not very long after my father died, I received word that my solicitor in the area wanted to lend him another fifty pounds. I was not pleased, but given that my father evidently had some regard for the man, I let it proceed. I would even have accepted the meager and inconsistent payments that he had been giving my father, but when he stopped paying altogether, I thought it a little excessive." Darcy shrugged. "When I inquired of my solicitor he confessed that he had been misled. He had thought the money needed by the old man to recover some money of his own which would in turn allow him to clear his debt to me entirely."

"Instead, it seems that old Mr. Bingley was simply financing his son's bad behavior. It was his son--the same man who now seeks to slander my good name to my family--that squandered the money and thought that he could take advantage of some vague connection with my father to avoid repaying a single shilling. I told my solicitor to take whatever steps he thought necessary to recover the money, but in truth I never thought I would see it again."

He frowned deeply. "Neither did I think that that same irresponsible young man would intrude on me again."

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat. "I hear that the old man was put into debtor's prison. He was very ill and died there."

"That was not my intention to see him suffer for his son's bad behavior. Still, if he was fool enough to let the boy take advantage of him in that way..."

"You didn't know?"

"No. I make it a point to avoid listening to gossip, especially when it concerns me. And as for Bingley...I had almost forgotten all about him."

"Odd," Fitzwilliam said. "You are usually so meticulous in making sure that you know everything that is being done in your name."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Do not look at me like that. I am merely stating a fact. You are entirely certain that everything was carried out with propriety? In a case such as this...you are certain of the solicitor's good conduct?"

"Mr. Harris served my father before me and he serves me even now." Darcy looked his cousin square in the face. "I have acted honorably in all my dealings with Mr. Bingley and his father. I will not address this again, not even with you."

Fitzwilliam knew how much it must appall him to be accused of dishonorable conduct. He changed the subject.
Fitzwilliam hoped that when Lydia finally left Buxton House, the awkwardness of so many meetings between Darcy and Bingley's relations would be lessened, but they simply changed location. It was the end of January, not yet the Season, but there were plays and balls at every turn. Darcy was often with Fitzwilliam, Bingley was often with Buxton, and the brothers could not entirely avoid each other. Mr. Bingley refrained from any more bold displays of displeasure with Mr. Darcy's company. For the sake of their friends and relations, they were even seen to bow to one another, but they were not to be induced to any further intercourse, and even Buxton eventually gave up his hopes that they might reconcile and release him from his uncomfortable position.

Sadly for those whose enjoyment was in gossip, it was an uninteresting story. Had their dispute been over a woman, far more hushed conversations would have been had behind ladies fans, but it there was nothing so titillating to be talked about, and after the initial murmur of gossip had passed 'round London, the talk died down to almost nothing.

Jane was much admired as she took in the pleasures of the ton. "Can they not see my ring?" she asked Lady Buxton after she had at last escaped a persistent admirer.

"Your ring encourages them, Mrs. Bingley. They may flirt as outrageously as they like with you, without a thought to whether or not they would like to marry you."

Elizabeth, next to her in beauty, though not safely wed, attracted no small number of admirers herself.

"You ought to put a price on her," Lady Buxton said to Jane as they sat side by side watching the dance at Sir Edmund Wallace's winter ball.

"Put a price on her? I beg your ladyship's pardon, but she is not a horse for sale."

Lady Buxton laughed humorlessly. "This is the marriage market. She is no better than a side of beef at the butchers." Jane blushed and turned away. "I have offended you with my vulgarity. I apologize. At my time of life, one clearly sees that it is the truth itself that is vulgar, and one tires of screening it behind pretty words. Marriage is more business than romance. There is not a man here who would marry without knowing what he can expect for his trouble."

"Lizzy would be a credit to any man's name. Is that not enough?"

"Find me such a man here who prizes character above a handsome face and a handsomer fortune and I will eat my fan."

Jane was saved from having to reply by Lydia who plopped down next to her and exclaimed, "Lord, I'm fagged. I beg your pardon. I mean, I am exceedingly fatigued." She fiddled with her fan. "Do you think my dress is too low? I do not think that man looked at my face above twice the whole time we danced."

Lydia's dress would not have been too low for a girl less amply endowed, but for Lydia it was not quite the thing. "Do not be concerned with it now. Later, I can perhaps add some lace or a bit of spare material," Jane said.

"Good evening, my love," Bingley said from behind Jane and she looked up in surprise at his appearance. He bent down and would have kissed her cheek had Jane not stopped his lips with her fan.

"I perceive you have been in the punch."
"Only enough to warm me. Buxton and I came from Brook's just now. He would rather have stayed, but it was all politics and debate and I begged him to go. Devil of a cold night out there." Lydia was carried off to another dance and Bingley took the seat by Jane. "Dare I ask for your hand? Or is it too provincial to dance with my own wife?"

"I have no dances left to offer."

"I am too late! I pity myself exceedingly, though--" Here he leaned very close and said something that caused Jane to blush and hide her face behind her fan.

Bingley, failing to gain his wife's hand, wandered off to seek the company of another. Jane was taken off by a gentleman, and Elizabeth, who lacked a partner, took the seat by Lady Buxton. Mrs. Stanhope took the chair on Lady Buxton's other side and, giving a spare nod to Elizabeth, said, "Well, my dearest Adelle, have you seen Sophia Fitzwilliam this evening? Horrid woman! I detest her thoroughly because she is vulgar and illiberal and foists her brat of a child off upon you as if you had some responsibility to care for him. I say the next time she contrives to leave him with you, you should sell him to a chimney sweep. But, it will cheer you when you see what a ridiculous gown she has chosen. All white muslins and things suited to a girl of nineteen, not a widow on this side of fifty! I say this, you see, not wrong, or the other, since I woke up the other day and discovered I was one and fifty, though I declare I know not how it happened. Now, there is Harriet dancing with your son. I have been working on her for you. She is sensible that it is a good match. It is only that Harriet is vain, and would prefer someone..."

"Handsome?" offered Lady Buxton.

Mrs. Stanhope blushed. "And who is the girl Mr. Darcy is dancing with?" Lady Buxton could not say. "Adelle, tell me truly, is he betrothed to Miss de Bourgh? One hears such conflicting reports."

Elizabeth glanced up, surprised, for though in general she heard more of Mr. Darcy than she cared to, she had not heard of a betrothal.

"I cannot satisfy you about that either, Bess. I know not what Mr. Darcy intends with Miss de Bourgh. I know his mother wished the match. That, I suppose, will be a great inducement for him to carry through with it, besides her fortune."

Across the room, Darcy was not thinking of Anne de Bourgh, nor was he thinking much of his partner. He had, for the third time, found his gaze pulled to Miss Bennet. She was seated by his aunt, her lively eyes moving around the room with obvious enjoyment. It was a rare thing that a woman interested him, and he had spent some time trying to puzzle out why a woman of no great birth or breeding, connected to a man he regarded as an irresponsible rascal, should have captured his attention. He suspected it had something to do with her eyes, and was sure that a fancy based on such an inconsequential thing would soon pass away.

"Do I distract you, sir?" asked his partner, vexed.

Darcy gave a guilty start, but was saved from having to explain himself by the end of the dance. The young lady stormed off to find a more worshipful gentleman to lead her onto the floor and Darcy was accosted by Fitzwilliam. "If all of your partners leave you in such agitation, I can only say that it is for the best that you rarely dance."

Darcy pressed his lips together and forced himself not to look toward Miss Bennet. "Where is your partner?"

"Gone back to her mother," said Fitzwilliam, nodding to where Miss Stanhope had gone to join
Mrs. Stanhope. The younger lady was introduced then to Miss Bennet, and Darcy was able to watch her as she rose for the introduction without fearing he was being too overt in his admiration.

"Do you like her?"

"I do not dislike her. My mother and my sister are forwarding the match." He steered Darcy out of the ballroom. They passed through the card room and into a small room that, though open to the guests, was presently empty. "My mother wants me to marry. She will not let it alone."

"So marry, then. Andrew likely never will, and one of you must."

"Now you sound like my mother."

A man and a woman came into the room, the gentleman's hand resting in an improper place, and both Fitzwilliam and Darcy instantly recognized them as a lady of fashion and a baronet who was not her husband. The lady blushed, Darcy frowned, and Fitzwilliam excused both himself and his cousin from the room.

"Another crim con trial in the making," Fitzwilliam murmured to Darcy.

They made their way back into the press of the crowd, both thinking that Sir Edmund had gotten a good deal too liberal with his guest list of late. In the ballroom, they saw Buxton speaking to Miss Lydia Bennet, and were surprised to see him lead her out onto the floor for the waltz.

Lydia had wanted to waltz, but Jane had not been inclined to let her stand up with a man she did not know. It would have been too mortifying for Bingley to stand up with her, besides that he was engaged to another. Buxton had been quietly prevailed upon by Bingley to lead her out. Buxton, never at ease in a dance, and less when he was forced to touch his partner, stared over Lydia's shoulder and cursed his sister for having made him learn to waltz at all.

"Mr. Darcy is with your brother," Lydia said. She was almost as displeased with her partner as Buxton was with her.

"He very often is. They have been like that since children."

"I do not like Mr. Darcy. He was cruel to my brother."

Buxton shrugged.

"He was! You do believe that? If you do not, you are no friend of Mr. Bingley's."

"Bingley is a good man, and Darcy is a good man, and I do not know what to think."

"They cannot both be good men, and I know my brother-in-law is one, and therefore Mr. Darcy is a liar and a cheat."

Buxton led her to the side and bumped into another couple. Lydia rolled her eyes.

"I think they are both good men. They are both good men, and why they should have such wildly different stories..."

"Ow!"

Buxton glanced down at her offended foot, but was too distracted by his thoughts to say anything.

"Oh, do not trouble yourself. It is not as if I need that foot to walk on. I have another, after all."
Several moments later, Buxton finally roused himself from his pondering. "Did you say something?"

The music ended. Lydia had never been so glad to end a dance in her life.

* 

Bingley was a light sleeper, but a dancing and a heavy dinner and too much good wine had done him in. Jane had to nudge him three times before he roused. It was the ambiguous time when late becomes early, perhaps three or four in the morning.

"What is it?"

He could not see her, but he could hear how quickly her breath was coming. "I need to ask you something."

Bingley opened the bed curtains and lit a candle. It was only a little light, but they both blinked hard. She was sitting up in bed and he leaned up on one elbow. "Have you slept at all?"

She shook her head. "My..." She made a sort of gesture with one hand. "It has come again."

"Are you in pain?"

"No. That is not it. I need to ask you..."

"Yes?"

"Did I do something wrong with Anne? Was I a bad mother?"

"What?"

"I fell pregnant with Anne so quickly, but now it has been months and there have been no other children, and I begin to wonder if Providence has not seen to fit to deny me because--"

Bingley sat up fully. "Jane, please tell me that you have not been lying awake for hours tormenting yourself..." The way she twisted the blankets between her fingers was answer enough. He grabbed her hands and held them tightly between his. "You were a good mother to Anne and when we are blessed with another child, you will be a good mother to them as well. I know you know that. Why..."

The tears began to fall, silent and fast, down her cheeks. "Forgive me, I--it has been months. I should not..."

He kissed her cheeks and tasted salt on his lips.

She sniffled loudly and lay down. He rolled onto her, letting his head rest between her breasts. She ran her hand through his hair. "I want to go home."

"We will start making preparations tomorrow."

"You do not mind, do you? You have been enjoying yourself here. You are more at home in London than I am."

"I am at home where you are, Jane. London or Longbourn, it makes no difference to me." He uttered a contented hum as she played with his hair and fell back asleep. Jane licked her thumb and forefinger and reached over to put out the candle. She finally fell asleep.
Chapter 17

Two things happened.

First, Sophia Fitzwilliam lost her Almack’s voucher. Mrs. Stanhope was one of the Lady Patronesses of Almack’s, and rumored to have been instrumental in this decision. Lady Buxton was forced to choose between her friend and her dead husband's sister-in-law in the ensuing feud. It was not a hard decision. When Mrs. Fitzwilliam declared that she took refuge in the fact that her son would inherit Kentridge, Lord Buxton being half-mad and his brother being a confirmed bachelor, Lady Buxton was most seriously displeased.

Second, Lord Buxton, upon being asked by his mother how he liked Sir Edmund's ball, replied that his dance with Miss Lydia had been the highlight. It had been an attempt at wit, an attempt to express how little he had enjoyed any of it, but Buxton was not known for wit, and Lady Buxton took him in earnest.

* * *

Lady Huntly was stretched out on the couch by the fire, propped up by an impressive mound of pillows. "Invite Miss Lydia Bennet to stay with me? Whatever for?"

"I cannot ask her to stay at Buxton House," said Lady Buxton. "We must tread softly and carefully. Your brother startles easily."

"Richard would not startle if you dropped a pianoforte from thirty feet and it landed next to him."

"Andrew, Mary, we are speaking of Andrew. Have you listened to a word I said?"

"No. I do not care about Richard or Andrew or balls or Lydia Bennet. I have not moved my bowels in four days, I cannot lie down without getting the heart-burn, my legs are swollen and hideous, and every day a new ache is added to my existence."

"In short, you are with child. To hear you speak, one would suppose that no one but you has ever suffered such inconveniences before."

"You have no pity on me."

"I have pity, but your complains are excessive. Now, let us return to the matter of Andrew and Miss Lydia Bennet or I shall tell you again how you alone of all my children kept me in labor pains for three days."

"Lydia Bennet is vulgar and low. How you can even contemplate her succeeding to your place as the Countess of Buxton is beyond my ability to comprehend."

"I confess I do not like her above all others, but your brother waltzed with her, and told me the very next day that it was the best part of the ball."

"Andrew said that?"

"He did."

"If he wants her, let him pursue her. He has connection enough in Mr. Bingley to seek her company."
"I would rather she stay in London. I cannot conceive of your brother going to Hertfordshire after her."

"I do not want her in this house. I do not want to pretend to like her for eight weeks together. It is bad enough that I must pretend to be interested in her when I see her in company because Richard pulled me into the whole sordid affair after she thrust herself upon Buxton House. Besides, what if she does not like him?"

"Am I about to kidnap the girl and force her to exchange vows with Andrew? I only want proximity. Proximity does more for love than anything else. Miss Bennet will be with her, and they will be able to enjoy the Season. Really, I am doing a great deal for this girl on the faint hope that she might one day marry Andrew and bear him a son with whom I can spite Sophia."

"You? I am the one who must bear the inconvenience of guests. No. Absolutely not. I am miserable already with breeding. I need no more trials on my nerves."

"If you do this for me, I will see to it that Lord Peter gets a commission in the Life Guards."

"How..."

"Do not trouble yourself with that, only trust that it can be done."

Lady Huntly was silent for some time, contemplating the benefits to her if she were to be the one to succeed in freeing her husband from his annoyance of a brother. At last, she smiled sweetly. "Do tell Miss Bennet and dear Lydia that I am so much looking forward to their visit."

"Mary, you are kindness and condescension itself," said Lady Buxton and kissed her daughter's forehead.

*

Kitty took to her room for two days upon learning that Lydia had been invited to stay for six weeks on Saint James Square as the special friend of the Marchioness of Huntly. They were nearly packed to return to Longbourn. It was only a small matter of separating Lydia and Elizabeth's trunks from those of Jane and Bingley and sending the former to Huntly House while the latter returned to Longbourn. Astonishingly for those who knew her well, Lydia wanted to stay with Bingley and Jane, but she was at last forced to admit that two more months in London was far more exciting to her than spending the last of February and March and early April at Longbourn.

They were soon ensconced at Huntly House, to avail themselves of the hospitality of the Marquess and Marchioness. Lord Huntly was much involved with politics and rarely at home, but Lady Huntly—despite her occasional claims of pregnancy-induced invalidism—was quite active. She looked Elizabeth and Lydia over after their arrival and quickly determined that if she was going to be saddled with unwanted guests, she would at least make them over into young ladies of fashion that she could safely have associated with her name.

"Miss Bennet...oh, odious titles and formality...may I call you Elizabeth?"

"If you like," Elizabeth said.

"Well Eliza, I suppose your brother-in-law gave you some money for your stay."

"Yes." Bingley had placed fifty pounds in her hands before he left, and charged her, with a wink, to be as reckless with it as her prudence would allow, adding that she would have more if she needed it. Elizabeth was determined not to need it.
"Your wardrobe needs a fair amount of work, I fear. Several new gowns at least..."

"I have enough for one new gown for myself and my sister."

"One?"

"Only one, your ladyship."

"Well, I will send for my own old gowns from my mother. I daresay there will be something in there for you, and your sister as well. Really, Eliza, the gown you are wearing now is rather provincial. You are in London now."

Elizabeth smiled into her work. She was wearing the muslin that Lady Buxton had given her. Lydia and Elizabeth were shortly outfitted in gowns which Lady Huntly had no need of, reworked to be of the latest fashion. Lady Huntly found after a few days that she actually liked Elizabeth. Seeing nothing that might expose her to ridicule, and ensuring that she was suitably attired, she was quick to introduce her into her own company.

Lady Huntly had no such fondness for Lydia, but Lady Buxton had her own plans for Lydia, and took her under her wing. Lydia rather conveniently developed a worshipful sort of reverence for Lady Buxton, who had a confident air, an ease and surety about her which Lydia, so prone to being tossed about by her own impulses and emotions, envied. A daily tea became their morning ritual.

Lydia watched as Lady Buxton set down her tea cup silently and attempted to imitate the action, though her cup rattled in the saucer and there was a moment when she felt sure that she would lose the spoon to the floor.

Lady Buxton's pug, Scarlet, jumped up on the sofa and rested her head on Lydia's leg. Lydia stroked her head absently.

"--and so I tried, but Lizzy was so tired of me after half an hour and I do not think the pianoforte is quite the thing for me, though I hate that I have no accomplishments. Do you think Lady Huntly will teach me the harp if I ask her."

Lady Buxton raised an eyebrow at her daughter's probable reaction to such a request. "I do not think Mary would be a very good teacher for you. If you want to learn, though music is something better learned in childhood, you should employ a master and go about it correctly. You must apply yourself to it."

"That is rather a lot of work, though, isn't it? I am very bad at applying myself. I have been trying, but it is so hard to be dutiful and industrious and all of the other things that Lizzy tells me that I should try to be. I sometimes wish that I could simply...stop being me and be someone else entirely. Someone good."

"My dear, if you want to improve yourself, you do not need to become another person. You must only find the parts of yourself that you like, and find ways to encourage them, and find the parts of yourself that you do not like, and discourage them."

"What if there are no parts of myself that I like? What if I am a bad person all the way through?"

"I assure you that you are not."

Lydia looked down at the floor and screwed up her courage, then looked up at Lady Buxton and told her the whole of what had passed between her and Mr. Wickham. Lady Buxton received the
tale with no great expression, and when she had finished said only, "A hard lesson to learn, but one that will serve you in your life to come."

"I was very stupid."

"We are all stupid in our youth. The trick is to avoid being stupid in your old age. The world loves a foolish girl, but despises a foolish old woman."

They were interrupted by a loud knock. Lord Buxton, on being allowed into the room, gave a slight nod to Lydia and said, "Mama, are we putting new wallpaper in the drawing room?"

"We are."

"I do not want new wallpaper. What is wrong with the old wallpaper?"

"It is out of fashion, and stained because your father smoked in that room"

"I do not want new wallpaper."

"You do not want it because it is new. In a month it will not be new, and then you will like it."

Buxton was not convinced, but he knew better than to argue with a woman in matters of interior design, and closed his mouth. He turned to go, but Lady Buxton called him back. "I have just recalled a matter that I need to discuss with the housekeeper. Perhaps you would be so kind as to keep Miss Bennet company until I return."

Buxton glanced at Lydia, who was scratching Scarlet's head. She looked no more enthusiastic about the idea than he felt. "I am poor company for a young lady."

"Show her your collections. You have a veritable museum." Without waiting for him to answer, she swept past him, whispering as she left the room, "The shells, not the bugs."

Buxton glanced at Lydia and then away. "Do you want to see my collections?" he asked the carpet.

"No."

Buxton relaxed and took up the newspaper.

* *

It was odd to be at Longbourn without either of Jane's sisters. The still of the house was a trial to both of them, but more to Bingley, who had an active personality and a distaste for silence. Jane found employment in attending to little things around the house. She saw to the nursery at last, which had been left untouched after Anne's death, and had things packed away for future children. Bingley shot when the weather allowed, rode even sometimes when it did not, and made himself a nuisance to Jane when neither diversion was open to him.

"It looks rather like a small dog."

"It is a rose."

"Well, yes, I can see that," Bingley said, leaning over Jane's shoulder. He took her embroidery hoop out of her hands. "But if you turn it like so...there, can you not see it?"

"I cannot see it. May I have my work back?"

Bingley handed it back and came around to sit beside her on the sofa. Every so often he would
Bingley handed it back and came around to sit beside her on the sofa. Every so often he would heave a sigh and shift in his seat, but he showed no signs of going elsewhere. Jane was trying to settle upon something for him to do when they heard a carriage on the gravel outside. Bingley went to the window and cried, "Louisa!"

"Your sister! Here?"

Bingley ran from the room, leaving Jane to look around the room anxiously, seeing every disarranged pillow and trace of dust. She went to the window and saw Louisa alight from the carriage. Her feet had barely touched the ground before Bingley embraced her, lifting her up off the ground in his excitement. Jane knew little of Louisa except that she was Mrs. John Griffith and had no children. Looking at her now, she saw a woman of fashion and beauty who rose only to her brother's shoulder. She took Bingley's arm as he led her into the house. Jane quickly straightened what she could, but the room was not to her satisfaction before Bingley came into the room with Louisa.

"--have not seen you in ages and ages." He introduced her quickly to Jane and pulled over a chair. "You must be chilled. It is terrible weather for traveling. Tea, of course you will want tea." He rang for the servant.

"How came you to be in Hertfordshire, Mrs. Griffith?" asked Jane as she poured.

"Oh, heavens, Jane, call her Louisa! We are all family."

"I am returning from a long visit to a friend, and when I happened to learn that I would pass within two miles of Longbourn, I thought I must go see my brother."

"I am glad you did. You will stay, of course," said Bingley.

"Yes, of course. I despise inns of every sort," said Louisa.

"Jane, you do not mind, do you?" Bingley asked, remembering belatedly that Jane might have some opinion on the matter.

Jane assured them she did not and left them to go have a room prepared for their guest, and see to it that Mr. Griffith's servants and horses were cared for. Louisa and Bingley fell into the easy conversation of a shared childhood, which was enlivened by the novelty of not having seen each other in many years. When Jane returned, she was entertained stories about her husband, including not a few that Bingley might have rather stayed untold.

"--and the painting was reckoned as a loss, of course. My grandmother switched Charles mightily, but he never gave heed to that, though he did squeal so at the time."

Bingley looked at Jane. "This is why I sleep on my stomach, you know. I spent half my childhood bent over a chair."

"You deserved every lash and more," Louisa said.

Bingley shrugged, torn between objecting in a bid for pity and a certain pride in his boyhood misadventures. "I have at least calmed with age, I think," he said finally. "I destroy very little these days, and Jane has not even the option of beating me for my misbehavior." Louisa laughed.

They ate a simple dinner and played cards in the evening. Jane retired early, but Bingley and Louisa stayed up to talk.

"How many children does Caroline have? I can never recall if it is two or three?"
"It is two, but she is breeding again, much too soon. It is not healthy."

They lapsed into silence, watching the fire burn. "How old were you when my father went away to India?"

"Eight, I believe."

"Do you remember him?"

"I suppose."

"What do you remember?"

"I recall that he was soft. I always thought of him as being soft. He had a comfortable lap."

Bingley smiled. "I remember so little from that time."

"You had far more chance to know him than I. You lived with him all those years."

"He was different then. He was ill and there was something sad and broken in him. I could see it even as a child. He tried to hide it, but it was there. I do not think he was like that before he went away."

"No," said Louisa. "He was always cheerful, I do recall that."

"I have been thinking about him a great deal lately. I have been trying to find out as much about his time in India as I can. He never spoke of it, but I suppose I think that if I knew more of it, I would understand him."

"Perhaps there is something in the papers my grandmother gave me."

"What papers?"

"A great many papers. You know our grandmother died last year--"

"I did not know that!"

"Did I forget to write to you? I suppose it slipped my mind. You never liked the old woman."

"I would have gone to pay my respects."

"Well," said Louisa with a wave of her hand, "it is not as if she left you anything in her will. I would have written to you if she had. When she died, she left me all of her papers, and there were boxes and boxes of them. She never could bear to throw away a letter however unimportant it was. I have yet to sort them...dull, tedious task. Do you want them?"

"I want the papers related to my father."

Louisa wrinkled her nose. "You have no idea how many letters and bills and records there are, Charles. You cannot expect me to sort it. I will send you everything and you may do the sorting, and send back to me anything you think I would care to have. I trust your judgement on that."

"You are very kind, dear sister."

"Yes," Louisa said. "You are my brother, however, and you are worth the trouble." She patted his head and went up to bed.
When Darcy entered Huntly House, he was led to a small saloon to await Lord Huntly, but hearing the sound of girlish laughter, curiosity drew him through the half-open door into the drawing room where Elizabeth and Lydia were seated together on the sofa. Elizabeth was laughing softly, but Lydia was doubled over in giggles. She held a book loosely in one hand and was holding it out toward her sister. "Lizzy, you must read now. I cannot read for laughing."

Elizabeth took the book. "Chapter Ten. Contains several incidents, in which the reader is expected to be very interested. Arabella had spent some hours in her closet--" She saw him from the corner of her eye and rose with a polite greeting.

Lydia, less practiced in displaying good manners, hesitated for a moment out of sheer spite, but finally roused herself and rose as well.

"I did not mean to intrude," Darcy said, unable to offer any explanation for his having in fact intruded on them. "The...door was not closed." He frowned.

"We were reading," said Lydia.

"The Female Quixote."

"Yes. I like it," Lydia said. "It is very diverting."

"It is one of my sister's favorite books. I do not care for it."

"I like it very much, and so does my brother," said Lydia, with the air of someone who had just gained the conversational superiority. Elizabeth nudged her.

"Do you not care for novels, Mr. Darcy?" asked Elizabeth.

"Books either have worth or do not have worth," Darcy said. "I do not base my opinions on their format. There is not a single character in The Female Quixote for whom I have the least respect, excepting the clergyman at the end. That is my quarrel with it."

"You need not make friends with the characters, sir. They are there to be laughed at, and perhaps teach young ladies not to let romances and fantastical stories form their opinions."

"I am not a young lady who needs to be taught such a lesson, and I do not have the patience to spend two volumes doing nothing but laughing at the follies of others."

"No, indeed, I am sure the world itself provides you with a great deal to laugh at."

"It does not. I am not one of those who turns everything into a joke."

"Nor, I hope, am I, but I do love to laugh."

Darcy fell silent. He spied the stack of books on the table. "I thought you did not read very often, Miss Bennet."

"The inclination and the opportunity do not coincide as often as I would like, but I have had more time for it of late. These books you see here are for my sister's edification, however."

"I am going to become well read," Lydia said.

Darcy looked at her in surprise. "An admirable goal."
Lydia shrugged. "It seemed easier than mastering the harp." Because she took joy in seeing Mr. Darcy uncomfortable, she added, "Lady Buxton recommended some of these, but I also wrote to my brother. Mr. Bingley is a great reader." Mr. Bingley was not a great reader, but Lydia had moved too far away for Elizabeth to nudge her again. "He said the last book he read was *The Wealth of Nations* which I think is the dullest book I have ever seen, but seems like a very smart sort of book for all that, and he thought I would like *The Comedy of Errors*."

"Anything else?" Darcy asked.

"N--no. That was all. He--he would read more, but he is always so busy running the estate and doing other very important things."

"Lydia, will you please fetch my shawl? I suddenly have a chill."

Lydia had grown shrewd enough to know she was being dismissed, but she went to get the shawl nonetheless.

"My sister is very loyal to Mr. Bingley."

"As are you."

"He has earned our loyalty many times over."

Darcy met her intelligent eyes and looked away before he could get drawn into them. "Mr. Bingley seems able to inspire a great deal of loyalty in his friends and relations. I confess it surprises me."

"Perhaps, sir, that is because you do not know him."

"I know enough of him."

"Knowing of someone is not the same as knowing them."

Darcy might have said more, but he heard Lydia return, and while he might have preferred to continue his conversation with Miss Bennet, he had had enough of her sister. He bowed his leave and returned to the saloon.

*
Chapter 18

Lord Buxton's collections were truly astonishing works of art. They spanned the globe, filled with specimens from every corner, often bought at great price and sometimes sought out and brought back on a commission from Buxton himself. Besides this, Buxton brought something of his own to them. He had a knack for sorting and organizing them in interesting ways. There were not many people who could truly appreciate his interest in flying insects, but those who did could spend hours peering into Buxton's specially made cherry wood chests, eager to see if the slow gradation of color from warm red to cool blues would continue, and if the next insect in line would be big or small, fat or thin.

He was bent over them, carefully cleaning the glass on one of the small cases which sat out on a stand—the servants did not touch the collections—when a sharp knock interrupted him. Buxton glared at the door without saying a word, but a second knock roused him to a minimum of civility and he called for the intruder to enter.

Lydia Bennet stood in his doorway. She wore a yellow muslin gown which had become her favorite and her hair was tastefully arranged in a mass of curls with a simple ribbon across the top of her head. Her bonnet hung from her arm by the strings and she held her kid gloves in one hand. Buxton could not be expected to pay attention to such things, but someone else might have noticed that her appearance had changed in the weeks she had spent with Lady Buxton. There was a maturity in her that ironically represented itself in her choosing more maidenly fashions for herself, as if she had grown comfortable in her own skin and was not running so breathlessly fast to be something other than what she was.

Lydia closed the door. She walked over to the table where the case of dragonflies lay open and reached out to touch the delicate iridescent wings.

"Don't," Buxton said and shut the case so quickly that Lydia had to snatch her hand away. She glared at him.

"Do you want to be married to me?"

"No!"

"Well I do not want to be married to you either."

"Who has any notion of our being married?"

"Your mother."

"What?"

"Lady Buxton wants us to be married."

"Did she tell you this?"

"Of course she didn't." Lydia rolled her eyes. "But she is always leaving us together, and talking about you as if you are so very wonderful, which I suppose she has to think you are, since you are her son, but I would rather speak about her. I like your mother far better than I like you. So I have been thinking, but I could not puzzle it out, and then I talked to Lizzy about it, and Lizzy said that she thinks Lady Buxton wishes a match between us, and I asked Lizzy what she thought I should do, and Lizzy said that I should not marry you if I do not want to, and I do not want to, so I think you should tell her it is not going to happen—your mother, I mean, Lizzy already knows."
"Why do I have to tell her?"

"Because she is your mother. Anyway, I am hoping that if you tell her rather than me, she will not lose interest in me, because I like taking tea with her very much. And, by the by, I think it is very unkind of you to fail to oblige her. You should marry. Roderick should not get your fortune. Lady Buxton told me he pulls Scarlet's tail. Brat."

"You just said you do not want to marry me. What makes you suppose that any other woman feels differently?"

"What does it matter how they feel? You are rich and you are an earl and they would marry you anyway."

"You would not."

"I might, if you asked. It would be very stupid of me not to. Only please do not ask, because I would rather not."

Buxton drummed his fingers on the table, thinking that she had very little to worry about on that score. "I would like to marry, if I could only find a woman who would not ask anything of me."

Lydia bent over the table and rested her face in her palm. "You will have to give her pin money. No one marries without pin money."

"I do not mean that. I mean that I only want to be left alone."

"I do not think Lord Huntly spends more than ten minutes a day with his wife, and they both seem perfectly contented on that score. If you really want a wife who will have nothing to do with you, you should marry Charlotte Lucas, though she is poor and plain and thoroughly an old maid. Maria said once that Charlotte wants everything that a marriage can offer, except the man." Lydia looked at the clock. "I am supposed to go riding in Hyde Park with Miss Stanhope. Good bye."

Lord Buxton was too lost in his thoughts to reply, but Lydia did not expect him to, and let herself out.

* 

It was a fine day for riding. The air was brisk, and there was only the promise of spring to be had, but the sun was out. Many gigs and phaetons which had been sadly neglected all winter were taken out to Hyde Park that day. While Lydia was being driven by Miss Stanhope, Elizabeth had joined Lady Huntly. Her ladyship dexterously maneuvered them through the throng of other vehicles as they made their rounds through the park, seeing and being seen by everyone who mattered.

Lady Huntly drew the carriage to a slow crawl when she saw her brother walking with a dark haired young lady.

"Walking, Richard? How provincial."

"Unlike the rest of you, I prefer to occasionally remind myself that my legs work. How do you do today, Miss Bennet?"

"Very well," Elizabeth said. "And I quite agree with you. With all respect and compliments to Lady Huntly's skill with a whip, I miss the simple pleasure of walking that one is afforded in the country."
"Good morning, Georgiana," Lady Huntly said to the young lady. Georgiana said something in reply that was almost too soft to be heard over the sound of the wind in the branches of the trees and blushed through her introduction to Miss Bennet.

"Georgiana is quite knocked up this morning. I was walking her home, but I am of a mind to stay out in the fine weather, and if Miss Bennet is agreeable, perhaps the young ladies might switch places. I am a very good walker, I warn you."

"I am not afraid," said Elizabeth. Colonel Fitzwilliam was a good walker, but so was Elizabeth. They fell into step together easily.

"Are you well acquainted with Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

"Very. I am her co-guardian along with her brother."

"Oh dear," Elizabeth said teasingly.

"Pray, why do you say so?" asked Fitzwilliam, not entirely succeeding at hiding his real alarm.

"Do not look troubled, I have heard nothing bad of her. I only know something of girls in that time of life. That is all."

Fitzwilliam relaxed. "It is not always easy, I confess."

"It is rarely easy," Elizabeth said, thinking of their difficulties in managing Lydia's behavior. She suspected, from what little she had seen of Miss Darcy, that she had never run so wild as Lydia, but something in Colonel Fitzwilliam's reaction to her teasing suggested that even the quiet Miss Darcy might have given her guardians some grievances.

"My mother speaks highly of Miss Lydia, which in turn speaks well of those who have cared for her."

They left the park and walked toward Huntly house. The street was quiet. It seemed almost deserted after the bustle of the park. "You yourself have been a witness to the difficulties that we have had," Elizabeth said quietly, dropping her voice despite the lack of potential eavesdroppers. "I do not know if I ever properly thanked you for the service that you did for Lydia in so capably protecting her reputation. Your entirely family has been more than good to her."

"My mother has grown fond of her."

"Lady Buxton has done her greater service than I think she knows. Lydia has recovered her spirits with her. I am very glad to see it."

"My mother mentioned she suffered a disappointment before coming to London." Seeing Elizabeth's concern he said, "She told me no more than that."

"It was a disappointment, but it was also an escape." She hesitated, then added, "I have perceived that you have no good opinion of Mr. Wickham, so perhaps you understand why I say it was both."

Fitzwilliam kept his stride but only just. "Mr. Wickham formed designs on her? I would not have thought her rich enough to tempt him."

"I do not know what his ultimate intentions were, and I do not care to attempt to figure them out. I spend as little time thinking about him as I can. He caused my family great pain and cost Mr. Bingley no inconsiderable sum of money. Lydia is wiser for it, however. Perhaps we all are."
"Indeed," said Fitzwilliam absently, nonplussed to learn that Wickham had meddled with another young lady. He invited himself into Huntly House with her, and went to speak to his brother-in-law while Elizabeth changed from her walking dress. He was pleasantly surprised to find that Darcy was also there, deep in politics with Lord Huntly.

"Darcy, you really ought to go to Parliament if you are so concerned about the state of the kingdom," Fitzwilliam said.

"I may, someday," Darcy said.

"I have a borough that you can have," said Huntly. "You could have your own way on most things."

"I thank you, but no," replied Darcy. He despised the system that allowed men like Huntly to offer up seats in Parliament as though they were handing out glasses of swizzle at a country party. If he went to Parliament, it would be on his own merits; he would not have his vote controlled by a puppet master in the House of Lords.

"Do you have need of me?" Huntly asked Fitzwilliam.

"No, I have something I need to discuss with Miss Bennet, but she is refreshing herself after our walk. She is a fine young lady."

"You are too deeply invested with Miss Stanhope to change horses now," Huntly said with a smirk. Fitzwilliam inclined his head with a small smile and Darcy frowned. Huntly continued, "Miss Bennet, for all that she is very fine in her way, has no equitable claim to anything more than a modest gentleman of respectable fortune."

"Matches are not always equitable," Fitzwilliam said. "A pretty face can open doors that remain shut to an ample dowry."

"Are you really considering her?" Darcy asked.

"I? No. Her dowry is too uncertain, and the situation between you and Bingley would give me pause even if it were not. Besides, I will offer for Miss Stanhope soon, but for heaven’s sake, nothing of that to my mother! Not until it is all settled."

"Will she have you?" asked Huntly.

Fitzwilliam shrugged. "We understand each other."

Darcy, relieved for reasons he had no intention of contemplating, said nothing. Huntly was called away to receive a visit from one of his bankers. He begged his guests to help themselves to his brandy while he dealt with the business.

"What is your business with Miss Bennet, if it is not personal?" asked Darcy, handing Fitzwilliam a glass.

"I wish to speak to her about her sister, and Andrew. My mother is playing matchmaker there, and I am not sure I approve."

Darcy grimaced. "Is Lydia Bennet to be the Countess of Buxton?"

"I sincerely hope not. My family and hers may be twining together, but that is taking things much too far, in my opinion."
"Your family has been most accommodating to the Bennets, and to Mr. Bingley," Darcy said quietly.

Fitzwilliam frowned into his drink. "It is not meant as disloyalty to you, you must know that."

"How else am I to take it?" Darcy asked sharply. "Mr. Bingley insulted me in company, and in turn your family brings him and his wife and sisters to their bosom, elevating them all far beyond anything they have claims to. Explain to me how that is not disloyalty."

Fitzwilliam looked away. "Bingley is a very likable man who has drawn out my brother from the queer little world that he inhabits. And whatever he was as a young man, I cannot consider him a rascal."

Darcy looked at him sharply. "And you?"

"Do not do that. This is not the Theater of Pompey." Fitzwilliam set down his glass and rubbed at his eyes.

They were interrupted by the return of Lord Huntly, who informed Fitzwilliam that Miss Bennet had come downstairs and was waiting for him in the saloon. Fitzwilliam spared one last speaking glance at his cousin.

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The Bingleys were not early risers. Jane, by nature prone to late mornings, rarely rose from her bed before ten thirty, and Bingley was often some minutes behind her. The tardy appearance of Mrs. Bingley this morning, however, was enough to cause talk between the servants. She came down stairs some time after one in the afternoon, and found Bingley in his study, in danger of being crushed by a tower of papers.

Jane took in the piles and boxes off papers with her mouth slightly agape. Bingley looked up, smiling. "Good afternoon, my love."

"Good afternoon. Why did you not wake me?"

"You were a sleeping beauty, a heavenly vision of purity. How could I, a mere mortal, presume to wake you?" He rose and kissed her soundly.

Jane laughed. "You are in an odd mood."

"This mess" (he indicated the room with a sweep of his hand) "may be doing unfortunate things to my sanity."

"Is this all from your sister?"

"Yes. It arrived this morning, all thirteen boxes. My grandmother never threw out a slip of paper in my life. For example--" He dug through a small pile that was stacked by the door. "I have here a bill dated July of 1784 for five pounds of beef."

"How can I help?"

"Please, don't trouble yourself. This is my project."

"Am I not allowed to be a part of it?"
"It is tedious and uninteresting, and I do not know why I am even bothering. There is no reason for you to be bothered."

"It is no bother."

He shrugged. "You have other things to attend to."

"Why will you not let me help you? Why are you so insistent about hiding this part of your life from me? You call me reserved!"

Bingley looked nonplussed. "I never..."

"I learned more about your childhood from your sister than I ever learned from you." She caught herself and took a breath. "I don't want to pry. I want to respect your privacy. I just wish that you were more open about your father. You tell me scarcely anything, but he is so clearly important to you."

"Ah--" He looked around and found a box that had not yet been opened. "Three piles. One for things that can absolutely be gotten rid of, one for things to send back to Louisa, and one for anything--anything--that might be related to my father. Anything that's related to India or has my father's name or--well, anything."

Jane nodded and began sorting. It was slow and tedious business, sometimes interesting, sometimes amusing, and mostly dull. Many of the papers were bills and other inconsequential things that could be tossed into the fire without a second thought. Some were letters that would be returned to Louisa. Jane was, on the whole, very cautious about retaining all of the letters, even the ones that seemed of no great importance. She saw her husband's name in a letter to Bingely's grandmother and smiled.

"--but I am sorry to hear that the boy troubles you. Send him to sea, if you wish to have another moment of peace. The boy needs discipline. A daily flogging is all that I can see will set him to rights."

Jane glanced at Bingley who was busy with another box. After reading the letter over to check that no valuable information was contained in it, she quietly tossed it into the fire.

Late in the afternoon, they took a break from the work, and took an early dinner in the dining room. Being alone, they sat together at the head of the table and stayed there long after the dishes had been removed.

Bingley held his port wine up and examined it in the fading afternoon light. "When I was a boy with my father, luxury was port wine. My father bought a bottle for Christmas ever year. Now I have as much as I can drink, but at the time, having it more than once a year was a dream. We bought a bottle when my father first learned that he had money in India."

He looked at Jane, who met his gaze steadily, not speaking. She was right, he was too closed off from her when it came to his past. Once, speaking freely about all that had passed with his father had seemed the most difficult thing in the world, but gain and loss and above all time had changed his perspective. As he began to talk, he found that the words came easily. "My father went to India with five thousand pounds, much of it borrowed from old Mr. Darcy, who thought that my father had merit, and business acumen. He was right. My father was a superb businessman. He managed nearly fifteen percent return on his investment during his first year in India, and ten percent the second year. But just as it seemed that he and his partner were close to realizing a great fortune, they suffered a--a severe reversal of fortune."
"What happened?"

"They lost a ship to privateers. My father lost ten thousand pounds and a good friend on that ship. He only spoke of that once. It was one of the very few times that I saw him weep." Bingley cleared his throat. "Things were rather dire after that. I do not know all the details, but there was a fire on one of the plantations, and business deals fell through, and then there was his illness... My father came home.

"When he first returned, I thought him the same man who had left us. A father is invincible in the eyes of his son you know, but he was very ill even then. It was...hard for me to realize that he was not the immortal that I believed him to be, and worse when I glimpsed the disdain in which he was held by my mother's family. They resisted his marriage to my mother, and when she died in the child bed with Caroline--I do think he was more than ill after India. I think he was broken. I never could make things any better."

"You were a child. Of course you could not."

"I suppose. I wasn't an easy child, though. I tried to be a dutiful son, but I had too much energy, and no head for studying my lessons. He wanted me to be the businessman that he could not, but at twelve I was more interested in swimming and running races than in ledgers. I still am, I suppose, though these days I have gotten good at feigning competence and responsibility."

Jane shook her head and smiled. Bingley picked up her hand and kissed the pad of each finger in turn. "My dead Mrs. Bingley, have I ever told you that the swirls on your fingers are the most lovely that I have ever beheld?"

Jane laughed. "Have you made a study of that particular feature in the general population, Mr. Bingley?"

"Ah, well, no. I confess I have not, but I am convinced that yours are a perfect specimen of the kind." He released her hand and sobered. "I was telling you a story, and I really must not let your physical perfections distract me." He sighed. "After my father came home, my grandmother, who despised him more than anyone, agreed to keep the girls but would not let me stay in her house, and so we were on our own with less than a hundred a year."

"How could you live?"

"It is not so very little as it sounds, or it would not have been if my father had been able to work, and had not been so determined to raise me as a gentleman, with all the trappings of education and breeding, and none of the money. We rarely went hungry, and were only occasionally entirely without heat. I never once feared the workhouse, and for that I am truly grateful."

It was warm enough now to have the windows open. A slight breeze came in, making the candles flicker. "My father still owed a great deal of money to old Mr. Darcy. He had paid back some of it during his prosperity, but there was a debt of more than a thousand pounds hanging over our heads. Old Mr. Darcy was a truly good man. He took whatever little we could spare, and never pressed for more, and when he came to understand the true extent of my father's illness and misfortune, he forgave the debt entirely. His son--"

"Charles?"

Bingley scowled down at the table. "Darcy lent my father fifty pounds, on the understanding that it would only be paid back if my father recovered some money from India that was owed him. When the money never came though, he demanded payment anyway, and when we couldn't pay, he had my father thrown into debtor's prison. He died there, in squalor and in his own filth."
"Did you not have a contract?"

Bingley smiled without a trace of humor. "It was filed with a solicitor, and somehow conveniently lost."

"It makes so little sense. Why would a man with as much money as Mr. Darcy go to such lengths over fifty pounds?" Jane slipped her hand into his. "I confess, I hate to think of someone acting so unscrupulously. And he is a relation of the Fitzwilliams, who have been so good to us."

Bingley shrugged. "You are wiser than I am, perhaps you can figure it out. I know only that it did happen."

He sorted papers late into the night, long after Jane had gone to bed. He found what he was looking for some time after midnight.
Mr. Darcy called at Longbourn the following afternoon. Jane was still asleep. Bingley had been up late and awake early, but though his mind was racing and he desired Jane's company, he suspected she was with child again, and did not dare interrupt her rest. He was sitting in his study drinking coffee and pondering over what he had found the night before when a servant knocked and entered with Darcy's card. Bingley stared at it for some time before he could properly understand what it said.

"Mr. Darcy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here to see me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why? What could he want?"

The maid wisely refrained from commenting that she was not in the habit of asking impertinent questions of her master's callers. She said only, "The gentleman is waiting in the hall. Shall I show him in?"

Bingley nodded and put away his papers. He was just coming to his feet when Darcy strode into the room.

"Mr. Darcy," said Bingley, with a nod.

"Mr. Bingley," said Darcy, with an answering nod. He took off his hat and gloves and set them on the table.

They stood staring at each other for a long moment. Bingley was not inclined to offer those small evidences of hospitality and warm feelings to a man for whom he had not a single hospitable or warm feeling and so refreshment was neither offered nor accepted. There was a gaping hole in the meeting where those little nothings which say so much should have been. Darcy at last said, "I do not suppose you were expecting me."

"I was not."

"I thought it better to come myself rather than trust someone else, or the post. I wish to settle things between us."

Bingley bit back his first exclamation of surprise and managed to confine himself to a slight raise of his eyebrows. He had the satisfaction of seeing Darcy grow uncomfortable under his silent gaze.

"You must understand that this goes against every proper feeling. Nothing but the highest regard for my family could induce me to do such a thing. Honor, pride, honesty, integrity, all of these must balk at the thought of such a capitulation. Your rank is so far beneath that of my own as to make this extended intercourse between my family and yours an affront to the standards of proper behavior. There is also the total want of propriety shown by your youngest sister and the connections which you maintain in trade. All of this, however, I am prepared to overlook. Though it pains me, I will settle with you for five thousand pounds. It is as good an offer as you are ever likely to receive. I despise myself for even offering it, but it seems I am willing to sacrifice even
my own self-respect for the good of my family, even if they show no great loyalty to me."

Throughout this speech, Bingley had turned first red, then white. His jaw was clenched so hard that it was with effort that he managed to speak at all. "Pray forgive me, sir, if your supreme condescension does not create in me the effect that you likely expect and I fail to fall upon the floor and kiss the tops of your boots. I have no interest in your settlement. As in that case we have nothing further to discuss, I will leave you to show yourself out."

Darcy's eyes widened. "And this is all the reply which I am to expect! I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little civility, I am rejected. But it is of small importance."

"You dare to speak to me of civility when you come into my home and insult me? When you attack the honor of not only myself, but my wife's sister and uncle?"

"Did you expect me to flatter you? You claim that I have attacked your honor, yet you have slandered me in the courts and in the streets. You have brought all this down upon me, made even my own family doubt me!"

"I have spoken nothing but the truth! You defrauded an ill and desperate man who had faithfully paid you out of his meager means for many years! But even this...had only our own letters been returned to me--had only my questions been answered satisfactorily--had only your solicitor or your steward or you yourself taken a moment-- What conclusion was I to reach in such a case? I went faithfully to Mr. Harris every week for six months and then every day for six weeks and he would tell me nothing at all. Finally he claimed to have returned everything to me when I had not the least awareness of receiving it. Five letters I wrote to you, all of them unanswered!"

"Your version of events paints me and those in my employ as unkind indeed, but I have every faith in Mr. Harris. He did return your letters to you, and put up with you for those many months with surely more patience than you deserved. As for your letters, I tell you truly that I read everything addressed to me, even the multitude of begging letters I receive each day--among which I do not doubt your epistles must have been numbered--and I tell you I did not receive anything from you. I do not know why you have decided to hate me, or blame me for all of your ills, but I am sorry to tell you that I am not the villain of your story."

Bingley shook his head. "So you tell me that I received letters that I did not and failed to write letters that I know I did. Forgive me, but though you are so far above me in rank, I am not inclined to take your word above my own memory. I do hate you, but it was not a decision reached lightly! Indeed, there was a time when you were to me the best man that I had ever met. But that was a very long time ago, and before I saw you in your proper light."

Darcy appeared for a moment confused. He took up his hat and gloves and opened the door. "I can see no advantage to our continuing in this argument. I will take my leave of you."

As soon as he had gone, Bingley collapsed back in his chair. He was shaking all over, hot with anger and mortification.

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Such was the condition of the roads and the superior construction of Mr. Darcy's carriage that he was returned from Hertfordshire in time for an early supper. He found that he was alone in his house, Miss Darcy having been invited to dine with her cousins. It was a condition which suited him entirely, and he sent his regrets to his cousins that he would not be able to join the party.

He took a simple dinner in the dining room, afterward settling himself in the library with a glass of brandy and one of his favorite volumes, but the peace that generally accompanied such an
arrangement did not follow. He set aside the book and sipped his brandy.

He was disgusted with himself. It took him some time to work out why, but his awareness of himself was too great for the discovery to remain hidden for a very long time, He had not kept his word to Fitzwilliam.

His intentions had been good, but finding himself facing the task of reviewing the contracts and letters and documents that a legal case brought about, his resolution had faltered. Why, after all, should he waste his time in a fruitless search and for what? To possibly benefit a man who had humiliated him in front of his friends and family and been rewarded for his arrogance and conceit by further intimacy with Lord Buxton and all his relations?

Ah, now that certainly pained him. Darcy was a man of strong loyalties, and to be thus treated by his closest family...insupportable! Worse still that Mr. Bingley's entire family seemed to be latching on to Darcy's maternal relations, like barnacles on a ship. Miss Lydia spent her days with Lady Buxton, Miss Bennet with Lady Huntly, and even their Cheapside aunt and uncle had been welcomed once or twice it seemed. Such extraordinary condescension seemed to him to be quite exceptional.

None of that, however, was an excuse for failing to keep his word. His father, that most excellent of men, had given him good principles, and he had always considered his obligation to keep his word as paramount. Attempting to take the easy way out of the situation by offering a settlement had been unworthy of him.

Darcy leaned back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head, crossing his legs.

The knock of a servant interrupted his thoughts, and a servant entered with the card of Colonel Fitzwilliam. Darcy hesitated for a moment, then nodded and in a moment his cousin was with him, grinning widely.

"Your congratulations! I am to be a married man!"

It was far from unexpected, but Darcy managed to rouse himself from his ruminations to sincerely congratulate Fitzwilliam. "It is an excellent match. Fortune, connections, and personality are all in favor of your happiness."

Fitzwilliam settled onto the chair across from him. "And my mother will stop nagging me. That also will add greatly to my happiness. It is to be hoped that the match will be blessed with offspring without delay, and then perhaps I will be able to sit through a private meal with her ladyship without hearing one discontented sigh from my mother's end of the table."

"I am sure she does not--"

Fitzwilliam gave him a look of weary exasperation.

"Ah. I see now why you capitulated."

"It was not all capitulation. I would not marry Miss Stanhope if I did not actually like her. I will tell you a very great secret. I think I may even love my bride to be."

Darcy smiled. "Then I am even more sincerely happy for you."

"And you?" Darcy's brows drew together. "Come now! It is well known that love is a contagious disease. The infected are driven to spread it. What of yourself?"

"I have yet to meet a woman who interests me sufficiently to induce me to matrimony."
"Have you told this to Lady Catherine?"

Darcy got up to refill his glass. "Forgive me, Cousin, but your teasing comes at a bad time. I have been to see Mr. Bingley today."

"Has he returned to London?"

"No. I went to his estate to make him an offer of settlement."

"What? All the way to Hertfordshire to talk to a man you despise! Why?"

"I wanted to speak to him man to man, but it was a mistake, and a foolish one. It ended badly." He related as briefly as possible the unpleasant scene between himself and Mr. Bingley.

"And he did not accept your offer? That is surprising. It surely would have been in his interests to do so."

"Yes," Darcy agreed, sitting down. It had puzzled him as well. Was it Bingley's pride? Perhaps. Darcy certainly could have found a more politic way of making the offer, but he had been so angry with being placed in the position of having to make it, and had had so much time to ruminate on the injustice during the ride to Hertfordshire, that at the time there had seemed to be no words strong enough to express his disapprobation of the situation.

Darcy frowned, contemplating the entire unpleasant scene in his head. Something about what had passed between them did not sit well with him. It had been more than pride in Bingley's face. There had been something else in his face, in his eyes. It had been...betrayal.

He sat up in his chair when he realized why the expression on Mr. Bingley's face had seemed so hauntingly familiar. It had been reminiscent of Georgiana's face when she had realized how terribly she had been betrayed by Mr. Wickham. Of course, the pain on Mr. Bingley's face had been much less marked, his countenance neither devastated nor guilt-ridden, but his eyes...

Darcy raised the glass to his lips, but set it down without actually drinking.

Fitzwilliam looked at him with a quizzical expression. "What are you thinking?"

"Only...only something about his words and his appearance. I--I hardly know--" Mr. Bingley's words had seemed to indicate that they had had relations prior to the mess about Old Mr. Bingley's alleged fortune, but if so, Darcy hardly recalled it. He searched his memory for the face, but it was an unremarkable face, blandly handsome, soft-featured and appearing younger than his years. The only thing at all notable about the man was his hair. "I remember that hair!"

"How much have you had?" Fitzwilliam asked, taking up the forgotten glass and eying it dubiously.

"I remember the boy now. Do you recall the year before I went to Oxford, when my father sent me to tour all of his estates? There was one...the family that was letting the main house ridiculed the old man who pretended to be a gentleman, but something about what they said intrigued me and I went to call on them.

"He...Bingley, I mean, he seemed to be all of nine or ten, though he must have been older." The boy had been caged energy, half climbing the walls, full of the high spirits of a young child, but seeming at the same time repressed and responsible beyond his years. "I have thought about that boy from time to time, but--I've never made a connection. How odd!"
Bingley had been hovering over his father, apologizing for having nothing to give their visitor, but explaining without embarrassment that they had been forced to let go of the maid earlier that month, and that they had very little coal and less food. The old man had been clearly in pain, and hardened by the difficulties of his life, but there had still been a kindness in him, and a tenderness when he looked at his son, that had struck Darcy to the quick.

"I remember that I ordered a present of coal made to the family and I wrote a letter to the boy, encouraging him in his studies and suggesting that arrangements could be made for his education if he applied himself. We exchanged some letters, in fact." Perhaps half a dozen of them, Bingley's always marked by appalling penmanship and a worshipful tone that had put Darcy in mind of what a younger brother might have been.

"It went no further?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"No." Darcy had gone to Oxford, his time had been taken up by his studies, by his own father's illness, by his being required to take on greater and greater responsibilities, and then his father's eventual death. Darcy had scarcely thought of that boy in years, but as a vague regret and a wish that he had followed up more fully on helping the boy to an education.

Darcy had always taken a measure of pride in not being the sort of man who could be easily swayed from his opinions, and he was well aware that forgiveness did not come easily to him. His good opinion once lost was lost forever.

And yet...

He had been wronged. Darcy's family ought to have stood by him more fully, and he suspected and was pained by the thought that their willingness to entertain Bingley had more to do with the man's easy nature and charm than with essential facts. Bingley had been foolish, Bingley had been impulsive, Bingley had been prideful.

Bingley had been a grieving boy.

Darcy's father had told him that a man fought for what was due to him, but that a good man yielded in order to serve the greater good.

To fulfill his word to Fitzwilliam; to look at it all again, this time giving Mr. Bingley some benefit of the doubt; to make peace with Bingley...surely that would serve the greater good.

"I begin to think that--I know not what I am thinking. I might call on him again."

"Do you think it likely to end well?"

"Ah. No." He trusted neither of their tempers in that situation. "But a letter, perhaps."

*

"We make an ideal pair," Jane said a few days later when she found Bingley awake and at his desk much too early, a cup of coffee at his left hand and papers in his right. "I sleep far too much and you hardly sleep at all."

He smiled but did not look up.

"What have you found?"

"Answers," Bingley said. "And more questions. It seems to be the way of it. I found letters from the Frenchmen with whom my father made his investment, and yet...the numbers do not seem to
add up. There's mention of an account that I have never heard of. I cannot make sense of any of it. I always had a sense that there was something more to this than...but it must be...if it went through a translator before being sent, then perhaps...this is surely wrong."

"Perhaps sleep would help," Jane said.

"Yes," Bingley agreed. He did not move.

Jane sighed the sigh of the long-suffering wife and sat down. "What did Mr. Darcy have to say?"

"Arrogant nonsense and...it doesn't signify. Nothing of importance. What the devil--" He glanced at Jane. "Beg pardon, but what does the Bank of England have to do with any of this?" He looked at Jane as though she could offer him all of the answers. She blinked at him. He shook his head and reached for his coffee, but sloshed it instead of picking it up. A few drops fell onto the papers on his desk and he stared at them for a time before registering what he was seeing.

Jane drew another breath, but she had not gotten one word out before Bingley held up his hand and said, "I need sleep. I know it. I will go now." He rose and kissed her. Turning to leave, he was stopped when Jane got up from her chair and caught him by his sleeve.

"Charles, will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Do not come back into this room for the rest of the day. You need to leave this for a time. You will drive yourself mad if you do not."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and smiled sheepishly. "Very well. I will go lie down for a few hours, and then we will go riding, if you think it will not do you harm."

Jane smiled and assured him that it would not.

Bingley went up to bed, intending to sleep for a few hours at most, but his exhaustion was greater than he knew, and he slept until it was nearly time for dinner. It was too late to ride, but they ate a pleasant dinner and afterward retired to the drawing room to play cards.

"I am sorry that we did not have our ride," Bingley said. "Tomorrow, perhaps, we will go out." The pile of papers on his desk pulled at him, but he had promised her a ride and he intended to keep his word.

"I am not sorry, if it means you have been able to sleep." She looked at him over the tops of her cards. "And, if you are rested enough, perhaps though you were not able to mount a horse today, you might find the energy to mount your wife tonight."

This bold statement, in combination with the gentle pressure of the top of Jane's slippered foot against the back of his calf, caused Mr. Bingley to lose all interest in the cards in front of him. They left their game unfinished, and the candles for the servants to put out.

The next morning Bingley did not allow himself to set eyes upon his desk until they had gone for their promised ride. As a consequence of his renewed attentions to his duties as a husband, the letter from Mr. Darcy sat on his desk for a full day before he ever knew it existed.
Chapter 20

When preparations for the marriage between Miss Stanhope and Colonel Fitzwilliam took over Buxton house, Lord Buxton locked himself away in his private rooms. No amount of cajoling on the part of his mother or sister could induce him out of them, and, Fitzwilliam being rather glad to have him removed from underfoot, he found active encouragement to stay away from his brother. Buxton despised company at the best of times, and to come down to breakfast and find that his carefully maintained schedule had been disrupted by arrival of Mr. Hawkes to consult about wedding attire was simply too much.

Despite what his sister claimed, as he was a man of no little means and had numerous servants to bring him food and other necessities, it was in fact possible for him to remain in his rooms until his brother married and went away. Nevertheless, finding himself without a desired volume of Richardson, and not trusting any of his servants to be able to locate it in less than an hour's time, he did at last slip from his rooms one afternoon, hoping that the gaiety of the wedding had been moved to another location for the day.

Head down, he barreled into the library and right into a woman he did not recognize. He jerked his head up and frowned severely, wondering how many strange people were going to invade his house before the matter was settled. As he was then actively avoiding company, he wore a dressing gown instead of a coat, had slippers on his feet, and had not bothered either to comb out his curly hair or shave.

The woman, startled by being thus struck and hardly reassured by the strange appearance of the man in front of her, stood dumb for a moment before recovering herself and curtsying. She had, fortunately, been forewarned about the odd habits of Lord Buxton, and been assured that he was not, as far as they could tell, actually mad, and that he was certainly harmless.

"My lord," she said respectfully, trying to disregard his queer looks.

"Who are you?"

"Charlotte Lucas, my lord."

He actually took a moment to look at her face for a half-second before returning his gaze an indeterminate spot over left shoulder. "Where did you come from?"

"My father is in London for the day and I came to visit my friend, Miss Bennet. She is in the drawing room with Lady Huntly and Miss Stanhope at present."

"Why are you in the library?"

"I do not think my input is much needed. I know very little of what is ton. I thought to read for a time instead. I was assured that the library was open to guests. If I have been mistaken in that--"

"Your father is Sir William Lucas. I know him."

"He has mentioned the acquaintance."

"Hardly even that," Buxton said. "I could not escape the introduction. When you are rich and important, it is always like that. Inconsequential people flit about and want to know you."

Charlotte pressed her lips together. "It must be very difficult."
He failed to notice the sarcasm in her voice. "I would not call it difficult, only an annoyance. I am surprised that you are not with the ladies. Most women lose their heads when there is wedding planning to be attended to."

"I am not excited by the romance of weddings," Charlotte said. "I find that people put too much effort into weddings and not enough into marriage."

He turned away and went to get his book without another word, and Charlotte, astonished by their odd conversation, forgot to get a book before she returned to her friend.

*

Resentment made Mr. Bingley want to toss away Mr. Darcy's letter unread, but wisdom prevailed in the end and he went out into the garden and settled onto a stone bench to read it.

Dear Sir,

Allow me first to assure you that I have no intention of renewing my offer of settlement, nor of giving further vent to resentments and insults. You and I find ourselves in odd circumstances. Rather than be permitted to give in fully to our hatred of one another, we must make way for the demands of family. It is an uncomfortable situation to be sure, but not one which we can ignore.

I propose then that we clear the air between us. I will begin by taking one small measure of blame upon myself. I did not recall until recently that we had had intercourse prior to your asking for aid with the financial matter which is now the subject of our disagreement. For having forgotten you and your father, and for having neglected to maintain the relationship which we began so long ago, and only for these things, I apologize.

As to your father's papers, the alleged fortune, my supposed thievery, the incompetence or outright dishonesty of those in my employ, and your misfortunes, for these things I will not apologize. I have maintained, do maintain, and will continue to maintain that I and those beneath me have acted honestly, scrupulously, and properly in all things. At the request of my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, I have spent the last days of my life reviewing all things related to our disagreement.

You claim that Mr. Harris tricked your father into borrowing additional money from me on the false pretense that doing so would yield a return on the additional investment, and on the understanding that. If no return on investment would be forthcoming, the new debt would be canceled. You have nothing but your word to back up this claim, as the paperwork associated with the loan mentions no such agreement.

Further, you claim that upon being applied to for the return of your father's letters and financial papers which you say contain the evidence of your father's fortune, you were rejected and repeatedly told that such letters had been returned to you when in fact they had not. Your lawsuit against me is based on these missing documents, and upon your claim that Mr. Harris stated that they passed through my hands and that I had undertaken to return them to you, something which Mr. Harris' does not recall having said and something which I certainly deny.

We have, then, perfectly opposite versions of the events. Mr. Harris has told me that while he was at first hopeful that he would be able to recover some money for you, a letter telling him that your father's account was fully discharged and that no money remained to be given to him put an end to those hopes. He is further adamant that he returned all of the letters and legal documents to you by post, and that included also in this bundle the final letter from India which put an end to the matter. He assures me that your father undertook the loan on the understanding that he would repay in full, that your father understood the consequences of borrowing additional money when I had already--out of respect to my departed father--agreed to continue a policy of forbearance with
respect to the original money owed to me.

Your father, I am sorry to say, found himself in prison by his own foolishness and mismanagement. I say again that I received no letters from you at this time. I have gone back through all of my papers and found nothing.

I confess I am not hopeful that we will be able to reconcile these versions of events, but for the sake of my family I am prepared to make the attempt.

I await your reply.

F.D.

The following day, Mr. Bingley sent a letter of his own.

Dear Sir,

Neither am I particularly hopeful that we will find our way to an understanding as you are quite right that our perceptions are perfectly opposite. I never received my father's documents and I wrote to you five times. This I suppose is the essential point in our disagreement. I cannot fault you for having forgotten me. I know now something of the load of responsibility of a man with an estate to say nothing of multiple estates, and a family to care for. It is understandable that the concerns of a child such as myself escaped your notice, and if you can condescend to apologize I can set aside my resentment long enough to say that despite the way in which things turned out your kindness those many years ago was very much appreciated. Indeed you were for many years the very best of men in my mind but perhaps it was for the best that I learned that to idealize any man is to be ultimately disappointed.

I know not what to think. I know my own memory and yet as I read your letter again I cannot but believe that you are telling the truth as you know it.

Perhaps if we are not both right we are both wrong.

C.B.

*

Mr. Darcy was contemplating Mr. Bingley's letter when Fitzwilliam called.

Darcy asked, "Do you recall when I had the stone?"

"Are you referring to the days during which you did nothing but lay in bed with your face pressed up against your pillow to muffle your screams of agony, punctuated occasionally by your lifting your head to beg me to put you out of your misery while I could do nothing but yell at ineffectual physicians and try to keep Georgiana occupied and ignorant of the real extent of your suffering."

Darcy winced. "Yes."

"I have completely forgotten about it."

Darcy ignored the sarcasm with the ease of practice. "It occurs to me that my ordeal happened around the time that Mr. Bingley claims to have written his letters." He handed Fitzwilliam Mr. Bingley's letter.

"An interesting theory," Fitzwilliam said of the last line.
"Yes. It has set me to thinking."

"You are formidable when you do that."

"If Mr. Bingley wrote his letters during my illness and recovery, then they most likely went through the hands of my steward, who was new at his post at the time, and who may well have regarded them as nothing more than begging letters. They may have been set aside, even destroyed. They ought not to have been, but it is very possible. When I reviewed all of my papers after I was recovered, they may not have been there at all."

Fitzwilliam seated himself in front of Darcy's desk, crossing one leg over the other and leaning back in the chair with a thoughtful expression. "That would certainly account for your differing perceptions. The matter of the missing documents may not be so easy to explain away, however."

"No," Darcy conceded. "But perhaps if Mr. Bingley and I stop trying to prove one another a liar, we may actually find our way to the truth."

* * *

Lydia was determined to be polite to Miss Stanhope. It was not unreasonable, after all, that Lady Buxton should shift her attentions from Lydia, a girl who had no great claim to her affection, to the woman who would be her first daughter-in-law. It was nevertheless hard to see Miss Stanhope become the object of Lady Buxton's condescension while Lydia, though not excluded from tea, was no longer the prime reason for it.

While pretty, rich Miss Stanhope held deeply colored silks against her face to determine which suited her best, Lydia had sequestered herself in the corner of the room. She had taken up a sheet of paper and was sketching Scarlet, who sat sleeping on a cushion by the window. It was not until Miss Stanhope had gone that Lydia was able to set down her pencil and screw up her courage to ask the question she had wished to ask for days.

"You are not very angry with me, are you?"

"Why should I be angry?" Lady Buxton asked.

"Because I do not want to marry Lord Buxton. I would, if you really wanted it, only he does not want to marry me, and--"

Lady Buxton laughed. "My dear girl, I hope I am not so much of a brute as to force together two people who have no affinity for one another." A strange, sad look crossed her face. "Indeed, I would be very sorry to see any young lady pressed into a marriage against her will. It is all well and good to nudge young people to do what is best for them, but to force them against reason is quite unconscionable." She looked down at her hands, and seemed for a moment to be thinking of something else entirely.

They were joined then by Lady Huntly and Elizabeth. They had come from the shops. Bingley, concerned that his sisters should have all they needed, had recently sent Elizabeth another hundred pounds though she had not quite spent the first fifty, and Lady Huntly, bored with buying things for herself, had taken to helping Elizabeth to spend money instead.

Elizabeth was indeed beginning to look the fine lady, and she could almost laugh when she caught sight of herself in the mirror. London had been good to her. The wealth of new ideas and new fashions suited her curious and active mind, and her looks, never plain, had been made more striking by the excitement in her eyes and the aid of fine clothing and the careful grooming of her borrowed lady's maid.
Lady Huntly fell into conversation with her mother, Lydia returned to her sketch, and Elizabeth seated herself by the window with a book. She made, it must be said, a lovely image in profile as she was lit by the sun coming through the window. That Mr. Darcy, upon joining the party, paused to regard her despite his steadfast conviction that he must conquer his foolish interest, is hardly surprising.
Chapter Notes

This story remains unfinished. I continue to make no promises about it ever being finished. That said, I shocked myself by finishing chapter 21 the other day. I tried, but couldn't find a beta reader, so I'm posting unbeta'ed. I'm sorry in advance for any mistakes.

Content warning for racism and references to slavery.

"I have seen military campaigns carried out with less precision than this wedding."

Buxton grunted, which was more than Fitzwilliam had expected of him. Fitzwilliam had taken refuge in Buxton's rooms, ducking milliners and cooks and lawyers to find the only unoccupied space in the house. He sat by the window, stockinged feet up on the sill, looking out at the busy street below. Buxton was making notes in a book of sermons, carrying on, no doubt, an extended argument with the text.

Fitzwilliam shook his head. Their father had tried in vain to break his eldest son of his excess religiosity. Locking the boy in closets and wine cellars had been reward rather than punishment for a queer spirit like Andrew's, beatings had simply allowed him to play the martyr in his own mind, and forcing him into whorehouses and gambling dens had made him hate the vices of the world rather than covet them. If Andrew ever became a proper dissenter, it would be, like most things, all the old man's fault.

A soft knock at the door pulled Fitzwilliam from his thoughts. Andrew called for the intruder to enter. Fitzwilliam was surprised to see Miss Lucas standing at the door, with a work basket in her hands.

"My lord, if I am not intruding..."

"No more than my brother is," Buxton said. "And I don't dislike you."

Fitzwilliam nearly choked. He looked carefully at Miss Lucas, but she was merely arranging herself with her work, and showed no awareness that "I don't dislike you" was the closest Buxton had ever come to making love to a woman.

Miss Lucas was a plain creature, with no accomplishments or charms or fortune to overcome her unfortunate lack of a chin, close-set eyes, and limp hair. Fitzwilliam watched her, but there was little to keep a man's interest. She was working quietly, not on some elaborate and delicate silk, but on a man's shirt. She looked up when she sensed his interest in her, offered him a small, self-conscious smile, and turned back to her work. If she was in pursuit of his brother, her tactic was by far the cleverest he had ever seen.

Or perhaps she was, like him, simply seeking a quiet refuge from the madness below.

Either way, she had precious little chance of succeeding.

*
The second meeting between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley went better than the first. There was, at least, less shouting, and no one turned red...at least, not with anger. It was an uncomfortable conference that took place between the two of them in the study of Mr. Darcy's townhouse, and not the most informative, but one very important thing did come of it: they both came from the meeting with the conviction that the other was not the villain that they had so long supposed.

So far advanced was the diminution of animosity between them, that a first tete-a-tete beget a second, and this second ran so late into the night that Darcy surprised himself by inviting the other man to stay for dinner--a courtesy he rarely extended to anyone he was not close to, much less a man he had until a few weeks prior regarded as a base scoundrel.

Bingley's face mirrored Darcy's own better concealed astonishment, but he accepted graciously on the terms that "we not discuss letters or accounts or stewards or India for another moment."

Darcy smiled and called for dinner to be served up in the informal dining room.

They spoke little but watched one another closely through the first course. Darcy had been expecting a roughness in Mr. Bingley to reveal itself at the dinner table, but Bingley had been polished to a high gleam by his wife, by his inlaws, and by Ashbourne--the last being a combined study in precise manners of eating and drinking that could be safely imitated combined with impolitic speech that taught a man what not to say in company.

Bingley was not often driven to uncomfortable silences--an earnest, rambling flow of good-natured conversation was his more usual reaction to such awkwardness--and by the second course, his natural tendencies had asserted themselves. "Are you all alone here?" he asked.

"For the present," Darcy said. "Georgiana is with her friends, though she will of course return for her cousin's wedding."

"But you are by yourself? How dreadful!"

Darcy smiled. "I am quite content with the arrangement, I assure you. I find that my own company is sufficient for me much of the time."

"But you must have friends who come to call."

"Some. I am not given to making friends easily, not as you seem to be."

"It is not so hard. I could introduce you, oh, to a great many people."

Darcy could not help but laugh, though he hid his mirth behind his wine glass. "You are mistaking a lack for a desire. I have all of the friends and relations that I need."

"I cannot imagine such a large house empty and rambling. Jane and I have been alone at Longbourn these many weeks, and I find it much too quiet for my tastes."

"Clearly we are very different people," Darcy said, but the statement was open and friendly, and not closed and hostile as it would have been before.

"Clearly," Bingley said with a laugh. "Jane has tried to teach me patience and reserve, but I fear such lessons are far beyond me."

"You cannot have been married for very long. Perhaps your wife will improve you in time."

"I fear my deficiencies are intractable. Jane and I have been married for, oh, more than two years now."
"You would have been very young when you married."

"I had just attained to my majority, and Jane likewise."

"Most men who choose their wives at that age live to repent the choice."

Bingley shook his head. "No man could repent of choosing my Jane, though I am glad I got there first."

Darcy smiled again at the foolish, love-struck look that crossed the other man's face. "I know little of your wife, but she seems a good woman."

This comment, as expected, led to a panegyric upon the many virtues of Jane Bingley. Darcy politely did not laugh, and was surprised to find that he found Bingley's good-natured ramblings rather pleasant. As his speech drew to a close, Darcy, against his better judgement, asked, "And her family? I understand that you are cousins."

"Very distantly," Bingley said. "A connection through a--oh, some ancestor or other. I knew nothing of it until I learned of the entail."

"How did you find her family? It cannot have been easy to marry and find oneself with four dependent sisters."

"I suppose not," Bingley said. He considered his wine glass. "The Gardiners were a great help. In the end, I found myself responsible for only two of the girls. Lydia was...somewhat trying at times, but Lizzy was in every way a help to us."

Darcy leaned back in his chair, affecting an indifference he hardly felt. "You found Miss Bennet a good sort of woman, I take it."

"I did," Bingley said. "I knew when I discovered by good fortune that I had to marry one of the girls. What man could do differently?" Darcy knew many men who would have left the five girls to their own devices and reveled in their new-found fortune, but he said nothing. "Lydia and Kitty were much too young and silly, and Mary is--" He grimaced, saying everything he felt about her without uttering a word. "Lizzy, well, we would not have done for each other. She is too sharp for me. But as a sister I find her invaluable."

"Does she have a sharp tongue?"

"A clever one. She is teasing, but not cruel. She is witty, very bright. I am glad she is in London now. She should not be hidden away in Hertfordshire, though I will be sorry to lose her."

"You wish to see her married."

"If she wishes it. If she does not, she will always have a home with Jane and me. I hope by the next season to be able to give her a not insignificant amount of money upon her marriage. Perhaps six thousand. Not very much, but the standard of London, but enough that she will not be dismissed out of hand for her lack of fortune. She is worth much more than that, but I will have to trust that a wise man will see that."

Bingley was beginning to watch him with a shrewd look in his eyes. Darcy changed the subject.

* * *

There could be no wedding without the input of the venerable Lady Catherine de Bourgh. News
of her imminent arrival was, both expected and greeted with a collective groaning of the spirit.

Harriet looked nervously between her husband-to-be and her mother. "Is she quite so bad?"

"I will protect you, my love."

Lady Buxton rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Richard, stop filling the girl's head with tales. Her ladyship is a formidable woman, but hardly the dragon my sons make her out to be. Lady Catherine was raised alongside my late husband," Lady Buxton said, more to Mrs. Stanhope than anyone else. "Unlike Lady Anne, who turned out to be a weedy sort of thing without a backbone to support her, Lady Catherine held her own among the strong personalities in her house. It is hardly surprising that she is a force to be reckoned with."

"You are very fair to a woman who thinks you a stain upon the family name,"

The only hint of discountenance in Lady Buxton was a slight twist of her mouth. "Sir Lewis' fortune is largely from the slave trade. One cannot excuse such a proceeding without considering the people sold as chattel to be sub-human. She despises me because she cannot do otherwise without admitting to hypocrisy. She has always been fair to my children."

Fitzwilliam met his mother's eyes, but if there was any pain there, it was too well hidden for even him to see. He fixed a pleasant smile on his face and said nothing. It was how he endured most of the casual cruelties that could not be escaped any more than his ancestry. He had been to Bermuda, seen men worked to death on sugar plantations, and known with a bone-deep certainty that he could have been among them if not for the whim of his great-grandfather, a man who had chosen to ship his bastard child to France to be raised in a convent rather than subject her to the agonies of life on the plantation. But he came home and said very little. One could not be both of African heritage and a respectable member of the ton without accepting some dissonance in one's life, and there was nothing to be done but to suffer it in silence.

"To return to the essential point," Lady Buxton said, "Lady Catherine is nothing you need to be concerned with. She will give you all manner of unwanted advice. Nod your head and agree, and remember that when she is gone, you may order your closets and hire your servants as you see fit."

"It will be fine, my love," Fitzwilliam said. "I will throw myself in her path if she becomes too much for you, and Andrew is going to his shooting box for the next month, so we will not have a repeat of the incident at Kentridge."

"What happened at Kentridge?" asked Lydia Bennet. She had been so unobtrusively sewing in the corner that Fitzwilliam had forgotten she was there.

Even the unflappable Lady Buxton winced at the question. "We have chosen as a family to never speak of it again. It really is for the best."

*

Bingley returned to Longbourn only to pack his trunks and return to London. "And you are quite certain that you will be alright without me?"

"Of course."

Bingley paused in the packing of his trunk. "I should not go."

Jane sighed. "Charles, you must go."
"I may be away for as long as two weeks. And you are in a delicate state. You have been so terribly ill."

Jane rested her hands on her gently swelling stomach. "I am not well enough to travel, but I am hardly an invalid."

"What if something should happen?"

"I am not without aid close at hand. There are the servants, our neighbors. Charlotte Lucas is coming home."

"But--"

Jane sat on the sofa, sitting longways along the whole length of it and elevating her legs to ease her already swelling ankles. "Mr. Bingley, are you entirely concerned with me, or are you merely apprehensive about what awaits you in London?"

Bingley sat down, taking her feet in his lap. "Mr. Darcy and I are going to try to figure out what happened all those many years ago. I know the money is long gone. I have no need of it in any case, I simply want to know, and I think I finally may. Darcy is an cleverer man, and has a great deal more resources than I. I am afraid that even with all that, perhaps there will be no answer. Perhaps all the anger and uncertainty that I have known will come to nothing. Or perhaps it will not. Perhaps I will get my answer. And what then? It will not bring my father back. It will not erase those many years of suffering."

Jane reached forward to take one of his hands. "No, it will not. But Charles, no matter what happens, for your sake, for my sake, for the sake of all of us," she touched her stomach, "you must end it here."

"Yes. I know. Perhaps that is what I fear most. What am I if I am not the angry, grieving son of my father?"

Jane drew a sharp breath. "You are my husband, the father of our daughter and all of our future children. the brother that my sisters did not have, the owner of Longbourne. You are a gentleman and a friend and a fine man. And you will always be your father's son, but the anger...I did not know the man, but I do not think he would want it for you."

Charles kissed her hand. "I should get on my knees and thank Providence every day that I found you."

Jane smiled. "We have both of us been very blessed," she said softly, blinking away a sudden tear.

Bingley touched his ring and tried to ignore the sudden ache in his chest. He slid down from the couch and settled on the floor next to Jane. "I miss her too," he said.

"I have felt the quickening. It terrified me. This child is real."

Bingley rested his head against her stomach, though it was too soon for him to feel anything. "You are certain that I may leave you."

"Go to London and settle your business. Then come back to us."

"Always," Charles whispered. He twined his fingers with hers and didn't move for a very long time.
Chapter 22

Jane received a letter from Charles four days after he left.

Dear Jane,

Arriv'd London. Have been out making calls all afternoon. Buxton House is madness itself. Lizzy is with Lady Huntley and very well. Lydia is with Lady Buxton, likewise. My plans have changed, trunks sent to Darcy. Your dear uncle has the toothache, very bad. Buxton House cannot acom'date another soul, and Darcy has offered to me one of his rooms. Am therefore writing this in the drawing room while Darcy reads. 'tis very odd that I should be so calmly sharing a room with the man. I have mentioned our library to him. I did not think it would impress him, but he had a positive gleam in his eye when I told him of those few books that I could recollect. The library at Lng'bn is very old, I think. Miss Darcy is here. She is quiet as a mouse but plays well, tho cld only be prevailed upon to play one piece. Cards after. I miss you very much.

C

"How is Mr. Bingley?" Charlotte asked.

"He is well," Jane said. She squinted a little and managed to make out the last lines of his letter. "I will write to him tonight."

"I hope you are not lonely."

"Oh, no. I miss Charles, but, well, it is so quiet, and peaceful, being all alone in the house." One of the maids came in to take the tea things away.

Charlotte smiled. "Yes, it must be very nice to be entirely your own mistress."

Jane smiled into her work. "I confess it is."

"You have redone the dining room," Charlotte said. "It looks very nice."

"Do you like it? I was not entirely certain about the pink, but I do think it works rather well." Jane tucked an errant strand of hair up under her cap. "Did you enjoy your time in London?"

"Yes. Though I think perhaps Lizzy has grown a bit too smart for me."

"I am certain she still adores you."

"She was very kind, very cordial, very welcoming. But she--"

Jane caught her meaning. "She is dazzling," she said quietly.

Charlotte met her eyes. "Yes."

"Lizzy has always been quick, and she has read so much, and her conversations are so very clever. She has a very great deal to offer Society. A retired life, hidden away...it would be a waste."

"She has attracted a great many admirers in London. Lady Huntly is quite taken with her."

"We shall not keep her long, after Charles settles the matter of her dowry. She says she will only
marry for love, but there are so many men in London. She is sure to meet one who turns her head in time."

"I do not doubt it."

Jane smiled, only a little sadly. "Well. But she shall always be our Lizzy, no matter what else she becomes."

"Of course," Charlotte said, and returned to her work.

*

Mr. Darcy was an especial devotee of the Opera, and kept a box. Elizabeth, having been caught up in Lady Huntly's social circle and the business of town, had been aware of the reconciliation of her brother and Mr. Darcy only through Jane's letters and the occasional piece of gossip. She had not realized how complete it was until Bingley arrived at Lord Huntly's house and asked if Elizabeth would care to join him and Mr. Darcy at the Opera that evening. She was, upon reflection, not entirely surprised to learn that the two men had settled their differences. She had heard so much of Mr. Darcy being a good sort of man, and knew so well her brother to be so, that she supposed it was only natural that they should neither of them be the villain that the other thought.

It was, however, rather odd to dress that evening. Lady Huntly's confinement was fast approaching, and she could not go out, but she sat in the dressing closet as the maid did Elizabeth's hair in the most modern style.

"Was I not right about the blue?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes, your ladyship."

The gown had been an indulgence. Charles would continue to send her more money than she needed, and Lady Huntly, deprived by childbearing of the joys of outfitting herself, would continue to turn her dress makers' attentions to Elizabeth. She looked a very fine lady in light blue silk, with borrowed jewels about her neck.

"Your ladyship is very good to me."

"It pleases me to be so. And pray don't confuse me for the altruistic sort. My mother may be exercising her charity with your sister, but I am young, and must needs be more farsighted than that. You will be a fine connection soon enough."

"Your ladyship?"

Lady Huntly smiled. "You are causing quite a stir, my dear. Or have you not noticed?"

Elizabeth colored. Lady Huntly laughed. "You are a positive wit, my dear girl, and a not un handsome one at that." She shifted on the couch and frowned at the child kicking at her insides. "There is talk. Let me speak to your brother. For ten thousand pounds, I could fetch you a Viscount. Perhaps something better, if you don't mind one who is old, or has a a crooked nose. Are you very nice about those things?"

"Your ladyship is very kind, but I prefer to marry for love."

"Why on earth would you do something as silly as that?"

"Because it sounds rather nice, don't you think?"
"Not really, no. Certainly not as nice as a pair of matched footmen at every door."

Elizabeth turned her head to admire the maid's work. "I would prefer both, I suppose, but I think it far more important for there to be love in a marriage."

Lady Huntly shrugged her shoulders. "Well, pray do try to love a rich man. It's so much more convenient that way."

"I will do my best, your ladyship."

Elizabeth traveled to the opera with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Stanhope. She had not previously given much thought to the attention being paid to her, but either because of Lady Huntly's prodding or because she looked particularly fine that evening, she felt acutely the eyes of many following her to the box. Charles was there already, with Mr. Darcy, and a tall, dark-haired lady that Elizabeth did not recognize.

"Georgiana!"

The young lady smiled very slightly and nodded politely. "Hello, cousin."

"This is my sister, Miss Darcy," Mr. Darcy said.

Elizabeth curtsied. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Darcy. I was afraid I would have none of my own sex with whom to converse, excepting of course Miss Stanhope, whose attentions are naturally otherwise occupied."

Miss Darcy managed a few soft words in reply, Elizabeth perceived her to be either excessively proud or excessively shy, though it was difficult to determine which. The party arranged itself in the box, and Elizabeth found herself between Mr. Darcy and Miss Stanhope. Miss Stanhope was the sort to talk through an opera, though her voice at least was pitched low and she was entirely attentive to Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mr. Darcy, by contrast, was utterly silent, and beside him Miss Darcy was enraptured with the performance, her attention never straying to the audience, which gave some explanation as to why Mr. Darcy had allowed her to join him for the evening, though the young lady was so clearly not out.

It was a fine performance. Elizabeth lost herself in it as nearly as Mr. Darcy and her sister, though she doubted her enjoyment was as informed as theirs. She caught them discussing some technical details of the music between the acts. During an intermission, she rose to stretch her legs. Bingley walked with her, but was soon caught up in conversation with some acquaintances. Elizabeth was content to admire the many and varied gowns, and to surreptitiously gaze at the eminent persons of whom she had only read. She had spied Mr. Pitt in a box across the theater when she was met by Lord Edrington.

"Miss Elizabeth, How good to see you again," he said.

"My lord." She offered him her hand, which he not only pressed, but kissed. "If you are looking for Colonel Fitzwilliam, he is entirely occupied with Miss Stanhope. He may be prevailed upon to break away for a few moments. I understand you once saved his life. That should entitle you to a bit of notice, though you are neither fair nor plump nor well dowried."

Edrington laughed. "I confess I have come in search of your party, though Fitzwilliam is not my aim. I have heard tell that you are leaving us soon."
Surprised, Elizabeth said, "I will return to Heartfordshire in a fortnight. Are my comings and goings of interest to such an esteemed circle as yours?"

"Among some of us, perhaps. I am having a small card party after the opera tonight. Do you think your party could be prevailed upon to join us?"

"It is not for me to accept or decline, my lord, but I--" She spied Charles walking near her and managed to call him over. Edrington repeated his invitation.

"Of course. Capital idea! If Lizzy is not too knocked up."

"No, indeed, I am not fatigued at all. Lady Huntly keeps late hours, and I have become accustomed to staying up late."

"Wonderful," Edrington said. "Bring Darcy and Fitzwilliam too, if you can persuade them."

Elizabeth left the opera in high spirits. Miss Darcy of course had to be taken home, and Miss Stanhope plead a headache, and wanted nothing but to sit quietly by a fire. Colonel Fitzwilliam was quick to oblige her, and take her home to her mother's house. So it was Miss Bennet and Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy who were announced in the card room of Lord Edrington's home.

After several months of fetes of two or three dozen being dismissed as little out of the way gatherings, Elizabeth was relieved to find that Lord Edrington's idea of a small card party was to have in fact a small party. Her relief, though, was dwarfed by that of Mr. Darcy, who greeted the sight of a ten people rather than thirty with gratitude, though he did still find his way to the corner of the room with swiftness.

Elizabeth found herself completing the whist table that contained two ladies of fashion, and a handsome naval officer who would set off for Portsmith in a few days, and would not see land again after that for many months. Darcy was drawn to the pianoforte, to listen as Edrington's young cousin and ward played a piece with much technical skill but no heart. He had just taken some port when Bingley came to stand beside him.

"Anyone looking at you would think you were at a funeral, and not a party."

"I am perfectly content, I assure you."

"You do not look it."

"Not all of us express our every emotion without reserve." He frowned, wondering if he had been too forward, too harsh, but Bingley only laughed.

"Oh, very well. Sit stiffly and gaze upon us with disapproval, but do it at the piquet table."

They played high, but without intensity. Darcy was able to watch the room as much as his cards. Bingley chattered away, pausing occasionally to allow Darcy to reply, but filling any silences before they could become awkward. It was oddly comfortable to sit and listen to him, knowing that Bingley would welcome any contributions to the conversation, but was perfectly content to carry it entirely by himself if need be. Darcy could see why Buxton in particular would find the man the easiest companion he had ever had.

His gaze was drawn as it too often was to Miss Bennet. The ladies and the naval man were laughing over some witticism of hers. The candlelight sparkled off of her necklace, and caught her dark eyes. Clever woman, he thought. He could not but admire the way that she could command a room, drawing attention to herself without ever being vain or vulgar. She was a wit without descending into irreverence. She could not have previously known such circles as she now found
herself in, but she was as comfortable in the august company of earls and admirals as she must have been in her drawing room in Heartfordshire. An admirable creature, to be sure.

Darcy begged off from another game. Edrington took his place at the table, and Darcy found himself by the pianoforte once again, though it was not in use.

He heard Bingley say, "Those who think that happiness can be had without money have never had the misfortune to try to exist without the latter, or known what a blow to the former is the knife of hunger in one's belly."

"You know something of it," Edrington said.

"More than I would care to," Bingley said. "Point of four."

"Not good," said Edrington, and Bingley took the points. "Most men, you know, would have a care that such a past remain unknown, or spoken only in whispers."

Bingley shrugged. "I cared about such things once. Now, I have no time or patience for any man who would look down on me because I once had holes in my boots."

"Quite right," said Edrington.

"Well, sir," said Miss Bennet, startling him, "you shall have a chance to judge my playing after all. I would modestly prepare you for disappointment, but I think you would only accuse me of a humble sort of bragging."

Darcy smiled. "Did you not once thoroughly disabuse me of that notion?"

"Did I indeed? I would not have thought you the sort of man to be easily disabused of any notion."

"It does not happen often, but I like to think that I am not so unreasonable as to be unmovable in the face of evidence."

"And has the evidence convinced you of my brother's goodness?" He inclined his head. "I am glad of it," she said. She sat at the pianoforte. Darcy stood near enough to be of use in turning the pages. "Charles is by no means a naturally contrary man. I think perhaps it was a trial to him to be at odds with anyone."

"You are loyal to your brother. It is a credit to you."

"Perhaps it was less of a credit to me when you thought him a scoundrel."

"No, even then you were in the right. True loyalty is all too rare."

"In these degenerate times."

"What?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Forgive me. I was finishing the thought. Of late any time I hear a criticism of society, it seems always to be followed by a lament of the times in which we live."

"The times may or may not be degenerate, but loyalty has ever been a quality to be admired."

"You find me admirable, then, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy stiffened and looked away. Fortunately, Miss Bennet had come to a difficult part of the
music, and was too absorbed in her playing to notice his discomfort.
"Oh, I wish the whole world could read these," Lydia said. She was ensconced in her usual place in Lady Buxton's sitting room, her head in a volume of letters, poetry, and essays. It was a privately-published book, circulated among a select few not because it was particularly scandalous, but because none had yet seen fit to introduce its brilliance to the wide world through a proper publication.

"Perhaps someday they shall," Lady Buxton said, not looking up from her work. "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu deserves to be recognized as a great scholar, though I do not think it likely she will ever get the respect that is properly due to her. Our sex rarely does."

Lydia frowned. "Did you love your husband?"

Lady Buxton did look up now, and was quiet so long that Lydia was about to retract the question with an apology when she finally said, "No. There were moments when I felt something almost like affection for him, but never anything I would call love."

"Why did you marry him? Because he was rich?"

Lady Buxton set down her work and looked hard at Lydia. The girl was seated across from her, legs crossed at the ankles, wearing a simple floral dress and a white fichu. Her hair was tied up with white ribbons, with ringlets falling to either side of her face. Lydia grew restless and uncomfortable under the scrutiny, but before she could speak, Lady Buxton said, "Quite the opposite. I was rich, extraordinarily so. He was quite poor, and desperate to no longer be so. Desperate enough indeed to marry a French Negro who had been kept in the country her entire life."

"How were you so rich? I thought Negroes were always poor, or slaves."

Lady Buxton smiled, not happily. "My grandfather was a free black man from Saint Domingue who turned privateer--or pirate, if you prefer. He took several ships of immense value. He saw
when the winds of politics shifted against the privateers, and he retired to France to live a quiet life in the country. My father had been born by then, though my grandmother died in the childbed. He was raised in France, by my grandfather, and grew up to be a clever man who ran his lands profitably."

"What about your mother?"

"She was a French woman of good birth who defied her family to marry my father. When my parents died, it was her family that took me in. They liked my money, but despised me. Despised my skin, I should say, for had it not been for that detail, I am sure they would not have minded me at all."

Lydia frowned. "And Lord Buxton?"

"He came to France on his Grand Tour. I met him when I was fourteen, just a year after my mother died. My mother's family was trying desperately to find some way to take my fortune from me. I daresay given enough time, they might have succeeded. I could tell even then that he was a hard, unyielding sort of man, but he had his code of honor, and I trusted him more than I trusted my grandparents." She shrugged. "It was a wise choice, though one I sometimes wish I had not had to make. In all events, he got a fortune in the bargain, and I got a title and a trip to England, and escape from the clutches of my mother's family."

"I am sorry for you," Lydia said.

"I am not," Lady Buxton said decidedly. "No one escapes their share of hardship. Mine has been more than some, but less than most. My parents were wonderful to me while they lived, and my husband was difficult, but he was no villain. I lost four children of the seven I bore. That is the great pain of my life. For the rest of the badness that has come into my life, I do not spare much thought." She paused, and a look of pain passed over her face for a moment before she banished it. "Or I try not to." She took up her work, "Now tell me of Charlotte Lucas."

Lydia wrinkled her nose. "Why do you want to know about her?"

"What sort of a woman is she?"

Lydia turned a few pages in her book, not actually seeing them. "Lizzy likes her."

"Miss Bennet's good regard is certainly worth something. What do you think of her?"

Lydia looked up. "What does my opinion matter?"

"A wise person seeks information from all sources," said Lady Buxton.

"She's plain." Lydia bit her lip. "Not accomplished. Rather dull. She wants to get married, but she's never had much success in that quarter. I'm sorry, I don't know what else you want me to say."

Lady Buxton smiled reassuringly. "It is enough. Nevermind."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Excessive curiosity, one of my few flaws. It is of no matter."

It was of quite a lot of matter, in fact, for just down the hall Lord Buxton was missing Charlotte Lucas. It was the first time in his life that he had keenly felt the absence of someone other than his mother. He found he did not like the feeling.
"I never met your father, but from what my father told me, he was an excellent man."

They were in Darcy's study, Darcy and Bingley and a several stacks of relevant papers. "He was," Darcy said.

"He showed remarkable forbearance on the initial loan, the money that he lent my father, before he left for India."

Darcy declined to point out that old Mr. Darcy had lent Bingley's father a mere two hundred pounds on the basis of their meeting. Pemberley easily spent that much and a good deal more on port each year.

"Did your father ever talk about his business in India?" Darcy asked.

"Rarely."

"He was at odds with the East India Company."

"Yes, I knew that," Bingley said. "I did hear him once or twice complain of the more corrupt nabobs." He was sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him, managing to look both proper, for informal company, and completely relaxed at the same time. It was a skill that Darcy privately envied. He was always stiff in company, formal or informal.

Darcy frowned at the papers in front of him. It was a source of perpetual astonishment to him how complex the situation had grown. It was not simply the matter of the loan from the Darcy estate to old Mr. Bingley. Darcy had initially been interested only in untangling that matter which concerned him personally, yet as he had started to peel back the layers of the story, the matter of what had happened in India had begun to nag at him.

Bingley was not unintelligent, but Darcy's mind was by far the more powerful and analytical, besides being better trained by superior education. What Bingley might puzzle over for half an hour, Darcy could absorb in a few minutes. Privately he admitted to himself that it was not just the desire to clear his own name, and perhaps also to aid Bingley, but the mystery of it all that kept him so interested.

There were tantalizing hints that Mr. Bingley had made money in India, but the details were scanty. There was a letter, detailing a success by a partner, and yet that partner unable to be traced. It was maddening.

A servant brought Colonel Fitzwilliam's card. That gentleman, when announced, did not bother with greetings and began by addressing himself to Mr. Bingley. "How much do you know of Charlotte Lucas?"

Bingley blinked. "Very little. She's Lizzy's friend, and Jane's."

"What do you think of her?"

"I do not think of her, not often. Why do you ask?"

"I have a very bad feeling my brother is going haul off and do something exceedingly stupid, that is why I ask," Fitzwilliam said, all but falling into a chair and snapping at a servant to bring him something strong to drink.

Darcy grasped his meaning at once, but Bingly blinked. "What do you mean?"
Fitzwilliam took an offered glass of port from Darcy. "I had dinner with him last night. He talked about her. She was all he talked about."

Bingley's eyes widened as he understood. "Charlotte Lucas? No! She's plain and...she's quite plain."

"My brother is a man of very strange tastes," Fitzwilliam said forlornly and sipped his port. "Talk to him?"

"About Charlotte Lucas?"

"He listens to you, in so far as he listens to anyone at all," Fitzwilliam said.

"Well certainly, if you think it will help." Bingley got up and walked around the room, stopping to pick up a chess piece and turn it over in his hands. "It would not be an advantageous match, surely, but it would not be the worst he could make either. She is not a bad sort of woman. Lizzy likes her, and I have learned to trust her judgement in most things."

Darcy, not looking up from the letter he was reading, said, "Miss Bennet does seem to be a woman of good sense." Bingley did not take any particular note of the comment, but Fitzwilliam glanced at Darcy out of the corner of his eye. Darcy, seeing this, hastily added, "Although she is rather to prone to make light of things which ought to be regarded seriously."

"Come now," Bingley said, feeling that he by rights had to defend his sister. "Lizzy likes to laugh, but she is never vulgar." He did not pause long enough or seem offended enough for Darcy to offer up any sort of apology even if he had been inclined to, and continued, "As for Charlotte Lucas...she certainly does not spring immediately to the mind when one thinks of a countess. I will speak to Buxton, and see if I can persuade him away from the scheme. Assuming it even is a scheme. Perhaps you are too quick to assume?"

The last was intended for Fitzwilliam, who said, "If I am, I shall be glad for it."

To be related, even obliquely, to Sir William Lucas...and if such a thing came to pass, his yearly visit to Rosings would be even more of a trial than usual. The thought of Lady Catherine's reaction to such a match was chilling. Although, were he totally honest with himself, a part of him very much wanted to see it.

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