

For the Love of Jane



A novella by Teresa Fields



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Mrs. Bennet had designed to keep the two Netherfield gentlemen to supper; but their carriage was unluckily ordered before any of the others and she had no opportunity of detaining them.

"Well girls," said she, as soon as they were left to themselves, "What say you to the day? I think every thing has passed off uncommonly well, I assure you. The dinner was as well dressed as any I ever saw. The venison was roasted to a turn—and everybody said they never saw so fat a haunch. The soup was fifty times better than what we had at the Lucases' last week; and even Mr. Darcy acknowledged, that the partridges were remarkably well done; and I suppose he has two or three French cooks at least. And, my dear Jane, I never saw you look in greater beauty. Mrs. Long said so too, for I asked her whether you did not. And what do you think she said besides? "Ah! Mrs. Bennet, we shall have her at Netherfield at last. "She did indeed. I do think Mrs. Long is as good a creature as ever lived—and her nieces are very pretty behaved girls, and not at all handsome: I like them prodigiously."

Mrs. Bennet, in short, was in very great spirits; she had seen enough of Bingley's behaviour to Jane, to be convinced that she would get him at last; and her expectations of advantage to her family, when in a happy humour, were so far beyond reason, that she was quite disappointed at not seeing him there again the next day, to make his proposals.

"It has been a very agreeable day," said Miss Bennet to Elizabeth. "The party seemed so well selected, so suitable one with the other. I hope we may often meet again."

Elizabeth smiled.

"Lizzy, you must not do so. You must not suspect me. It mortifies me. I assure you that I have now learnt to enjoy his conversation as an agreeable and sensible young man, without having a wish beyond it. I am perfectly satisfied, from what his manners now are, that he never had any design of engaging my affection.



Chapter 1 ~ A Gentleman Caller

“You tell me now that she was in London, all those weeks and you concealed it from me?” bellowed Charles Bingley angrily towards his friend, as they exited Netherfield House and walked down the path to the awaiting carriage.

Friend, ha! Charles was beginning to think that this man would soon be numbered amongst an extremely short list of his former friends.

Fitzwilliam Darcy was embarrassed, but frankly, getting this admission off his chest would finally lift one of the last remaining burdens that he had been carrying on his shoulders these last weeks. He lowered his gaze contritely and said, “It was an arrogant presumption based upon my

failure to recognize Miss Bennet's true feelings—and yours.” Here he looked up to gage his companion's reaction to his words, saying, “Will you forgive me, Bingley?”

Charles simply stared. Could it be true? Could the proud and imposing Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, gentleman of noble birth, and, up until now, his own example of unerring judgment, be admitting that he was at fault? Charles paused a little longer not a little amused; he was going to savour this moment for he was quite certain that it would never come again. However, when Darcy began to worry the knob of his walking stick, Bingley knew that he had held him in suspense too long.

“You admit that you were in the wrong, then?”

“Utterly. Completely.”

Fitzwilliam looked at his friend worriedly. Bingley had not sounded particularly angry just then, almost as if his anger was done away with almost as soon as it was aroused. If someone at that instant had asked him to describe the look on his friend's face, he would almost describe it as a well-satisfied smirk. Admitting his guilt was one thing, but knowing his friend was enjoying his predicament at his own expense was somewhat disconcerting.

As Fitzwilliam Darcy pondered his own dubious thoughts, joyous thoughts immediately entered Charles Bingley's mind: He would ask Miss Jane Bennet to become his wife that very day, that very hour if he could manage it.

“Then I have your blessing?” asked Charles, having already made up in his mind what he would do regardless of his friend's answer.

Bingley was too transparent for his own good, thought Darcy, having read his friend's intentions instantaneously. “Do you need my blessing?”

“No!” cried Bingley, incredulously. “But I should like to know I have it all the same,” he added, so as not to appear totally uncharitable.

“Then go to it!” Fitzwilliam Darcy smiled a bittersweet smile to himself as he turned to enter his awaiting carriage. As the servant closed the door he looked upon Charles with envy. Charles would soon receive his fondest wish and he knew all too well that he would never have his own granted. As the carriage moved away towards London, his mind was bombarded with thoughts of that other Bennet sister who would never be his.



Mrs. Henry Bennet of Longbourn House was still in her dressing gown as she studied herself in the mirror lamenting the loss of beauty and youth. Unsatisfied with what she found there, she began to irritably arrange the items on her dressing table and then huffily pull the shawl from her

shoulders. Why did it have to be so warm and her nerves torn into shreds? She had much upon her mind: four daughters still unmarried and a husband ill disposed to do anything about it.

In this state, she casually glanced out of her bedroom window. Her eyesight wasn't what it was in her younger days, but if required, she could certainly spot a lone gentleman on horseback from a quarter mile away, and this gentleman now approaching, though only lately returned into the neighbourhood, and, who had only been sitting at her table two days before, was well known to her.

An instinctive feeling washed over her. "He has finally come for my Jane," she whispered to herself. "Jane!" she cried suddenly on the verge of hysterics and loud enough to wake the entire household. "Jane!" she shouted again as she hurried from her own bedchamber and raced in the direction of the chamber that held her eldest, and from now on, dearest child. Bursting through the door, she cried, "Jane! Oh my dear, dear, Jane."

Jane Bennet, still in her nightdress and undoing her evening braid, was puzzled.

"He has come, Jane, he has come at last; stir yourself, he has come!"

Jane furrowed her brow. She could not possibly guess whom she meant, and whoever this person was, he was abominably rude for coming so early and distressing her beloved mother.

"Who has come," she asked.

"Why, Mr. Bingley, of course! Make haste, for you are not even half dressed!"

Before Jane could respond, her mother raced from the room and down the hall; Jane did not have to guess where. Between the commotion, the calls for Hill, and the raised voices, she knew that her mother was calling from the direction of her sister Elizabeth's room.

Jane felt the need to follow her mother to impart words of calm. When she arrived in the corridor, however, Jane could see for herself that her mother had apparently abducted Sarah from her morning duties for the maid still held warm French irons in her hand. She offered her mother a reasonable and, she thought, simple solution to their predicament just as her three younger sisters approached, "Mama, let Kitty go down, she is forwarder than any of us."

"Oh, hang Kitty, what has she to do with it!" was her mother's harsh response as she pushed Jane back into the direction of her room and pulling Sarah along. "Be quick, Jane and stir yourself; he is here, he is here!"



Within twenty frantic minutes, after a hurried dip in the bath and much pulling of her hair and buttoning into her gown, Jane was finally ready. Mrs. Bennet satisfied that the servants below had made her unexpected guest comfortable, and after seeing her dearest girl in full beauty,

rushed off with Sarah to finish her own toilette. However, before going, she warned Jane to wait so they could go downstairs together and to remain standing so as not to crease her gown.

Elizabeth Bennet, seeing this as her opportunity to tease and to lighten the mood, slipped into her sister's room to see what blushes she could bring to Jane's countenance. Good thing too, for Jane had the most serious expression upon her face.

"If Mr. Bingley does not fall at your feet and beg you to marry him this very day, I will forever label him the cruellest gentleman of my acquaintance!"

Jane blushed. "Oh Lizzy, I am sure you are wrong. I am certain that Mr. Bingley merely called upon us early this morning to take up my father's kind offer of shooting."

"Believe that, Jane, if it gives you comfort," teased Elizabeth with a flash of merriment in her eyes. "Besides, I have just passed Papa in the hall and he has told me himself that he will remain in his library, and, in his own words," said Elizabeth imitating her father voice, "until the silly young fool marries one of my daughters or concedes to the folly of seeking the company of so many silly young women."

Jane was distressed. As much as she loved her family, it pained her to think that everyone in the household would suspect Mr. Bingley's only motivation for coming was marriage, when she, in her modest way, would not dream of thinking of his coming for any reason like that at all.

Elizabeth, knowing her sister well, sensed Jane's inner turmoil immediately. "Forgive me, Jane. I had no right to make sport of your feelings. Of course Mr. Bingley is a friend to our family and may come as often as he chooses. We will welcome him just as we always have done."

"You are right, Lizzy; he may come as often as he likes. But--," Jane stopped momentarily as an uncharacteristic and heartless thought entered her mind. "Do not you believe, Lizzy, that perhaps he is not so... deserving of our--." Here she paused again; she was so unused to thinking ill of anybody that this new thought temporarily struck her mute.

Elizabeth could see where her sister's thoughts were headed and if left to her own silent contemplations, Jane would soon, no doubt, become more miserable as the moments passed by. Thoughts of Mr. Bingley's ungentlemanlike departure from the country nine months ago and his two sisters' coldness to Jane in London were sure to be twisting their way through her thoughts at that moment.

Today Elizabeth wished to see her sister happy and she would do everything in her power to make it so. "Dear Jane, as I have always said, think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure; put all these unhappy thoughts aside and go forward from this day determined to be contented," said Elizabeth clasping her sisters hands. "Truly Jane, Mr. Bingley has shown himself determined to be our friend since his return into the neighbourhood; more too by his willingness to put up with our mother's constant attentions." She continued, rolling her eyes, "And if that has not warned him off, then he is very much deserving of your special kind of care."

A light blush spread across Jane's cheeks. She knew Elizabeth was right; Mr. Bingley had made his intentions of renewing their family's acquaintance fairly plain; yet, something else disturbed her mind, only she could not quite wrap her mind around it.

"When we go down, will you stay with me, Elizabeth? I know I can face anything if you are there with me. Promise me that you will not leave me for an instant."

"Yes, of course," replied Elizabeth, with a smile. "Then, if you are well satisfied, shall we dare our mother's disapproval and go downstairs to properly greet our guest as we ought?"



Where Miss Catherine Bennet had been content to worry on her own interests, Miss Mary Bennet had not been so insensible to Jane's wounded feelings all these months. In her estimation, Mr. Bingley, though lately returned into the neighbourhood and giving all the appearance of wishing to further his acquaintance with the Bennet family, deserved observation and who better than herself.

Her family may only have seen a young woman with a nose buried in a book, but to Mary it had always been the perfect guise for ferreting out information that her elder sisters never seemed to want to give. Jane had not been herself since the moment of that gentleman's departure and Mary felt it was up to her to find out his intentions.

"So," asked Mary suspiciously, and with an eye towards protecting her poor sister, "Are you now firmly fixed in the country, Mr. Bingley?"

"Pardon?" asked Bingley, not quite sure where this question would lead by the look on Mary Bennet's face.

"No thoughts of *dashing off* to town?"

"Dashing off?"

"You know, absconding, taking leave, *running away!*"

Bingley smiled uncomfortably, "Miss Mary, I hardly think..."

"But you did it before; how are we to be certain that you won't do it again?"

Bingley knew this line of questioning was bordering on the impertinent, but he also knew he must put up with it just to get one moment alone with Jane. At that moment Bingley heard someone clear their throat from behind him and instinctively standing to bow, turned around to see Jane Bennet looking from him to her sister Mary with marked displeasure.

Mary, feeling now that she may have gone a bit too far, left her seat on the settee and took up another near the window.

“Mr. Bingley,” said Jane, “I hope you can forgive our late arrival, we...”

“Oh no, Miss Bennet,” Bingley rushed to explain, “It is I who must be forgiven. I don’t know what got into me this morning. I suddenly remembered your mother’s kind invitation to dine with you all today and I set off at the very moment without paying much attention to the time. So, here I am!” He then bowed and smiling sheepishly to Elizabeth, said, “You will remember my friend Mr. Darcy saying once before about my rapidity of thought and carelessness of execution.”

Mary, from her seat by the window scoffed audibly which earned her a glare from Elizabeth.

“I am such a shatter-brained creature,” continued Bingley in earnest, “—is there any hope that I may be forgiven for all my shortcomings?”

The last was said as a sort of petition to Jane; however Jane just smiled benignly, rather too benignly in Elizabeth’s opinion and to cover up her sisters inaction, she moved forward to take his hand, “Nonsense, Mr. Bingley, I can assure you that no one here thinks of you in such a way; is that not correct, Jane?”

Jane made no answer and occupied herself with the business of sitting down and indicating to their guest to take a seat. Jane then said suddenly, “We interrupted your conversation with our sister when we came in, please continue.”

Bingley, unsure if he really wanted to proceed with the direction of that particular conversation, merely said, “Miss Mary was simply asking how long I intended to stay in Hertfordshire-- on this visit.”

“Oh, then you will be leaving us again, Mr. Bingley,” was Jane’s curt reply.

Elizabeth, feeling all the tension in Jane voice, rushed to cover up for her.

“Oh no indeed, Mr. Bingley would not be so cruel as to deny us his company so suddenly. Is that not correct, Mr. Bingley? You know our family is delighted to have you as our neighbour once again.”

“Ah, it is funny that you mention that, Miss Elizabeth, for I have...”

Unfortunately, he could not finish his answer to his satisfaction for Mrs. Bennet chose that exact moment to noisily flutter into the room.

“Hello, Mr. Bingley; how good of you to call. Elizabeth,” said Mrs. Bennet turning to her second daughter with barely concealed hostility, “I did not know you had come down bringing our dearest Jane with you.” Her look spoke volumes; Mrs. Bennet felt herself ill-used, and

naturally if there was any ill usage involved, Lizzy must be to blame. “Mr. Bingley, I hope that Lizzy has not been running on and monopolising the conversation in the manner she is suffered to do amongst our family party?”

Mr. Bingley did not know exactly what to say to such a speech or which way to look so he settled for simply kissing Mrs. Bennet’s hand.

Elizabeth, embarrassed for her mother, sighed and sensed a tedious morning. Hoping to steer her mother away from a line of unfortunate questioning and daring her mother’s disapproval, decided the only way to keep from total mortification was to prove her mother right by taking control of the entire conversation.

“Mr. Bingley, I hope that you left Mr. Darcy well this morning?” Elizabeth blushed straight away; where had that question come from? She admonished herself for such a selfish notion; this was meant to be Jane’s day and she banished all thoughts of Mr. Darcy and herself from her mind.

“Mr. Darcy left me quite early this morning for London, I’m afraid. When I write to him of my news this evening, I will tell him that you asked after him.” It was Mr. Bingley’s turn to blush; he silently hoped that no one read between the lines of his statement.

However, Elizabeth, terrified of revealing too much herself by her comment, immediately launched into a statement of her own.

“Oh no, Mr. Bingley, do not trouble Mr. Darcy with my insignificant inquiry. That is to say, I certainly do wish him well; I did not have a chance to speak to him much when we played cards the other evening—that is to say, he played at Whist while I played at Casino and therefore we sat at different tables. He was very silent that evening; I mean, he always seems very silent, not that there is anything wrong with silence.” She felt very foolish but covered up quickly by adding, “And how are your sisters?” She immediately regretted bringing them into the conversation sensing that no good could possibly come of that either.

“I believe they are well,” was Bingley’s uncomfortable reply.

Jane, who had been smiling at him politely, suddenly went pale; but, being the gracious lady that she was, regained her composure, smiled serenely, and asked after them herself.

“Do Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley stay in town the whole of the winter?”

Bingley felt a pain in his chest. His thoughts turned again to the mortifying interview with Darcy from that morning and the conspiracy involving his sisters.

“My sisters’ plans are at present unsettled. That is to say, I believe Caroline will be spending much of her time... elsewhere. I plan to remain on my own in Hertfordshire for some time. I anticipate that there will be nothing very appealing in town this winter; I doubt I will even open my London house—so you see, Caroline and Louisa will have to find their amusement in some

other quarter.” Moreover,” turning to Mary, he added, “I am firmly fixed in Hertfordshire at the present; wild horses could not drag me away.” He had finally gotten it all out and he was very pleased with himself.

Elizabeth smiled broadly and thought to herself: *if Jane was insensible to all that Mr. Bingley was trying to say, then there was no hope for her, ever.* She looked to Jane to gage her reaction, but Jane simply stared at her folded hands, deep in thought.

There was a lull in the conversation as Mr. Bingley’s reply hung in the air. Mrs. Bennet, who had been sitting quietly, not attending to the discussion, and caught up in her own schemes and machinations for her eldest daughter, suddenly asked, “So, Mr. Darcy has gone to town?”

“Yes, ma’am, he left earlier this morning,” replied Bingley.

Another uncomfortable silent descended down around the group. Bingley glanced from one face to another uneasily, then down to his own hands, wishing he could think of any excuse to be alone with Jane for a moment. Rescue came in the form of Miss Catherine asking her mother why she kept winking.

“Winking!” shrieked Mrs. Bennet, “What a notion! Why would I be winking at my own daughter, pray?”

Bingley could not be insensible to the acute mortification of the two elder sisters. Jane shuttered slightly but remained as composed as possible; Miss Elizabeth looked heavenward as if asking for angelic intervention.

Mrs. Bennet continued, “But now you ask, it puts me in mind—I do have something I would speak with you about. Come with me,” she said rising, “Come along! And you too, Mary, come!”

Obediently, Miss Mary and Miss Catherine rose to follow their mother as Bingley stood and bowed the ladies from the room. As the door latch clicked, Charles Bingley returned to his seat and racked his brain for some way to be rid of Miss Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, embarrassed at her mother’s conduct and uncomfortable herself, took up one of her sister’s embroidery hoops and angled her body away from the couple to give them some semblance of privacy.

Bingley fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat and was just about to say something asinine about the weather, when the door to the drawing room opened again and admitted Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper.

“I beg your pardon,” she said, her discomfort palpable, “Miss Elizabeth, you’re needed upstairs!” Hill quickly curtsied and fled.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and stood to depart, throwing one sarcastic glance in the direction of her sister as Bingley stood and bowed once again. Elizabeth closed the door with a snap and left her sister and Mr. Bingley on their own.



Charles Bingley was never more nervous in his life. He stood by his chair staring down at the most beautiful creature in the world. He wanted so much to say all the correct things and say them in just such a way, but the words that he had composed on his way to Longbourn now seemed to be an absolute muddle in his mind. And why, he thought, did his beloved Jane keep glancing up at him with her lovely eyes; didn't she know they made him all the more flustered?

"Mr. Bingley, do sit down," said Jane for lack of anything else to say.

"Ah, yes." He started to take his seat but soon thought better of it. "I mean no; I shall not sit." Jane looked perplexed but remained silent. "What I have to say will come out best if I stand." Jane cast her eyes to the floor, held her breath, and waited. "Miss Bennet—"

"Yes, Mr. Bingley?"

"Miss Bennet, you can have no doubt for the reasons of my early arrival at your door this morning."

"I do indeed, Mr. Bingley."

"You do?" said Bingley, somewhat taken aback at being so easily seen through.

"Yes, you said it yourself; my mother invited you to take a meal with us, which is rather surprising, for I thought you were to shoot with my father this morning?"

Charles Bingley relaxed and smiled; relieved somewhat that she was indeed unsuspecting. "No, no, Miss Bennet, I mean, I was to shoot with your father, but he only stipulated that I would come along any morning convenient—there was never any set schedule."

"Oh, I see."

"Now, Miss Bennet--"

"Yes, Mr. Bingley."

"I came for another reason entirely."

"And that is, sir--?"

“Miss Bennet, what I have to say—” He hesitated, trying to decide where it would be best to begin. “Miss Bennet, if you will indulge me, there are several things I feel I must explain, and I feel that I need to go back to the beginning. Would you be so kind as to listen to me for a moment?”

“By all means, Mr. Bingley, go on.”

“Charles.”

“Pardon?”

“Miss Bennet, we have known each other for so long, I thought you might like to call me Charles?”

Jane looked away, “Mr. Bingley, I hardly think—”

“Yes,” he rushed to say, embarrassed by such a notion. “Of course, you are right, you are right. Forgive me.”

Mr. Bingley became silent. He was slightly unnerved by her unwillingness to use his Christian name and had lost his drift. He had thought this would all be so easy, and sensed that if he did not take care; things could soon spiral out of control.

Jane said, “Perhaps if you start your story, Mr. Bingley, then I would understand more fully the reasons for your coming.”

Bingley took the opportunity to sit down; he did not trust himself anymore to stand on his own feet.

“Miss Bennet--” However, before she could say, ‘Yes, Mr. Bingley’, he held up his hand to forestall her. “You may remember my saying that Mr. Darcy left me this morning for London. Jane silently concurred. “However, before he departed, he imparted some information to me, which, I must say, was rather astonishing to me.”

“How so, Mr. Bingley?”

“Well, I don’t quite know how to put this--.” Bingley was now unsure how to proceed. He did not want to make his friend out to be a complete villain, but he also didn’t believe that Darcy’s actions should go unpunished. He stood and came to sit by Jane. For a moment he considered taking her hands in his, but soon thought better of it.

“Darcy and my sisters have always taken great pains to protect me from harm.” Jane looked somewhat concerned at what he had said, so Bingley quickly amended himself by adding, “Not what you are thinking; not from any kind of physical harm, but mostly from the personal harm that I may have inflicted upon myself by certain... notions.”

Here Jane furrowed her brow. She was having trouble understanding. Bingley, sensing this, thought it best to take her hands. “In their need to protect me, they forced me to question certain... beliefs that I had... pertaining to you.”

“Concerning me? How so,” was Jane’s genuinely confused reply?

Charles Bingley, without realizing he did so, squeezed Miss Bennet’s hands tighter; he knew he had to proceed cautiously.

“First, let me say that I did not believe them--at first, but they played upon my lack of confidence and made me question my own opinions. I now see that I was in error myself; in error for being so easily persuaded and in error for not coming to your defence.”

“My defence?” said Jane, stunned. “For heavens sake, Mr. Bingley, what could you possibly mean by this? Why would I need defending?”

“Miss Bennet, I don’t excuse them for their actions; it was abominable behaviour and I said as much to Darcy this morning.”

“You move too fast for me sir, I still don’t understand to what you refer.”

The situation had indeed spun out of control. Bingley had thought he was making perfect sense, yet, from the look in Jane’s eyes, it seemed to him that he did not.

“Oh, Miss Bennet, please forgive me. In my rush to explain all, it would seem that I am making a mess out of everything.” He paused to collect himself. “This may be hard for you to hear, but I feel I must speak on it if ever I am to gain your good opinion.” He cleared his throat and pushed on. “It would appear that my sisters along with Mr. Darcy had some... reservations as to certain feelings that you may or may not have had for me. In addition, I know now that they conspired together to conceal certain things from me, such as your being in London last year.” He saw the look of recollection flash across Jane’s face and hurriedly added, “I am not so much a fool as to believe that I do share in most of the responsibility; I am as much to blame for having so little assurance in my own abilities as for allowing them to persuade me against you in such a way.”

Jane could not but take a breath; to have all of her suspicions finally confirmed was disconcerting. She suspected his sisters involvement in keeping them apart long ago, but to be linked to Mr. Darcy whom she had always defended; that could not be so.

Jane’s silence forced Mr. Bingley to go on; he had other things to speak of. “My dearest Miss Bennet, you look upon a man in pain. I assure you that my torment all these last months at being parted from you has been excruciating. There are so many things that I wish to speak of, but first and foremost you must allow me to speak a little of what is in my heart—that is to say, to speak about certain loving feelings I have... for you.”

Jane knew in her own heart that she had once loved Charles with all her heart, and probably still loved him, but her own agonies of the past year had left her drained and questioning her judgement. Now with his admission to his persuadable nature, she could not help but think on him with a bit of irritation.

Bingley continued, not knowing that he was treading on shaky ground. “Miss Bennet, this past year, I have thought of nothing else but you. When I quitted Netherfield for London...”

“Oh, you mean when you left the country, telling your neighbours that it was to be a speedy overnight trip, only you never returned to take a proper leave of the people of Hertfordshire who welcomed you into their homes as a true friend.” Jane now looked on Mr. Bingley with something akin to annoyance.

A pain shot through Charles chest; he could scarce believe that those words had just come from the lips of one so angelic and if to prove his point, Jane pulled her hands from his grip, stood, and walked over to the window to stare out into the garden.

Charles stood and rushed on to tell his full story.

“Last November, at the ball at my home, I knew I had lost my heart totally and completely to you and I was convinced that you held some partiality towards me. As you know, the day after the ball I set off to London to consult with my man of business. I wanted to make certain arrangements--. Oh, Miss Bennet, I was so happy to have finally found someone to share my life with. The next day, once I had finished my business I hurried back to my house in London to prepare to set off for Hertfordshire within the hour. I had not been there long when Darcy arrived along with my sisters and Hurst. I didn't know what to think; the plan was for them to wait for my return to Netherfield. It would seem that once I was gone there had been much talk about settling in town much earlier in the season. I would have returned to Netherfield; you must believe me, it was my sincerest wish, but I was prevented by everyone else's removal. I then spoke to my friend and later to my sisters unreservedly of my affection and feelings that I had developed for you and why I would return into Hertfordshire. Louisa, Caroline, and Darcy all convinced me that although you were a sweet and delightful girl, they had seen no particular regard in your countenance for me. They told me repeatedly that you had no real feelings for me and that you were only being polite to a new neighbour as you would be polite to any new person of your acquaintance. I am ashamed to admit, that I began to believe them. They entreated me to wait and to give more thought to a decision that would affect my entire future. They implored me to take a few weeks to think things over. Up until then, I had no reason to doubt them, they had always steered me right. Darcy then made it his business to keep me occupied. I spent most of my time in his company and that of his sister, Miss Darcy. All of a sudden there were the Christmas holidays to contend with and the weeks became months and soon afterwards I felt too cowardly to return into country; I could not bare the thought of coming back after so long an absence with the possibility of seeing you giving your attentions to another. I suffered greatly.”

He had suffered greatly? Jane had heard enough. She turned around to face him. She was conflicted. As she looked on him, she felt for his predicament in having so many others to please, but what bothered her most was his total lack of strength of character.

Bingley was unnerved by her silence and fearing that her silence meant more, pressed on. “Darcy had invited me to spend some of the summer months at his home, Pemberley, in Derbyshire.”

“And Miss Darcy was there, no doubt.”

Charles was broadsided by Miss Bennet’s comment. It had come from out of nowhere. He had no idea how Miss Darcy’s name had even come to be part of their conversation.

“Miss Bennet, I don’t understand. What can you mean?”

“Merely that I have heard your named linked to hers before.”

“Why Miss Bennet, what can you...” It was something in Jane’s countenance at that moment that caused Bingley some alarm. “Miss Darcy is a dear, sweet girl; and just that, a girl! I have never thought on her for moment!”

“According to your sisters, she is much admired by you.”

Charles swore an oath. It now seemed that his sisters had done much more than simply persuading him from his Jane; it would seem that they had also filled her head with lies. He began to pace back and forth.

“Oh Jane, what must you think of me? How can I convince you of my regard for you and only you?” He stopped before her and reached out to grab her by the shoulders but stopped himself short before he could touch her. “As I said before, you were never forgotten; not for one moment, one hour, one day. Ask your sister, she will tell you that I asked after you most particularly when I met her at Pemberley.”

Here Jane looked up in disbelief. “You were at Pemberley at the same time as my sister?”

“Yes, indeed. Did you not know?”

“It would seem that I did not.”

Jane walked over to the fireplace mantle to gather her thoughts and Mr. Bingley followed. She stood there for a moment in deep contemplation; it saddened her to know that Lizzy had been keeping things from her.

“My dear Miss Bennet,” he said, lowering his voice tenderly, “I know I was very wrong and I can not hope to explain all of my actions any better than I have done already. What I said earlier was the absolute truth, I do love you, and I do so want you to be my wife. I promise you that everyday of my life I will venture to give you no reason for misgivings. I can only beg of you to find it your heart to forgive me and forget.”

Jane closed her eyes at his words. *Forget?* Why did he have to use the word forget? If he had said any other word, then perhaps she could forgive him. Yet, how could she ever hope to forget such a terrible year?

Jane cleared her throat to cover up the fact that she was near tears. He had thrown himself upon her mercy and she well knew she held his future happiness in the palm of her hand.

“Mr. Bingley, I am very much flattered by your proposal. However, to except them while I have uncertainty in my heart as to your general character would be very unwise. All I can do now is thank you for your friendship to my family and me. For my family, they are very fond of you and I hope this answer, though disappointing, will do nothing to deter you from seeking out the company of my mother, father, and sisters again. As for myself, I will continue to treat you as I always have done, but I find it impossible to give you my heart in the manner in which you require. There, I have said my peace. I can only ask you to adhere to my wishes.”

Here she turned away to keep Charles Bingley from seeing the conflict that she was certain was playing across her face.

To say that Charles Bingley was stunned would be an understatement; he felt as if all the air had been let out of his lungs. He had thought that if he had laid out all the facts, been truthful, then he would most assuredly receive his heart's reward. How could it be possible that Jane Bennet had no intention to marry him? How could she stand there and break his heart?

Bingley's voice was filled with raw emotion and quivered unsteadily when he asked, “Do you mean to say that you do not love me, Jane? Not even a little?”

She spun around to face him and spoke with a passion that surprised them both.

“It is my love for you that has made me miserable, Mr. Bingley!” She struggled to suppress a sob. “For months and months I have endured your absence. I visited your sisters in London only to be made a fool of; yet, you offer me no explanation as to what I've done to them to make them hate me so. I have had my heart broken into a thousand pieces with my thoughts and my hopes for your return and here you stand asking for the cruellest thing of all, you ask me to forget. Forget? How on earth could I ever hope to forget such a thing?”

Tears filled her eyes and she brought her hands up to her face to wipe them away. All Bingley could do was to lamely pull out his handkerchief, which she refused by shoving away his hands. All he wanted to do now was to take her into his arms, cover her with kisses, whisper words of love and regret into her ear, and to ease her pain. Unfortunately, as he leaned into her to offer her more comfort the sudden entrance of Elizabeth prevented him.

Elizabeth was keenly aware that she had interrupted something of a delicate nature because Bingley immediately drew back.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” said Elizabeth as she turned to go away.

“No!” replied Jane, “Don’t go, Lizzy.”

Bingley leaned in to whisper something to her sister that Elizabeth could not make out. But, whatever it was, it was very brief and to the point. He turned and immediately left the room closing the door behind him but not before giving Elizabeth such a look of heartfelt agony that it went straight to her heart.

“Well?” she asked her sister, not a little concerned.

“Lizzy, what is this that Mr. Bingley tells me? You have seen him recently in Derbyshire, yet, you did not tell me so?”

Elizabeth rushed forward. “Oh my dear, Jane, forgive me, I know I was wrong, but I did not think that you should know. Nothing good could have come of it! Believe me; I did it only to spare your feelings.”

“Oh Lizzy!” cried Jane, “Why does everyone treat as if I were some helpless child to be protected and coddled.” In a tearful wail Jane rushed past her sister, opened the door, and ran up the stairs to her own room.

Elizabeth’s first inclination was to go after her sister, but the need to receive an explanation from Mr. Bingley prevented her. She ran out the front door just as the groom ran off having helped Mr. Bingley mount his horse.

“Mr. Bingley, please wait!” she cried, “What can be the matter with Jane?”

Bingley struggled to keep his countenance and Elizabeth felt that if given a moment to himself he would break down in tears.

“Your sister has made me wretched, Miss Elizabeth. I do not blame her; I brought it all on myself and have only myself to blame. She has refused the offer of my hand and to own the truth, I think she has nearly killed me.”

Forgetting herself and reaching up grasping his coat, Elizabeth cried, “For heavens sake, Mr. Bingley, do not say such a thing. She is only upset; it has been a trying time for her. Come into the house and let me speak with her to ascertain her true feelings. Believe me when I say this, I have no doubt of her unending affection.”

“That is the cruellest joke of all, Miss Elizabeth; your sister has admitted them as much to me herself. I have no doubt that she once loved me greatly, but what she will not forgive is my abominable treatment of her. For that I can not blame her.”

“But none of this is your fault, Mr. Bingley; surely others are culpable.”

Bingley responded bitterly, “Yes, my sisters, and my *great* friend, Mr. Darcy; the very demons sent down to ruin all my dreams of happiness.” Bingley pulled himself away from Elizabeth and made to nudge the horse to be on his way.

Elizabeth stopped him with a final entreaty. “Please come into the house to calm yourself. I beg you, Mr. Bingley, don’t leave like this. I can only hope--.”

“Hope? You speak to me of hope?” He laughed cynically, “Never shall such a word enter my head again. Under the circumstances, Miss Elizabeth, I am sure your family will understand my need for a hasty departure.” Without as much as a by your leave, he hit the rump of his horse with his riding crop and was off.



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