

Chapter 7 ~ Good Neighbours



At this time the previous year when staying with the Hurst's, Miss Caroline Bingley would have cast a disgusted look at her brother-in-law's plate. But now, she was rather accustomed to seeing the revolting spectacle. As was *his* ritual, the plate before him was piled high with sausage, bacon, muffins, and a large slice of pork pie. As was *her* practice, she would turn her head away to avoid all scenes of unpleasantness and ask her sister for one of the several morning papers they generally took. That particular morning, Caroline was very eager to peruse the society pages to see who else had come to town.

Caroline had also already read the *Porcupine*, reading up on all the juicy titbits (that she had not gleaned from amongst her more gossipy acquaintances) on the progress of the Rushworth divorce. What a scandal it had all had become and all so shocking and humiliating for the lady that Caroline could not wait to learn even more.

The *Post*, just the day before, heralded the arrival of the heir to the Earldom of Matlock, a gentleman known to be somewhat of a recluse and who had long been away from London. The paper had wildly speculated on the various reasons he would be accompanying his young cousin, Miss Georgiana Darcy and her companion into town, with marriage between those two being the underlying hint in that preposterous article.

Now she wanted the *Times* as she never had any doubts as to that papers veracity. For where Georgiana Darcy was, Fitzwilliam Darcy, she was sure, would soon follow, and if that illustrious gentleman had any new information on his actions, the *Times* always made sure that they were the first to report it.

She imagined the grand dinner she would give at the Bingley townhouse in honour of Darcy's return: her brother Charles at one end of the table, bending heads with Georgiana and whispering little compliments into her ear; and she at the other end, with the handsome Fitzwilliam Darcy to her right and dashing Lord Whitfield at her left. She had written to her brother just days before to hurry his return to London for she had much that she wished to accomplish.

"Perkins, has the *Times* come this morning?" asked Louisa Hurst as she played with her bracelets.

Mr. Hurst looked up in alarm.

"Yes, ma'am," replied the footman, "It is in the master's library. Shall I fetch it for you?"

"Yes, indeed."

The footman went away and Hurst panicked. He had left that newspaper in there on purpose because he knew what it contained and fancied a peaceful breakfast that morning. In unguarded moments when he was thought to be asleep on a sofa, he had listened to the ladies machinations

enough over the last year to know that the portents of doom were wafting in the air. He immediately lost all interest in his food and was very keen, most extremely keen, to get out of the house.

He stood suddenly and made to turn for the door. "I must be off."

"Excuse me," asked his wife, disbelieving, and not a little piqued.

"I'm going out, Louisa, and I shall be gone all day."

"Chetwyn, what *are* you talking of?"

"Uh--business matters--last minute."

Chetwyn Hurst had no business dealings that she knew of; in fact, he was the lazy son of a lesser north-country Baronet who had too many lazy sons of little education and no profession.

"Oh no, you don't! You told me last night that you were going to help me select the new drapes for the morning room and I intend to hold you to it, sir! Monsieur Delacroix is coming today especially."

Hurst's face contorted. "I don't recall saying any such silly thing. Anyway, can not Caroline help you with that?"

"No, she can not; she has an appointment with her dressmaker today; do you not sister?"

"Not without the proper funds from Charles, I don't," Caroline mumbled into her teacup, more to herself than to her sister.

"Can't be helped, Louisa," said Hurst, as he backed his body towards the door.

"But you promised me!"

"Must dash; pip, pip."

His hand was on the knob just as Perkins pushed it open from the opposite side.

"Oh, I am sorry, sir. Let me get that for you."

Hurst did not wait for the footman to open the door properly, he just pushed his way past, and was frantically gesturing to the other footman standing at the entrance for his hat and gloves; his wife had arisen from the table and followed him out, hard upon his heels. When he saw her approaching he mumbled, "Oh, Lord."

"When do you expect to return?" asked Louisa, coming into the front hall, her voice taking on a loud, high, and screeching pitch.

"Don't know that, now do I? Never know with business."

“What business is this that calls you away? You’ve never had any business before.”

“Now, now; nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over.”

Her husband had not called her pretty in such a long time that Louisa was momentarily stunned. Chetwyn Hurst, seeing that his tactic had succeeded, collected his things. As he put on his hat, the footman attempted to brush his coat for going out but Hurst who would have none of it, shrugged him off, and practically ran out the front door as Louisa, now awakened from her reverie, followed him outside shouting after him.

“You had better not be going to that club of yours to play cards all day, do you hear me? Do you hear me, Chetwyn? *Chetwyn!*”

Several neighbours, walking past the house at that time, stopped and looked up, exceedingly appalled at such a boisterous display. Then again, it was the Hurst’s after all; hardly surprising behaviour.

Louisa recollected herself, plastered a disingenuous smile on her face, and bowed politely. She was just about to say good morning to the meddlesome Mrs. Amelia Gilbert and her thick-headed son when from somewhere behind her in the house she heard a blood curdling scream.

“Noo!”



Elizabeth rolled her eyes heavenward at what passed for *interesting* conversation in William Goulding’s head. She thought that if she had to endure his tedious conversation another minute (especially on an empty stomach as she had not had her breakfast) she would not be responsible for her actions.

“So this fellow, this Mortimer from down Watford way, asked me if I saw a better curricule than his. Aye, says I; mine; and faster too!”

His voice, a great booming instrument, coupled with his tendency to fancy himself better than any man in the country at nearly everything and his having the education of a haystack, made him the most absurd man in existence. For once she wished she could sigh out loud in the manner of her younger sisters to hint him away. And it was not at all helpful that her mother sat there encouraging him.

“I expect my curricule is the fastest in the county, if not in the entire south of England. I have a gig a too; it is also very fast!”

“Did you hear that, *Kitty*,” said Mrs Bennet, her interest peaked, “A gig *and* a curricule?”

Kitty’s eyes grew large in alarm. She hoped desperately that her mother did not intend her for the great lumbering oaf sitting in front of her; everyone else in the room knew perfectly well that he was there for Jane.

“Tell me,” asked Mrs Bennet, wanting to turn that gentleman’s conversation away from his conveyances and over to the charms of her daughters or to the goings on in Meryton, “How is everyone at Haye-Park? Your mother is well, is she not?”

“Everyone is very well. Father is very much caught up with building at present.”

“Building, sir,” questioned Mrs Bennet, not having heard of any of this from the usual sources.

“Aye, Father has great plans for improvements such as enlarging the house and the park; he says it is high time he added on to the house for the benefit of *future* Goulding’s.” Saying that, he cast a long, significant stare in Jane’s direction and Elizabeth blanched at his presumption. “He has even purchased old Harold Cooks farm for me; he says it is high time I have a place of my own to farm. The house there is a good one and only lacks a women’s touch.”

Mrs Bennet’s eyes sparkled greedily. In the past, she had always considered the Goulding’s as somewhat beneath the Bennet’s, and she was forever hoping that they would quit their house in favour of something further away as she considered old Mr. Thomas Goulding as course and his wife (the daughter of a bailiff) barely worth noticing and the house at Haye-Park as far too fine for someone whose family made their fortune from the buying and selling of hay. However, here sat William, now telling her of his families improved consequence in the world.

“How fortunate you are, Mr. Goulding,” continued Mrs. Bennet, smiling and nodding to her guest, “It is nice to know that your family has done very well for themselves.”

Mrs. Bennet, especially eager to marry off one of her remaining daughters after she had been so successful in marrying off one and engaging another, was more than delighted to be entertaining another young gentleman in her drawing room. And if he had come a little too early that morning, what of it; all men looking to engage themselves to one of her daughters came early, did they not?

“Will you and your family be attending the village fete this year, Mr. Goulding?” she asked.

“Aye, and I will be entering one of our fine Haye-Park pigs in the judging this year.”

“Did you hear *that*, Kitty,” said Mrs Bennet, her eyebrows shooting upwards and using more muscles in her mouth than were necessary, “Mr. Goulding says he will be entering a pig?”

Kitty’s eyes flew to Elizabeth in a panic, hoping that her elder sister would somehow put a stop to her mother’s nonsense with some clever aside or witty remark; Elizabeth did not disappoint.

“How amusing that sounds, Mr. Goulding. Unfortunately the Bennet family must miss seeing you and your excellent pig there.”

Before the gentleman asked why that was, Mrs Bennet interrupted, “What is this, Lizzy, my dear? Surely you must be mistaken.”

“Pardon me, ma’am, but you must remember that we will all be in London that week. We, none of us, will be unable to attend the fall fete this year, unless none of my sisters wishes new clothes for my wedding.”

“Oh no, mamma!” added Kitty, hastily. “I simply must have a new gown from town for Lizzy’s wedding!”

Mrs. Bennet contemplated for a moment. She had been certain that the family had no ideas of going up to London until the week following the village fete and she thought that it had been a settled thing. Anyway, as no specific date for the wedding had been decided upon, she quickly added up things in her head thinking that Elizabeth must be in error.

“Lizzy, my dearest, I do not believe...”

“Then again, I could just wear something new off the peg from Miss Sarah’s shop in Meryton, and you, Mamma, you may wear your new brown cambric. Mr. Darcy and the Earl of Matlock, I am sure, will not hold our plain, country style of dressing against us.”

Elizabeth’s ridiculous statement had the desired effect, “Oh, of course you are right, my dear. How came I to be so muddled? You must all have new things from London.” And turning to her guest asked, as if he did not know already, “You have heard, have you not, Mr. Goulding, that our dearest girl here is to marry Mr. Darcy of Pemberley. I believe the notice has been already been placed in the *Times*.”

Mr. Goulding’s face showed his incredulity, the whole of the county had heard of that impending marriage and he had no idea why Mrs Bennet was speaking of it as if it was a new occurrence.

“Yes indeed, ma’am; I have already offered my congratulations to Mr. Darcy and my best wishes to Miss Elizabeth.”

“You know, Mr. Goulding,” added Mrs Bennet pleased with herself and hardly hearing him, “It is such a great comfort to a mother to know that one of her daughters will be so well looked after. Of course it can also be a very distressing thing for, as you most certainly know, my Lydia has moved away so very far and now Lizzy will be going to a place quite northward, as well. It would be such a pleasure to have one of my daughters married and living near me, don’t you believe, my dear Mr. Goulding. Why, I was just saying to my sister Philips the other day...”

Elizabeth, seeing where the conversation was most likely headed, interrupted. “Mamma,” she said more forcefully than she had originally intended, “I have just had a letter from Charlotte Collins yesterday, and she says that Maria is to visit with her at Hunsford again. Is not that a fine thing?”

“I do not see that, why should I see that, how can that be?” said Mrs Bennet impatiently; disliking turning the conversation onto a subject she was in no mood to speak on.

“Why Charlotte was in hopes of inviting one of my sisters to accompany her sister into Kent. Think of all the people they would meet there in the company of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, just like I did.”

Elizabeth knew full well that Charlotte's letter contained no such thing; in fact she was pretty certain from several of the hints in it that Lady Catherine would never welcome another Bennet sister into her home again.

Mr. Goulding looked back and forth between mother and daughter; he was curious how this would all affect his own plans. "Surely, Miss Bennet will not be going into Kent?" he asked, horror overtaking his countenance.

The Goulding heir had again shown a marked partiality towards Jane, but Mrs. Bennet still meant for Jane to have Mr. Bingley. Kitty was in her sights for her guest and Mrs Bennet, alert to the fact that William Goulding was by far paying too much attention to her eldest instead of giving all his attention to her youngest, said, "Oh yes, indeed, I should say so; Jane is so very fond of Mrs Collins. As for Kitty, now she will stay here—with Mary, of course."

Jane sat to the side looking as beautiful and as demure and uninterested as ever. To Elizabeth it was almost as if she was not attending to the conversation, which, in truth she was not. She was far too busy thinking of Mr. Bingley and how sad he had looked the last time she had seen him.

She had seen Sir William Lucas attacking him with his conversation days ago and to Jane's eyes Charles Bingley seemed to be nodding and humouring the gentleman as a way of tolerating what had appeared to be a tedious conversation. She had glanced in Mr. Bingley's direction several times that evening and it pained her to see him so dejected. He had lost weight she was certain and the liveliness had gone out of his countenance.

She wondered what he must be doing at that moment. Did he have guests at Netherfield? Had all his other friends, with the exception of Mr. Darcy, come up from town for the shooting? She had not heard, but that was what he must be doing, she surmised; her own father was in the field at that moment with all his neighbours partaking of the sport and perhaps Mr. Bingley was amongst them.

And what had become of his sisters; how did they feel to be banished from his life? She knew that she could never be on such friendly terms with them again, yet, she did not like to think that anyone would be so distressed at the loss of the society of such a good brother.

She suddenly stopped her line of thoughts and began silently berating herself for her weakness. Why was she even thinking of Charles Bingley? What could she possibly hope to gain by it?



Not three miles away, Charles was engaged in much the same manner. He sat in the empty drawing room of his nearly empty house, staring out of the window into his empty garden, brooding moodily and planning his next move that he hoped would alleviate his empty heart.

He had just finished writing a most uncharitable letter in response to one he had received the day before from his sister, Caroline, entreating him to:

...return to town as I have no idea what could possibly keep you there so long...

Her letter was full of plans for him to quit the country and bold hints that she was in desperate need of funds to finance her winter wardrobe. She considered it quite shocking to be seen out of doors in her tattered rags and his man of business, as she stated further in her letter, *was not at all as helpful as one in his station in life ought to be*. He would not budge without Charles written instructions as Charles was trustee and no moneys could be paid until he had granted his approval.

Since Charles held all the cards, he felt that he must now be cruel in repayment for his sister's cruelty to him. The letter was written on a crisp sheet of paper without one blot to be found.

From this day forward your allowance will be reduced by half and returned to the amount it was originally set to be. As I well know, your current mode of lifestyle far exceeds what funds you will in future have on hand. I suspect you must now find some way to make ends meet as I have come to believe that I have been far too liberal a brother in this matter and as I know full well it was always father's intention for you to show some restraint in your personal expenses.

You may stay on with Louisa and Hurst for now unless you have somewhere else you wish to go at this moment or until I see fit to set you up in an establishment of your own. My house in London will be sold as soon as may be and for the time being, I am fixed at Netherfield Park. You are never to come here, as you, Louisa, and Mr. Darcy are no longer welcome in my house.

All argument is useless and a complete waste of my time. I suggest you save your energy and use this time to have your belongings in the London house packed up and carted away.

---Charles

The servant entered to take away the mail and Charles asked him to relay to the stables that his horse should be saddled. Today he would begin his campaign to win back the affection of the only person on earth dear to him and he pitied any man or woman who stood in his way. Therefore, to Longbourn he was to go.



To Elizabeth, it seemed as if they would not be rid of their guest any time soon. Obviously, feeling the stirrings of her own hunger, Mrs Bennet invited Mr. Goulding to breakfast with them. He acquiesced with very little persuasion and sat at table monopolising the entire conversation as a way of further impressing Jane.

Now, with breakfast long over they had once more returned to the drawing room. William Goulding was again holding court and sitting far too near her sister, and telling Jane, yet again, all about his curricula, his pigs, and his new farm. He was at the height of bad manners as the visit had gone on much too long; even Mrs. Bennet now began to entertain thoughts of hinting him away.

Jane sat next to him quietly, listening and smiling blankly in all the right places, nodding at all the correct moments and saying all the things that she ought. It was this general sort of complaisance that worried Elizabeth; Jane now acted, she feared, just as Mr. Darcy had believed her to once be: with a heart not easily touched.

Mrs. Hill's entrance at the drawing room door cut off Mr. Goulding's pronouncement that his new farm would be all that was modern and enviable and how it was far more superior to all other farms in the county.

"Mr. Bingley for you, ma'am."

Bingley entered the parlour with a peculiar look on his face, which to Elizabeth, seemed as if he was come prepared to do battle.

They all stood and Mrs Bennet, momentarily flustered with William Goulding sitting next to her eldest, said, "Oh, Mr. Bingley; this is indeed a surprise."

"I hope I do not call at an inconvenient time, Mrs Bennet." He glared at William Goulding suddenly noticing him in the room and where he was sitting.

"No indeed, sir, you are welcome at any time; is he not Jane," fluttered Mrs Bennet.

As Bingley bowed, Jane smiled up at him just as she always had, but to Elizabeth, it did not seem to have all the warmth that it had had in all their previous encounters.

"You are very welcome, sir," said Jane gently.

Bingley bowed next to the other Bennet sisters to give his greeting; Mary and Kitty curtsied, smiled, and welcomed him politely; Elizabeth only curtsied.

It was now a little confusion as to where to sit. William Goulding already occupied the seat to Jane's right on the settee and Elizabeth, the seat to her left. Mrs Bennet sat in her usual seat by the fire with Kitty sitting, as her mother had earlier commanded, in her father's chair so that Mr. Goulding might have a good view of her. But now, to Mrs Bennet, it would not do to have her there. The seats around the table where Mary sat were, in Mrs Bennet's opinion, too far away for Mr. Bingley to command a view of her loveliest daughter's face.

"Kitty my dear, what do you do there, you know you do not like to always be sitting so close to the fire."

"No, indeed mamma, I like to today for I am a little chilled this morning."

Mrs Bennet now showed her impatience with Kitty for not taking the hint.

"Then *Kitty*, dearest, run along and get your shawl from above stairs."

"I have my shawl with me, do you not see mamma?"

Kitty pulled her shawl up for her mother to have a better view.

“Kitty, *my love*, I am sure you will need your warmer shawl from your room. Now, run along, dear!”

As Kitty arose and went out the door, Elizabeth turned away slightly to hide her embarrassment just as Mr. Bingley moved over to take the seat that was always his when he came to Longbourn.

“Good morning, Goulding,” said Bingley, eyeing the other gentleman as if he were a fox too near his chickens, “Fancy meeting you here so early in the morning.”

“Yes, hello Bingley;” said Mr. Goulding, flatly, “funny, I was just going to say the same thing to you.”

The two men glowered at each other; no looks of goodwill passed between them.

Mrs Bennet then spoke hastily, “Tea, Mr. Bingley?”

“Thank you, ma’am. Two—”

“Now, Mr. Bingley,” replied Mrs Bennet cutting him off, “Jane knows very well how you take your tea, is not that correct, Jane?”

Jane, having the tea tray before her, had leaned forward and was already pouring his tea. She simply nodded and smiled politely as she added milk and two lumps of sugar to his cup, just as he liked. She also made sure that there were two pieces of shortbread on the saucer instead of the cake as he was especially partial to shortbread.

Charles smiled and sat up straighter as he noticed the care and attention which Jane Bennet was taking in preparing his tea. He looked over at William Goulding with a good deal of smugness and triumph playing about his features when Jane handed the saucer and napkin over.

However, at that same moment, Jane started slightly nearly upsetting his teacup. She turned pink with embarrassment, quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed her discomfiture, and found Mary staring back at her.

“Are you well, Jane,” asked Mary, knowing full well what Mr. Bingley had done; he had deliberately caressed her fingers at the exchange of the napkin and from her vantage point at the table she had observed the entire scene.

“I am very well, Mary. It was very clumsy of me. I hope I did not spill anything on you, Mr. Bingley.”

“No, not at all.” He crossed his legs and sat back in his chair with a satisfied expression. *So, he thought, she is not so impervious to me after all.*

“Would anyone care for more tea,” asked Jane hastily, unconsciously bringing her hand to her throat to cool the warmth that she suddenly felt there. Everyone indicated that they were content and Jane quickly glanced at Mr. Bingley a little meanly as he innocently stirred his tea.

Kitty now returned with her warmer shawl and sat next to Mary at the table. Mary, keenly aware of Jane’s true feelings, would not let the matter rest. “Mamma, is it not a lovely day today? Might I suggest a stroll in the gardens? The gentlemen have not seen how beautiful our chrysanthemums have become this season.”

All the sisters turned to look at Mary; she had never shown an interest in the gardens before, much less ever spared the time to stroll through them.

“What a splendid idea, my dear. What say you to that, Mr. Bingley, Mr. Goulding?”

William Goulding seemed quite put out; he had gardens enough at Haye-Park to look at and he would much rather stay indoors and look at Mrs Bennet’s pretty daughter. Bingley seemed extremely interested in being out of doors and sat his tea down instantly and stood. “What a wonderful idea, Miss Mary, I would so much enjoy taking a stroll through your gardens; lead the way.”

The ladies all went away (some more reluctantly than others) to collect their things and the two gentlemen made haste to remove from the drawing room, momentarily getting stuck in the doorway as they both exited at the same time on their way to the entrance to see who would be the first to offer Miss Bennet their arm.

As the maid assisted the girls in going out, Jane leaned in and whispered to Elizabeth. “Please stay with me, Lizzy; Mr. Bingley is very good to call upon my mother today, but I find myself not equal to his presence this morning.”

“Anything, dearest, anything; have no fear.”

Mrs Bennet stood by the front door with every intention of grouping the couples as she saw fit. Kitty would do nicely for William Goulding, she thought, as he was not too clever and Kitty had never been celebrated for her wit. His income was a good one, now with a farm of his own and an income of little over a thousand a year at present and very likely more, she calculated, when his father was dead.

As for her eldest, no matter how much Jane protested that she no longer cared for Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet knew full well that she was suited to him perfectly; anyone with half a brain could see that for themselves. And if she could but only manoeuvre her daughter to his arm at just the right moment... however, she was forestalled by Elizabeth, who went out of the door with her arm linked tightly around Jane’s, leaving Mary and Kitty to be escorted by the gentlemen.

Jane and Elizabeth were at some distance from the group behind when Jane whispered, “Thank you, Lizzy. I do not wish to be on my own with Mr. Bingley.”

“Uncharitable as it may be, Jane, I do not wish to speak to him as well. I still have not decided if I can forgive him for his abominable treatment of Mr. Darcy.”

“Oh no,” admonished Jane, “Please don’t say that, Lizzy. It would pain me greatly to have you at odds with him. Although all the unfriendliness is on Mr. Bingley’s side, we must believe that Mr. Darcy’s regard can not be done away with in an instant. I am convinced with everything in me that one day Mr. Bingley will remember his friend with a warmth and kindness which will do away with all previous dislike.”

Elizabeth smiled to herself to hear her sister defend him so. “You are too good and of course, you are right, Jane. Even if I cannot, at present forgive him this one slight, on the basis of Mr. Darcy’s past and even present regard, I must and should endeavour to be civil.”

The two ladies were then joined by Kitty and Mr. Goulding, who was eager to have Jane’s company as soon as possible. “I will have you settle one thing for me, Miss Bennet.”

“Sir?”

“I was asking Miss Catherine here if she had ever seen a faster curricule than mine. I fancy she has not and neither have you, I’ll wager.”

“Well, I...” stammered Jane, not sure what she would say; Elizabeth just sighed and looked heavenward; she had almost reached her breaking point.

“James Cox would have you believe his curricule is much faster because it comes from London. But I had mine made up at Oxford and I can tell you that the chaps up that way know their business. We race this Friday out at the post road to determine once and for all who the better man is.” Jane smiled kindly but showed no more interest so he pressed on. “Perhaps, Miss Bennet, you’d like to come see me win, with all your sisters, of course. And, after the race, I can give you a go in my curricule if you like. What do you say to that, Miss Bennet?”

“Did you hear that Mr. Bingley,” interjected Elizabeth, hastily, calling that gentleman over to save her sister the trouble of responding to such an impertinent question, “Mr. Goulding plans a curricule race Friday next and all my sisters have been invited. He wants us to believe there is no other gentleman in the country better than him at the sport? As a sportsman and gentleman, sir, I wonder what you would make of such a spectacle.”

Bingley catching her tone replied, “The prospect of seeing the vehicle upset in a ravine, the horses in great agitation, and the driver with a broken head for his trouble, is not something I would wish a young lady with delicate sensibilities to witness,” and then, turning to the gentleman, added, “however, I, on the other hand, would find it above all things, highly diverting.”

No one in the little group gathered could mistake Mr. Bingley’s meaning. Jane and Elizabeth were each visibly uncomfortable with Jane’s face in especially high colour; Kitty was unsure of what to do or say so remained quite. The only odd member of the group was Mary, for she simply smiled. But they were all saved from responding by the approach of Mr. Bennet and the gillie having just come from hunting pheasant.

“Good day, gentlemen; what do you do here gossiping with the ladies? I don’t know what you find so interesting with them when there is so much sport to be had?” He had the gillie lift up the

brace of pheasants to show them his success. He noticed that no one of the party paid him any mind; everyone assembled had a bizarre sort of look about them. He could especially see for himself that the gentlemen were chiefly occupied in despising each other.

“Well, it has been a fine day but I am in need of sustenance. Could I tempt you two fine fellows inside for drink of something?”

The two gentlemen stared at each other, each seeing what the other would do first. Goulding spoke first.

“Excuse me, sir, but Miss Bennet wanted to hear more about my curricule.”

Mr. Bennet doubted very much that anyone wanted to hear anymore on that subject as he had heard all about it since the young man had acquired it. Mr. Bennet then turned to Mr. Bingley.

“You are very kind, sir, but I believe Miss Mary intended to show me more of your flower garden.”

“Well, suit yourselves, gentlemen,” said Henry Bennet, wryly, who then added, “I hope you will forgive me if I deprive you of one of your number; Lizzy, come with me, I would speak to you for a moment.”



In her father’s library at the window, as her father busied himself at the far table, Elizabeth could observe the goings-on on the lawn. Mary was pointing out the various plants while Mr. Bingley kept glancing over his shoulder in order to see what Jane was about. In the opposite direction William Goulding was talking on and on yet again as Jane and Kitty seemed to be politely nodding for lack of anything better to do.

“You wished to speak to me, Papa?” said Elizabeth while staring uneasily at the scene.

“Yes, I wanted your opinion of something of great importance; I was wondering who your money is on.”

She turned. “Money, sir?”

“I have not decided who to put my money on as yet. Goulding has the slight advantage as Jane has known him longer, but I will wager that you are firmly in the Bingley camp since he is Mr. Darcy’s great friend. What say you Lizzy?”

Her father didn’t seem to actually require an answer and simply picked up his wine and came up to stand behind his daughter to see what scenes had so captivated her attention.

“Nothing entertains me more than two fellows at odds over one silly young woman.” He said, laughing heartily.

“How can you say Jane is silly, Papa?”

“No, you mistake me, my dear; I speak only of young women in general; the absurdity of this situation lies firmly in the gentlemen’s corner.”

Elizabeth sighed, “I can not find humour in any of this; I worry so for Jane.”

“Worry? Why should you worry so? I thought all young women aspired for the attentions of two lovers at the same time; it gives her such a distinction amongst her acquaintance.”

Elizabeth frowned. “You said exactly the same thing when you thought Bingley had crossed her in love.”

“And so I did,” said Mr Bennet recollecting himself. “Well, knowing her disposition, I am certain that the incident has now been forgotten by Jane.”

“And I am certain that Mr. Bingley’s presence here today upsets her greatly.”

Mr. Bennet looked more closely; outside, just at that moment, Jane began laughing at something William Goulding had said, drawing Bingley’s notice.

“Oh, yes, Lizzy, look at poor Jane,” said her father, sarcastically, “So upset.”

Elizabeth, impatient with her father lack of sympathy, left the window and began pacing back and forth. Her father turned and followed her progress with his eyes, seeing clearly that something was upsetting to her.

“What is this really all about, Lizzy? Bingley’s presence never caused you any distress on your sister’s behalf before; I rather thought you wanted to encourage her in that quarter.”

“I-I did-- I still do— I just thought—oh, I don’t know what to think, it’s all so—” She turned to her father and laid her head on his shoulder. “Papa, I don’t know what to do; everything is at such an impasse right now.”

Mr. Bennet held his daughter for a moment. It struck him as odd that his daughter, Elizabeth, so happy a few days ago and so newly engaged should feel so distressed. He chuckled slightly and said, “Tell me, Lizzy, what is your grief really all about. Does this have anything to do with Mr. Darcy’s sudden departure the other day? Please don’t tell me that I shall I have to go up to London to call him out and fight a duel with him for the protection of your honour?”

Elizabeth leaned away from him and gave him a withering look; leave it to him to make a joke at a time like this.

“I see your look, Lizzy, and I know what it means: something of great import must be troubling you to cause this look of anguish. Why don’t you unburden yourself a little? I am sure once it is all said out loud, you will probably find that it is not half as dramatic as you imagine.” Mr. Bennet released his daughter, took is wine over to his chair, and turning added, “I’ll even leave off laughing until the entire tale is told.” He sat down and was all attention

For her part, Elizabeth wanted to unburden herself, yet didn't know how much she could safely tell her father. She did not want either of her parents to know the exact particulars of all the bitterness between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, for her father would only make sport of it and Mrs Bennet would most likely turn it into common neighbourhood gossip. She felt uncomfortable making any communication that would lay all the particulars out for all to see, so she chose her words carefully.

“You remember just the other day when Mr. Darcy took leave of us?”

“Of course, Lizzy; I was there at dinner when he made the announcement that he had to go up to London on business.”

“Well, that's just it; it was not exactly business that called him away. I have no doubt.—that is to say—I mean, I am sure he will look to his business—I suspect that while he is in town---”

“Come now, Lizzie, all at once; better out than in.”

She sighed but forged on. “It would seem that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley are not on such friendly terms as they once were.” At her father's questioning look, she rushed to add, “Please don't ask me why, Papa as I am not at liberty at present to divulge what has caused the rift, but there is one none the less. With the situation as it now stands, Mr. Darcy felt the need to remove himself from Netherfield as soon as possible.”

Mr. Bennet sat back in his chair, surprised, silent, and thinking. He tried to remember the last time he had seen the two gentlemen together and settled upon the dinner at the Lucas's. He recalled that Darcy was always at Lizzy's elbow, but Bingley, now that he thought about it, stayed well clear of his friend and was never in the company of anyone in particular. How strange, he thought, for one with such an affable character. “Well, this is startling news, indeed. I never took my son-in-law as one who would perpetuate a malice.”

“A malice,” replied Elizabeth, angered, “What makes you think it is all on Mr. Darcy's side? I can assure you, sir, it is not!”

Mr. Bennet had never seen his daughter look that way before; how Elizabeth's eyes burned with indignation as she defended the one she loved; he was at a loss for words.

“I only assumed--Bingley hardly strikes me as the type to--but are you sure, Lizzy?”

“Oh yes, Papa. Since Jane's refusal of his offer of marriage, I believe Mr. Bingley has set himself down a path of ill-temper and resentment. He blames Mr. Darcy for certain... actions, that I may not speak on now and for which I agreed were very wrong of him to do. However, Mr Darcy has begged for and had been given Mr Bingley's pardon. Now, with Mr. Bingley's disappointment, it has all turned round to anger and dislike.”

“*Bingley?*” Henry Bennet was having trouble believing it. “And does his resentment lean towards Jane, do you think?”

“No, I doesn't resent Jane; quite the contrary, I believe he is still attached to her very much.”

“Does your sister resent Mr. Bingley, then?”

“No Papa, when have you known Jane to resent anyone? She is incapable of it. But it is my belief that she feels he slighted her greatly by staying away so long, then suddenly turning up here at Longbourn again, almost expecting her to marry him without question. I am convinced with everything within myself that Jane does have affection for him, only is buried under the weight of uncertainty, frustration, and confusion.”

Mr. Bennet puzzled over this for some time; how strange things seemed to be: The pleasant Mr. Bingley having words with his friend, Mr. Bingley’s previous admission as to his neglect of Jane, and his Lizzy taking it all upon herself. Added all together, things were very extraordinary indeed. Once again, Mr. Henry Bennet held himself responsible for not taking a more active role in the lives of his daughters and it hurt him to see his Lizzy so distraught when at this time of her life she should be enjoying nothing but bliss; it nearly brought tears to his eyes.

“Tell me,” he asked, his voice all compassion, “how can I help?”

Elizabeth nearly cried at that moment; her hands both came to her face in relief. Her father’s look was one of genuine concern and she went to him and threw her arms around him with joy. “Oh thank you, Papa, thank you!”

Mr Bennet stroked Elizabeth’s hair. “Now, what would you like to see happen and I will do everything in my power to make it so.”

With great emotion, Elizabeth, kneeling before her father, replied, “What I believe would be best is that, for a time, Jane needs time to sort through her feelings for Mr. Bingley. I am very certain that if she sees less of him for a while, it can only serve to re-awaken her warmest regard.”

Mr Bennet reflected for a moment and said, “After all of your heartache concerning Lydia, it pains me to see you taking so much more upon yourself.”

“Don’t worry for me, Papa. Think only of Jane; to see her happy again is my fondest wish.”

“And how do you hope to see that accomplished?”

“Perhaps, for a time, you and Mamma would not invite Mr Bingley to Longbourn so much—just for a short while—until Jane sees how she truly misses and loves him. I am in hopes that the power of his absence while he is living so near, will be of great affect.”

“Speaking of the power of absences, upon my future son’s return, can I hope to see your smile return?”

“Oh yes, Papa. But Mr. Darcy has assured me that he will visit us all in a few weeks, and for that I am pleased. Yet, in light of his lack of a welcome to Netherfield, he says that when he does return, he will be obliged to seek lodgings at the inn.”

“The inn!” cried Mr Bennet with incredulity. “Oh, no, no; we can have none of that! We have rooms aplenty here; he shall come to us at Longbourn. Would that make you happy, my dear?”

Once again Elizabeth hugged her father. “It would give me more pleasure than you know, Papa. But then...” she paused, drew back, and looked up at her father with concern.

Mr. Bennet saw instantly what made her anxious and sighed himself. “Yes, I know, Lizzy; your dear, Mamma; I quite understand. It falls to my lot to have to live with her; we can not plague your Mr. Darcy with her tremblings and flutterings, now can we?”

He thought on the subject for a few minutes. He stood and poured himself another glass of wine, paced back and forth, weighing the advantages and disadvantages; taking into account all that he had heard about Mr. Bingley and his daughter; thought of the time which was probably needed before the wedding, and finally came up with a bold plan.

“I have just had a very good thought, Lizzy and must ask you if you trust me to find a sensible solution to this entire situation?”

“Yes, of course; only... what do you have in mind, papa?”

He smiled at his daughter, his eyes twinkling; leave it to her to want to know every particular.

“It is nothing I will speak of at present--not until I speak to several others—and if I am successful, everyone, especially you, will be made happy. Now go away, Lizzy and leave it all to me.”

Lizzy reluctantly left the library even more worried than when she entered. She had no idea what scheme her father had up his sleeve and even though she had told him that she trusted him, she knew she would have to keep a close watch on his dealings over the next several days.

Back in his library Mr. Bennet was all confidence. Ladies, even his Lizzy in his opinion, had the tendency to worry over such trifles. The situation was a simple one to solve and it only required him to write two very brief letters. And why should one rattle away with niceties and pleasantries on several sheets when half a page with a few short and simple lines to just the right persons would suffice? Good thing too, for both of his brothers were just the sort of men who liked when people came straight to the point.