

PRIDE & PREJUDICE

A full-length comedy by
Claire Wittman

Adapted from the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JANE BENNET, warmhearted and infinitely generous, though quite shy.

LIZZY BENNET, a stubborn spirit who wields her wit with more cleverness than care.

MARY BENNET, a great reader of many important books.

LYDIA BENNET, vivacious and precocious.

KITTY BENNET, the baby of the family who wants to live in a novel.

MRS. BENNET, forever plagued by her poor nerves, mother of the Bennet sisters.

MR. BENNET, long-suffering and wry, father of the Bennet sisters.

CHARLES BINGLEY, an enthusiastically kind fellow, but highly persuadable.

CAROLINE BINGLEY, a self-proclaimed sophisticate.

FITZWILLIAM DARCY, an introverted gentleman, protective of himself and others.

GEORGIANA DARCY, artistic and impetuous, the same age as Lydia Bennet.

THE RIGHT HONORABLE LADY CATHERINE DE BOURGH, grande dame and overbearing aunt.

ANNE DE BOURGH, Lady Catherine's sickly daughter.

MRS. REYNOLDS, the Darcys' housekeeper.

LADY LUCAS, a proud society matron.

CHARLOTTE LUCAS, pragmatic and a very good friend.

MARIA LUCAS, a little silly, the same age as Kitty Bennet.

MR. COLLINS, cousin to Mr. Bennet, a pompous popinjay of a

clergyman.

MR. WICKHAM, more charming than sincere.

RESIDENTS OF MERYTON AND DERBYSHIRE, dancers, villagers, soldiers, servants, children.

SETTING

The English countryside, sometime in the past.

NOTES

Hello, friends!

When performing this play, English accents are not required; the natural dialects of the actors are perfect exactly as they are!

Sometimes, characters cut one another off before they finish their complete thought, which is notated by a "—" Elsewhere, characters interrupt and talk over one another, which I've identified by using a "/" at the moment of interruption.

At several points in *Pride & Prejudice*, there are moments where actors can use physical connection to tell their characters' stories. However, neither directors nor actors should ever feel pressure to include kisses, embraces or any other sort of touch unless everyone involved feels safe and completely enthusiastic about blocking these moments. There are many ways to tell a love story like this one, and you should feel empowered and encouraged to find the exact right way for your particular cast.

The characters in this play all use she/her and he/him pronouns, but all roles could very well be played by actors of any gender, provided they are comfortable playing characters that are referred to with those pronouns and correspondingly called "boys," "girls," "ladies," "gentlemen," and so on.

It's also very important to remember that in the 18th and 19th centuries, people of all races, nationalities, religions, genders, abilities and body types existed exactly as they do today! I highly encourage everyone working on this play to spend a little time researching the many ways in which historically underrepresented voices actually shaped history and how we can honor them today by shining a light on their stories.

Thank you so much for choosing to read—and perhaps even perform—*Pride & Prejudice*! I hope you have as wonderful a time working on this play as I did.

Kindest regards from your friend,

Claire

SCENE 1

(The drawing room at Longbourn. JANE, embroidering. LIZZY, trimming a bonnet. MARY, reading. LYDIA and KITTY, at a looking glass.)

LIZZY: Lydia? Kitty? Enlighten me as to what precisely you are doing?

KITTY: We're practicing pouting!

MARY: Pouting?

LIZZY: You need practice?

JANE: Lizzy.

LYDIA: It's what men want.

JANE: Whatever gave you that impression?

LIZZY: Have capriciousness and cunning overtaken sincerity and sense?

MARY: I certainly hope not.

KITTY: It's in all the books. If you are sad and mysterious, and beautifully so, then you have a very good chance of marrying a prince or at least a widowed count with a fortune.

LIZZY: Very specific.

(Lydia rapidly cycles between pouting and smiling.)

LYDIA: That's all well in fiction, Kitty, but in real life, you must learn to show lightness and gaiety as well as a pretty melancholy.

LIZZY: A delicate balance, to be sure.

LYDIA: Men want to know that they are the answer to all your sadness.

JANE: Men want kind companionship and agreeable conversation.

MARY: Men want a finely honed moral character.

LIZZY: Prepare to be amazed, but each man is a discrete being and will want whatever his particular fancy pleases at any moment's notice, and this ridiculous world shall almost certainly give it to him.

KITTY: I'd give anything to be married. It's not fair that I must wait until all the rest of you have husbands to accept a suitor of my own.

LYDIA: I'm not waiting. I shall be the first married, you'll see!

MARY: Patience is a virtue.

JANE: Well said, Mary. Lydia, do not wish away your youth, for to be a wife is a tremendous responsibility. Rather than wait, prepare.

LYDIA: I am preparing. I just explained that I was practicing pouting—

KITTY: You're taking up the whole mirror—

LYDIA: My hair is more lustrous and full, so I need the greater portion—

KITTY: No it isn't and no you don't—

MARY: What peace it brings to care not for one's appearance! As Mr. Fordyce writes in his sermons—

JANE: There is more than one mirror in the house, girls. Kitty, go to my room and take mine instead.

KITTY: Thank you, Jane!

(Kitty bounces away to retrieve the mirror.)

LIZZY: Jane, I think you must have the most patience of us all, for who could hope to be worthy of such infinite compassion?

JANE: Worthy enough for you to sanction the marriage, you mean? If my husband must pass your muster as well as mine, I fear I shall be a spinster forever.

LYDIA: Oh Jane, don't despair! Or if you do, do it with a little more light in your eyes, like this.

(She demonstrates.)

Even if your beauty is less vivid than mine, you shall have any husband you want, no matter what Lizzy says.

JANE: Well, thank you.

LIZZY: But what do you want, Lydia? Surely that is of equal importance to "what men want."

LYDIA: I want to be wanted! Desired beyond all reasonable comprehension.

(Kitty returns.)

KITTY: I want to go to Europe and discover a young nobleman trapped in a tower with nothing but his paintings and his jewels to attend him, who will thank me for my rescue by making me his bride and crowning me —

MARY: I would like to be the first invited to play at every party and not have to ask for use of the pianoforte.

JANE: And you, Lizzy? What is your heart's dearest wish?

LIZZY: To see each of you achieve yours.

JANE: But for yourself?

LIZZY: A small fortune, five thousand acres of my own to walk as I please and a reputation as the finest wit in three counties.

JANE: But you have no sensible heart to temper your tenacious head?

LIZZY: Oh, very well, I suppose I should hope for love, too. It would not be disagreeable to meet my equal and have him treat me as his —

(Enter MR. BENNET, pursued by MRS. BENNET.)

MRS. BENNET: But Mr. Bennet, I have such news to — Girls, girls, girls! Kitty, my darling, do stop coughing so — have you no compassion for my poor nerves?

KITTY: I don't do it on purpose!

MRS. BENNET: Mr. Bennet, do you not think she looks a little unwell?

MR. BENNET: Even less than a little.

MRS. BENNET: Go a little nearer the fire, Kitty, for I had such a cough persistently at your age, and now see how I am plagued constantly with an affliction of the nerves and the throat and the —

MR. BENNET: At least you are consistent, my love. Goodbye.

MRS. BENNET: But my dear Mr. Bennet, you must not go, for have none of you heard that Netherfield Park is to let at last?

MR. BENNET: I have not heard any such thing.

LIZZY: You mean you did not listen when you heard it.

MR. BENNET: What a well-trimmed bonnet, Lizzy. I am sure Mr. Bingley will like it very much.

MRS. BENNET: Mr. Bingley?

MR. BENNET: I am going into town to meet Mr. Phillips and Lord Lucas —

MRS. BENNET: Mr. Bingley?!

MR. BENNET: Do not wait on supper for me; we will dine at Lucas Lodge —

MRS. BENNET: But what do you mean by this "Mr. Bingley"?! And why should he see Lizzy's bonnet, let alone like it?

LIZZY: I'm not making it for him.

MR. BENNET: Mr. Bingley, you say, my dear?

MRS. BENNET: Yes! Why, I am half-sick already of Mr. Bingley.

LIZZY: The word does lose some meaning after so much repetition.

MR. BENNET: What a shame, for he is the most pleasant fellow I ever did meet.

MRS. BENNET: And you did not think to tell me so at once? You have no compassion—

MR. BENNET: My compassion is an unstoppered wellspring of devotion. My vocabulary is limited to what is necessary to be understood.

MRS. BENNET: Then employ every word of it to the task of making friends with Mr. Bingley and ensuring his presence at the Assembly Room Ball this fortnight! For what reason else do you think a single man in possession of good fortune should take up residence here in Meryton, at Netherfield?

MR. BENNET: Some quiet?

MARY: Good fishing?

LIZZY: A house?

MRS. BENNET: A wife! And it is at the ball where he shall surely set sights upon her—

MR. BENNET: Or where her mother shall set sights upon him.

MRS. BENNET: —and you know that there is not a girl in the county more beautiful than Jane, nor so frolicsome as Lydia—

MR. BENNET: I must put in a particular good word for my Lizzy's wit.

JANE: And one for Mary's prudence, too!

KITTY: And the better you all are at everything, the sooner it's my turn!

MRS. BENNET: He will surely take a liking to one of them, and then husbands for the rest will follow once such a fine connection is made.

MR. BENNET: When next I see him, I will inform him of this buffet of glories from which he may have his pick. Until then, my dear, soothe your nerves and mine by refraining from too many verses of "Mr. Bingley," will you?

MRS. BENNET: You are too good to me, Mr. Bennet, too charitable by half, / and what a father, a provider! Such a friend, no wonder Mr. Phillips and Lord Lucas are so eager to...

MR. BENNET: Good night, girls.

(The Bennet parents exit, Mrs. Bennet exalting all the while.)

MARY: Well, we all know what Mama wants.

LIZZY: And what a married man in possession of five daughters and little money wants. He takes care not to say too much of anything in front of us, but I know he worries for us and our futures as much as she does.

KITTY: They both love us, but each in their own way.

LIZZY: Here's the wisdom we've been wanting all morning.

MARY: Have you been reading sermons, too, Kitty?

KITTY: Ugh, no! I read that in one of Mrs. Lennox's novels, I think.

JANE: Well, I myself am not worried, and I hope none of you shall be either. We shall fortify one another against any storm, and rejoice with one another for any triumph.

LYDIA: Yes! I think we may all be satisfied, perhaps even at this very next ball...if Mama will but keep her composure, and Mary not play so very loudly upon the / pianoforte, and Lizzy not be perfectly insulting to everyone she lays eyes upon.

MARY: We are not to put our lamps beneath bushels, Lydia! It is my particular talent as—as—as dressing yourself / up is yours, and will you wrap yourself in sackcloth? I think not.

KITTY: I want to wear your blue dress, Lydia, and I will put my hair all the way up like Lizzy does hers, if you will just help me / please, Lizzy?

LIZZY: If not perfect satisfaction, we shall at the very least have excellent dancing, and that is a certain step towards falling in love!

SCENE 2

(The Meryton Assembly Hall. The ENSEMBLE, including LADY LUCAS, CHARLOTTE LUCAS and MARIA LUCAS. Lizzy and Jane enjoy a dance while their mother, father and sisters look on.)

MRS. BENNET: I must say, I am disappointed—greatly disappointed—at the number of gentlemen here tonight. There are twice as many ladies, I venture! Twice!

LYDIA: It shall only be worse when Mr. Bingley arrives, for Mildred told me he brings with him twelve ladies and seven gentlemen from London.

MARY: Fredrica said five of them were his sisters and one his cousin.

LYDIA: That still leaves six unattached, unrelated ladies, and London ladies are so often considered superior. How will any of you hope to compete?

KITTY: I wish we had not come at all! Nobody will dance with me, and I must sit about with the actual children as if I were not very nearly a woman! And the kicking up of dust makes me sneeze.

MRS. BENNET: Oh, there, there, Kitty, my darling...

(The dance concludes, and the couples disperse to reveal MR. BINGLEY, CAROLINE BINGLEY and MR. DARCY entering the room. A hush falls.)

KITTY: It's him!

MARY: Which is him?

LYDIA: It doesn't even matter.

(The Netherfield trio takes center stage.)

BINGLEY: Hello!

(No one says anything for a moment, and then the Bingleys and their friend are beset by the crowd, all talking at once over one another.)

CROWD: Good evening, Mr. Bingley!

How do you find Meryton, Mr. Bingley?

Miss Bingley, charmed, I'm sure.

Is this your sister, sir?

But who is this gentleman?

Please, Mr. Bingley, but a moment of your time—

You will dance, will you not?

The finest of apparel, to be sure, never the like seen in Meryton!

May I get you some wine, Mr. Bingley?

Welcome, gentlemen and lady, welcome.

Will this be the whole of your party?

You are even more charming up close than at a distance! (*Etc.*)

(*Mr. Bennet distinguishes himself, with the rest of the family attendant.*)

MR. BENNET: Sink or swim, eh, Mr. Bingley? Do you remember me, young man?

BINGLEY: But of course: my new friend, Mr. Bennet! He of the five lovely daughters –

CAROLINE: And here they all are. My, aren't you all very...quaint?

BINGLEY: How splendid to meet you, each and all!

LIZZY: Jane, I think he really means it.

JANE: He is most kind.

LIZZY: Then he is a most fit partner for you, I think.

JANE: Lizzy, don't –

LIZZY: Sir, would you care to dance with the sweetest girl in all of Hampshire?

CAROLINE: And that is yourself?

LIZZY: Not for worlds. I speak for my sister, Mr. Bingley, who has in her perfect kindness refrained from besieging you herself. This is Jane.

BINGLEY: Will you be so perfectly kind, then, as to dance with me, Miss Jane Bennet?

JANE: Very happily, Mr. Bingley.

(*Jane and Bingley join the crowd for the next dance. Lizzy finds her friend Charlotte Lucas.*)

LIZZY: Thus goes everyone into the world but us! Tell me, Charlotte, what do you think of our forgoing this frantic scramble to the altar altogether?

CHARLOTTE: I may have no other choice. For too long have I neglected the mercenary business of courtship, thinking it distasteful –

LIZZY: It is.

CHARLOTTE: –but I have yet to meet the gentleman who concurs and will neglect it with me.

LIZZY: What man would forgo such power? Sparse few manage not to abuse it. I hope Mr. Bingley is one such...

CHARLOTTE: But what shall we do instead? I am not sure I can weather another year in my mother's house.

(Mrs. Bennet is making a spectacle of herself beside a mortified Lady Lucas.)

MRS. BENNET: Jane is so admired! Everyone is saying how well she looks, and Mr. Bingley thinks her quite beautiful, one can tell –

LADY LUCAS: My dear, how your voice carries –

MRS. BENNET: Kitty! Kitty, stand away from the window; you shall take a chill!

(Kitty sneezes excessively. Lizzy sighs.)

LIZZY: Nor I. Perhaps we should start a school.

CHARLOTTE: I haven't a head for numbers. We might become midwives.

LIZZY: I haven't a stomach for physic.

CHARLOTTE: Actresses, then?

LIZZY: Why, you are so very good at maintaining the dignity of your expression in every impossible circumstance, I think you should be perfect at it! But I have no such control over myself as to form the dramatic passions.

CHARLOTTE: True, true! The moment you think something, it is writ large across your face.

LIZZY: Suppose Romeo were to stumble on his doublet or his speeches – I should laugh in his face in the solemnest of scenes!

(The dance concludes. Jane rushes to gush to her mother and Kitty as Lizzy gathers together the youngest guests for the evening's next festivity, passing right by the Netherfield trio as they mention her name.)

BINGLEY: Oh, just look, Darcy! How beautiful is Miss Bennet in the flickering candlelight...

DARCY: *(Not looking:)* Truly exemplary. The most beautiful in the room by far. Well done.

BINGLEY: You're not even – ah, but your gaze is diverted by her sister, the equally lovely Miss Elizabeth.

DARCY: She's tolerable, I suppose.

BINGLEY: Surely you're joking!

DARCY: I'm not. And I don't.

BINGLEY: What fault do you find in her?

DARCY: She smiles too much. It is...distracting.

BINGLEY: From what?

DARCY: Everything. Anything. One hardly knows where to look in this overcrowded –

CAROLINE: Yet another opinion in which we are in perfect accord, Mr. Darcy! I dare swear, sir, we have been in harmony all evening. Isn't it terribly too busy? One can hardly hear oneself think!

(The youngest assembly-goers – led by a pointedly smirking Lizzy and featuring particularly the talents of Kitty Bennet and Maria

Lucas – take the floor, performing a cheery maypole-like dance to the adoration and applause of their families.)

BINGLEY: (As they dance:) Why, what a charming notion! They take care to include everyone, even the children, in the festivities!

CAROLINE: It is very...rustic. Do you not agree, Mr. Darcy?

DARCY: Mhm.

BINGLEY: I would join them in a heartbeat if only I knew the steps.

(Bingley attempts to mimic a few of the steps.)

CAROLINE: Charles, please!

DARCY: More jumping. Less dignity. Faster.

(Jane notices Bingley's dancing and laughs and applauds in delight rather than derision.)

BINGLEY: See here, Miss Bennet appreciates my efforts!

JANE: It is very good of you to join in local custom. I am sure we all appreciate it.

DARCY: Does that custom mark the evening's conclusion?

BINGLEY: The night is but young, Darcy! Though I find the room is a little warm, Miss Bennet – perhaps you might show me the way to the gardens, for I have heard such charming talk of the local shrubberies.

JANE: We do pride ourselves on shrubberies. It's just this way, sir!

(Exit Jane with a beaming Bingley.)

(The assembly prepares for another dance, but Mary attempts to take up residence at the piano and proceeds to play and sing a plodding rendition of a song popular either in the Regency era or the present day; whichever best suits!)

(Couples begin to form nonetheless, and Lizzy is without a partner. She locks eyes with Darcy and smiles at him: a dare. For a moment, he is ready to match her, but he catches sight of Mary's musical fiasco – and Mrs. Bennet, who is making a fuss over Kitty's imagined illness – and Lydia, who is edging Darcy's way with her pout firmly affixed to her face – and instead turns away from Lizzy sharply.)

(The dance goes on without either of them.)

LIZZY: Can you imagine, Charlotte? Mr. Darcy, in his grave and infinite wisdom, has decided better than to punish himself with any more of my good cheer!

CHARLOTTE: Then there is no hope that Lydia has embellished the tale she has just told me.

LYDIA: He called her "tolerable"! What a hideous insult it is; I should have left the ball entirely and not be seen a month after.

LIZZY: Never fear, Lydia; no one tolerates you.

LYDIA: Thank heavens for it!

CHARLOTTE: Regardless of his taste – poor though it must be to neglect you so, Lizzy – his manners should have prevailed to extend you an invitation to dance.

LIZZY: Frankly, I am sorry for Mr. Darcy that he is not more civil, for neither fortune nor fashion can make up for poor manners, and he shall be universally spurned himself within a minute of his being here if he does not demonstrate a vast and hasty improvement.

(Hearing his name, Darcy draws nearer again.)

LYDIA: Then you despise him perfectly, Lizzy?

(Lizzy notes Darcy's presence and raises her voice just enough to be overheard.)

LIZZY: Quite the contrary. I find him completely delightful.

CHARLOTTE: How can that be?

LIZZY: You know I'm always in search of something to laugh at, and he has already given me ample occasion for it.

(Darcy coughs and turns away. As she follows the other girls out, Lizzy pauses beside him.)

Perhaps you might learn to laugh at yourself first, Mr. Darcy. I always do...and so laugh last, too.

(Another dance begins, and the girls whirl away laughing, as our scene transports us to...)

SCENE 3

(The garden outside the Assembly Hall. Jane and Bingley walk together.)

BINGLEY: Well, this is an exceptional garden! I thought the shrubberies might be too high for my taste – for I never like not to see where I am going – but I find I can just see over the top!

JANE: You will keep a good watch then, lest my mother and sister demand any more of your graciousness and time. Lydia will talk of nothing but you and your sister for a week.

BINGLEY: She is a lively conversationalist.

JANE: She is a lively everything. She takes after our mother.

BINGLEY: And, if I may say, your father is a fine gentleman; asked all about my family and our health and took two biscuits with his tea when we met, which is my sort of fellow, indeed.

JANE: We love him dearly.

BINGLEY: How perfectly jolly it must be; never a dull moment at the Bennets', I imagine!

JANE: You could not find seven more different souls under one roof. Each of my sisters has her own special dream – of passion

or piety or a new French silk. Lydia is quite simply satisfied by that which is beautiful, and who could fault her for that? I certainly don't.

BINGLEY: Which is your dream?

JANE: To be useful as much as ornamental. You heard her praise me in your presence, but...my mother in turn lauds and despairs of my beauty. Sometimes it seems like our triumph or ruin hangs upon the color of my gown or the state of a single lock of hair. But I suppose I should like to think there is more to me than the capricious whims of flesh and bone. I have some substance, too.

BINGLEY: Well, of course you're very beautiful! Grant me, I tend to think nearly everyone is, in their own way, but your way is particularly nice because it seems like it comes from your goodness, from the way you smile like you're truly happy to see people and the way you listen like you're truly happy to hear what someone else has to say.

JANE: On both counts, I hope you will find that I really am so truly happy.

BINGLEY: And I might understand how you feel. A bit. I won't presume, of course. But everyone fawns over my fortune. I suppose I should like to think there is more to me than that, too.

JANE: There is. It would be easy for someone so rich to be half so kind and still well-liked, but you treat everyone as your equal. I am so grateful to you.

(Beat.)

BINGLEY: Miss Bennet, if I may –

JANE: Mr. Bingley, I hope you –

BINGLEY: Oh, please –

JANE: No, you should –

BINGLEY: I insist.

JANE: Thank you.

BINGLEY: Of course!

JANE: Well. I hope you will not think me too forward –

BINGLEY: No, never!

JANE: – to say that it has been lovely to speak with you, and I hope you will ever count me amongst your friends.

SCENE 4

(The drawing room at Netherfield. Bingley, Darcy and Caroline discuss the previous evening's events.)

BINGLEY: "Friends" leaves room for hope, don't you think?

DARCY & CAROLINE: No.

BINGLEY: Ugh. Ugh! Dash it all, forever! Ugh!

(Beat.)

Dear me, I'm so terribly sorry; pray forgive my dreadful violence of passion, sister. But what did I do wrong?

CAROLINE: You must not blame yourself, Charles. There is so little refinement of passion in this village; even if her feelings for you were rapturous, the stolid confines of her upbringing would render her completely incapable of expressing it to any satisfaction.

DARCY: Last night was a lesson in first impressions. And how they may go awry.

BINGLEY: I thought I made a good impression.

DARCY: You cannot have avoided it.

BINGLEY: Perhaps I ought to call upon her father or arrange to just, you know, come upon them by chance in town? Perhaps

then I might glean from one of her sisters if Jane might return any inkling of my affection for her. Miss Elizabeth, for instance, could tell me—

DARCY: Absolutely not.

CAROLINE: I agree with Mr. Darcy.

DARCY: If you truly think her deserving, then let us afford Miss Bennet an opportunity for candor, unhindered by the spurious ceremony of balls.

CAROLINE: What do you propose?

DARCY: Ask Miss Bennet here to dine—Miss Bingley may extend the invitation so as not to suggest your particular preference. Then we may observe her and ascertain if her feelings equal yours.

BINGLEY: Yes! Yes, that's wonderful, Darcy.

CAROLINE: If it is your design, sir, then I am in perfect accordance.

DARCY: I suspected you would be.

BINGLEY: I shall alert the entire staff as to her coming—Miss Jane Bennet here to dine, what a splendid notion it is! Write to her, Caroline—write to her without delay!

SCENE 5

(The garden at Longbourn. Enter Lizzy, Jane and Charlotte, pursued at once by Kitty, Lydia and Maria. The three younger girls pass a letter back and forth, and a scramble to retrieve the letter ensues.)

KITTY: Jane!

MARIA: Jane!

LYDIA: Jane!

KITTY: Jane!

MARIA: Jane!

LYDIA: Jane, a letter —

JANE: So I see. May I —

(Enter Mr. Bennet and Mary.)

MR. BENNET: Lizzy, muster the troops.

MARY: Papa has had an urgent letter!

LIZZY: Such is the theme of the day — Lydia, give Jane the —

LYDIA: Guess who it's from —

KITTY: It's from —

MARY: It's from —

MARIA: No, Kitty, make her guess!

MR. BENNET: No, Mary, I will explain —

JANE: I'd rather not guess, thank you —

(Enter Mrs. Bennet.)

MRS. BENNET: Such an ache in my head! I know it shall soon rain!

LYDIA: The perfect parchment — neither too pale nor too yellow, but perfectly in-between!

LIZZY: Give it —

MARY: What is it?

MARIA: Prepare to be jealous, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: If you say so.

KITTY: Oh, Mama!

MRS. BENNET: Kitty, you mustn't run about like this —

KITTY: But there is such an ado—

MRS. BENNET: You shall aggravate your cough—

LYDIA: Guess, Jane, guess—

MR. BENNET: Girls!

JANE: The Gardiners?

KITTY: No!

JANE: Please—

LIZZY: Aha!

(Lizzy recovers the letter and hands it to Jane.)

MRS. BENNET: Jane, who is— Kitty, from whom— Elizabeth! Oh, how you fray my poor nerves, girls— and what is this letter of yours, Mr. Bennet?

MR. BENNET: One which concerns us all. Now let me see, here is my wife, her poor nerves and all— five, six, seven?— of my daughters.

CHARLOTTE: Maria and I were just on our way home, Mr. Bennet.

LIZZY: No, stay!

MR. BENNET: What's another half dozen at this point? We are to be a crowded household come tomorrow, for this letter informs me that tomorrow noon, Mr. Collins will be arriving to see the home my ancestors so flippantly entailed to—

MARIA: Entailed—

KITTY: Oh, it's so horrible, Maria, like the bleakest possible novel: By law, Longbourn must be passed down to a male heir, so when Papa—you know—expires—we shall all be cast out into the street, and some horrible old, decrepit distant cousin

shall dwell in our own dear home. And he's coming to look at it for the first time tomorrow.

MR. BENNET: We cannot say for certain he is horrible nor old nor decrepit.

LIZZY: We can only hope.

MR. BENNET: Maybe he'll expire first.

MRS. BENNET: Elizabeth! Mr. Bennet!!! I daresay I shall expire from your incivility this very moment!

MR. BENNET: I only jest, my dear.

MRS. BENNET: But who is he really, Mr. Bennet—have you any sense of him?

MR. BENNET: Mr. Collins is, according to my solicitor, a clergyman of the highest repute. And he himself writes that he is quite the favorite in his current parish.

LIZZY: He writes this of himself?

CHARLOTTE: Even I can conjure up a few verses about pride.

MRS. BENNET: Tomorrow, Mr. Bennet?!

LIZZY: Contradictions are the most interesting thing about anybody; I cannot wait to meet him.

MR. BENNET: Tomorrow noon.

CHARLOTTE: So many gentlemen flooding into the neighborhood; I fear your mother will not survive another.

MRS. BENNET: Then we must make preparation at once! For even if he is as old as you, Mr. Bennet—

MR. BENNET: Thank you.

MRS. BENNET: —we cannot pretend it would not be to the benefit of us all were Mr. Collins to set his sights upon one of our girls.

LYDIA: A clergyman?! What a dull husband that would make. I shan't have him; I've decided already.

KITTY: Neither me!

MARIA: Nor me!

MARY: I would not object to—

MRS. BENNET: There is no time to waste! Kitty, set the housemaids to make up a fresh bed for Mr. Collins, and Mary, set our religious texts to the front of the shelves!

MARY: Just like I've always wanted!

LIZZY: You will not leave me to face this tempest alone, will you, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE: I would not miss a moment for the world.

MR. BENNET: Girls. You will find me in my study—but not before tomorrow noon, if you please.

(Exit Mr. Bennet and the younger girls to their tasks.)

MRS. BENNET: Now, Jane and Lizzy and you, Charlotte Lucas, must—

JANE: If it will not trouble you too greatly, Mama...might I beg reprieve from these great preparations? I have been invited to dine tonight at Netherfield...and I want so very much to go.

MRS. BENNET: At Netherfield! With Mr. Bingley!

LIZZY: Mama, please be calm—

JANE: His sister has invited me—

MRS. BENNET: That's as good as to say your sister, Jane!

LIZZY: Jane has as many sisters as she needs without the addition of Caroline Bingley.

JANE: Oh, I do not dislike her, Lizzy! Not at all. If she errs on the side of too much gentility, it must be the product of a London upbringing.

LIZZY: And if you err on the side of too much generosity, it must be in spite of a Longbourn upbringing.

MRS. BENNET: Lizzy, saddle the mare immediately while Jane and I determine how best to dress for—

LIZZY: The mare, Mama? Are you seriously—

JANE: Oh, don't trouble Lizzy any such way, Mama, I will walk—

CHARLOTTE: Trouble me instead, Mrs. Bennet! You must allow me to send for our carriage, Jane, to transport you—already the clouds are darkening, and you must not walk or ride so far lest it rain.

MRS. BENNET: Nonsense, nonsense—to delay so long as it would take to bring the carriage round will make her late! You must ride, Jane. Now, the blue silk is perhaps too thin for autumn but becomes your complexion so...

(Exit Mrs. Bennet.)

JANE: Oh, Lizzy!

LIZZY: How you smile, my darling Jane!

JANE: On your very lives, you must neither of you breathe a word of this to Mama...but I think Mr. Bingley is everything a young man ought to be...sensible, yet lively; with such perfect manners, yet such ease. I was quite surprised that he asked me to dance a second time.

LIZZY: I wasn't.

CHARLOTTE: Nor I.

LIZZY: You love everyone in the world with immediacy, and the feeling is mutual. Especially for Mr. Bingley, it seems.

CHARLOTTE: Then you give Jane leave to like him?

LIZZY: I do!

CHARLOTTE: And for her sake, will you forgive him his most grievous fault?

JANE: Whatever can that be?

LIZZY: That he is too agreeable?

CHARLOTTE: That he is in particular too agreeable towards your new foe, Mr. Darcy.

LIZZY: My foe! I like the sound of that. Yes, a nemesis would suit me well, if you'll second me, Charlotte.

JANE: If Mr. Bingley sees in Mr. Darcy redeeming qualities, perhaps his merits are just...hidden.

LIZZY: If one only chooses to display their redeeming qualities under very particular circumstances, then I like them even less for it. Manners should not be situational—one set for the prestigious and another for the plebeian. But if you exert some of your goodness on Mr. Darcy, perhaps he will improve.

CHARLOTTE: Jane and Mr. Bingley together cannot help but convert him.

LIZZY: Ugh, you and I shall have to become positively gentle if we spend too long in their presence. But I do hope we have occasion for it. You must have the most beautiful evening, Jane, and hurry home to tell us all about it.

JANE: I will! Come help me with my hair, will you, Lizzy?

LIZZY: Yes, we shall attempt to improve upon perfection!

(Jane exits.)

Do you think he shall ask her to marry him this very night?

CHARLOTTE: Perhaps he might...if she will borrow a little of your confidence and offer a sign of her own in return for such a plain overture of affection as this invitation. Without some encouragement, he may come to doubt that she returns his feelings, let alone wants to marry him—

(Thunder rumbles.)

LIZZY: The deluge approaches. We must hope Mama relents and lets Jane take your carriage...

SCENE 6

(The drawing room at Netherfield. Bingley, Caroline and Darcy rush to meet their guest.)

BINGLEY: Oh, my heavens! Goodness gracious, Miss Bennet!

(Jane, sopping wet and disheveled, is practically carried into the room by two Netherfield servants.)

CAROLINE: I could have told you they would not have their own carriage!

BINGLEY: Oh, Darcy, what shall I do? To bring her all this way in the rain...she'll never love me now!

DARCY: She'll not live to love you if we don't warm her up at once.

JANE: Miss Bingley, Mr. Bingley, please forgive my appearance—

BINGLEY: No, no, not at all— you look a picture, Miss Bennet, a very picture! Like a heroine in a novel, so very windswept and yet so very lovely—

JANE: You are too kind, my dear Mr. —

(Jane sneezes.)

BINGLEY: Bring her upstairs at once, please! To the finest of our rooms – spare not one single blanket, no means whatsoever to make her comfortable.

(Jane is taken out.)

DARCY: Well, this is already a disaster.

BINGLEY: No, no – I think it may prove the opposite, Darcy, for necessity dictates she must spend tonight here – we may impress her with breakfast as well as dinner!

SCENE 7

(The drawing room at Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet and the girls frantically prepare the house.)

MRS. BENNET: Lydia, stack those cushions higher – we are not a country inn, but a home of hospitality!

LIZZY: No, Lydia, he will have nowhere to sit. Mama, please – why don't you rest yourself, and I will take care of –

LYDIA: We don't actually want him to like Longbourn, do we? For then perhaps he will go away and not insist on the inheritance.

LIZZY: It doesn't work that way.

MRS. BENNET: And therefore, he must marry one of you, or we shall all be turned out of the house as soon as he pleases! Excellent first impressions are vital – the clock strikes noon! I think Jane shall not even join us – this is an excellent sign.

LIZZY: No, Mama, it is not, for she may be legitimately ill from riding through the rain, not just trapped overnight –

LYDIA: I should love to be trapped overnight at Netherfield Park!

KITTY: Me, too! There's probably a ghost.

MARY: Ghosts are not real.

MRS. BENNET: Egad, Mary! You frightened me quite out of my wits; I thought you were a part of the furniture.

(Enter Charlotte with Maria in tow.)

CHARLOTTE: No, that's me!

MRS. BENNET: Charlotte Lucas, and the little one, too!

MARIA: Maria.

LIZZY: Mama.

MRS. BENNET: I won't have you inveigling yourself to the front of the line on Lizzy, who shall be so very difficult to be rid of anyway —

LIZZY: Mama!

CHARLOTTE: So pleased to be here.

LIZZY: As am I.

KITTY: Cook says there's no more grouse anywhere in the village, and if we want it, we will have to hunt it down ourselves.

MARY: All is not lost—perhaps he is a vegetarian! Just this morning I have been digesting *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food, as a Moral Duty* by Mr. Riston, which is deeply rooted in Christian principles—

LIZZY: Does Mr. Riston suggest any recipes for potatoes, potatoes and more potatoes?

MARY: I will fetch the book and see!

LIZZY: Thank you.

MARY: And I will bring my hymnal as well, for I believe a small concert of solemn songs would make Mr. Collins feel very much welcome—

LIZZY: I think that might rather gild the lily, Mary. A tune or two might suffice if the conversation begins to lull, for you will surely give us cause to lift our voices again.

CHARLOTTE: What are you planning to do if your family ever begins to understand what you're actually saying to them?

LIZZY: I hope they shall dole back to me my lot in loving mockery.

CHARLOTTE: I take it he has not come yet?

LIZZY: No, but he has thirty seconds before it is past noon and he is past uncivil.

(Enter Mr. Bennet.)

MR. BENNET: Ladies. Mr. Collins is...arrived. I beg of you: Maintain your composure at all costs.

LIZZY: Our composure? Why –?

(MR. COLLINS enters.)

COLLINS: Heavens bless you, Mr. Bennet, but I am quite overcome!

(Everyone turns to look at him. Mr. Collins bows with such solemnity that the returns are diminishing, to say the least. The family returns the honors.)

Pray grant me a moment of silence to contemplate upon the many mysteries of divine providence which have brought us at last together at the wellspring of acquaintance, and one hopes, forgiveness!

(Everyone stands quietly while he contemplates. Eventually, he sighs enormously and speaks again.)

I thank you, and I hope you will permit me to express to you, and to your wife, and to your daughters, the deep regrets I harbor for waiting so long to attend upon you. My doubts, sir,

were only for your own good; I feared it might pain you to face your loss in the face of the person who stands most to gain from it. But I race ahead of my own courtesy: I am of course the Reverend Mr. William Eustace Collins, your father's father's cousin's son's son, and lately ordained – indeed this Easter – as a minister in His Majesty's concentrated church. And as a clergyman, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds, I flatter myself that my present overtures to assert goodwill between us in spite of the entailment of this house are highly commendable, for charity begins at home! Mrs. Bennet! Allow me to kiss your hand.

MRS. BENNET: Oh, sir, you are very kind! I was at first greatly disposed to despise you, but never let it be said I cannot change my mind. You show such compassion for my poor girls, and I know matters of money and property are always left up to chance in this world.

COLLINS: I am entirely sensible as to your daughters' predicament, but one look upon them and I do not doubt they shall soon all be disposed of in marriages of prodigious excellence. And, though I would not wish to be too forward, you must know I am come prepared to admire them myself.

(Collins immediately descends upon Lizzy, who is trying to shield Mary, Lydia and Kitty, who are mesmerized, disgusted and hysterical with laughter, respectively.)

Why, surely this must be Miss Jane Bennet!

LIZZY: I fear this must not be, for I am Elizabeth.

(Collins then turns to Charlotte.)

COLLINS: Then it is you who must be the divine Miss Jane –

CHARLOTTE: You don't know how greatly you flatter me, but I am merely an acquaintance of the family.

LIZZY: Merely nothing. This is my dearest friend, Charlotte Lucas.

COLLINS: A true pleasure. There is nothing like friendship to fortify the soul against the temptations of worldly, intemptuous concerns. Provided one's companions are of stolid moral character. If not, there is nothing like friendship to decimate virtue and deplete one's spiritual reserves with pettiness and rivalry and prating on and on and on. A dreadful habit, but one which can be curtailed by engagement in more careful conversation.

LIZZY: Oh, Charlotte exceeds morality; but rest assured, she metes out her virtues a little at a time, so as not to overwhelm anyone.

MRS. BENNET: And here, Mr. Collins, are Mary, Lydia and Catherine.

MARIA: And I'm Maria Lucas!

MRS. BENNET: Yes, yes; the Lucases are a perpetual fixture in this house, Mr. Collins –

COLLINS: May they ever be so!

CHARLOTTE: Thank you.

MRS. BENNET: But our Jane is of course visiting this day with the Bingley family over at Netherfield Park, and we expect her home any moment to announce her engagement to Mr. Bingley...

SCENE 8

(A corridor at Netherfield. Bingley rapturously makes an announcement to Darcy and Caroline.)

BINGLEY: Darcy! Sister! I am pleased to announce...that Miss Jane Bennet fell asleep holding my hand an hour ago!

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DARCY: You stayed at her bedside an hour?

BINGLEY: Too brief?

DARCY: Too prolonged.

BINGLEY: Oh, Darcy, Darcy, Darcy, you have never been in love!

DARCY: Nothing could persuade me to such a state if these are the symptoms.

BINGLEY: It's happiness, not a disease, Darcy. I swear I would marry her this very evening if only she could stop coughing long enough to agree to it.

DARCY: I simply hope she cares for you with equal fervor.

BINGLEY: I do think she meant to tell me of her own affections just now, but her own afflictions overtook her instead. But no matter: I will nurse her back to health, and then see if my suit suits her!

(Exit Bingley.)

DARCY: He is an incurable romantic.

CAROLINE: I could not agree more, Mr. Darcy. He is just so.

DARCY: And what are you, Miss Bingley?

CAROLINE: Why, whatever you would have me be.

DARCY: The author of a letter to Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

CAROLINE: Miss Elizabeth Bennet? Surely you will not invite her to come stay as well?

DARCY: Ah, yes, that is the better plan. And never mind. I shall fetch her here myself.

(Darcy exits, leaving a petulantly exasperated Caroline behind him.)

CAROLINE: Ugh!

SCENE 9

(The drawing room at Longbourn. By light of candles, Kitty, Lydia and Maria are acting out a gothic drama, complete with dramatic piano music courtesy of Mary. Mr. Collins, Charlotte and Lizzy act as their audience.)

KITTY: It was a dark and stormy night!

(Thunderous chords. Lydia, as the heroine Cassandra, swoons her way across the "stage.")

LYDIA: Oh, whatever shall I do? Lost in these terrible, terrible deep, dark woods!

(Mr. Collins whispers loudly to Lizzy.)

COLLINS: Is this an allegory for the fall of mankind? Like a medieval morality play!

LIZZY: I believe it is up to interpretation, Mr. Collins.

LYDIA: I would a handsome soldier were come to rescue me!

COLLINS: Perhaps the soldier represents virtue.

LIZZY: It could be thus, Mr. Collins.

(Collins yelps as Maria, delighting in her role as an ancient crone, pops out from a hiding place.)

MARIA: Mwahahaha, my dear!

LYDIA: Ooooooohhhh!

COLLINS: I daresay they even have a hellmouth!

LIZZY: Perhaps you might offer them these compliments after the performance, Mr. Collins?

MARIA: You shall roam forever in these woods, and with each step, your faméd beauty shall dwindle and become mine – all mine! Mwahahaha!

KITTY: Then suddenly, a large and looming figure appeared –

(With another thunderous chord, and a real crash of thunder, the door to the house flies open, and Mr. Darcy enters. Lydia shrieks, first in character and then in legitimate delight.)

LIZZY: Mr. Darcy?

DARCY: Miss Elizabeth.

KITTY: Oh, it's him!

MARIA: Here? At your very own house?

CHARLOTTE: Hush, you two.

DARCY: Well. This is...theatrical.

MARY: Thank you.

KITTY: I wrote it!

MARIA: I helped!

DARCY: Indeed.

CHARLOTTE: Maria, I think 'tis time we were home.

DARCY: Not on my account, I hope, Miss Lucas—

CHARLOTTE: No, sir, thank you. Tomorrow, Lizzy?

LIZZY: Tomorrow.

CHARLOTTE: Gentlemen.

(The gentlemen bow. Exit Charlotte and Maria.)

COLLINS: Mr. Darcy?! Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy!

LIZZY: Fitzwilliam?

DARCY: Sir?

COLLINS: Permit me to introduce myself, young man! I am of course the Reverend Mr. William Eustace Collins, and a cousin of the laudable young ladies. Sir, you and I may boast—if one may boast without straying too near vice—of a dear acquaintance in common, for as she must have announced to

you and her other kin, Mr. Darcy, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of your aunt, the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of Rosings parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavor to demean myself with grateful respect towards Her Ladyship, and of course to you, and all others upon whom her partial favor falls.

DARCY: Oh. I don't believe she's ever mentioned you. Miss Elizabeth, a word?

(Elizabeth and Darcy draw away.)

Is your father at home?

LIZZY: He is retired to bed.

DARCY: It's seven o'clock.

LIZZY: It's been a long day.

DARCY: I regret to prolong it further.

LIZZY: I regret that, too.

DARCY: Your sister is taken ill.

LIZZY: You ought to have led with that at once!

DARCY: Well, such is my business here.

LIZZY: What's happened?

DARCY: At first, we thought she had merely taken a chill, but her cough has not improved since last night. Bingley called for the doctor, and he suggested she remain with us at Netherfield for some time until her lungs are recovered. I believe your presence would be of great benefit to her. If you are not otherwise occupied with...?

LIZZY: *The Adventures of Cassandra.*

DARCY: Indeed.

LIZZY: Let me pack my things.

DARCY: I will wait in the carriage.

LIZZY: Pray do, Mr. Darcy, or you'll find yourself cast in the next one. They've been desperate for a proper villain.

DARCY: Is that how you see me?

LIZZY: Is that how you behave?

(Lizzy exits. Lydia, still in her "gothic heroine" costume and with an overstatedly flirtatious air, approaches Darcy before he can exit. He attempts to look anywhere else.)

LYDIA: Why...hello.

DARCY: Mhm.

LYDIA: It is Mr. Darcy, is it not? He of the great estate of Pemberley.

DARCY: Mhm.

LYDIA: I have heard about you...such...things.

DARCY: Miss Elizabeth, make haste!

(Reenter Lizzy.)

LIZZY: Sir, if you raise your voice in this house again, I will go so slowly that you will be breakfasting beside Mr. Collins tomorrow.

(Darcy cannot help but smile, even at the censure.)

DARCY: *(Whispering:)* Miss Elizabeth, make haste. If you would. Be so kind.

LIZZY: Much improved. Lydia, Kitty, Mary – tell Mama what has happened. And do not embellish!

(Exit Lizzy and Darcy.)

LYDIA: Mama! Jane is dying, and Mr. Darcy has carried off Lizzy in his coach!

KITTY: Oh, it's even better than a play!

SCENE 10

(The drawing room at Netherfield. Darcy and Elizabeth, reading on opposite sides of the room. Mr. Bingley, losing a battle with a vase full of flowers. Caroline, bored.)

CAROLINE: Mr. Darcy, won't you take a turn about the room with me? I think we might both find it quite refreshing after sitting in silence so very long.

DARCY: No. Thank you.

(Silence.)

CAROLINE: Brother?

BINGLEY: Perhaps this afternoon—I am arranging these flowers for Miss Jane Bennet, and it's decidedly more difficult than I could possibly have imagined...

(More silence.)

CAROLINE: Miss Elizabeth?

LIZZY: I beg you'll excuse me, but I am just at the best part of my book.

(Even more silence. Caroline wanders the room aimlessly, picking things up and putting them down, primping in the mirror for Darcy's presumed benefit and sighing. Contrarian as ever, Darcy addresses Elizabeth:)

DARCY: What are you reading, Miss Elizabeth?

LIZZY: The myths of the Greeks.

DARCY: An excellent subject.

CAROLINE: Is there a second volume? Perhaps I will peruse it myself—I can be a very great reader when I am not otherwise engaged.

BINGLEY: I don't know how you ladies do it—all these handicrafts and hobbies! Embroidery and painting and lace-making, and meanwhile, I can't control half a dozen daisies.

LIZZY: You make an excellent effort, Mr. Bingley; Jane will be delighted no matter your skill.

BINGLEY: It's just that I know she is so accomplished—

DARCY: Accomplished, Bingley? That word has become a common courtesy given to any young lady who might embroider or paint in some small measure. I can hardly call to mind six who are truly deserving of such praise.

CAROLINE: Indeed, I have always said that to be truly accomplished, a woman must be a fine musician and singer.

DARCY: Proficient in dancing.

CAROLINE: Drawing.

DARCY: Speaking in French.

CAROLINE: Or perhaps Italian.

DARCY: And to that must be added the improvement of her mind. An appreciation for the classics, perhaps.

LIZZY: Mr. Darcy, you might as well wish to court a Cyclops in a bonnet, for your accomplished woman is more myth than matter.

DARCY: You will not flatter yourself accomplished, then?

LIZZY: Not even if you did.

DARCY: Why not?

LIZZY: I would disagree with you because you deserve it. And furthermore, I am content in my own worth. You can neither add to it nor diminish it with your opinions, which I will never trust in regard to women and their accomplishments until you can perfect each and every item on your own extensive list. I will never curry favor with gentlemen by devaluing my fellow ladies. Mr. Bingley, permit me to take your lovely gift to my sister!

(Lizzy departs with the vase.)

SCENE 11

(The village green in Meryton. The MILITIA runs drills on the green as other RESIDENTS of Meryton go about their daily business. Mr. Collins lectures as he strolls alongside an enraptured Mary and the other despairing Bennet sisters.)

COLLINS: I declare, there is nothing like the pastoral charms of an English village to remind one of the virtues of simplicity. How humble the cottages! Each roof a neatly thatched testament to the lowly farmer cloistered within, the gentle wives tending the cooking fires, the dutiful children at their lessons...

LYDIA: *(Whispering:)* I feel like a pupil in Sunday school.

MARY: *(Adoring:)* Me, too!

COLLINS: ...it is perhaps not quite so eidetic as my own parish of Rosings –

LIZZY: Do you perhaps mean Edenic, sir? Or idyllic – ?

COLLINS: No, no, my dear Miss Elizabeth, the word is "eidetic" – I will lend you an excellent dictionary, and you shall find it greatly improving! Now, what was I imparting?

LIZZY: *(Whispering:)* I could not wait to escape Netherfield, and now I cannot wait to go back.

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COLLINS: Ah, yes! As Mr. Fordyce writes in his sermons —

(MR. WICKHAM, who has been observing this exchange, sidles up to Collins.)

WICKHAM: Pray, Your Reverence, I could not help but overhear...you are surely not *that* Mr. Collins? He of the finest parish in the whole south of England?

COLLINS: Heavens preserve you, young soldier: I am.

WICKHAM: We were stationed in — uhm —

LIZZY: Rosings.

WICKHAM: Rosings! None too long ago...and our drummer, young Mr. Denny over there, was overtaken with the spirit of your sermon. Would you do us all the great honor of introducing yourself to him? He'd be struck dumb at just the sight of you, I know.

COLLINS: To lead, sir, is to serve, sir, and to serve, sir, is to lead, and so I am at your service, sir! Show me the way.

WICKHAM: Just on the other side of the green, you'll find him in his tent...pointed roof, made of canvas, drum somewhere nearby...

(Collins is already halfway gone, with Mary trailing eagerly after him, dragging a protesting Kitty along.)

LIZZY: How many of your canvas tents have pointed roofs and are somewhere in the vicinity of a drum?

WICKHAM: All of them.

LIZZY: Much as I wish I were a better woman, I cannot help but be grateful to you.

WICKHAM: What can I say? I love to play the savior.

LIZZY: Mm, not grateful enough to grant you that far a favor.

WICKHAM: You needn't; clearly it was him who needed saving from you.

LIZZY: So you charm the dragon rather than slaying her?

WICKHAM: I'm willing to venture a scorch mark or two for the sake of a beautiful smile. George Wickham.

LIZZY: Elizabeth Bennet.

LYDIA: Lydia! Charmante, mon capitaine.

WICKHAM: Bonjour, mademoiselle.

(Lydia practically swoons.)

Sisters, I take it?

LYDIA: Oh, mon capitaine, I am très amazed that you think so! We look nothing alike, as you can see.

WICKHAM: Do me a great courtesy, won't you, Miss Lydia?

LYDIA: Anything.

WICKHAM: I've a taste for something sweet. Take this and find us both some sort of confection, yes?

(He hands her a coin. She almost swoons again and runs to do his bidding.)

Forgive me another little lie, Miss Elizabeth. I can't stand sweets.

LIZZY: Then you and I shall get along. But I shouldn't have let you do that. She'll be wildly in love with you before she sets one foot in the shop.

WICKHAM: I'll be perfectly honest from this moment forward, upon my word as a gentleman.

LIZZY: Your word? Which one, for they are all sweet and none sincere so far as I can tell.

WICKHAM: Give me one more chance! No, really, I'm begging you—I'm desperate to have any conversation that doesn't return to muskets and maneuvers. Tell me about this village of yours—is it true that the great house of Netherfield Park is nearby?

LIZZY: Indeed—

WICKHAM: And is it true that Mr. Darcy—?

LIZZY: Mr. Darcy?!

WICKHAM: Then he is here. And he's made an impression, I take it?

LIZZY: He certainly has. We are at present sharing lodgings at Netherfield—my sister and his friend Mr. Bingley are very politely avoiding declaring their love for one another, you see.

WICKHAM: Poor Mr. Bingley! I wager he won't last a year in that malcontent's good graces. Darcy does not make friends easily, but he discards them with not a jot of effort. Such it was with me.

LIZZY: You have my truest sympathies!

WICKHAM: And I must confess, there is a little more to the story: I was very much in love with his sister, Georgiana. And he thought me inferior to her and convinced her of the same.

LIZZY: I am sorry, but perhaps not so surprised, to hear this. I flatter myself I can take the measure of a man quickly, and from the moment he arrived in Meryton, Mr. Darcy has made it his business to let everyone know he is superior to us all. I thank you for your confidences, and if there is anything, Mr. Wickham, I may do to make you feel welcome here, I hope you will let me know it.

WICKHAM: Grant me the favor of your next dance, Miss Elizabeth.

LIZZY: Alas, there are no assemblies planned at present, to my knowledge—

WICKHAM: I welcome the wait if it perpetuates our acquaintance.

LIZZY: As do I. Ah, look alive; here is Lydia returned!

WICKHAM: And Mr. Collins flanking us to the east! I'll beg my leave of you—but just for now.

(Exit Wickham. Reenter Lydia.)

LYDIA: Have you quite frightened him off with your idle chatter, Lizzy? I'll be cross with you—

LIZZY: No, no, he flees from His Impeccable Reverence Mr. Collins, and I suggest we now do the same. Come on, Lydia—let us run!

SCENE 12

(The drawing room at Netherfield. Caroline, Bingley and Darcy talk together.)

CAROLINE: Charles, she *walked* back from the village. Every step of the way.

BINGLEY: Well, she didn't want to trouble us for the coach.

CAROLINE: But what must you have thought, Mr. Darcy? I was perfectly exhausted just glancing at her—and I'll swear the hem of her gown was caked with six inches at least of mud!

DARCY: I thought she looked very happy.

CAROLINE: Are you suddenly reconciled to Miss Elizabeth's perpetual chortling, sir?

DARCY: I am necessarily wary when she laughs, but no longer especially disappointed when she smiles.

CAROLINE: Does she perhaps remind you, then, of your own little sister? For Miss Georgiana can sometimes be a little merry –

DARCY: No. I wouldn't say I think of Miss Elizabeth in such a way. At all.

CAROLINE: But then perhaps they are not so very much alike. For wouldn't you say, Charles, that Miss Georgiana is of a delicate, artistic temperament, whereas Miss Elizabeth is practically wild –

(Enter Lizzy escorting Jane.)

BINGLEY: Miss Bennet! Here you are at last! Well and on your feet again! The very bloom of health, indeed, I would say.

JANE: Good morning, Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, Mr. Darcy. How lovely it is to see your drawing room clearly at last! I was not quite conscious when first I was here, but your home is of course as lovely as one could dream. Miss Bingley, how can I ever thank you for your hospitality?

CAROLINE: You have been an immaculate guest, Miss Bennet. There is no need for excessive thanks.

BINGLEY: We'd be overjoyed if you stayed forever!

JANE: I would never dream of troubling you so!

DARCY: Bingley.

LIZZY: Jane.

BINGLEY & JANE: What?

CAROLINE: I would offer you a parting cup of tea, but you must be so very eager to return home –

BINGLEY: And a simple cup of tea would not suffice!

JANE: Oh, it would!

BINGLEY: We must have a proper celebration of your health, and of our new home here at Netherfield. Have you not said many a time, sister, that we ought to host our own ball here?

CAROLINE: I cannot recall.

BINGLEY: Then let us make this the occasion to do so. In a week's time, shall we say, with the whole town invited...and the militia, too, and all the children—?

DARCY: Are you sure that is wise?

CAROLINE: The children, Charles?

JANE: How perfect!

BINGLEY: It's decided! Miss Bennet, please, permit me to escort you in to breakfast before you go?

(Exit Bingley, Jane and Caroline. Elizabeth starts to leave, too, but Darcy catches her before she goes.)

DARCY: You look pleased, Miss Elizabeth.

LIZZY: My sisters will be overjoyed. And you know I delight in dancing.

DARCY: And do you make it a general rule to amuse your partners with your candid observations of others?

LIZZY: I make it a rule to be generally pleasant to anyone who doesn't deliberately provoke me. Which includes making genial conversation with one's partner. If you're very daunted by the notion, I could teach you: you might perhaps remark upon the beauty of the ballroom, or the number of couples, or your preference for the tune. Really rather simple. You can even rehearse it.

DARCY: Rehearse it with me. Dance with me. The first dance at Bingley's ball.

LIZZY: I...I am spoken for.

DARCY: By whom? It's been three minutes since they decided –

LIZZY: A standing promise to my new acquaintance, Mr. Wickham. Whom I think you know? (*Beat:*) Mr. Darcy?

DARCY: I know better than to advise you of anything, Miss Elizabeth –

LIZZY: And yet?

DARCY: – and yet I will entreat you, as a friend, to give your attentions anywhere else but to Mr. Wickham.

LIZZY: We are friends?

DARCY: We could become friends.

LIZZY: Perhaps we could. I will take your entreaty under advisement.

DARCY: And the dance?

LIZZY: Good evening, Mr. Darcy.

(Lizzy exits. Bingley returns, practically humming with happiness, but stops when he sees Darcy's expression.)

DARCY: You mean to invite the whole militia? Including –

BINGLEY: Oh, he's here?

DARCY: Yes.

BINGLEY: I can't very well extend the invitation to all the militiamen save one –

DARCY: Can't you?

BINGLEY: Perhaps you could. But Darcy, it would be rude! I know you don't care much for Mr. Wickham, though you won't tell me why – he'll probably decline anyway, knowing that you'll be here, and even if he came, you don't have to speak to him, so why worry –?

DARCY: Bingley—

BINGLEY: It's decorum, Darcy!

DARCY: Miss Bennet doesn't love you. She is simply very kind and grateful.

BINGLEY: How do you know that?

DARCY: I can see at a distance what you can't see up close.

BINGLEY: You're angry because I am prizing a general courtesy over a specific one.

DARCY: Yes. But I am taking the opportunity of my anger to tell you a difficult truth. Another day I might have spared you, and you'd be hurt all the more later. Have your ball. Invite whom you'd like. Perhaps you will set your sights on a worthier object.

BINGLEY: I don't like to fight with you, Darcy.

DARCY: I don't want to see your heart broken.

BINGLEY: Give me one more chance to discover if she loves me. Surely she'll say something at the ball?

DARCY: Perhaps we will both be blessed with a happier truth.

BINGLEY: Everything must be perfect...the food, the music, the dancing...

SCENE 13

(The ballroom at Netherfield. The food, the music and the dancing are superb. The ensemble, as well as Bingley, Darcy, Caroline, Charlotte, Maria and Lady Lucas, mill about, partaking in the festivities. The Bennet family, with Mr. Collins, arrives.)

MRS. BENNET: Upon my word, I never saw such a sumptuous home!

KITTY: It looks just like a fairy tale!

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MARY: A string quartet!

COLLINS: Not, perhaps, so fine as Huntsford, the home of the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but an acceptable imitation, as I do think the chintz similar to that which Her Ladyship prefers—

MRS. BENNET: Oh, Jane, I will visit you every day when you are married.

MR. BENNET: And perhaps you can manage to lose me in the library. Which I mean to seek presently; good evening, girls.

(Mr. Bennet exits.)

JANE: I cannot see Mr. Bingley anywhere...

LIZZY: He is likely pacing about the balcony, fussing over the precise order of compliments he plans to use in his proposal.

JANE: I fear my hopes are too high, Lizzy.

LYDIA: Everyone in town is talking about it.

LIZZY: Because you and Mama can't help but gossip as loudly as—

MRS. BENNET: Oh, there he is, Jane!

JANE: I will wait for him to speak to me. He must be so very busy as host...

COLLINS: Miss Elizabeth, will you—

LIZZY: Charlotte! Do excuse me, Mama, Mr. Collins: I see Charlotte and Maria...come on, Kitty!

(Lizzy and Kitty run off with Charlotte and Maria.)

LYDIA: Don't leave me here!

(Lydia follows them.)

COLLINS: Miss Elizabeth, wait! It is my intention to— Oh, she's gone.

MARY: Mr. Collins, whatever wisdom you would impart upon my wayward sisters, I would be most honored to hear.

COLLINS: Your sisters would do well to follow in your example in many things, Miss Mary.

(Collins pursues Lizzy.)

MARY: Oh, I am a fool in love!

(Delighted, Mary swoons away after Collins. Meanwhile, Bingley, Darcy and Caroline:)

BINGLEY: There she is!

CAROLINE: There they all are.

BINGLEY: Why doesn't she come to say hello?

DARCY: Bingley —

BINGLEY: She will. I'm sure she will.

DARCY: I hope for your sake that she will indeed.

CAROLINE: Yes, just as Mr. Darcy says.

BINGLEY: You know, you agree with Darcy a great deal, don't you, Caroline? I've only just noticed!

DARCY: Only just?

(Elsewhere, the girls hide from Collins.)

LYDIA: Do you think that the divine Captain Wickham will be here this evening?

LIZZY: He's not a captain yet, Lydia —

(Wickham sweeps in.)

WICKHAM: But I will be someday. Why, these must be the Misses Lucas...and my dear friend Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Kitty...and this angel whom I do not recognize...

LYDIA: Oh, yes you do!

WICKHAM: Surely not Miss Lydia?

(Wickham and Lydia flirt as Charlotte speaks privately to Lizzy.)

CHARLOTTE: Who is this flatterer?

LIZZY: Mr. Wickham. A kindred wit, or at least I had hoped so...

CHARLOTTE: A kindred wit to you and a kindred flirt to her.

LIZZY: You are more astute in a moment than I was in an hour.

CHARLOTTE: Everyone likes a compliment. But you deserve them consistently.

LIZZY: As do you, my dear Charlotte!

COLLINS: *(From across the ballroom:)* Miss Elizabeth? Has anyone seen Miss Elizabeth Bennet?

WICKHAM: I didn't realize you had a suitor, Miss Elizabeth.

LIZZY: Neither did I...oh, no...

LYDIA: Run! This way, this way!

(They scatter. As one dance fades into another, Jane and Bingley bump into each other by accident.)

JANE: Mr. Bingley!

BINGLEY: Oh, hello.

JANE: Hello.

BINGLEY: It's so wonderful **JANE:** I'm so happy to—
to—

BINGLEY: Please—

JANE: No, please, you—

BINGLEY: I—

JANE: Yes—?

BINGLEY: Have you found the evening to your liking?

JANE: Of course –

BINGLEY: Only as a matter of course – ?

JANE: Always as a matter of course –

BINGLEY: But –

JANE: I mean to say that...I am always delighted by Netherfield, but never more than tonight.

BINGLEY: By Netherfield?

JANE: And all those who dwell within! You have been such gracious hosts and friends to me, and now I'm so glad that the whole of Meryton may now enjoy the hospitality you showed me –

BINGLEY: Of course. Of course. Do please excuse me, my d –
Do excuse me, Miss Bennet.

JANE: Wait, Mr. Bingley!

(Meanwhile, Mary plays and sings in a manner most arduous as a chase ensues: Jane tries to find Bingley, Bingley looks for Darcy, as does Caroline, while Darcy seeks Elizabeth, who is frantically trying to escape from Collins, while the younger girls run about making a perfect spectacle of themselves.)

(Bingley finds Darcy.)

BINGLEY: You were right! Darcy, she does not love me, I'm sure of it...oh, dash it all, it's all gone to pieces...all my hopes and dreams and plans...all lost, all gone, all shattered!

DARCY: No, Bingley; if she were worthy of your dreams, she would have –

(Bingley is already gone to weep somewhere.)

(The chase continues.)

COLLINS: I daresay you do not mean to avoid me, Miss Elizabeth – oh, Miss Lydia, have you seen your sister –

LYDIA: No, never once in my whole life!

WICKHAM: Elizabeth who?

LYDIA: Ah, the words I long to hear, mon capitaine!

(Lydia practically drags Wickham to the dance floor.)

(As Collins closes in, Lizzy looks about frantically for a partner, but none are to be found except...)

LIZZY: Mr. Darcy!

DARCY: Good evening –

LIZZY: Dance with me.

DARCY: I beg your pardon?

COLLINS: Ah, there you are, Miss Elizabeth!

LIZZY: I'll be absolutely silent, I promise.

COLLINS: Miss Elizabeth, I say!

LIZZY: You have every reason to refuse me; I would understand why, but if I can forswear my pride long enough to ask this undeserved favor of –

COLLINS: Miss Elizabeth, would you do me the incomparable honor – oh.

(Darcy says nothing, but just in time to prevent Mr. Collins from intruding, he smiles and takes her hand.)

(Lizzy and Darcy dance.)

DARCY: Look at the beauty of the ballroom. Upon my word, how many couples there are. I much prefer this song to the last one.

LIZZY: You surpass all our instruction: You not only laugh at yourself, but at me, too.

DARCY: I cannot help it. Believe me, I've tried.

LIZZY: As have I. You are a wit, Mr. Darcy.

DARCY: Only in spite of myself.

LIZZY: I cannot believe that. You have a merry soul hidden somewhere in all this decorum, and I flatter myself that I am coaxing it forward.

DARCY: If anyone can...

(They dance. They fall in love.)

(The dance ends, and they part wordlessly.)

(Jane pulls Lizzy aside, distraught.)

LIZZY: Jane, what is the matter?

JANE: I think I have been greatly mistaken. With Bingley. He was so cold to me—

LIZZY: Where is he? I've a word or two that will heat him considerably—

JANE: No, please don't. I am mortified enough. Lizzy, I think I have mistaken his kindness for love, when it was only ever a natural gentility and goodness... What he must think of me.

LIZZY: Even if he is so unlucky as to not be madly in love with the most extraordinary person in the world, how could anyone ever think ill of you? You have done nothing wrong—

JANE: No, I have been presumptuous and thoughtless. I only hope he can forgive me.

LIZZY: There is nothing to forgive.

(Mrs. Bennet arrives with Lydia, Mary and Kitty.)

MRS. BENNET: What's this, Jane?

JANE: Mama, we have all been greatly in error. Mr. Bingley is a perfect, unassuming gentleman, while I have assumed a great deal, and it would be best if I excused myself for the evening.

(Exit Jane.)

MRS. BENNET: Then they are not engaged?

LIZZY: No!

MRS. BENNET: Oh, Lizzy, Lizzy! Whatever are we to do?

LIZZY: Find Papa and take her home, Mama. I will stay with the younger girls and –

(Mr. Bennet reappears.)

MR. BENNET: Here I am. I don't know what's happened, but leaving a party is always for the best.

MRS. BENNET: I am sure Mr. Collins will be only too glad to chaperone you home, Lizzy –

LIZZY: No, Mama, I can chaperone us all home myself –

MRS. BENNET: Mr. Collins! Mr. Collins!

(Mr. Collins is thusly summoned.)

And he has been trying all night, my dear, to speak with you.

COLLINS: In private! With your gracious mother and father's permission.

LIZZY: There is nothing that he could possibly have to say to me that everyone else cannot hear –

LYDIA: I owe Wickham another dance.

KITTY: Maria and I were just going out to the garden.

MARY: I have nowhere in particular to be!

MRS. BENNET: I desire you to come with me, Mary.

MARY: But –

MR. BENNET: Are you certain, my dear?

MRS. BENNET: This evening may yet prove fruitful to their futures! You may not care a wit that your daughters will be destitute when you are dead, but I—

MR. BENNET: I am practically gone and buried already, I see.

(Mrs. Bennet shepherds off Mary.)

Lizzy, your mother may never forgive you for what you are about to do to Mr. Collins. But I will never forgive you if you don't.

LIZZY: Wait, what do you — ?

(He exits. Lizzy and Collins are alone.)

COLLINS: Miss Elizabeth. How do you find this evening? I daresay you have so far declined to dance with me for fear that I might have some scruple as a clergyman, but let me assure you, I am very far from dreading a rebuke either from the archbishop or Lady Catherine de Bourgh by venturing to dance.

LIZZY: I was enjoying myself perfectly, Mr. Collins. And I am glad to find you are untroubled by scruples.

COLLINS: Speaking, my dear young lady, of scruples...I confess...I am very glad to at last be alone with you.

LIZZY: Oh?

COLLINS: Do not be alarmed!

LIZZY: Sir, I cannot help it.

COLLINS: Then your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections.

LIZZY: I am not especially modest—

COLLINS: And humble, too!

LIZZY: Nor that.

COLLINS: You can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse, however your natural delicacy may lead you to dissemble; my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered your home, I singled you out as the companion of my future life—though I will confess that it was my first intention to court your sister Jane, but she being away from home, you were the obvious choice thereafter. But before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it would be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying.

LIZZY: Please, you need not—

COLLINS: My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances—like myself—

LIZZY: Indeed, sir—

COLLINS: —to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced that it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier—

LIZZY: Exactly how many reasons have you, Mr. Collins?

COLLINS: It is the particular advice and recommendation of the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, whom I have the honor of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion—unasked too—on this subject, and I am certain that she will approve of my choice. You must meet her at the earliest possible opportunity, and I daresay her presence upon our matrimonial day will be the greatest honor of your life thus far—

LIZZY: I haven't said yes.

COLLINS: Then by all means, my dear, you may say it now.

LIZZY: I won't.

COLLINS: I know that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept when he first applies for their favor –

LIZZY: My answer is no.

COLLINS: –and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second –

LIZZY: I will not marry you.

COLLINS: –or even a third time. When I do myself the honor of speaking to you next on the subject, I shall hope to receive a more favorable answer than you have now given me; and though I am far from accusing you of cruelty at present –

LIZZY: Accuse me of anything you like except dissembling. I am being perfectly frank and honest with you. I will not marry you, and I hope you will not be too brokenhearted, for if you think me the sort of person who would play at refusing an offer of marriage she intended to accept, then you do not know me at all and would be most unhappy to discover someday that I was your wife.

COLLINS: But –

LIZZY: Good evening, Mr. Collins.

(Lizzy exits.)

COLLINS: Well. We are all liable to error. But I hope you will not resent me for withdrawing my offer immediately –

(Collins starts to exit himself but nearly collides with Charlotte on his way out.)

CHARLOTTE: Sir, are you quite well?

COLLINS: No, I am – Oh, good evening. Miss Lucas, is it not?

CHARLOTTE: It is.

COLLINS: I daresay you are very kind to ask after me. Are you engaged for the next dance?

(They exit together. Meanwhile, Lizzy escapes from the ballroom into the garden.)

(She sits alone for a moment. Enter Darcy.)

DARCY: Miss Elizabeth?

LIZZY: Sir, I have made myself quite clear— Oh, Mr. Darcy! Thank goodness it's just you.

DARCY: That's almost cordial. Does my dancing recommend me so highly?

LIZZY: I was just speaking with Mr. Collins.

DARCY: Did you get a word in edgewise?

LIZZY: He asked me to marry him. So the only word I needed him to hear was "no." And even that took longer than it ever should.

DARCY: That man's no match for you.

LIZZY: Mr. Darcy, please don't oblige me to agree with you!

DARCY: Very well: You're a fool to turn down the offer of eternal matrimony with such an agreeable and distinguished gentleman.

LIZZY: I would rather leap headlong into eternal spinsterhood, but thank you for the condescension of your superior wisdom.

(They both laugh, then stay in comfortable silence for a moment.)

It's so rare I have a moment to myself. I am almost never alone...and I wonder if I always say the things I think because I don't have the time or the quiet to just think them and decide if I mean them.

DARCY: I'm alone all the time and find I say all the things I think regardless, the very moment there's someone to listen.

(Beat.)

LIZZY: Did you say something to Mr. Bingley about my sister?

DARCY: Say something? Whatever can you mean—?

LIZZY: You did, didn't you? Yes, I can tell from your expression. He behaves this evening as though she is a stranger. Jane is beside herself.

DARCY: She is?

LIZZY: She's gone home.

DARCY: I had no idea she was so greatly enamored of him.

LIZZY: Enamored? She is in love!

DARCY: You wouldn't know it.

LIZZY: You wouldn't. But I know it, and Mr. Bingley should have—

DARCY: If it were any sort of obvious, he would have discovered it; he has spent countless hours fretting over her every slight expression—

LIZZY: Then he does—or did—love her?

DARCY: Frankly, I can never tell with him. He loves every stray kitten who shows up at the door—

LIZZY: My sister is not a stray kitten!

DARCY: No, of course not—I only meant—!

LIZZY: Yes, please do say what you mean—!

DARCY: You are completely baffling and I am most ardently in love with you!

LIZZY: You are...in love with me?

DARCY: Marry me, Lizzy.

LIZZY: What?

DARCY: I have never felt more happiness than I do in your company. I'm not sure I knew what happiness was until I saw it modeled by you. Even in the midst of that primordial chaos of your family –

LIZZY: You do not understand the first thing about my family –

DARCY: What, should I delight in their inferiority –

LIZZY: Their inferiority?

DARCY: I was going to say "to you" – they are inferior to you!

LIZZY: And that's better?

DARCY: It is an impediment, yes, their social ineptitude, but not one I am unwilling to overlook –

LIZZY: Well, I wouldn't want to trouble you –

DARCY: No, trouble me! You already do –

LIZZY: You wish to marry someone who troubles you.

DARCY: Yes! Against my better judgment, my reason, my plans and, I have no doubt, the wishes of my family – I wish to marry the woman I love –

LIZZY: Am I meant to be grateful you have put in such an effort to overcome not liking me, that you might love me?

DARCY: Yes.

LIZZY: Why would you want to marry someone who would feel merely grateful to be chosen by you?

DARCY: I had hopes you would feel more than that –

LIZZY: I will be loved against no one's better judgment. The circumstances of my birth, the people I love, are not to be overlooked. I venture to say that this is not love at all.

DARCY: You make your judgments so swiftly, Miss Elizabeth—I am not often inclined to speak my feelings, and you deny me the opportunity to express them fully—

LIZZY: And should I not expect that you may grow tired of me, that the terrible blight of my family's eccentricity would soon become too difficult to ignore?

DARCY: I could never—

LIZZY: Mr. Wickham informed me of your proclivity for discarding your friends without cause. That you determined him inferior to your sister and thwarted their love, and now you have done the same to my sister—

DARCY: Why would someone of your sense allow a flattering weasel like Wickham to dictate your opinion of me?

LIZZY: Even if I had never spoken to him, what you have said to me tonight confirms my every belief of your arrogance, disdain for others and complete want of compassion.

DARCY: Would you have accepted me if I had done this differently?

LIZZY: If you could have done this differently, I hope you would have.

DARCY: Then allow me to express my best wishes for the happiness of you—and your family—and my regret for interrupting your peace and quiet tonight.

(Darcy exits. The ball swirls on, uninterrupted by these half a dozen heartbreaks.)

(Lizzy gathers her sisters and finds her way back home to Longbourn.)

SCENE 14

(The garden at Longbourn. The Bennet family, sans Jane, debriefs.)

MRS. BENNET: What a dreadful night it was! I may never recover...

MR. BENNET: Let's never go out again, what do you say, my love?

LYDIA: Jane's been up since dawn—what is she doing? If I were her, I should languish in bed at least a week.

KITTY: Maybe she should take ill again and see if it works this time?

LIZZY: Jane sent a letter to our aunt and uncle in London with the morning post. They have long promised that any of us may come to visit them at our leisure, and Jane wishes to take them up on their offer and start for town today...provided you approve, Papa.

MR. BENNET: I think it very well. To be out of this house would do anyone good.

MRS. BENNET: But tell me, my dears, did any of you manage to salvage a single scrap of the evening?

LYDIA: I danced with every officer.

MARY: I played three songs.

KITTY: I found this shiny rock in the garden.

LIZZY: Mr. Collins proposed to me.

MRS. BENNET: Oh, thank the heavens, Elizabeth, I knew you'd see reason when the time came—!

LIZZY: I rejected him.

MRS. BENNET: What?!

LIZZY: And then Mr. Darcy proposed to me.

MRS. BENNET: Oh, thank the heavens you rejected Mr. Collins, Elizabeth, for such a man as Mr. Darcy is far superior to—

LIZZY: I rejected him, too.

MRS. BENNET: WHAT?!

MR. BENNET: Two in one night, Lizzy? That's something, even for you.

MRS. BENNET: I am quite overcome! Have you no pity for my poor nerves, none of you?

(Kitty sneezes.)

And now Kitty's cold is returned!

(Mrs. Bennet weeps.)

MR. BENNET: There, there; all is not lost. There is more to life than marriage and money—

MRS. BENNET: No, there is not, Mr. Bennet!

MR. BENNET: Then perhaps there should be.

LIZZY: Charlotte and I play this game all the time, Mama! We have thought up half a dozen professions—

MRS. BENNET: Professions? To such lows we have fallen...

LIZZY: Come now, Kitty will write a terribly adventurous novel.

KITTY: I have seven ideas already!

LYDIA: I would make a most extraordinary milliner.

MARY: You will need to learn to sew.

(Enter Jane.)

JANE: And who knows what new dreams may find me in London?

MRS. BENNET: And there are gentlemen in London.

MR. BENNET: One or two, at least, last I heard. Let us help Jane pack, my dear.

LIZZY: Oh, my darling Jane. We will miss you so much.

JANE: And I'll miss you. But I'll write you every day of all the wonders that town can provide.

KITTY: You must go to the theatre, and to the Tower where all the queens were imprisoned, and...

(Exit Jane with Kitty chatting away, and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.)

LYDIA: I don't understand why Jane may go to London when she has completely failed at the simple task of winning a silly man's affection, while I must languish here—

LIZZY: Do you ever think before you speak, Lydia?

LYDIA: Why should I? When you speak your mind, it's the height of cleverness, but it's spiteful when I do?

MARY: It is rather a hypocrisy, Lizzy.

LIZZY: It is, rather. Forgive me, I— you are both quite right.

LYDIA: You're welcome.

(Reenter Kitty with Charlotte and Maria.)

KITTY: The ladies Lucas are here! Lydia, come, we are going to write another play about Jane's great misfortune.

MARIA: But with a happier ending!

LYDIA: Ooh, perhaps we might invite a certain handsome captain to play the soldier this time.

MARY: I will compose something especially for it.

(Exit Maria, Kitty, Lydia and Mary.)

CHARLOTTE: Lizzy, I have some news I must share with you.

LIZZY: I hope it is good news, for we are in scarce supply of that here.

CHARLOTTE: It is...surprising news. Last night at the ball, Mr. Collins proposed to me.

LIZZY: Last night at the ball, Mr. Collins proposed to me, too! Oh, I almost begin to pity him, to be rejected twice in one evening—

CHARLOTTE: I didn't reject him.

LIZZY: What?

CHARLOTTE: I said yes.

LIZZY: Why?

CHARLOTTE: He made a very elaborate speech.

LIZZY: On his reasons for marrying? Are you hoping that someday he'll love you as much as he loves Lady Catherine de Bourgh? He won't.

CHARLOTTE: I don't need him to. I am tired of pretending I do not want a husband. Because I do. I want to build a life with someone, forge a future based on a few common virtues and a generous toleration of one another's faults.

LIZZY: But why this husband?

CHARLOTTE: He is a man of profound conviction, even when he is completely, devastatingly wrong. Just like the other person I care about most in this world.

LIZZY: I don't know whether to thank you or weep at the comparison.

CHARLOTTE: Truly, I delight in his company.

LIZZY: How is that possible?

CHARLOTTE: His interpretation of scripture is novel.

LIZZY: A popinjay in a collar would preach a better sermon—he'll probably insist on officiating the marriage himself. "Do you, the very Reverend William Eustace Collins of Rosings Parish, take this woman, interchangeable with another in a matter of minutes, to be your eternal housekeeper?" You deserve better!

CHARLOTTE: Do you ever listen to yourself speak, Elizabeth? You are all too eager to make a clever joke of your prejudices and your judgments because it spares you the necessity of changing. You think your wit protects you from being unkind, but you're as discourteous as Mr. Darcy, and I for one think you deserve nothing less than eternity with one another. As for myself, I will create the happiness I deserve out of what the world has dealt me. If you do not wish to share in my happiness, then that is your choice.

(Charlotte exits. Lizzy begins to follow her but runs into Darcy instead.)

DARCY: Good day, Miss Elizabeth; please do me the great favor of reading this letter.

(He hands her a letter, bows and flees.)

(The text of the letter is thus, and it may be assigned to any actor or actors and interpreted through any movement or blocking deemed appropriate and inspiring by the director and actors.)

Dear Miss Elizabeth,

Before you crumple this letter and sentence it to the fire, let me assure you that you will find here no repetition of the sentiments which were expressed last night. I have no wish to pain you or trouble you further, but I think I must inform you,

for your own sake and that of your sisters, of the circumstances surrounding my falling out with Mr. Wickham.

In our youth, Mr. Wickham's father served mine as steward of our estate, and in return for this service, it was decreed in my father's will that young Mr. Wickham should become the clergyman of our parish when his studies were completed and that my family would fund this education.

To such studies he briefly applied himself, but then he grew bored and requested of me more money to study law instead. This, too, was not to his taste after some time, and he returned to Derbyshire to live idly at my home, where he found a fresh object of amusement: persuading my sister Georgiana to fall in love with him.

That he never truly loved her was made evident in how quickly he broke her heart and absconded with the militia, chasing some imagined glory and leaving her without so much as a goodbye. I suspect he cared only for her fortune.

It is in my nature already to be protective over those I love...something I can reluctantly admit we have in common. This circumstance with my sister, who is the picture of innocence and kindness, has made me perhaps over-vigilant.

So when I saw Bingley, another kindly innocent, cast his heart towards someone who did not seem to truly return his affection, I intervened.

I do not know your sister. Those signs of love which may have been unmistakable to you were inscrutable to me. And in my pride, I never thought to simply ask her how she felt. Nor did I ask you before presuming you would accept my suit. Though I regret these errors, I cannot regret our acquaintance, which has served to show me certain flaws in my character, which I now may remedy. For that, I thank you and remain yours humbly,

Fitzwilliam Darcy.

(Lizzy finishes reading the letter.)

LIZZY: Oh, Mr. Darcy. You have shown me my flaws, too...but if you can undertake to remedy yours, I certainly must not be outdone.

(If desired, this scene can serve as the end of Act I.)

SCENE 15

(Outside the Huntsford Parsonage. Lizzy writes a letter.)

LIZZY: My dearest Mrs. Charlotte Collins, let us be perfectly plain. You have always been a better friend than I have merited. Your wise words at our last parting have awakened not only in my mind but in my heart a sense of kinder obligation to others – indeed, I have lately come to realize that too many of my sharp judgments and pronouncements have done great disservice to those I love. I thank you for having such compassion as to tell me a truth about myself that I would not have otherwise allowed myself to know. May I come call upon you – and your very reverend husband – in your new home, and perhaps begin my new resolve by repairing things between us?

Your loving friend, Lizzy.

(Charlotte enters, and we are transported to Huntsford.)

CHARLOTTE: Oh, Lizzy, welcome, welcome!

(The girls embrace, delighted. Mr. Collins makes his usual dramatic entrance.)

COLLINS: Did you know, Miss Elizabeth, that Huntsford is the fifth oldest parsonage in the county?

CHARLOTTE: I will be sure to regale her with the entire history. But my dear Mr. Collins, I have here a note from Her Ladyship—

COLLINS: Her Ladyship! This is, of course, Miss Elizabeth, my patroness, the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh! She is all affability and condescension, and I doubt not but you will be honored with some portion of her notice while you are here.

CHARLOTTE: Yes, she wishes us all three to dine with her and Lady Anne—

COLLINS: Her Ladyship's daughter, you know, and a most accomplished young woman—

LIZZY: Is she indeed?

COLLINS: I must to my study post-humous to compose a proper grace to say before the meal.

CHARLOTTE: Perhaps you mean "post-haste," my dear?

COLLINS: Oh. So I did. My mind moves so rapidly, you know, that a paltry word or two may become muddled in service of a higher thought. What a gift it is to have a wife so attentive as yourself, my dear Mrs. Collins. Pray call for me when it is time to depart!

(Exit Collins.)

LIZZY: Was that the slightest hint of humility I detected in His Reverence?

CHARLOTTE: I hope I am becoming a dulcifying influence on my new husband.

LIZZY: And you are happy? For that is all that ever should have mattered to me.

CHARLOTTE: I am the happiest I have been in my life. We may all be loath to admit it, but Rosings and Huntsford are as

beautiful as he bragged—you and I will walk for miles while you are here, Lizzy! And as to Mr. Collins, his flaws are also his greatest appeal to me—he is so preoccupied with himself that he affords me perfect freedom to pursue my own passions. He is more attuned to his duties towards Lady Catherine, leaving me a fresh, delightful purpose in ministering to our parishioners. And I imagine my faults make similar room for him to excel. We are a most proper match, and I will never be able to thank you enough for turning him away!

LIZZY: And can you forgive me for the way I have spoken to you?

CHARLOTTE: I can and I do. Now, let us dress for dinner with Her Ladyship.

(Mr. Collins returns in time to have the last word, which the ladies pay little heed to as they exit to dress, as Rosings Park appears.)

COLLINS: Do not make yourself uneasy, Miss Elizabeth, about your apparel. Lady Catherine is far from requiring that elegance of dress in us which becomes herself and her daughter. I would advise you merely to put on whatever of your clothes is superior to the rest—there is no occasion for anything more. Lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved!

SCENE 16

(The grand receiving room of Rosings Park. LADY CATHERINE presides over her household. Her daughter ANNE sits listlessly nearby, and other GUESTS or SERVANTS may be in attendance as well. Collins, Charlotte and Lizzy enter.)

LADY CATHERINE: Good evening, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Collins.

COLLINS: Your Ladyship is most obliging!

LADY CATHERINE: Say hello, Anne.

ANNE: Oh? Hello.

CHARLOTTE: Your Ladyship, permit me to introduce my dearest friend, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

LIZZY: Thank you for your invitation, my lady.

LADY CATHERINE: Be seated.

(Everyone is seated.)

Anne, you will please provide us with some music.

ANNE: Oh? Very well.

(Anne proceeds to play a laborious, plodding song. Everyone pretends it is magnificent.)

LADY CATHERINE: Do you play and sing, Miss Elizabeth?

LIZZY: When prevailed upon.

LADY CATHERINE: I would hope you were highly proficient. Do you draw or paint?

LIZZY: No, my lady.

LADY CATHERINE: You ought to have been taught, sent to London to study the masters. I know many families who are of even less means than yours who have taken the trouble to have their daughters achieve the necessary accomplishments. It is the only way to secure an advantageous match.

LIZZY: Well, my lady, there are five of us —

LADY CATHERINE: Five!

LIZZY: And all daughters, madam.

LADY CATHERINE: Then your mother must have employed a governess —

LIZZY: No, indeed. We were educated in the village school and pursued our own passions by our own direction.

LADY CATHERINE: How terribly unfortunate. And your father's estate is entailed on Mr. Collins, I think.

COLLINS: So it is, my lady! It is a pleasant little property, and I am much fond of—

LADY CATHERINE: I am sorry for you, Miss Elizabeth. I see no occasion for entailing estates from the female line. It is not thought necessary in the de Bourgh family...but as this conversation has made clear, it is not for me to understand the ways of the lower orders.

LIZZY: It is curious, my lady, that you should be musing on talents required for a woman to be accomplished, for just a fortnight ago, I had a similar debate with your nephew.

LADY CATHERINE: My nephew?

LIZZY: Yes. Mr. Darcy.

LADY CATHERINE: I was not aware you were acquainted with Fitzwilliam.

COLLINS: We had the good fortune to meet him in Meryton! He is the very picture of Your Ladyship's kin—

LADY CATHERINE: Do you lay claim to friendship with my nephew, Miss Bennet?

LIZZY: No. I regret not.

LADY CATHERINE: I am pleased to say that it is our family's intention that he be married to my daughter Anne.

CHARLOTTE: Is he?

LADY CATHERINE: Indeed, I have no doubt that they are very soon to become engaged, for he comes this very Saturday to visit us. Do you not think it will be so, Anne?

ANNE: Oh? Yes.

LADY CATHERINE: Did he never mention this attachment, Mrs. Collins?

CHARLOTTE: I would not presume to be his confidante. I was aware that he carried affections for someone—

LADY CATHERINE: That is as good as to mention it.

COLLINS: Your Ladyship is right, as ever!

LADY CATHERINE: Come. 'Tis time for dinner.

(Exit Collins, Lady Catherine, Anne and anyone else save Charlotte and Lizzy.)

LIZZY: What mischief you make, Charlotte!

CHARLOTTE: I could not help myself! Mr. Collins is in this matter quite correct: Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine are clearly kin, for they are both so staunch and officious.

LIZZY: Mr. Darcy has perhaps a little more heart than she.

CHARLOTTE: Oh?

LIZZY: You are not the only person to whom I owe apology for my over-hasty judgment. Though I regret to cut short our time together, I absolutely must not be found here by him.

CHARLOTTE: You know that Mr. Darcy's estate of Pemberley is not so very far from Rosings.

LIZZY: Is it?

CHARLOTTE: And you know, too, that such great old houses always are left open to visitors, especially when the family is absent.

LIZZY: Oh, you hope to tempt me into an imprudent decision, and just after I'd resolved to be more measured in my conduct, too!

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