



Becoming Catherine Bennet

A Pride and
Prejudice
Sequel of
Lizzy, Kitty,
and Miss
Anne de
Bourgh

Joseph P.
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Introduction

Although this is perhaps a *Pride and Prejudice* “variation,” I consider it more a sequel. I attempt to stay true to Miss Austen’s story with the exception of a paragraph in the final chapter. There, Miss Austen, referring to Catherine, writes:

Kitty, to her very material advantage, spent the chief of her time with her two elder sisters. In society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia, and, removed from the influence of Lydia’s example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid. From the farther disadvantage of Lydia’s society she was of course carefully kept, and though Mrs. Wickham frequently invited her to come and stay with her, with the promise of balls and young men, her father would never consent to her going.

In this telling Kitty/Catherine does go to Newcastle, to Lydia and George Wickham, where she settles in.

I have tried to be faithful to the story, but any errors and any inconsistencies are, of course, mine. In particular, I must note that I am an American lawyer. I have endeavored to get the roles of barristers and solicitors recited properly. Insofar as I have failed, that, too, is on me.

Be assured that while this story is chiefly about Catherine and in large part Anne de Bourgh, Elizabeth Darcy is crucial to the tale and she and her dearest Fitzwilliam will be together at the end as they are at the beginning, an old and happy couple indeed.

* * * *

A Book like this can only be dedicated to one person: Jane Austen. The process of writing this increased my admiration for her writings, not just *Pride* but her other books as well. Be forewarned. An author embarking on a journey as I have can

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only hope to give the reader some sense of AustenWorld. How well I have done so, if at all, I leave to my readers to decide.

Part I

Chapter 1. The News from the Netherlands

Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy was the first to hear the noise rolling down London's Brook Street early on a Tuesday morning in mid-June of 1815. Her room was still dark, but the shouting made it through the windows, which faced the street and were open slightly to give some relief from the warm night. It was a joyous sound, though she couldn't make out what was being chanted.

She stumbled her way to the windows and opened one wide. Dawn was breaking and she could see the revelers thrusting torches up and pulling them down. "God Save the King"? Yes, that's what it sounded like. She leaned out slightly and the morning air helped rouse her and now it was clear. It was a crowd of all sorts, visible in the first rays of the new, fine day. Servants. Toilers. Even some gentlemen. "God Save the King" and "Hail Wellington." They were marching and laughing and dancing. Probably to Hyde Park with their torches and makeshift banners and a few Union Jacks.

Before she could go to her husband's room, which faced the rear, he himself was through her door without a knock. "You've seen them," he said, with an excitement rare for him.

He stepped up to her, both of them in their nightgowns without a care that they might be seen. Without much of a care in any way, shape, or form.

"It must be news, good news," she told him as she felt his arm encircle her waist and they leaned out and waved randomly at the marchers.

Mrs. Darcy turned to her husband. "I cannot believe it, but we must have won. Surely Bonaparte is done for."

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He tightened his grip and pulled her closer. They were both staring out, and he said, "Indeed. Bonaparte is done for once and for all."

It was not long before Bradley—the butler—came through the open door.

"A footman told me, Sir, Ma'am. He went out and they told him of the great victory in the Netherlands. Do you think it's true, Sir?"

Darcy turned to the servant. "God willing it *is* true, Bradley."

Bradley, suddenly aware of his impertinence, bowed and backed quickly from the room. When the door was closed behind him, Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam threw themselves together.

"Thank God it is over, finally. Thank God," she said, and her husband kissed the top of her head and echoed her words. "Thank God. Peace at last."

"You should speak to the servants," Elizabeth said, her right hand clutching her husband's left as they again looked out over the crowd that seemed to have grown and grown in just the last few minutes as the very day itself brightened.

"I shall," Darcy said. Elizabeth quickly put on a robe and in a moment, the couple stood on the landing overlooking the front foyer. Shouts arose from below and echoed about. The servants hushed when Darcy, with Elizabeth to his right, looked down across the wrought-iron railing.

"I see that you have all heard the news. It is a great day for our country, I think. A great day that will long be viewed as such and, I hope, will lead at long last to peace and prosperity."

"Peace and prosperity!" was hurraed by the group below three or four times before Darcy's extended arms quieted them.

"Yes, peace and prosperity. Now, I must ask that one or two of you stay behind"—and the butler, cook, and a new maid promised they would and Darcy thanked them—"but for the rest of you, enjoy the day." With that, an eager footman rushed to open the grand front door and he led the rest—save for the

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three who remained—out into the growing mass of citizens celebrating a great day and, they hoped, a generation of peace and prosperity.

“They will enjoy it,” Elizabeth said to her husband as she grasped his hand while they watched the rush to join the crowd surging west to the nearby park.

“Yes, Lizzy. It is as if a cloud were suddenly cleared away to reveal a breathtaking sky.”

“There will be rain, you know.”

“Yes. But not today, my dearest. Not today.”

The Darcys were quickly dressed, and the crowd was gone, to Hyde Park or perhaps the Palace. Little Fitz, all one-and-a-half-years of him, was collected from the nursery and carried for the momentous four block walk to Mount Row and Number 19, the house Charles Bingley bought after marrying Jane Bennet, it being inappropriate that they impose on the Hursts—Mrs. Hurst being Bingley’s sister—on Grosvenor Square.

Darcy lifted his son so he could bang the knocker as was his great pleasure and, to him, entitlement, and Bingley himself answered. “Uncle Charles!” was shouted by the child at the unexpected honour. The precious cargo was passed from Darcy to Bingley as Elizabeth rushed into the foyer, where she was met by Jane coming down the stairs.

“We were just coming to see you. Isn’t it wonderful?” Jane said.

They had done much the same things some months before, only August 1814 it was, when they were sure Bonaparte was to become an historical footnote, sitting angrily but defanged and helpless on Elba. This time, though, the Allies would surely send him far from Europe and he surely would never return.

While the Bennet women went into the dining parlour where there was coffee and some breakfast—the Darcys having left far too quickly to eat what Cook made for them—the men followed.

“We know nothing other than what we heard from the masses in the street,” Bingley said. “I dearly hope it is true.”

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"How could it not be?"

Bingley smiled at his friend, holding the handle of his cup between several fingers of his right hand. "This is not like you, Darcy, to be so...optimistic. I think it best that we wait for official news."

"You are right, of course. But it is so damned hopeful, do you not think? "

"I *do* think. But let us not count our chickens just yet. Let the others have their fun, but we must be prepared should these turn out to be a hoax and our hopes dashed."

But it was not a hoax and their hopes were not dashed as Wellington's dispatch from the town of Waterloo was circulated far and wide in London after its arrival the next day. However excited everyone was at the *rumour* of victory was nothing compared to what they felt with the *reality* of victory, and it took many days, nearly to the following Monday, for things in London to resume any semblance of normality.

In some places, though, things would never again be normal. A week after the first news arrived from the continent, Mr. Bingley received a letter. It was from Captain George Wickham's regiment late of Newcastle.

June 21, 1815

Mr. Bingley,

I am charged with providing you with sad news concerning the fate of your brother-in-law, Captain George Wickham. He was a brave man and a fine soldier. It was in the latter capacity that he suffered mortal injuries. He led his men in their defense of a crucial spot on the battlefield, until he and too many others were cut down.

His widow, your sister-in-law, is being cared for by her sister Catherine. The Army will do what it can to lessen the blow I fear both sisters, especially the young widow, will never surmount. I ask that you advise your wife and her sister Elizabeth (who I understand lives not far from you in

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town) at a time and in a manner as you deem most appropriate. A separate letter has been sent to Mrs. George Wickham's parents. I am also taken to understand that your brother-in-law Mr. Darcy may have useful information concerning Captain Wickham's family. If so, I would very much appreciate his passing it on to us so we can make the appropriate notifications.

Again, I am woefully sorry for the loss to your family and to the Royal Army and our proud Nation.

God Save the King.

*Sincerely,
Reginald Turner
Colonel, First Foot Guards*

Bingley stared at the letter before rereading it. He must see Darcy without delay. Together they'd decide how to tell their wives about their brother-in-law. He refolded the paper and placed it in an inside pocket and left for Brook Street.

Darcy was in but surprised by the early visit. At Bingley's request, they went into the library where, the door closed, Bingley handed the letter to his friend.

"So that is the end of him," was Darcy's immediate response to the news upon finishing the letter, and he would not waver notwithstanding his friend's stare.

"There. I have said it. He is gone, and I will say no more of him. I only wish that his good father and mine were still alive to see that he died a hero. But they are not. That's all I will say. Now we must tell our wives."

With that, he stood, leaving Bingley to stare up at the coldness, however justified in both men's minds.

"Sadly," he added, "I cannot help the Colonel about the family, he being an only child and his parents long gone. I will write to him telling him that."

Jane and Elizabeth would be back soon enough from their regular morning stroll, Darcy said, and after offering Bingley

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some of the house's refreshments, the two adjourned to the rear garden to await them. To tell them of what had happened to their suddenly widowed sister.

Darcy had not softened when he and Bingley sat with their wives some half-hour later in the drawing-room. After telling the women the news, Jane reminded the husbands that Lydia was with child, based upon a recent letter from Kitty—Lydia, Kitty said, being far too busy to announce the good news herself—and that she prayed that there had been no disruption in the pregnancy. Darcy could not resist adding, chiefly to Elizabeth, “Your sister made a dreadful mistake, but she was young and I shall not hold that mistake against her or against her child, whomever the father.”

This struck his wife as most unkind, but Darcy checked her before she could speak.

“I know my dear who the father is. I will not be prejudiced against that innocent and perhaps in time the child will think me a kind uncle.”

The rest thought it best to avoid the issue, at least for a time, so Jane and Bingley quickly said their goodbyes and walked back to their home.

All this prepared them for the letter Jane received two days later from Newcastle.

June 22, 1815

Dearest Jane,

I am so excited about joining you in London now that my dear, sweet Wickham is deceased. I will, they assure me, get a generous pension for the rest of my life, and I must take solace in that. They will also transport me and Kitty wherever I wish to go, and of course I said I wished to go to you. I am told that the army can only pay for us to go by post, but I have told the commander that your dear husband will pay the difference in cost for us to take a chaise to London and so we will be with you sooner than you can

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imagine. Our furnishings, meager as they are, will follow by some conveyance.

I think, however, that London may be too busy for me and my little one (when he comes). I do not dare ask directly, knowing D's unfounded prejudice against my dear Wickham and Lizzy's acceptance of that prejudice, but I should like to live at Pemberley. I am told it is vast and that there is more than enough room for me and my little one.

Perhaps, dearest Jane, you could broach this discreetly. Ideally without even mentioning that I made the request. You can make it sound like your own idea. "I think Lydia and the child will be better off in the country and where better than Pemberley?" Like that. You will think of something more poetic! I am sure, and Lizzy will never know the idea came from me.

You may wonder about my going to Longbourn, but I have lived as a married woman too long from the nest to return to it and believe I have suffered sufficiently to justify being accommodated in a place as heralded as is Pemberley. And, of course, I fear a lingering animosity in Meryton with respect to the debts by dear departed Wickham may have left there even if our dear Papa has resolved most of them.

I must end now and assume you will receive this before you receive me! I cannot tell you how pleased I will be to be with you again and out of the desolation that is the north of England. I will not need a large room when I arrive, but as I am with child, I think it must be larger than what you provide Kitty.

*Your sister,
Mrs. George Wickham,
Widow of a deceased hero*

P.S. You need not burden yourself with informing dear Mamma and Papa about my misfortune. In addition to what dear Col. Turner has sent them, I have sent a letter. I have

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asked that they come to see me in your house in London and assured them that your sweet husband will have no hesitancy in paying for a chaise to take them directly.

After rereading portions of the letter and folding it and before seeing Lizzy, though, Jane went to inform her husband. He, upon hearing the news, had her tell the housekeeper to have three rooms prepared for the arrival.

With those arrangements set in motion, Jane walked to Brook Street. As it was plain that Lydia didn't want Jane to show her actual letter to Elizabeth, she merely informed her sister when they next met of what was necessary to be told. That the two youngest Bennets had invited themselves to the Bingleys' house in town—which is how Elizabeth understood what Jane said, though not as Jane actually put it.

Both the houses were already festooned in black draped down from each window. There were celebrations of the great victory everywhere but even in Mayfair there were those houses that had similarly gone into mourning.

Chapter 2. Two Letters

Jane doubted that Lydia, or Kitty, thought to inform their other sister, Mary. She undertook to do so.

By the spring of 1814, after Kitty had joined Lydia in the north and Jane and Elizabeth were long since married off, Mrs. Bennet had tired of Mary's moping about. Without her younger sisters to complain about or her older sisters to rein her in, Mary turned on Mrs. Bennet. Without Lydia to act as a companion, Mrs. Bennet turned on Mary. There were weeks during which the mother and daughter barely spoke—though Mr. Bennet counted these as among the most blessed of his life.

But Mary did find someone of like mind and like temperament on a visit to her aunt and uncle while in London in the spring of 1814. Joshua Bowles was a bachelor vicar with a fine living in Northumberland who happened to be visiting his ailing, and since deceased, mother in Cheapside at the time. He also happened to be carrying the desire to find a woman of a suitably suitable frame of mind who he could marry and with whom he could finally experience the "sins of the flesh" so as to better be able to counsel and perhaps comfort those of his flock who too often were guilty of committing this particular and particularly common sin.

Thus it came to be that Rev. and Mrs. Joshua Bowles were now happily ensconced in a parish not far from the Scottish border.

Happily for them (and sadly for everyone else), the couple reinforced one another in their view of the world and of the people who inhabited it. When Mary wrote to her sisters, which she did infrequently, her letters never strayed far from the sentiments she displayed when they were all living at Longbourn. The others wrote to her only when absolutely necessary.

And now it was absolutely necessary that Jane write to Mary. She gave the news of their brother-in-law's death. She added

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that she understood if Mary's duties prevented her from coming such a long way to London to see Lydia, though she was of course welcome to stay with her or with Elizabeth. And she asked that Mary and her husband pray for Captain Wickham's soul.

Elizabeth also wrote a letter, though not to Mary. Hers was to Charlotte Collins, who'd become even more of a friend after Elizabeth became Mrs. Darcy and especially after the sudden and untimely (but little mourned) death of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

They wrote often and in mutual confidence, though once married Elizabeth truly never "polluted" Rosings Park itself until after Lady Catherine's demise. Mr. and Mrs. Collins both were altered after her passing, like flowers allowed to blossom after the removal of an obstacle that prevented the sun from reaching them. In this, Elizabeth was exceedingly pleased that what she once thought impossible—that Charlotte could ever be tolerably happy in the lot that she had chosen—had truly come to pass.

Much as she would have liked Charlotte to come to London, though, Elizabeth asked her to remain in Kent, at least until the initial grief felt by the Bennet family had eased. She promised she would try to visit come autumn, if not sooner.

Her friend's response came almost immediately.

*Hunsford Parsonage
July 2, 1815*

My Dear Eliza,

Mr. Collins and I are dreadfully sorry to have heard the news about Captain Wickham. Whatever our view of the man, it is sad that he was taken so young. It must be some solace to Lydia and the others in your family that he died in such a heroic manner, for which we must all be grateful.

As to dear Lydia, I pray that she can withstand the storm she is going through and that their child will come and be a healthy remembrance of his father.

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Please express our condolences to her and tell her that Mr. Collins and I very much look forward to seeing her when matters have settled.

*Your dear friend,
Charlotte*

The letter from Mary—"Mrs. Bowles"—to Jane appeared a bit over a week after this. It said she and her Joshua would, of course, pray for the soul of Captain Wickham in the hope that his behaviour since leaving Longbourn so long before and especially the manner of his death would put him in good stead with the Lord. She and her husband (the vicar) opined that it was up to Jane to undertake the correcting of those faults in Lydia—and in Kitty, too—that were inappropriate and that Jane should guide their sisters to a more wholesome and pure life, one as a widow and the other sadly but unavoidably destined to be a spinster.

Mary concluded by saying that of course she and her husband (the vicar) were far too consumed with their mutual duties in his parish to even consider decamping to London for any period of time and that they appreciated Jane's understanding of this reality and anticipated that Jane would adequately explain this to her sisters and, most importantly, to their mother and father to whom she wrote separately to express her condolences and those of her husband (the vicar).

Elizabeth did not share Charlotte's letter with Jane. She merely told her of its contents in broad strokes, Jane did show Mary's to Elizabeth and when Elizabeth finished with it, she merely said, "it is as we expected."

Chapter 3. The Bennets' Arrival in London

At Longbourn, Colonel Turner's letter arrived one day before Lydia's did. Mr. Bennet opened it in the drive immediately after paying the courier. It was much like the colonel's letter to Bingley (and to many others). Mr. Bennet read it twice before folding it and slowly walking into the house to give the news he knew with honesty and some regret would be a much harsher blow to his wife than it was to him.

It was hot, and Mrs. Bennet sat quite unladylike in her favourite parlour chair, which had been moved nearer the window so she might get a touch of any breeze that made an appearance. She heard her husband enter the room but did not turn to him.

"When will this eternal—" she began but the stiffness of his presence stopped her query.

"What is it, Mr. Bennet?" but she was again halted when she saw the official letter dangling from his right fingers.

"At least it is not our girls," he said as he stepped towards her. He held his hand out and let her grab the colonel's letter.

She too read it but could only do it once, and not as deliberately as had her husband. It did hit her far harder. She let the document fall to the floor, and Mr. Bennet bent to pick it up and left his wife to contemplate the news, she being struck dumb by what she read.

The family's housekeeper, Hill, was in the hall waiting to find what happened, and Mr. Bennet told her that his wife's "favourite son-in-law has died a hero" and asked that she get something that might calm Mrs. Bennet's nerves and make sure smelling salts were at hand while he went into his library to meditate on the sad news about his least favourite son-in-law.

He was not there long when he heard a knock.

"Come," he said, and in came his wife.

"I must see my sister," Mrs. Bennet said. "I must see her right away."

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"You cannot be serious, my dear. This news has struck you like a thunderbolt. You must calm yourself. Perhaps retire to your room so you can properly absorb what you have just now learnt. I can send someone to fetch her."

"My Mr. Wickham has died a hero, Mr. Bennet, and it would be a grave insult to his memory not to make that fact known far and wide. And I am sure we will be going up to London soon enough to be reunited with my girls and I must ensure that this news gets to my sister and others in Meryton—oh how they thought themselves so superior to my dear Mr. Wickham—without delay.

"If necessary, I will sit with my sister for a minute or two to recover my senses and I shan't be long. But it is my duty and I will fulfill it."

Mr. Bennet stiffened in his chair at this declaration and insisted that he would accompany her.

"No, Sir," his dear wife responded. "This is lady's work and I fear you will be too ready to display your disregard for this hero as you have too often done, especially with those other two."

"Darcy and Bingley?" he asked, with a tinge of annoyance.

"The very ones. Oh, I should like to have seen their faces when they learned that Wickham has forever established his position as greatly their superior without regard to how many estates they have and how many horses they can ride.

"No, Mr. Bennet. I shall go alone. I shall be proud to go alone to share this dreadful news with my sister."

"May I not comfort you?"

"Oh, Mr. Bennet. We both know too well your limitations in that regard. I will see my sister and be comforted by her."

Mrs. Bennet turned and called to Hill as she hit the hall, telling her she must be properly attired for going into Meryton and that Hill must find something black to serve as at least a temporary sign of the mourning she was flinging herself into until she could get the appropriate wardrobe.

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And word did spread quickly through Meryton—indeed two or three other families received similar official letters from captains or majors or colonels—about the death of the “hero.” Whether it was because of the late-afternoon heat or the weight of the news or a combination, Mrs. Bennet found herself quite unable to rise from her sister’s parlour for her return to Longbourn. A message went in her place, asking that things be brought so she could spend the night at the Philipses’, Mrs. Philips being Mrs. Bennet’s sister.

Mr. Bennet was quite taken aback by the request and hastened to have Hill assemble what was necessary and carried it himself in a single-horse trap to his sister-in-law’s. There, immediately upon his arrival, he found himself chastised by his wife for making such a fuss over her though, in truth, she was pleased by the sudden show of consideration (if not affection).

She sent him off though, that she might continue to commiserate with her sister and the two were soon sampling reviving liquor and swinging back and forth between the happy memories they had of Captain George Wickham and the ache of knowing that they would have no new such memories of his and they must be satisfied with Lydia and the child she would be bearing soon enough.

Mrs. Bennet had not yet returned home when (as we said) a different courier appeared. He handed Lydia’s letter to Mr. Bennet, who again read it in the drive. It was longer, more detailed, and far less formal than was the Colonel’s. Indeed, it repeated much of what Lydia wrote to Jane, with the addition of references to how she hoped her mother would bear up under the news now that her dear Captain Wickham has forever proved his worth and that she was longing to be reunited with her mother at Jane’s—“for surely Jane will want us to stay with her”—in London.

The letter’s “I can assure you, dear Papa, that Mr. Bingley will surely pay for the hiring of an appropriate coach to convey you and Mamma so that you will be comfortable on your journey”

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jumped out at Mr. Bennet. *I would not for all the tea in China have myself take further advantage of the kindness of Mr. Bingley and we will pay for our own coach*, he thought before he had retired to his library to again contemplate what had become of his family and what would become of it. Especially the fate of his two youngest and at times silliest of daughters. Perhaps the tragedy would push them into adulthood. He could only hope that it would do so.

But there only so much contemplation that could be done, even for a man such as him, and in two days' time, Mrs. Bennet had returned and was sufficiently recovered that the pair could set off to London to be of comfort to Lydia.

Mr. Bennet insisted that they be as little an imposition on his Bingley son-in-law or, for that matter, his Darcy son-in-law, as possible. It was agreed that they would arrive—in the carriage hired by Mr. Bennet—and stay with Mrs. Bennet's brother (Mr. Gardiner) in Cheapside.

They arrived there in the early afternoon of a rainy London day and had a note advising of this fact promptly dispatched to Jane. The expected response soon appeared, expressing the Bingleys' hope that Jane's parents and her aunt and uncle could come to Mount Row for dinner with the Darcys, where all could commiserate on the great loss the family had suffered as their period of mourning began.

When they were all later assembled in the large drawing room on the first floor at No. 19, Mount Row, once Jane had everyone's attention, she said, "I've received news from the north and Kitty said that she and Lydia should be expected to arrive on this coming Tuesday, in three days, and that they've taken up our offer to stay here."

"Is that all?" Elizabeth asked.

"That's all they say now. They've asked that we make one, or perhaps two, servants available to them while they adjust to London—though I think it is more Lydia who insists that she have her own servant and Kitty would be content to share—and

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that they do not know what will become of them or how long they will stay or where they will go when they've, as Kitty put it, 'outlived our welcome.'"

"Well, I think we can all agree," Darcy said somewhat thoughtlessly under the circumstances, "that that last bit came from Kitty and not Mrs. George Wickham."

Lizzy shot a look at him while the others looked to the floor.

Darcy lowered his voice so only his wife could hear. "I am sorry, but I will not be a hypocrite."

"Then you best be silent if you must when you are with them."

To this, he could add nothing, and he stepped away and the others resumed their discussion of what exactly needed to be done to prepare for the visit until it was noticed that Mrs. Bennet had drifted off as she sat on a couch off to the side. It was not long after she was gently roused that she and her husband and the Gardiners were on their way back to Cheapside so Mrs. Bennet in particular could recover from what had been a far more taxing and stressful journey than she had expected.

Chapter 4. Kitty and Lydia's Arrival

The two youngest Bennets arrived from Newcastle as planned, on the Tuesday in the Bingley-paid-for chaise. The footman jumped down before it stopped and had the door open as it rolled to a halt. The door to the Bingleys' house opened. The butler, Crawford, stood at the top of the marble steps, watching. The footman held out his hand, and Kitty took it to remove herself. From the pavement, she looked up at the enormity—to her—of the mansion.

She'd been to and even had stayed at the house for a brief period before she joined Lydia in the north but was still awed by it. She stood waiting for Lydia to follow her. And waited. The footman stood himself a statue as he too...waited.

Kitty turned and poked her head through the door.

"Are you coming?"

"Kitty," was the response. "I believe I am at least entitled to have the presence of my family, being the widow of a hero and with child and all, before emerging. Go and see where they are and why they are not here."

Kitty was long and painfully accustomed to this. At each stop along the way south, Lydia made sure everyone they saw knew her mourning was for a hero killed in the recent great battle on the continent.

Now on Mount Row, Kitty left the carriage in her own black dress. She caught the footman's eye and shook her head and walked toward the door. Crawford had not moved. Kitty asked where her sisters and parents were.

He nodded. "Very good, Miss Bennet. We were expecting you. I shall inquire within."

He entered the house. Kitty walked back to the chaise, where the footman was still a statue, holding the door and exchanging smirks with the coachman, who was keeping the two exhausted and steaming horses steady.

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Kitty barely said to Lydia that inquiries were being made when Mrs. Bennet herself came bounding awkwardly from the house towards the chaise with Mr. Bennet not too far behind. They'd come from the Gardiners' in anticipation of the widow's arrival but Mrs. Bennet had tired of staring out and fallen asleep on a sofa in the drawing room about half an hour beforehand. Her husband shook her awake when a footman came looking for them, and the two elder Bennets hurried down the stairs to the foyer and out the door.

When she heard the commotion, Lydia rose from the chaise's bench and, with the aid of the footman, set her foot down on the London pavement and awaited her mother's hug. Said mother swept by her spinster daughter to reach the more valued (and first married) one. Said hug was delivered with a "Oh, my poor dear" and earned "Oh, dear mamma, you cannot know how I have suffered" in response.

Lydia stepped back and patted her stomach. "No one can know what I have been through."

Her mother's arm again encircled her, and Mrs. Bennet whispered into her ear, "I cannot know, but I know you will be strong in these trying times."

The two again separated and turned. Side by side, they prepared to make their appropriate entrance into the Bingley house. They were quickly past Kitty and with the slightest of acknowledgements of its mistress, who had come from the house shortly after their mother had and who stood to the side, they were inside.

Instead of immediately following Lydia and her mother, Kitty turned to Jane. "Thank you so much for having us." She put her arm through her sister's, and they entered the foyer together.

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WHEN HIS SISTERS-IN-LAW were settled, Charles Bingley allowed his good nature to take over. Lydia treated his house as if it were Longbourn and she were still a girl. After several days

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of her giving instructions to the house's servants without regard to the fact that she was a mere if honoured guest, even Jane began to chafe at her youngest sister's behaviour.

Elizabeth came each day to visit, and she and Darcy often dined there. It was on one of the latter evenings that things came to a head. When the butler Crawford bowed to those in the dining parlour and said Mrs. Wickham could not join them, Elizabeth stood. She threw her napkin to the side of her soup and was heading to the door when Jane jumped up and stopped her.

"She is a suffering and pregnant widow, Lizzy. You must let her have her moods."

Elizabeth said, for all to hear, that Lydia was also a spoiled brat and always had been and that it was time she rejoined her family, however briefly. Before Elizabeth could enter the foyer, Jane said she'd go. The dining parlour was silent, no one daring to taste any of their soup for a moment, awaiting whatever was going to happen next.

What happened next (if some minutes later) was that Lydia appeared beside her eldest sister, in a quickly donned and simple dress.

The next morning, the house continued as it had long done before the young widow and her sister appeared. Lydia, though, found herself not a part of it. She wondered whether Jane had had the chance to discuss with Elizabeth her going to Pemberley. When they next spoke, Jane confessed that she had not seen an opportune moment to do so but promised she would in the next few days.

For Lydia could not wait to be gone. As a widow and woman-with-a-child, she was greatly limited in what she could do in London (much as she had when she was last there, cloistered with her dear Wickham as he struggled to get his affairs in order and then (upon being discovered by Darcy) with her aunt and uncle and their annoying children before they could be wed).

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The formality of those visits to the Darcys' house when she made them were also wearing on her.

For her part, the very next afternoon Jane sat with Elizabeth at the Darcys' and repeated Lydia's request. She did not feign, as Lydia asked her to, that it was her own idea. Elizabeth was not such a fool.

"Well," she said, "we will be going there shortly for the season anyway and they'd be coming with us. I'm sure Darcy won't object to their going early, although it will create something of an inconvenience for the servants and we will have to make sure there is a physician there and available to care for Lydia's condition. And Kitty will accompany her. I will speak to Darcy."

Which Elizabeth did some hours later.

"If she is out of our hair, so much the better," he said. "I mean, really, Lizzy, she is such an unwelcome burden on Charles and your sister and on everyone who works at the house. I'd be happy, I'm afraid to say, to see the back of her forever, but this will have to do. I will write to my steward and Mrs. Reynolds. I'll leave them to make arrangements, including as to ensuring the availability of a physician or midwife," Mrs. Reynolds being the Pemberley housekeeper.

Elizabeth wouldn't admit it, but she shared her husband's desire to see Lydia gone, and so she quickly walked to the Bingleys' to give the good news to Jane.

Regarding her parents, they were still staying with the Gardiners but were tiring of London and were anxious about returning to Longbourn and planned to do so when the other members of the family headed down to Pemberley and now that journey would be made sooner.

Chapter 5. Kitty & Elizabeth

The routine at the Bingleys' was quickly established. When Bennets went for strolls, which were rarely long, they were properly attired in black. Jane and Elizabeth had arranged for some simple black frocks in crêpe to be prepared for themselves and their sisters and they were on hand when Kitty and Lydia arrived and within the week more elaborate yet not overly elaborate dresses were delivered to Mount Row.

Plus, plans were made for the young widow and Kitty to go to Pemberley. And on one of the last nights that they were at the Darcys' for dinner, Kitty took Lizzy aside briefly. She asked whether, "in confidence," they might speak the next day about a matter of some importance. She gave no hint of what that matter might be, and Lizzy found the request itself quite disconcerting: She couldn't recall Kitty *ever* speaking with her about anything *in confidence*. But as it was clear Kitty did not want anyone else to know about it, Lizzy did not mention it to Darcy.

The next day broke fine, though it had the feeling that it would grow to be very warm. Late in the morning, Kitty left the Bingleys' for the short walk to see Lizzy, who'd been half-watching for her from the sitting room and was on her as soon as her sister was in the foyer. She dismissed Bradley after she asked him to have refreshments—Kitty was quite warm from her walk—brought to her study, where she quickly led her sister.

"Darcy is out with Bingley prancing around on their horses and will not be back for some hours," she told Kitty in an artificially light-hearted tone as they settled and waited for something to drink and for Kitty to regain her composure.

The two had never been close. If there was an older sister who Kitty'd confide in, it was Jane. Just as was true with Lydia and even (although rarely) Mary. One never need fear being chided or not understood by dear, sympathetic Jane. One could hope but not be sure about Elizabeth. Yet it was Lizzy who Kitty

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wanted to see and there she was in Elizabeth's study, in one of a pair of armchairs separated by a round table on one side of the room.

They spoke simply as they waited for the refreshments, but as soon as the footman who brought up a curaçao concoction and a plate of biscuits closed the door behind himself, all calm vanished from the younger woman.

"I cannot endure it."

"Endure what?" Lizzy responded stiffly, very much taken aback by the rapid change in Kitty's disposition.

Kitty's eyes were watery.

"Lizzy. I am with child."

Elizabeth said nothing.

"I. Am. With. Child. Lizzy. Say something."

The statement left Lizzy speechless. She'd not been so shocked at news since those letters from Jane telling of Lydia's running off with Wickham. Those horrible letters that made her think she'd lost Darcy just when she'd found him. How long ago that was. And how long it was before she recovered her senses now. She leaned towards Kitty.

"Know that I will always love you no matter what." She grasped Kitty's vibrating hands. Her voice lowered, she added, "Tell me you know that" as she tightened her grip.

Kitty fought the tears but was finally able to say, "I know that. Oh, Lizzy. It's why I came to you and no one else. God knows I need your strength. I have been so weak and so so stupid."

Kitty was sobbing and looking down at her sister's hands and for a moment Lizzy didn't know whether Kitty would ever allow her to release them.

She is such a girl and such a woman, Lizzy thought. When she felt Kitty's hands relax, she pulled hers away to grab a kerchief from her sleeve and give it to Kitty to clear her tears. She then ran a finger across Kitty's cheek before moving her hand to Kitty's chin. That she lifted so their eyes could meet. When they did, Lizzy said with a love she never imagined she could have for

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this sister, "I am here for you. I will tell no one unless you wish me to. If you have no other friend in the world, you will always have me. Do you understand?"

Kitty nodded, having regained some control of her senses.

Relieved, Lizzy sat back in her chair and Kitty mimicked this.

"Good," Lizzy said. "Now tell me what you wish to tell me."

To Lizzy, all Kitty's youth and naivete and innocence were gone. Kitty, such a childish name, stood and began to pace back and forth. She seemed to be using her arms for balance or to allow herself to keep moving, and she sometimes seemed to be speaking to Elizabeth and sometimes seemed to be speaking to no one. Through it all she kept her voice low.

"I was such a fool. Such a fool. For years there was Lydia with Wickham, always mocking me. She did not mean to. She couldn't help it, and I cannot blame her. She got him first and when I joined her in Newcastle, I hoped to catch the eye of a fellow officer. But none was interested in 'Wickham's cast-off,' as I know some called me. Perhaps some thought he had...had me before he captured Lydia.

"I could hear them, Lizzy. I could hear them when they...when the two of them were having relations in their bed. Always laughing and grunting and I wanted to laugh and grunt like she did. At an officers' ball, Lydia and Wickham were gone early and left me alone and a Captain Johnson came up to me. He was new to the regiment. He asked if I wanted some air. I must have looked desperate. I don't think our absence was noted.

"It was cold and my coat was still inside. He put his tunic over my shoulders and said sweet things to me. Things no officer or any other man had said to me before. They always treated me like a girl, those other officers. It's how they treated Lydia too when Wickham wasn't around. Like the militia officers did in Meryton."

She stopped and glanced at Lizzy, who took it as a signal that Kitty wanted to be sure she was listening. When Elizabeth

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nodded, there being nothing she could say in the moment, Kitty resumed her back-and-forth pacing.

"It was dark, Lizzy, but he seemed handsome enough. And suddenly he kissed me. I was never kissed, Lizzy, and I fell deeper and deeper into it. It was glorious, like I always dreamt it would be. I pulled him to me. I promise you I pulled him and I felt his hands against—"

She stopped and suddenly returned from that cold place in the north to the Mayfair room where her sister was watching her intently and got back to her pacing.

"I am sorry. I will only say that together we...we had relations, leaning against the building. It hurt and there was some blood, but it was glorious too and I was afraid I was too loud, like Lydia often was. He hurried me back to the ball and as soon as we were through the door he bowed and I curtsied and he went to re-join his fellows and they all shared a laugh and I dared not think of what, or who, it was about.

"I waited a little bit and declined several officers who wished to have a dance with me by saying I felt ill and then one of the nicer ones got my coat and walked me back to our quarters. He bowed to me when we separated but once I was inside, I had to hear the moaning and grunting from Lydia and Wickham, and I fell asleep in my dress."

She stopped her walk with the end of her story and sat back on her chair.

"Tell me I was a fool. I know it."

They both knew it.

"And what of Captain Johnson?"

"Soon he fell right in with the others and treated me as all of the others treated me."

"Never again?"

"Just that one time." She stiffened. "I don't regret it. It was...well, it made me feel like a woman for the first time. But, no, I didn't care for him enough to pursue it, and we were again

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nothing but strangers and he took to treating me like a little girl. The way the others, even Wickham at times, did.”

Elizabeth looked up and down at her sister and realised she was far from a “little girl” now. It greatly saddened her.

“Yes, Lizzy, it was four months ago.”

“And Captain Johnson?”

“Dead in the Netherlands.”

No more was said. Kitty stepped to the door. Lizzy jumped to her. She ran her hand across her sister’s, which was holding the doorknob. After that slight intimacy, Kitty opened the door and she and then Lizzy went to the hall and down the stairs without another word, even as Bradley hurried to the foyer and opened the door for the house’s visitor.

“We will go for a walk,” Lizzy said. “It will do us both a world of good.”