

A woman in a blue dress holding a fan, surrounded by roses. The woman is shown from the back, wearing a long, light blue dress with a white lace collar and cuffs. She is holding a white fan in her right hand. Her hair is styled in an updo with a red flower. The background is a light pink color with a repeating floral pattern. The top and bottom edges of the image are decorated with a border of green leaves and brown roses.

Jane Bennet  
in  
*January*

A gift from

*Austen  
Variations*

to you!



Jane Bennet  
in  
*January*

by

Diana Birchall, Jack Caldwell  
Leslie Diamond, Maria Grace,  
Kara Louisa,, Susan Mason-Milks  
Abigail Reynolds, and Shannon Winslow

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Jane Bennet in January

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DEDICATION  
For our devoted readers.

# *Authors' Note*

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*Maria Grace*

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## **Jane's Poetic Admirer**

By Kara Louise

*"I do not like to boast of my own child, but to be sure, Jane -- one does not often see anybody better looking. It is what everybody says. I do not trust my own partiality. When she was only fifteen, there was a gentleman at my brother Gardiner's in town so much in love with her that my sister-in-law was sure he would make her an offer before we came away. But, however, he did not. Perhaps he thought her too young. However, he wrote some verses on her, and very pretty they were." **Pride and Prejudice,**  
Chapter 9*

### **The Gardiners' Home Gracechurch St.**

"Jane! Elizabeth! Come quickly!" Mrs. Bennet squealed as she entered the house with Mrs. Gardiner. "I have some news for you!" She turned her head both directions looking for her daughters, and the two women walked towards the drawing room. On the way, Mrs. Bennet stopped at the stairs and called one more time. "Jane! Elizabeth!"

She waited until she heard the sound of footsteps and Elizabeth's voice. "Coming, Mother."

Mrs. Bennet clasped her hands tightly and followed her sister-in-law into the drawing room,

taking a seat as she waited for her two eldest daughters.

Jane walked into the room first. At fifteen, she had grown into a very attractive young lady. She was followed by Elizabeth, who at fourteen years of age was about the same height but not quite as pretty. Jane had a very serene, generous, and quiet personality while Elizabeth was lively, enjoyed a good laugh, and had a tendency to speak her mind. The two young ladies were very different but were extremely close.

“What is it, Mother?” Elizabeth asked.

Mrs. Bennet waved for the girls to sit. Elizabeth could tell from her mother’s jubilant smile and rapid hand motions that it must be good news.

“We were in the milliner’s shop and your aunt met an acquaintance there, a Mrs. Thornton. They are having a ball and have expressly invited *you*, Jane!”

“Me?” Jane asked. “Are you certain, Mama?”

Mrs. Bennet nodded.

Jane looked at Elizabeth and then back at her mother. “But I have never been to a ball.”

“Well, everyone must have their first.”

“But...” Jane paused and looked again at Elizabeth. “But I would not wish to go without Lizzy.”

Mrs. Bennet wagged her head back and forth. “We knew you would say that, and so your aunt casually mentioned to her that you would feel so much more at ease if your sister was by your side.”

“And what did she say?” Elizabeth asked.

“She said you would be more than welcome to come,” Mrs. Gardiner replied.

“But Jane, it was *you* they particularly invited,” Mrs. Bennet gushed.

“But how did they even know about me to invite me?” Jane asked.

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. “I may have mentioned that my two favourite nieces were going to be staying with me. I had no idea they would invite us to a ball.”

“So we are both to go to our first ball!” Jane turned and grasped Elizabeth’s hand. “Oh, I would be so nervous without you. I am so glad you will be there with me!”

At length, the girls were told that the Thorntons had a large home in a fashionable part of London, but had only recently come into money. They had been long-time friends with the Gardiners and were hosting this ball for a nephew who was coming to town.

The day of the ball arrived, and Elizabeth and Jane talked as they dressed in the gowns specially made for the occasion.

“I hope we shall remember all the steps to the dances,” Jane said. “I would hate to make a mistake on the dance floor!”

“Heavens!” said Elizabeth. “With all the practicing our mother and aunt made us do since we received the invitation, we best not forget.”

“I still do not understand why we were invited. But

Mother thinks it is a wonderful thing.” Jane looked apprehensively at her sister. “I know how much Mother talks about meeting the right gentleman to marry and thinks a ball is the perfect place to meet one. I hope she does not expect me to make such an acquaintance tonight.” Jane let out a moan. “I am still too young.”

“Unfortunately, Mother does not think it is ever too early to begin planning and scheming for our marital felicity.”

Later that evening, Jane held Elizabeth’s arm tightly as they travelled to the Thornton’s home with their mother, aunt, and uncle. The carriage stopped in front of a large, stylish home. They stepped out and joined others who were walking up to the house.

The party entered and stepped up to greet Mr. and Mrs. Thornton, where introductions were made. The Thorntons welcomed them warmly.

After speaking briefly with the couple, the sisters walked into the ballroom, following the urgent motions of their mother. They stepped in and gasped. They had never seen anything like it. Melodies being played by a small orchestra filled the ballroom, a wondrous display of food and beverage was set out on a table at the side of the room, and people were dressed in their very finest. Candlelight flickered across the walls, and couples were lined up to dance.

The two girls smiled at other guests as they slowly walked about the room; Jane had her hand tucked

securely around her sister's arm. Their mother had walked away with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and was being introduced to a woman.

At length, Elizabeth looked at her sister. "Jane, if you do not loosen your grip, I shall have no feeling left in my fingers" She tilted her head. "My understanding is that one should become acquainted with the people at a ball and not remain at the side of one's sister the whole time."

"Oh, Lizzy, I am so nervous."

"Yes, and there is one gentleman over in the corner of the room who has not taken his eyes off of you since we first entered." Elizabeth felt Jane shudder. "So I thought. You noticed him as well, I see."

Jane silently nodded her head.

"Perhaps he is merely bored with the people here and is lost in his thoughts. He likely has no idea he is staring." Elizabeth shook her head firmly. "You have no need to worry, dear Jane."

The two stood silently for a few minutes until Elizabeth felt Jane's grip about her arm tighten.

"Look, Lizzy! Mother is going up to him with that lady. She is introducing them."

"I would not be surprised if that is his mother. I believe there is a resemblance. Still, I do not think you have any reason to..." Elizabeth stopped when Jane gasped.

"They are coming over!" Jane whispered frantically.

Elizabeth took Jane's hand and began to pat it. "Now you can worry."

"Girls!" exclaimed Mrs. Bennet, who stopped proudly before her daughters. "May I present to you Mrs. Shirk and her son, James? Mrs. Shirk is the sister of Mrs. Thornton. Mr. Shirk is their nephew." She turned to the woman and her son. "These are my daughters, Miss Jane Bennet, the eldest, and Miss Elizabeth."

The ladies curtsayed and the gentleman bowed.

Mr. Shirk smiled and looked at Jane, saying, "My eyes beheld you across the floor, and my heart at once began to soar." His eyes remained steadfast on Jane.

"Oh, Jane!" Mrs. Bennet cried! "He is a poet! And a fine one, indeed!"

Elizabeth stifled a giggle when she noticed Jane's pale face.

"Thank you," Jane said softly. Her cheeks blushed a bright rosy shade.

"Please accept my offer to dance the next," Mr. Shirk said with a slight raised brow, "Is there hope that I might have a chance?"

"Oh, my!" Mrs. Bennet gushed. "You should be flattered, Jane!"

Elizabeth could not hold back a chuckle, but disguised it with a cough. Her mother gave her a warning look.

"Of course, she would be delighted!" Mrs. Bennet answered. "Now, come, Elizabeth. Your aunt has need

of you.”

Jane reluctantly released Elizabeth’s arm so her sister could follow her mother and Mrs. Shirk. Elizabeth looked back once, giving Jane a resigned shrug of her shoulders.

She turned back and walked over to her aunt, who was speaking to a couple.

“Elizabeth, I should like to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins. This is my niece, Elizabeth.”

The couple smiled, and Mrs. Hawkins said, “Your aunt speaks very highly of you and your elder sister. It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Thank you. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

They spoke briefly, and then the Hawkins went onto the dance floor to await the next dance. Elizabeth and her aunt watched as Mr. Shirk escorted Jane to the dance floor.

“It appears as though the Thornton’s nephew has taken a liking to Jane.” The crease in Mrs. Gardiner’s brow convinced Elizabeth that her aunt was just as surprised as she was. “I know spoke often about you to them, and perhaps on occasion mentioned how handsome you both are.”

“Well, I am certain you spoke of Jane’s beauty; I cannot be certain you spoke of mine.” She did not wait for her aunt to reply. “We shall now see if he is as good a dancer as he is a poet.” A chuckle escaped.

“He is a poet?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“He thinks he is,” Elizabeth answered and sighed. “Poor Jane. Forgive me, Aunt, but I fear she is far too pretty to waste it on someone like him.”

“Now, Lizzy, one cannot be too particular when it comes to attracting a man’s attention.”

“When she is older, she can decide how particular she wants to be.”

Elizabeth was disappointed she could not find fault with the gentleman’s dancing, even when he was so engaged in speaking to Jane.

Mr. Shirk was all propriety and did not exceed two dances with Jane, but he stood with her or watched her when she was dancing or speaking with someone else. She and Elizabeth danced several dances, enjoyed a delicious meal, and made many new acquaintances. It was a joyous evening.

On the ride home, the girls were tired and did not speak much. They sat silently as Mrs. Bennet expressed her complete delight that Mr. Shirk paid such particular attention to Jane. Mrs. Gardiner confessed that she discovered Mrs. Thornton had informed her sister about Jane’s beauty. Apparently, Mr. Shirk had been quite interested in making her acquaintance.

There was little opportunity for the sisters to speak that evening once they arrived back at the Gardiners’ home. They were both greatly fatigued and went straight to bed.

The next morning, Elizabeth tapped lightly on

Jane's door and whispered, "Jane, are you awake?"

"Hmm?"

At Jane's muffled reply, Elizabeth opened the door and walked in. Jane sat up and stretched her arms high in the air.

"How did you sleep?" Elizabeth asked.

"I think I fell asleep before I even put my head on the pillow."

"It was exciting, was it not?" Elizabeth tugged at the sleeve on her nightgown. "Imagine, we have now been to our first ball!" She laughed. "And in London, no less!"

After a long yawn, Jane replied, "Yes, but I know you are more interested in what I thought of Mr. Shirk than in talking about the ball."

"To own the truth, I am most curious."

Jane sighed. "I confess that my enjoyment of the evening was somewhat tempered by Mr. Shirk's attentions." She looked down and shook her head. "During our two dances, Mr. Shirk spoke almost constantly in poetic form." She glanced up and bit her lip, adding. "I had to admit I almost giggled on several occasions."

"Oh, that must have been dreadful!" Elizabeth took Jane's hands. "If they were all as bad as the ones I heard, I cannot imagine how you kept from saying something to him. If it had been me, I would have asked him to refrain from any more poetic attempts or not speak at all!"

Jane chuckled. "I wondered what you would have done if you were me."

"You and he can both be grateful it was not me!" Elizabeth stood up and crossed her arms. "So even our Jane, who is always so generous towards a person's faults, found him to be quite an oddity."

Jane sighed and looked up at Elizabeth. "Those times I did not have a dance partner, he lingered near. I can honestly say I hope never again to hear another sentence that ends in a rhyme."

"I can only imagine." Elizabeth walked over and clasped her sister's hands. "But poetry is not just having words that rhyme." She looked at Jane with a sly smile. "It is something that requires one's heart, one's thoughts, and a lot of time."

Jane looked at her curiously, and then picked up her pillow and threw it at her sister. The two young ladies began to laugh.

Later that morning the two Bennet sisters were sitting in the drawing room with their mother and aunt. The sound of a carriage stopping before the house drew their attention, and Elizabeth walked over to the window.

"Oh dear," she said softly.

"Who is it?" Jane asked.

Elizabeth flashed her sister a forced smile. "Mr. Poetic himself."

"Mr. Shirk?" squealed Mrs. Bennet. She clasped her hands and quickly stood, rushing to the window.

She placed her hand over her heart. "Oh, Jane! This is wonderful! And to think you kept it a secret all this time that he was going to pay a visit!"

Jane's face paled. "He said nothing about paying us a visit."

Elizabeth chuckled. "He probably could not think of a word that rhymed with it." She sent her sister an apologetic look and reached for her hand. "I shall be here with you."

A short while later Mr. Shirk entered and bowed, greeting the ladies.

"Welcome to our home, Mr. Shirk," Mrs. Gardiner said. "Please have a seat."

"Mr. Shirk! It is so good to see you again!" A sideways glance at Jane and a quick nod of her head displayed Mrs. Bennet's ebullient approval.

"I hope you do not mind," Mr. Shirk replied. "I am grateful you are so kind."

"Ooh, you can pay us a call anytime!" Mrs. Bennet assured him and then began to laugh. "I think I just made a rhyme! Oh, and another!"

The two sisters watched in astonishment as their mother and Mr. Shirk were the only ones enjoying their repartee, which continued for quite some time.

At length, Mr. Shirk looked at Jane, giving her a nervous smile, and then back to Mrs. Gardiner and Mrs. Bennet. "I hope you do not consider me ill-mannered or rude, but I shall be honest; I am in quite the mood. I was so inspired by Miss Bennet, I fear,

that I wrote a poem I would like her to hear. Would you mind terribly if the two of us stepped outside so I can read it to her – if I may? It is truly such a beautiful spring day!”

Elizabeth watched Jane’s eyes widen, and then she swallowed hard.

“Oh, I see no harm in that!” Mrs. Bennet replied. “Certainly! Certainly!” She clasped her hands tightly. “But may we hear a few lines ourselves?”

Mr. Shirk pulled out a piece of paper and cleared his throat. Taking in a deep breath, he began, “Was she a princess, or an angel, or a dream? This lady whose hair was like sunshine and skin like cream; Her eyes are so blue I felt I would melt; as I looked into them, there was so much I felt.”

“Oh, Jane! Such lovely verses! And all inspired by you!”

Mrs. Gardiner drew in a breath and said, “Pray, do not stay out too long.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” Mr. Shirk said as he stood. He handled the piece of paper gently, as if it were a treasure, offered Jane his arm, and the two stepped out the door. From the look on her sister’s face, Elizabeth could almost feel her desperation.

Once they stepped out, Elizabeth went to the window. She saw them begin strolling along the street. She watched as Mr. Shirk held out the paper in front of him and could only imagine what other things he had been inspired to write about her sister.

They soon disappeared from view, which caused Elizabeth a brief bout of apprehension, but the couple soon turned around and began walking back. Mr. Shirk was no longer reading from the piece of paper.

She turned to her mother and aunt. "It appears as though he has finished reading his poem and I am of the opinion they have had enough time alone. I shall go out and join them."

"Oh, no, Lizzy!" her mother cried. "You shall spoil everything."

Mrs. Gardiner placed her hand over Mrs. Bennet's. "No, I think Elizabeth is right." She nodded several times in her niece's direction. "Perhaps you ought to join them."

Elizabeth did not wait for her mother to argue and hurried outside, seeing that the couple was in front of the neighbouring house. She looked down at the variety of flowers in her aunt and uncle's garden and suddenly smiled. "It is a beautiful spring day!" She walked over to one particular flower and picked it.

When the two came up to Elizabeth, relief spread across Jane's face.

"What do you have there?" Mr. Shirk asked. "There is nothing like a flower so fair."

Elizabeth held it up to him. "A flower, of course. What colour would you say it is, Mr. Shirk?"

He smiled. "Why that flower is orange! There is... It is... Um..." His voice trailed off.

"Why, I believe you are correct, Mr. Shirk. It is

orange,” Elizabeth said with a chuckle.

Jane looked at her sister oddly.

“You seem to truly enjoy the poetic form, Mr. Shirk,” Elizabeth said.

“Oh, I do, most heartily!”

Elizabeth frowned and shook her head. “It is such a shame, is it not, Jane?”

Jane’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I distinctly recollect a time when you told me you hoped to never again hear another sentence that ends in a rhyme.”

Both Jane and Mr. Shirk gasped. He turned to Jane. “You dislike poetry?” His countenance fell. “This is unfortunate. I had hoped... I have always wished to have someone by my side who both inspires me and encourages me in my writing poetry. I should one day like to publish a book of my poems.”

“Oh, and I am certain you shall,” Elizabeth said. “You shall publish a book and meet someone who will inspire and encourage you. Unfortunately, that person is not Jane.”

Mr. Shirk looked down as he shuffled his feet. “I... Pray, forgive me, but I must take my leave. Be so kind and give my regards to your family, but I just recalled that I am to depart on the morrow and I need to make certain all my affairs are in order.” He looked at Jane. “It has been a pleasure, and perhaps in a few years you will grow to appreciate rhyming verse.”

“Perhaps,” Jane said. “Thank you.”

Mr. Shirk nodded and walked back to his carriage.

“There!” Elizabeth said triumphantly. “I do not think you need to worry about him any longer.”

“But why did you ask him about the flower?” Jane fingered the dainty petals in her sister’s hand and pulled one off. “It is definitely orange.”

Elizabeth laughed. “There is no word that rhymes with orange. I wanted to see what he would do.”

“Oh, Lizzy, I cannot believe it. And to use my words from last night to make him think I disliked poetry.”

“It worked, did it not?” Elizabeth took her sister’s arm and they began to walk to the house. “Did you notice that he seemed to lose all poetic inspiration after that? He stopped speaking in rhyme.”

“I did, but what are we going to tell Mother? She shall be most upset.”

“We shall tell her that Mr Shirk sent them his regards but was required to depart as he is leaving town on the morrow.”

“Do you think she shall be upset?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I do not think so. At least, not until she learns that Mr. Shirk quickly departed when he heard you had a great dislike of poetry.” Elizabeth let out a cheery laugh. “But we shall worry about that later.”

“Oh, Elizabeth, I hope he does not suffer greatly on my account.”

“I am certain he shall not. He shall likely spend the

rest of the day penning a poem about the loss of love  
and then he shall be quite well.”

## **Jane Confides How She Fell in Love with Mr. Bingley**

By Shannon Winslow

*When the theme for this month was announced (Jane Bennet in January), I thought the perfect piece for me to share would be this scene from, Miss Georgiana Darcy of Pemberley, which is in turn an expansion on a passage you may have read in my earlier, parallel work The Darcys of Pemberley.*

*It takes place at Pemberley about a year after the close of Pride and Prejudice, and it's told from Georgiana's point of view.*

With Mr. Bingley away to supervise the move, Jane became Elizabeth's constant companion. I knew they had been the closest of sisters all their lives. And now, with these few weeks again under the same roof... Well, I could see it was a special treat for them both. I did not wish to interfere, so I was sure to make excuses for allowing them plenty of time to themselves.

I do not mean to say that my company was ever shunned by them. On the contrary, the sisters made me feel very welcome in their intimate society, and I am convinced they were entirely sincere in their desire to include me at these times. Perhaps they both

missed the presence of their younger siblings and I thereby helped to fill a void for them. They certainly did for me. Elizabeth was already become the sister I never had, and in Jane I found another.

Since they were both older and had gone ahead of me in many of life's important steps, they were in the position to tell me much of interest – the sort of information my mother would undoubtedly have supplied me, had she lived. I wanted to know a woman's place in marriage. What were her duties, responsibilities, her pleasures and vexations? What was necessary to keep a husband happy and a home running smoothly? Jane and Elizabeth had experience in these matters whereas I had none.

However, between my shyness in asking straightforward questions and Jane's particular modesty in speaking on delicate topics, my progress toward discovering these secret mysteries was slow. Enlightenment came bit by bit, more by my diligently gleaning what was incidentally dropped than by a calculated harvest of information all at once.

So I accumulated knowledge over time, primarily just by keeping my ears and eyes open. But one day, when the three of us were sitting quietly together over our needlework, I did find courageous enough to ask Jane to tell me how she and Mr. Bingley fell in love.

“Oh, my,” she said in answer, demurely laying a hand to the side of her face. “Can you really be interested?”

“Very much so, but perhaps you had rather not.”

“No. Although I would not care to talk about it to just anybody, it is the kind of thing sisters share, is it not?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Exactly, and it is a story well worth telling, Jane, especially in light of the happy way it has turned out.”

“As you wish, then,” Jane agreed. “Yet, as for falling in love, it will be a very short story on my side, for I believe I was fairly smitten the first night I saw Mr. Bingley, at that ball in Meryton.”

“It was the same for him, Jane, and you know it,” Elizabeth added. Then she turned to me. “Mr. Bingley thought Jane the most beautiful, most angelic creature he had ever come across. He has told me so himself. And of course, I quite agree with him.”

“Now, Lizzy, you mustn’t say such things,” returned Jane. “Sometimes I think you take delight in embarrassing me.”

“I speak only the truth, but I will let you tell it your own way.”

“Yes, please,” I said to further encourage her.

“Very well, Georgiana. As I was saying, I liked Mr. Bingley at once. He was exactly my idea of what a young gentleman should be – not only handsome, but also very good, amiable, and well mannered. He sets everybody at their ease from the first moment. We danced four dances together that night, and he paid me the further compliment of introducing me to his

sisters. Then, for as long as he remained at Netherfield, we saw each other frequently and spent as much time in each other's company as possible. Our familiarity naturally increased and, from his continued attentions, I began to hope – and other people began to expect – that he would soon make me an offer. Instead, he and all his party, which included your brother, went away to London. I was told he had no definite plan of ever returning to Hertfordshire.

“All seemed at an end, and although I endeavored to overcome my low spirits at the likelihood of never seeing Mr. Bingley again, I'm afraid I really was quite miserable. As it turns out, he was as well. Nevertheless, we were kept apart for months by...” Here Jane glanced at Lizzy. “Well, that hardly matters now. In any case, looking back, I see it as a time of testing. No matter how painful the separation, it served to prove the strength of our devotion. Neither of us could forget the other, you see. So, when we next met, there could no longer be any doubt of our mutual attachment. Mr. Bingley quickly came to the point, and we were married shortly thereafter. Now here we are as you see us these many months later.”

I sighed. “Beautiful,” I said, thoroughly captured by Jane's story and the embellishments added by my own imagination. “If I could but marry for love, as you did, and live always near Pemberley, I believe I should be truly happy.”

“That sounds lovely, dear,” said Elizabeth. “Do you

have anyone in mind to play the role of your husband in this charming picture of connubial bliss? Your brother has taken great pains to see to it that you are introduced to suitable young men. Has one of them caught your fancy?"

"Oh, no! Well... not really," I stammered. None of the 'suitable young men' I had been introduced to interested me in the least. I had in mind a less suitable, somewhat older man instead when I continued. "That is to say, there is someone I admire very much, but it would be impossible."

"Do not despair, Georgiana. The most surprising things do occur," Jane encouraged. "Elizabeth and I are examples of that. You know our histories; what seemed out of the question once, ultimately came to pass."

"Yes, and in the meantime, try to keep open to other possibilities," Elizabeth advised, pressing my hand. "Your future happiness may not lie where you think."

## **In the Shrubby**

By Diana Birchall

A carriage and four was heard turning onto the lawn at Longbourn, much to the surprise of the breakfasting party at Longbourn. It was not the time for visitors, and Mr. Bingley had only just walked over to see Jane, who had been his affianced for precisely one week. Mrs. Bennet, craning her head around the window-curtain, to see without being seen, relayed what she saw to her daughters and son-in-law elect.

“Well, I declare, it is not a carriage that is familiar to me. It is not the Longs – or the Gouldings – do you recognize it, Kitty?”

“No, Mama, it is a very fine one though.”

“The livery of the servant, I think, appears to be that of a nobleman. I might find it in the Peerage,” Mary observed.

“There is not time for that,” said Elizabeth impatiently, as the carriage approached the driveway of the house. “You are right, Kitty, the carriage is a handsome one, but the horses are not its equal.”

Mr. Bingley got up and had a look. “Those are post horses,” he observed. “They have been running a long way and appear tired. I wonder at the coachman.”

“It’s a woman in the carriage,” said Jane. “Who can she be?”

“You would best sit down, Kitty,” advised Elizabeth, not wishing to criticize her mother directly. “It is enough to disconcert any visitor, to see a circle of faces peering at her through the window, whoever she is.”

“She must be a rich woman. Only look at the hangings on that carriage!

None of our neighbors has any thing so fine,” said Mrs. Bennet excitedly, still keeping her seat by the window.

A look of internal recognition crossed Bingley’s face, and he took Jane’s hand. “I don’t want to be confined to a formal visit, do you?” he whispered urgently. “Let us go outside in the shrubbery, shall we? Come.”

Jane agreed and they swiftly passed through the kitchen, which connected to a back door, and stepped outside. It was a beautiful golden October morning, and Jane smiled at her intended, as she breathed the fresh-feeling air and looked at the Michaelmas daisies lifting their heads. “What a good thought of yours, Charles,” she said in delight. “You were right. It is so lovely out here, much better than being pent up in the sitting-room, talking to a strange lady, when we can be by ourselves.”

“She is not exactly strange to me – I thought I recognized her,” said Bingley, with a concerned look.

“Really? Then why did you leave? Who is she?”

“I believe it to be Lady Catherine de Bourgh. I had

the honour of meeting her once when I was staying at Pemberley. I am sorry to say it, but I would rather not meet her again.”

Jane looked at him, all astonishment. “Charles! I have never heard you speak so ill of any one before.”

He looked uneasy. “Her manners are not of the sort – She has quite a

condescending dictatorial way about her, and spoke to me as to a tradesman. I did not like her.”

“That is all of a piece with how Lizzy described her, after she saw her at Rosings. But I never thought she was serious. Dear me, Charles, why can Lady Catherine de Bourgh be coming here?”

“That’s the question. What, indeed? And driving in such hot haste of a morning – it is very singular.”

“It is so strange! I do not have the least idea of what could bring her. Are you sure it was she?”

He nodded. “Yes, and I can conjecture what it is about, too.”

“I cannot guess at all. Please tell me, if it is honourable to do so.”

“I will. Now that we are engaged, there can be no secrets between us. Jane, you know that Darcy is in love with Lizzy...”

“Why, yes, we spoke of it. At least, I know he was in love, at one time. She told me of his proposal, last April, and that she had all the pain of having to turn him down. You don’t think – is it possible that he continues to love her?”

“I know he does.”

“Has he – said something to you?”

“Well, it has always been obvious to me that he still cares, but last week, when he confessed to me that he and my sisters knew you were in town last winter, and made his apology for concealing the information, he also hinted at his own feelings and his hopes.”

Jane sat down on a little bench and passed her hands over her eyes. “This is wonderful – this is too much to be believed,” she said. “Mr. Darcy, and my Lizzy!”

“He has no idea whether Lizzy has changed her mind about him, but it is perfectly obvious that he has never lost his feelings for her. I believe he means to try to ascertain her heart. Jane, do you think he has any chance, this time, of succeeding?”

Jane thought for a little while, and shook her head sadly. “Oh, I wish things could be different,” she said, with anguish. “How I would rejoice, if my dear sister could find such happiness as I have done! But you know, I am afraid that she has always disliked poor Mr. Darcy.”

“Any thing but poor,” said Bingley. “But that is what I feared. It is such a pity she has never come to know him as he really is, Jane. Darcy is one of the finest men I have ever met in my life. Clever, upright, kind, charitable – he is everything that is good.”

“She only sees him as proud, I think,” said Jane thoughtfully. “I always felt that she did not give him

enough credit. His friendship for you, and his love of her, would tell me all I need to know about his having a good heart. Your testimony to his character is sufficient; he cannot be as proud and rude a man as she thought him initially. It is all through a series of misunderstandings.”

“If only they could solve their misunderstandings, and come together, as we have done,” said Bingley earnestly, “I believe their minds, and tempers, would complement one another, and be of mutual benefit. I am persuaded that it could be a very happy marriage.”

“I think you may be right,” Jane agreed, “and how happy it would make us, for your dear friend and my dear sister to love one another. But I cannot think it in the least possible.”

“If you, who know your sister’s heart, are so convinced, I am really afraid Darcy has not a chance.”

“But what,” asked Jane, “what can this visit of Lady Catherine be about? Can Darcy’s aunt suspect his partiality for Lizzy?”

“That is my surmise. And if she does, it would be entirely within her character to come and have a stern talk with Elizabeth. I don’t envy your sister the ordeal, if that is what this is all about!”

“If it is Lady Catherine, after all. Remember we are not entirely certain of that yet.”

“Oh, good Lord, Jane – they are walking in the shrubbery – coming directly this way!”

“It *is* Lady Catherine! Dear me. What is she

saying? No, no, we must not listen. Let us go this way, and take care she does not see us.”

Jane drew Bingley into another passage through the winding hedgerows, but they were not fast enough to avoid hearing Lady Catherine’s brazen voice ringing through the shrubbery.

“Obstinate, headstrong girl! I am ashamed of you! Is this your gratitude for my attentions to you last spring? Is nothing due to me on that score?”

Jane shivered with fright. “Oh! How dreadful! How can Lizzy bear it? I am so sorry!”

At a safe distance from the intimidating lady, Bingley reassured Jane with a gentle embrace, but was unable to keep from adding, “What a horrible old Tartar she is!”

Jane looked at him sorrowfully. “This must put an end to any possible hopes we had for Mr. Darcy and Lizzy, however slim they might have been. They can never marry, if Lady Catherine is so angry as she sounds.”

“I fear you are right. Darcy is very careful to obey his aunt. This is too bad, indeed.”

“Yes. I am so sorry. He is the only man I have seen who might make Lizzy happy, and now she has lost that chance,” she said sadly, sinking to a bench seat well hidden by large willows.”

“Perhaps not,” Bingley consoled her. “Remember how much time passed for us, and how many obstacles were in our path, before it all came right, my

dearest Jane. Perhaps Darcy and Elizabeth may overcome their difficulties too.”

“But – Lady Catherine?” asked Jane faintly.

“You are right. There can be no hope, after all. Lady Catherine is a woman who always gets her way,” he answered, regretfully.

## A Jane Bennet Variation

By Abigail Reynolds

*In Pride & Prejudice, after Jane Bennet receives the letter from Caroline Bingley informing her Mr. Bingley is not returning to Netherfield, Elizabeth reflects, "That he [Bingley] was really fond of Jane, she doubted no more than she had ever done; and much as she had always been disposed to like him, she could not think without anger, hardly without contempt, on that easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends, and led him to sacrifice his own happiness to the caprice of their inclinations." Jane, of course, is anxious to find reasons to think well of him, and will hear nothing of it.*

*But I've always wondered -- what if Jane Bennet had another man, one with more backbone, to compare to 'the most amiable man of her acquaintance'? Would she be able to find some anger at Mr. Bingley then? Jane Bennet ended up telling me the answer herself when I wrote Mr. Darcy's Refuge, when she meets Colonel Fitzwilliam, an equally amiable man but one who could stand up for himself in disagreements. She falls in love with him, but believes he is in love with Lizzy. Here's the scene where the details come out,*

*as he is fetching her to London under false pretenses.*

At first Jane had been nervous, perched on the narrow seat of the curricle. She had never ridden in such a stylish vehicle before, nor so far from the ground in an open carriage. But Colonel Fitzwilliam had noticed her discomfort and made a joke about how he felt tiny when he stood beside one of the fashionable high-perch phaetons, and shifted to make more room for her so that she did not have to sit at the edge of the seat. She noticed his skill at handling the team; she was not accustomed to seeing a driver so responsive to his horses.

As always, she found him remarkably easy to converse with. She still could not understand why Lizzy had chosen Darcy over his much more amiable cousin, and wondered, not without guilt, if her sister had made her choice based not on her heart but on the need for one of them to marry well. If Bingley had lived up to her expectations of him, Lizzy would not have had to consider their family's future when making her decision. At least Lizzy did seem genuinely attached to Mr. Darcy, but that could be an act. She would need to see the two of them together to know for certain.

“Since you are aware that Lizzy is in London, I assume Mr. Darcy must be as well. Have they been able to meet?”

“Several times. In fact, there is a confession on

that subject I must make to you.”

Jane’s stomach lurched, and it had nothing to do with the motion of the curricule. She did not want to hear about Colonel Fitzwilliam’s heartbreak at Lizzy’s hands. She could accept that her own romantic fantasies about him were hopeless since he could not afford a woman with her poor prospects, but it was harder to face that he cared for Lizzy more than for her. “I am eager to hear it,” she said politely.

“I am taking you to London under false pretences. While my mother did in fact invite you and Miss Elizabeth to tea, it was only after she discovered that you would be coming anyway. I chose to tell your mother of the invitation as the reason you should be allowed to come with me because my instructions were to fetch you without telling your mother the true cause.”

Jane’s heart began to flutter. “What is the matter? Is Lizzy ill? Or my father?”

“Miss Elizabeth gave me a letter for you which explains the situation.” He withdrew a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to her.

Darting a glance at him, Jane opened the letter and began to read. She gasped when she reached the part about her father’s heart seizure, and she must have turned pale since the colonel placed his hand lightly on her arm and said, “He is better now.”

Not for the first time, she wondered how he could tell so easily what she was thinking. Her eyes hurried

through the rest of the letter. “They are to be married tomorrow?”

“Yes, and Miss Elizabeth very much desires your presence.”

Her first thought, oddly enough, was for the colonel. How this sudden marriage must pain him, yet he had gone out of his way to fetch her and had even been reassuring her when he himself must be in need of comfort! Her earlier envious thoughts were banished now, replaced by a desire to protect him from pain. “Thank you for bringing me,” she said slowly. “I appreciate the efforts you have taken so that I may attend.”

“It is a pleasure and an honor to be of service.” He sounded as if he actually meant it. In a lighter tone he added, “Even if it did require me to indulge in a bit of prevarication with your mother just as she was proclaiming how she knew she could trust me to bring you safely to your uncle’s house.”

She turned a grateful smile on him. “You gave her such delight by making her believe that the Countess of Matlock wished for my presence enough to send her son for me. You may be certain she will be sharing that story with everyone of her acquaintance!”

“I hope the change of plans does not cause you any distress.”

“Not at all!”

“I am glad. You seemed a little subdued, and I supposed you might be disappointed.”

How could she tell him she felt pain on his behalf? “I was taken aback to hear of my father’s heart seizure.”

“Of course.” He looked at her with such sympathy that she felt almost guilty for misleading him.

“I am also a selfish creature, and I find myself sad to be losing my sister’s companionship sooner than I had expected.”

“That is a worry I can help allay. Darcy and your sister plan to spend a month or more at Netherfield so that she can be near your father during his recovery.” He seemed to be watching her very carefully.

The mention of Netherfield did not cause her the pang of distress that it had so often since Mr. Bingley had left. “It is kind of Mr. Bingley to allow them the use of it.” How odd it was – usually she found it difficult to speak his name, but this time it rolled off her tongue without a second thought.

He seemed unusually preoccupied with the horses as he steered them around a slow farm cart. “I understand that Bingley will be returning there soon as well.”

For a moment she could not think at all. She had prayed for so long to hear this news, had longed for it and dreamed about it, and now that it was here, she felt nothing except embarrassment for all the talk and pitying looks that would now begin anew, just when they had started to wane. With Lydia’s disgrace, Mr. Bingley would be that much less likely to seek her out.

He might even start dangling after some other pretty girl who would at least have the advantage of knowing that he would eventually disappoint her hopes. She would not be able to avoid seeing him if Lizzy was living at Netherfield. To her astonishment, she realized she did not want to see him at all, and that distressed her most of all. She looked away from the colonel, pretending interest in the farm they were passing. At least she had the consolation that the colonel did not know what Bingley had meant to her.

With great care, Colonel Fitzwilliam said, "Darcy tells me there is a lady in the vicinity whom Bingley has found himself unable to forget, and whose acquaintance he intends to renew."

"Does he?" The uncharacteristically angry words escaped Jane's lips before she realized what had happened. "I wonder that any lady who had been abandoned so long would be willing to receive him again. I suppose he believes his fortune is enough to gain him forgiveness."

Colonel Fitzwilliam did not appear to be disturbed by her outburst. In fact, he seemed to be smiling, or at least as much as he could while tunelessly whistling. "Many ladies would tolerate a great deal for a fortune such as his."

She could not understand him. Was he laughing at her? She took care to speak in her normal, calm voice when she said, "Perhaps some might think it naïve of me, but I believe that true affection and respect are

worth more than the largest income. Is something the matter, Colonel? You have gone quite pale.”

His pallor was belied by his expression as he beamed at her. “I am quite well, thank you! I am merely suffering from an unaccountable urge to spring the horses, but I will not subject you to that.”

Pleased to see him cheerful again, she said recklessly, “Why not? Is it too dangerous?”

He smiled broadly. “You do not mind if I spring the horses? It is not dangerous, at least not on such a good road. The horses are very well trained.”

“I cannot say if I will mind, as it is something far from my experience, but I will never know if I do not try it.” She could not understand what had happened to her normal reticence.

“In that case, you might wish to hold onto the rail.”

Obediently she leaned forward and gripped it with both hands. “Very well, you may do your worst, sir!”

He hesitated. “Will you tell me immediately if you find it at all unpleasant?” At her nod of agreement, he shook the reins. As the horses shifted in unison to a smooth canter, the curricule surged forward.

The wind whistled past Jane’s ears. It was an odd but exhilarating sensation to hurtle along at such a speed with no enclosing carriage. The countryside almost seemed to blur beside them, but her attention was captured by the colonel’s intent expression as he drove, shifting the reins slightly from time to time, the team responding instantly to his instructions. Despite

their speed, she did not doubt his command of the situation.

He reined the horses in as they came up behind a plodding stagecoach, deftly veering around it and onto the clear road ahead at a trot. "Well?" he said. His hair was becomingly tousled and his expression was boyish.

"It might be a bit much for everyday, but there is something pleasing about it. You drive beautifully. I was not in the least bit frightened."

His expression of satisfaction warmed her heart. He said, "Thank you. Darcy's team is a pleasure to drive. I have none so fine. Actually, I do not own a team at all, just my horse, but he has bravely carried me through several battles, so I cannot complain."

"Carrying you to safety seems of greater value than the ability to race along the highway in a fashionable equipage."

"Ah, but the fashionable equipage is enjoyable, is it not? Still, one can live without it. Tell me, Miss Bennet, would you consider an offer from a gentleman with little to offer except his affection and respect?"

Jane's heart slammed against her ribs. She could not possibly have understood his question correctly. He was in love with her sister, and Lizzy had told her that the colonel needed to marry an heiress. How could he be offering for her? Or was her heart hearing only what she desired in a question that had been

meant innocently? That must have been the case. The disappointment was bitter. It was exactly calculated to make her understand her own wishes, even though they were in vain.

But she intended to keep the colonel's respect, so she put on the calm face she employed to disguise distress. "Is that a theoretical question, Colonel?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. "For the moment, yes. After all, your father has made quite clear his opinion of gentlemen who offer for his daughters without speaking to him first. Fortunately, I know precisely where to find him."

Heat seemed to pour through her, and Jane was certain her cheeks must be scarlet. She looked down to hide the incredulous smile that insisted on showing itself. "But you hardly know me."

"Do you recall the day we met, and you walked with me through the gardens to the wilderness beside your house? By the time we left that wilderness, I felt I had known you all my life. When we danced together at that assembly, I realized that I found more pleasure in one of your smiles than I could recall experiencing in a day spent with any other lady." He paused, then began again, his voice rough. "Despite my profession, I am not a violent man. But when I learned Bingley intended to return to Hertfordshire, I wanted to run him through. That was when I first knew what it would cost me to see you married to another man."

"Yet you were the one to tell me of his return."

“Of course. I would not attempt to secure you under false pretenses. You deserve to know that you have a choice, especially since he has so much more to offer than I do.”

“I beg to differ.” And she looked up at him with her heart in her eyes.

## The Proposal

BY Susan Mason Milks

*I like to imagine that rather than Mr. Bingley proposing to Jane Bennet in the family drawing room, they instead strolled into the garden. There under blue skies, he finally asked the question she had been waiting and hoping for.*

Several days of cold rain fell, keeping Charles Bingley confined to Netherfield. He had visited Longbourn almost daily since his return to Hertfordshire, and each day strengthened his opinion that Jane Bennet would make the perfect wife for him. When would this infernal rain stop? The longer he had to wait, the more he feared he would not be able to express himself as eloquently as she deserved. At last, after three miserable days of pacing the drawing room at his home, the skies cleared, and he hastened to Longbourn for what he thought might just be the most important day of his life.

After handing off his hat and gloves to one of the servants, he was shown to the drawing room where he was greeted by Mrs. Bennet who fussed over his comfort.

“You must sit in this chair, Mr. Bingley. It is by far the most comfortable in the room. Mr. Bennet prefers it when he joins us,” she said.

Jane kept her eyes modestly cast down, but he thought he noticed her glance his way several times. Her cheeks were slightly pink which he took as a sign she was affected by his presence.

“These are just from the oven,” Mrs. Bennet said, proudly as she offered him a plate of fragrant biscuits.

Jane quietly fixed his tea. He was inordinately pleased she remembered exactly how he liked it, with more sugar than most people found agreeable. Although eating anything, even Mrs. Bennet’s delicious biscuits, was difficult given the constriction in his throat, he managed two just to be polite, washing them down with tea.

“And how are your sisters? Will they be joining you at Netherfield?” asked Mrs. Bennet.

“I have written to Caroline and asked her to join me as soon as possible. With my sister in residence, I will finally be able to repay your family for all the hospitality you have shown me in the past few weeks.”

“Oh, Mr. Bingley, how delightful! We shall look forward to it most eagerly, will we not girls? Your sister is an excellent hostess.”

She continued in this vein for several minutes, praising everything from the quality of the food served in his home to the heavy damask curtains in the drawing room at Netherfield. Several times, he attempted to respond, but apparently he was not required to speak at all, merely to listen and nod his head from time to time. Bingley set his cup aside and

waited patiently for an opportunity to speak. Finally, she paused to take a breath.

“Mrs. Bennet, I wonder if I might take Miss Bennet out into the garden this morning briefly for a private word?”

Upon hearing “private word,” Mrs. Bennet sprang into action. She not only granted his request but practically shoved them out the door.

Once outside, Bingley was again at a loss for words. To cover his discomfort he began to ask Jane questions about the foliage in the garden. She looked puzzled but responded politely.

After several minutes, she said, “I know you are enjoying the garden, Mr. Bingley, but if I may be so bold, I believe you have something quite different on your mind.” She laid a gentle hand on his arm.

Bingley felt the warmth from her hand through the superfine of his coat. “How is it you know me so well, Miss Bennet?”

Jane responded with a shy smile. “Surely, you are aware whatever you are thinking is clearly written upon your face?”

Bingley blushed and then grinned. He captured Jane’s hand and brought it to his lips.

“My mother always said that about me. It was very inconvenient as a child because I could never get away with even the tiniest falsehood to cover my wrongdoings. She always knew exactly what I was thinking.”

They both laughed. Jane motioned to a bench under an old tree, and they settled there side by side. Again, Bingley felt the tension building as he struggled to find the words he wanted to say. Uncomfortable with the silence and still grasping for the courage to speak, he jumped up and began to pace.

“Miss Bennet, I do not have the facility with words that some gentlemen do, nor will I ever be eloquent at expressing myself about the things that are the most important to me.”

Jane kept her eyes on her hands, which were folded in her lap. After ranging back and forth for a minute, he returned to sit beside her, taking her hands in his.

“I never stopped thinking about you,” he said quietly.

“And I never forgot you.”

“No one could ever be as lovely or as sweet as you. I have come to the conclusion that my life would not be complete without you in it. My dear sweet Jane, I love you most ardently. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Jane felt heat rising inside her and knew she must be red from her toes to the top of her head. Continuing to keep her eyes on their joined hands, she did not know whether to laugh or cry. She could not seem to connect her brain and her mouth to form a reply. When she said nothing, Bingley continued

anxiously, filling the silence.

“I confess when we first met, I was taken with your angelic beauty, but as I spent more time with you, I began to realize there is much more to you. Your inner light, your grace, your kindness, only serve to magnify the beauty of your face. In fact, the two are so intertwined and complimentary, well, I...” he faltered. “I am making a mess of this, Miss Bennet. Let me just say you far outshine any other woman I have ever met. Please, make me the happiest of men and accept my hand.”

Jane smiled and squeezed his hand.

“I think you are quite eloquent, and I liked it better a moment ago when you called me ‘Jane’.”

“Oh, Jane, my Jane,” he whispered, raising her hand to his lips. “Please say ‘yes.’”

When she finally found the courage to look up at him, she was struck by how the blue of his eyes was so like the color of the sky that day. They were very similar to her own, and she happily envisioned a stair step of children all with the same blue eyes. “Mr. Bingley, there is nothing in the world that would make me happier than to be your wife.”

Simultaneously, they each took a deep breath and then began to laugh. When he put an arm around her, she laid her head on his shoulder. To her delight, she felt him kiss the top of her head, and then gently tilting her face up, he touched his lips to hers. “Oh, Jane,” he sighed, pulling her more closely against him.

“I have thought of you as “my Jane” for a some time now, but I did not dare to hope you would forgive me for not returning to Hertfordshire last autumn as I promised.”

“I have said many times you are forgiven. Besides, it is not in my nature to hold a grudge.”

He smiled. “No, it is not and for that I am eternally thankful. I cannot believe you accepted me after I made such a mess of my proposal.”

“Your proposal was perfect. There was really only one word I heard over the clamor of the blood rushing through my ears and that was ‘love.’ You said you loved me. That was all I needed to hear.”

Jane laid her head on his shoulder and breathed in the earthy scent from the garden as it mingled with his spicy cologne. At last, she was being rewarded for her unwavering belief in him.

“I could sit here with you forever, but I believe it is time for me to speak to your father.”

Although Mr. Bennet did not think Mr. Bingley had the most discerning mind, he was certainly one of the most pleasant young men he had ever met, and he was raised in Mr. Bennet’s estimation when he chose Jane as his wife. Mr. Bennet was certain Mr. Bingley was perfect match for Jane’s gentle temperament. As a father, he was very pleased to know that Jane would be so happily settled.

## **An Interview with Miss Jane Bennet**

by Jack Caldwell

**JACK CALDWELL:** Hello, everyone—Jack Caldwell here. It is Jane Bennet in January time here at Austen Variations. Therefore, this lady is the perfect guest to be in my studio outside of time and space. Let's have a warm welcome for everyone's favorite sister from *Pride and Prejudice*—Miss Jane Bennet.

**JANE BINGLEY:** Thank you, Mr. Caldwell. You are very kind to invite me.

**MRS. BENNET:** Oh, yes, very kind! Very kind, indeed!

**JC:** Thank you, ladies. Err... you do understand the invitation was for Miss Bennet.

**MRS. B:** Oh, yes, and if I may say so, it is high time you had my darling daughter here. Carry on, Mr. Caldwell, conduct your interview.

**JB:** My mother wished to accompany me, you see.

**MRS. B:** You will forget I am here. I shall be a quiet as a mouse.

**JC:** And you couldn't say no.

**MRS. B:** Not here. Not here at all!

**JB:** It made her so happy to come.

**JC:** And you're all about making people happy, or that's what Jane Austen leads us to believe. Which brings me to my first question: Miss Bennet, are you as nice as *Pride and Prejudice* suggests?

**MRS. B:** Of course she is! Besides, she is Mrs. Bingley

now!

JC: I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bingley.

JB: It is quite all right. As for your inquiry, I do not know how to properly respond. I treat people well, as we are taught. It is not artifice, I assure you.

JC: Some readers—and writers, I may add—think you can be Pollyannaish at times, particularly when it comes to Caroline Bingley and George Wickham.

MRS. B: What does my son-in-law have to do with this?

JB: It is my nature to assume the best in people, not the worst. It is not foolishness but an attempt to act as a Christian should. However, I am not a Pollyanna. I admit I was deceived by my sister Caroline, and while she has apologized for her actions and I have forgiven her, I cannot forget her transgression. I wish I could fully trust her, but that is beyond me.

MRS. B: Who is this Pollyanna girl, and what connection is she to my Jane? Who is she to us?

JB: I shall explain later, Mama. As for Mr. Wickham, I believe I shall reserve comment on my brother-in-law.

MRS. B: Dear Wickham! So gallant! So handsome! It is a shame he and my dear Lydia are so far in the North! If only my son Darcy would do more for them.

JC: Getting back to the subject at hand, do you deny you are a perfect angel as some have stated, Mrs. Bingley?

MRS. B: Do not tell Mr. Darcy I said that, I pray you! He gets very annoyed when I speak of Wickham.

JB: Angel! Charles is too kind.

JC: Are you aware not all authors in the Jane Austen genre write you as an angelic Jane? Some question your motivations. You appear in their works as vain, selfish, and conniving.

JB: I cannot say I like it, but you authors are all-powerful.

MRS. B: Rubbish! All rubbish!

JC: Just for the record, I like you as the kind-to-a-fault counterpoint to the somewhat cynical Elizabeth.

JB: Dear Lizzy! Yes, at times she can appear judgmental. She means well and has a good heart.

MRS. B: I always said Lizzy was too impertinent by half. Thank goodness Mr. Darcy married her anyway. Not that there is anything amiss with my dear Mrs. Darcy, mind you! Or Mr. Darcy, for that matter. So refined, so charming! So rich! I am exceedingly proud of her, and Mr. Darcy is as fine a son-in-law as Mr. Bingley.

JC: By the way, Mrs. Bingley, just what do you see in Bingley?

MRS. B: Sir! How dare you!

JB: Mama—

MRS. B: I will have you know Mr. Bingley is worth five thousand pounds a year! Five thousand, sir!

JB: Mama, it is a perfectly legitimate question.

MRS. B: Well, I am insulted, I can tell you.

JB: There is much to be said for my husband, sir. I always wished to marry for affection. Charles is

everything I wished for in my life's companion.

MRS. B: Yes, his five thousand a year!

JB: Mama! I am fortunate Charles is comfortably situated, but I did not marry him for his money. He is exactly the good, amiable, and well-mannered gentleman I always dreamed of marrying.

JC: Even though he was convinced of your indifference when you first met in Hertfordshire?

MRS. B: WHAT?!

JB: That is true. However, that is all in the past, and we are perfectly happy.

MRS. B: Who did it? Who told such lies? Tell me their names!

JC: You are very forgiving about that, Mrs. Bingley, given the pain it caused you.

MRS. B: It was Lady Lucas, I suspect! Always she has been jealous of my girls!

JB: My heart was utterly broken. I thought I should never marry. But now, in my present joy, I am well acquainted with the motivations of... those involved. I am satisfied.

MRS. B: Or perhaps it was Mrs. Long. One must watch out for the quiet ones!

JB: My life today could not be fuller, married to a wonderful gentleman who loves and respects me.

MRS. B: And I never liked Mrs. Goulding.

JC: Aren't you a bit concerned that your husband might be too obliging? Too willing to follow other people's advice?

JB: Charles is naturally modest, but so am I. Still, we have both learned much in our time together. We are much less obliging than one might think. Of course we seek out my brother Darcy's guidance as the need arises. His advice is uniformly excellent—[SHE LOWERS HER VOICE]—well, mostly.

JC: I get it. So Bingley is safe from influence?

JB: I would not say that. Though, if a wife is clever, she has her own methods of persuasion.

MRS. B: I taught my girls well, did I not?

JB: Mama!

JC: *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted for film several times. Some of the actresses that have portrayed you were Maureen O'Sullivan, Sabina Franklyn, Susannah Harker, Rosamund Pike, and Namrata Shirodkar. Do you have a personal favorite?

JB: All the ladies are quite lovely. I cannot choose among them.

JC: Somehow I knew you'd say that.

MRS. B: Who is that last lady? That name sound very exotic!

JC: How 'bout Bingles? You've got your choice of Osmund Bullock, Crispin Bonham-Carter, Simon Woods, or Naveen Andrews.

JB: My goodness! All very handsome gentlemen! Although, I must say that Mr. Andrews is quite... striking.

MRS. B: The... the fourth gentleman? But dear, he is not... is not... English!

JB: Yum.

JC: Does that matter?

MRS. B: Of course it does!

JC: Oh really? Let's see what the films did to you, madam.

MRS. B: Me?

JC: Yep. Here are Priscilla Morgan, Alison Steadman, Brenda Blethyn, and Nadira Babbar.

MRS. B: OH MY GOD! That last lady is a—

JC: Don't say it. This is a family-friendly website.

MRS. B: My nerves! My nerves! Jane, my salts! Quickly now!

JB: Here they are, Mama.

MRS. B: Such palpitations in my heart! I feel so ill!

JC: Thank you, Mrs. Bingley. Until next time, I'm Jack Caldwell of The Cajun Cheesehead Chronicles.

JB: By the way, Mr. Caldwell, can you provide Mr. Andrew's direction? I would be ever so obliged.

JC: Okay... maybe not such an angel, after all.

## **Jane and Colonel Fitzwilliam?**

By Maria Grace

*In 'Remember the Past', Jane found love, not with Bingley, but with Col. Fitzwilliam. A few scenes got cut from the final project, but they live on here, for your enjoyment.*

Richard Fitzwilliam trudged upstairs to his chambers. How close had they come to tragedy? He had reconciled himself to it on the battlefield but had deceived himself in Pemberley's safety far too long. He dropped into his favorite chair and scoured his face with his hands. Life was too fragile and too short. He had delayed far too many things far too long. Darcy made his complacency too easy, but no more.

The fragrance of honeysuckle wafted through the room. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Funny how that scent soothed the depths of his being and righted his world. A gentle touch on his shoulder coaxed him to open his eyes.

"Fitzwilliam." Her voice caressed his name, wanton and proper all at the same moment.

A familiar frisson coursed through him, lingering potently with her nearness. He opened his eyes.

She stood beside him, looking down with that look she reserved just for him.

He pulled her into his lap.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and

nestled into his shoulder. "You smell like horse."

He threw his head back and laughed a soul cleansing laugh. "Oh, Janie, you always know what I need."

"It is hard to believe they are all returned and well," she whispered.

"It is. I am still surprised a broken arm is the worst of it, considering all that might have been."

She shuddered. "Lizzy has just gone to see Papa. I think they shall mend their bridges."

"About bloody time! The hard headed—"

"Yes, I know." She laughed the tired half laugh-half sigh she used when she did not want to admit her weariness. "You should be glad I am not nearly as stubborn as either of them"

"I am certain I shall count my blessings for that." He pressed his forehead to hers. "And for so many other things."

"Is this finished now?"

"Not yet." He grated his teeth and shook his head. "Piper has sent men out to find him."

"You think they will succeed this time?"

"Yes."

"Why? What has changed?"

"I had a very long talk with the boys on the way here from Alston. From Philip's account, Wickham is very ill indeed."

"And when they catch him?"

"They will bring him here."

She gulped. “Then what?”

“I am not sure. It is for Darcy and the Admiral to decide.”

“I am sure Darcy will be far more inclined to mercy than Papa,” she craned her neck to look at him, “or you.”

“No doubt. Given my druthers—”

“I do not like it. They do not need more conflict between them.”

“I know my dear. But I have no desire to think about that now.” He pulled her a little closer and pressed his face into her hair. Honeysuckle and sunshine, so warm and close. Frayed nerves gave way to a new, and far more pleasing, tension.

He kissed her forehead, down her temple, her cheek, until he found her lips. Sweet, warm and welcoming, she received him with increasing vigor. For all her quiet propriety, a stream of passion ran within and bubbled up to greet him. She yielded to his hand at the small of her back, pressing her softness into the planes of his chest.

He should stop now, should right her to her feet, and should be concerned for someone walking in on them. But here and now, after all that occurred that day, ‘should’ mattered very little. Gaping, ragged places in his heart screamed for comfort Jane alone could provide.

He was no Darcy, nor ever would be, but the woman who trailed kisses up his jaw to that spot

behind his ear, the one that made him forget everything but her—she did not ask him to be Darcy or an earl's son. She esteemed him for himself alone. Aching emptiness gnawed within, a hunger demanding to be filled.

He found her lips again.

Her hand glided down his chest to his side and the sharp crest of his hip as she met his kisses with her own. Did she know what her touch did to him? Would she stop if she did?

“Janie, I must know, are you disappointed in me—that I did not find—”

She jumped backwards and nearly fell out of his lap. “Richard Edward Hubert Fitzwilliam!”

Surprisingly strong hands grabbed his ears. “If I ever hear you say something so stupid again, I swear to you I shall box these ears of yours so hard you will—”

He took her wrists and pulled her hands away. “What did I say so wrong?”

She dropped her feet to the floor and stood, hands on her hips, towering over him, a picture of righteous indignation. “You know very well—do not play the fool with me.”

“I have no idea what you are so upset about.”

She huffed, turned on her heel and stalked to the door. It shut with a soft click, immediately drowned out by the angry steps as she stomped back.

“Have you so conveniently forgotten? We have

after all had this conversation not just once, but several time before. I would like very much never to have it again." Her lips flashed up in a thin smile, the one that always portended her sharpest tone. "Though I highly doubt I will be so fortunate."

He hauled himself to his feet. "What are you going on about?"

"I am tired of hearing you compare yourself to Darcy and anyone else you make out to be somehow better, richer or more accomplished than yourself. I simply will not have any more of it."

"But—"

"No—no more excuses. Would you have me go on and on as to how I cannot hold a candle to my fiery sister—neither in the eyes of society nor my father?" She turned her back and paced the length of the room. "I am handsome enough, I suppose—but lack the sparkle and wit she possesses. Papa tries—has always tried—to be fair and not to favor any one of his children, but it is clear he understands neither Philip nor I. Lizzy and Francis are so like him, he cannot help but be more sympathetic toward them."

She turned and faced him again. Her eyes—oh her eyes! They were not angry as her posture would have suggested, but so very, very vulnerable.

What had he done?

"Shall I wave that as my standard before you? Remind you as to how you are settling for second best? Constantly belittle myself for being who

I am, not someone and something else. Tell me— you were the one who played at swords with my sister – were you not tempted by a woman with so much—”

“Stop it!” He strode to her, boots clomping loud on the hardwood floor. He took her shoulders in his hands and gripped them tightly, arms trembling, restraining the desire to shake her. He dragged her to him, kissed her hard, and crushed her into himself. Anger and passion blended, his hands claimed her as his own.

The softness of her curves yielded to the strength of his arms. No doubt she would deny him nothing in this moment. Her need to be desired matched his own, kindred souls completing one another.

“She never tempted me. You must believe that. I enjoyed her playfulness with the boys, but she could never understand me as you do. I have never, will never long for her. Only you dearest, only you.”

She pulled back and met his gaze. “Then stop comparing yourself to Darcy. I want you, not him. You proved your gallantry when you went to look for the boys. Who found them was a matter of luck. You would have laid down your life for them, just as they did and you are not even father to them. Does not that make you even more the hero?” She pressed her hand to his chest. “I know your heart, Fitzwilliam , and that is what I love.”

A strangled cry even he could not decipher tore from his throat as he devoured her waiting, tempting

lips. She lost her balance and clutched at him, one hand at his lapel, the other—dear God!—two hand spans lower than his waist.

Desire—ragged and raw—surged through him, throbbing, aching for its completion. He forced his eye open to see his longings mirrored in hers. They were betrothed, Only a date need yet be set. No one else would know.

But he would.

He steadied her on her feet and pressed her cheek to his chest. “I dare not continue. I want you too badly.”

“I—”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “I know and I treasure that more than I have words to speak. But I will not anticipate our vows. You are too valuable to me for that. Not to mention, I could not look your father or Darcy in the eye again if I did.”

“You are right. Papa would be disappointed—”

“To put it mildly. But let us set a date for our own happiness. My solicitor works on the papers for the estate even now. We need not wait until they are finished, though. There is a house I found in town we can let until the estate is ready for us.”

“I would like that very much.” She exhaled hard and smiled up at him.

Had she any idea how difficult she made his decision when she did that? He drew her close and rested his chin on her head.

“I would also like it very much if you had a bath.  
You still smell like horse.”

They laughed heartily, the sound of a future being  
born.

## 50 Shades of Jane

By L.L. Diamond .

As he raised his hand to knock, Charlie's eyes roved up to the carved and painted shackles adorning a flat stone placard overhead and the small plaque by the door that read "gaolhouse." When Jane mentioned she lived in the old jailhouse, it had been a joke, hadn't it? Well, he assumed she was having a bit of fun, yet here he was.

He shook his head. He was being ridiculous. People lived in all sorts of places in England—renovated barns, old churches, and apparently, even jails.

He shook off his initial shock and bounced on his toes, gripping the bottle of wine clasped in one hand and the lilies he held in the other. He'd met Jane Bennet at the leisure centre a few weeks ago. She'd been leaving the spin class when he bumped into her on the way to the weight room, but his clumsiness prompted a conversation, then coffee, then dinner, and so on.

Most of his friends liked to joke about the obligatory third date, yet Jane was different—he didn't want to rush things; however, it was now three weeks and she'd invited him to dinner at her house. Oh yeah, no doubt about it! He gave an extra bounce on his toes. He was going to get lucky tonight!

The door flew open, making him start, but Jane's angelic face calmed his nerves. "Charlie! I'm so glad you could make it!"

Her wide smile accented her delicate features as he handed her the flowers. Why was he always speechless in her presence? When he didn't say anything, she giggled and pulled him inside, closing the door behind him.

Fine, golden-blond hair brushed her shoulders as she sashayed past an antique jailhouse door. He did a double take. A jailhouse door? He halted in his tracks and stared where a small trap door, built into the middle, once served to pass food or possibly other items.

"Charlie?"

His eyes shot up to where she stood a few feet away. "Oh! Isn't it great! It's from the original prison. Look!" With an ease that showed her experience, she pulled the pins turned whatever knobs required to open the panel and closed it again.

She took the bottle of wine and gestured towards a passage with her head. "Let's open this while I finish dinner. I hope you like stew."

"I do." He cleared his throat. "I like it very much." His eyes glanced back to the knobby panel then wandered around the welcoming living room as he followed. Glass shelves were encased within square columns and a niche with bookshelves fit under the stairs, containing an enormous collection of books.

Jane must be quite the reader.

They stepped through a short doorway into the kitchen, and he paused. With a lift of his chin, he traced the two windows on the opposite wall up towards the high ceiling, but his eyes came to a sudden stop on a black metal object hanging on the wall.

“Are those shackles?”

“They are.”

The sound of a slight pop prompted him to look in her direction. She poured a glass of wine, and held it out for him. Once he'd taken it, she took a sip from her own glass. Her eyes popped wider. “Would you like a tour?”

His eyes darted back to the metal restraints bolted to the plaster. Suck it up, Bingley! She's not a freak! She's sweet Jane. Docile Jane. The girl you've been fantasizing over for the last few weeks!

“Yes,” he blurted. “I'd love one.” Her soft hand took his and led him into the dining room, which had a large brick fireplace on one wall and a window on the other.

“Do you live here alone?” Good question! Small talk would be excellent right now—something to lighten the mood.

“I share the place with my sister, Lizzy.” She smiled as she bit her bottom lip. “But Lizzy is in London for the next two days for work.”

He took a large swig of wine as the blood began to

course through his veins. They were alone, and would be all night long!

She pointed to the brickwork, calling his attention back to her. "This was originally outside, but we enclosed it to make it a part of the house."

The antique brick of that wall gave the room a sophisticated old world meets new feel. "Does the fire work?"

"Unfortunately, no, but I want to put candles in the grate. I think it would look pretty."

A simple wood table sat in the middle of the room with a wood bowl centred upon the top. The light fixture...

"Jane, is that barbed wire?" His voice cracked, and he coughed.

She nodded. "It is. Lizzy has an artist friend who made it for us. Isn't it lovely?"

With a tug, she turned him back towards the kitchen. He happened to peer up. Dear Lord! A ball and chain hung over the passage between the dining room and the kitchen! His foot caught something, so he looked down to a glass panel in the floor. "What is that?"

"Oh! That was a passage where people could throw money or food down to the dungeon for the prisoners."

His mouth went dry. Prisoners? She was so upbeat when she spoke of this, as if nothing were strange about it in the slightest.

She turned and gave him a quick kiss to the lips. “Just wait until I show you the dungeon. I think you’ll love it best of all.”

He swallowed a lump in his throat. She wanted to take him to the dungeon? What kind of woman was he dating? It wasn’t a red room like in *that* book was it? Oh God! Could sweet, feminine Jane be a dominatrix? His palms began to sweat and his heartbeat thundered in his ears. He liked to experiment in the bedroom, but pain was out of the question! His butt cheeks clenched.

His eyes roved the edges of the glass in the floor. Was there a handle? Would she lock him down there and use the panel as a trap door to throw him food?

“Charlie?” His attention snapped back to her. “Perhaps we should eat. You’re behaving a bit spacey.”

“I need the bathroom?”

Her brow furrowed. “Off the laundry room behind you.”

He hurried back through the dining room as she began dishing stew into bowls. Walk, Charlie, walk!

“By the way, the artwork in there was not my idea! Lizzy thought it was a riot to have articles and advertising for Thomas Crapper in the toilet!”

Once the door was shut behind him, he leaned against it. Thomas Crapper artwork? That was the least of his problems!

Where had he gone wrong? Perhaps he should run for it. With a groan, he rubbed his face. The problem

was he really liked Jane, but what if she was some sort of deviant. He shuddered. He'd stick it out. They'd have dinner, and he would discover for certain whether she was into anything out of the ordinary.

His trembling hand took out his mobile; he pressed one of the last numbers called.

“I thought you had a date.”

He turned and faced the wall. Maybe she wouldn't hear him if he whispered! “Darcy! Thank God! You have to help me!”

“Charlie, you've had sex before. Don't tell me you need me to remind you how...”

“No!”

“Then...”

“Just shut your gob and listen. I arrived at Jane's tonight to find she lives in an old gaol, complete with shackles and a ball and chain hanging on the wall!”

He looked down to the toilet and whimpered. Was that barbed wire encased in a clear acrylic toilet seat?

“And the barbed wire!”

A strangled, strange noise came from the Darcy. “What was that?”

Darcy snorted, and Charlie gasped. “You're laughing at me!”

“No, I promise...”

Charlie didn't hear the rest because he hit the end button. He wiped the sweat from his brow and scanned the small room. There was a window! His shoulders dropped. He was a coward, but not that

much of a coward.

He had to end the evening. Jane couldn't be led to believe that he would accept being treated in such a way. An image of a black leather-clad Jane appeared before his eyes. Maybe...

No! No pain! He would not be whipped, gagged, bound or whatever she had planned. He was leaving!

With a heavy heart, he stepped back into the dining room. He was going home. A knot formed in his gut as he watched her work before the stove. How was he supposed to know that underneath that innocent peaches and cream complexion and floral attire hid a BDSM sex queen? She hid it so well. Who could've guessed?

"I'm sorry, but I need to go."

Jane whipped around from the stove, and a line formed between her eyebrows. "Are you ill?"

He cleared his throat. "I just feel rather poorly all of a sudden."

"I wish you didn't have to leave?" Her hand reached up and fiddled with the collar of her form-fitting, V-neck top, prompting his eyes to trace down her figure to her knee-length flowered skirt and bare legs. He didn't want to leave, but then he did. Perhaps being her toy wouldn't be so bad? No, pain was not an option! After all, he had sensitive skin.

He had to get out of here!

She grabbed his hand. "At least let me show you the dungeon first." Her fingers wrapped his in a tight

grip as she led him through the house and descended a black metal spiral staircase. As they made their way down, the air became that musty dusty smell found in really old structures and it became colder.

He was going to die! Why didn't he pry his hand from her and run screaming for the front door? There was a pub down the road—surely someone would hear his cries for help.

When he stepped foot on the solid stone floor, he took a deep breath, glanced around and frowned. This was no sex torture chamber! Stark white walls contrasted against the original wooden beams in the ceiling. A wooden wine rack was built into one part of the wall and held two bottles cork down in their slots.

He released her hand and stepped around the corner where two decorative barrels sat in a corner and a glass box containing...

“Those are where the original shackles were attached to the floor in here and a chain would've hooked them to the irons on the prisoner. There is also one in that room. She pointed behind her. Lizzy and I found them when we dug out the basement.”

Once he'd examined the entire chamber, he walked back to where they entered. Sure enough, there was another glass box with an ancient looking metal chain attached to the floor.

He stood stock-still and looked about him. “This is the dungeon?”

Jane crossed her arms over her chest. “Charlie,

what is wrong with you tonight?”

“Huh?”

“You are behaving such a strange manner. I...”

“You live in an old jail.” His tone was rather accusatory and her eyebrows rose on her forehead.

“I went to uni for history. What subject do I teach, Charlie?”

He shrugged. “History.”

“This building dates back to the twelfth century and has original irons, gaol door, and brickwork that was added over time. All of this is historical. There was even a famous prisoner here once. I can show you the book about him upstairs.”

He was an idiot! Charlie squirmed and began kicking his toe against the ground in front of him. He would have to confess it all. She would be upset. No, she would be livid.

“It was just the shackles and the ball and chain hanging from the wall upstairs, and the barbed wire... and you have a dungeon.”

Sweet, demure Jane’s eyebrows drew together for a moment before her eyes bulged, and she dissolved into gales of laughter. “You thought I had a torture room?” An unladylike snort escaped her nose.

“I’m a complete prat!”

Once again she took his hand and led him up the spiral staircase and then the stairs in the parlour to the first floor. When they entered a feminine and frilly bedroom, Jane turned, put two hands on his chest,

and backed him up until his calves hit the edge of the bed frame. A gentle push was all she required to put him flat on his back upon the mattress.

She climbed astride his hips and pushed his hands over his head, pinning them in place. “I’m not into whips or bondage. If I’m in a take charge sort of mood, this is what you can expect.”

He cleared his throat as his heart pounded against his ribs and his trousers became tight. “I have no objections.”

A wide grin adorned her face as she leaned down to press a kiss to his lips. Her hands moved to his chest, and his fingers found the velvet flesh of her thigh, itching to trace his way to the swell of her hip. Jane placed a suckling kiss just under his ear, and he groaned.                   Dinner                   could                   wait!

A few hours passed before they ate the stew Jane had prepared, which was rather dry from sitting on the hob for so long, but Charlie would swear until his last breath that it was the best stew he’d ever eaten. Breakfast the next morning was even better.

## What If Jane Spoke Her Mind?

By Susan Mason Milks

*I have often wondered what Jane and Mr. Bingley talked about when they were alone. Austen gives us so few clues. Also, what if Jane resolved to be bolder in trying to straighten out the misunderstandings between them when he returned to Hertfordshire after nearly a year of silence.*

“Mr. Darcy is not with you today,” Mrs. Bennet observed after Mr. Bingley arrived at Longbourn alone.

“He had business in town. I am not certain when or if he will return,” Mr. Bingley informed them.

Jane watched her sister Elizabeth’s face, but saw no hint that would give away her thoughts on the matter. For her part, Mrs. Bennet looked smugly pleased, and plunged into bringing their guest up to date on the latest Meryton gossip. Mr. Bingley listened politely and inquired about the health of their mutual acquaintances in the community. When she insisted he join the family for supper that evening, he eagerly agreed. From time to time, he turned to smile at Jane, but she tried to keep her face calm and serene.

Jane let her mother carry the conversation while

she allowed her mind to roam over the questions that had been plaguing her for the better part of the past year. Why had Mr. Bingley not returned to Netherfield last autumn after promising to do so? Why he had not called on her when she was in town over the winter? And most importantly, what did he mean by suddenly appearing at Longbourn after such a long period of silence?

She knew she should guard her heart, but it was difficult when he turned that charming smile on her. How could she be certain this was something more than just a way for him to pass the time while in the country as it appeared he had done a year ago?

After visiting with the Longbourn ladies for about a quarter hour, Mr. Bingley asked permission to escort Jane for a walk into Meryton.

“A walk into town sounds like a lovely idea,” cooed Mrs. Bennet. “Kitty, run along and chaperon your sister and Mr. Bingley. I would go myself, you understand, but I must confer with the cook about our supper this evening. I am so pleased you have agreed to join us, Mr. Bingley.”

Jane excused herself and went up to her room briefly to retrieve her gloves, bonnet, and reticule before they walked out. As she descended the stairs, she heard the hum of voices drifting out from the sitting room. There were the higher tones of her mother and sisters’ voices, and the lower pitched sound of his, which sent warmth through her. How

she had missed him!

Once outside, Mr. Bingley offered his arm, and she carefully placed her gloved hand lightly upon it. Yes, she remembered how this felt—the strength of his arm, the security of his guiding her. She wanted to trust him again, but even her open, trusting heart was finding it difficult. Each time she saw him, however, a little more of her wariness dissolved.

At first, he talked about mundane things, the change in the weather and the scones he'd been served that day. Gradually, their pace slowed, and after a short time, Kitty had moved far enough ahead that she would not be able to hear them talking.

Jane was just gathering her courage to speak, when Mr. Bingley blurted out, "Please forgive me for being so forward, Miss Bennet, but something has been on my mind for some time. I am just not certain where or how to begin."

Jane's heart sank. He was going to tell her he was leaving again. She swallowed down the disappointment as best she could.

"I suspect you have been wondering why I did not return to Netherfield last autumn."

She started. This was not what she'd been expecting. She had always hoped he would explain but talking openly of such personal matters made her uncomfortable. It was simply not done. On the other hand, being polite, quiet, and obedient had been getting her nowhere except hurt. Perhaps, it was time

to throw away the rules. If they were ever going to be anything to each other except indifferent acquaintances, she would have to be bolder.

“I did wonder. I had thought we were...” she hesitated, searching for the right word, “friends.”

“I thought so, too.”

“Then your behavior has confused me, sir.”

He stopped abruptly and his face took on a reddish hue.

“Oh, blast!” He grew even redder. “Please forgive my language, Miss Bennet.”

“Of course, you are forgiven.”

“You may not think so well of me after you hear what I have to say.”

“Then it is all the more important that you explain,” Jane said.

Bingley looked down and scuffed his boots in the dirt. Finally, he looked up at her.

“Very well. My sisters told me they were certain you did not have any special feelings for me, that you were just pretending interest in me because your mother encouraged it.”

Jane turned away and looked at the ground. Her eyes filled with tears that she did not want him to see.

“I am so very sorry I allowed them to influence me. I knew it couldn’t be true, but...”

His feet appeared in front of her, but she still refused to look up at him.

“Miss Bennet, is something wrong?”

She wanted to shout at him that of course, something was wrong, but instead she controlled her voice and asked, “What did I do that made your sisters think that?”

“They did not say.”

“And yet you believed them?” Her voice came out shriller than she’d been hoping.

Bingley scrubbed a hand over his face. “Oh, what a mess I have made of this.”

Jane had to get through this. She had to say what was on her mind no matter what happened.

“You said you would return in a few days, but instead I received a letter from Caroline saying you were settled in London for the winter. She made it clear your...interests...were in another direction.”

“Interests? I do not understand. To what other interests did she refer?”

Was he truly this thick? Was he going to make her say the words aloud? When she stared at him silently, he gave her a reassuring smile.

“Shall we sit over here?” he said, indicating a fallen tree near the road. Jane allowed him to guide her there. When she sat down, Bingley took a seat beside her. Not too close, but close enough that Jane’s heartbeat quickened until she could hear her pulse thrumming in her ears. It was now or never.

When she finally finished telling him about Miss Darcy, he was silent for a minute or two, during which time she waited in dread for his response. She worried

she'd made a mistake! Losing him again would serve her right for being so forward. In Jane's experience, nothing good ever came of speaking your mind. She plucked at her gown anxiously.

"Miss Bennet, I am speechless. My sister's impertinence in writing those things to you shocks me. I do not know what she could have been thinking."

His response made her bolder again. "I believe her intent was quite clear."

"I have never been interested in that way in Miss Darcy. She is a lovely girl, but I have always looked upon her more as a younger sister. I assure you I have never entertained any serious idea of courting her."

The pained look on his face convinced Jane he was telling the truth. "At the time I received the letter, I thought...well, you may imagine what I thought."

"I knew Caroline had written but had no idea this was what she had told you. I am so sorry, Miss Bennet. Can you ever forgive me?" His eyes seemed to plead with her. She of all people understood what it was like to have a relative whose behavior could be an embarrassment.

"You cannot be held responsible for your sister's actions," Jane replied softly.

"Did you write back to her?"

She nodded.

Bingley took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Caroline led me to believe you never answered her.

Every time we talked about it, she tried to convince me your silence was just another sign of your lack of true feeling and that your only thought was for my fortune. She even implied you had another beau in the neighborhood, who was courting you. I thought I had no chance.”

Jane shifted uncomfortably. “I was always taught it was not polite or ladylike to display one’s feelings too eagerly.”

Bingley hung his head. “Miss Bennet, what a mess I have made of things!”

The silence between them seemed to go on interminably.

“So Caroline knew you were coming to town this past winter?”

Astonished at the turn this conversation had taken, Jane managed to find her voice again. “Yes, I wrote, but when I arrived, I heard nothing from her. After several weeks, I called on your sisters, thinking perhaps my letter had somehow become lost.”

“You called on them? But they never mentioned this to me.”

“I was not there five minutes before I realized I had made a mistake.”

He frowned but did not ask her to explain. “Did she return your call?”

“Yes, but only after several weeks.”

Bingley put a hand over his eyes and sighed. “I apologize for my sister’s rudeness. I had no idea of

any of this.”

“She made it quite clear you were busy with other pursuits. That is why I was so surprised when you and Mr. Darcy came to call.”

Bingley anxiously ran a hand through his hair, a habit of his Jane found endearing. “How you must despise me! I understand if you wish me to return you home immediately. I cannot believe you received me at all after what happened.”

Jane was confused. “You think I despise you?”

He looked at the ground and nodded his head.

Jane tried to think of how she could explain to him what she was feeling, but she had no idea how to express what she was thinking. When she saw his hand resting on the bench between them, she simply set her hand over his. “I do not despise you, nor do I wish to return home now.”

When he looked up at her hopefully, she felt unsteady.

“Are you certain you do not wish me out of your sight?” he asked, sounding almost like a sheepish little boy.

“Yes.”

“Is that a ‘yes’ you wish me to stay or a ‘yes’ you wish me to go?”

“It is my wish that we begin again, but only if that is what you desire, also.” She held her breath.

“More than anything.” Bingley squeezed her hand. “May we be friends again?”

Jane looked away so he would not see the tears in her eyes. “Nothing would make me happier, Mr. Bingley,” she whispered.

She felt a light touch of his fingers on her chin as he gently turned her face towards him. “I hear your words, but you do not look happy, my dear sweet Jane.”

Had she heard him correctly? My dear sweet Jane? Her heart began to race as if she had just run all the way from Longbourn to Meryton. Taking a deep breath, she looked up and gave him her warmest smile. “Truly, I am very happy now.”

“In spite of the tears?” He brushed the wetness from her cheek with his thumb. “I plan to speak harshly to Caroline about this.”

“I would prefer if you did not. I am certain she was only doing what she thought was right for you.”

“I would never want you to be hurt, especially if it were over something I could prevent.”

Any last remaining doubts she might have had about him fell away, and she tumbled back into love even more than she had been before.

“I would not blame you if you did not forgive me.” Then turning his clear blue eyes on her, he said, “But I pray that you do.”

Jane felt a shiver all the way down to her toes. “There is nothing to forgive. You are here now and that is all that matters.”

“You are generosity itself. How I have missed

talking with you! You always seem to make me feel as if all is right in the world.”

That night, Jane lay awake long after the rest of the household was asleep. Moving to the window, she looked out across the countryside in the direction of Netherfield. Was Mr. Bingley awake, too, thinking of her? Could the months of loneliness and heartbreak finally be behind her? No matter what happened now, she was glad she had taken a chance and spoken her mind.

## End Notes

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