

GIVEN GOOD PRINCIPLES
BONUS CHAPTERS

BITS *of*
Bobbin
Lace

Maria Grace



BITS

of

Bebbin Lace

GIVEN GOOD PRINCIPLES
BONUS MATERIAL

by

Maria Grace

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Bits of Bobbin Lace

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DEDICATION

For my husband and sons.
You have always believed in me.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoy this brief collection of bonus material to go along with the Given Good Principles series. It will give you a glimpse into the lives of the Darceys and Bennets prior to the birth of their children, a look at a few of the side characters, as well as an epilogue for the series as a whole.

Many Blessings,

Maria Grace

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George and Anne Darcy's Story

He had never been more alone.

George Darcy sat in his study, staring into his cold coffee. The cracking fire did nothing to dispel the cold in his heart. Perhaps he should put it out. Darkness would be much more appealing right now.

Eight weeks ago, Anne returned from four months at Matlock with the baby, Fitzwilliam. How his boy had changed! A father was not supposed to be so sentimental, but blast and botheration, he would never get to enjoy those early milestones with his little family: Fitzwilliam's first smiles, him sitting up and crawling. Bradley warned him against bitterness. After all, Anne suffered through the miscarriages and then childbirth.

In truth, what had he to complain for?

That attitude had worked for the first month of their return. For a little while, it was like returning to the early days of their marriage. His precious Anne had returned to him.

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. One month ago he confessed his indiscretion to her. He had to, the guilt—he could live with it no longer. It was bad enough, what he had done, but to speak the words aloud and see her face whilst he did! Naturally, Anne was devastated, her fury at his infidelity impossible to miss. They had hardly spoken since then.

If only he had never told her. He pushed himself up from his chair, wishing, for a moment, he had not ordered his servants to remove all spirits from his private study. Oh, to be able to escape from this, even for a little while. His gut tightened. No, he dared not think that again. Such thoughts brought them to this place. He crouched beside the fireplace and extended his hands. The prickling heat stung his skin as much as warmed it. Fitting somehow. Bradley was right, of course. He had to tell her. The guilt was turning him into a monster even he did not recognize. She did not deserve his betrayal, no matter how she hurt him, but what now? Was this all he could anticipate—cold civility and fumbling attempts at banal conversation over meals?

A soft knock broke his reverie. Somehow the noise felt unfamiliar, not the purposeful sound of his servants. "Come." His own voice sounded strange in his ears.

The door opened with a creak and a wraith-like figure, clad in robe and nightdress, appeared.

"Anne!" He rushed to her side. "Are you well? The baby..."

"We are both well." She drew her dressing gown around her more tightly.

He could tell she had had little sleep. Her eyes—had she been crying? His gut wrenched. No more tears, dear god, please! "Come in." He guided her to the settee and sat beside her. As usual these days, he fell silent. What more was there to say on the matter? He had said everything he knew to say and it made no difference.



Anne stared into the fire for a long time. Perhaps she should not have intruded. She glanced up at him. Hair tousled, his cravat and neck cloth were gone. His waistcoat lay over his desk and his shirt hung untucked. A tortured expression haunted his handsome features. Bradley was right; she must talk to him. But perhaps this was not the time. If not now, though, when?

She lifted her steepled hands to her face and pressed her fingers to her lips, praying for the right words to speak. Eyes closed, she drew a deep breath. "Tell me why," she whispered.

His face darkened, like a gathering thunderstorm. She flinched. She had not expected him to like the question, no certainly not. But would to be so very much to ask that he not lose his temper? Just this once, might he please not become the ogre she despised?

"Did you love her? Did you...desire her?" Her voice cracked as she forced back tears.

His eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened, but his words were soft and low, spoken through gritted teeth. "No, I did not."

Perhaps this time would be different. She met his eyes. "Then why, George? I must know." She hid her mouth with her fingers. Words she did not want to say threatened to tumble out. He had not lashed out this time and if she were careful, the détente might be maintained.

He looked away and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Does it really matter?"

"It does to me," she whispered.

"I betrayed you Anne, and I am sorry." He sprang to his feet and paced. "I failed you...and our son abominably. Why I did does not matter, it does not change what I did." On his knees before her, he drew ragged breaths. "Please, please forgive me. I cannot continue with this distance between us." He rested his forehead on her knees.

She laid her hand softly on his unruly curls and stroked his hair. How long had it been since she had touched him? Did he know the distance tore at her as much as he said it did him? He shuddered under her hand. "Our vicar says my Christian duty is to forgive you, so I will..."

His head shot up, hope clear in his eyes.

"...but..."

He grimaced.

"If ever I am to trust you again, if ever we are to be as we once were..."

He caught her hands in his, holding them close to his lips.

"I need to understand why." She set her jaw. What reason could he give to justify not keeping his marital vows? None, there could be none. But Mr. Bradley urged her to hear him out. Out of respect for him alone, she would.



He stared over her shoulder, unable to meet her eyes. How was he to admit such a thing to her? She would hate him for his weakness, but what more was there to lose? If there was even a chance...he must try. "This was my fault and mine alone. I felt nothing for her, nothing. She is a selfish, manipulating woman who found me in my cups and offered herself to me."

She shook her head, her cheeks heating. "Too much port and you take to the arms of another? I can never trust..."

He touched her arm. "Anne, I was angry and hurt. I drowned myself in wine so I would not feel."

"Angry? Hurt? Over what?" She jumped to her feet, stepped back from him, and held her open hands between them. "How dare you! What right ..."

"What do you mean? You know not what I have suffered!" He retreated to the fireplace and leaned against the mantle, throat tight and aching. What was the point in this conversation? She would never understand, why would she even want to?

"What you have suffered? You? Excuse me sir, but it was I who suffered, not you! Or have you forgotten the four babes that I lost?" Her balled fists shook at her sides.

His chest tightened as blistering heat rose along his neck. "What would you understand of suffering, madam?" He clenched his hands into fists so tightly they shook. "It was only babes you lost, ones you never even knew and now you have a healthy son..."

She gasped.

His words were horribly cold, but once released, he could not regret them. The anguish he bottled within once uncorked would not stop its flow. "But each time I... lost... my... wife," his voice broke, "...my dearest, precious wife."

The crackling fire roared loud in the silent room. Anne stepped toward him and laid her hand on his arm.

He pulled away sharply and took her shoulders in his large hands. "You stole my wife from me! Do you no understand, with each loss you drew farther and farther away from me, into your rooms, into yourself, until my wife was gone. You left me. I was alone." He stood panting, his fury spent.

He released her and paced the room again. Cold emptiness filled the place where his fury had been.

"The port numbed my pain. When Lavinia came to me, I was so angry—Anne I am sorry—I wanted to hurt you as badly as you hurt me. I was wrong. I should never have allowed my temper to..." Men did not cry. But he leaned against his desk, face in his hands trying to contain the ragged sobs.



Anne stared at her husband, jaw dropped. Cold crept across her face as a fresh knot tied in her belly. He was right. In her grief, she shut him out.

Fresh darts pierced her heart. She had hurt him and never recognized it, never even considered it possible. Heavens, Mr. Bradley was right!

She flew to his side, clutching at his hands, pulling them from his face. "George..."

He turned aside from her, hiding his eyes.

"I had no idea. I ...hurt you?" Tears flowed down her cheeks, matching his. She took his cheeks in her hands, forcing him to look into her eyes. "I was so absorbed in my own pain I never gave thought to anyone else. I am sorry."

"It does not excuse what I did, nothing does!" He laced his fingers in hers.

"You are right."

He began to pull away, but she held him fast.

"But now I understand." She pressed her forehead against his hand for a long moment. "I know hurt ... and being angry and alone. I hate that I never saw what I was doing to you." She sniffled and bit her lip. "I cannot hate you for that."

He tipped her chin up and gazed into her tear-filled eyes. "What are you saying?"

She swallowed hard. "Will you forgive me for...for taking your wife from you? I was wrong to hurt you the way I did." She bit her lip. "Perhaps if we both forgive, we can begin anew?"

"Oh, Anne!" He drew her into his arms. "I am sorry I allowed my hurt and resentment to build. I should have...oh so many things I should have done differently. Even if you can never forgive me, I forgive you, my love." He rubbed his into her hair. "Let us begin again and I will be the man you deserve. Help me become that man for you and for our son."

His arms were so warm around her. How she had missed his embrace. "I love you. I want to put this behind us and look ahead. I do not want this last month to be the way of things for the rest of our lives. We will work at this and make it right. Bradley will help us; I am sure. I fear it will not be easy for I find I am less perfect than I thought..." She laughed ruefully as she gazed up at him, loosing herself in his loving eyes.

"You are perfect enough for me, my love." Tentatively at first, he leaned down to kiss her. She reached up to meet him, tangling her small hand in his hair.

Perhaps they could make this right even now.

Thomas and Fanny Bennet's Story

Spring 1786

Thomas Bennet sat anxiously in his carriage, wringing his hands in his lap. The short journey into Meryton seemed longer than he had ever remembered it. After a month and a half in London, he was anxious to arrive at his destination. This was no ordinary social call. Today he would ask Miss Fanny Gardiner to be his wife! He smiled, leaning back in his coach. How much longer would it be until he could see his dear Fanny's face?

She was so beautiful and lively, and he so dull. How she could possibly care for him. Her sisters said she only cares for his fortune, but they were the fortune seekers, not her. She was all that was good and sweet and winsome and... He laughed. He was worse than a school girl! At five and twenty, one should have better sense!

The carriage lurched to a stop. He bounded from its confines and up the steps to the Gardiners' door. The housekeeper led him in to the parlor where Mrs. Gardiner sat.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Gardiner," he bowed, his eyes searching for the painfully missing presence.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bennet." She rose to meet him. The relief in her voice did not fit and afternoon call. Something was very wrong.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but you seem troubled," he said, willing his voice not to quiver.

She nodded. "It is not me, sir, but my youngest daughter. Miss Gardiner is out in the garden. She is very distraught, but will not speak to me of it."

"Perhaps I might be of some comfort to her." It was improper to suggest such a thing, but if she was truly distressed...

"I confess, I hoped that you might consider it." Mrs. Gardiner led him to a window that overlooked the garden. "There she is. I believe that she might welcome your company. I will stay here. If you promise to stay in view of these windows, I can chaperone you from here."

Fanny... Miss Gardiner must be truly beside herself if her mother was willing to allow him such freedom. "That is indeed good of you, ma'am." He hurried out the door into the garden.

He only took a few steps onto the gravel path before he heard Fanny's violent sobs. His heart tightened. Moments later, he was on his knees before her. "Miss Gardiner..."

She glanced down at him, her eyes red and flowing with tears. She tried to speak, but could only cover her face with her hands and sob once more.

"Fanny! Please, what is wrong? What has happened?" He pulled her hands from her face.

"No! No!" she exclaimed, pulling away from him. "You must go!"

His heart turned to ice in his chest. This could not be! "I will not go anywhere without an explanation, Miss Gardiner."

She stared at him, the pain in her eyes heartrendingly clear. "My sister was right. You should have nothing to do with me. I... I am... I am ruined!" Sobs overtook her once more.

"What are you talking about! What has happened?" A sick feeling overtook him. Dear Lord what had happened?

"I cannot, I cannot speak..."

"You can and you will, Fanny Gardiner. I will not leave without a full accounting of your claim." His words were stern, but his hands gentle.

She cried for long minutes before she spoke again. "I am ruined, Mr. Bennet. You are a gentleman. You cannot wish to keep company with such a woman as I." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"What has happened? What are you saying?" Cold crept across his face. "Is there another..."

"No! Oh no! Mr. Bennet... Thomas...no... I love you! You must believe I would never betray you!"

"Then what?" He squeezed her hands hard.

"While you were gone, my father...we had a guest...my uncle..."

No! Not that man! Anger replaced fear in his belly.

"At dinner, he paid me every compliment and I thanked him for it. But Mr. Bennet, you must believe me, I did not... I did not..." She turned away and wept once more.

"No, Fanny, please, do not tell me...he did not!"

She nodded, though she did not face him. "He came to my chambers late at night. I did not want him there! I tried to scream, but he covered my mouth with his hand. I tried to fight him, but...but..."

"Oh, no, Fanny!" He could not restrain himself. Wrapping his long arms around her, he pulled her into his shoulder. "My precious Fanny. I am so sorry." Pangs seized his chest, so painful they took his breath away.

"Now I am ruined!" She sobbed painfully into his coat.

"No, no you are not. It was not your fault, and I will not let that change anything. I met with my solicitor in London to have settlement papers drawn up. I came here with the intention of asking you for your hand in marriage. I love you, Miss Gardiner, and I want you to be my wife." He stared lovingly into her eyes ignoring the tightness in his throat.

"You do not understand!" she countered in a voice bordering on hysteria. "I...I...fear that...I am with child!" She fell prostrate on the bench.

Another man's child! She carried another man's child. But it was not her fault. She smiled too much, but that did not make her a public woman. He knew her uncle's reputation. He was the worst sort of man. He could not doubt what she had told me.

Can he be father to another man's child? He chewed his lip. If he could not, he could not have Fanny. He did not want to imagine a future without her. That was far too bleak. Nor could he subject her to what her life would become as the mother of such a babe.

He moved to the end of the bench and whispered in her ear, "Listen to me, Miss Gardiner, I beseech you. I have heard all you have told me, and I understand. But it does not change my desires."

Stunned, she pushed herself up and stare wide-eyed into his face.

He brushed tears from her cheek. "I have no doubt that you are not at fault, my dear, dear Miss Gardiner. I love you too much, and cannot fancy a life without you, whatever that means. If there is a child, I will call it my own, as long as that means you will be my wife. May I have your hand?"

"Are you certain?"

He nodded somberly. "Totally certain."

"Oh, Thomas!" Her beautiful smile burst forth, weak and weepy to be sure, but it was there. "Yes, yes I want nothing more than to be Mrs. Bennet. I just believed...I thought you would not..."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Her mother was watching—at least she would not for certain what had transpired. Perhaps her dreadful sisters would stop tormenting Fanny now.



One month later Thomas Bennet arrived at the Gardiners' home to much the same scene as the night he had proposed. Fanny was in the garden weeping, her mother fretted in the sitting room and her father was closeted in his bookroom.

As before, he raced to her side, the sounds of her soft weeping filling his ears. She had been ill for days and had not received his calls. Now this? What could have happened? "Miss Gardiner?" he asked softly, "why do you weep? Are you still unwell?"

"No, sir," she whispered, not looking at him.

"You must tell me, what is wrong?" He took her hand.

She looked at him with an expression that stopped his heart

"You have no more need to protect me, Mr. Bennet. My reputation will remain untarnished. I have...I have lost the...the..." her voice broke. "You are free, Mr. Bennet. You are far too good a man for the likes of me."

He slapped the bench beside her. "That is enough! Has your sister, Mrs. Phillips, been here tormenting you?"

She nodded, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"I swear, when we are married, that harridan will not be permitted in our home!" He took Fanny's shoulders and lifted her to sit beside him. "I have had enough of her constant berating and belittling of you! Why do you persist in paying attention to what she says?"

“I...I...I do not know.”

“Oh, my dearest Fanny, too many people have spoken to you so. I know your mother and brother are the only ones who have been gentle with you. But I will see to it that when you are my wife you will never again...”

“Your wife?” She blinked, her brow knit.

“Of course you will be my wife. That pearl ring you wear, is that not why I gave it to you?” He laughed softly, rubbing his thumb across the ring.

“You would still? Even though...” she could not finish the thought.

“Of course. I cannot consider a future that does not include you as my wife. Come, let us go inside, your mother is nearly beside herself. Let your maid help you tidy up, then you can tell me the final plans for our wedding.”

The Rawlses Visit Longbourn

Spring 1795

Fanny Bennet, the mistress of Longbourn, sat in her favorite chair in the parlor. How good it felt to get off her feet for a moment. Thankfully, she had just checked off the last of her morning list. So much to do to prepare for the dinner party tonight!

Mr. Bennet would be returning from town soon. The girls played quietly upstairs with the nursery maid. Everything around her was in order. She leaned her head back with a contented sigh and permitted herself a moment's rest and reflection. Her husband was respected in the community. Her neighbors sought her company. They dined with four and twenty families in the area. The dire words that her father had spoken over her at her marriage to Mr. Bennet had not come to pass. She was not his ruination.

Eight years of hard work reflected in the quiet efficiency of her household and the contentment of her husband's tenants. Few knew how hard she worked or how diligently she studied to learn all that her own mother failed to teach her. But she wanted it that way. How mortifying it would be to be discovered exerting such efforts over what came so easily to others! She shuddered. No, she would not allow anything to lend credence to her father's declarations of how unfit she had been when she first married. Now, finally, she felt the seeds of confidence bursting forth.

If only she could produce a son, though. That one accomplishment still eluded her. None of the advice she followed seemed to make any difference. Five daughters! What proper wife produced only daughters? There had to be an answer for it.

She puffed out a sharp breath. No time to dwell on such things, her afternoon list called. As she rose, movement outside the window caught her eye. A strange carriage rolled up the drive, directly toward the house. She hurried to the window. The coach bore neither crest nor any kind of identifying mark. Of average quality and color, it gave no clue as to its occupants.

Her heart squeezed in her chest as she glanced at the mantle clock. Not, she had not lost track of the time. Her dinner guests were not due for hours yet. She leaned closer to the window.

The carriage stopped near the front steps and the driver jumped down. He flipped down the step and opened the door. A dark clad man and two women emerged.

Edith? What is she doing in a strange carriage? Why would she be bringing someone here? Fanny gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth. Mr. Rawls and Melissa? When did they return from the continent? I did not know they are come back! What are they doing here? Mr. Bennet declared they were not welcome at Longbourn. What am I to do?

She hurried away from the window to the door then back to the settee. Patting her hair, she tried to sit, only to land on a misplaced pillow. Fanny jumped up, rearranged the pillows and straightened her skirt. A sharp knock at the door made her gasp.

“Come in.” If only her voice sounded less unsteady to those on the other side of the door than it did in her own ears.

“Mr. and Mrs. Rawls and Mrs. Philips to see you, madam.” Mr. Hill lifted his eyebrows. “If you wish, I will instruct them to return when the Master is home.”

Fanny swallowed hard. “No, he will be home soon. It is all right. Show them in.” She fumbled for her fan and fluttered it awkwardly.

Hill bowed and retreated. A moment later, he reappeared, three guests following.

Fanny jumped to her feet. “Sister, brother, I did not realize you were back.” She dismissed Hill with a small wave. “Edith, you did not tell me.”

“We have been back nearly a month now, in London.” Mr. Rawls Rawls thumbed the labels of his expensive coat. He glanced about the room as he sauntered in. His gloved hand glided across the back of each chair he passed.

Fanny gestured for him to sit.

He glanced at his glove and brushed traces of dust from his fingertips with his thumb.

“We have only just arrived in Meryton.” Melissa sashayed in behind him. She gazed around the room, nose wrinkled as though a bad smell hung in the air. “Edith insisted we come to see you, as we have never seen Longbourn.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“You have been on the continent for so long—” Fanny folded her fan and set it on the table with a clatter.

Melissa perched on the settee beside her husband, hands primly folded in her lap. “Edith told me you have *five* daughters! Five!”

“Yes, I do,” Fanny stammered. Her cheeks grew hot, her heart seemed to inch up into her throat, the way it always did when Melissa scolded.

“Whatever were you thinking producing so many girls?” Melissa’s frown followed well-etched lines in her cheeks.

Fanny lifted her chin and pulled her shoulders back. “They are fine, dear girls. My youngest, Lydia just began walking. I will have the nursery maid bring them down directly.” She scurried out the door and shut it behind her, panting as it shut.

“Madam?” Hill asked.

Fanny leaned against the wall, pressing her temples. “Have the girls brought from the nursery.”

Hill curtsied and disappeared up the stairs.

What was she to do? After the Rawls refused to attend their wedding, Mr. Bennet had banned them from Longbourn. But she could not turn her sister and brother away. Why had he not returned yet? She needed his strength so much!

Hill returned with the girls and their nursery maid in tow. Fanny inspected each of her daughters, tucking their hair and adjusting their dresses until she could stall no longer. She led them into the parlor.

Edith smiled warmly. Melissa and Mr. Rawls, wearing identical severe expressions, stared at the girls.

“These are my daughters. Children, this is your Aunt and Uncle Rawls. They have been on the continent all these years. That is why you have never met them. They are only just come back.” Fanny stood behind them and urged them to take a step closer to their strange relations.

The older girls glanced at each other, then back at their mother and nursery maid.

“We are pleased to meet you,” six year-old Jane offered softly at the urging of the nurse. She curtsied in her best grown up fashion.

“I am Lizzy,” the precocious four and a half year-old pressed forward to offer her own awkward curtsy.

Kitty and Mary hid behind their nurse’s skirts while Lydia struggled to free herself from the young woman’s arms.

“They are fine girls, are they not?” Fanny wrung her hand.

“Have you only one nursery maid for all five?” Rawls sniffed. He turned to his wife with lifted brows.

“Why yes, they are good children and have no need...”

“Really, Fanny, I thought better of you.” Melissa rolled her eyes. “I grant your oldest is a very pretty girl. But she should be under the care of a governess by now, learning all those accomplishments she will need in order to save her family...”

“Save them? Save them from what?” Fanny’s face grew cold and her chest pinched. “Patsy, please return the girls to the nursery.”

Bobbing her own curtsy, the nursery maid ushered the girls out.

“Now what is it you believe my Jane must save her family from?” Fanny crossed her arms and scowled, hoping she looked stronger than she felt.

“Why, the entail, dear. Edith told us all about it.” Melissa looked at Edith.

Edith’s jaw dropped and she stammered something unintelligible.

“Have you forgotten that Longbourn is entailed away from your daughters?” Melissa’s saccharine voice dripped venom. “Or did Edith exaggerate in her letters?”

Fanny’s hear raced, her breath coming short. “It is true.”

“So if anything happens to your dear, foolish Mr. Bennet, you will be thrown out into the hedgerows, my dear, unless your girls make good matches.” Mellissa gracefully rose and strode to her youngest sister. “Have you not wondered why God has not given you a son?”

“Melissa!” Edith Phillips snapped and jumped from her seat. “You have gone too far! Stop it right now.”

“Hold your tongue, woman!” Mr. Rawls commanded, glaring at Edith.

“You are being punished for what you have done.” Melissa laid her arm over Fanny’s shoulders.

“What have I done?” Mrs. Bennet whispered hoarsely, her stomach knotted miserably.

“We all know what you have done, Fanny. There is no need to pretend.”

Fanny stared at her, forehead knotted.

“Jane was born in August, you were married at the end of December.” Mr. Rawls sneered.

“Clearly you anticipated your vows and went to the altar...” Melissa patted Fanny’s shoulder.

“Jane was born early...”

“Of course you say that, dear. You do not take us for fools do you?”

“Tell her!” Fanny turned to Edith. “Jane was so tiny when she was born. If you had seen her you would know, she was born too early. The midwife did not think she would survive. Edith...”

“It is true, Melissa.” Edith rushed to her sisters and took Fanny’s hand. “I was there when Jane was born. It was exactly as Fanny says. I told you that in my letters!”

“Of course you would support your favorite sister and try to cover her sins.” Melissa’s lips wrinkled in a frown and she folded her arms over her chest. “Every woman in her position says the same thing. But saying it does not make it true.”

“We all see the evidence of your low morals. That is why you have only girls.” Rawls leaned against the back of the settee.

“Can you not see, Fanny? You are not a fit mother for them.” Melissa sidled closer to Rawls.

“How can you say such a thing!” Edith snapped. “They are fine, sweet girls! You can ask anyone in town here who knows them. There is not a one here who would criticize them. She has raised them...”

“To be loose women like herself!” Mr. Rawls took a step toward Fanny. “You are a liar and a public woman. I am surprised Bennet condescended to marry you. He could have kept you as a mistress ...”

“Mr. Rawls! Stop it, you cannot say such things!” Edith jumped between Mr. Rawls and Fanny. “Your accusations are utterly false. I cannot let you speak so. How can you say such things about our brother? He is a good man—”

He pushed Edith away and she fell to the floor with a thin scream.

“Stop it!” Fanny lunged toward Edith. “Do not touch her and do not talk about my husband in such disgusting ways!”

“We know what you are Fanny.” He stepped closer to Fanny.

Melissa edged in closer from the other side, trapping Fanny between them. “But your girls do not have to suffer your same fate.” She leaned close, her breath hot on Fanny’s face. “Do you want your girls to be like you? They do not have to be.”

“What are you saying?” Fanny barely got the words out. Her throat felt dry as cotton wool.

“The Lord has not given us children,” Melissa whispered. “But that is so that we can provide a decent home and upbringing for yours. I can raise them to be true ladies, as my own daughters. They will make fine matches. I can introduce them to the Ton, they will have all the advantages that an accomplished woman can give them. Just think how much more I have to offer them. They do not have to be tainted by your sin.”

“You cannot have my girls!” Fanny stamped her foot. “Get out of my house! Get out! Mr. Bennet has never welcomed you here. He would not want you to stay! Get out!” She grabbed Melissa’s sleeve and pulled her toward the door.

“Not without those girls! You cannot raise them, Fanny. You are no better than a common whore!” Mr. Rawls took Melissa’s arm and pulled her toward himself.

Fanny whirled on him and slapped him as hard as she could. “No!”

His head snapped back and he stumbled but caught himself on the mantle, laughing. “You have just proven our point. You violent, uncontrolled—” He stepped backward, caught his heel in the carpet and tumbled down. His head struck the fire irons. A dull thump, the sound of a melon dropped on the floor echoed through the room. He lay still upon the floor.

“What have you done!” Melissa flew to her husband’s side.

Edith screamed.

The door flew open.

“Send for the doctor now!” Edith cried.

Mr. Bennet gasped. “What are they doing in my home? Hall, call for the doctor.”

“Mr. Rawls fell and hit his head.” Edith cried, pointing toward the fire irons.

“You brought that miserable toad into my house?” Bennet dropped to his knees beside Mr. Rawls.

“They just arrived. They had not met the girls! They had not seen Longbourn!” Edith stammered. “They insisted on coming. It was not my idea, not my fault...”

“He is still breathing. Hill!” Bennet rose. “Hill!”

Hill peeked in. Her face turned ashen when she saw Mr. Rawls.

“Call for the grooms to get him upstairs and into a bed. See to him when they get him there.”

Hill curtsied and hurried away.



A quarter of an hour later, they had Mr. Rawls ensconced in a guestroom, tended by the doctor, Mrs. Rawls and Hill. Upon the doctor’s arrival, Mrs. Phillips rushed home to get her husband.

Bennet and Fanny stood alone in the parlor. He took her hands and led her to a chair. She sat and he knelt beside her.

“He will not survive. I...I...killed him...” she whispered, a lost look on her face.

“No, you did not. You have not the strength to do such a thing,” he whispered in her ear, wrapping her in his arms. “He tripped and fell. You had nothing to do with it.”

“I slapped him—”

“You did not make him fall.” He brushed tears from her cheek.

“How do you know?”

“You see the carpet bunched on the floor? That is where he tripped. It was not you.” He swept her sweat dampened fringe back from her forehead. “What did he say to provoke you so?”

Tears filled her eyes and her chin quivered. “Jane, she was born in August. You know she was early. She was so small! But they said...we...that you...that I...”

“Shhh.” He pressed his fingers to her lips. “I understand.” He ground his teeth. Oh the things he would like to say right now, but Fanny was too delicate to endure his temper, even if it were directed at another. “You and I both know what they claim is untrue. Even if it were true, she was born well after we were married. They are the only one who would make such an issue.”

Fanny sniffled and nodded weakly.

“My dearest, they are jealous. We have five beautiful girls. They have no children and probably never will. Rawls is accustomed to taking what he wants, by any means necessary.” He kissed her forehead. “He was cruel and horrible and wrong. What happened here is not your fault. It was his own doing.”

She blinked rapidly and swallowed hard. “I did not invite them, they just appeared at the door.”

“Of course not.”

“I knew you did not want them here, but I did not know how to turn them away. I did not wish to offend them.” She pressed her fist to her mouth and bit the edge of her finger. “They wanted to take the girls! They said I was an unfit mother, that God was punishing me by giving me only daughters!”

“Our girls are not a punishment! They are my delight! How could anyone claim such a thing?” His clenched his fists and rose slowly. “I have never heard something so absurd!”

Fanny began to sob. “He said I was nothing but a common whore and that our daughters would be too! Father said...” She crumpled into her lap, hiding her face in her hands.

“Oh Fanny!” He laid his hand on her back.

How long had he struggled to forgive Old Gardiner and his like-minded son Rawls? Their harshness had forever scarred his precious wife. Just when he could finally face his father-in-law without a mouthful of caustic words, his fool brother-in-law would have to return to reopen those old wounds. How was he to forgive this new offense? He exhaled heavily. Somehow, for Fanny, he would, lest he permit bitterness to overwhelm him.

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I promise you, none of those words will leave this house. I will not hear such things spoken against you or the girls. Do not believe a word that was said.”

She lifted her face from her hands and met his eyes for three long breaths. With a nod, she pressed her lips hard and rubbed tears away with the back of her hands.

“New, I must go upstairs to deal with the doctor, but do not fear, dear Fanny. I promise you, I will take care of you.” He pressed his handkerchief into her hand as he rose.

Hill waited at the door. “How is she, sir?”

“Fragile. She does not deserve this.” He sighed and tugged his coat sleeves. “Stay with her; be gentle with her. They broke her heart today. Do whatever she needs. All I want is to see her well again.”

Hill nodded and slipped into the parlor. Setting his features into a grim expression, Bennet climbed the stairs.

A Bit of Bobbin Lace

Miss Yates asked her to make a bit of lace weeks ago. For a gift for Longbourn's mistress, she said. The Bennet girls had been right good to them that year, it were only proper to present the family a small token.

Mrs. Black rolled her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck. It had been years since she had got her lace pillow and pins out. That reminder of better days were just too painful to look at. Often enough she wondered, what were the point of holding on to them any longer. Selling 'em made more sense. Lord knew they need the blunt. But she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

Years had taken their toll; sickness and hardship left her a bitter old woman she barely recognized, an empty husk of younger herself. She almost refused to a'thomasing when Miss Yates came to her door this morning. What were the point? Things only went from bad to worse for the like of her and getting throwed out of Longbourn sounded like a right foolish way to spend the morning. But Miss Yates was a stubborn woman, so stubborn Mrs. Black had to give way and join the mumpers on their journey into the crisp morning air.

The housekeeper and the daughter of the house welcomed them warm enough and gave them a lovely tea fit for quality guests. The generous blessing of wheat and food stuffs were certainly more than she hoped for. She was as grateful as she was surprised. But the Master himself asked to speak with her now. Certainly he would demand those gifts back since she were not a Longbourn tenant.

Mrs. Black followed Hill, cane thumping softly on the faded carpet of the hall. Longbourn weren't so fine a place as Netherfield to be sure. But then, that Bascombe fellow who owned Netherfield were no Mr. Bennet.

Where were Bascombe when her son were so sick in his lungs he nearly died—or when the whole family came down with the fever. Nowhere, that's where. It were the Lucases and the Bennets who came to help their neighbors and a right good thing they did too. With no money for an apothecary, it were those smelly brews Lady Lucas and Miss Mary made up that set them all to rights.

Them Bennets were good folk. There were no good reasons for her to be so cow-hearted, being called to see Mr. Bennet. Little good knowing that did.

Her hand shook harder than usual no matter how hard she gripped her cane. Fool thing acting like it were a'fearing.

The heavy door swung open in front of her.

"Mrs. Black, as you requested, sir." Hill curtsied and left.

"Yes, yes, come in and shut the door behind you." Mr. Bennet sat behind a great wooden desk, covered with books and papers. Stacks of books littered the floor.

He were not a tidy fellow. Mrs. Black forced her grin back. So unordered a man did not intimidate her. He were just like her son, but without a wife strong enough to manage him good and proper. She stepped in as briskly as her cane and old bones allowed.

She wobbled to a halt just in front of the desk. The lavender sachet for the Mistress lay on the desk blotter before him. He worked the edge between his fingers.

“You called for me, sir.”

He nodded and grunted.

“Seems to me you oughts tell me what for. Guessing will be of no use to either of us.”

He lifted his eyes. “Yes, I suppose, so.”

A man who married off four daughters in a single year should not have so many creases in his face. Perhaps the talk of Mrs. Bennet’s ailments were true after all.

“I understand you and your family have had a most difficult time this year.”

Her shoulders twitched up. “There be those time in any life for certain. I just be thankful I ain’t put none of them to bed with a mattock and spade.”

He nodded. “The weather will turn cold soon. The children are not big enough to chop wood.”

He were right and Bertie were not yet strong enough to be about it neither. But he would try—and probably put hisself in the ground doing it.

“I will send Billy Thompson this week. He is a bit of a scamp, but he can chop and help you prepare for the turn of the season. I expect you will be able to manage him well enough.”

“Raised four sons, ya know. He can’t be more handful than them were.” She clutched her cane more tightly and wobbled slightly. “Thank you very kindly, sir.”

He nodded. “You still make lace?”

“Haven’t had so much time for it lately, what with the family sick and the like.”

“Would this allow you more time for a special project?” He pushed several coins toward her.

“Oh my!” She twisted her free hand in her skirt. To whip off them coins, much as she needed them, would show herself not but a greedy guts.

“If you agree, I will give you the other half when you deliver your work.”

He probably wanted something she could not do. Nothing so good could come so easy, even on St. Thomas’ Day.

“Can you do this?” He slid a piece of paper out from the bottom of an untidy heap and pointed to the image of a lace fichu from a ladies’ magazine.

She picked it up and held it at arm’s length, turning it this way and that. Her heart beat faster. That pattern were not so complicated—

“But I want you to make the flowers roses instead of whatever those are here.” He flicked his finger on several spots of the image.

Roses! That were all her wanted? Just roses? “I made many a lace rose, sir.”

“So you can do this?”

“I can. But it will not be ready for Twelfth Night, if that be what you had in mind.” That truth could cost her blessing but she never had been good for a humbug.

“I had no expectation it would. I would like it for the spring, to celebrate the anniversary of our wedding.”

“That I can do.”

“Very good then. Take the coins and the picture and go on to work.”

“Thank you kindly, Mr. Bennet.”

The coins rattled in her hand. Was it possible? She could pay rent on Christmas now. “Thank you most kindly.” She turned toward the door.

“And do send your girls around, twice a week I should think. With four of our girls gone now, I hear cook complaining of too much food going to waste.”

“Yes...yes I will sir.” Oh, oh could it be? They would be warm and dry and fed this winter?

She hobbled away, tears streaming down her cheeks and falling on her grey dress in dark silent splotches. She’s heard Mr. Bennet’s name was Thomas...no wonder he’d be so good, Meryton’s own St. Thomas.

A Tongue-tied Fool

January 31, 1812

Three days! He had been in town three days now and had not called or written. Why had Miss Hurst sent that note? What kind of friend was she? Louisa would have been far happier not knowing of his presence if he did to intend to call.

She paced the now familiar track across the length of the parlor. Kitty and Charles had the knocker restored to the door a week ago. There was no reason he should not have come.

But there was a reason. Caroline. How was it the one time her behavior was not calculated and intentional, that was the one time the gossip could not be quelled.

To be certain, the story of Charles' surprise wedding made a much bigger splash in the gossip sheets. They had entertained a significant number of distant acquaintances who came to call after having read it. So there was a chance that they were not utterly ruined.

Still, there were those who asked after Caroline, though. Miss Hurst went out of her way on each call and in each letter to do so. Was she trying to torment Louisa? Why could she not be more like Kitty and stand with her in her trial?

The front door creaked. Kitty and Charles must be home early from their morning calls. Thank heavens, she did not need to be alone any more today.

The housekeeper appeared in the doorway. "Mr. Hurst to see you, madam. Are you at home to him?"

Her face colored and her hands prickled. "Y...Y...Yes."

The housekeeper curtsied and disappeared before Louisa had to say more. She stumbled to a mirror and patted her hair. Her eyes stared back at her, filled with dread and despair. He had not written in so long, not even to announce his arrival in town. Surely this would be a dreadful interview.

"Mr. Hurst, madam."

Prickles rose along the back of her neck. She turned slowly, certain she would fall if she moved any faster.

His coat hung limp on his shoulders and his breeches fell loose from his hips. Shadows painted the palor of his cheeks and beneath his eyes.

"Mr. Hurst?" She wanted to rush to his side, but her feet would not obey.

"I am glad to finally see you, Louisa." The hoarse whisper was not the rich vibrant voice she remembered. He bowed from his shoulders—that was entirely unlike him. When he bowed—if he bowed—it was always deeply and from the waist.

"Please, sit down." She gestured toward a chair and moved to take one herself. Regardless of his preference, she had to sit, soon. He knees would not hold her much longer.

His slow, deliberate steps were those of an old man twice his age. He eased himself into a chair.

“Thank you for coming.” It was closer to a whisper that she would have liked.

“You must have wondered if I was ever going to come.”

At least his direct manner had not changed.

“The thought had crossed my mind.” She stared at her hands.

“I read that Charles is lately married. Quite a to-do about it in the Morning Post”

“Yes. It was a nice little piece. I have read it numerous times now.”

“Quite the brilliant move on his part, really.”

Her head snapped up. “Excuse me.” Her brow drew into a tight little knot. He always teased her about that.

“With all the fluff and fluster your sister stirred up, it was a brilliant maneuver to divert attention from her.”

She clutched the arms of the chair. “Did I hear you correctly? Do you suggest Charles went to those lengths as a means to nullify Caroline’s impact?”

“It has been suggested.” He shrugged.

“By whom—jealous old tabbies who cannot abide romantic gestures on the part of a man truly in love?”

“Flowers, gifts and poetry—those are romantic gestures. Contriving a surprise wedding, during a Twelfth night party no less—that is something else altogether.”

She rose and walked to the window. Better to talk to his reflection in the glass panes than to him. “So you came merely to criticize Charles to me? I hardly think that the most needful topic between us right now, but I will oblige.”

Behind her, he shifted in his seat, grunting so softly she barely heard. So he was not willing to respond. How kind.

“Charles’ wedding had nothing to do with Caroline’s scandal and everything to do with the dear, sweet loyal girl he married. Kitty is everything he deserves in a wife, and I am proud to call her my dearest friend. It was an extravagant, even flamboyant gift, to a lady who richly deserved it. I cannot now imagine it happening any other way for either of them. You know Charles. Can you imagine him marrying in an ordinary way? He does nothing in the way of the rest of us. Why should this be any different?”

Hurst’s reflection nodded and grunted.

“You shall have no criticism from me. I was happy to stand up with Kitty and I would do it over again as well. So if that is the conversation you came for, our interview is at an end.” Heartbeats throbbed in her ears, so loud he might have to shout to be heard.

“Is that how you wish to be married?”

She whirled on him. “What kind of question is that?”

“One that requires an answer.”

“You know I love Charles, but I am not like him. I am happy to support him in his flights of fancy. They always have a way of working out. But I have not the disposition to live that way myself. I am quiet and conventional and happy to be so.”

He nodded and shifted his weight, clutching the armrest so hard his fingers left impressions in the cushion.

“Now you have your answer, I require one as well. Why have you come?”

“It is not obvious?”

“Not at all.”

“What do you think?”

“That I do not wish to play parlor games guessing at your intents.”

“I suppose you are right. My manners are abhorrent. But that is nothing new is it? You have long known that I am not well polished.” He pushed to his feet and shuffled toward her. “Obviously my sister has not told you. I thought she would have, but I suppose I am not surprised.”

He stood very close to her, smelling of apothecaries and dust.

“You surely have guessed by now. I have been very ill in the last six weeks. Influenza, the surgeon said. It settled in my lungs—he told me I would die.”

She gasped.

“But he was wrong.” He chuckled and coughed. “Now he says I will live. What is more I do not have consumption as he predicted either. But it may be months before I regain my strength, if ever I do.”

“So that is why you did not write?”

“I could not hold a pen for weeks. Even when I could, I coughed so hard I could not write. Marcella should have written you with that intelligence.”

“She wrote, but only to warn me that...”

“That I would reject you because of Miss Caroline.”

“Yes. I knew nothing of your illness. If I had—”

“She never has liked you very well.” He inched closer.

She leaned her forehead on the cool glass. He usually managed to say precisely the wrong things. It was not malice, just his nature. “Why did she invite me to stay with her then?”

“I suppose she was looking for what she might use against you.”

“She is opposed to our union?”

Of course, it should have been obvious.

“Are you?” Her breath fogged the window pane, faded and fogged it again.

“I do not know.”

Cold trickled from her face, down her chest and to her feet. She turned to face him. “If that is your answer, then it is time for you to go.”

His eyes widened and he pulled back.

“I have tolerated Caroline all these years, never knowing how a true sister behaves. Now that Kitty is my sister, I see I have been far, far too patient. I will not endure Caroline’s

meddling, nor Marcella's. If she has altered your opinion of me, then it is just as well. I have no desire to live with a man so easily swayed by a nasty foolish woman. Good day. Mr. Hurst." She slipped past him.

He caught her arm. "Wait."

His fingers barely closed around her forearm. Something in his tone, something pained and vulnerable, stopped her.

"Louisa, please." He screwed his eyes shut. "I know I am a total failure at words. I have all the elegance of a canting thief when I try to speak. I am sorry. After all that has happened, I had no idea if you would still want me."

"Excuse me? You think me some kind of jilt—"

"No, no, that is not what I am trying to say." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Then what are you striving to communicate?" She should be more patient, and might have been three days ago. "Marcella attempted to start gossip about you and your brother and his wife."

"Gossip about us? What did she say? Is it not enough that Caroline—"

"What she said is of little matter now, as it has turned all arsy-varsey on her."

"Excuse me?"

"Apparently, your brother's romantic gesture has won him great reverence among the ladies of Marcella's set and they would near nothing against him and his new wife. Instead, there is now awful rubbish going about regarding Marcella. Someone has concocted a cock and bull tale of a lover she jilted whilst visiting Shropshire."

"I had not heard."

"It is entirely untrue, though it matters little. Her reputation may well be in tatters by the end of all this."

Louisa sighed.

His tiny wry smile finally appeared. He was so dear when he wore that expression. "We both have sisters who do us no favors."

"Perhaps we should set them up in a cottage together—"

Hurst barked out a coughing laugh, so hard he doubled over. He righted himself and wiped his eyes with his coat sleeve. "Two top hens pecking each other to death." He lifted his hands, formed into beaks, and pecked one against the other.

She covered her mouth and laughed. He always had been able to make her laugh.

"Perhaps they would be so busy pecking at one another they would stop hounding us."

"Delightful thought that." His face lost all humor. "Equally delightful is the thought of you marrying me."

She cocked her head and stared, eyes bulging. "Excuse me, I believe just a moment ago you said you did not know how you felt about our union."

He blew out a labored breath. "The stories circulating about Marcella do not reflect well upon my family."

"Nor do those about Caroline reflect well on mine." She pinched her temples.

“I did not—do not—know if you would still wish to join yourself—”

“As I did not know—”

“Will you please just listen to me!” His hand knotted into a fist. “I do not want you forced into a marriage you do not want. I would not blame you. I am still not well, my sister, not to mention I am boorish company at best, no match to your brother’s fine manners and appealing ways.”

“Enough, enough, enough!” She stalked to the fireplace and back again. “Have I not wondered the same? Caroline’s behavior has certainly been enough—” She threw up her hands. “I am done with her ruling my life. If you wish to end our understanding because of her, leave now. You may show yourself out.”

He stared at her for three long heart beats and shuffled toward to door.

She turned her face aside. It was enough he was leaving, she did not have to watch.

A hand touched her shoulder. “I am not leaving.”

“Why not?”

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Because I love you.”

She looked up at him. His face spoke the truth. He meant it. He was not one to speak what he did not fully mean.

She touched his hollow cheek. “You have never said that before.”

“I am a tongue-tied fool.”

“Yes you are.”

“Am I your tongue-tied fool?”

“Yes you are.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. “Then nothing and no one else matters.”

Their lips met, warm, soft and sure.

He was hers and she his, and he was right, for that moment nothing else mattered.

A Locket and a Promise

Send Charlotte, she is by far the properest person to go. Yes, yes, she has not a wife's grief. Of course, send sensible, staid Charlotte!

Charlotte huffed and flung her shawl across her shoulders. The door was already open, so she darted out without so much as a goodbye over her shoulder. Little did her feelings matter. It was not as if anyone believed she even had them anyway.

Her throat pinched and eyes stung. The Bennet sisters had been her closest friends—perhaps her only friends. Now they were gone and married, few could see past her useful, sensible façade.

Uncle Gates had been one who could. She dragged her sleeve across her eyes and fumbled to find a handkerchief. He used to take time to talk with her, discover her opinions, her dreams. Who else even knew she had them? He took her seriously and even promised—

A sob tore through her and escaped through her clenched jaws. She dashed into the alleyway shadows as it overtook her with wracking shudders and stolen breath. She braced her hand against the dusty side of the stone building and leaned her head on her arm.

She had to bring herself under better regulation. It would not do to be found like this, crying in the streets of Meryton. But if she did not cry now, the pressure of holding it all within may well drive her mad. Tears flowed down her cheeks, dropping to the dusty ground in miniature puddles before the dirt absorbed them as though they had never been there at all.

Uncle understood her as none other did or ever would. He alone held hope that she was not yet on the shelf. He even promised to introduce her this spring to his connections in Bedford. New society might just be the thing. He was sure he would be the one to find her an amiable husband.

But now, that was over. Her own father had given up hope. Even Mama no longer brought up the possibility. John's new wife had begun talking about her coming to live with them. She too mentioned new society, but Charlotte could see through the ruse.

She straightened and dabbed her eyes. It was foolish of her to stand here, sobbing like a little girl. Things were as they were and she best accustom herself to it. Moreover, she would not continue to be a burden on her father or her brothers. After she picked up the mourning jewelry, she would visit Mrs. Ames. If she could find a position as a lady's companion for cranky Miss Rhodes, she could find one for sensible mild Miss Lucas. That was simply the way things had to be and the sooner she accepted it, the better.

She wiped her face and tucked the handkerchief into her reticule. A tug on her spencer, an adjustment of her bonnet and she could face the streets of Meryton once more.

She stepped out of the alley's shadow and paused, blinking in a ray of sunlight.

Something struck her shoulder and she cried out.

“Pray excuse me, Miss!”

She jumped aside, dodging a falling leather case. Another case teetered, barely perched atop a considerable pile carried by someone entirely unfamiliar. It fell, revealing a face.

It was a man’s face, neither young nor old. Not quite plain, but neither was he dashing. His nose was a might too large for handsome, but his soft brown eyes did much to make up the fault.

“Pray excuse me, Miss. I was blinded in the sun and could not see you there.” He glanced about, probably looking for his dropped parcels, but his eyes always returned to her.

She blushed, foolish though it was. “No harm done, sir.”

“Might I trouble you for your help?”

She picked up the fallen boxes.

“If you will just place them—” He started to bend his knees.

“No, I fear that will be too dangerous. Let me carry them for you.”

He straightened. My, he was quite tall, fully head and shoulders above her.

“I do not have far to go. Just to the jeweler’s shop.” He pointed his chin in the general direction.

“I am going there myself, so it shall be no trouble at all.”

He craned his neck around the packages in his arms and peered down at her. His lips drew up into a lopsided, endearing smile. He reminded her of a very well loved stuffed toy her youngest brother carried with him whilst he was in the nursery.

“I will accept your help most gladly then. I could not bear being an inconvenience to you.”

They set off down the street. He was lanky, almost gangly and walked with the same awkwardness of her brothers when they had grown so tall so fast.

“This is a lovely little town,” he said, “and the people here are very friendly, so much friendlier than London.”

“I have never been to London, but I do agree, Meryton is a most agreeable place.”

“I am much relieved, then to be correct in my assessment.” He grinned—at her!

What an odd, open temper he possessed. It could not be bad though, not with the delightful fluttering it stirred in her belly.

A small dog darted across their path. He tripped over his own feet and staggered several steps, swerving wildly to balance his load. “Great goodness, that was close!” He chuckled. “I must say, that was a smart little dog though. Do you like dogs?”

She cocked her head. Had she heard him correctly? “Yes, I do.”

“Very glad to hear it. I am quite fond of them myself. I always say it shows a great deal when a person does not like dogs.”

“I quite agree.” She should not be smiling so, but it would not be suppressed.

“I mean to have several, you know, dogs I mean. As soon as I get a bit more settled, I shall seek myself a puppy—”

“My father expects his hound to have a littler soon if you have a preference for—”

“Capital! I knew Providence would put me in the way of the exact means of acquiring my four-legged companion.”

“Perhaps you should see my father’s dog first?” She lifted her brows.

“If you insist, but I am sure she is a perfectly delightful creature.”

Was it wrong to be so pleased she might have his company again?

He stumbled against a step, barely catching himself and his packages. He was so skilled at preventing them from tumbling down, perhaps he was a street juggler in London. “Oh well, bother that. Forgive my clumsiness, Miss. I do believe we have arrived.”

She opened the door for him.

“Forgive me for imposing on you once again.” He edged past her.

“Not at all.”

“If you would just set those on the table there.” He pointed with his elbow.

She turned, set the boxes down, and turned back. He disappeared down a narrow, dark hall. She was alone once more.

The shop’s silence ached in her ears. She drew her shawl tighter and cast about for any sign of occupants. But none presented itself in the cold, unnaturally clean store front. Jewelry glittered, hard and cold, from the glass topped cases. Even the sunbeams through the window lost their warmth.

She sniffed and gulped back the pressure in her throat. What a fool she was—

Shuffling footsteps broke through the thick blanket of silence. “Miss Lucas.”

She turned. Mr. Wells, the jeweler shambled in. Short and round, his full beard must have contained the hair displaced from his bald head. He pushed thick glasses up his nose with a very long, nimble finger.

“Good day, Miss Lucas. Are you here for your locket or the mourning rings?”

“I came for the rings. I do not know of any locket.”

“I guess it was to have been a surprise. Still, though, I think old Gates would want you to have it.” He shuffled to one of the glass cases and unlocked a drawer beneath.

“Excuse me?”

He pulled a velvet bag from the drawer and spilled it on the glass case. A dozen mourning rings clinked and bounced upon the glass. Black enamel ovals bore Uncle’s initials. Tiny gold beads surrounded the enamel.

She picked one up and held it in the light. It was just Uncle’s taste—and hers. She slipped it on her finger.

“Gates commissioned me to make a locket—he said it was a gift for you. I do not know the occasion. Seeing how he is gone now, I don’t suppose it matters much. He paid for it up front, though, so I have no reason to keep it.” He looked over his shoulder. “Albert, bring me that locket you just finished.”

Her tall clumsy friend appeared from the narrow hall. He showed something to Mr. Wells who nodded and pointed at Charlotte.

“Miss Lucas, may I present my nephew, Mr. Lamb. He’s come to work with me here. He fashioned this piece for Gates.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Lucas.” He grinned, eyes sparkling.

Warmth flooded the room. Her cheeks prickled. “Likewise, I am sure.” She curtsied.

He handed her a locket.

She cradled it in her palm. The large oval held a woven plait of red hair shot with silver. It could only be her uncle’s. A tear stole down her cheek. Tiny seed pearls surrounded it, with a slightly larger red stone after every third pearl. She swallowed hard. Uncle was the only one who knew how much she loved garnets.

“It is lovely,” she whispered, the words tearing at her throat like thorns.

“I wish he could have been here to present it himself,” Mr. Lamb said. “Would you like to wear it?”

She nodded.

He walked behind her, took the ends of the chain, and fastened it around her neck.

She brushed the locket with her fingertips. “Thank you.”

Mr. Lamb stared down at her. “I can see he meant a great deal to you. I am sorry you have lost him.”

It would have been nice to speak, but she could only blink up at him. If her lips did not remain tightly pressed, she would certainly cry again.

“I am glad you are pleased, Miss Lucas. My nephew does excellent work.”

“Yes, he does.” She sniffled. “I—I should be going now. Thank you for everything.” She turned and hurried out.

The bright sun brought more tears to her eyes. She wiped them on her sleeve as she strode down the street.

“Miss Lucas!”

She stopped and turned toward the voice.

Mr. Lamb closed in with great length strides. “Please wait.” He reached out his hand. “You forgot these.”

The rings! What a nobby she was. She screwed her eyes shut. “Thank you.”

He pressed the black velvet bag into her palm. “It would be a shame for you to have come out for them only to leave without them.”

“Yes, of course. I am sorry, must think me—”

“Very pretty, indeed.”

She shook her head, eyes widening.

He slapped his hand over his mouth. “Forgive me. I have the most shocking tendency to speak my mind at the least appropriate moments. I hope I have not offended.”

Her cheeks burned. He thought her pretty? No man save her uncle ever called her that. “It is quite all right. Thank you.”

“I..I...that is to say—” he raked a fallen lock from his face. “May I...may I call upon you...tomorrow perhaps.”

“To see my father’s hound?”

“Yes—no—I mean—” he huffed and rubbed his forehead. “I would like to see the hound, yes, but if you do not already have a gentleman caller...”

She met his gaze. How incredibly intense it had become. All awkwardness had melted away, replaced by something she had never seen before and dearly hoped to see again, often. “I do not.”

“That is very welcome news, very welcome indeed.” His grin returned, but did not entirely displace the fiery glimmer in his eyes. “I would very much like it if I might call upon you. If you would welcome me, I mean.”

She bit her lip and drew a deep breath. “I...I would welcome you very much.”

He pulled himself up straighter. Oh he was so very tall! His grin broadened, if that were even possible.

“Capital. I...I guess I will see you tomorrow then.” He bowed from his shoulders, touched the brim of his hat and sauntered away, at least a hand span taller than when he arrived.

She stared after him until he disappeared into the jeweler’s shop. Lightheadedness threatened. Oh, she must remember to breathe. Would he keep the promise to call? His grin assured he would.

The memory of his smile and the expression in his eyes would keep her awake tonight. The locket shifted against her neck. She traced the line of pearls and garnets. Perhaps Uncle had managed to keep his promise to her after all. Her visit to Mrs. Ames would definitely wait.

Of Kympton Parish

Early spring 1813, Pemberley estate, Derbyshire

A petite young woman stood silhouetted against the rising sun. Her warm woolen coat hid her increasing belly to all but the most observant witnesses. The morning mist caressed her face, welcoming her into the quiet church yard. From the window of the grey stone parish church, her observer watched the vigil, repeating a common ritual. A familiar pull tugged at the vicar's heart. John Bradley pursed his lips and nodded his grey head.

He donned his coat reached for his cane, his familiar wintertime friend. The gnarled wooden knob fit his calloused hand, reminding him of years gone by, but those reflections would wait until later. He looped his new muffler, knitted for him by Pemberley's mistress, around his neck and pulled on his wide brimmed hat. Now he was ready to face the cold morning air. Ordinarily, he would not have been so diligent in his preparations, but the young woman would scold him relentlessly if he did not. He smiled to himself and pushed the heavy wooden door open. A chill wind buffeted him as he stepped into the morning. He pulled the muffler tighter around his neck. How dear were the hands that had crafted the thoughtful gift. The entire estate benefited greatly from her presence.

He approached with deliberate, unhurried steps. There were plenty of them for reflection and contemplation this morning. She did not turn when he stopped beside her. For several minutes they stood in silence, side by side, contemplating the neat graves, two long set, two others much more recent, but showing signs of settling into the quiet repose of the family resting place.

"I can hardly believe they are gone." Her voice was brittle in the morning breeze.

"It is always a tragedy to lose a babe before he is churched," Bradley touched her shoulder softly. "I buried my daughter and her son before he was churched. I understand."

She turned to him, tears trickling down her cheeks. "I am so sorry that you do. I would not wish this pain on anyone." She looked back at the graves and dabbed at her face with her handkerchief. "I never expected to lose them, and so close together. Who would have thought?"

He shook his head.

She wrapped her arms around her belly. "I think I would be more afraid of my coming confinement if it were not for your comfort."

"I am grateful to have been service."

The iron gate screeched. No amount of oiling or mending seemed to change its familiar greeting. It closed again, the clang echoing against the church wall and gravestones. A tall young man carrying a quiet baby in his arms. The child gazed up at him with a smile and sparkling eyes.

“I think Bennet was pleased to go with me this morning,” Darcy stood beside his wife and Bradley. “His parents were pleased to know he was so content in their choice of caregivers whilst they visit Meryton.”

“I do believe you are correct, sir. He seems in quite good spirits.” Bradley reached up to pat the boy’s cheek, allowing the child to grab his finger and try to shove it in his mouth. “He is a dear child with such a sweet disposition.”

“He reminds me of his mother,” Elizabeth murmured, stroking Bennet’s back. “She was a very sweet baby.”

Darcy laid a warm hand on her shoulder. “Mary will be a good mother to him in her stead.”

“And he will be a good son to her and Pierce.” She looked up at him lovingly. “They all have you to thank for that.”

Darcy shook his head, “She was my sister; I could have done no less. Would that I could have done more.”

“What more was there to do?” She shrugged. “After she eloped with Lt. Harper she could not return to Meryton, much less return as a widow, near to her confinement. The scandal would have destroyed my mother.” She leaned her head on his shoulder. “And it was you who insisted she be buried here, near the place where she found comfort in her last months.”

Bennet squirmed and reached out for his aunt.

She took him from Darcy and kissed the baby’s cheek. “He is such a cheerful boy, so much like Lydia. She was such a comfort to Mary, both of them sharing their confinement together.”

“It was difficult to watch Mary struggle so.” Darcy straightened his coat. He gazed at the marble cherubim standing guard over his parent’s graves.

“She was so hopeful after Lydia delivered so easily. After two days of travail, I was sure we would lose her, not Lydia.” Elizabeth cuddled Bennet closer. “After all that, it seemed so cruel that Mary’s son never took his first breath.”

“No, dear, it was a mercy.” Darcy shuddered slightly. “The child could not have lived long and watching him die slowly would have been worse.”

“I do not think Mary would have lived if Bennet had not needed her so desperately.” Elizabeth glanced back at Bradley.

“I am grateful I did not have to bury another daughter that day.” Bradley swallowed hard. “Instead, I have a grandson, Bennet Bradley Harper Pierce. The boy has almost as many names as you, Darcy.” He took the baby from Elizabeth. “God has been good to us. And God willing, in the summer, little Bennet will start to welcome his cousins.”

“It is still difficult to imagine Richard a father.” Darcy laughed.

“I suppose he says the same of you.” Elizabeth arched her eyebrow at him.

“That he does. He might be insufferable if he had been the first to produce an heir but since we attribute that honor to Pierce now, his pride is under good regulation.”

“I just received a letter from Louisa and one from Kitty. It seems there will be more cousins to welcome in the fall.”

“Now Bingley I can picture as a father! I remember well watching him and Kitty playing with the Gardiner’s children. I think I envied his ease with them.”

“In that, I believe little Bennet has done you a world of good. You are quite comfortable with him now.” Lizzy twined her fingers in his as she looked up at him.

They reminded Bradley so much of George and Anne Darcy. They would have been proud of the man Darcy had become. It was good to have Pemberley manor filled with the smiles and sighs of love once again.

Elizabeth peeked at Bradley. She giggled and broke away, taking the baby back.

“You are all men of good principles. I am grateful that I have been allowed to be here to help pass them on yet another generation.” Bradley straightened his coat and his muffler.

“As are we, sir.” Lizzy leaned over and kissed the vicar’s cheek.

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Don't miss the rest of the *Given Good Principles* Series

Darcy's Decision

Six months after his father's passing, Fitzwilliam Darcy still finds solace in his morning reflections at his parents' graves. Only in the quiet solitude of the churchyard does he indulge his grief. None but his unlikely mentor recognize the heartache and insecurity plaguing him as he shoulders the enormous burden of being Master of Pemberley. Not all are pleased with his choice of advisor. Lady Catherine complains Darcy allows her too much influence. Lord Matlock argues, "Who is he to question the God-appointed social order?" But the compassionate wisdom Darcy finds in his counselor keeps him returning for guidance even though it causes him to doubt everything he has been taught.

In the midst of his struggles to reinvent himself, his school chum, Charles Bingley, arrives. Darcy hopes the visit will offer some respite from the uproar in his life. Instead of relief, Darcy discovers his father's darkest secret staring him in the face. Pushed to his limits, Darcy must overcome the issues that ruined his father and, with his friends and mentor at his side, restore his tarnished birthright.

The Future Mrs. Darcy

With the regiment come to camp in Meryton, many young ladies are pleased. Not all share their enthusiasm. Among them, Mr. Carver, who removes his family from Meryton's savage society. He blames, not on the militia officers, but the Bennet family. The flirtations and boisterous ways of the youngest sisters are too much to be borne. Not even Jane's renowned beauty and charm can make up for them.

Elizabeth denies the allegations at first, but rapidly uncovers the shocking truth. The Carvers are not the only family to cut the Bennets from their acquaintance. Their reputations materially damaged, the family borders on social ruin.

The news is too much for Mrs. Bennet who collapses from the shock. So, Elizabeth and her sisters must manage the estate until she recovers, a task for which none of them is prepared.

Warned by Mr. Pierce, the local curate, that several of the officers have unsavory designs on the local girls, Elizabeth must find a way to honor her father, rein in her sister and salvage the family's reputation, all in the most ladylike way possible.

All the Appearance of Goodness

What is a young woman to do? One handsome young man has all the goodness, while the other, the appearance of it. How is she to separate the gentleman from the cad?

When Darcy joins his friend, Bingley on a trip to Meryton, the last thing on his mind is finding a wife. Meeting Elizabeth Bennet changes all that, but a rival for his affections appears from a most unlikely quarter. He must overcome his naturally reticent disposition if he is to have a chance of winning her favor.

Elizabeth's thoughts turn to love and marriage after her sister Mary's engagement. In a few short weeks, she goes from knowing no eligible young men, to being courted by two. Both are handsome gentlemen, but one conceals secrets and the other conceals his regard. Will she determine which is which before she commits to the wrong one?

Twelfth Night at Longbourn

Twelfth Night—a night for wondrous things to happen.

At least for other people.

In the months after her sisters' weddings, nothing has gone well for Kitty Bennet. Since Lydia's infamous elopement, her friends have abandoned her, and Longbourn is more prison than home. Not even Elizabeth's new status as Mrs. Darcy of Pemberley can repair the damage to Kitty's reputation. More than anything else, she wishes to leave the plain ordinary Kitty behind and become Catherine Bennet, a proper young lady.

Her only ray of hope is an invitation to Pemberley for the holidays. Perhaps there she might escape the effects of her sister's shame.

Getting to Pemberley is not as simple as it sounds. First she must navigate the perils of London society, the moods of Georgiana Darcy, and the chance encounter with the man who once broke her heart. Perhaps though, as Catherine, she might prove herself worthy of that gentleman's regard.

But, in an instant all her hopes are dashed, and her dreams of becoming Catherine evaporate. Will Kitty Bennet's inner strength be enough to bring her heart's desire?

On an ordinary night perhaps not, but on Twelfth Night, it just might be enough.

Available in paperback, e-book, and audiobook format at all online bookstores.

About the author

Though Maria Grace has been writing fiction since she was ten years old, those early efforts happily reside in a file drawer and are unlikely to see the light of day again, for which many are grateful.

She has one husband, two graduate degrees and two black belts, three sons, four undergraduate majors, five nieces, six pets, seven Regency-era fiction projects and notes for eight more writing projects in progress. To round out the list, she cooks for nine in order to accommodate the growing boys and usually makes ten meals at a time so she only cooks twice a month.

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