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The Other Bennet Sister

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PART ONE

## CHAPTER ONE

**I**t is a sad fact of life that if a young woman is unlucky enough to come into the world without expectations, she had better do all she can to ensure she is born beautiful. To be poor and handsome is misfortune enough; but to be penniless and plain is a hard fate indeed.

Four of the five Bennet sisters of Meryton in Hertfordshire had sensibly provided themselves with good looks enough to be accounted beauties in the limited circles in which they moved. Jane, the eldest, was the most striking, the charms of her face and figure enhanced by the unassuming modesty of her character. Elizabeth, the second sister, made up in wit and liveliness for any small deficiencies in her appearance; while Catherine and Lydia, the two youngest, exhibited all the freshness of youth, accompanied by a taste for laughter and flirtation, which recommended them greatly to young men of equally loud and indiscriminating inclinations. Only Mary, the middle daughter, possessed neither beauty, wit, nor charm; but her sisters shone so brightly that they seemed to cancel out her failure and, indeed, eclipse her presence altogether, so that by the time they were grown, the Bennet family was as regarded as one of the most pleasing in the neighbourhood.

It was common knowledge, however, that the Bennet girls' prospects were to be envied a great deal less than their beauty. At first sight, the family appeared prosperous enough. They

were the principal inhabitants of the village of Longbourn; and their house, solid and unremarkable as it was, made up in comfort what it lacked in pretension. There were servants to wait at table, a cook in the kitchen, and a man to tend the gardens; and though Mr Bennet's possessions were not extensive, they were quite enough to sustain his credit as a private gentleman. Few of the families with whom they were intimate were sufficiently rich or genteel to condescend to them with confidence, and the Bennets were regarded, in public at least, as eminently respectable ornaments to Hertfordshire society.

But in the country, no family's business is ever truly its own, and everyone knew that the outward prosperity of the Bennets rested on very uncertain foundations. Their property was subject to an entail which restricted inheritance to male heirs; if no Bennet son was produced, the estate would pass eventually into the hands of Mr Bennet's cousin. At first, this had seemed of little significance. As baby after baby arrived at Longbourn with promising regularity, surely, it was only a matter of time before the much-anticipated Bennet boy put in his overdue appearance. But when the tally of girls reached five, and it was clear no more children could be expected, the entail cast a deepening shadow over the family's happiness. On Mr Bennet's death, his widow and daughters would be left with nothing but five thousand pounds in the four per cents, and a humiliating reliance on the uncertain charity of a distant and unknown relative. Their friends were not without sympathy for the Bennets' plight, but that did nothing to dampen their curiosity about what was to come, for what could be more compelling than to watch at first hand the probable wreck and dissolution of an entire family's fortune?

Mr Bennet refused to gratify his neighbours by displaying

any obvious disappointment at the cruel trick of fate which had deprived his dependants of the security he had once so confidently expected them to enjoy. To the world at large, he remained what he had always been: detached, amused, and apparently resigned to an outcome it was not in his power to change. To his family themselves, he seemed barely more concerned. Perhaps in the long hours he spent in his library, he wrestled with himself to find an answer to their plight. If so, he shared neither his anxieties nor his conclusions with them.

His wife, however, had none of his restraint. Mrs Bennet thought of little else but the hardships which lay in store for herself and her daughters when Mr Bennet was dead, and she was often to be heard lamenting the wickedness of the entail, both at home and abroad. Her nerves, she declared, were not equal to the strain placed upon them by such an unfortunate business. How anyone could have had the conscience to entail away an estate from their daughters she did not profess to understand; but unless something was done about it, ruin must engulf them all. She was a woman of no great intelligence and small imagination, but she possessed considerable powers of energy and application, which she devoted with all the tenacity at her command to finding a solution to their predicament. She was soon persuaded that there was only one answer to the miserable situation in which her girls were placed: they must marry, as quickly and as advantageously as possible. If their father could not secure his daughters' futures, they must look to a husband to do so.

To have seen her daughters married to men of merely respectable means would have soothed away many of Mrs Bennet's fears; but to imagine them united to husbands of ample income and substantial property was for her a joy

undimmed by frequent contemplation. Nothing made her happier than to think of them in possession of elegant houses and rolling parkland, certain of never hearing the dreaded word *entail* again. She was aware, of course, that wealthy men in want of wives were not easy to find and harder still to catch, especially by girls without large dowries. But she was undaunted. Her daughters, she believed, possessed an advantage that would enable them to triumph over all difficulties: other girls might be rich, but her daughters were beautiful. This, she was sure, was the blessing that would deliver them into wealth. Their looks would attract men of the first eligibility, dazzling their eyes, winning their hearts, and persuading them to ignore the promptings of cold, mercenary common sense. It was for Mrs Bennet an article of faith that, in the absence of ten thousand pounds in the hand, a pretty face was the single most valuable asset a young woman could possess.

Her own experience confirmed her opinion, for, some twenty-five years before, it had been Mrs Bennet's youthful beauty which had swept a besotted Mr Bennet to the altar, overcoming all obstacles that appeared to stand in the way of their union. As he gazed on her handsome face, it had meant nothing to him that her father was merely a country attorney who kept an office in Meryton, or that her brother lived within sight of his own warehouses in Cheapside. He had been determined to marry her, and against all advice to the contrary, he had done so. On the whole, Mrs Bennet considered herself well satisfied with the outcome. It was true that Mr Bennet was a whimsical man who teased her more than she thought proper. But as mistress of Longbourn, she presided over a property large enough to gratify her vanity, while her husband's rank assured her the pleasure of patronising her

less-fortunate acquaintances on every possible occasion. For Mr Bennet, however, the benefits of his marriage were far less apparent. His failure to consider whether his spouse's character was likely to bring him as much pleasure as her appearance had more serious and lasting consequences. The shallowness of Mrs Bennet's mind, and the limited nature of her interests, meant theirs could never be a partnership of equals. She could be neither his companion nor his friend. Her beauty had been enough to win him, but, as Mr Bennet soon understood, it was not enough to make him happy.

Fortunately for Mrs Bennet, she was not a reflective woman, and if her husband now regretted the principles on which he had made his choice of a wife, she remained oblivious of this fact. As a result, her prejudices survived unchallenged. She esteemed no qualities of female character other than beauty. Wit and intellect, kindness and good humour mattered not at all to her. Good looks trumped every other attribute. In her daughters, she valued nothing so much as their power to please.

With four of her girls, Mrs Bennet had, in this respect, every reason to be satisfied. Of Jane she entertained the highest possible hopes, for, as she frequently observed to Mr Bennet, she could not have been born so beautiful for nothing. Three further sisters, if not quite as generously blessed as Jane, were still, in Mrs Bennet's opinion, sufficiently distinguished to attract notice wherever they went. Only one of her daughters had failed her. Mary had made the mistake of inheriting neither the looks nor the charm shared by all other female members of the Bennet family. This was a sin for which, in Mrs Bennet's eyes, there could be no forgiveness, as Mary herself had quickly discovered.

## CHAPTER TWO

Mary could not remember exactly when she had discovered she was plain. She did not think she had known it when, as a very little girl, she had played happily with Jane and Elizabeth, running round the garden with grass stains on her dress; or when they had huddled together before the nursery fire, warming their feet on the fender. She did not think she had known it when Mrs Hill, her mother's housekeeper, had washed her face every morning and tied a clean pinafore over her dress. She had certainly not known it when she and her elder sisters had rushed into the kitchen on baking days, begging for a crust of warm bread which they would carry away and eat together behind the shrubbery, laughing as if they would never stop. Then, she thought, she had been happy. But by the time she was seven or eight years old, she had begun to suspect something was not quite right. She saw that her mother often looked at her with an expression she did not direct at Jane or Lizzy. It was something between irritation and puzzlement, Mary was not quite sure which, but she came to recognise it very well. A summons always followed.

'Come here, child, and let me look at you.'

Mary would get down from her chair and walk across the drawing room to where Mrs Bennet sat, uneasy under her mother's scrutiny. Her hair ribbons would be tweaked, her

sash re-tied, her dress pulled this way and that. But whatever it was that bothered Mrs Bennet, none of her attempts to correct it ever satisfied. She pursed her lips and looked away, frustrated, speechlessly waving her daughter back to her place. Mary knew she had disappointed her mother, even if she did not yet know in what way she had fallen short.

But she was a clever girl, and she soon understood what the sighs and frowns and dismissals meant. She could not help but notice that Mrs Bennet never talked about her appearance with the pleasure with which she described her elder sisters.

'Jane is as lovely as an angel,' her mother often declared, regarding her eldest daughter with transparent pride. 'It is a pleasure just to gaze at her.'

Jane would hang her head, for she was a modest girl, and compliments made her blush. She would not look at Elizabeth, who, when Mrs Bennet's preening grew excessive, would catch her sister's eye and try to make her laugh. Elizabeth's own appearance was not quite so much to her mother's taste as Jane's. Her dark eyes and sparkling smile were too suggestive of her lively character to win Mrs Bennet's wholehearted approval. She was too amused with the world to qualify as a true beauty; but for all her misgivings, Mrs Bennet's appraising eye acknowledged there was something about Lizzy that appealed. While she often scolded her second daughter for the pertness of her remarks and the independence of her spirit, she did not complain of her looks.

As she grew older, Mary waited hopefully for Mrs Bennet to bestow similar words of appreciation upon her. At first, she imagined her mother's approval would come naturally with time, that she would reach an age when she too would bask in her admiration. But even when she paid extra attention to

herself, making sure that her stockings were straight, her face was clean, and her hair well brushed, still her mother had no kind word to offer her. Month after month, she waited, anxiously anticipating the moment when Mrs Bennet would find something about her to praise. Perhaps her eyes might be considered fine, or her figure graceful. Perhaps her hair might be her best feature. She did not mind which part of her Mrs Bennet thought worthy of notice; anything would do, as long as it allowed her the chance to take her place amongst her sisters in the glow of their mother's approval.

Mary was ten when she understood this would never happen. It was a warm afternoon. Mrs Bennet was taking tea with her sister, Mrs Phillips. Jane and Lizzy had vanished at the sound of their aunt's arrival, leaving Mary alone, perched on the sofa, twisting the ends of her hair in her hands, wishing desperately to be somewhere else. Neither her mother nor her aunt paid her any attention. Their conversation rambled on, ranging from the likelihood of Lady Lucas's cook leaving her – 'and just before the bottling season too' – to the probability of the vicar's wife being brought to bed this very week; but when Mrs Phillips dropped her voice to a whisper and leaned forward to impart a particularly choice piece of gossip, Mrs Bennet was suddenly alert to her daughter's presence.

'Mary, go down to the kitchen and bring up some more sugar. Take the bowl. Now, please.'

Delighted to be released, Mary lingered as long as she could on her errand, dawdling back along the hall, kicking her shoes against the flagstones to see how much dust she could raise. At the door to the morning room, she stopped to smooth down her dress when, emerging from the low murmur of conversation, she heard her own name pronounced. She

knew she should declare herself – Mrs Hill had often told her that listeners never heard good about themselves – but she found it impossible to draw away.

'I think Mary is in better looks today,' remarked Mrs Phillips. 'A little less pale than usual.'

Mrs Bennet sniffed. 'It's kind of you to say so, sister, but I'm afraid I can't agree. For so young a girl, she has no bloom at all. Not like Jane and Lizzy. Their bloom is always very much remarked upon.'

'Indeed, they are very pleasing,' agreed Mrs Phillips obligingly. 'And I doubt that Mary will ever be admired as they are. But, sister, I wonder if you aren't rather harsh in judging her as you do? Perhaps she suffers by comparisons. If Jane and Lizzy were a little less handsome, then she might seem prettier in your eyes?'

'I wish with all my heart you were right, but I'm afraid comparisons don't come into it. Mary is simply very plain, and that's that. I blame Mr Bennet's side of the family. We Gardiners have always been remarkable for our appearance.'

Mrs Phillips topped up her tea and looked for the sugar bowl.

'Well, I'm very sorry for the girl. It cannot be easy to be the only ugly duckling amongst so many swans.'

'Yes, it is a great disappointment to me, and excessively bad for my nerves. But I find that once I look at my other daughters, I soon feel better. Where has she got to with the sugar?'

Mary edged into the room, her eyes on the floor. Her fingers were clenched very tightly round the sugar bowl as she placed it on the table. Her aunt smiled at her, but Mrs Bennet paid no attention as she slipped away. In the hall, her heart beat hard in her chest. She felt her mother's words with as

much force as if they had been a blow. So now she knew, she thought, as she walked upstairs. Now she understood. She was plain – like a boiled potato, a length of unbleached calico, a flat white dinner plate. She walked into her bedroom, pulled the chair towards her dressing table and placed her face as close as she could to the little mirror. The glass was old and tarnished but provided enough reflection for Mary to see herself clearly within it. A small face looked back at her, round and pale. Yes, she thought, a dinner plate. Her grey eyes, under light eyebrows, were neither large and blue like Jane's nor dark and clever like Lizzy's. Her features were regular enough, but they were not distinguished. Her mouth was narrow, her lips thin. There was an anxious look about her, she decided. Her face did not suggest, as Lizzy's did, that she might break into laughter at any time. Her hair was a light brown. It was not gold and shining, as Jane's was. There was nothing about her, she concluded, that demanded attention or that would make anyone look upon her with pleasure. Her mother was right; she neither glowed nor bloomed. For a while she stared at the mirror, still hoping to find some bright feature, some hidden asset that might redeem her. When she found nothing, she picked up the shawl that lay hanging on the back of her chair and draped it carefully over the mirror. A single tear trickled down her face which she did not trouble to wipe away.

Mary said nothing to Jane or Lizzy about what she had heard. She supposed they knew already; her plainness now seemed so obvious that she did not know how she had not seen it herself. She did not expect them to show her any sympathy. They would never understand how she felt. How could they? Their beauty was as much a part of them as an arm or a

leg – it was impossible for them to imagine life without it. Under its protection, they would leap and spring and dance into their futures; she, on the other hand, would trudge stolidly forward, placing one foot in front of the other without joy or grace. She had learned from Mrs Bennet that without beauty no real and lasting happiness was attainable. It never occurred to her to question what she'd been taught.

She had always been a cautious, watchful girl; now she thought of little else but the poor impression she must make upon those around her. The high spirits that had once inspired her to play and run about with her sisters ebbed away. She no longer had the heart for it. When Jane and Lizzy romped together or raced about the garden, everyone smiled and said they looked charming; but Mary told herself that if she were to do the same, she would appear ridiculous. It did not seem fitting for her to be light-hearted. Seriousness seemed the only quality a plain girl might adopt without exposing herself to the scorn or pity of others. Gradually she became used to it, until she came to believe that it was her nature, that this solemn, solitary, awkward creature was really who she was.

She watched with sadness as Jane and Lizzy drifted steadily away from her. They gave up their attempts to include her, rebuffed by her unhappiness. Mary was not surprised. Of course they preferred each other. How could they not? It was not long before they formed a tight, impregnable partnership, shored up by shared confidences and whispered asides. Mary could hardly believe there had ever been room for another sister in their affections, let alone herself. She bore the loss of Jane philosophically. For all Jane's sweetness, Mary had always found her a remote presence, unknowable behind her perfect face; but the gulf that had opened up between herself

and Elizabeth caused her real pain. It was only as they drew apart that Mary realised how much she loved her, how much she had revelled in her lively presence. No one could make you laugh as Lizzy could, tease you into happiness, coax you into smiling at yourself with such easy charm. For a while, Mary clung on to a hope that Lizzy would be the one to save her – that she would recognise her sadness and extend her hand to help her, pulling her out of the pit of misery into which she felt she was slowly sinking. But although Lizzy sometimes looked at Mary with puzzlement, sometimes almost with regret, she neither spoke nor acted to keep her near; and soon their old closeness was nothing more than a memory.

As her elder sisters retreated from her, Mary had wondered whether she might not find a friend in one of the younger girls. When they were small, she watched them keenly, trying to see if they had inherited Jane's and Lizzy's beauty. She did not like to admit what it was that she hoped for. It seemed a cruel thing to wish that a chubby toddler might not grow into a fine young girl; but Mary could not help it. If either Kitty or Lydia turned out to be plain, then she might not feel so alone. Two plain sisters would understand each other. They would make common cause together, and surely, grow to be friends. It was not long before it became obvious this would not happen. By the time they were in their first proper frocks, even Mary could see that they followed not in her footsteps, but in those of Jane and Elizabeth.

'They are handsome little things,' declared their mother, with satisfaction. 'Not quite the equal of Jane, but very pleasing nonetheless. Four beauties out of five is a very respectable number. I'm sure no one could have done better.'

As Kitty and Lydia grew older, Mary quickly understood

that her younger sisters had as little need of her as the elder two had. Left to herself, Kitty might have weakened. She was a mild, pliable girl, eager to please. She might have been persuaded to be Mary's friend. But the youngest Bennet daughter was determined that would not happen. Even as a child, Lydia was headstrong, bold, and wilful; and once she decided she wanted Kitty for herself, Mary was no match for her. It did not take long before Kitty was entirely in thrall to Lydia, dominated by her iron whim, obediently echoing all her opinions. Soon, Kitty had as little time for Mary as did anyone else. By the time she was fourteen, Mary knew she came first with none of her sisters. She was no one's special friend or confidante. Neither her mother nor her father looked on her with any particular affection. In the midst of so large a family, she was utterly alone.