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**Austen University Mysteries
BOOK 2**



**THE
PORTRAITS
OF
PEMBERLEY**

ELIZABETH GILLILAND

the portraits of pemberley

Book Sirens Excerpt

book two in the austen university mysteries

Elizabeth Gilliland



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volume one

“There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular
evil.”

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

one

november - 10 days after the event

GEORGE WICKHAM WAS FOUND (by a freshman of no real importance) on the campus square, tied up, spread-eagle, hungover, and it must be noted, completely naked.

While there were many at Austen University who felt the punishment fit the crime, there were also those who failed to see the poetic justice—among them, naturally, Wickham himself, along with the Austen University administration, including President de Bourgh.

And, as it was rapidly becoming clear to Elizabeth Bennet as she sat in the waiting room outside her office door, whatever President de Bourgh thought, so too thought her office assistant, Mr. Collins.

“You’ve made us quite upset, Miss Bennet,” Collins informed her, glaring across his desk. “*Quite* upset.”

Along with having his lips permanently attached to President de Bourgh’s ass, Mr. Collins was, unfortunately, Lizzy’s first cousin once removed. Up until recently, this relation had not seemed quite so unlucky, since it was at Mr. Collins’s encouragement that Lizzy had applied to Austen University and gotten a full-tuition scholarship for academic achievement. Coming from a family with five daughters, Lizzy knew this was no small financial feat, and thus managed to hold her tongue at her distant cousin’s strange habit of insisting on being called “Mr. Collins,” even by his relatives.

Observing this sycophantic behavior in her cousin, however, Lizzy

felt a twinge of worry about her genetic makeup. She'd already had her concerns from her mother's side, but now she had to worry about what unpleasant dormant lurkers might be hiding on her father's side, too.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Collins," Lizzy told him evenly, and could not help herself from adding, "*quite* sorry."

Collins's face furrowed with the effort of determining if he was being apologized to, or mocked. Fortunately before any permanent wrinkles could be fixed in place, the intercom buzzed, and President de Bourgh's imperious voice snipped over the speaker. "Is she here?"

"I'll bring her straight in." With that, Collins opened the office door and glared Lizzy into entering.

With her Southern flair for the dramatics, President de Bourgh had kept the back of her office chair turned toward the door, waiting for Mr. Collins to come to stand behind the desk with an outraged glower, before slowly turning to face Lizzy.

Caren de Bourgh was precisely the sort of woman who looked as though she would never die, which is to say, she had the appearance of a hardy tangerine left out in the sun for just a bit too long. Her hair was dyed a deep black which nobody had believed to be her natural hair color for at least the last twenty years, and it was styled in a gravity-defying bouffant that betrayed her age more than any grays could. She had a penchant for wearing bright-colored shirts and distinctive pieces of jewelry, the bigger the better, that was perhaps matched only by her love of pralines, of which she always had a tin on-hand.

"Elizabeth Bennet," she drawled in her distinctly Charleston accent, "take a seat."

Lizzy did so, careful to keep her back straight and to only cross her legs at the ankles. These old Southern women had eyes like hawks, and took any sign of comfort or familiarity as an indication of bad moral character.

"I suppose you know why you're here?"

"I'm assuming it's because of my article."

"If you can even call it that." Mr. Collins' own fairly mild accent always became much more pronounced in his boss's presence.

President de Bourgh retrieved the offending article from the *Juve-*

nilia—the weekly university publication—and placed it squarely in the middle of her desk. “Would you care to explain to me what this is?”

Lizzy observed where President de Bourgh’s finger had landed. “I believe that’s a penis, President de Bourgh.”

A *pixelated* penis, but still it took a full minute for the furor to die down, with President de Bourgh alternating between loudly condemning Lizzy’s forward, Yankee ways, and Mr. Collins following his boss in an awkward echo as he hurried to repeat everything de Bourgh said and match her ire for ire.

Lizzy waited for the commotion to die down before supplying, “I suppose you were referring to the article itself? It would have been strange if the school paper didn’t cover the incident.” Wickham’s public display had been huge news across campus, after all—and hard to miss, with so many people posting pictures before security was able to cut him loose.

“We made it very clear to your faculty chair that nothing about the incident was meant to be broadcast through school media. Professor Palmer led me to understand that you were instructed not to write the article, but printed it anyway.”

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. “I was advised not to, but ‘instructed’? That sounds an awful lot like censorship.”

“Your point being?”

Propriety be damned. Lizzy crossed her legs, taking pleasure in the little hitch of distaste on President de Bourgh’s upper lip. “Look, the article is out there. Can’t undo it. No use crying over spilt milk—or loose nuts, as the case may be.”

She’d hoped the phrasing might incur another outcry of moral outrage, but instead President de Bourgh glared at her. Not so much a glare of dislike, although the emotion in question was certainly present in that steely blue gaze, but one of calculation. “You’re awfully self-assured for someone so young. Pray tell, how does someone of your age get to be quite so confident?”

“Pray tell,” Collins echoed with a sneer, until President de Bourgh waved a hand in his direction and he all but clapped his hand over his mouth, mortified at having spoken out of turn.

This felt like a trap. Lizzy tread carefully. “I don’t know. I mean, I always eat my Wheaties...”

Alas, de Bourgh did not crack even the smallest of smiles. “Tell us, Miss-Know-It-All-Bennet, what should the administration do, rather than—as you put it—cry over spilt milk?”

“Well, I guess I’d put my effort toward trying to find out whoever tied Wickham up in the first place.”

Somehow, and Lizzy did not quite know how, she had stepped onto a hidden landmine. President de Bourgh smiled. “Marvelous plan, don’t you think, Mr. Collins?”

Even Mr. Collins seemed a bit taken aback by her abrupt shift in mood, and had to double-check President de Bourgh’s expression before parroting, “Marvelous!”

“Great. I’m glad that’s settled.” Lizzy rose to her feet, hoping a hasty exit might save her from whatever unpleasantness was bound to follow.

President de Bourgh’s voice reached her before she managed to make it out the door. “You’ll let us know, won’t you? As soon as you figure it out.”

“As soon as *I* figure it out?” Lizzy was beginning to understand Mr. Collins’s propensity for echoing.

President de Bourgh’s smile was a full-on, cat-that-ate-the-canary grin now. “Very generous of you to volunteer to discover who tied George Wickham up in the campus square. Of course, as this is a time-sensitive issue, we’ll need an answer by a week from today. Or we’ll have to assume that you—as a person with vested interest in seeing Mr. Wickham publically humiliated—are the culprit. And what do you think the punishment for such a crime should be, Mr. Collins?”

Mr. Collins looked thrilled, and maybe even a little aroused, at the sudden power that had been placed into his hands. “Suspension?”

“For an infraction this significant, Mr. Collins? I’d hate to think you’d gone soft.”

He was practically quivering now with the ecstasy of it. “Expulsion.”

“Yes, Mr. Collins, I believe that would be the most fitting solution.”

Lizzy kept her face perfectly composed, not wanting to give either the satisfaction of seeing her panic. And most certainly, it would be

satisfaction that these two sadists would feel at the thought of seeing her squirm. “Then I suppose I’ll see you in a week.”

And it wasn’t until she was safely in the windowless stairwell that Lizzy let herself collapse against the wall, sliding down to sit on one of the steps. “Well, shit.”

chapter two

IT IS a truth universally acknowledged that a woman at risk of being expelled for a crime she didn't commit must be in want of some chocolate.

Granted, it didn't take much to make Elizabeth Bennet crave chocolate. Chocolate was the elixir of choice when celebrations were in order, and the drug of choice when life was at its most trying. She had long ago come to terms with the fact that she would never have the so-called ideal body, and that she would always be just a little bit "plush" (as her diplomatic older sister, Jane, had once phrased it in an attempt to be kind). In every other aspect of health, Lizzy could practice moderation. She ate mostly fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats; she loved to take long, vigorous walks; she could take or leave drinking, and drugs were a hard pass for her, except for marijuana (which was basically the state flower of her home state, Colorado, as well as a personal favorite of her father's). But chocolate? Chocolate, she believed, was the only thing not meant to be enjoyed in moderation. Whoever said that "nothing tasted as good as being thin felt" (an adage her mother tried not-so-subtly to ingrain in her daughters' young minds) had obviously never had a fresh-baked chocolate-chip cookie. Chocolate-dipped strawberries. The perfect cup of hot cocoa.

It was this last item that Lizzy purchased for solace from the Crescent as she confided the events of the morning to her roommate, Nora

Dashwood. The Crescent, Lizzy believed, had the best cup of hot chocolate in town, if not the country, if not the entire world. Most coffee shops made their cocoa an afterthought, putting together a treacly substance that was more sugar than chocolate, but the Crescent had just the right balance of sweet and rich, a true sensory pleasure—and not something for the faint of tongue. Even Lizzy didn't normally partake of something so decadent on a weekday morning, but it was a needed antidote to that meeting with de Bourgh.

Nora watched her with thinly masked concern as she drained the dark chocolate concoction. “Do you think she could have been bluffing? Maybe she won't really expel you.”

Lizzy sighed glumly as she scraped what remained of the chocolate dregs at the bottom of her mug. “De Bourgh doesn't bluff,” she returned bleakly. Anyone that used to having the world at her beck and call didn't make idle threats about getting her way, after all. “It's fine, though. My mom says you don't need a college education to get married and pregnant, so all I have to do is find someone to knock me up and make an honest woman out of me.”

“Well. You haven't been expelled yet, so don't poke any premature holes in the condoms.”

One of the nice things about Nora, and the reason that Lizzy had immediately gravitated toward her back in their pledging days at Pi Kappa Sigma, was her unflappability in the face of any crisis. On paper, that might not seem like the most exciting or alluring quality in a person, but having grown up in the Bennet household with an array of high-strung personalities, Lizzy appreciated a person who could take things in stride. It had also made immediate sense to her, after meeting Nora's younger sister Marianne, why there was very little that could ruffle Nora's feathers.

The cup sufficiently drained, Lizzy sighed and set it back on the table. “I'm afraid it's only a matter of time. De Bourgh's been wanting a scapegoat from the Austen Murder Club for a while. Bad luck that it had to be me, I guess.”

Before Nora could answer, her gaze caught on something over Lizzy's shoulder, and she stiffened. Frowning, Lizzy turned to see that Fo-Hian Darcy and Charlie Bingley had just entered the coffee shop.

Lizzy felt herself tense, too, overcome with a swift and paralyzing sense of confused embarrassment at the sight of Darcy. She hadn't seen him since...well, since the night that Wickham had been tied up and left naked in the campus square. Not that it was unusual for Darcy and Lizzy to go long periods without being in contact; they were barely acquaintances. In fact, it would have been strange for him to reach out to her—only she'd called him that night, and texted, more than once, and there had never been any response. That in and of itself was a response, she supposed—but there had been something strange and charged between them that night at the gala, hadn't there?

All of this moved so quickly through Lizzy's mind that she didn't have time to make herself look away before Darcy noticed her staring. For a moment they were mutually staring at each other, Darcy's face inscrutable. At last, he leaned over to say something to Bingley, who did a double-take at the sight of Nora. *His* feelings, at least, were clear; he was embarrassed, but too well-bred to pretend he hadn't noticed her. After a brief moment's deliberation, the two boys began to make their way over to the table.

Finally, Lizzy was able to wrench her gaze away from Darcy, exchanging a quick, wordless glance with Nora. She would have offered some sign of solidarity between them if Nora's eyes hadn't communicated so clearly that she didn't want any kind of fuss. Nothing to indicate that her heart had been smashed to smithereens by Charlie the previous semester. It was completely in keeping with Nora's personality—logos first and foremost, barely any pathos—but even so, Lizzy had to be impressed by her friend's fortitude. No one looking at her now would have ever guessed there'd been anything between her and Charlie, last year or *ever*.

"Hello, Nora. Elizabeth." Darcy stopped just short of their table, not so much oblivious to the stares he drew as he crossed the room as accustomed to them. At well over six feet and with an aesthetically appealing combination of tall, dark, and handsome, Darcy had the easy authority of someone who'd had every door in life open to him, always.

Bingley was softer, sweeter, with his boyish good looks and dimples, though he also topped just over six feet and was just as athletic as Darcy. Even the little bit of stubble he'd apparently grown in Paris couldn't

make him look like less of a baby-face. His hair was shorter than Lizzy had last seen it, buzzed into a fade that ended just above his ears.

As he met Lizzy's gaze, he grinned, seeming genuinely happy to see her. "Hey, Lizzy. How you been?"

Lizzy faltered for a moment, uncertain what the protocol was for seeing the guy who'd almost dated one's best friend but abruptly left midway through the previous semester without saying goodbye. Should she be standoffish, in solidarity with Nora? But then, Nora didn't seem to want to let on at all that Bingley's departure had fazed her, so it would be strange for Lizzy to be cold when Nora herself seemed so collected. She would just be undermining Nora then, wouldn't she?

And anyway, it was impossible to be indifferent to that puppy-dog expression, those dimples. Lizzy rose to her feet, giving him a quick embrace. "Hi, Charlie. It's good to have you back. Are you *back* back?"

Bingley's gaze darted to Nora before he caught himself, looking instead to Darcy. "To be determined." Steeling himself visibly, he faced Nora. "Hi, Nora."

Nora stood, too. She made no move to hug Bingley, but her smile was friendly. "Hi, Charlie. It's nice to see you."

"Nice to see you, too."

A long pause followed that interaction, as no one seemed entirely sure how to proceed. They were rescued—or at the very least, distracted—by Karoline's loud, distinct voice.

"Charlie! Darcy! There you are." Lizzy looked up at the sound of Karoline's heels clacking across the floor. Behind her, Lucy Steele was dressed in obvious imitation of Karoline's flashy style, and was apparently now following her like a lapdog—which was a kind of surprising turn of events, but in hindsight, shouldn't have been. "Please tell me you have my oat milk latte—I'm in desperate need of caffeine."

Karoline drew up short at the sight of Lizzy and Nora, doing an admirable job of pretending to notice them for the first time. If life as a soul-sucking harpy didn't work out for her, she might be able to fall back on a career in the theatre. "Oh, Elinor. Elizabeth. I didn't realize today was coupon day at the Crescent."

Lucy smirked, exchanging a conspiratorial look with Karoline—which was a bit rich, all things considered. Lizzy only just managed to

suppress an eyeroll. She hadn't thought Lucy could manage to get any more annoying, but sometimes people could exceed expectations. "Well, some things are actually much worse when you get two for the price of one," she returned, smiling sweetly at the two newcomers in their matching lavender dresses.

Karoline spared Lizzy a brief glare before casting her gaze, nervously, to her brother in such close proximity to Nora. Lizzy saw the exact moment that Karoline realized all of her evil machinations to keep them apart might come to naught if they actually had the opportunity to talk to each other again. "Charlie, you should probably be getting back to the Theta house. Knightley said he was going to drop by today to say hello."

"He said he *might* drop by." Bingley returned, sounding embarrassed for Karoline's obvious intervention. Then, glancing around the group gathered at the table—and probably calculating how awkward Karoline could make things for Nora—he seemed to reconsider. "But there were some other Thetas I wanted to catch up with..."

"Are you walking?" Lucy spoke up, seemingly oblivious to the tension around the table. "I was going to head back to the Delta house and it's on the way."

"Um. Sure, yeah." Bingley cast a quick glance at Nora before waving to the group without quite meeting anyone's eyes. "Bye."

Silence, awkward and painful, followed in their wake. Karoline was smug, Nora stoic, and Lizzy simmering.

Darcy was the one to break the silence. He shifted, looking almost-uncomfortable? His features had always seemed incapable of making such an expression. It didn't sit well on him. "I heard you met with President de Bourgh." Darcy never referred to the woman in question as his aunt. It was almost cute, that he had deluded himself that everyone hadn't already pieced their relationship together. Or maybe it was just gauche in his social circle to throw that kind of information around.

"I did," Lizzy confirmed.

Another shift from Darcy, a slight bob of his throat. "What happened?"

Lizzy drew in a breath, torn between fully outing President de Bourgh's scheming and putting Darcy in an awkward position. Which,

in itself, put Lizzy in an awkward position, because it had never once crossed her mind in her past interactions to worry about how Darcy, of all people, might be feeling, and the world suddenly felt off-kilter in a way that left her feeling unsteady on her feet. “Not much,” she hedged.

To her surprise, Nora spoke up. “She’ll be expelled if she can’t figure out who ‘assaulted’ Wickham within a week.”

Lizzy blinked at her friend, incredulous, but Nora looked completely unapologetic as she met her gaze. And maybe she was right. Maybe Darcy *should* know. Peripherally, Lizzy was also aware of Karoline trying desperately to fight back her gleeful smile—God, she must just be loving this—but her eyes fixed on Darcy, needing to see his reaction.

He blinked at her, as if he was uncertain he’d heard Nora right. “She actually said that? That you would be expelled?”

“Those were her exact words.” Now Lizzy did look at Karoline, raising an eyebrow. “You got something you wanna say, Karoline?”

Karoline remained silent, pressing her lips together, though her eyes danced gleefully.

When Lizzy looked back to Darcy, his face was expressionless. “I see,” he said, then looked down at his watch. “I have a meeting.” And with that, he turned and left the cafe.

Lizzy wasn’t the only one flabbergasted by the response. The mirth fled from Karoline’s face, replaced with dismay. “But...I thought we were getting coffee?” She followed after him, heels clattering in her wake.

That was...weird. Lizzy knew that things had become complicated between her and Darcy, but she’d expected him to at least pretend to care that she might get expelled. But maybe that would involve admitting that his aunt had done something wrong, and he just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Lizzy did her best to shake the encounter off, looking over to Nora, who was watching her with a strange expression on her face. “What?” Lizzy asked.

A beat, and then Nora shook her head—slowly, as if she were piecing things together. “Nothing,” she said, then raised her mug to take a long sip of coffee—her eyes darting back to Lizzy’s face again in a long, silent appraisal.

about the author



Elizabeth Gilliland is a writer, Dr., wife, mom, and lifelong Jane Austen fan. She is a playwright (whose plays have appeared off-off Broadway), a screenwriter (with a master's in screenwriting and production), an academic (with a PhD and a dissertation on Jane Austen adaptations), and now a published author! When she isn't writing or grading papers, she is most likely reading a good book, binge watching the latest hit, working on a puzzle, or hanging with her cute kid.

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Austen University Mysteries Series

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