

CHAPTER ONE

I suppose if this were a proper book I'd begin it something like, "Miss Lydia Bennet, youngest of five daughters to a father hopelessly entailed, had few advantages in life, but not too few to squander." That sounds fine, and important, and promises that no matter how exciting the story may become it will all resolve with a tidy boring moral at the end. That is why Kitty and I prefer to skip the last chapter of novels.

However, that bit about squandering isn't true. Oh, I daresay many in Meryton would whisper that I had indeed squandered all my advantages of birth and position; and that much is true, and Lord knows I have shed many a tear over it. However, I was born with greater gifts than one silly girl can use up in a lifetime. Kitty is proof enough of that. For another thing, I am not the youngest of five daughters. I am the youngest of seven.

Those who knew me in Meryton would frown over this, and perhaps discreetly count on their fingers. As far as the public remembers, we Bennet sisters number but five. There is beautiful Jane, the eldest; Lizzy, second in beauty and first in her own mind; dull, moralizing Mary, so mortified by her own lack of beauty that she was doomed to become clever; my darling Kitty; and me, Lydia, the baby.

This count is wrong in two respects. Firstly, three of my elder sisters died shortly after birth. No doubt the world scarcely remembers them, for unless Mamma wanted something from my father and wished to remind him of all she had gone through on his behalf, Charlotte, Anne, and Sophia were rarely spoken of in our household. Quite right, too. Deceased progeny are hardly a jolly topic of conversation, I think.

Nevertheless, this makes me, Lydia, the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. Strange, is it not, that being born so late and a girl should be a source of both my misfortune and my strength?

Those readers diligently counting Miss Bennets will have noted that the count is still off by one. Five living girls and three dead ones bring the total to eight, not seven. Is all this arithmetic making your head ache? It is mine. Perhaps I'd better begin again.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter must be a witch.

My earliest memories are of my sisters' backs. I remember toddling along after them, calling for them to wait. Jane was always kind, and Lizzy only slapped me if I tangled her embroidery; but Mary loathed me. She would begin to cry and whine to our mother the moment I came near. "Mamma, Lydia pulled my hair! She stained my dress! Take her away! Mamma!"

Quite often I did pull her hair and stain her dress, but I was only trying to get close to her. I adored her, and yanking on one of her long, neat plaits was one of the most reliable ways to get her attention. I thought of nothing but attracting attention in those days; in our large family circle I was often forgotten. They do not remember it so, of course—in a large family, every child is sure that they alone were uniquely neglected. Lizzy says I was Mamma's favorite from birth, which is quite possible, but Mamma was often abed with her nerves or another failed attempt to produce an heir, and quite often no one was looking after me at all. Once my mother, after bringing me on a morning visit to show me off to Lady Lucas, forgot me in the carriage, and no one found me until tea-time. Another time I fell in the stream that ran through the garden, and despite my cries no one came. It was one of my father's tenants who fished me out, and that, I believe, because he heard my cries and thought me one of his lambs. Jackson brought me into the house, dripping and sobbing, and *then* the house was set in as much of an uproar as I could wish. I spent the evening on my mother's lap, being squeezed and kissed

and lamented over, while my sisters petted and caressed me and brought me sweets and bits of ribbon.

The next day, I threw myself in the creek again. Well, what did they expect? A good thing witches float.

I wanted hugs and sweets and smiles from them all. Failing that, I would accept scolds and slaps. Mary was my primary object. I adored her, worshiped her, thought she was beautiful. (She should have enjoyed it while it lasted—I was the only one who ever thought so.) In my foolish baby mind, if I glued myself to her side firmly enough, she would eventually return my regard, and we would form a pair like Jane and Lizzy. Alas, even then Mary loved nothing but solitude and study, and her legs were long enough to escape me.

And so I found myself, in a house crowded with sisters, servants, and visitors, usually alone. It did not suit me. Mary is born for solitude, but I am born for company, as much and as merry as possible.

I took to spending my time with Mamma's cat. My father gave the little gray kitten to Mamma after one of her indispositions, and for a time she enjoyed cuddling the sweet little ball of fluff. But it soon grew into a stringy, mottled gray cat with a piercing yowl, and Mamma took no further notice of it.

I began to follow the cat about as I had my sisters. At first I had no better luck winning its heart. Indeed, when it saw me reaching my jammy hands toward its fur, it would make a sound of dread low in its throat and leap for the nearest open window. But cats are simpler creatures than sisters. Neither scratches nor howls deterred my lavish embraces and sticky kisses. My love needed an object, and the family cat could not escape. Generous gifts of cream and kippers soon had the creature following me from room to room, much to Mary and Papa's disgust. Indeed, Papa would leave the room when he saw us coming, claiming that my pet made him sneeze.

I did not care. I only hugged my cat close, glorying when she purred instead of fleeing, and whispered my secrets into her fur.

So far, ordinary enough. Many a lonely young girl makes a companion of a pet. What happened next, though, was far from ordinary. I made believe that my cat was my sister, and my family indulged me, as one does with an imaginative and spoiled child. “And how is Kitty today?” they would ask me.

“Kitty is hungry,” I would say, or “Kitty wants to go to the market,” and my elders would nod solemnly. Do you know the difference between pretending to believe a witch, and truly believing her? There isn’t one. Kitty this, Kitty that, was the refrain in our house, until one day, they were not humoring me—they saw her, too.

From that day forward, my parents had not four daughters, but five. The world saw Kitty as a tall, thinnish girl, not terribly bright, but with a great gift for learning things she wasn’t supposed to know. She had a rather carrying voice, and spoke almost exclusively to me.

This was my first spell. I thought nothing of it at the time. All small children think they can control the world around them. Years later, my aunt explained to me what a tremendous working my first one was—I would not match it till the events of my sixteenth year. Later still, we talked of the price of it. All magic carries a price, of course, and if you do not pay up front and in full, it will extract the cost in its own way.

My aunt’s theory on the price for that first, unconscious spell was an heir. Perhaps my mother would have had one more child, maybe even a boy to save us all; but my unknowing childish gluttony for love snatched its soul from her womb to fashion Kitty. I tend to disbelieve this theory. On the day my father first referred to Kitty as his daughter with no hint of mockery, his favorite horse dropped dead at four years old and he could never afford such a fine one again. No further explanation, I believe, is necessary.

CHAPTER TWO

If you were to tell Lizzy's story, or Jane's, I suppose you would begin with when they met their husbands. I don't say that to slight them! I've often wished that my own life had turned out like theirs. They seem very happy with their rich husbands, and though neither man is to my taste, who am I to judge? I am a foolish wretch and usually racked with misery of my own making. Ask anyone. Ah well! At least I've known such fun as they will never come within a hundred yards of. La! Imagine what Lizzy would do if she knew I made that spot on her chin pop back out whenever she vexed me.

The story of Lydia Bennet must linger in her childhood for a while (but take heart, dear reader, there are handsome rakes and ardent suitors to come). Luckily for me and my family, I was not the only witch in our connection. My aunt Philips, my mother's sister, lived in Meryton and she had the gift. When all the town began referring to a ragged mouser as Miss Kitty Bennet, she realized that one of us must have it, too. Shortly after that, she cornered me after a family supper.

"That is a very pretty bit of magic you worked, my girl," she said. "They all see Kitty as your sister now, even your father, who still sneezes when she comes near."

"I know," I said complacently. I was too young to be astonished at the mention of magic. "Papa thinks he avoids her because she is so stupid. He dislikes me for the same reason, so it's easy for him to believe. Pooh, I hate sherry." I withdrew from the scent of sherry on her breath. I had not yet learned to be polite. (Some would say I never did.)

My aunt merely chuckled, sending more clouds of sherry breath my

way. "Careful, my girl. If you're to be a witch, you needn't hold your tongue generally—it's the good Christian folk who must take care not to offend *you*. But I'm a witch myself and you'd better mind me, or I'll disenchant that cat of yours and the Bennets will find themselves with only four daughters again. There, don't cry." She chucked me under the chin, which had begun to tremble, and glanced nervously over her shoulder at my mother sitting by the fire. I had a piercing voice when I cried.

"Don't take Kitty away," I whispered. My mother still hadn't noticed anything amiss, but Kitty, curled up next to her, narrowed her eyes at us and came stalking over.

"Take me where?" she said.

"Nowhere," said my aunt hastily. "I'm proud of the glamour she cast over you, Kitty dear. And as long as you both behave I'll do nothing to alter it."

Kitty slipped her hand into mine and squeezed it. I was glad I'd made her my older sister instead of younger. Lifting her chin, she was nearly as tall as my aunt.

"As if you could," she said scornfully. "I'm in this shape because I choose to be." But I saw a flash of doubt pass over her face. We had never met another witch before.

My aunt laughed. "Isn't that just like a cat. Everything has to be your own idea. I believe I've frightened you two, and that's the last thing I would wish, my dears. Come, let me make it up to you. Let's have some fun, eh?" And from the depths of her dress she produced two lengths of lace and handed one to each of us. We gasped.

"This is the new lace from London! Mrs. Pierce said she wouldn't have any till next week. How did you get it?" I demanded.

She looked sly. "When you're a witch, there's much folks will do to oblige you, if you know how to ask."

That was enough for me. The promise of new lace made me clamor to learn all she had to teach, and she readily agreed.

"I'd better train you up, yes, for Lord knows who you'll kill, else. I'll

teach you. You too, Miss Kitty. You won't be able to work human magic, of course, but Lydia's power is bound up with you."

Naturally I agreed. From then on Kitty and I spent all the time we could in the village with my good aunt. She made me promise not to tell anyone of our lessons; however, I think she must have laid a powerful silence spell on me as well, for I was such a chatterbox in those days and never could have kept mum on my own. I suppose she had to do it, but I'm sorry for whatever alley cat or street mongrel sacrificed its life's blood so that a middling witch like my aunt could perform such a spell. I have always been powerfully fond of animals.