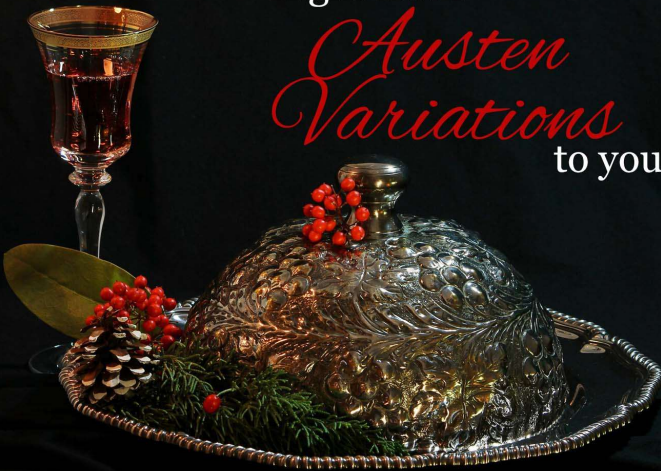


A
*Very Austen
Advent*

A gift from

*Austen
Variations*
to you!



*A Very Austen
Advent*

by

Nicole Clarkson, Catherine Curzon, Amy
D'Orazio, Leslie Diamond, Maria Grace,
Joana Starnes, and Shannon Winslow

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A Very Austen Advent

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DEDICATION
For our devoted readers.

Authors' Note

We hope you enjoy this brief collection of stories from the Very Austen Advent 2018 from our website JaneAustenVariations.com.

Please share this book with your friends and invite them to visit us at JaneAustenVariations.com

Maria Grace

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A Christmas Letter from Lydia Wickham

To Elizabeth Darcy (with Annotations by Mr. George Wickham)

By Nicole Clarkson and Catherine Curzon

Merry Christmas! And what is the Christmas season without a kindly word from our nearest and dearest? Today, Catherine Curzon and I bring you a sweet missive from a young couple celebrating their first Christmas together. We hope it warms your heart (but don't try to drink your tea while you read).

~Nicole and Catherine

My dearest Lizzy, (or "Our dearest sister"? Don't you think? Whatever you think best, darling)

You must know how delighted we both were to receive your Christmas letter last week. I beg you forgive my tardiness in replying, for as a married woman now (How delicate you are, you minx! "A tired, satisfied, eminently satiated, married woman"), I do have ever so many duties on my mind! You were so kind as to enquire about how we have been keeping ourselves, so I shall enumerate for you all our many (many!) joys and trials these three months since our marriage.

Now of course you remember that my dearest

George has been in the Regulars, and so I see him but little (But when you do, by God how we make up for the time lost). He must spend most of his time with the officers, you understand, but he does return as often as he can to illuminate my quiet evenings at home (And those evenings are NEVER quiet once I am in residence. What good is a girl like you if one can't show her she is missed?). You may or may not have heard that he was grievously wounded not long ago. The rumours all had it that he had nearly perished on the field of honour due to a gunshot (It'll take more than that! Bring down the legions of hell and still I prevail, for my girl is waiting! Besides, honour it was, and never let it be said that George Wickham is anything BUT honourable, it is my middle name. One of them), This incident has been tragically inflated, for it was nothing of the sort—for what regiment would have kept him on after so grossly violating the law? No, my dear Lizzy, it was only a sword wound, and he received it after a minor altercation in the village with the silliest, most irresponsible shopkeeper. Imagine the nerve, to accuse my noble husband of such a deed as sneaking out of his upper windows at dawn! You will be happy to know that my dearest George has fully recovered and is in marvellous health. (And if I HAD sneaked out of the window, you can be sure he wouldn't have seen me!)

As for myself, I have been feeling a little poorly of

late, but I am sure it is nothing to alarm. My dear George is exceedingly proud, and declares that we shall have an “olive branch” bearing the Wickham name come next summer. I do snort so when he invokes Mr Collins’ tones, for I fear it is so terribly funny that I cannot do otherwise (Though never in the bedroom, my love! Just imagine...)! I do hope poor Charlotte is bearing up tolerably well. I suppose you must see her soon, for does not Mr Darcy visit his aunt whenever the old bat summons him? (He does... wringing his hands and touching his forelock...)

I cannot think how you can abide her! If I were you, Lizzy, I would drop a hot coal in her slipper (or in her chamber pot), but I suppose that would be just the sort of thing she would think of as a compliment to her station, or something like that. On second thought, don’t warm her slippers for her, but perhaps you should bring one of Mr Darcy’s hunting dogs and let it sleep in the house (Yes! The fellow with the white muzzle, he has a most aromatic air about his hind quarters, never at a loss for a pungent, fruity mishap. I swear I have seen him extinguish a candle with it). Goodness me, but that does remind me so of the funniest thing that happened the other day! It was the day George came home, for he had been given a few days’ leave. I recall that part specifically, because they said if George had not been here, the dog would have just gone on and left me peacefully. It belonged to one of the neighbours, of course, and it was no fine

hunting dog like you must have, but a regular sort of brute. I think he is usually kept out of doors, behind the house, for his master has a little shop where he sells cigars and liquor and various delicacies which satisfy mens' vices. The dog's duty is to guard the back windows, of course.

Anyway, he is a big bruising sort of creature, and he had got off his chain somehow. He was trotting down the street as merrily as you please, not troubling anyone in particular. I was walking home when I saw my George coming up the street. Well, the dog saw him about the same time, and seemed to think George a terrific sort of man. In this, we are perfectly agreed, but the dog was a mite more brutal in his worship of my husband than I typically am. (You are lively enough, Mrs Wickham. Passionate, always. Brutal, never.). Poor George was obliged to run for our door, catching his hat as it almost fell off and bolting the door tightly behind himself! 'Well!' said I, 'at least the dog knows a gentlemanly sort when he sees him!' but the fool creature would not leave off once the door was closed! He ran round the house, leaping at the windows where our landlady Mrs C— has her quarters. The beast was barking loudly, and I heard Mrs C— crying for someone to silence him. (Why did she not ask the rather well-built fellow who flits by her quarters of a night? He looks like the sort who would wrestle a hound into submission without a moment to think. Why, if he dare take on the considerable Mrs

C–, then even the most boisterous pup would be no match for him!)

I walked up to the door, just as smartly as you please (I really have become rather a fine lady, Lizzy, you truly must see me to appreciate how much I have grown!) (In every sense of the word. Blossoming, one might say, and bringing my blossoms out in turn.) and set my hand upon the latch. When the dog saw me at the very same door through which my husband had entered, he bounded in my direction. I do not think he meant any harm—you remember how Papa’s old dog would bark and wag his tail whenever Hill would walk outside with the scraps? That was precisely this dog’s manner. He seemed to think he was to receive some treat from me (a hound after my own heart), but how he would think so, I cannot imagine. Well, he did not quite knock me down, but it was a near thing! As it was, my bonnet was askew and my little basket of... well, let me simply say that I had some sewing items that I had picked up as a service for one of my neighbours. Anyway, that basket was all soiled with muddy dog prints, then the items were scattered all over the street as he sniffed through them.

I cried out for George, for you must understand that I was petrified! The dog then pinned me to my door, licking my face most revoltingly (I have told you, my love, that you do wear the most... unique scents. I fancy the pup was simply intrigued as to this exotic new flavour.)! I could not find the latch with my hand,

but fortunately my dear George heard me cry out and a moment later he rescued me. He very gallantly shooed the dog away and then so gently—oh, Lizzy, it is a pity you will never understand how gentle such a gallant man can be when he wishes to comfort his bride!—he carried me up the stairs. (Let us draw a delicate veil over what came next, eh? I'm sure we don't want your sister fanning herself and reaching for her salts!)

Now, I did say that it was a funny incident, and you must now be asking why I thought so. Well, the boon was in the shopkeeper's profound apology for his dog's offences against my person. I was not knocked about so terribly, but the shopkeeper felt so badly on my account that he gave us a fine box of cigars and two beautiful bottles of... well, it is not legal to say what precisely was in those bottles, but I assure you, it was magnificent. Although, sadly, George tells me I should not drink very much of it in my present condition. (WHY are you writing a letter? WHY am I annotating a letter? All of this is a mere trifle when there are Lydias in delicate conditions to carry up to bed and ply with the finest truffles and a little taste of the strong stuff. A pox on letters! A pox on sisters, even fine ones!)

As for the rest of our adventures, I will only say that our life contains scarcely a dull moment. Never shall I complain, for I cannot fathom the dullness of life with a placid, boring man such as Jane's Mr

Bingley or... well, do not tell her that I said anything against Mr Bingley, will you? He did send us such a nice ham for Christmas. (Don't tell her that we named it Bingley!) It is a rather convenient thing to know such a generous gentleman, is it not? (It is, for we shall never want for ham again) And now, I expect you think we must be looking for something more, but I can assure you, such is not the case. We are to journey to the Continent soon, so of course, I could not carry a thing with me, and what is more, my George has taken a bit of savings we had conveniently put by and done exceedingly well at the track. How many soldiers do you know who could afford a golden-hilted sword? Now, I did not say that he purchased such a foolish thing, but he could, if he wanted to. (Indeed I could, but such sums are better spent on comforts for my girl. You shall have all the ribbons and pillows your heart desires.)

Oh, Lizzy, I know that I shall be far too busy to write next week when I ought, so I shall tell you now, well in advance. George says to tell Mr Darcy that if he would like to go to the track in a fortnight to put half a crown on Rudolph's nose (such a silly name for a race horse!) he would be eternally grateful. We shall forward you the half crown, of course, but Mr Darcy may think of putting some money of his own on the same horse, for the favourite, Blitzen, is sure to suffer a sudden lameness the day before the race. Or so my George informs me, and his information is never

wrong. (It comes from the very finest sources, as we shall not tell young Mrs D and her good husband. I have left a half crown on the bureau, so long as no questing hounds have made away with it.)

Do write me soon, my dearest sister! I shall be tremendously busy, but I will send you our new address as soon as ever I know it. I do dote so on your letters, for you speak of such gentle, mundane matters, it quite makes me giggle.

Yours,

Lydia Wickham

P.S. Please tell Mama when next you write that she ought to stop sending me so many fashion plates, for hers are terribly out of date.

Lyd

P.P.S. I do wish I could see Mr Darcy's face when George's tip makes him a wealthy man!

L

P.P.P.S Mrs Darcy, your sister shall not be writing for a good while for she and I have some serious marital business to conduct. Three months we have been wed and three months we must celebrate this very eve! Letters might satisfy the intellectual appetites, but they are little match for action, don't you think?

P.P.P.P.S I suspect that you shall redraft this letter, Mrs Wickham, and remove my carefully thought-out and well-argued additional comments. I

wish that you wouldn't, for who wouldn't enjoy such an honest and carefree note? You are adorable, Mrs W, and I shall scribble all over every letter I find, just to see the flush in your cheeks and you shall forgive me because you know that I love you and your letters. Three months – here's to many more!

Yankee Swap

By Amy D’Orazio

Snow. Darcy frowned as he pushed through the revolving door, not pleased to see the arrival of the white stuff which did nothing but snarl up the already terrible traffic and make the sidewalks a mushy mess. He wondered how much would accumulate and if it would affect Georgiana’s travel home from college.

Looking up he saw Bingley coming down the sidewalk. Bingley raised his arm to wave at him, and Darcy nodded at the same time as he reached for his phone, deciding he should talk to Georgiana as soon as possible, tell her he would prefer she come down on the train rather than catch a ride with her dorm mate.

“I thought we were meeting at the diner,” he said absently to Bingley as he began to type his message.

“More fun to walk together,” said Bingley.

“A little out of your way, though. Think this is going to accumulate?”

“Ah, I needed a little walk and nah, probably no more than an inch or so.”

Darcy tapped another sentence, then paused. “In the case of an ice storm, what’s safer, a car or a train?”

“Um... train I guess? You ever play Yankee Swap Darcy?”

“Yankee Swap?” Darcy looked down at his old messages, searching out the name of the person

Georgiana traveled with. Some girl called Ava Grantley. Sounded like a bad driver. He looked up, squinting at the sky. Was it already coming down harder?

“Yeah, Yankee Swap. Everyone puts a present in, you pick a present out, people can steal it from you.”

“Can’t say I’ve had the pleasure,” Darcy replied tapping away as the men continued their slow progress down the sidewalk.

“So the presents are... they aren’t expensive, like gag gifts really, something to make people laugh. Nothing over \$15-\$20, you know? Everyone throws something in, you don’t have anything you can’t play, no big deal, but it is a lot of laughs.”

Darcy pressed send. “The trouble with the holidays is that they come at the most abysmal time of year, but no one wants to miss their visit to Grandma, so you have twice as many people on the roads complicated further by horrible weather.”

“Yeah, nothing worse than snow at Christmas time.” Bingley rolled his eyes. “So I’m at Jane’s aunt’s house and suddenly remember I forgot my Yankee Swap gift, which totally bummed me out because I love Yankee Swap! I had such a good one too! The real Mr. Potato Head... I took a potato and stapled an actual carrot to it, then—”

Darcy tuned him out. The last thing he wanted to hear about was some party at Karen Philips house because Karen Philips was the aunt of Elizabeth

Bennet and Elizabeth Bennet hated him. He had tried, for a little while, to hate her back but the fact that he loved her kept getting in the way.

Bingley had finished talking and was staring at Darcy, expecting a reply or so it seemed. Darcy said, “Ah, sure. Real potato. Sounds hilarious.”

“But I left it at home! So, obviously, I had to come up with something else instead,” Bingley explained in a relieved voice. “I wrote something and put it in a plain envelope. You see the way they play it, you don’t open the presents until the very end so the better your present is wrapped, the more likely it is that people want it. So mine was just a slip of paper in an envelope, didn’t look like much of anything at all. I planned to take it myself, during one of the stealing rounds.”

“Ah,” said Darcy.

“Don’t you wonder what my present was?”

Darcy stifled a sigh. “Okay, what was your present?”

“It was a... a romantic date. I specified the romantic part so it would be funnier when I opened it”

“A romantic date?” Darcy flicked away the snow which had accumulated on the lapel of his coat.

With increased enthusiasm, Bingley said, “Is there anything more romantic than New York City at the holidays? Carriage ride in Central Park, blanket built for one, mulled wine and holiday lights... you know what I mean.”

“Sounds charming. So you’d win your own romantic date and then—”

Bingley laughed, too loud and too hearty. “No, it wasn’t a date with me.”

Darcy felt the prickles of discomfort in his gut that always resulted from one of Bingley’s escapades.

“Who was the date with then?”

“It was a date with... well, with you.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped, and he stopped in his tracks. Ah, Bingley I never know whether to laugh at you or punch you. “So you forgot your potato and then came to your second choice, me. It was me or the potato?”

Bingley chuckled awkwardly. “I forgot the potato. You were a spur of the moment idea.”

“And by the way — a date with me is a gag gift? This is your opinion of me? Oh hey, I don’t have a potato, so I’ll throw in a date with Darcy. You can forget me taking you out on a date — or are you taking me out? Because if so, I have a list of demands.”

“Come on, let’s walk. I’m getting cold.” Bingley still sounded very nervous, but Darcy acquiesced, strolling down the sidewalk. “As it turns out, I wasn’t able to take my gift.”

“What? What do you mean?”

They had arrived at the diner by then, entering to the smell of bacon and coffee. It was a place they met often, and Darcy instinctively moved to their usual booth at the back of the dining room. The two men slid in just as the waitress, a short, swarthy Greek

woman shouted something at them about coffee. Moments later it arrived, hot and steaming and smelling much better than anything any barista could have made. Darcy inhaled gratefully, still shaking off the cold.

“Ok, so you couldn’t take your gift. Why not?”

“So Jane was wearing this headband, like a velvety headband and it had antlers on it and mistletoe... it was on these little springs, and they would bounce around...I said she had to kiss me under the mistletoe and then we—”

Darcy sighed. “So you were too busy canoodling with Jane to remember that your idea of a gag gift is pimping me out.”

“Not exactly like that.”

“How is it not like that? You sold me like a potato Bingley.”

Bingley laughed, his eyes moving around and carefully avoiding eye contact with Darcy. “Well if you put it that way, I guess I did pimp you out a little but it was unintentional, I swear. Anyway, I’ll pay for the whole thing, so don’t worry about that.”

“Yes,” Darcy said drily. “The finances of the date are obviously at the forefront of my concerns. Who won me? If you say your sister, forget it, I’m not going. I’ll give her a potato to make it up to her.”

“No, Caroline wasn’t even there.” Bingley chewed his lip a second before saying, “You might think its worse though.”

Darcy groaned loudly enough that the elderly couple in the table nearest them looked at him in alarm, and the waitress came stomping over to inquire if everything was okay. “We don’t have any food yet,” Darcy reminded her, and she stomped off muttering something about Joe Jr. calling in sick.

“Who won me?” Darcy demanded.

“I think,” said Bingley, “if you really think about it, this could be seen as an opportunity.”

“Her name, Bingley. Or did you set me up with a man?”

“No, I didn’t set you up with another man.”

Bingley forced a chuckle. “The winner of the date was Elizabeth Bennet.”

Darcy exhaled in a whoosh and found himself sinking back against the cracked vinyl seat of the banquette. The sounds of the busy diner, the clinking of plates and utensils, the squeak of shoes on the old linoleum floor, all seemed to die immediately, and he heard nothing but the sound of his own pounding heart. For a few minutes, he couldn’t say anything, his mind whirling with thoughts and implications.

Bingley leaned over the table. “I know you don’t really get along. To be honest, I was surprised that she agreed to do it.”

“She agreed? She said she’d go out with me?” *That sounded too eager Darcy. Calm down.*

“She seemed a little shocked when she opened it, just sort of looked at it for a lot longer than it would

take to read it. So I went over and said if she didn't want to do it—

“You'd give her a potato instead?” Darcy chuckled weakly.

“No, I said I'd take her out.” Bingley cleared his throat. “With Jane. I mean, all three of us. But she said no, that if you agreed to it, she was willing.”

I guess I'm not the last man in the world she'd ever go out with. Bingley is. It was hard to contain the giddy smile that arose at that thought. He turned his head quickly to avoid Bingley's notice.

“Fine I'll go,” he said, making sure he sounded sufficiently grumpy.

“Super. I have one of my admins, Nicola, setting things up.”

“Nicola? The aspiring romance novelist? Who thinks of Hallmark movies as research?”

“Who else?” Bingley smiled, easy and relieved now. “I needed an expert.”

Charlotte Face-timed her just as panic was beginning to set in. “Is that what you're wearing?” she asked in place of hello.

“I know!” Elizabeth Bennet wailed as she turned to look at herself in the mirror for the thousandth time. “I honestly hate every single thing in my closet. What happened to my real clothes, all the cool, fashionable stuff?”

“I think you’ll regret a dress,” Charlotte replied in her usual calmly pragmatic way, “first because it’s freezing and second because you might end up rock climbing and then what?”

“Rock climbing?” Elizabeth started flipping through the clothing in her closet for the millionth time. “Darcy doesn’t seem like the type.”

“I’m just saying, you should try to be comfortable.”

“I won’t be comfortable regardless,” Elizabeth said. “And it’s Darcy! Might as well at least try to look the part of Girl-Dating-Billionaire.”

“I think the fact that you’re different is why he loves you.”

“Not this again. He doesn’t love me.”

“He said he did. He stares at you as he does.”

“Ugh! Let’s not rehash all this. Help me get dressed!”

With Charlotte’s help, they found something Elizabeth prayed would work, skinny jeans with a light gray sweater and a furry vest. Just in time, she thought, hearing the sound of her buzzer as she finished zipping her boots. She went to the intercom. “Hi, um, Darcy?”

“Hi, Elizabeth. How does this work, do you buzz me in?”

He’s probably never been in a building without a doorman before. “Give me two minutes, I’ll be right down.”

“I don’t mind coming up.”

“No really—be there in a minute.”

She grabbed her scarf and gloves, zipped up her boots, and ran out the door, finding him still standing on the step. He was, as always, dressed to perfection, his jeans and sweater somehow looking like they were made for him, a Louis Vuitton scarf tossed just so around his neck and a peevish expression on his face.

“I would have come up to get you.”

“No need,” she said with a determinedly bright smile. “Here I am.”

“It seems rather an inauspicious way to begin a date,” he said. “It’s the New York equivalent of me pulling up in the driveway and honking my horn or something equally reprehensible.”

“Reprehensible?” She laughed as his driver opened the car door for her. “That’s a strong word for something that really doesn’t matter.”

“A gentleman should pick his date up at the door,” Darcy insisted.

“And so you did, only it was the door to the building. I was ready, and I came down, so what’s the harm? In any case, I must say, I was promised a romantic date, and here we are, already arguing.”

It was how it generally went with them she thought as she slid over to allow him room to get in, greeting the driver as she did so. Friction and discord just seemed to crop up between them no matter what. *This is why it would never work between us.* She looked away from him, out onto the other side of her

narrow street, willing away the odd swell of disappointment that rose with that thought. Why had she thought, for even an instant, that anything could be different between them?

She heard the car door close, his and then the drivers, and she realized she needed to stop staring out the window. She turned to look at him. “So, what’s the plan?” she asked brightly.

“Elizabeth wait,” he said. “Um, I think perhaps—”

“I don’t want to argue with you,” she said quickly. “My apologies. I should have waited for you to come up.”

“I don’t care about that,” he said. “Not really. But you... you’ve accused me of ungentlemanly behavior before, and I didn’t want you to think—“

She sighed, leaning her head back against the leather of the headrest. “That’s not why I said that.”

“I know it’s not,” he said. “I know its because of...because of—”

“George Wickham,” she said, straightening and turning to face him. “Hearsay, I know, and I’ve already decided to put everything he said out of my head and form my own opinions. So far, though, it seems to be same-old, same-old.”

She heard the irritation in her voice and had no doubt that he did too. She reached up and touched her fingers to her forehead, vainly trying to massage away the headache that was forming. This was all completely pointless. She leaned towards the driver.

“Excuse me? Would you mind pulling over here?”

The driver did as she asked, smoothly crossing two lanes of traffic and gliding up next to the curb.

Elizabeth turned to Darcy, smiling with fake brilliance. “Well, we gave this a shot but let’s be honest, you and I are just never going to get along.”

“What? You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Would you mind letting me out?”

Looking somewhat stunned, Darcy exited the car, holding the door open so she could slide out. They had only traveled a few blocks, she noted with relief. In fifteen minutes she’d be in her sweatpants scrolling through her Netflix queue. Dark had fallen, but it was still pretty early, lots of people bustling around, getting dinner and whatever; she’d be fine walking back.

She extended her hand and Darcy took it, looking wooden. “At least we can say we tried,” she said briskly.

“Elizabeth, please don’t go.” Darcy did not relinquish her hand.

“I have to.”

She watched as his face sank from its usual haughty contours into something else: disappointment. He tried to cover it but she saw it anyway, and it brought her the memory of the first time he’d asked her out.

He hadn’t looked disappointed that day. He’d

looked confident, assured, having no doubt of her affirmative reply, although he'd mostly told her why she wasn't good enough for him. Even once she'd said no, he didn't look disappointed, he'd looked angry.

Oddly enough he had also told her he was in love with her. Utterly bizarre but the memory of it was, she supposed, why she had thought a second chance might work. *Wrong, wrong, wrong Lizzy.*

She gently tugged her hand away. "We should try to be friends, for the sake of Jane and Charles if nothing else. He's proposing to her on New Year's, did you know that?"

"Are you in love with him?" There was stark pain on Darcy's face now, and it made the awkwardness of the situation that much worse.

She quipped, "Who, Charles? No, but Jane is."

He shook his head, looking down at his feet.

"Wickham."

"Wickham?" Elizabeth threw back her head and laughed.

George Wickham was a friend of Elizabeth's, a new friend. They had dated once or twice, and then George made it clear he wasn't really looking for anything serious—because of his financial situation. "When I am with a woman, I need to spoil her," George told her. "Really treat her like the queen she is, and I just can't afford to do that right now."

Elizabeth knew, from Wickham's own stories, that he and Darcy had gone to school together. Wickham's

father had worked for Darcy's, and the two men had been close, so close that when Mr Wickham died, Mr Darcy had promised George he'd take care of him. College, business or law school, a position in Darcy's company, but George had told her that Darcy had cut him off from all of that at the first opportunity, even going so far as to deplete his college fund. It was part of what made Elizabeth hate Darcy so much, his cruelty to his boyhood friend.

"No, I'm not in love with Wickham," she said. "We're just friends."

"Before you go," said Darcy hesitantly, "I just want to explain a few things to you about him."

"It won't change my mind," she warned.

"I understand. I just think you should know some things."

The real story of what George Wickham was and was not turned out to be pretty different from what he'd told her.

"George had taken a smattering of classes from a state college," Darcy told her. "Had zero interest in anything except the sorority girls. When he finally flunked out, he asked me to give him the money my father had invested for his education. He drank his way through half of it, made some bad investments with the rest and came to me penniless shortly after that. He was buying in to an online supplement business and needed start-up money, which I gave him. Then he lost that and wanted to start a medical

marijuana business in Colorado. That went bust too. Then a gym, then a restaurant, and finally a photography studio. That's when I said no."

Elizabeth by this time had grown numb with dismay. Through her distress, she tried a smile. "You don't like photography?"

"I like photography, and I'd be happy to invest in a photographer who had some training and showed any modicum of business sense. George has neither. I'm guessing he just wanted to use it to lure pretty girls into dark rooms under the promise of becoming models. Anyway, it infuriated him, and he wanted to get back at me."

It seemed that a well-timed bout of insomnia had led Darcy to the horrifying discovery that Georgiana, his fifteen-year-old sister, had been sneaking out of the house to meet George Wickham. She thought she was in love with him and that he was her boyfriend; Darcy immediately understood that Wickham was trying to get revenge and/or make some money.

"A case of chlamydia and a broken heart," Darcy said matter-of-factly, his eyes trained on the sidewalk. "Antibiotics took care of the first and therapy took care of the second. All in all, I was grateful, it could have been a teen pregnancy or some sort of highly publicized legal battle."

"So you didn't press any charges?"

He shook his head. "No. Right or wrong, I didn't want to make a news story out of her, and she was

already so depressed. It really affected her: her grades slipped, and for a while, she sort of stopped caring about anything. Distanced herself from friends, gained some weight, it was terrible. She's better now."

"He's terrible," Elizabeth said, feeling the lump in her throat swell. "I thought the worst I could accuse him of was having a roving eye, but this is truly well beyond that. He's scum."

"He is," Darcy agreed.

They stood in silence for a moment, the car idling beside them. Elizabeth was beyond merely embarrassed; she was humiliated she had been so easily taken in and mortified that a great deal of her lousy opinion of Darcy was based on what she'd been told by a liar.

Suddenly tears threatened in her eyes. This was always her problem, she tended to rely too much on first impressions of people. George had swooped in full of compliments and charm, and Darcy had insulted her the first time they met. She'd decided George was the hero and Darcy was the villain and had proceeded accordingly.

For the first time, it made her wonder how much of her contentious history with Darcy was her fault instead of his. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I had...I had no idea."

They stood in silence for several minutes, while people passed by them. A group of teenage boys, one of whom apparently had backpack speakers went by

them playing a song by Tyga. It reminded her of a quote she'd once seen, attributed to the young rapper: It's hard to forget someone who's given you so much to remember. Darcy had definitely given her a lot to remember in the course of their brief acquaintance.

"Would you like me to have Sam take you home?" Darcy asked quietly.

"I don't suppose you'd care to spend your evening with an idiot?" she said with a weak laugh.

Darcy didn't return her smile. He reached out, lightly touching her cheek with his gloved thumb. "You're not an idiot," he said. "George has always been good at making women fall under his spell."

"I'm definitely not under his spell," she said. "In fact, I'd love to just forget about him completely."

Then Darcy opened the car door. "Let's go have that date."

He slid into the car after her and the driver, the soul of discretion, said nothing, proceeding as if nothing had happened. The silence was awkward between them for a few minutes until she said, "So Bingley didn't tell me anything about our plans tonight. Only that it would be a late night."

"He didn't tell me anything either," he said. Leaning forward, he asked the driver, "Sam, where are you taking us?"

"Holiday lights, sir," the man replied. "Dyker Heights."

"Dyker Heights!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "That's

amazing!”

“Is it?” Darcy asked. “I’ve never been.”

“Neither have I. I always want to, but you know how it is, things get busy, and next you know it’s January.”

“That’s the truth,” Darcy acknowledged. “A new experience for us both then. Let’s hope its as amazing as people say it is.”

Thirty minutes later, Elizabeth found herself pressed close to Darcy amid a throng of people wandering the streets of Dyker Heights. It was something extraordinary to be sure, each house decorated elaborately and extravagantly with lights and inflatables and any other manner of holiday decoration. The results ranged from elegant to kitschy, but there was an undeniably festive atmosphere around it all.

Despite the gaiety that surrounded them, their argument and Darcy’s subsequent revelations about Wickham had cast a pall over them. Darcy barely spoke, responding civilly to her attempts at conversation but with no real warmth. She thought they must look very odd, walking along, not touching, not speaking, each giving a cursory examination to the houses but with little true pleasure.

As if he had read her mind, he spoke. “Which is your favorite so far?”

“Which house?” She considered it a moment. “The one with the flamingos. You?”

“Flamingos, hmm?”

“Well, they weren’t ordinary flamingos—they were wearing scarves.”

“That does make all the difference.” Darcy chuckled, and though it sounded forced, she appreciated it.

“Which was yours?”

“The house where the people were handing out kugel and latkes, but I had an early lunch, so it is perhaps a biased opinion.”

“That kugel was the best I’ve ever tasted! Someone’s bubbie’s recipe, I’m sure of it.”

“The kind of recipe that’s not written down,” Darcy added. “She just stands over the next generation and shows them how to do it.”

“Exactly!” Elizabeth agreed enthusiastically.

As if on cue, the car came rolling up next to them. Sam lowered the window. “Sir, Mr Bingley has arranged a dinner reservation.”

Elizabeth offered a tentative smile. “Unless the kugel filled you up?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Let’s go.”

From the brink of disaster, it seemed their date had been saved. Darcy was grateful for that much even if it had left him feeling even more tongue-tied than usual. It was difficult to want something so badly. He’d never found himself in his position before, desperate for a woman to like him, but then again,

he'd never had a date with Elizabeth Bennet before.

He hoped Bingley had something extraordinary planned for dinner; a cozy little Italian bistro maybe, or a supper club. Something where they could both relax, shed the remaining hard feelings, and just talk.

Five minutes later, he stood on the sidewalk his nascent optimism shattered. The restaurant looked like a Christmas village in Bavaria, or what Disney might think a Christmas village in Bavaria looked like. He could only imagine what sort of food might come out of a place like this—weiner schnitzel? Sauerkraut?

“Kostlich?” Elizabeth looked intrigued. “I’ve never been here.”

“No,” Darcy said flatly. “We are not eating here.”

“Why not? It looks fun.”

Fun. The last thing Darcy wanted was some sort of theme park, leftover-Oktoberfest dinner with her. He wanted romance. Bingley had promised him romance, and this was not romantic. They entered the restaurant, finding it positively festooned with every form of tinsel, lights and bauble that one could imagine. A baby was screaming towards the back of the room, and Darcy thought *same kid, same*. It was overwhelming, the flickering lights, the loud, tinny version of Kling, Glöckchen which was playing, the smell of sauerkraut and sausage in the air. Evidently, the place was popular: they stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the small space waiting to be seated. Darcy had never had a panic attack before but felt

certain this might be the place for his first. “Let’s get out of here.”

“You want to leave?” Elizabeth looked up at him. “Are you sure? I think it’s sort of cute.”

“I admire your spirit,” he said with a half-smile. “I was hoping we could eat somewhere more...
romantic, elegant, special, expensive “... quiet.”

“It is pretty loud,” she admitted.

“Let’s leave,” he urged. “Forget Bingley’s plan. We could go to the Rainbow Room or something, somewhere total New York Christmas but with less kitsch.”

“The Rainbow Room?” She looked doubtful. “Isn’t that—”

Whatever she thought was interrupted by a large red-faced man wearing a Santa suit sans the beard.

“Are you Mr. Darcy?” He shouted over the music.

“I am,” Darcy acknowledged. “I am afraid we can't—”

“Follow me!” He turned and began to move through the crowd. Elizabeth threw a little smile up at him, squeezed his arm and said, “Let’s just go with it.”

He found himself following thinking that if she smiled like that at him often, he’d probably do anything she wanted.

The man led them to an old stairway, small and tight but Darcy was grateful that the music and lights died away as they climbed. They seemed to be leaving the restaurant—not a bad thing, but Darcy was

curious about what was going on.

Moments later, having climbed at least four flights, they were ushered through another door. Elizabeth halted in her tracks causing Darcy to collide with her. Both of them gasped.

It was a winter wonderland, up on the rooftop. Potted Christmas trees formed an enchanted forest in the midst of which was a little gazebo. The gazebo was decorated with candles and lights and contained one small table for two, as well as portable heaters to keep them warm. A waiter stood by the table ready to welcome them.

The large man smiled. “Mr. Bingley asked me to make you wait in the foyer just long enough for you to look like you were about to leave. He said it wouldn’t take long.”

Elizabeth laughed, and Darcy sheepishly admitted, “Loud music and crowded rooms are not exactly my thing.”

They were seated and served hot mulled wine which was delicious. Bingley, via Nicola, had gone so far as to arrange a private menu for them. “I suppose we should never have doubted Charles,” Elizabeth mused. “Jane tells me he’s the king of romance.”

“He’s doing well for us,” Darcy acknowledged. “Much better than I could have done, for sure.”

Elizabeth put her hand in her chin, one elbow on the table. Her eyes shone in the candlelight. “I doubt that’s true. Properly motivated, I am sure you’d have

done just fine.”

“I think the very fact that I would have wanted it to be perfect would have kept me from making it anything special. I would have just spent a bunch of money without really doing what I wanted to do.”

“What is it you would have really wanted to do?” she asked.

Darcy lowered his gaze to the handwritten menu which was still beside his appetizer plate. He had creased it when he looked at, and he used one finger now to idly trace the crease. “I think when you’re with someone you love, the romance comes from just being in their presence. It doesn’t really have anything to do with candles or snow or roaring fires, anything like that. It’s just being together.”

“I agree,” she said. “I think it’s just sharing the moment, the two of you in your own little bubble, and feeling like you’re so glad it’s them and no one else with you in that moment.”

She paused, and he raised his eyes to see her biting her lip before admitting, “I’m happy to be here with you. Even if we had stayed downstairs, and eaten jaeger schnitzel and beer, it still would have been romantic because we’d have laughed at it together.”

Her words made him catch his breath, and when he exhaled again, he sighed her name. “Elizabeth.” She waited for him to say something else, so he swallowed, and said, “I...I am so glad to be here with you tonight.”

It was an excellent time for an interruption; he needed to gather his wits again, and so was delighted to see the arrival of the first course. By the time they had been served, he could breathe normally again.

“How are your aunt and uncle?” he asked. “I enjoyed meeting them... was that last month already?”

“It was,” she said. “The day after Thanksgiving I think? I always go out shopping with them then.”

“I really enjoyed my conversation with your uncle that night.”

“You were so kind to invite us all back to your place for dessert.”

“But you couldn’t come,” he said. “I think there was some emergency with your sister?”

“Lydia.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Yes, whenever Lydia thinks she’s not getting enough attention she likes to stage an emergency to get the whole family in a flap. Anyway, you were just so...so kind to us all.”

“Did you expect me to be otherwise?”

“Honestly, yes I did,” she admitted. “To be perfectly frank when I saw you I expected you to walk by and ignore us. You could have, you know. A few steps to the right and you wouldn’t have even passed our table.”

He met her gaze steadily. “Why would I have done that?”

“My aunt and uncle are... well you know, he does well enough, his car dealership is one of the most profitable in Queens. But that’s nothing compared to

the businesses you run but you treated him like you were both the same.”

“We are both the same,” Darcy said. “Business is business, no matter what the dollar amounts attached to it are.”

“You surprised me,” she said. “I realized I knew absolutely nothing about you and what little I believed I knew was completely wrong. It made me want a second chance.”

He gave her a slight grin. “I’m glad,” he told her. “I’m doing my best to improve on further acquaintance.”

Light snow had begun to fall over the city by the time they left the restaurant. As Darcy helped her into the car, she wondered if this was it, the end of their near-fairytale date. She found herself hoping it wasn’t.

“Well, Sam?” Darcy asked as he entered the car. “What next?”

“A carriage ride, sir,” Sam replied. Elizabeth hid her little exhale of relief. “Mr Bingley was quite insistent that a carriage ride through Central Park be included.”

By the time they arrived at the carriage ride, however, the light snow had grown more determined, along with an increasingly fierce wind, the kind that threatened of real winter to come. Elizabeth was not about to protest, however, and climbed into the carriage seat, immediately taking cover under the

warm blanket.

They set off a bit quietly, Darcy tucked into his blanket and Elizabeth cocooned into hers. “If only the wind would die down a little,” she said, feeling the sting of the snowflakes against her face.

“Yeah,” he said, looking none too happy. “Should we ask him to turn around?”

“Let’s give it a little bit longer.” Then, on an impulse she didn’t dare to examine, she said, “Maybe if we both snuggled under both blankets, it might be better?”

He turned to look at her, seeming more surprised than she would have expected. After all, he was a hunky billionaire, didn’t women want to climb under his blankets all the time? Then again, she told herself, not so many hours ago you were almost flinging yourself from a moving car to get away from him.

She opened up his blanket and hers and slid close enough that the long length of his thigh was pressed against hers. Then she reached across him, putting her blanket across him, then pulling his blanket across her. The immediate increase in heat was undeniable, especially when he tentatively pulled her into his side with one arm. She snuggled in, hoping he knew how much she wanted to be there.

Elizabeth tilted her head up at him. “Better?”

“Perfect,” he replied.

The horses began to move and with it, the conversation. Elizabeth found herself a little surprised

by how talkative Darcy could be. They spoke about family and friends, about Jane and Charles, about how Darcy didn't watch sports very much and Elizabeth did, and how both preferred paperbacks to e-readers. Somewhere in the course of things Elizabeth realized they were holding hands and that, even better, their gloves were removed and his thumb was brushing the skin of her thumb. In the midst of a conversation about favorite travel spots, she found herself wondering what it would be like to fall in love with him.

Central Park was strangely deserted, and at length, Elizabeth remarked on it. "It's weird, isn't it, to be in Central Park and not see all the joggers and tourists and bike riders?"

"I paid them all to stay away," Darcy replied with a little smirk. "I was hoping to have you to myself."

She laughed. "And so you do! But the question is then, what shall you do with me?"

He looked down at her, and for a moment her own daring failed her. She felt the heat of him pressed beside her, a stark contrast to the cold air on her cheeks. He wanted to kiss her—she could sense it in the air between them, that electricity that comes before an earth-shattering kiss. Beneath the blanket, she felt his hand envelop hers, and she tilted her head up, wanting Darcy to know that she wanted to kiss him too.

He's unsure of himself. The thought amazed her that she would have him in her power enough that he'd want to kiss her and yet deny himself. He really does love me. The thought of that made her shiver and wonder what it might be like to kiss him.

"The Bow Bridge, sir," announced the carriage driver loudly.

The disappointment that coursed through her was almost painful in its severity. Bow Bridge? What did she care about the Bow Bridge, she'd been there a million times, she wasn't some tourist!

Darcy sounded more baffled than angry when he replied. "Ah... the Bow Bridge? Are we... should we exit the carriage?"

"Yes, sir," the man said, climbing down from his perch and coming to assist them. Grudgingly Elizabeth emerged from her blanketed paradise and jumped down.

It was rather beautiful, a spot of snowy, urban perfection; it served as an ideal backdrop to a veritable multitude of engagement photos and Instagram posts. "The place where people come to propose," she said.

"People who lack imagination," Darcy snorted beside her.

"How imaginative does a proposal need to be?" She looked up at him. "Really, all that's required is a simple 'will you' and a ring. Actually, you don't even need the ring."

“I thought every girl wanted something unique and special, something to tell her friends about so they could all gasp and be amazed,” he said.

“Finding love in and of itself is the unique and special part,” Elizabeth said. “Or so I’ve always thought.”

“I can’t disagree with you there,” he said.

She felt it again, that tension in the air, the portent of a kiss. The snow had become more lazy, drifting rather than blowing and surrounding them with the feeling of enchantment. Great spot for a first kiss, she thought. The tourists would be proud.

“If you were willing,” he said, “I would love for you to meet my sister.”

His sister? That’s what he’s thinking about right now? Elizabeth recovered quickly from her surprise. “I’d like that too.”

“We could have dinner together perhaps?”

“Sounds great.”

“How does tomorrow sound?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Unless you’re busy of course,” he said immediately. “You probably are. Busy that is.”

“No.” She laid her hand on his arm. “No, I’m not busy. I was just surprised, that’s all. Surprised you wanted to see me again so soon.”

“You are?” He shook his head slightly. “Elizabeth, if I had it my way, we’d have a date tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that... every day after that

until...”

She waited a moment, not breathing, her chest tight with anticipation. “Until?”

Her hand was still on his arm, and he reached for it, removing it from his arm and bringing it to his lips, lightly kissing her fingers. Such an old-fashioned gesture might have seemed contrived from another man, but for Darcy, it seemed perfectly natural.

“Until what we had was no longer considered dating,” he murmured, dropping her hand, and touching the hair around her face.

She touched her tongue to her lips. “Tomorrow then,” she said. “I’m already looking forward to it.”

His eyes fell to her lips, and she thought now, do it now, kiss me...but he didn’t.

Darcy gestured back to the carriage. “Shall we get back in? I’m starting to feel the cold, and I’m sure you must be too.”

Sweet agony. He had never understood phrases like that, so common in romance stories, until he was actually living it. It was painful, his want for her, but it was also pleasurable because it was the understanding that even if he couldn’t have her now, someday he might.

Might. Because he still wasn’t quite sure. The date had progressed from anger to her wanting to leave, and then onto to her staying and from there, heaven. They had talked, laughed, cleared up

misconceptions—it was much more than he'd dared to hope for, particularly when the date itself had been basically forced on her.

He realized then that the car had come to a stop in one of the side streets of Manhattan. He leaned to look out the window but couldn't see anything he recognized. "Where are we?" he asked Sam.

"A club, sir. One Mr Bingley thought might be a fun way to end the evening."

He looked at Elizabeth his eyebrows raised. "I have to admit, Bingley has done us well so far, but this doesn't look like any club I've ever seen."

"Which makes it more appealing in my book." She grinned. "Let's go in."

They had to descend a few steps below the sidewalk to enter. It proved to be a private club, happily absent of any sort of throbbing techno beat. They were greeted by a host named Niki who was wearing a leopard print silk pajamas and black high heels trimmed with marabou. Don't tell me this is the new trend. Darcy shuddered even as he gave her his name.

"Welcome to the Slumber Party, Mr. Darcy. Come with me, we'll find your outfits in here."

They followed her into a small room, shooting each other baffled looks as they went. Inside the room were racks and shelves of new clothes. "Mr Bingley has paid your admission fee. It includes the pajamas, which are yours to keep afterwards."

“Pajamas?” Elizabeth asked.

“As you see, we have a wide selection,” Niki chirped, gesturing at the wall behind her. “Baby dolls, onesies, footsies, nighties, lounge pants... whatever you’d like.”

“I don’t think we’ll need those,” Darcy informed her.

“Oh but you have to wear pajamas,” she chirped. “It’s our dress code.”

“A dress code? Of pajamas?”

“Yes,” she said. “And I should tell you now, despite our theme, this is not a sex club. Pajamas must be worn at all times, and private areas are monitored by closed-circuit televisions. Indecency will lead to immediate removal.”

Elizabeth gave him a startled, amused look and mouthed the words sex club, then said aloud, “I’m game if you are.” To Niki, she said, “White sherpa onesie, size small.”

“Sherpa onesie?” Darcy asked.

“You got it,” Niki replied. “I think we have some tall sizes, I’ll hook you up.” With that, she disappeared behind the curtain into a back room.

Darcy sighed. “I was asking what it was, not making my selection.”

“I think you’ll be delighted with your choice,” Elizabeth assured him. “Nice and cozy.”

Ten minutes later, Darcy was incredulous. “I look like a tall wad of cotton.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth replied, barely smothering her grin. “Very dignified actually.”

“Totally hot,” Niki assured him in a bored tone. “Now let me show you to your table.”

They entered a dark cavernous room, dimly lit by some well placed flameless candles. It was mostly quiet, people lingering over drinks, though in one corner, a pillow fight was happening. “This is without a doubt the oddest place I’ve ever been,” Darcy announced.

Bingley had done well by them, reserving a private space with furry pillows on the floor and velvet curtains to separate them from the rest of the club. “Last call is 5 AM,” Niki told them gesturing towards the pillows. “As I mentioned before, these rooms are monitored, and any attempts at a DIY porn show will result in your rapid removal from the premises. What can I get you to drink? I cannot say enough good things about the hot chocolate experience, it’s a flight of five spiked hot chocolates. Want me to hook that up for you?”

Darcy nodded, and she was off. Elizabeth tossed herself down onto the floor pillow. “Very comfy,” she announced. “Join me?”

“How am I supposed to sit in this thing?” He grumbled. “Do people really sleep this way?”

“I think teenage female people do,” Elizabeth said and then reached for his hand, almost pulling him down beside her. Moments later, Niki returned.

“The hot chocolate experience,” she announced setting down four mugs. “Nutella, almond joy, peanut butter cup, peppermint bark and salted caramel. Have fun!”

Elizabeth picked up the mug that Darcy believed was Nutella hot chocolate. “A toast to second chances,” she announced, taking a sip. “Extremely hot but delicious.”

He took the mug from her, sipping cautiously. “Agreed,” he said. “Wonder what kind of booze is in this? I can barely taste it.”

“I sense a whiff of bourbon,” Elizabeth replied. “But I could be wrong.”

Almond joy was likewise delicious, “although if you didn’t like coconut, you’d be in trouble,” Darcy decided. “It’s very coconutty.”

“I love coconut,” Elizabeth said. “I like to eat it, smell it, the works.”

“I have to admit,” Darcy said, “I’ve always like the coconut-smelling conditioners and such that they make for women. Men always get some sort of woodsy-smelling shampoo.”

“That’s right. It’s like women want to be on the beach while people assume men want to be permanently in Colorado or something.”

“Exactly. Somewhere we can stomp through the woods looking manly in red plaid.”

Elizabeth laughed then picked up another cup of hot chocolate. She took a little sip and made a face,

quickly setting it down. “Gross. This one tastes awful.”

“What’s in that one?”

“The peanut butter. Mental note, peanut butter and booze do not mix. I think I need another swig of the Nutella one to cleanse my palate,” she complained.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Darcy said. “I just drank the rest of it. Give me a minute, I’ll order another one.”

“Not necessary.” She shook her head, her eyes locked onto his as she leaned into him. When she put her hand against his chest, his brain bleated out one word into his conscious—kiss!—and then it happened, her lips on his. Too fast she was pulling away from him.

“Don’t go,” he said, already a little breathless. He cupped the back of Elizabeth’s head and kissed her again, deepening the kiss. A clattering sound surprised them both; the mug which had contained the Nutella hot chocolate had fallen and rolled away. Elizabeth moved to quickly pick it up; then, looking at him, she had removed the rest of the mugs to the side.

He hoped he was correct in his understanding of her invitation, and took her into his arms. He’d dreamt of this moment for months now, but the reality was so much better, holding her tight against him, tasting her, touching her, and feeling her touch him too.

It was too tempting to be laying in a mass of pillows with the woman he loved; instinct drove him

to lay her down and to slide on top of her, to trail kisses onto her neck and lower. But it was her fault—and something he would tease her about for years to come—that they got kicked out.

Caught up in the moment like he was, she slid down the zipper of his onesie. It was hardly scandalous, just enough so that she could push her hands inside and touch his chest, but apparently, it was too much for Niki.

“I’m sorry,” she said, giving them a rueful smile. “We can’t allow it. It escalates too quickly and then next we know...”

“DIY porn?” Darcy asked soberly, making Elizabeth, sitting red-faced beside him, laugh.

“Exactly,” said Niki.

“Just give us a minute to put our clothes back on,” Darcy said. “I promise we’ll go quietly.”

Epilogue

One year later

“You know I got charged for that, right?” Bingley grumbled.

“No! You did?” Elizabeth asked. The two couples were strolling the streets of Dyker Heights, enjoying the lights.

“How much?” Darcy asked.

“Two-fifty,” said Bingley in an aggrieved tone. “It’s a very strict club.”

“Well, it’ll give you something to think about next time you want to offer up my dating services for Yankee Swap,” Darcy informed him.

“Hey!” Elizabeth protested, snuggling tighter under Darcy’s arm. “You’d better not. Or if you do, just make sure I know which it is first because he’s all mine.”

Though it had been a year, hearing her say things like that still caused the same happy thrill to go through him. All mine. Yes indeed, he was all hers, and he was hoping that, by the end of this night, she’d be all his too.

Jane and Bingley had been married a few weeks prior, on the twenty-sixth of November, and had recently returned from their honeymoon. He had pressed them into service immediately, setting into action a plan he had been developing since August. It was hard to believe it was nearly upon them, just a few more houses down.

“Wonder what’s wrong with that one?” Elizabeth pointed to a smaller, more modest looking house that was completely dark.

“Maybe they don’t decorate?” Jane asked innocently.

“I think the neighbors make a covenant,” Bingley opined. “All of this brings a lot to the shopkeepers, so it’s in everyone’s interests to keep it going.”

“Be that as it may,” said Elizabeth, “they don’t have any lights.”

The house was fenced in with a low stone wall and wrought iron fencing, and Elizabeth moved close, turning her back on the rest of them and almost pressing her face to the fence to better see the house. “They have the lights,” she reported. “They just aren’t turned on. I wonder if they know? Maybe a fuse blew or... oh!”

The lights had come on suddenly, dancing, flickering and illuminating things to the beat of an old song he’d always particularly liked and imagined she would too, Smokey Robinson singing about how in love he was and that if his girl loved him too, it would be Christmas every day. Right on cue, Elizabeth enthused, without turning around, “Oh I love this song!”

Quietly, Jane reached into her back, withdrawing her camera and stepping back to frame her shot. Bingley raised his phone to his face, pressing the record button as the passersby on the street began to gather, looking curiously at Darcy who had gotten onto one knee on the sidewalk.

As Elizabeth watched the lights on the house, a marquee which ran along the roofline, but had been previously dark, lit up. At first, it showed no more than a series of symbols... a tree, a snowflake, a snowman and then hearts. Then came the words:

Dearest loveliest Elizabeth, I love you so much.
Please say you will marry me.

Elizabeth gasped, turning around to find him with

a ring in his hand. “The year we’ve had together has been the best year of my life,” he said. “I want to make your whole life feel like the holidays, every day better than the one before it. I love you more than words can say. Will you marry me?”

Her eyes shone as she covered her mouth with her mittened hands and walked to him, helping him stand. “Yes,” she said, to the cheers of the gathered crowd. “Forever and always yes.”

Wrapping Up Charlotte

by Leslie Diamond

Part 1: The Introduction

Charlotte Lucas logged off the Darcy Holdings server and swiveled around in her chair. Lizzy had left an hour ago, but Charlotte had stayed to finish up her prep work for the next day. She hated coming in first thing Monday morning and playing catch-up. Well, it might not really be catch-up, but to her, it felt like it was.

She grabbed her purse from the file drawer where she stowed it every day and tugged it to her shoulder as she strode for the elevator, the doors opening not long after she pressed the button. When she stepped into the lobby, she glanced down at her phone to load the book she'd been reading for the subway ride home.

She'd just touched the app icon on the screen when her entire body smacked into something hard and fell backward, her butt stinging when it hit the cold, hard marble floor. "Crap! Why don't you watch where you're going?"

A hand appeared in front of her face. "I could say the same to you since your eyes were plastered to your phone." With the help of the mysterious hand, she managed to stand but she scanned the floor instead of looking up. Her phone was gone.

"My phone? Did you see where it went?" She

couldn't lose it! Everything was on it! Her schedule, her lists, and every single contact! She splurged on the model with the most memory for that reason. She couldn't afford another!

While her eyes traced every bit of tile she could see, her Harry Potter phone case appeared in front of her. Her breath left her all at once. Thank God!

“Ravenclaw, huh? I'm more of a Slytherin, but I promise I'm not an evil one.”

She started and her eyes traced their way up the mysterious arm to a face that wore the sexiest, lopsided grin she'd ever seen. The heavy English accent didn't hurt his sex appeal, either. “Well, you did knock me down?” she quipped.

“Only because I was looking at my mobile, too. If I'd seen you there, I wouldn't have had the pleasure.”

Pleasure? She glanced behind her. He was talking to her? He had to be bullshitting her.

“I thought to surprise my cousin who works here but they told me he'd already left for the day.” He laughed and shook his head. “Look, I just got into town, and I'm starving. How about I buy you dinner to make up for the sore bum?”

Charlotte chuckled. “I don't know you. You could be some psycho killer.”

His dimples deepened as he glanced out the bank of windows at the front of the building. “I'm not suggesting we go to a dark alley or catch a taxi together. If I remember correctly, there used to be a

fairly decent steakhouse just around the corner.”

“Fairly decent?”

He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Meh, I prefer British beef, but they do a good job with what they have.”

Her head hitched back. What a pretentious load of . . . well, she’d already said it! “Thanks, but no thanks. I need to get home. I have a boyfriend—a big one with muscles—waiting for me.”

“No worries. My apologies for knocking you down.”

She took a large step away from him and hurried through the door into the falling snow without peering over her shoulder. He wouldn’t follow her, would he?

When she hopped onto the subway, she watched the platform while the doors closed and they started off. No sign of him. She was safe. She’d never see that jerk again.

“Charlotte!” Lizzy’s voice echoed through the door and into the outer office. One day that woman would learn how to use the phone on her desk for something other than flirting with her husband, the big boss man, or ordering takeout.

“What do you want?” called Charlotte, getting up and walking through the door.

Her best friend and supervisor had a stack of papers in front of her while she bit her thumbnail. “Do you know where the property records are for the

Mansfield transaction?”

“No, but I can check with Mr. Hurst. In the last meeting, Mr. Hurst indicated the merger was when he headed the department. Those files might still be in his cabinets.”

“Lizzy!” came a distinct voice from behind. Charlotte froze. No way! It couldn’t be!

She slowly turned to find the man who bowled her over the week before standing in the doorway. “You? What are you doing here?”

Mr. Tall, Blonde, and Mysterious gave that same devilish grin. “I told you I was here to see my cousin.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nice try. Lizzy isn’t your cousin.”

His smile deepened. “No, not by blood, but William has been my cousin since birth, so she is indeed my cousin—by marriage.”

At the big reveal, Charlotte turned and gaped. “What?”

Lizzy stood and crossed her arms over her chest. “Charlotte Lucas, this is Andrew Fitzwilliam, William’s cousin on his mother’s side.”

“But everyone calls me ‘Drew’,” he added, entirely too smug for his own good.

“Oh,” she said like the blooming idiot she was.

“He’s here to spend the holidays with us.”

Drew leaned against the doorframe. “I haven’t spent time with Will and Ana in a few years. I couldn’t wait to surprise them. I also wanted to meet the

newest Darcy since I couldn't make the wedding."

Charlotte stared. "But you couldn't see Darcy because he went home early, according to you." She spoke almost like she was talking to herself and not someone else.

"Exactly," he said in an entirely too cheerful voice. "Why don't you join us for lunch? We're going to some new place Mrs. Reynolds suggested. I can finally make up for the fact that I knocked you on your duff."

Charlotte peered at Lizzy out of the corner of her eye. That one eyebrow arched almost up to her hairline, which wasn't good. Lizzy would want to know everything that happened with this guy and why Charlotte was so defensive.

"You should come, Char. Ana and Will are joining us, too."

"Miss Lucas should definitely join us," said Mr. Darcy as he strode through the door. "Are you ready, Elizabeth. We have reservations in fifteen minutes. Mr. Hill is waiting downstairs in the company limo. The weather is too cold to walk today."

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "It is not."

He kissed her temple. "Humor me."

Lizzy sighed. "Okay, but you're being silly."

At the sound of a chuckle from beside her, Charlotte turned and lifted her eyebrows. "How long are you staying in town?"

"For the next month." Her eyes roved over the expensive grey suit that fit him like a glove. "I head up

the London office with my younger brother, so I can work from here almost as easily as I can from my own office.”

“Let’s go.” Mr. Darcy waved them forward, so she fetched her purse and walked with Mr. Fitzwilliam toward the elevators. Every muscle in her body clenched in response to him. Why did he make her feel like a moron or like he was laughing at her?

When they were all in the warmth of the limo, Mr. Darcy took Lizzy’s hand while they spoke quietly. Something was up but Charlotte couldn’t put her finger on it. She’d have to keep an eye on the two of them.

“How long have you worked for Lizzy?”

She flinched and turned to face Mr. Fitzwilliam. “For as long as she’s been a lawyer. We’ve been best friends since we were little. I never thought she’d be my supervisor, but I love working for her.”

“That’s good. Not everyone can say that they love who they work for.”

“No, they can’t. Luckily Lizzy isn’t a moody boss and I don’t take advantage of our friendship.”

He nodded. “That’s a common problem when friends are in that position.”

Like Mr. Darcy said, Ana met them at the restaurant. Everyone appeared so laid back and relaxed. A fire burned merrily in a fireplace next to their table and a fully bedecked Christmas tree stood nearby, its lights twinkling merrily. The meal was

delicious and Mr. Fitzwilliam insisted on paying her portion to make up for when they met, despite her protests that it wasn't necessary.

When they returned to the office, Mr. Fitzwilliam lagged behind the others, grabbing her by the elbow before she could catch the elevator with Lizzy. "I wanted to ask you a question."

"Me?" she said. "What could I know that you need?"

That wicked grin appeared on his face. "Nothing like that. I was hoping for someone to go sightseeing with me this weekend. What do you think?"

The tips of her fingers pressed against her chest. "Me? You want to see New York with me?"

"Yeah, you know, ice skate in Central park, see the tree in Rockefeller Center, maybe go to a show. I've never been in New York in December."

She scraped her teeth along her bottom lip before she shook her head. "I shouldn't date one of the big boss men."

He gave a quick bark of a laugh. "I'm not your boss."

"You aren't far off." Who was he kidding? His position with the company was lightyears higher than hers.

His grin widened. "I could fire you."

"You think that will get me to go out with you?" She propped her hands on her hips. "I'd be more likely to kick your ass."

“Very well, I’ll quit.” He started to walk toward the elevators, so she grabbed his arm.

“Are you crazy? You can’t quit!”

“Why not?”

“Because you run one of the major offices, because you’re the big boss man’s cousin, because . . . oh, I don’t know. Just because!”

“So, will you go?”

“No!”

He lifted his eyebrows and chuckled. “I won’t give up.”

“You should.”

The elevator dinged and he backed in while he pointed at her. “I’m not going anywhere you know.”

When the doors closed, her shoulders sagged. He would be here a month. She’d have to put up with his insufferable ass for a month? She was going to lose her mind!

Part 2: The Capitulation . . . Maybe?

“I’m coming!” Charlotte pulled on her sweater as she padded to the door. Who rang a buzzer like that? She couldn’t understand Morse Code for crying out loud! “Yes!” she yelled through the intercom system next to the front door.

“I hope you’re wearing your favorite Christmas jumper!”

She jerked back. What in the heck was he doing

here? “How did you find out where I live?”

“Didn’t you know everything is on the internet these days?” She grumbled and wrapped her sweater tighter around her. “Let me in!”

“Are you stalking me?”

“Oh, good Lord no! I just want someone to sightsee with.”

“What about your cousin?” she said. “I bet he’d be willing to show you around.”

“He’s a bit busy at the moment.” She opened her mouth to speak. “Yes, he’s busy on a Saturday.”

Her finger hovered over the button that opened the front door of the building. Should she? Shouldn’t she? He was the most annoying man she’d ever met! With a groan, she let him into the building and sagged against the wall while she waited for him to knock. Her apartment was only on the second floor. It didn’t take long.

When she opened the door, he held out a tiny cell phone on a ribbon. “I saw it and thought of you.”

“Is that a cell phone Christmas ornament?”

“Yes, it is.” He stepped around her and strode toward her tree. “I think it’d go perfectly right here.” He hung it right in the middle on the front side of the tree. “Now, you still look like you’re in your jim jams. Hurry along and get dressed. We have a lot to do today.”

She laughed incredulously. “I never said I was going anywhere with you.”

“Perhaps I don’t take no for an answer.” He blinked and straightened. “Unless it’s the obvious, extremely important no, if you know what I mean.”

Charlotte closed her eyes. “Thank God for that, at least.” One thing she could promise herself, she would never, ever sleep with Drew Fitzwilliam!

“Well, come on. Get into your Christmas jumper and let’s go.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going.”

“Really? What else do you have to do today? Scrub toilets? Mop floors?” He propped his hands on his hips. “Take pity on a poor traveler and show him the city. Come on. You know you want to.”

“Fine, but you owe me coffee. I haven’t had any yet.”

He chuckled and held out his hand. “Deal!”

It didn’t take long at all for her to change. This wasn’t a date, so what she wore didn’t matter. She put on her favorite pair of jeans. They looked good but were still comfortable. Then she put on her emerald green turtleneck and her best brown boots.

Their first stop was to the local coffee shop on the corner. He bought her an espresso and chocolate croissant and drank his own flat white while she ate her breakfast. They took the subway to Rockefeller Center and saw the tree, then walked to Central park and Wollman Rink.

As she laced up her skates, she peered over at him. “Have you ever ice skated before?”

Drew gave that devastatingly cocky grin that made her stomach flip. “No, but it can’t be that hard.”

Why was she not surprised? True to his overconfident personality, he assumed he could do anything without effort. She’d seen it often enough the last week or so at work. How she looked forward to seeing him fall on his ass!

When his skates met the ice, he wobbled like a small child trying to stand for the first time. Charlotte followed him out and skated around him. “Are you going to make it?”

He waved her off. “No worries. I can do it.”

She skated backward while he awkwardly stepped forward and his feet slid right out from under him with a “oomph.”

“Are you okay?” She bit her cheek to keep from laughing.

“I might need a bit of help,” he said, rubbing his backside.

“You think so.” A wide grin lit her face.

“You don’t have to look so happy about it.”

She held out her hand to help him up. “I don’t mind anything that takes that overly large ego of yours down a notch.”

As he regained his footing, he furrowed his brow. “I don’t have a big ego.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Maybe you should get to know me. You might change your mind.”

She took both of his hands in hers and began to skate backwards, letting him slowly trail along and become accustomed to the ice. “I doubt it. Besides, I don’t date Slytherins.”

One side of his lips quirked up. “We’re not all evil, you know. We’re ambitious, which lumps some of us in when we merely want to be the best at everything.”

“No one can be the best at everything,” she said, looking down at his feet. That lop-sided smile did things to her and she couldn’t let him win. He was all wrong! He lived in England, he was a head of one of the company offices, and he was in the wrong Hogwarts house! Why couldn’t she find a nice guy who lived in New York City?

“I can try. I can be a stubborn git when I put my mind to something.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“You could give me a chance.”

Her eyes lifted to his. “You’re not my type.”

“That’s just an excuse like that big boyfriend you had at home. I figured it was, but Lizzy was happy to tell me the truth. You’re free and single. I’m free and single. Have lunch with me?”

“When?”

“Every day that I’m here.”

She released his hands and threw hers up, dropping them to her sides. “Why me? Why have you decided that you have to pester me?”

“Because you’re the first woman in a long time

who finds me annoying.”

She scrunched her forehead. “And you like that? Are you some sort of masochist?”

He laughed and managed to lean forward to grasp her hands. “Lord, no! I just find you interesting, and I want to learn more about you. Don’t you want to know more about me?”

“No.” She let one side of her lips curve up.

“No?” He narrowed his eyes a little then shook his head. “I don’t believe you. Nice try, love.” What was it about English accents? His had this deep quality that made her have to resist curling her toes.

“Why do you never believe me?”

“Because if you were really so dead set against me, I would’ve never gotten you out of your flat. I annoy you, but I think some small part of you likes me. Besides, you know your excuse about not dating me because I’m a ‘big boss man’ is bollox anyway. I’m not a supervisor in this office.”

“You’re still an executive.”

“So, by your reasoning, you couldn’t date someone in the mail room. That’s pretty limiting.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I don’t date anyone I work with. It doesn’t matter the capacity.”

“Perfect,” he said, grinning. “You don’t work with me.”

She pressed her lips together and withheld a growl. He could be so infuriating!

Part 3 – The Revelation . . . Resolution . . . or whatever it is!

Charlotte stepped into the opulent ballroom and absorbed her surroundings. The splendor of the Darcy Holdings holiday party never failed to impress her. Tonight was no different.

She spotted Charlie and Jane Bingley near the bar, Jane sitting heavily on one of the stools. The poor thing was two weeks away from delivering their second child. Why she was at a holiday party instead of reclining comfortably in her husband's La-z-boy at home?

"Jane," she said to carry over the music when she neared them. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a balloon that has too much air in it."

Charlie kissed his wife's temple. "She insisted on coming. I don't know why. I tried to get her to stay at home with Rosie."

"Because our daughter wouldn't have let me rest either." She leaned closer to Charlotte. "Have you noticed anything odd about Lizzy lately?"

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows. "Like what?"

Jane's husband rolled his eyes. "Jane's convinced Lizzy is hiding something. Darcy is behaving oddly, too, but he's also had a lot on his plate. Lizzy has too for that matter."

Lizzy hadn't had a cup of coffee in a month, and she'd been ordering odd lunches, too. One day, she

would eat something so bland that Charlotte would wonder how she swallowed it. The next, she'd order a chili dog and onion rings. Charlotte had her suspicions, but if Lizzy wasn't talking, neither was she. "No, I haven't noticed anything."

"Happy Christmas." An arm rested over her shoulders and Charlie started to chuckle.

"You might lose that arm if you leave it there."

She turned as Drew shrugged his free shoulder. "It'd be worth the loss."

Jane's tiny giggle carried over the music, but Charlotte stepped forward, letting Drew's arm fall. "A glass of the red, please?" The bartender nodded and poured the glass. She took a gulp then turned to find Jane staring at her. "What?"

"Nothing."

It wasn't a secret that Drew had managed to talk her into lunch more often than she managed to outwit him. At first, he brought lunch to her, which got the entire executive assistant pool talking, so she suggested they go somewhere else. If only he hadn't worn that insufferable grin when she mentioned it!

She planned a lunch with Lizzy and Jane to avoid him, but the day after, he showed up like clockwork. She'd, at least, paid for her own—most of the time. Another swig of wine went down her throat.

His palm rested between her shoulder blades and she froze. "Why don't we get you some food?" He glanced at Charlie and Jane. "Would you care to join

us?” After they declined, Drew took her hand and pulled her toward the buffet while she gave Charlie and Jane a finger wave with the hand holding her wine.

Once she had a plate, Drew steered her to a table and pulled out her chair. She finished off her wine and set her glass on a passing tray, trading it for some champagne. He sat down beside her. “You’re a good assistant.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, taking a drink while she watched him. Was he making a joke?

“Because you know as well as I do that Lizzy is pregnant.”

She gasped and the next thing she knew, she was coughing in an attempt to expel the champagne that went down the wrong way. “I beg your pardon?” The words were gasped out when she caught her breath.

“Well, I’ve seen her run for the closest water closet at the sight of breakfast. Mrs. Hill doesn’t get offended and simply hands Darcy a bag of saltines before he follows his wife out of the room. She also drinks copious amounts of ginger tea—vile stuff, that.” He picked up his knife and fork, but held them relaxed in his hands. “I don’t doubt you’ve noticed your own clues, but you didn’t say a word to Lizzy’s sister. I admire that.”

She chugged down her champagne and grabbed another glass. She really needed to get him on a plane to England! The sooner, the better!

Charlotte groaned and tried to swallow. Lord, her mouth was as dry as the Sahara! It tasted—was she sucking on sweaty socks? Yuck!

“Shh, love. Go back to sleep.”

Her eyes shot open. What the . . . ? It was dark, so she ran her hand down her body to find she was still in her dress from the party and her panties were still intact. She relaxed but her heart still raced from the shock. Why was he in her bed?

She remembered dinner, they’d danced to three songs, then everything went blank. One thing remained constant throughout the evening, the champagne.

Carefully, she pushed the covers back and started to pull herself to the edge, but a heavy arm over her middle created a problem. With two fingers, she picked up the arm by the wrist and slinked out from under it. When she rose, her head throbbed and she put a palm to it.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I need to use the bathroom, and I want to brush my teeth.”

The sheets rustled, but she didn’t look back. She closed the door behind her, only opening it once she was brushing her teeth and he knocked. Once she rinsed her mouth, his hand appeared in front of her with a glass of water. “Take these.” Then drink all of this. And no whinging.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Yes, she griped, but what did he expect? His low chuckle could be heard over her swallowing the water. “What are you doing here?”

He brushed her hair behind her ear. “You were drinking champagne like it was water and became pissed as a parrot. I made sure you got home then stayed to make sure you were okay. I didn’t want you getting sick in your sleep.”

“Oh.” She set the glass next to the sink. “Thank you.”

His fingers laced with hers. “Come on. Let’s get you back to bed. If I make you uncomfortable, I can go kip on the sofa.”

Once he tucked her in, she grabbed his wrist. “The sofa is lumpy. You might as well stay here.”

She couldn’t see his face, but when he curled behind her, his lips were definitely smiling as he pressed them where her neck and shoulder met.

The next time she woke the cool air of the room chilled her back so she rolled over. Drew sat on the side of the bed, his short blonde hair sticking up in all directions.

“Where are you going?” She glanced to the clock by her bed. Six a.m.? Why would he get up so early on Christmas? “Do you have somewhere you need to be?”

“Lizzy and Darcy will be expecting me when they open gifts.”

Charlotte laughed. “Which won’t be for another four or five hours. Trust me.” He looked over with his

eyebrows lifted. “She’s the world’s worst at getting up early,” she said.

One side of his lips tugged upward in that sexy smile she’d been resisting since they met. His eyes held hers as she sat up. Why had she been holding him at bay? At the moment, all the reasons she’d been using didn’t seem to matter—not that he was a boss in the company, not that he lived in England, and certainly not that he was a Slytherin. He’d never listened to her reasons, anyway.

How many times had she wanted him to kiss her? This moment was one of them, but she wasn’t going to bite her lip and pretend it didn’t exist—not this time.

When she leaned closer, he sat stock still while her stomach was full of butterflies. He could at least help and meet her half-way! Eventually, his eyes fluttered closed and their lips touched. Her free hand curled around the back of his neck, and he groaned as she pulled him back down to the bed with her.

“Charlotte, are you sure?”

“Positive,” she whispered against his lips.

He lifted up and whipped off his t-shirt. As he settled back onto her, he lightly bit her neck, sending little sparks traveling through every nerve ending.

“How long did you say we have again?”

“I don’t have anywhere to go. Do you?”

Drew lifted up and stared into her eyes. “Not for hours, yet.” He brushed a sweet kiss to her lips. “You’ll go with me, won’t you?”

She nodded. She wouldn't admit it to him—not yet, at least, but she'd follow him anywhere.

Mr. Darcy's Advent Season

By Joana Starnes

5th December 1811, White's, London

“Whatever ails the fellow?” Colonel Fitzwilliam good-naturedly muttered with a nod towards Bingley, who sat across from them still gazing fixedly into the fire, chin in hand.

It was little wonder that the colonel should remark on the other's uncommonly sombre temper. It was distinctly out of character for Bingley. Yet Darcy was unwilling to speculate on the uncomfortable topic, either inwardly or aloud. Instead, he shrugged and made a show of turning the page of his morning paper. It did not come as much of a surprise that the evasive tactic did not serve him. Evasive tactics never did, where his cousin was concerned.

“You might as well set that aside,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said with a dismissive flourish of his hand. “You have been staring at it for six minutes together and you will not persuade me you have found something quite so fascinating therein. Which, come to think of it, begs the question – what ails you? You hardly said a word all morning. I grant you, this is nowhere near as shocking as your voluble friend lapsing into grim and extended silences, but ‘tis enough to pique my interest all the same,” he drawled, stretching his long legs towards the fire and reaching

for his cup of coffee.

Darcy grimaced and stirred in his seat as he folded the paper, then dropped it on the table at his elbow with a gesture of impatience.

“You should join them if you are starved for conversation,” he observed, tilting his head towards the other occupants of the room. “I daresay they are garrulous enough to suit your taste and disposition.”

And so they were. The merry group of five were still gathered around young Sommerville, mercilessly teasing him about his unabashed delight in his recent betrothal. There was every reason to believe that Sommerville’s happy situation and excessively high spirits contributed to Bingley’s lack of cheer, but yet again Darcy reminded himself that it served no purpose to speculate on that particular topic.

What was done was done, and it was for the best. In due course, Bingley would come to see it too. In time, he would become attached to some other fair-haired angel. Well-dowered, hopefully, and with the right connections. A sensible man should know better than to succumb to fascination. No one in his right mind would be swayed by the transient appeal of all manner of allurements. However charming, they were inconsequential. There was more to choosing one’s life companion than grace and beauty, or a voluptuous form, a shapely ankle, rosy lips simply begging to be kissed, dimpled cheeks and laughing dark-brown eyes and sharp wits and a splendid gift of repartee.

Once it became blatantly clear to him that it was not Jane Bennet's appealing attributes – physical or otherwise – that he was cataloguing, Darcy's hand tightened around the armrest and he sat up straighter with a scowl. His frown deepened when his cousin chortled.

“Ah. There we have it. I think I can guess the cause of your ill-humour,” the colonel said with an air of confidence that might have made Darcy start, had he not known that, however astute, his cousin could not possibly read minds nor picture bewitching young ladies with whom he was not acquainted.

So he replied with matching confidence and a fair amount of feigned disinterest, “I should imagine not. But I expect you will regale me with your suppositions nonetheless.”

This time, the other laughed outright.

“You know me well.” Colonel Fitzwilliam sipped his coffee and gleefully resumed. “I am prepared to wager that all this talk of betrothals had you thinking of my mother's upcoming soirée. Surely she did not omit to mention that Lord Denham and his daughter were invited specifically with you in mind.”

Darcy darted his eyes heavenward and said crisply, “She did not.”

His cousin's wicked grin widened.

“Come now. Even a dour soul such as your good self might derive some amusement from our dear aunt Catherine's likely response to the dinner

arrangements.”

Darcy cast him a censorious glance, but true to form, his cousin was undaunted. The colonel gave a nonchalant shrug.

“Naturally, Mater had no way of knowing that her beloved sister-in-law would deign to travel to town and grace us with her presence. So, here we are. Mater could not very well rescind Lord Denham’s invitation. Lady Catherine will have to countenance seeing you paired with the charming Lady Alicia for dinner.”

Darcy’s censorious glance grew downright severe.

“Have you perchance considered Anne’s feelings on the matter?” he scathingly asked. “Or are you so entertained by the prospect of barbs flying over the dinner table to think of anything else?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam shrugged again.

“Anne has no wish to marry you. Why should she be affected?”

Darcy gave a low huff of exasperation.

“Because no person of common decency could be at ease in such circumstances. She will be mortified by her mother’s tactless comments.”

Just as Elizabeth had been mortified by Mrs Bennet’s. The sudden notion gave him pause. How odd that he had not noticed until now how similar his aunt and the Hertfordshire matron were, in this respect at least. One was an earl’s daughter, the other the descendant of some lowly tradesman, yet they both pursued their offspring’s interests – or rather

their own – with the same steadiness of purpose. With the same mulishness, in fact, and the same lack of manners. Both loud. Both brash. Both damnably opinionated. Both of them paying no heed to their daughters' wishes and relentlessly urging them towards an advantageous match instead.

The colonel's reply drew him from his ruminations.

"You should give Anne more credit," he observed. "The Fitzwilliam profile is not the only trait she had inherited from her mother. In case you have not noticed, she also has Lady Catherine's ability to turn a deaf ear to anything and everything she does not wish to hear. Still, you have a point, so I shall make it my business to ensure Anne has entertaining company at dinner," he undertook with a roguish quirk in his lips.

But Darcy could no longer hear him all that well. The colonel's low tones were suddenly drowned out by raucous laughter, and above it rose young Sommerville's cheerful but firm voice:

"Very well, gentlemen, laugh if it pleases you. I say you are naught but covetous wretches, and you shall not laugh me out of my joy, nor distract me from my purpose. Call me unfashionably besotted if you will, but I must beg to be excused from our regular amusements. I shall be otherwise engaged, you see. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve, and that task will command my full attention. I said this before, and I shall say it again: she is an angel, and

only a fool would absent himself from her society to silence your blasted quibbling. So pray, enjoy the delights of bachelorhood with my blessing and do not bemoan my fate. Mark my words, I shall have the last laugh in a few years' time."

Protests, raillery and laughter erupted yet again, but Darcy did not look their way. The harsh sound of a chair scraping against the wooden floor drew his eyes towards his friend. Jaw set and his mien dark, Bingley stood.

"Excuse me," he said and abruptly left the room.

6th December 1811, Grosvenor Square

When Darcy called upon Bingley on the following morning, he was told that his friend had already left over an hour ago.

"He said he was of a mind to go for a lengthy ride. Which is just as well, for I have something to say which could not have been imparted in his presence. Unfortunately, I have received another letter from Hertfordshire," Miss Bingley said, her tone of voice a clear indication of her deep sense of ill-usage.

Darcy found it as repugnant as her air of complicity. Colluding with her against his best friend sat ill with him, even though it was done in Bingley's best interests.

The question “And what am I to do on the occasion?” sprang to mind, but it was an uncivil thing to say, so he bit it back. Just as he bit back the insane urge to request permission to read that letter. It would be in Miss Bennet’s hand, not hers, but it might convey something – might make some passing reference to the family. It was very likely that Miss Bennet would mention her dearest sister and closest companion.

Aye. Very likely. And what of it?

Darcy straightened in his seat and resumed control over his senses and his temper, only to have his efforts thwarted by Miss Bingley’s whine:

“Would you kindly advise me, Mr Darcy? Surely you must know an effective way of discouraging the impertinent. For frankly, this is sheer impertinence, to my mind. I made it very plain in my last letter that I have neither the expectation nor the wish to continue this acquaintance. If she had an ounce of dignity and decorum, she would cease importuning me in this disgraceful manner.”

That Miss Bingley of all people should speak of lack of dignity and of importuning others might have amazed him once. These days, however, nothing she said or did had the power to surprise him. Except, perhaps, that she could accuse the placid and uniformly civil Miss Bennet of impertinence. His countenance set, Darcy stood.

“I fear I have no advice to offer,” he said tersely.

“But I am quite certain you can be as trenchant as the circumstance requires. Pray excuse me, I must leave you now,” he added, just as Miss Bingley opened her lips with the obvious intention of detaining him. He only stayed for long enough to ask her to inform her brother of his visit and to convey to Bingley that he was always welcome in Berkeley Square whenever he found himself in need of company or a friendly ear.

He had to make the offer, as Darcy knew full well, even if the prospect of lengthy conversations with a lovelorn Bingley was as unappealing as could be. But that was the mark of a true friendship: being at hand to give succor and guidance in times of need. Even if the words Miss Bennet should be so frequently repeated as to drive him to distraction.

11th December 1811, Berkeley Square

Yet Bingley did not come to unburden himself. A brief note was sent to Berkeley Square instead, to let Darcy know that, despite very vocal protestations from his nearest and dearest, Bingley had decided to spend a se’nnight or so with his unfashionable cousins in the North. Thus, at least Darcy was spared more conspiratorial exchanges with the man’s sister. He was also spared the sight of Bingley in the lowest of spirits, but that relief was hardly something a good

friend should rejoice at.

Not that he was in any humour for rejoicing, Darcy thought as he paced before the windows, only to scowl as the feeble voice reached him yet again. The ballad singer who plied her trade in the square selling broadsides had become a nuisance of late. Ever since she had begun to sing that song to advertise her wares, to be precise. The ballad was set on the old tune of Greensleeves, and the well-known melody droned on and on under his windows in a manner that severely taxed his equanimity. It would doubtlessly try anyone's patience – even that of fortunate souls who were not plagued by his recollections.

She had played and sung that at Netherfield. Not this woman's ballad, naturally, but the traditional song. It had sounded odd on the pianoforte rather than the harpsichord and she had faltered in places, but she had tugged at his heartstrings with every note and every word nevertheless.

Three-quarters of an hour later, when he could not bear the ballad singer's droning any longer, Darcy sent a footman into the square with thrice as much silver as her broadsides were worth, to buy her wares and send her on her way. In a while, the singing ceased – a sure sign that John had done his master's bidding. A few minutes later, the young footman returned to the morning room, presumably to demonstrate that fact. Why else would the lad hand him one of the printed sheets?

Darcy cast it a cursory glance but did not take it. Instead, he shrugged. "What am I to do with it?"

"I thought—" John stammered. "Shall I dispose of them all, then, sir?"

"Aye. Take them below and do with them what you will. The servants may have them, or they can be used to light the fires. I have no use for them myself."

"Very well, sir," the younger man said and bowed, then promptly left, taking the broadsheet with him.

Alone once more, Darcy made his way towards the window, hands behind his back. He had not the slightest wish to read *The Tragic Ballad of The Lady Who Fell in Love with Her Serving-Man*. The title was a sufficient indication of its mawkishness. He gave a derisive snort. At least he had not lost his senses to the point of falling in love with a housemaid. Not that falling in love with a gentlewoman beneath his station served him any better.

The ludicrous thought brought him up short. In love? Preposterous! He was not in love. The very notion! Lust was not love. And the same could be said of the passing thrill of infatuation.

12th December 1811, Berkeley Square

The ballad singer returned on the following day, and who could blame her? She had not found such

success nor such riches anywhere else in town. Unfortunately, on this occasion she was disappointed. Regardless of how many times she sang the Tragic Ballad beneath the windows of a certain house in Berkeley Square, no more silver coins were sent her way.

She could not know that she had done her work all too well on the previous day, and had reminded both the master of the house and his sister of a favourite tune. She had also revived Georgiana's interest in the small harpsichord that was still kept in the music room for sentimental reasons – it had been their mother's. Thus, to Darcy's dismay, his sister spent the best part of the morning playing and singing Greensleeves. There was no point in coaxing the ballad singer into leaving the square, now that the song rang within his very home. It was flawlessly performed. Georgiana did not falter. Naturally. His proficient sister could play sonatas and elaborate concertos, so she would have no difficulty whatever with a tune of almost childlike simplicity. A poignant tune. Haunting. Maddeningly so. And the words only served to make it worse. They clung to one's mind and spoke incessantly of love. Or rather of an obsessive fascination.

...Oh, why did you so enrapture me?
Now I remain in a world apart
But my heart remains in captivity

Greensleeves was all my joy
Greensleeves was my delight
Greensleeves was my heart of gold
And who but my lady Greensleeves...

Darcy gave an irritable snort as the chorus began to repeat itself through his mind, even though he had taken refuge far enough from the music room and now he could scarce hear it.

“Stuff and nonsense! She does not even wear green!” he muttered, as though the colour had anything at all to do with it, and since he did not have the heart to ask his sister to abandon the wretched tune, he strode to the bell pull and gave it a sharp tug.

The footman who came to attend him was told to send word to the mews for a horse to be readied. Darcy inwardly scoffed as he waited for his mount to be fetched to the door. With any luck, unlike Bingley, he might cure his foolish pining with a long and punishing ride.

12th December 1811, somewhere in Mayfair

He was wrong, he found. She did wear green. Green and gold, diaphanous and bright. She was the very image of Pomona as she skipped along the footpath bordering the Rotten Row, a small bunch of

wildflowers in her hand. Wherever did she find them at this time of year? His disobedient heart lurched. It was Elizabeth, was it not? He could not be mistaken, surely! No, of course he was not mistaken. He could have recognised that lithe form anywhere. So, this was what Miss Bennet had to say in her letter, that they were in town? Very likely. Yet Elizabeth was alone, blithely scampering through the park with no care for the proprieties, just as she had roamed over the fields surrounding her home. With no care for her safety, either, which was a great concern. For goodness sake, this was not her tame and safe Hertfordshire! She should be warned, he thought. She should be protected.

He made to speak, call her name, but no words came out. And then she turned around and saw him standing mere yards away. He could scarce tell how he got there, but it mattered not. Her eyes sparkled as she curtsied.

“Oh,” she said softly. “I was hoping we might meet again.”

“Did you?”

That was a foolish thing to say, he thought, and seemingly she was in agreement for her lips curled into a diverted little smile.

“Of course. I thought I made it plain enough.”

Perhaps she did, but he could not dwell on that as her smile widened and the adorable dimple made an appearance in her flawless cheek, just above the

corner of her lips. Rosy lips and full, simply begging to be kissed. So he kissed her. Clasped her to his chest. Shapely, warm and perfect. Without another thought, he swept her up into his arms – his prize, his joy and his delight. He had to have her for his wife, the naysayers be damned!

12th December 1811, Berkeley Square

A groan left his lips, followed by an oath. A dream. Just a dream. Of course. What the deuce did he expect?

The second groan was stifled. Only a sigh escaped. It had been a perfect dream. Senseless and unattainable, but ever so appealing. As was she. Not senseless – never that – but maddeningly appealing. And also out of reach, reason reminded him in no uncertain terms.

Darcy propped himself up on one elbow and pummelled his pillow in frustration. Everything could happen in a dream. One might float on air. Or fly to the moon. Or follow one's heart and fly in the face of common sense and duty. And then the dream would vanish, leaving the stark reality behind.

He pummelled the pillow yet again for good measure, refusing to acknowledge that reality was stark in more ways than one. But the acute sense of

loss would not be disregarded. It had washed over him in an instant when he had awakened alone in his bedchamber, his arms empty and his head still full of her. The sharp stab of dismay had since then turned into an odd sort of oppressive ache. It was still there, the dull ache. Very much so. It would not be dislodged from his chest, for all his scoffing at senseless dreams and wild flights of fancy.

Darcy expelled a ragged breath and dropped his head back on the pillow to fix his eyes on the canopy above. He could not even blame his dream on the brandy. If only things were as easily remedied as that.

13th December 1811, Hanover Square

Upon reflection, a goodly dose of brandy might have made his aunt's soirée a trifle more bearable, Darcy inwardly grumbled as he shifted in his seat. The conversation over dinner had been bland and uninspiring. Lady Alicia, Lord Denham's eldest daughter, might have been a pleasant companion, but she laughed needlessly and often at nearly everything he said, and goodness knows he was not as entertaining as that. Not even at the best of times.

Miss Beatrice Mortimer, who was seated at his left, strongly reminded him of Miss Bingley and her ingratiating tactics and, unless he was much

mistaken, Lord Fanshawe's second wife had shamelessly flirted with him throughout dinner.

For her part, Lady Catherine had glowered. Her scowls were aimed in turn at him, his companions and at her sister by marriage, even though – or perhaps because – Anne seemed to be well entertained at the other end of the table by Richard's and Lord Crowthorne's conversation.

His other aunt, Richard's mother, returned sweet smiles of angelic innocence in response to Lady Catherine's glares, and since there was no love lost between the pair of them Darcy suspected that the lady of the house was having a fairly diverting evening.

The withdrawal of the ladies took the undercurrents to the drawing room, leaving behind more bland talk – this time about the war, public affairs and horses. A brief exchange with Richard provided a brief respite from the tedium, but not much amusement, for Darcy did not think he could safely express the wish that one day they might trade places, and it would be his cousin who would be paraded and disputed like some prized bull in the marketplace. This was not the best setting for raillery, and besides he suspected that Richard would in fact enjoy being paraded and disputed.

Unfortunately, they could not stay away from the drawing room for ever, and in the end Darcy steeled himself for the task and made his way therein. Still

uncannily like Miss Bingley, Miss Beatrice found something to say to him before he had taken many steps into the room, but he offered her a civil bow and a brief reply and kept his course towards the sofa where Anne and Georgiana sat in quiet conversation.

His choice to join them was in deference to his sister and his cousin, rather than to please a certain cantankerous aunt. Nevertheless, Lady Catherine looked grimly pleased as she approached them.

“Ah, Nephew, a moment with you at last,” she sniffed. “It seems your society is in high demand tonight.”

Her petulance brought something akin to a chortle to Darcy’s lips, but he valiantly suppressed it. Likewise, it would not do to tell her that his society was always in demand and being importuned by two or three young ladies was nothing out of the common way.

“My apologies,” he said instead, and civilly followed it with, “I hope you are having a pleasant evening.”

“I am not,” Lady Catherine replied, which could not surprise him. She had always been one for uncompromising frankness. “But never mind that now. I trust you will escort us to Rosings and spend the festive season in Kent.”

“Oh. Will you not remain in town for Christmas?” was all that Darcy thought fit to say on the occasion.

“Certainly not!” Lady Catherine scoffed. “One

should spend Christmas at one's country estate, not gallivanting about town without a care for one's duties," she added with a flinty stare.

Darcy ignored both the stare and the barb and countered, "My thoughts entirely. Which is why I must regretfully decline your invitation. Georgiana and I will travel to Pemberley by the week's end," he said, which earned him a wide smile of gratitude from his shy sister. Clearly, Georgiana was as averse as he to being cooped up with a pontificating and overbearing Lady Catherine.

Their aunt grimaced.

"Rosings will be yours too, as you well know. And Pemberley is in dire need of a mistress. A man should marry in his prime. I said as much to my parson. Unlike some, he is ready to oblige me. He is to marry in a few weeks' time."

Darcy's jaw tightened. Was she expecting him to bow, scrape and obey her like that obsequious buffoon?

"I am happy for him," he said tersely.

"Yes, well. He proposed last month to one of his cousins. The eldest, I think. No, the second eldest," his aunt carelessly delivered the horrifying tidings that hit him like a punch in the stomach and robbed him of breath.

Elizabeth was to be married? A wave of nausea engulfed him. Mrs Collins? Bound to that sorry excuse for a man – bearing Collins's children? The nausea

turned vicious, just as the room grew unbearably hot.

“So they are to wed?” Darcy choked out.

And then his aunt spoke again, and he could breathe.

“No. The chit refused him. Inconceivable, I know. He made an offer to one of their neighbours next. A sensible gal, from what I hear, who knows her place and will make him a very proper wife...”

But Darcy was no longer listening.

“Excuse me,” he said with a stiff bow and made a beeline for the port decanter.

“Well, I never!” Lady Catherine spluttered, most seriously displeased.

14th December 1811, Berkeley Square

A very proper wife. His aunt’s words stayed with him as Darcy nursed his brandy in the long hours of the night. That was what was expected of him: to choose a very proper wife. Not Elizabeth. He knew his duty, and one day his unruly heart would listen to the voice of reason. He would remember her as a delightful dream of his youth and follow his path, while she followed hers. One day she would marry. Someone sensible and kind, God willing, who would treat her well. Someone unknown to him, hopefully. Someone whom he could not picture courting her –

marrying her – making a life with her. His grip tightened on the glass. Darcy brought it to his lips and drained the fiery liquid in one draught.

As for himself, it was high time he joined the marriage mart in earnest. Come January, he would. With any luck, he might find a tolerable life companion. Not Miss Bingley, perish the thought, nor Miss Beatrice, nor others of their ilk. Not Lady Alicia either. Miss Wyatt might have been an option, with her dark-auburn locks and wide brown eyes, if only she were not so mousy and insipid. Not a spark of fire in her, and not a chance of clever repartee.

Oh, well. The grand salons might have something to offer in the months to come, and he might be engaged by April. He had better be! Otherwise, Heaven help him, he would have to endure another visit to Rosings at Easter, and more prodding on the subject of matrimony!

Mr. Collins's Last Supper

By Shannon Winslow

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an ordinary clergyman cannot expect a vast deal out of life. He must not expect to derive great wealth from his work. He must not expect prestige beyond the common courtesy due his office. He most certainly must not expect to dwell in luxury all his days. The best such a person can reasonably look for is to spend his life in useful toil, and to receive his reward sometime thereafter.

A perfectly sensible man of a suitable nature accepts these unalterable facts as a matter of course when he enters the clerical profession. But William Bartholomew Collins was a man of rather less than perfect sense and suitability, as anybody having spent ten minutes in his company could attest. He was, however, a person upon whom the friendly face of undeserved fortune had smiled.

Mr. Collins had already been given more than one reason to suppose himself singled out by providence for special beneficence. Through no effort of his own, he stood to inherit Longbourn, a tidy estate in Hertfordshire, which was happily entailed upon him due to the bad luck of his cousin (the current holder) in begetting a useless succession of five daughters instead of a single male heir. Since this plainly represented the hand of God at work, Mr. Collins planned to take

possession with a clear conscience when the time came.

In the interim, the clergyman basked in the rarified light of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's patronage, a place where he could sample, albeit vicariously, the wealth and consequence he secretly yearned for. The crumbs from her exceedingly handsome table often fell to him. Her Ladyship, in return, received a doggedly faithful servant eager to prostrate himself at her feet.

Pure chance – nay, surely providence again – had introduced Mr. Collins to the great lady's notice at the very moment she had the living of Hunsford parish to dispose of. A proper semblance of modesty prevented Mr. Collins from openly accepting credit for his early and unexpected rise to prosperity. He instead lavished his praise for the appointment on Lady Catherine herself, for this incontrovertible proof of her superior judgment.

Good fortune had also thrown a humane and judicious wife in Mr. Collins's way. Charlotte, rather than being blinded to her spouse's deficiencies by love, chose to look past them with a view to the snug comfort promised by the parsonage home he offered her. Once installed there, she unflinchingly did her duty to home and husband, managing both with equal efficiency.

With his good wife's encouragement, Mr. Collins took daily outdoor exercise, tending the garden and walking to Rosings Park to pay homage to his noble patroness. Alas, this proved an inadequate antidote to his hearty appetite. Mr. Collins's habit of taking too

much pleasure in his dinner (or perhaps, simply taking too much dinner) resulted in a more portly figure than some thought prudent or fashionable. Still, no one could have foreseen that his overindulgence would precipitate his premature and permanent demise.

The day began like any other. Mr. Collins rose at dawn – an admirable custom learnt in his spartan youth and retained as a point of personal pride. After an hour spent closeted in meditation, cultivating what he flattered himself were high thoughts and lofty principles, he breakfasted with his wife.

“What are your plans for the day, my dear?” Charlotte inquired of him as they ate. She asked the question every morning even though there was never much mystery or even variety in her husband’s answer.

“I have a full slate of important work to do, I assure you,” he replied. “I shall be in my book room for the whole of the morning, going over the discourse to be preached on Sunday. Every word of it is already firmly fixed here in my head,” he said pointing to that appendage. “It is the presentation that still wants refining. A great deal of practice is required to give one’s speech that unstudied air, you know, but that is what sets the really accomplished orators apart from the rest.”

“Yes, so you have informed me on more than one

occasion.”

“Would you care to hear it later – my sermon, I mean?” Mr. Collins asked, reaching for another portion of ham. “It would be no bother at all.”

Charlotte considered the question a moment. “I think not, my dear. I would not wish to ... how shall I explain? ... to dilute the impact of your words by listening in on them before they are fully prepared. Let them overtake me unawares at the proper time and place – of a sudden and in church.”

“Of course. That is only right. Though you are my wife, I mustn’t show favoritism. All my parishioners have a rare treat in store for them this week, though I say it myself.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. The message I speak of came to me in a bolt of inspiration,” he said in hallowed tones, raising his eyes heavenward. “It sprang into my mind, nearly fully formed, directly out of a chapter of Fordyce’s Sermons. I merely had to add such personal touches and illustrations from my own experience as naturally suggested themselves.”

“How convenient. Has Lady Catherine sanctioned your selection?”

“Your scruples do you credit, my dear,” he said, patting her hand, “but you should know by now that I never venture an opinion from the pulpit without her approval. She has already scrutinized the text point by point and given her kind approbation ... provided I

make the changes she advised.”

“Are there many to be made this week?”

“Only so many as are perfectly reasonable and as I have grown accustomed to expecting.”

“Her Ladyship is exceedingly attentive to detail.”

“Very true, my dear. Nothing is beneath her notice. She makes even the minutest concerns of her neighbors her business. Is that not the soul of charity itself?”

Charlotte was saved from the task of contriving an answer to this question by a timely distraction. The bell at the door sounded – the back door used by servants and tradesmen.

Mr. Collins exhibited more than usual interest in the ordinary occurrence, going so far as to suspend his meal and his conversation in order to incline his ear in the direction of the noise. The patter of feet and a muted exchange of words could be heard. Mary, the household’s young maid-of-all-work, then appeared with a large, irregularly shaped parcel wrapped in brown paper.

“This just come from Rosings, madam,” she announced. “Compliments of ‘er Ladyship.”

A beatific smile overspread Mr. Collins’s countenance. “Excellent,” he murmured.

“What is it, Mary?” Charlotte inquired.

“A joint of mutton, madam, or so says the footman who brung it. He also says as I am to cook and serve it this very day,” Mary added fretfully. “Ladyship’s

orders.”

“How peculiar.” Charlotte turned to her husband. “Do you have any knowledge of this, Mr. Collins?”

“She is the soul of charity!” he sang out. “Did I not say so less than five minutes ago? And here is yet another confirmation of it.”

Charlotte sighed. “Very well, Mary,” she said. “You had best take that to the kitchen and see to it at once. Set aside your other chores for now.”

“Yes, madam, as you wish.” Mary bobbed a curtsy and went.

“Now, Mr. Collins,” his wife continued, “please contain your raptures a moment and give me an answer more to the purpose. What is this about? Why, pray, is her Ladyship sending us meat?”

“Really, my dear Charlotte, you surprise me. Such kindness should not be questioned. No reason beyond virtuous benevolence is required for one Christian in a state of plenty to give to another who is in want.”

“Yes, but where would Lady Catherine get the notion that we are in want?” Charlotte received no answer other than the elevated eyebrows and vacant look of her husband, which spoke volumes. “Ahhh. I perceive that this is your doing, Mr. Collins.”

“Well, perhaps I did chance to mention to my noble patroness that our larder had grown rather thin, and that mutton was your particular favorite. That is all.”

“Oh, Mr. Collins! You have done much more than that. You have insulted my housekeeping, sir, and you

have told two falsehoods besides. As you well know, we are in no danger of going hungry here, and mutton is your favorite, not mine!”

“Well, there is something to what you say, my dear. Still, you must admit it has been a good long while since we had such a lovely joint of meat at our disposal. If Lady Catherine deigns to make us a gift of one, who are we to deny her the gratification of demonstrating her generosity? It is one of those distinctions of rank that she likes to have preserved.”

Mr. Collins paid little mind to his wife’s scolding. He could not allow himself to be weighed down by worldly concerns—the solvency of household accounts, stores of food, or even attacks on his personal behavior—not when the Lord’s work and Lady Catherine’s wishes demanded his every attention. Dipping into a jar brought fresh only that morning from his reputedly impoverished pantry, he spread a quantity of marmalade onto a heel of brown bread. This Mr. Collins carried off to the privacy of his book room to enjoy later.

Mrs. Collins, who had known her husband’s limitations from the beginning, understood the futility of pursuing the matter with him any further. Being of a thoroughly practical turn of mind, she set her momentary irritation aside in favor of more productive employments.

Charlotte first ventured to the kitchen to see what mischief Lady Catherine’s contribution had created

there. Mary was as industrious a maid as the mistress of any household could hope to employ, but she was not at her best when beset by unexpected circumstances. The unforeseen arrival of an overnight guest had been known to throw her into a state of near panic. The appearance of a leg of mutton at the door might prove nearly as harrowing.

Charlotte smoothed Mary's ruffled feathers as best she could. "Never mind about the ironing," she told her. "I shall be happy to help you with that later. As for the chicken, it will keep till tomorrow. Devote yourself to that joint of meat, Mary. Lady Catherine desires that we eat mutton today, and therefore, mutton we shall eat."

Defiance, or even delay, was unthinkable. Although Charlotte could not (as her husband did) consider Lady Catherine's interference a mark of charity, she did accept it as part of the bargain she made when she agreed to marry Mr. Collins. Lady Catherine was accustomed to having her instructions obeyed without question, and she kept a watchful eye on all her subjects for signs of insubordination. Indeed, no sooner had Charlotte settled in the parlor to address herself to some mending than she received the herald of the great lady's arrival.

Charlotte heard her husband calling her name, his hurried footsteps approaching in the hallway. "There you are," he said, bursting into the room, nearly out of breath. "Make haste, make haste, for her Ladyship is

here! I have just seen her carriage from my window.”

“Oh, yes? Then she is very welcome,” Charlotte responded, continuing at her work.

“No, no, my dear, that will not do at all! She is with her daughter, and only stopping at our garden gate. We must go out to them at once; we dare not keep them waiting.”

“Very well,” said Charlotte, rising to do as she was bid. She laid her sewing aside, pulled a shawl about her shoulders, and followed her husband from the house.

The two ladies from Rosings waited without, ensconced in a barouche-landau, one of several carriages belonging to the estate. Lady Catherine sat stiffly erect on the side facing the parsonage. From her elevated situation, she sited down her aquiline nose to observe the Collinses’ approach. Miss Anne de Bourgh sat beside her, nearly lost in shadow.

Mr. Collins gave a low bow when he reached them, and offered a speech of welcome with many thanks for the honor of their visit and many apologies for not having greeted them more speedily. So thorough was his discourse on these topics that there remained not a word for Charlotte to add, and no room to add it in any case.

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Lady Catherine at last, “that will do, Mr. Collins. I will speak to you more later, but it is your wife to whom I must address my present business.”

Mr. Collins nodded his acknowledgement and

silenced himself at once.

Charlotte stepped forward and gave Lady Catherine her polite attention.

“Now, Mrs. Collins, I trust you received the parcel I sent over early this morning.”

“I did, your Ladyship, and I thank you. It was a very thoughtful gift, and it is this minute in the oven under Mary’s careful supervision.”

“I am glad to hear it. See that she does not ruin it by overcooking. I will not have a perfectly aged joint of my best mutton spoilt by carelessness.”

“No, madam.”

“Nor will I have it said that I allowed a clergyman’s family under my care go hungry,” she continued with more energy. “But really, Mrs. Collins, I must insist you keep a closer watch on your budget from now on. The living I provide your husband should be more than adequate. I defy anyone to argue otherwise. So, unless a servant is thieving from under your nose, I can only conclude that this current shortfall is the result of some gross mismanagement on your part.”

Charlotte, who had been expecting some charge of this sort, was careful not to let any hint of vexation be heard in her answer. “It will not happen again, I assure you, Lady Catherine.”

“See that it does not. I take my responsibilities to this parish very seriously, and I never begrudge charity where it is due. I am no miser. Ask anyone. However, there is a limit. I cannot be expected to stand in the

breach for every case of negligence and bad judgment in the county. This one wants a bit of meat for the table; that one needs milk for the baby. Why, I should be eaten out of house and home if I allowed that sort of thing to be perpetuated. I will not have it, Mrs. Collins! Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, madam. As I said, this error will not occur again." She turned a pointed look upon her husband. "Will it Mr. Collins?"

He shook his head resolutely. "No, no, indeed, Lady Catherine. We are greatly indebted to you for your generosity in our hour of need. Such kind condescension is rarely met with. But we shall never trouble you to repeat it. You will have no cause to concern yourself with my wife's housekeeping again. You have the word of your most humble servant on that."

"Very well. There is no need to grovel. I give this correction for your benefit, not mine. As long as you have both learnt your lesson, we need say no more about it. Mr. Collins, you will wait upon me later as we discussed. And for heaven's sake, come promptly. I cannot abide tardiness, as well you know." Not wanting or expecting a reply, Lady Catherine called for the coachman to drive on.

The Collinses remained silent in the immediate wake of the carriage's departure. They watched the elegant equipage as it rejoined the road for Hunsford village and presently vanished from their sight behind

the hedgerow. Only then did Charlotte voice the mildest measure of her opinion on what had passed. Though naturally modest, and further reduced by two years of marriage, her pride demanded that much.

“That was most unpleasant,” she said.

“I see what you mean, my dear,” said Mr. Collins, “but we mustn’t blame Lady Catherine.”

“Indeed, I do not blame her.”

“Of course not. How could anybody find fault with the very picture of virtue and respectability? She is the sort of woman whom it would be impossible for one to regard with too much deference. As for any unpleasantness, I daresay it will soon be completely overshadowed.” Just then, an agreeable breeze wafting from the direction of the kitchen arrived, confirming this opinion. Mr. Collins hoisted his nostrils high into the air to better capture the enticing aroma. He inhaled with eyes reverently closed. “What a fine dinner we shall have today! I fancy you will soon thank me for arranging it, my dear.”

He returned to the house with a light step, humming a little tune as he went.

Charlotte was less sanguine. At such a moment, she could not help questioning the lot she had chosen for herself. At such a time, she could not help wondering how she might have fared had she never encouraged Mr. Collins’s attentions. She had made the pragmatic choice – the only sensible thing to do under the circumstances – for at the age of nearly eight-and-

twenty, she could ill afford to be too fastidious. It was either marry the only respectable man available, or be a burden to her family the rest of her life.

Most days, she was quite content with her decision. She had made it with eyes wide open, not expecting (nor indeed finding) grand passion in her marriage, or even the sweet consolation of a likeminded partner. She had asked only for a comfortable home and the claims to reputation marriage provided. These things she had achieved, thanks to Mr. Collins. The more irksome aspects of the arrangement she dealt with by spending as little time in her husband's company as possible. That, she fervently believed, was the secret to harmony.

With this maxim in mind, Charlotte sat down to pen a letter to a cherished friend who lived at a remote location to the north.

Dearest Elizabeth,

How often I think of you, regretting that so much time and distance separates two friends who were once as close as sisters. Of course, this is a situation easily remedied. Unless some working of fate brings you soon into Kent, may I not come to you at Pemberley? I have a little money set aside that I might use to finance the journey, and I feel the walls closing in about me here.

Charlotte stopped, crumpled the unfinished note, and cast it into the fire. "Enough!" she told herself.

“Find some more useful occupation.” She abandoned her writing desk and went to the kitchen to help Mary.

Meanwhile, Mr. Collins suffered no such torturous wrestlings of mind and conscience. He was confident of Lady Catherine’s forgiveness. Once also assured of her safe return from Hunsford, which he ascertained by careful watch of the road outside his window, he put the morning’s misadventure out of his head. He settled down to his work and to await the summons for dinner.

Minute by minute, though, the succulent smell of meat roasting in the near vicinity made it more difficult for Mr. Collins to keep his thoughts centered on the sermon before him. According to his experience, it was nearly impossible to elevate the spirit when one’s stomach demanded its due. The two purposes were at odds with each other and could not be reconciled. Tending to the needs of the body in order to free the soul was the only reasonable course. Thus, he did not tarry when the bell announced that all was ready in the dining room.

Had Mr. Collins known the decidedly inauspicious outcome of the dinner before him, he would hardly have hastened to commence it. Had the lowly clergyman suspected that the formerly friendly elements on the table would soon turn traitor, he surely would not have been so eager to take them to his bosom once again. As it happened, however, no alarm sounded in the region between his ears when he served the first juicy slice of mutton onto his plate. His hand

betrayed no tremble of trepidation as the fork bore one substantial bite after another to his mouth. He chewed and savored, oblivious to all else, including his wife's attempts at conversation.

So thoroughly occupied was he, that it required the clanging of the clock tolling the hour to rouse him from his private reverie at last.

Mr. Collins's placid countenance tightened as he apprehended the gravity of the situation. "Why did you not say something about the time?" he demanded of his wife. "You heard Lady Catherine's warning against tardiness only this morning, and yet you allow me to tempt her disapproval this afternoon. My dear Charlotte, what were you thinking?"

Charlotte took a deep breath, sat back in her chair, and calmly regarded her husband. "I suppose I was thinking you were capable of reading the time for yourself. Was I mistaken?"

"I will not debate the matter with you, Mrs. Collins. Lady Catherine awaits."

He got to his feet at once, but then lingered in excruciating indecision, looking from the clock to the uneaten remains of his dinner and back again. The appeal of his plate ultimately prevailed, and he took one final bite of his entrée. It was an unfortunate choice, but all might yet have been well had he listened to his wife's counsel.

"For goodness sake, Mr. Collins," she said patiently, "do sit down and take your ease. You had much better

finish your dinner at the table, like a gentleman, instead of rushing off to Rosings with a mouth full of mutton. Since the old lady was so anxious that the meat not be spoilt, I daresay she would not begrudge you the time to consume it properly.”

Mr. Collins paid no heed. He pressed ahead toward the door as if his life depended on it. And indeed it did, although not in the way he might have supposed. In his haste, Mr. Collins must have mistakenly inhaled rather than swallowed, for that last tender morsel lost its way. Instead of sliding safely down his gullet to the stomach where it belonged, it unhappily wound up firmly wedged in his windpipe.

He coughed. He sputtered. He retched. He reached for a glass of wine to wash the trouble down. However, this only proved to make matters worse, for he could then draw no breath at all. Mr. Collins suddenly envisioned himself rushing headlong, not to Lady Catherine’s abode as planned, but toward his maker’s habitation, a crossing he had fervently hoped to postpone till many years hence. The dire look of dread that presently overspread his face was a fearsome sight to behold.

Poor Charlotte immediately sent the manservant off to summon help from Rosings. At the same time, she rushed to her husband’s side, seeking to assist him by administering several sound blows to the broad surface of his back. Mary stood by, crying and violently wringing her hands to no avail. It was a desperate

situation, and all these considerable efforts on Mr. Collins's behalf failed to alleviate the crisis.

The end came swiftly. Slumping to the floor at Charlotte's feet, Mr. Collins soon slipped irretrievably from this life into the next, wearing a permanent expression of surprise at such an unexpected exit.

A wise woman once observed that a young person who either marries or dies is sure to be kindly spoken of. So it was with Mr. Collins. Having at such an early age accomplished both these difficult undertakings, his reputation was forever secured. His not insignificant faults promptly vanished from view, leaving the general impression that he had been one of the most congenial creatures to grace fair England's shores.

Mourners flocked to Hunsford church to speed William Collins on his way to God: a sister; a collection of cousins; members of the little flock he had endeavored to shepherd during his brief term as rector; even persons of considerable rank and influence. Lady Catherine could hardly avoid the obligation. Her wealthy nephew from Derbyshire, being related to the deceased by marriage, also came. And the bishop himself delivered the eulogy.

"Dearly beloved," he began in a commanding voice that penetrated even to the darkest corners of the nave. "While it is sadly true that I only met our fallen brother

some once or twice, he was, by all accounts, as worthy a man as one could chance to encounter in this life – pious, devoted to his duty, a loquacious orator, a credit to his profession. So say all who knew Mr. Collins, and I hear nothing to the contrary from those who did not. Why the Lord chose to take such a fine specimen of humanity from our midst, we may not fully comprehend. We, who are left behind, must simply be grateful that God gave us the privilege of, for a short time, sharing Mr. Collins’s pilgrimage upon this earth.

“I think there can be no more fitting tribute to our absent friend than the sentiments expressed in his own words. I refer specifically to a portion of the sermon Mr. Collins was preparing for you only moments before his death.”

The bishop paused for dramatic effect, and then made a show of clearing his throat before resuming.

“He writes:

It is not for any of us to question the circumstances to which the Almighty, in His infinite wisdom, has chosen to consign us. Quite the reverse, for I submit that it is each person’s sacred duty to accept his appointed place, and to make a careful study of patterning his conduct accordingly, to treat with respectful deference those positioned above and with kind condescension those below. Whether one’s situation be exalted or extraordinarily mean; whether one’s days be many or few: these are matters best left

to Providence.

I humbly offer myself as an example. I am but a simple clergyman who has been called into some distinction by the bounty and beneficence of a higher power – I refer, of course, to the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, whose reputation for charity is so well deserved. Ever since my preferment, it has been my earnest endeavor to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, to be always ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which she and the Church of England require, and to promote by all available means the blessings of peace to those within the reach of my influence. This is my calling, and from this determined path I flatter myself that I have never wandered very far astray.

Do I complain about my lot in life? Nay, for it is as Providence has ordained it. Do I chafe under the yoke of servitude? Heaven forbid! I count myself supremely fortunate, for no one could boast of a more benevolent mistress.

“He continues in a similar vein at some length, but you have heard enough of this essay to draw an unmistakable character portrait of its author. I ask you, then, have you ever before come across such a picture of loyalty and dedication? Mr. Collins’s own words have, after the fact, given us his proper measure. Had he known that he was setting down his own eulogy, he could not have made a finer job of it. Let each one

gathered here ...”

The bishop leaned forward over the rail of the elevated pulpit, hovering, as it were, above the congregation. His sharp eye searched face after face until every soul present felt its scrutiny.

“Let each one gathered here honor Mr. Collins’s memory by striving to be found similarly praiseworthy when summoned to that great day of reckoning!”

It was an eloquent speech delivered to powerful effect, and from which no immediate recovery was possible. Thus, the congregation sat some minutes in sober silence before filing out of the church to the sound of scattered sobs and whimpers. Mr. Collins would have been highly gratified to have witnessed the spectacle played out on his account. Could he have but heard the fine sentiments expressed therein, he might have thought it almost worth his trouble. In many ways, it was truly his finest hour.

Alas, as with the span of his life, Mr. Collins’s moment of posthumous triumph proved comparatively short. The bishop soon moved on to more pressing matters of business in London. The common folk returned to the drudgery of their daily lives, too tired and downtrodden to spare a thought for their departed spiritual leader, except perhaps on the Sunday when a different man took the pulpit. Lady Catherine appointed a new rector within the month. And while the Reverend Mr. Chesterfield failed to live up to his predecessor’s standards in certain trifling respects, on

the whole he filled the bill.

A year later, would anybody even remember a relatively insignificant clergyman? Mr. Collins, unfortunately, left no legacy of children behind as a lasting reminder that he had passed by. It was, therefore, incumbent upon his dutiful wife to keep his flame alive into the future.

In her own way, Charlotte did so. After the shock subsided, she found she could weather her husband's departure surprisingly well. Yet Mr. Collins left such an indelible impression in her mind of the connubial union that she earnestly vowed never to marry again. This vow she faithfully kept. She lived out her long span of days in the quiet retirement of the country, surrounded by friends, and she carried Mr. Collins's proud name with her to the last.

The End

Postscript

If you enjoyed this short story, continue reading in *The Darcys of Pemberley*, Ms. Winslow's Pride and Prejudice sequel for which Mr. Collins's Last Supper offers an introduction. Also consider her second Austenesque novel, *For Myself Alone*, now available.

A Gift from Rosings Park

by Maria Grace

Elizabeth loved Pemberley's morning room. Neither so large as to be impersonal nor so small as to be crowded, it was exactly as it should be to accommodate two people who very much enjoyed each other's company in the morning hours. It was true, she had a dressing room of her own which was very conducive to reading, letter writing or other work, should she want to use it. And perhaps one day she would, but not now.

She peered over her chocolate cup across the table at Darcy. A sunbeam and a short expanse of round table separated them. He was all at ease in this room, among the simple mahogany furniture, crisp white linens, and robin's egg blue walls. Though he had never said so, she suspected he and his mother must have spent agreeable hours in this chamber for he often seemed happiest in the places where he and Lady Anne had kept company. Perhaps one day he might also be at ease talking about his mother. It could be just a mite frustrating at times, but for now she would be patient.

Pemberley's cook's chocolate proved spicier than Longbourn's. She took another sip and held it on her tongue—what was that spice? Perhaps nutmeg? Maybe achiole? A bit of both?

“You seem deep in thought.” Darcy sipped his coffee and caught her gaze over his cup. It was a silly, dear

little ritual they had developed, one she would not care to miss.

“Just pondering my morning chocolate.” She swirled the tall, narrow cup, decorated with pink sweet peas and violets. Her morning chocolate was almost worthwhile just to get to drink from such delightful china.

“Is it not to your liking?” A narrow crease appeared between his eyebrows.

“I like it very well indeed. It is different to what we had at Longbourn and I was just trying to puzzle out the differences.” She set her cup on its delicately railed saucer and batted her eyes at him.

“Such a lively mind I married.” He chuckled warmly. He did that more often now. A year of marriage had been good for him. For both of them.

Mrs. Reynolds appeared in the door way, a silver tray in her hands. “An express just arrived for you, sir. It is from Rosings Park.”

He jumped and sat up very straight as though Lady Catherine had walked into the room herself. There was something about that woman that agitated him beyond anyone else. It was true, she was irritating, condescending, and overbearing, but those were flaws he overlooked in his other relations. No, there was something unique in his aunt that provoked him inexplicably.

Mrs. Reynolds held the tray out for him, and he scooped up the letter. He stared at it just a moment,

almost as though he was debating burning the offending paper without even opening it. With a hard blink, he made a decision and broke the seal.

Elizabeth returned to the list she had been writing. Christmas dinner at Pemberley was not a thing to be taken lightly. Mrs. Reynolds had it well in hand, but there were a few dishes she would like to see on the table. But truly, she would get little done until Darcy announced the news from Rosings.

He grumbled and muttered under his breath, tossing the letter to the side. “Well, my dear, it seems we have been paid back for the gift you insist we send to Rosings.”

“Gift?” She dropped her pencil. “I do not have the privilege of understanding you, my dear. I recall no gift dispatched there.”

He leaned back, arms folded across his chest. “I remember it quite clearly. You were the one who insisted we inform her of our happy expectations.”

“Oh, that! I had no idea you—or she—would conceive of that as a gift. It seemed rather appropriate news to share now that we have solid expectations.” She folded her hands over her increasing belly. The baby within responded with a little kick, as if to say he—or she, though Elizabeth felt certain this one was a boy—was listening to his parent’s conversation.

“I do not see how informing her was anything but a gift.” His lip curled back in that particular way it did when talking about Lady Catherine.

“You are still angry with her over her slights at Easter?”

He huffed and snorted. “Indeed I am. You are my wife, and I will not tolerate her slights toward you.”

Clearly that was not the only reason he was irked, but it was the only one he would admit to. “You should not let her work you into a lather. She is an old woman and very set in her ways. You cannot take what she says too personally. “

“Insults to you are personal.”

Indeed they were. If one took a moment to consider it, they really were no worse than the things Mama was apt to say. “Yes, but the more attention you give them, the more personal they become. Just ignore them as I do and you will find your interactions with her much more tolerable.”

His lips wrinkled and he rolled his eyes. “I suppose I will have little alternative but to follow your advice.”

“I am sure I should appreciate that sentiment, but there is something in your voice—”

“You are as astute as ever, but I expect nothing less from you.” He reached for his coffee and took a long draw from it as though trying to delay his answer as much as possible. “It seems Aunt Catherine has decided to repay our gift in kind.”

“A gift, from Lady Catherine?”

“Her exact words were ‘A gift from Rosings Park.’”

“How unexpected, and I must say, a little unsettling. Have you any idea of what it means or what

to expect?" Truthfully, it sounded a little alarming as well. Gifts could be tricky things.

"None whatsoever. I have never had a gift from her. I have not really known anyone who has had anything save gifts of obligation from her. But that is not all."

"Indeed? What else could there be?" The baby kicked again, as though he did not approve more than his father did.

"She demands out presence at Rosings to receive her largesse." He lifted the letter and waved it slightly

"So then we need not deal with this until Easter ..."
She relaxed a little into her chair.

He huffed. "You do not think it could be so simple. She insists that we be present at Rosings Park for the yuletide."

"She wants us to travel now?" And spend Christmas at Rosings Park, not Pemberley? Their plans for Christmas dinner had not been firmly set, but still, that was an odd request to come so late.

"Immediately, it would seem."

She wrapped her arms around her belly. "She does understand—"

"The nature of your condition? Yes, she references it directly. Let me read." He sat up very straight and his voice became just a mite nasal. "The journey might be uncomfortable with Elizabeth's increase, but it cannot be helped. Take an extra day, even two if you need in order to arrive, but I cannot excuse either of you from attendance. I request, nay, insist upon your presence at

Rosings no later than December twenty four. I will not take 'no' for an answer, nor can this audience be postponed. Your usual rooms will be waiting for you."

"Heavens! I think a royal summons would be no less forceful."

"I think His majesty would be more polite."

She snickered under her breath. He was probably right.

"What do you think? I will not insist that you travel under these conditions. No matter what she demands, I will not insist that you abide by her wishes. I will not put you at risk." His expression turned very serious.

"I know you would not, which is exactly why I can contemplate the matter with a clear mind." She chewed her lip. "I do not expect I will be able to travel with you at Easter, so it will be quite some time before I will see her again. I am not so ungainly—or uncomfortable—now to make the coach be unmanageable. If we take an extra day to travel, I think it will be tolerable. I am willing to go."

"Are you certain?" He leaned forward on his elbow.

"Yes. If nothing else, Lady Catherine has piqued my curiosity and you know that once that happens, there is no stopping me until it is satisfied."

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Elizabeth braced her feet on the floorboards and jammed her shoulder against the side wall as the coach lurched over yet another rut in the road. Perhaps she had been a little generous thinking that should could

easily manage the nearly two hundred miles to Rosings Park. The ride from Longbourn, while nearly fifty miles less, had not seemed so... so very long ... as this drive. Perhaps it was the novelty of the plush Darcy coach—it was so very much more comfortable than Papa’s had ever been. Perhaps it was the novelty of the long drive or riding alone with Darcy.

Whatever it was, it had made the trip pass far more quickly and restfully than this one. Had it not been for the soft squabs and excellent springs, she probably would have needed to turn back on the very first day. They could not arrive at Rosings soon enough.

She could see it in his eyes, Darcy was biting his tongue. Surely “I warned you” was on the very tip of his tongue. And he would be right to say exactly that. But he was far too generous—and wise—a man to say such a thing, especially to a woman who was increasing with his first child.

“Look there, Elizabeth.” He pointed through the side glass to a charming thatched cottage, covered with vines and the remains of a few much faded roses. “Do you remember the place?”

Once, it seemed so long ago now, Sir William Lucas had informed her that particular cottage marked the outskirts of Hunsford Parish, the very one that Mr. Collins served so vary gratefully. Would they see the Colinses on this visit? It would be difficult not to, considering the way Lady Catherine depended upon them for company—not that Lady Catherine saw it that

way. There would probably be no way to avoid it. It was a little sad, how much she would have liked to avoid their inevitable company. But things had grown uncomfortable during their last visit to Kent.

Enough of those thoughts. At least Rosings was not long off! “It is such a memorable place. It seems as though there must be some story attached to it.”

“My mother used to say the same thing.” His smile turned wistful. “She once said it looked like a stage set for a fairy tale. She half expected a talking cat to emerge from the front door and invite her in to tea.”

Elizabeth giggled into her hand. “I think I would have liked your mother very much.”

“And she you.” Despite his smile, he fell silent, as he often did when the topic of his mother came up.

So, he had come to visit Rosings Park with his mother, at least once. What was her relationship with Lady Catherine like? He never mentioned.

While it would have been nice to know what he was thinking just now, to share those musing with him, it was usually best to let him have a few moments of privacy with his memories. There was something still unusually painful there. No doubt he would permit her a share in that conversation when he was ready.

She shifted her weight to take the pressure off her back. Perhaps, when they returned, she would take Darcy up on his suggestion that they take the journey in five days rather than four. The coach lurched again.

Five days sounded like a very good idea indeed.

Rosings Park manor grew larger and larger, finally taking up the whole side glass, and beyond. The place was every bit as grand as Pemberley, but it had a different air. Pemberley seemed welcoming and friendly, Rosings would have nothing to do with such sentiments. It was elegant and proper, and ... was distant a fitting way to describe a property? It did seem quite distance, not unwelcoming so much as wanting to make sure one knew her place the entire time she was there. Even the wide, curved drive up to the house seemed design to remind one of the grandeur that awaited her. She sighed softly.

Darcy handed her down from the coach as though handling a china doll. Sometimes she teased him for it. But with most of her joints in rebellion and her stomach churning dangerously, she relished his solicitude. Her knees barely held her when her feet touched the ground.

This was no condition for greeting Lady Catherine. She hobbled around the carriage twice before permitting Darcy to escort her to the front door. Perhaps one day her joints would move properly again, but that would not be soon.

The butler, dressed in the same blue livery the household had worn as long as Darcy had ever known, met them at the door and led them to Lady Catherine's parlor. It was quite possible nothing had changed at Rosings Park since she had last been there—or for

much longer than that. Not a stick of elegant mahogany furniture had moved even an inch. None of the ornately framed portraits had shifted places. No winter curtains had been hung in place of the ones she had seen in the spring. Was it possible that the exact same flowers stood in the same vases as they had before? Surely Lady Catherine could not possibly be that particular, could she? Then again it might just be possible.

“Good afternoon, Aunt.” Darcy led the way into the parlor, bowing from his shoulders.

Elizabeth managed—just managed—a small curtsy on knees that complained loudly the entire way.

The room felt a mite too formal to call it a parlor, but compared to the rest of the rooms at Rosings, it was indeed quite understated. Lady Catherine dominated the central seating arrangement in her imposing upholstered chair. The couches to either side of it seemed a little timid in comparison, with their pale flowers unable to stand their ground against the strong blue of her seat.

“I had wondered when you would finally arrive. I will call for refreshments.” She waved toward the door, where doubtlessly someone was waiting to relay her orders. “Your color is dreadful, Mrs. Darcy. I shall order some ginger tea, or would you rather peppermint?”

“Peppermint if you please.” In truth, just the thought of a cup of peppermint tea soothed her roiling stomach. Yet another good reason to extend their

journey home by a day.

Lady Catherine waved again, no doubt insuring that it would all be exactly as she required. "I trust your travels were tolerable?"

Darcy led them to the couch on Lady Catherine's right. "They were well enough. The road—"

"Yes, yes, the road just as you cross into Kent. It has become dreadful in the year. The storms this autumn carved literal canyons in that route."

"Indeed, I feared that we might have broken a wheel in one of them." Darcy muttered in the way he did when engaging in obligatory niceties.

"I did warn you of that in my last letter. Why did you not take my advice and—"

"Perhaps you did not know there was a bridge washed out just outside of Kent along that way."

"Indeed, Indeed." She frowned. If there was one thing that Lady Catherine did not like, it was to be wrong. "And the weather? Was it agreeable?"

"We found it—"

"Most pleasant I would think. And excellent temperature and the wind quite comfortable for the horses, it seems." She smoothed her skirts over her knees.

Just like her home, Lady Catherine had not changed at all.

"You have been on the road, what four days now?" She looked directly at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth nodded slightly. "Yes, it has been four—"

“And in your condition! You must rest, that is all there is for it. You must rest. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I have invited the Collinses to decorate Rosings and eat dinner afterwards.” She folded her hands in her lap and straightened her shoulders.

What had she just said? Decorating Rosings? Why would she ever invite the Collinses for such a thing? Would her servants not simply handle those matters for her? There would be no avoiding their company now. She grimaced before she could bring the expression under control.

“You will need your strength for tomorrow. I insist you take to your room; I will have a dinner tray sent up for you. Darcy, you will join—”

“I will stay with my wife.” It was best not to argue with him when he used that tone. He must have gathered that she was not entirely pleased with their hostesses plans.

“Ridiculous.” She tossed her head.

“I am unmoved.”

“I insist.” Her voice dropped lower as she leaned forward just slightly.

“We are here at your insistence. I am tired. I will join my wife in our chambers and take a dinner tray with her.”

Lady Catherine’s eyes bulged, and she sputtered something unintelligible as she tried to catch Elizabeth’s gaze.

Elizabeth shook her head and looked away.

Lady Catherine pursed her lips and blinked rapidly. “Oh, very well. As you will. I suppose that is tolerable, though I had counted on your company at dinner tonight Darcy. There were things I wished to discuss with you.”

No doubt she meant her mysterious gift. Elizabeth’s curiosity rose up like an anxious kitten, pawing at the edges of her mind. She caught Darcy’s eye and cocked her head.

“I am in little mind for conversation tonight. There will be plenty of time for discussion tomorrow.” The tightness of his brow suggested what he would decline simply to remind his aunt that he had no intention of allowing her to believe she could order him about.

All told, that was probably for the best. Even if Elizabeth’s curiositykitten remained unsatisfied.

There was something to be said for the accommodations at Rosings. A very great deal actually. The Darcys’ ‘usual rooms’ were in fact a series of rooms and dressing rooms half the size of Longbourn’s first floor. The furnishings were not in the very newest style, but they were hardly old and were in excellent condition, not entirely unlike the furnishings at Pemberley.

There were moments when she reflected upon how easily she had grown accustomed to the comforts of Pemberley and even begun to take them for granted.

Guilt sometimes tried to take hold. But being able to help Lydia from her own pin money helped assuage the sensation.

She nestled into the grand four poster bed that took up most of the middle of the room. The feather beds were piled high, with bed ropes well tightened, and made up with fine, soft linens. Lady Catherine certainly spared nothing for the comfort of her guests—at least in the way of accommodations and furnishings.

Darcy rose early and ventured below stairs, probably to invite Lady Catherine to have her discussion with him before she decided he was negligent in his duties to her. On his way out he enjoined Elizabeth to linger as long as she liked, Lady Catherine did not need to be entertained, at least not by her.

It was a dear sentiment to be sure, but ill-informed. Elizabeth would enjoy the comfort of her bed for another hour only. But then it would only be proper to attend her hostess.

Just after ten o'clock, according to the resounding chimes of the longcase clock at the base of the grand marble stairs, Elizabeth made her way down, holding the bannister and taking each step deliberately. If she had a fall on the steps here, Darcy might never forgive Lady Catherine.

The morning room was exactly where it should be in a grand manor—or at least it seemed so—and it was

furnished in keeping with Lady Catherine's tastes and the rest of the house—elegant, expensive, and placed to generate the most admiration. The walls were a shade of yellow that hovered between yellow and gold, with the curtains favoring the gold, and the table linen favoring the yellow. Several landscapes that she had learned on her last visit were of the west side of Rosings Park, hung fittingly on the west wall. It was a little disappointing that the east wall boasted a portrait and two paintings of autumn flowers. Ample morning light filtered through the windows for reading, sewing, or writing.

A maid bustled past with a tray laden with foodstuffs destined for breakfast. No toast and tea, here. Ham, potatoes, kippers, jams and compote and a few things that went by too quickly for Elizabeth to identify. But they all smelt very appealing.

“Good morning, Mrs. Darcy. Pray join us.” Lady Catherine acknowledged her with a nod. She presided at the head of the table, the matriarch of all she surveyed.

Darcy rose and pulled a chair beside his out for Elizabeth, and helped her to sit as Lady Catherine pretended not to notice.

The great lady did not like anyone receiving attention besides herself, but it was not polite to notice such a flaw in her hostess' character.

Was it just to spite Lady Catherine that Darcy carefully served her plate? He would never admit it, but

it was just possible.

“Do you find everything to your liking? Is there anything else you wish to see from the kitchen?” Lady Catherine glanced toward the door when a maid waited for orders.

It was tempting to make an outlandish request just to see what Lady Catherine did with it, but that ran a very great risk. If Lady Catherine acceded to it, then Elizabeth would have to eat whatever was put in front of her. Best not act on that impulse. “Your hospitality is very generous, thank you.”

That seemed to satisfy Lady Catherine. “I was just informing Darcy of the day’s plans.”

He looked down at his plate. Clearly he had heard the plans already, and his opinions hardly mattered. Darcy liked to be in a place to make his own choices. That was a trait he shared with his aunt, though he would hardly appreciate being reminded of that.

“The Collinses will arrive at noon—they are always quite prompt I am pleased to say, for I have told him most clearly about the value of promptness in a character. It is the foundation of reliability I have said.” Lady Catherine sipped her morning tea, as though that ended all discussion on the matter.

Darcy kept his eyes averted but Elizabeth could still tell he was rolling them. While she did not disagree, that was still probably not a proper response.

“Once they arrive, he and Darcy shall take a cart and some of the men and cut evergreen boughs for the

house. I trust, with you to supervise, the task will be done properly and in good time. Whilst the men are gone, Mrs. Collins will assist us in tying bows for the boughs.”

Elizabeth nearly dropped her fork. Lady Catherine tying ribbon into bows with her and Charlotte? That was something Elizabeth might do with her sisters, but certainly not with Darcy’s aunt. Surely she had not heard that right. She glanced at Darcy.

He nodded, eyes wide.

How could that possibly be? She would have asked, but Lady Catherine launched into another topic and continued on that for the better part of an hour.

At exactly noon, the butler announced the arrival of the Collinses and ushered them into the parlor where Darcy, Elizabeth and Lady Catherine waited. Lady Catherine had insisted that they be there just a few minutes before midday to settle in and receive her guests in an unhurried fashion. Though the chair Elizabeth sat in was perfectly comfortable, even sporting a little footstool for her feet, she shifted uneasily.

“Come in, come in.” Lady Catherine’s words were orders, not invitations. “You all know each other, there is no need to wait for introductions.”

The Collinses trundled in, Mr. Collins muttering obsequious greetings as they entered.

Though technically Lady Catherine was correct, all

parties were already acquainted, in actuality, an introduction might be necessary. Charlotte was so altered that Elizabeth hardly recognized her. Her face was gaunt and her color—bad was the only way to describe it—and it looked like she was very close to confinement herself.

Charlotte was with child? How could she not have known that? It was true, their correspondence had slowed somewhat since her marriage and move to Pemberley, but still they had seen one another during Darcy's Easter visit. Had Charlotte not known then? Surely she must have. Why had she not mentioned her condition? Elizabeth had written to her of her increase just after she had written to Mama and Jane of it.

"I can see you are surprised, Lizzy. I suppose I should have told you by now." Charlotte waddled closer and sat down beside Elizabeth, awkward and heavy as a sack of potatoes.

Mr. Collins sat between Darcy and Lady Catherine and began the process of saying very little with a great many words.

"Lady Catherine thought I should have told you by now." Charlotte stared at her hands and shifted in her seat. "She told me that on more than one occasion."

"I confess I am rather surprised." What was one to say at such a moment? "But I suppose in many ways this entire affair is rather surprising in its entirety, is it not? Decorating Rosings?"

Charlotte kept her face down and nodded.

One more thing that had not altered at Rosings Park.

Of all people, why had Lady Catherine arranged for her to spend the afternoon with Charlotte? While it had been natural that their relationship had become more distant when they had moved away to live with their husbands, their friendship had taken a turn for the worse after Elizabeth and Darcy married, and another since their visit at Easter.

It was difficult to sort out why though. Was it because of Lady Catherine's initial reaction to Darcy's marriage that sent Charlotte and Mr. Collins fleeing back to Meryton to await the return of her favor? Was it Elizabeth's discomfort with Charlotte's future role as mistress of Longbourn? Or perhaps it was Charlotte's jealousy over the social rank into which Elizabeth married—she had exited the sphere to which she was born after all. Whatever it was, Charlotte had grown increasingly distant, as evidenced by this afternoon's surprise.

Truth be told though, the distance was something of a relief, sparing Elizabeth the need for too much interaction. Perhaps she had listened to one too many of Mama's choruses of 'the artful Lucases'. Perhaps she had just taken time to reflect on just how quickly Charlotte turned Mr. Collins' interests to herself. It really was astonishingly fast. Suspiciously, painfully fast.

It was not as though she had wanted Mr. Collins

herself. Just the opposite. At the time it had been a mercy not to deal with him anymore. But upon a very great deal of thought, Elizabeth began to wonder a great many things. Would Charlotte have tried to intervene if Elizabeth had been pleased with Mr. Collins' attentions? Was she waiting in the wings for her chance, or would she have taken a more active role in seeking his attentions? Had she just swept in when the opportunity presented itself, or had she been conniving and planning as Mama was certain? What kind of friend was Charlotte to start with? It all worked out for the best to be sure, but could she, should she, trust a woman who might have been planning a most bitter betrayal?

Those thoughts, though uncomfortable, seem far away and not particularly urgent to deal with whilst she had been at Pemberley. But here, sitting beside that same woman ... Elizabeth would rather have been elsewhere. Just about anywhere else.

"So, ladies." Lady Catherine cleared her throat.

Elizabeth jumped. When had Darcy and Mr. Collins left?

"Whilst the gentlemen are away, it seems we are left to our own devices." There was something far too smug in her countenance. And there was no ribbon to be seen. What was Lady Catherine about?

"You both will be brought to your confinements soon enough. I am sure you have given thought to the very sobering travails you will face."

Charlotte lost the little color in her face and clutched the arm of her chair. Oh no, Lady Catherine was going to tell them to make certain they had prepared their wills whilst they were still able. Would she be disappointed to know that more than one other helpful soul had already given her the same advice?

“What woman does not?” Trying to keep her voice pleasant was almost more than Elizabeth could manage.

“Did you know I nearly died during my travail with Anne?”

Elizabeth gulped. Lovely, her favorite topic of conversation since she began her increase—other women’s tales of horror and woe.

Instead of launching into a blood and agony filled tale as many women were wont to do, Lady Catherine did not indulge in the maudlin, summing the experience up with: “I nearly died. The damage was so severe that I never became with child again, much to my husband’s dismay.”

“I am very sorry to hear that he held against you something which you could not change.” It was not the first time Elizabeth had heard that sort of circumstance either, but still she was genuinely sorry.

Charlotte pressed her lips hard and nodded.

“My sister had no such difficulties. She birthed Darcy quite easily and without complication, with hardly any pain.” How odd, the look of vulnerability that crossed Lady Catherine’s eyes.

“She was a fortunate woman.” Charlotte’s hoarse whisper was almost imperceptible.

“I certainly thought so.” Lady Catherine turned aside sharply. “She never counted herself as fortunate. Never really appreciated what she had. A fine son with the promise of more, and easing through what nearly took my life.”

Lady Catherine never indulged in self-disclosure. Why would she suddenly being so candid?

“It did not get better when her son grew up strong and hearty and my daughter ...did not.”

Elizabeth drove her nails into her palms, shoulders twitching as though wearing an itchy wool blanket. Pray let her stop talking.

“She invited me to attend her when she gave birth to her daughter. But I did not choose to go and allow her to flaunt her triumphs before me yet again. She gave birth to her beautiful daughter. A fortnight later she was dead.” Lady Catherine stood and towered over both of them. “And I never had the opportunity to make peace with her. And I regret it to this day.” She turned to look directly at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth dropped her gaze. She could not possibly suspect...

“How odd, Darcy and Mr. Collins are coming up the path without a single evergreen. I must see what they are about.” She strode from the room without a backward glance.

Elizabeth glanced up and caught Charlotte’s eye

quite by accident. “That was quite unusual, I think. I cannot imagine what would have inspired such a speech from her.” She worried her hands together.

With any luck, one of them might begin to feel ill and they could end this awkward encounter. But luck evaded them. Silence hung thick and heavy like a London fog, threatening to obscure everything in the room.

“You do not?” Charlotte whispered.

“Do you?” Why had she said that when she did not want to talk at all?

Charlotte swallowed and wrapped her arms around her belly. “Do you resent me very much?”

Blood drained away from her face, tingling and prickling as it went. “Why ever would you ask me such a thing?”

More aching silence

“Because...” Charlotte sniffled and cleared her throat. “Because I resent you.”

Elizabeth blinked hard and cocked her head. “You resent me? I do not understand.”

“Truly, you do not understand?” Charlotte got to her feet as quickly as a heavily gravid woman might and turned her back. “You are a very clever girl. What do you fail to understand?”

“All of it I should say. What have you to resent me for? I do not see what I could possibly have done to you worthy of resentment. If anything, I would suggest I have far greater reason for resentment.”

Charlotte turned, glowering. “So then you do harbor something against me.”

Elizabeth scooted as far back in her seat as possible. “I did not say that. I said that if either of us has a reason, I am the one with greater reason. That does not necessarily imply that I am carrying any hard feelings.”

Charlotte laughed, thin and harsh. “What exactly do you have to resent? You are the one who married far above your station. You have more than you could ever need, or even want.”

Elizabeth planted her feet on the floor hard. “And you did not? You will be the mistress of Longbourn—you think that is nothing? You will be in a position to turn my mother and maybe even Kitty and Mary, into the hedgerows.”

“And between your husband and Jane’s, do you really think they will come to any hardship? You make it sound as though I do not deserve Longbourn.”

“You suggested that I do not deserve Pemberley.”

“It is far outside the sphere of your birth.” Charlotte’s expression matched Lady Catherine’s when she had said something similar to Elizabeth.

“I did not connive to get Mr. Darcy.” If only Charlotte knew the whole truth—but she probably would never believe she had refused Darcy’s first offer.

“Are you suggesting that I was inappropriate with Mr. Collins?” Was it dangerous for Charlotte to turn such a bright red?

“Just how many days passed between his offer of

marriage to me and his offer to you? What man changes his tack so quickly?"

"So you do resent me." Charlotte wrapped her arms over her belly, as though guarding her child.

Elizabeth tried to soften her voice but it did not seem to make much difference. "The whole affair has made me wonder a great deal."

"You wonder about my character?"

"Who would not?"

"You are not the first one to say so." Charlotte turned away again.

"I am shocked." Elizabeth took a step closer.

"You should not be. You have many friends in Meryton."

"I have heard nothing of it."

Charlotte waddled toward the windows. "I cannot imagine why. You recall, we spent no small time with my parents after you and Mr. Darcy wed. Rosings Park was not exactly friendly to us during that time—nor was Meryton to be honest. A great deal was said to me very freely during that time. You might be interested to know that more than one of our mutual friends asked me how I stole Mr. Collins from you. How long had I been planning it? What means turned his eyes away from such a pretty, young girl, to someone ... like myself." Charlotte's shoulders slumped and her head hung down.

"I had no idea."

"But you wondered the same thing, no doubt." It

was not an accusation, just a simple statement.

Elizabeth's heart pounded hard—could the baby feel it? “You must admit, from the perspective of our family—”

“I know your mother refers us as the ‘artful Lucases.’”

“Those words have been spoken in our home.” Elizabeth swallowed hard.

“I know, I know very well.” Charlotte trundled toward the bookcases adjacent to the windows. Perhaps she needed to move as much as Elizabeth did. “And I do not appreciate it. You had rejected him, unequivocally, and told me as much. You told me you did not want him! Does that not count for something?”

“I suppose it should. But it did make me wonder, if things did not go as they had ...”

“Would I have tried to distract him from you?” Charlotte turned and looked directly in her eyes.

Those words were far easier to think than to say or ever agree to.

“You can admit it; you wondered that. When so many others have, why should you shy away from it?” Charlotte tossed her head.

“I cannot believe someone said that to you.” That was not true. It was the sort of thing Mama was apt to say.

“But you do not deny thinking it.” Charlotte's bottom jaw jutted forward and she chewed her upper lip. “I would not have, but I still do not blame you for

considering it. It is only a natural thing to think. Especially when a plain, on-the-shelf-girl like myself is able to get herself a very eligible—”

Elizabeth would have said “very stupid” man, but best kept that to herself.

“—gentleman, when he was set upon the prettiest, most vivacious, and one of the best liked girls in the area. No one could work out why he might have chosen me when he could have had you—if there was nothing untoward going on.”

“You resent the suspicion cast upon your character.”

“Of course I do, would you not?” Charlotte stamped. “But of course what would you know of that? It is well understood that you got better than the rest of us because somehow you deserved to. You are pretty and smart and pleasing in company; your father was a gentleman and you were gently born. And I am none of those things. You have always had whatever you wanted—”

“You resent that as well.”

Charlotte ducked her head.

“It is a wonder that you ever continued your correspondence with me, perhaps that we were ever friends in the first place.”

“Just as much a wonder: that you ever wrote back to me at all. I admit I was surprised at that.” Charlotte plucked at her apron.

“You were?”

“Why would I not be? I hardly expected you would be speaking to me, even after you came to Hunsford and stayed with us. I had hoped that it would make things agreeable between us once again. I thought it had for a bit. Then you were so odd after Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam left, I hardly knew what to make of it.”

“I did not realize you saw that.” Elizabeth broke eye contact. Now was not the time to explain all that had happened in Charlotte’s own home that day.

“Of course I did. We have not been friends as long as we have for me to miss such a thing.”

“It was easy to allow myself to forget that.”

“I would never have tried to hurt you. You made it clear—you refused his offer. I would not have said, done anything otherwise.” Charlotte extended open hands.

“I believe you.” The words were barely a whisper, forced out because they were true, not that they were pleasing to say.

“Do you really?”

She looked into Charlotte’s eyes. “I do, and I am ashamed that I ever thought otherwise.”

“Do not be. I have not been any more gracious toward you.”

“I am not sure I deserved for you to be. I am heartily ashamed of the thoughts I have entertained.”

Charlotte shrugged. “I hardly recognize my thoughts toward you anymore.”

“So much so that Lady Catherine has seen?”

“It seems so. It appears that neither of us is without guilt in the matter.”

“Hardly, no.” Elizabeth rubbed her hands together against the uncomfortable sensations that would not leave her be. “You know I do not like to be wrong.”

“I think none of us do.”

Elizabeth dropped her voice to a whisper, “And I loath to allow Lady Catherine to be right.”

Charlotte giggled with her.

“But, in truth she does make—or rather she hints at, for she actually said nothing—we cannot know what our future will hold.” She drew a hand over her belly. “And I would hate to look back on this day, wishing I had followed Lady Catherine’s hints.”

Charlotte chuckled again. “I expect you will hear my husband say from the pulpit something about Christmastide being a season of reconciliation.”

“I have heard that preached more than once I think.” She met Charlotte’s gaze, eyebrow cocked.

“Will you forgive me, my old friend?” Charlotte offered her hand.

“Only if you will forgive me.” Elizabeth clasped her hand with both of hers. “I should like it very much if our letters could go back to warmth and confidences rather than receipts and rose gardens.”

“I should like that very much, too.” Charlotte tittered just a bit, a happy girlhood sound.

No, everything had not been resolved, and there

would be difficult conversations yet to come. But, the walls had broken down and they were on the path to making things right once again. It was a gift she could have hardly conceived, much less expected, but appreciated in a way difficult to express. How did one explain a gift of peace?

“What shall we tell Lady Catherine when she returns?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Need we say anything? It seems as though she knows it all without us speaking a word.”

“It does seem so. Perhaps I should call for the housekeeper to bring us that ribbon and we might have those bows tied for her before she returns.” It only seemed fitting that Lady Catherine’s gift might have some pretty ribbons to go with it.

“I saw some very unique and pretty bows in the last edition of *A Lady’s Magazine*. I could teach you if you like.” Charlotte had always been the first one to find such things and commit them to memory.

“Lady Catherine would approve and I would be happy to learn.” Elizabeth rang for the housekeeper.

The housekeeper soon brought ribbon and a sewing basket. They sat around a card table surrounded by snippets of ribbons and thread, laughing as they used to do back at Longbourn and Lucas Lodge, a pile of red ribbon bows growing between them.

From the corner of her eye, Elizabeth saw the parlor door peek open. Was that Lady Catherine’s face peering in? Surely it was, and she seemed very pleased indeed.

End Notes

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