

ANTHOLOGY

Christmas

Celebrations

SHORT STORIES OF JANE AUSTEN FAN FICTION

Edited by Cristy Huelsz



Summer Hanford

Joana Starnes *

Laura Hile *

Laraba Kendig

Jeanette Walls *

Marilyn Brant *

Suzan Launder *

Monica Fairview *

Sally Smith O'Rourke

Leslie Diamond

Debra Ann Kummoong

Regina Jeffers

Kelly Miller

2022

Christmas Celebrations 2022

**Short Stories of
Jane Austen Fan Fiction**

THIRD ANTHOLOGY

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FROM THE EDITOR

It is curious to think how this small project began almost 3 years ago, and now it has become a tradition, hosting authors from past editions and welcoming new authors to this experience of being able to see their works in another language.

With all my heart I thank all the authors who have shared their works for this anthology as a gift for their readers from various corners of the world.

Many thanks to my collaborators for proofreading both English and Spanish versions: Mariana Huelsz, Elisa Ocádiz, and we bid welcome to Belen Paccagnella into the team.

We hope that this anthology reaches you readers during this Christmas season and that even if it's for a moment, it fills you with emotions and good memories.

Sincerely yours,

Cristy Huelsz

The Colonel's Christmas Quest

by Summer Hanford

CHAPTER ONE

Upon reaching Pemberley, Richard waved off the assistance of Darcy's butler. "I know the way to the rose parlor, Stevens. Return to your evening. I'll wash up and then join the others."

The butler bowed. "Thank you, Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"My usual room?"

"Mrs. Reynolds said so, sir."

"Very good." The colonel ran up the steps, pleased he had the use of his customary quarters, which Darcy's housekeeper had been allotting him since he was a lad. From what he recalled of Darcy's new bride from her visit to Kent that spring, at which time she'd been Miss Elizabeth Bennet rather than Mrs. Darcy, she seemed the considerate sort of person who wouldn't uproot a man from his preferred room.

In short order, Richard was refreshed and on his way to the rose parlor. He'd donned a blue coat, the color looking well with his eyes, though he didn't imagine anyone within would appreciate as much. Reaching the open doorway, he paused to survey the gathering, some of those inside known only from the Darcys' nuptials.

Georgiana and Elizabeth sat together at the pianoforte, Georgiana's demeanor more relaxed and overtly joyous than

Richard recalled since before she went away to school. Mrs. Gardiner and the Gardiner children gathered around the instrument, clapping and laughing, and Richard imagined the game was to play each carol faster and faster without blunder. Off to the side, appearing impervious to the chipper ruckus, Darcy sat in animated conversation with Mr. Gardiner. The colonel smiled, happy to see his cousins in company which so obviously pleased and suited them. This was what Christmas ought to be, and he had no right to resent Darcy for winning Elizabeth and marrying her.

He did not, really. What he resented was Darcy having the funds to choose his wife for love, rather than connections and wealth. But while Richard could admit his resentment, he could find no blame. He would have done precisely what Darcy had, if he had the means.

One of the players stumbled over the keys.

“Cousin Lizzy! Cousin Lizzy!” the children chorused. “You made a mistake!”

Laughing, Elizabeth threw up her hands. “How do you know it was me? Your eyes are so keen?”

“I saw you,” one of the girls pointed.

“Miss Darcy is too good to miss,” another said.

Georgiana’s cheeks turned pink but she didn’t look down or lose her smile.

The Gardiners’ little boy thrust forth a hand, palm up. “You must pay us.”

Smile rueful, Elizabeth stood to count sugar candies from a bowl set atop the piano.

“Richard!” Georgiana exclaimed happily and came to her feet when she noticed his presence.

Everyone turned to look and soon Richard became engulfed in a warm welcome. Calls of bullet pudding were raised, the children remembering his rank despite his lack of uniform that evening. Chuckling at their enthusiasm for the idea, the colonel assured them, “Yes, I have brought a special bullet for the game. One I had with me on the Continent, but what of the puddings?”

Darcy looked to his wife, expression questioning.

Elizabeth shook her head. “I’ll warn Mrs. Reynolds of the need for puddings. We can play tomorrow.”

“Can we play now?” the youngest boy begged.

Elizabeth reached out to ruffle his hair. “Tomorrow. It’s almost time for you lot to go to bed.”

“But we haven’t made bows for the garlands,” one of the girls said to Elizabeth.

“And we have plenty of time. It’s a week until Christmas, you goose.”

The parlor returned to happy chaos, Richard offering to sing carols if Georgiana would accompany him. Elizabeth took the opportunity to sit with Darcy. Richard tried not to feel jealous of the loving look they exchanged.

CHAPTER TWO

After a few more carols, Mrs. Gardiner ushered the children off to bed, Georgiana accompanying her, obviously enamored of her new young relations. Richard supposed this to make a certain amount of sense. His cousin had been, by far, the youngest amongst his family for the entirety of her years.

“Port, anyone?” Mr. Gardiner asked, crossing to the sideboard.

Richard opened his mouth to accept, but shut it again as the butler, Stevens, stepped into the parlor doorway.

“Sir, there is a, ah, situation that I believe you must address.” Stevens announced to his master.

A line marred Darcy’s brow. “Situation?”

“Of a delicate nature, sir.”

Darcy glanced at the rest of the party before addressing the butler. “Feel free to enlighten me.”

Stevens grimaced like someone had stuffed a wedge of lemon in his mouth. “There is a young lady at the door, sir.”

“A young lady?” Elizabeth repeated, voice holding interest. “What sort of young lady?”

“A disheveled one, Madam. She claims...” The butler drew a fortifying breath. “She claims to have been kidnapped. She escaped, and when she saw the lights of Pemberley, she came to the manor through the orchard.”

“How peculiar.” Eyes bright with interest, Elizabeth turned to Darcy. “We certainly can’t turn her away.”

He frowned but nodded.

“Nor should we have her in here before first deciding if she is appropriate company,” Mr. Gardiner said from the sideboard. “Not with Miss Darcy liable to return as soon as my children have been read a story.”

Darcy stood. “I shall receive her in my study. Please escort her there and then wait for me.”

Stevens nodded and bowed his way out.

Richard rose to his feet, too curious to stay behind. “I would like to accompany you.”

“I will as well.” Elizabeth popped up from her chair.

Darcy turned to her with a scowl that would daunt most men, let alone a gently bred miss.

Elizabeth smiled beatifically. “I can’t leave her to you ogres, poor thing.”

“I will wait here in case the ladies return before you do, so they know where you’ve all got to,” Mr. Gardiner said and took his port to an armchair by the fire.

Darcy and Elizabeth locked gazes. If anything, her smile grew at the defiance in his stare. Finally, Darcy shrugged. Side by side they left the room.

Richard trailed the couple through the mansion. When they neared, they found that Stevens stood in the open doorway to Darcy's office, not inside the room but certainly with an eye on their unexpected guest. Richard offered the butler a nod as he followed Darcy and Elizabeth in.

And stopped.

Not disheveled, but rather quite bedraggled, a young woman stood in the center of the room, hands clasped before her, her eyes wide and wary. They were of the most amazing shade of forest green Richard had ever beheld. Ink-black hair tumbled down about her shoulders, perhaps at one point curled but now damp with the winter's eve. The hem of her gown hung wet and muddied to touch sturdy boots, both spring green gown and footwear of sufficient quality to denote a member of the gentry, though not without signs of wear. She also wore a deep green cloak, obviously selected to match her dark-lashed eyes, which now darted, taking in first the couple before moving past them to fix on Richard.

"I-I am so sorry to have intruded on your gathering," she said, words touched with a trace of a musical Welsh lilt. She dipped a curtsy. "I am Gwen Penfellow."

Darcy cast a look over his shoulder at the butler, who remained in the doorway. "Penfellow. I am not familiar with that name. Stevens, have you ever heard of them?"

"There are Penfellows in the northwest corner of the county, sir," the butler helpfully supplied.

Darcy turned back to the young lady. "Why are you here?"

From where he stood, Richard saw the chastising stare Elizabeth cast her husband. Apparently, she had more power over his cousin that he had previously imagined.

“You look very cold.” Elizabeth stepped forward and held out her hands to their unexpected visitor. “I’m Mrs. Darcy. Please, do sit with me and we’ll call for tea, unless you require something stronger?”

Miss Penfellow untwined her hands to extend one to Elizabeth, who clasped it in both of hers and led them to the couch. “Tea, if any is to be had, but please don’t put your staff to any trouble on my account.”

Noticing Darcy’s glowering stance, Richard came forward and bowed to Miss Penfellow, lest his cousin throw the lady out of the house. “Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, at your service, miss.”

She smiled up at him. Her cheeks tinted rose as she spoke. “That is very kind of you, Colonel.”

Held by those green eyes, Richard sat in one of the armchairs that completed the sitting area in Darcy’s office.

With a resigned sigh, Darcy did the same after offering an introduction. Elizabeth sent for tea and then all three of them turned questioning looks on Miss Penfellow.

She twined her fingers again, resting clasped hands in her lap. “You have every right to question my presence, Mr. Darcy. I can hardly fathom it myself. Earlier today I was tossed into a carriage and driven off with. I escaped while they rested the

horses, and have been running through the forest, and now I am here.”

“But why?” Elizabeth asked. “Who took you?”

Miss Penfellow dropped her gaze. “I wish I knew.”

Arresting as those green eyes were, Richard narrowed his, certain she lied. He’d heard many lies in his day, but not all of them with malicious intent. The act of deception alone did not condemn her.

“Well,” Elizabeth said, swiveling on the couch to face her husband. “We can’t simply turn her away. She will have to remain here this evening. Likely until the authorities can be brought.”

Darcy glanced his way and Richard shrugged. He was not opposed to the idea. Certainly, with a well-staffed house and several relations in attendance, they could deal with any trouble a single, slightly built, raven haired young lady could stir. “I second Elizabeth.”

Darcy remained in thought for a long moment. Neither Richard nor Elizabeth made a move to influence him further, and Miss Penfellow kept her gaze on her twined fingers.

“Very well,” Darcy said. “You can stay here for now. A room will be made up for you.”

“And I shall find you a gown and some things you might borrow,” Elizabeth added.

Miss Penfellow’s head came up, enough unaffected relief on her face to make Richard doubt his assessment of her truthfulness.

“Thank you. You have no notion how much your kindness means to me.”

Listening to that lilting hint of a Welsh accent and taking in the joy in her green eyes, Richard suddenly wondered how much it might mean to him.

CHAPTER THREE

At breakfast the following morning, an activity it pleased everyone to take together, Miss Penfellow came down in a light blue gown that Richard felt certain he'd seen Elizabeth wear before. Her hair was curled and her demeanor calm, though dark circles smudged her eyes. To the children, she was introduced as a surprise guest, the Gardiners and Georgiana having been informed of the details of her sudden appearance the evening before.

“I did not know it had snowed so vigorously last night,” Elizabeth said brightly, taking up a roll. “This rather curtails my plans for the morning. I do not ride, the carriage can’t get through and, in some dreadful fit of generosity, my dear husband has lent out our sleigh.”

“What plans were those, dear?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“To take round to the tenants the baskets we made up yesterday, of course. ‘Tis the season for generosity.”

“There are still some homes in walking distance. I am sure Mrs. Annesley would encourage us to go, were she here.” Georgiana commented, without none of the shyness the colonel

would expect of his usually reticent cousin when addressing such a large party.

Elizabeth turned a cheerful grimace on her. "That is all well for you with your long legs, but while you all know my love of walking, I do not enjoy slogging through the snow."

"We gentlemen could accompany you, tramping down a path," Richard offered. "Couldn't we Darcy, Mr. Gardiner?"

Rather than greet that with his customary frown, Darcy gazed adoringly at his bride. "I should enjoy nothing more than being out of doors in such fine company."

Richard raised his napkin to cover his expression, a smile winning out over jealousy. Delight filled him at how pleasantly changed his cousins were by the addition of Elizabeth to their lives.

"And we shall enjoy nothing more than leaving you youngsters to your walk," Mrs. Gardiner said with a smile. "Mr. Gardiner and I will remain with the children."

This evoked a chorus of protests from the little ones, eager to be part of the expedition. It was decided that even the youngest would go, the adults would pull sledges.

Once it was settled and the furor died down, Richard turned to Miss Penfellow, who nibbled on a piece of toast, taking in their familial banter. "Miss Penfellow, will you join us?"

She lowered her toast, assaying a tentative smile at the sea of gazes now turned on her. "Yes. I should like to, thank you."

This time Richard didn't employ his napkin to cover his pleasure at her reply. They finished breakfast with all conviviality, though Miss Penfellow only spoke if directly addressed, much as Georgiana used to, Richard noticed, but without his cousin's shyness.

When breakfast ended, Darcy held Richard back, waiting until they stood alone to say in a low voice, "I sent a groom for the Lambton authorities today, and my solicitor in the village."

"Your solicitor?"

Darcy nodded. "Yes, to have Miss Gwen Penfellow looked into. Her story does not sit right with me."

A vision of her sweet face formed in Richard's mind. But, much as it pained him, he nodded. "A reasonable precaution, to be certain," he agreed and went to fetch his hat, gloves, scarf and coat.

There was a certain amount of slogging involved in their trek. Richard and Darcy took turns going first through the deep snow, while the rest of the trailed behind in excellent spirits. The winter sun blazed so bright as to make a nearly blinding glitter of the whiteness around them. The ladies pulled two basket laden sledges, and, thankfully, the children were brimming with enough energy as to not to require them yet. Surely, Richard presumed, he and Darcy would be dragging Gardiner-draped sleds all the way back to the mansion.

Whenever they reached a cluster of drives forking off the main road to tenant homes, Richard and Miss Penfellow took baskets in one direction and Georgiana and Elizabeth in the

other, while Darcy waited with the gaggle of children and the sleds. He did this not to be unsocial, he explained, but to spare his tenants the surprise of him appearing on their doorsteps, catching them unaware. Richard enjoyed walking arm and arm with Miss Penfellow enough to make him a fervent supporter of this arrangement, as no other would permit him so much time alone with her.

He carefully avoided the topic of her alleged abduction. Yet, they conversed about many other things, Richard enjoying her slight lilt so fully as to finally ask, “I detect a bit of a Welsh inflection to your speech, if I am not mistaken?”

She smiled up at him. “You do. My mother was Welsh. She came to Derbyshire when she married an Englishman.”

“Was?”

“Aye. She died some years ago. Of a broken heart, I would say.”

“So your father is gone as well?”

Her gaze darted up to his, then away again. “Aye, he is.”

“My condolences, madam.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. She pointed to one of the tenant cottages, so snow draped as to be hardly visible. “No smoke rises from that one. Ought we still leave a basket?”

“No one seems live there at the moment. Perhaps the tenants are gone for the winter.” He gestured to a slightly larger cottage,

firelight-filled windows visible through the trees. “We’ll bring both there.”

She nodded. As they passed it by, she craned her neck, keeping the little cottage in sight. At one point she stopped and studied the empty house for a long moment, as if enchanted by it.

“Miss Penfellow, shall we?” Richard prodded, his tone gentle. He was puzzled by her sudden forlornness and her unusual fixation on the little house. Though quaint and pretty, there was nothing particularly remarkable about it.

“My pardon. I was lost in thought at how splendid it would be to hide away in such a lovely little cottage, the world cold outside but a fire within.”

“And someone by your side to keep warm with?”

She cast him a quick look, eyes wide and bright, then glanced back at the cottage. “Yes, and someone to keep warm with.”

They delivered the baskets to the larger cottage, cheerfully welcomed by those within, and were introduced to the elder couple and a younger one, and nearly grown children and a new babe. Richard loved watching Gwen with the children, laughing at their antics and becoming serious when they told her things that were important to them, and smiling down at the baby.

As they headed back to the others, Richard swept his gaze over the snow bedecked countryside, each denuded branch frosted in white that dripped down the sides and sparkled under the clear blue sky. They passed back by the empty cottage, nearing the others, before he decided on the best way to say, “I hope that

the loss of your mother does not leave you alone in the world." If so, it could explain her being abducted, assuming the quality of the clothing, boots and cloak in which she'd appeared indicated some savings.

Her nose scrunched. "I have a brother."

He was about to ask after this Mr. Penfellow when something hard and round thumped into his chest. A squeal of laughter rang out and a second snowball hurtled their way. Instinctively, Richard stepped before Miss Penfellow, taking another solid hit.

"Why, you little devils," Richard cried.

A hand thrust from behind him, proffering a snowball.

Richard cast Miss Penfellow a surprised look, took in the laughter in her green eyes, and accepted the gift as another ball collided with him. "They've good arms," he observed.

"I'm certain you do as well, Colonel. You'd best avenge your honor."

"But what of your safety, fair Gwen?"

Her eyes rounded but she quickly schooled her features from startlement. "My safety shall be guarded by yon tree."

Before he could reply to that, she dashed away, slowed by the deep drifts, laughing as a snowball sailed past her.

Richard turned back to lose his own volley, pelting squealing Gardiner children with lightly thrown attacks. Darcy stood among them, not engaging but with an exceedingly bland expression and a suspicious glint in his eyes. From Darcy's right, the direction

Georgiana and Elizabeth had gone, a snowball collided with his shoulder.

The addition of Richard's fair cousins to the game soon resulted in everyone covered with snow, even Miss Penfellow darting from behind her tree for the occasional lob. After much giggling and trampling of snow, and an ill judged ball that took Darcy right in the face, the master of Pemberley, not unkindly, called a halt. They loaded the now spent children onto the momentarily empty sledges and set out for Pemberley.

They returned to the manor house to find the called-for Lambton authorities waiting, causing Miss Penfellow to provide a recounting of her ordeal. Richard, who inserted himself into the interview, which took place in the library, found no variation in her recounting and few additional details, brought forth by the inquiry. Soon enough, the constabulary departed, leaving promises of investigation and a much more subdued Gwen. It saddened Richard to see she'd lost the joy gained earlier in the day.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two exceedingly enjoyable days later, with most of the roads industriously cleared, all four ladies took the carriage to finish delivering winter cheer to Pemberley's tenants. Darcy was locked in his study in conference with his steward and the children adjourned to the playroom with two maids, the menfolk obviously deemed incapable of minding them with the ladies out. Mr. Gardiner occupied a parlor armchair, engrossed in a book, so Richard attempted the same on one of the room's couches.

Unfortunately, every page soon transformed into an image of Gwen's stunning green eyes, set above her enticing smile.

Shortly before luncheon, after an agonizingly slow morning without Miss Penfellow in it, heavy footfalls of the sort Richard hadn't heard since Darcy married Elizabeth thudded down the hall. Alerted to his cousin's agitation by the sound, Richard closed the book he hadn't actually been reading. Darcy burst into the parlor, letter in hand and face wreathed with a scowl.

"She lied," he cried, slapping the page down on the low table before the sofa on which Richard sat.

"Pardon?" Mr. Gardiner enquired, looking up from his book.

"Miss Penfellow lied," Darcy reiterated. "If we may call her that, which we may not."

Richard took up the page, addressed to Darcy from the Lambton authorities. He skimmed the content, taking in a report that Gwen Penfellow of Derbyshire was recently wed to a Mr. Robert Careworth. He swallowed, an odd constriction in his throat threatening to prevent the movement, and glanced up. "She's married?"

Darcy flung a hand at the page. "That is not the worst of it. Read on."

Pain lancing through him, Richard did. "Her brother is George Wickham? How can that be?" He recalled her grimace before admitting, 'I have a brother.'

"Half-brother," Darcy said as Mr. Gardiner, who'd put aside his book and come to the sofa, plucked the page from Richard's

limp fingers. “Apparently, my father’s steward was not so different from his son as we’ve always believed. He got Miss Penfellow on her mother, a widow.”

“Says here she has another brother as well, Mr. Penfellow,” Mr. Gardiner observed.

“It’s no matter if she has twenty siblings,” Darcy said in a voice laden with simmering anger. “I know which one sent her here, and the moment the ladies return, I shall know to what end. In the meantime, I’ll have Mrs. Reynolds search Miss Penfellow’s room and count the silver.” Leaving the letter with Mr. Gardiner, Darcy stormed out.

Richard sat back, numb. Gwen, married? The property of another man?

But she’d obviously fled him. Didn’t want him. Perhaps—

Perhaps nothing. She was married.

He sat in dazed silence, thoughts spinning round in his head like flea ridden mongrels gnawing their own tails. At some point, Mr. Gardiner put a glass in his hand, but Richard didn’t sip the brandy he smelled there, stomach too roiled for strong spirits. Darcy came back and settled on the other side of the couch, glowering.

Happy chatter announced the return of the ladies. In moments, all four spilled into the parlor. Richard watched as color and joy blanched from Gwen’s face at the sight of their grim expressions. Apparently she had just realized her ruse had been uncovered.

“Georgiana, go to your room,” Darcy said.

Georgiana squared her shoulders. “I will not, I am not a child anymore and I believe I have the right to know what is happening.”

“Fine. Endure the pain of learning that your new companion has betrayed you in a most cutting way.”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth looked from face to face, ending with Miss Penfellow.

“First, explain why you did not introduce yourself as Mrs. Careworth,” Darcy demanded.

Mrs. Gardiner gasped. Richard sought Miss Penfellow’s gaze, pleading for a denial, but she didn’t look at him.

She locked stares with Darcy and cocked her chin. “Because I did not marry Robert Careworth.”

“The notary in Lambton begs to differ.”

“The notary in Lambton is not in as good a position to know what I have, and have not done, as I am.” Green eyes snapping, Miss Penfellow looked about the room, craning her neck to take in the women flanking her. “My brother is my ward until the twenty-fifth of December, the day of my birthday. He squandered all we have, save a trust set up by my father, to go to me on my majority. He schemed with his friend, Mr. Careworth, to force me to marry in exchange for a share of the sum. He had papers drawn up, but no banns were ever read. When I refused to sign, he signed for me and locked me in the cellar. If anyone found me to be married, they found it in error.”

The tightness in Richard's chest eased. This was the truth. He would swear it.

"But why come here?" Elizabeth asked. "Why not tell us the truth?"

Miss Penfellow cast another look about, expression beseeching now. "You must understand my lack of recourse. I went first to an attorney. He wouldn't even see an unaccompanied woman. I went next to the church but the rector refused to take my word without speaking with my brother, who is certain to lock me away again, or worse, turn me over to Careworth." She shuddered.

Anger surged through Richard. He'd wager he knew how this Careworth fellow planned to make the marriage official.

"I haven't the funds yet, and if my brother has papers saying I am married, I may never see them, so I've no means by which to purchase any loyalty, or even recourse to hide in an inn until my birthday." She turned pleading eyes on Darcy. "I came here because my father always spoke so highly of Mr. Darcy, but when I arrived and met you, I realized you can't be the Mr. Darcy he meant, since he spoke of an older gentleman. I did not know if I could tell you the truth and expect succor, and then everything began to go so well, and you are all so kind, that I did not want to admit I'd lied." Her voice caught and she met Richard's eyes. "I thought I would simply shelter here until my birthday and then slip away to claim my inheritance."

"Why should we believe any of that?" Darcy demanded.

Miss Penfellow gave a slight shake of her head. “Because it is the truth.”

“Is it?” Darcy stood, tall, severe and menacing.

Richard stood as well, ready to come between his cousin and Miss Penfellow, no matter her guilt.

But Darcy, always a gentleman even in anger, merely swept up the page the constable had sent and rattled it. “If that is the truth, why conveniently leave out who your brother is?”

“Who my brother is?” Confusion lined her brow. “Roger?”

Darcy held out the page. “George Wickham. Your father is Pemberley’s former steward and your brother is George Wickham.”

Georgiana gasped, swaying. Elizabeth was at her side in a moment, taking her arm. Mrs. Gardiner was quick to take the other, though confusion colored her expression.

“My father is your father’s former steward,” Miss Penfellow said. “But I have never met George Wickham and I cannot see why it should matter if I had.”

“I should throw you out of this house for such deceit,” Darcy growled.

“We cannot cast her out in the snow!” Elizabeth pleaded.

“I will not, but I must protect my family and those who live in this house. She will be confined until we unravel her true purpose here and what must be done with her,” Darcy declared in a tone that brooked no argument.

Slowly, Elizabeth nodded.

“In the cellar?” Miss Penfellow gasped.

“In your room,” Darcy grated out and called for Mrs. Reynolds.

CHAPTER FIVE

The following morning, after a relatively sleepless night, Richard found none of the cheer that had surrounded breakfasts since his and Miss Penfellow’s arrivals. Even the children were subdued, though he doubted they knew what troubled the adults around the table. The youngest dared to ask where Miss Penfellow was, to be informed she took breakfast in her room. Even her chair had been removed, the others around the table arranged so as not to emphasize the absence.

After breakfast, Richard went to see Darcy, who’d retreated to his office.

“Richard,” Darcy greeted, looking up from a ledger.

“Do you know where Wickham can be found? I’m going to go learn the truth.”

Darcy met that with a scowl. “We have the truth. He sent her here.”

“We are not certain of that. To me, she appeared surprised to hear his name. You saw how miserable everyone was at breakfast. We can’t have Christmas this way.”

“We can hardly have Christmas with you gallivanting about the countryside hunting George Wickham, either.”

“If you tell me where he is, I won’t have to gallivant,” Richard countered. “It’s still four days until Christmas.” And, if she could be believed, Gwen’s birthday.

“But only three until Christmas Eve.”

Richard studied his cousin. “You were very...firm with Miss Penfellow.” Draconian, even.

Darcy’s scowl deepened. “She entered my home playing the victim. I exposed her lie and she played the victim again. I’m too familiar with Old Mr. Wickham’s offspring falling back on that gambit to stomach it any longer. And,” he continued when Richard made to speak, “She brought Wickham into Georgiana’s thoughts. At Christmas, no less.”

“You brought up Wickham,” Richard corrected.

“Georgiana wouldn’t leave the room.”

“You could have been entirely more discreet. Taken Miss Penfellow aside.”

Darcy sighed and lifted a hand to scrub at his forehead. “I know.”

“Why are you so agitated? Miss Penfellow hasn’t even asked for anything. Or taken, I presume.,” Richard added, guessing his cousin would have issued that accusation as well, could he have.

“Not yet.”

“Darcy, you are a reasonable man. Do not allow your hatred for Wickham cloud your judgment. Tell me where he is and we

can be done on the subject once and for all. Or,” Richard drawled, “Shall I simply ask Elizabeth?”

“It’s nearly Christmas,” Darcy reiterated. “I need you here. Everything must be perfect.”

Ah, now he understood. “You want Elizabeth’s first Christmas at Pemberley to be perfect.”

Darcy shrugged. “Wouldn’t you?”

Indeed, he would. “I don’t believe you need to worry.”

“I wasn’t, until George Wickham intruded.”

Richard shook his head. “He didn’t, and he won’t, and I’ll be back well before Christmas Eve. And, Darcy, if I may add, with Elizabeth here, everything will be perfect. She’ll see to that.”

Darcy offered a rueful smile and nodded. “I daresay you’re correct. The Wickhams are not thirty miles from here. His regiment is stationed in Nottinghamshire.”

“Thank you. I swear to return for Christmas Eve mass and dinner. Don’t kick Miss Penfellow out until I do.”

Darcy gave a grudging nod.

CHAPTER SIX

Fingers frozen inside his gloves, Richard reached the barracks to which Darcy had provided directions. He was in full regimentals, so the guards at the entrance moved away to allow him in without any questioning. He asked them where the main quarters were and the guard pointed at a cabin not far away.

Through the frosty windows, he ascertained that some sort of celebratory gathering took place at the officers club but he didn't have time for a social visit. Not if he wanted to make it back to the inn in time to snatch a few hours of sleep before returning to Pemberley. If the weather held well enough, he meant to keep his promise to Darcy and be home for the celebrations.

Richard dismounted, leaving the horse at the hitching post and went forward to knock.

A bright eyed young man opened the door. "May I help you, sir?"

"I am Colonel Fitzwilliam. I sent ahead an express announcing my arrival. I'm in need of a quick word with Lieutenant George Wickham."

"Aye, sir. Please come in and wait for him in Captain Forster's office, he is way for the week. I shall bring Lieutenant Wickham to you." The young lieutenant bowed. Colonel Fitzwilliam was led to a small, quaint office.

"Fitzwilliam, it is you. This is unexpected."

Taking in Wickham's cautious demeanor, Richard attempted a reassuring smile. "Yes, well, I require a quick word. To clear something up."

If anything, Wickham appeared more leery. "Why in here? We can speak in the parlor, in front of everyone."

"I'm not here for vengeance, George. If that's what I wanted, I should have taken it long ago."

“If you’re not here on Georgiana’s behalf, then why?”

“A woman came to Pemberley. Your half-sister, Miss Penfellow. She claims her brother is forcing her into marriage.” Richard tried to keep his tone affable but if it turned out that Wickham was indeed the brother coercing Miss Penfellow, that affability would slip.

And if she was lying...if she was indeed married and simply an opportunist waiting for the chance to gain from Darcy’s hospitality? Or in league with Wickham for some gain? Richard did not know what he would do. His mind refused to move forward with either of those possibilities.

Wickham offered a flat grimace. “And Darcy wants to know if she means me? If I am forcing her into marriage?”

“No. I simply wish to know if you have any information on the matter.”

“If you must know, I’ve a letter here somewhere.” He patted several pockets, then pulled out a much folded page.

Richard took it, half in hope and half in fear. He unfolded it to read:

Dear Mr. Wickham,

You do not know me but I am your sister, through your father. My mother died leaving me as ward to you, but in lieu of your arrival, I am placed under the stewardship of my other brother, Mr. Roger Penfellow. It is Roger’s wish to force me to wed one of his acquaintances prior to my twenty-first birthday, when I will inherit the sum our father, Mr. Wickham, left me. I do not wish to marry

the gentleman but I fear Roger will be quite determined. I do not know for how long I can withstand him, especially as his methods are sure to become less and less savory as my birthday nears. I beg your assistance.

Yours truly, your sister, Gwen Penfellow

Richard refolded the letter and looked up. “You received this and did nothing?”

Wickham shrugged. “I’d yet to decide. It seems to me it’s a sort of deceit, now that I have money from my marriage. Someone wanting to take advantage on me.”

“When did you get this?”

“Nearly two weeks ago now.”

Richard tamped down a surge of anger. Where Wickham was concerned, the emotion never did any good. “Were you aware that you have a sister?”

Another of those aggravating shrugs that seemed to say, why should I care? “My father did mention Gwen once or twice. He may have urged me to seek her out and care for her. You know how sentimental men get as they near death, even for their by-blows.” Wickham frowned. “He said nothing about giving her money.”

Richard shoved the note in his pocket, battling between elation that Gwen might be telling the truth and anger with Wickham. “Thank you for your time. I shall keep you no longer.”

Wickham watched him mount, expression thoughtful, then said, “Fitzwilliam, if there is money, I think I should have some of it.”

Richard eyed Wickham, not bothering to hide his contempt for the idea, until the other man looked away. “Have a happy Christmas, George.” He whirled his horse and rode back down the drive.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exhausted, frozen through and having returned each borrowed steed on his way back until he once more rode the one he’d set out with, Richard reached Pemberley in time for the final mass on the twenty-fourth of December, if not actually early enough to dine with the family. He dismounted before the grand steps, the façade about the front entrance resplendent with lantern light, and handed the horse to a groom. The front door flew open, drawing his gaze upward. Elizabeth and Georgiana rushed down through the gently falling snow to meet him.

“Richard,” Georgiana cried. “She’s gone.”

He stared at them, mind nearly as numb as his fingers. “Gone?”

“After you left, Mr. Penfellow appeared together with the odious Mr. Careworth, who’s an attorney. They carried a supposed special license, and a priest accompanied them.,” Elizabeth said.

“What?” Richard gasped, cursing the continued snow that had slowed him. “Darcy let them take her?”

“Certainly not,” Elizabeth replied with a touch of indignation.

“But he’d stopped them from getting her money, you see,” Georgiana said, brushing away a snowflake that landed on her lashes. “Even though he didn’t believe her, he’d asked his man to stop them getting her money on the grounds that no marriage had yet taken place.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Which is how they knew she was here.”

“They said we couldn’t keep her from her brother, because he is her legal guardian until her birthday, tomorrow. He came back with the constabulary to get her today, but she was already gone. Mr. Penfellow didn’t believe us. He said he will press charges against my brother.”

Richard looked from one to the other. “But if Darcy didn’t turn her over to them, how is she gone?”

“She sneaked out the window last night,” Georgiana said in mild awe.

“She took a quilt.” Elizabeth proffered a page. “And she left you a note.”

Richard grabbed the folded paper, saw his name written in a smooth, flowing script that matched the one in Wickham’s letter. He tried to open it, but his numb, gloved hands wouldn’t unfold it.

“It says she’s so sorry and that she didn’t ever want to lie to you or hurt you, and that she’s left so as not to spoil our Christmas,” Georgiana said.

Richard turned to her in surprise.

“It wasn’t sealed,” she mumbled, dropping her gaze.

Richard looked about at the falling snow, inhaling frost tinged air. “We must start a search.”

“Darcy already did, for most of the morning,” Elizabeth assured him. “They tracked her footprints from below the window, but once they reached the roadway, it was too well traveled to distinguish them any longer.”

Georgiana added, “And Fitz sent some men to enquire after her Lambton and at the posting inn and, well, everywhere.”

Dark eyes intent, Elizabeth said, “We’d hoped you might know where she is.”

“I don’t.” Richard willed his exhausted mind to work. Once at the roadway, she could go anywhere. She needed to evade her brother’s machinations only a short while longer, until midnight. Would she then return? Did she dare come back anytime soon, when it was evident her brother was quite ready to lie to get her funds? Forging a wedding date would be the least of his sins.

And it was dark out, and freezing, too cold for someone with only a cloak and a quilt. Even if she planned to return soon, Richard wanted to find her now. He didn’t like the thought of her out in the winter’s night somewhere, alone and cold.

Inspiration jolted through him, warming even his fingertips. “I may know where she is.”

He tucked Gwen’s note away, already striding over to his horse. He grabbed up the loosely looped reins and vaulted into

the saddle. The beast pranced, invigorated by the same energy that ricocheted through him.

“Richard,” Elizabeth called before he could wheel away. “We’re to leave for mass soon. Will you both be here when we return?”

He paused, hands and heels poised to give the command. “God willing.”

“Do you love her?” Georgiana asked.

Richard couldn’t help but grin. “I do,” he said and signaled his horse to run.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Despite the gently falling snow, the roadways were well cleared and well trampled, but Richard didn’t require footprints to guide him. The journey to the scene of the snowball fight took little time. There, Richard urged his mount off the main roadway and down the rutted, snow choked track to the small cottage he and Miss Penfellow had seen a few days before, when they delivered the baskets amongst Darcy’s tenants.

‘I was lost in thought at how splendid it would be to hide away in such a lovely little cottage, the world cold outside but a fire within...’ The colonel recalled her words, heart about to burst with expectancy, “She must be here! Where else would she go?”

No smoke rose from the chimney. No light glimmered in the snow spattered windows. But when he reached the stoop and

jumped free of the saddle, he found footprints, barely discernible in the moonlight that filtered through the drifting snow.

He pushed the door open calling, “Miss Penfellow? Gwen? It’s Richard.”

“Richard?” she cried, rushing forward into the moonlight that slanted through the doorway, a quilt wrapped about her shoulders. “You’ve come back.”

“Did you not know I would?”

She shook her head, raven hair falling long and straight once more. “I was not certain when you would return. Oh Richard, I didn’t mean to cause such trouble. I simply wished for somewhere to hide from my brother and my father always spoke so highly of Mr. Darcy’s generosity.”

Richard held out a hand. “A generosity that is again open to you, and should never have been withdrawn.”

“It never was. Not entirely. Mr. Darcy has been very kind to me. I gathered from my brother’s shouting that he prevented them from keeping my dowry, and if I’d known the name Wickham to be so reviled, I certainly would have confessed that connection sooner.”

Which would have done her more harm than good, Richard wagered, wishing he’d thought of securing her funds. Trust Darcy to remain practical during a crisis, as Richard should have with all his experience and training. But he’d rushed off after Wickham and proof, thinking only of Gwen, and his heart.

He took a step forward, hand still proffered. “Come back with me now. You cannot stay here in the cold.”

She looked from his offered hand up to his eyes, hers rendered a luminous gray by moonlight. “Why did you leave?”

“In order to clear your name. To seek out George Wickham and discover if he truly was pressing you to marry against your will.”

“You could simply have believed me.”

Richard grimaced. “I wanted to. So very much, but you had deceived us once already and, well, your connection to Wickham does you little credit.”

“I’ve never even met the gentleman.”

“I know.” Please, take my hand, he silently urged her. “I’m sorry. I will not doubt you again.”

She smiled, the expression so gentle as to stab into his heart. “I daresay that’s not true. It would be a lot to ask over the years, that you never doubt me again. Perhaps, in the future, save it for the little things.”

“Over the years?” His heart constricted. “In the future?”

Her cheeks colored in a blush strong enough that even the cloak of night couldn’t hide it, but she didn’t look down. “That is, if you mean to propose to me after you kiss me.”

“I mean to propose to you first.” He meant the words to be robust, a declaration, but they came out low and entreating.

“Marry me, Gwen Penfellow. You’ve owned my heart since the moment I stepped into my cousin’s office and saw you.”

She placed her hand in his. “And you mine. I came to Pemberley to avoid matrimony, not find it, but how could I know that those hallowed walls would contain you?”

Richard pulled her into his embrace, not feeling a trace of the winter’s cold.

CHAPTER NINE

They rode up the lane leading to Pemberley far slower than Richard had last raced along it, Gwen before him in the saddle, wrapped in his arms, warm and glowing. Richard smiled, anticipating the happy reception they would have, Gwen welcomed and coddled as she should be. Placed in a chair before a warm fire, fed tea fortified with jam and brandy, and some of Mrs. Reynolds mincemeat pie, to restore her. Cheer and laughter, and the children still awake, for they would have been allowed to remain up for Christmas mass, and would all return soon.

In the valley below, the church bells of Lambton rang out, pure and celebratory in the night. Richard tightened his arms about Gwen and leaned forward to whisper near her ear, “The stroke of twelve. Many felicitations on your birthday.” Against the corner of his mouth, he felt her cheek round in a smile and kissed it.

They rode along in complete bliss, Richard wondering if their slow pace meant the returning churchgoers would overtake them, and turned up Pemberley’s drive. Finally, they rounded the last

bend, the great manor house spread out before them. He noted, as he hadn't the presence of mind to before, that in addition to the lanterns decking the grand front entrance, candles glowed in every window, flickering above snow laden sills.

Pemberley looking more lovely than ever brought to mind his childhood home, the Earl of Matlock's country residence, and his Aunt Catherine's vast estate. It occurred to him to wonder where he and Gwen would reside once they married. In mild shock he realized that, unlike with every other woman who'd ever caught his eye, he simply couldn't care. They would be happy wherever they went, be it a mansion or a cottage.

"Told you that if we waited long enough, she'd show up here," a smug voice said.

His haze of joy evaporating, Richard snapped his head around to take in a tall, dark haired fellow pointing a double barreled pistol at them. A shorter man stood beside him, dark blond hair slicked tight to his head, and a distressed looking priest shivered in his robes a few steps farther back.

"Roger," Gwen gasped.

"Get down off that horse, Gwen, and sign these papers while the priest watches."

Against Richard's chest, her spine snapped rigid. "I will do no such thing. You must have heard the church bells. You no longer have any guardianship over me."

"Only the four of us know you haven't signed yet."

"I count five people here," Richard said mildly, inwardly cursing that he hadn't even considered carrying his gun.

Roger Penfellow sneered. "There will be four soon. Now get down, Gwen, or I may miss your lover with my first shot and damage you."

"And do not worry, my sweet, for seven thousand pounds, I'm willing to overlook your being obviously spoiled goods," the greasy man added.

Down the drive, Richard heard the rumble of carriage wheels. Neither Roger Penfellow nor the man he assumed to be Mr. Careworth appeared to notice but the priest glanced that way, shoulders drooping in relief though Richard doubted he could see anything yet around the curve of the drive.

"I am neither spoiled goods nor willing to be your wife, Mr. Careworth," Gwen stated.

"We'll see about that," Penfellow snarled, bringing his other hand up to join the first in gripping the pistol, aim steady at Richard's head. "Dismount or I'll shoot."

"All will be well," Richard murmured in Gwen's ear. "Let me help you down." He brushed a kiss to her cheek. "Don't doubt me."

"I said dismount."

"We are, Roger," Gwen snapped.

Richard helped her slide down, then swung a leg over to join her. "There. Happy?"

"I'll be happy when my sister signs. Careworth, the license."

Mr. Careworth pulled a folded page from his pocket, then rummaged in another to produce a small stoppered jar.

Before he could find the quill, Richard stepped forward, placing his body between the gun and Gwen. “I don’t believe she will sign. Rather, I believe that you’re both going to be brought up on charges of kidnapping, attempted murder, forgery and trespassing.”

Penfellow snickered. “You think highly of your skills, sir.”

“In fact, I do, but I also think highly of my cousin and his staff.”

The rumble of carriage wheels grew in volume. Penfellow, glaring along the barrel of his gun at Richard, didn’t seem to hear, but Careworth tugged on his sleeve, trying to get his attention. Penfellow turned an annoyed look on him. The first carriage, for Richard judged there would be two, rounded the corner.

Penfellow swung round, pistol now pointed at Darcy’s conveyance. The coachman let out a shout of alarm, bringing his gig to a halt. Behind him and Gwen, Richard’s horse made a nervous sidestep.

“You see, Penfellow,” Richard said in that same mild voice. “Now there are far more than five people here, and you with only two balls in that gun. I believe that puts the odds more in my favor.”

At the top of the drive, Pemberley’s doors opened. Stevens and several footmen spilled out, pointing and chattering.

Careworth glanced that way and tugged on Penfellow's sleeve again.

"I think we rather have you surrounded," Richard observed as the second carriage halted behind the first.

A door on the first opened and Darcy stepped out. "What is going on here?"

"Mr. Penfellow was about to place his pistol on the drive and permit Stevens and your footmen to take charge of him and Mr. Careworth," Richard replied, raising his voice slightly as the butler and footmen tramped down the drive.

Penfellow glared at Richard. Snow drifted down. Stevens and the footmen reached them and drew up in an almost military formation.

Penfellow let out an oath and set down the gun. Richard stepped forward to claim it, keeping half an eye on the sullen gentleman as he did. Stepping back, he quickly emptied the powder.

"Stevens," Darcy said.

That word was all the loyal butler required to set him and the footman in motion. They quickly secured Gwen's brother, erstwhile false husband, and the priest, though Richard suspected the latter would soon be free to go, his lack of anything apparel but robes and his harried demeanor already speaking to his innocence.

Richard turned to Gwen and she wrapped her arms about his neck, smiling. "You saved me."

“Always,” he replied, the commotion around them fading into nothing as he gazed into her eyes.

“And you truly wish to marry me, even after one of my brothers pointed a gun at you and knowing the other is a Wickham?”

“With all my heart.”

“I shall never have a better, nor more exciting, birthday.”

“We may hope not more exciting but I shall strive every year for better,” he said, and couldn’t help but kiss her. He also couldn’t help but add, when he lifted his head, “I do admit, I’m surprised Old Mr. Wickham left you seven thousand pounds. We all thought he spent that money on his wife.”

Arms still about his neck, Gwen tipped her head to the side. “Seven thousand? That is only the half Careworth expected to keep.” She smiled. “You asked for my hand twice without ever asking after my dowry.”

“Because the chance to make every Christmas with you more wonderful than the last is all the dowry I need.”

THE END

About the author

Summer Hanford is an author of sweet, adventure-filled Historical Romance, Pride and Prejudice retellings and Epic Fantasy. She lives in the Finger Lakes Region of New York with her husband and compulsory, deliberately spoiled, cats. The newest addition to their household, an energetic setter-shepherd mix, is (still) not yet appreciated by the cats but is well loved by the humans. For more about Summer, visit:

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Christmas Letters

by Jeanette Watts

My Dearest Miss Fairfax,

It seems so little time since I last looked into your eyes, but I am absolutely withering for the lack of the sight of them.

When I proposed to you in Weymouth, I swear to you I was thinking it would not take me long to talk my aunt into agreeing that marriage was a perfectly reasonable request on my part. I do believe I was making some headway on our behalf.

But my aunt's health has taken a turn for the worse.

You knew her health was not good, which is why we were even IN Weymouth to meet you in the first place. The hot salt water baths were more soothing than invigorating for her, but I confess to you I believe once we left, she rallied admirably for a short while.

That was when I was doing my best talking, and I am sure progress was made!

But I fear it did not last long. Of late, she has been in such a fearsome temper, my uncle has spent days hiding from her!

Being more determined than my uncle to put her in a good mood, I have read to her until she snapped at me to stop and leave her alone, sung to her until my voice was too tired to carry a tune, fetched her shawls, dispatched with her shawls, brought her the dogs, removed the dogs from the room, and danced attendance upon her in every

way I could possibly think of.

There are days I fear she is ill enough, she does not have the energy to even have me in the room. Other days she does not have the energy to prevent having me in the room.

It is a balancing act of great finesse, and some days, a battle of wills; she wants to talk about herself and her various ills and aches and pains, while I want to talk about myself and my various hopes and dreams.

Have patience, and have faith in me, my sweet angel! I will prevail and be victorious! I have seen my aunt through worse spells. Sooner or later this will pass, and she will smile at my antics in her old way, and then I will throw myself upon her mercy and beg her to receive you.

It is a great deal to hope for, since there is not much time left, but I have this dream of being able to send for you to join us for Christmas!

Hold fast, my patient darling,

F.C. Weston Churchill

§

Most Well-Beloved Mr Churchill,

I am sorry to hear of the state of your aunt's health! It sounds like a trying time for everyone in your household. Poor health is such a trial!

I confess I had to giggle at your description of your poor uncle hiding

from your aunt while she was out of temper. You made me think of a cat, like the ones who tend to hide under a sofa when there are people present with whom they are not acquainted. The unfortunate image filled my head of your uncle on the floor, crumpling himself up to fit under the couch.

My own health has felt a bit fragile since we parted. I am still getting headaches, just as the doctor in Weymouth told me to expect. I do hope I am less of a trial to everyone around me than your aunt has been to you and your uncle.

I confess there are days I certainly want to snap at everyone who is dancing attendance upon me, so I am in complete sympathy with your aunt. My Aunt Bates means well, but she can be such a trial. My head will be aching, so her cure is to hover over me, wringing her hands and talking about every headache cure she has ever heard of. I swear she can talk for hours without stopping for a single breath.

I do love your sentiment of being able to come to you at Enscombe for Christmas! But, as you say, the time is rapidly shrinking. I hold no such hope of such a happy outcome. That way I shall not be disappointed if it does not come to pass, and will be the recipient of a thrilling surprise should I receive a Christmas invitation from your aunt and uncle!

In the event of such a happy occurrence, my valise is standing ready to be packed in a hurry.

Whether I see you or not for the holiday, it will not in the slightest bit change how I feel about you.

Ever yours

J. Fairfax

MY Dearest Miss Fairfax,

I was compelled to go to a pre-holiday gathering last night. There was dancing, and singing, and merriment, and all I could think of every moment is how much you would have enjoyed it.

If you had trouble sleeping last night, I am sure it was because your spirit was haunting me the whole evening. I fancied you picking The Duke of Kent's Waltz when we lead a dance together. I saw your fingers flying over the keys as you took a turn at the pianoforte so that the assembled company could dance. I could see your eyes smiling at me from across the supper table.

Even the carriage ride home last night was filled with thoughts of you. It snowed while we were inside, but by the time I was going home the sky had cleared and the moon turned everything into a sparkling white fairyland. I know Spenser did not mention snow in his poem, but this is clearly an oversight on his part. And here I was, in fairyland, but you, my Titania, were not here to grace it!

Every day apart from you gets harder than the one before. As Christmas approaches closer and closer, I feel your absence more and more strongly. Perhaps that sounds strange, since you have never been here in Yorkshire. The absence is not in the country, or in this house; it's in my spirit. I can keep you in my heart, but my spirit is suffering from the lack of nourishment it gets from the sight of you.

I can only hope that your suffering is not as acute as mine, for I would not for all the world have you suffering like this!

Yours body and soul,

F.C. Weston Churchill

Most Well-Beloved Mr Churchill,

Alas, as you were attempting to make merry for the holidays, I was doing much the same. My grandmother, aunt, and I were invited to a gathering at one of the neighbors'; and I, too, was dancing without you to dance with, and playing music without you to turn the pages, and looking across rooms without your eyes on the other side to smile back at me.

I imagine this was a much smaller gathering than yours; it was not so much a ball as a pleasant evening's diversion with music, and tea, and conversation, and a little bit of dancing broke out. The Miss Coxes adore dancing, and since it was their home, it was only natural to acquiesce to their demands for a few dances.

I was called upon to play the pianoforte to accompany some old-fashioned Christmas carols, and all I could hear was your voice singing "Here We Come A-Wassailing" and "The Twelve Days of Christmas." I am sure you and I would have given the assembled company a rendition of "Green Groweth the Holly" that would have been vastly appreciated. All I could think of the rest of the evening, and all the way home, was how much I miss the sound of your voice.

There are so many ways I miss your voice! There is the way our voices blend so well when we sing together, but there is also the sound of your voice when you walk into a room and greet everyone with your special gift for always saying the right thing. I miss the sound of your laughter. I especially miss the sound of your voice when you drop it to little more than a whisper to say things only meant for my ears.

As tired as my ears get from all the words they receive from my aunt

in the course of a day, they would eagerly listen to any words that might fall from your lips!

Yours most devotedly,

J. Fairfax

§

***M*Y Dearest Miss Fairfax,**

I have failed you.

I am writing this letter at the last moment, on the last post, on the last day, when I might possibly have sent you an invitation to come to Enscombe for Christmas. From here on out, there is not enough time for an invitation to travel from here to there, and for you to travel from there to here.

I am so, so, SO very sorry, my love. I had every confidence that my aunt would rally by now, and I would be able to spend Christmas looking into your eyes.

There simply aren't enough words in the English language to express my devastation. You deserve better. I swear I did my very best. My aunt was simply not in a frame of mind to listen, and I can't blame her. It is hard to be interested in listening to others when you are sick and miserable.

Forgive me, my dearest. I know YOU weren't expecting to share Christmas with me, but I was. Every letter I sent you, every moment

I looked around me, I pictured you here, standing beside the fire, sitting at the pianoforte, helping me and the servants put up the holly, getting into the carriage with my aunt and uncle to go to Christmas mass.

I realize all is not lost; while I cannot bring you with me for the ball at a neighboring estate, I can still be working to have you brought here before Twelfth Night. It is mostly my own ambitions that are thwarted. I wanted to be the one to hand you a candle on Christmas eve night, and send you off to bed with wishes for sweet dreams.

That, at least, I hope I may still wish for you, my sweetest Christmas angel.

Yours if you will still have me,

F.C. Weston Churchill

§

Most Well-Beloved Mr Churchill,

I do believe, my ownest one, that you need to forgive yourself for being unable to enact the impossible. I certainly forgive you! What you were hoping to achieve was perhaps not impossible, but you must own it was at least highly improbable, given the obstacles you were facing.

I have a great deal of sympathy for your poor aunt. I do know how hard it is to be patient, and to be solicitous to the problems of others,

when one is not feeling well. I have confessed to you before that when I am plagued with a headache, I find it so difficult to be patient with my aunt, and with the frankly silly people with which I am surrounded.

I have had evenings out when I have hardly said a word, because my head hurts from the residuals of my mishap, my heart hurts from being separated from you, and I am hard pressed to have patience for the insipid people with their gossiping conversations that surround me. I sit in a chair, gripping a glass, and grinding my teeth while I restrain myself from many an unkind word. I live in a certain amount of terror that one of the awful things I am thinking might slip out from between my tightly-clamped lips.

We will have the rest of our lives together; we will survive this trial. It only makes the prospect of our future together all the sweeter. We can start now to plan the yuletide festivities we will host once we are husband and wife with some measure of control over our lives.

Nonetheless, I will keep my valise at the ready, should you find yourself able to summon me by Twelfth Night... just in case, I shall finish the present I am working on for you.

No, I will not tell you what it is! Bring me to Enscombe by Twelfth Night, and then you will get to find out.

Your steadfast

J. Fairfax

My Dearest Miss Fairfax,

You are better to me than I deserve!

I spent this morning redoubling my efforts to ingratiate myself with my aunt until she banished me from her presence. Now I sit at my writing desk acknowledging the wisdom of your patience. No one can push a rope. I must simply wait, and let nature take its course. Sooner or later my aunt will be well enough to think about something besides the misery she is in, and then she will be willing to listen while I tell her of your many charms, and will allow me to bring you here as my betrothed.

This is does not mean I have completely given up on the idea of having you here for Twelfth Night! I mean only that I shall be more judicious when looking for possible means to broach the subject.

(Notice I have been very disciplined, and have NOT asked you what you are working on to give me for Twelfth Night. I will also be equally disciplined, and not tell you what I am giving you...)

While I must be reconciled to the idea of our being parted for a holiday meant for togetherness, I need not be deprived of knowing what you are doing, tasting, thinking, and feeling! Write to me everything. I will do the same.

I write that, while there is not too much to report yet. There is a large bundle of greenery near the door where the servants take deliveries; tomorrow the entire house will be draped with holly and ivy and other evergreen boughs.

Thinking of you every moment, of every minute, of every day,

F.C. Weston Churchill

Most Well-Beloved Mr Churchill,

Try to be patient and kind to your aunt, and I will try to be patient and kind to mine. They are both a trial to us in their unique ways. But it IS Christmas, and we are supposed to be thinking charitably of our fellow man.

Speaking of charity, my aunt and grandmother's neighbors here in Highbury have been exceedingly charitable! We have received jars of preserves, and hams, and all sorts of other foodstuffs; it is rather astonishing! I credit my grandfather. He was the vicar here for many years. I never met him, but I do believe he was a kindly and well-respected man. His good works have been remembered this long, and people still take care of his widow and daughter. And of course, granddaughter, while I am here.

At least it is not quite so strange, being here over the holiday. After I had left to live with the Campbells, I would not infrequently come to Highbury to visit for Christmas. I was sorry not to spend the time with the Campbells (who excel at the art of merrymaking and good fellowship!), but of course I must do my duty to my family.

I know you know exactly what is like to have torn loyalties – there is the family you were born into, and then the family who raised you. It is one of the many things that make us so well-suited for each other. We understand each other thoroughly thanks to our similar situations.

Understand me to be thinking of you every bit as often as you are thinking of me,

J. Fairfax

My Dearest Miss Fairfax,

Well, it is late on Christmas Eve, or perhaps I should say it is now very early Christmas morning. I should be going to bed, but I cannot settle down to sleep until I have first sat down to write you.

I accompanied my uncle to a gathering at our neighbor's estate; my aunt declined to join us, but insisted that we do not neglect our neighbors on her behalf. She stayed home attended by a friend, while my uncle and I went and made merry.

At least, I tried to be as merry as I could. Uncle Churchill is understandably quite worried, so I made extra effort to be lighthearted and provide distraction at all times. I even made him dance a little when dancing was called for. He protested that it might appear unseemly, but I pointed out that the ladies far outnumbered the gentlemen, so it was his duty to his hostess to dance with her. It did my heart good to see him promenading down the center of the line, smiling.

The pain of being apart from you right now is great, but I shall survive this, if only because I know you are counting on me to. If this killed me, I would not live to see you standing beside me at the altar someday soon. Our love is stronger than any obstacles life can throw in our path. We can endure this separation. Since I have failed to get you an invitation to Enscombe, I shall embark upon my original design to get myself to Highbury to visit my father and his bride.

Your observation about family and torn loyalties is so true! I have not been as diligent in paying my respects to my father as you have been in fulfilling your obligations to your aunt and grandmother.

Somewhere in the vastness of the English language are the words that will release me from my duty to my aunt long enough to do my duty by my father, which will put me within a short walk of your doorstep!

Merry Christmas, my love. I swear I shall see you soon!

Your faithful and devoted
F.C. Weston Churchill

§

Most Well-Beloved Mr Churchill,

It is Christmas morning, and neither my aunt nor my grandmother has yet stirred from their beds. I am happy for the moment of quiet with which to spend some time alone with you. At least, as alone with you as pen and ink can stand as representative for standing beside you, hearing your voice, seeing your eyes, touching your hand, feeling the warmth of your smile washing over my being.

The distress of being so far away from you feels less acute as I imagine what you are doing right now. Perhaps you are still asleep after your family hosted a dinner last night. Perhaps you are awake as early as I am, and already looking at your breakfast plate.

No matter what you are doing, I know you are thinking of me. Even if you are asleep! Since if so, then you are dreaming of me, which is still a form of thinking of me. Knowing that you are is the sustenance that

fires my spirit. I can face this Christmas without you, because this is the last time I will spend a Christmas without you.

By this time next year, we will be husband and wife, and we will be hosting our own Christmas celebrations together. Your aunt and uncle will be healthy and well, and the four of us will be together, admiring the greenery you've hung on the stairs, or around the fireplaces, toasting to all our continued good health, enjoying music at the pianoforte you say you have waiting for me.

I believe this with all my heart. This agony of separation is only for now, not forever. We will get through this Christmas, secure in our love for each other and our faith in the future.

Merry Christmas, my love, my friend, my reason for living,

J. Fairfax

Want to read the whole story?

Support the author and find
“*My Dearest Miss Fairfax:*
What Jane Austen’s Emma didn’t know”
available on Amazon.

About the author

Jeanette Watts has written three Jane Austen-inspired novels, two other works of historical fiction, stage melodramas, television commercials, and humorous essays for Kindle Vella.

When she is not writing, she is either dancing, sewing, or walking around in costume at a Renaissance festival talking in a funny accent and offering to find new ladies' maids for everyone she finds in fashionably-ripped jeans.

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Christmas Day

from «Unwrapping Mr. Darcy»

by Leslie Diamond

Elizabeth slipped on her last earring as her eyes met Grunt's golden ones in the mirror. "I know I cuddled with you last night, but I'm still mad at you, you know." She spoke in what almost sounded like a growl, but that didn't intimidate the black fur ball at all. Rather than appear all sad like a dog, he continued to sit primly on the fuzzy throw pillow and stare unblinkingly. He couldn't care less that she came home from the holiday party last night to her pretty Christmas tree sprawled inelegantly across her coffee table, the angel across the room, laying on her side.

This morning, after a pain reliever and a strong cup of coffee, her head wasn't as muddled and no longer ached, but her stomach still rolled. She was going to have to spend the day with William Darcy. William Darcy, her Secret Santa. William Darcy, her boss. She'd have to play nice, too, because Jane wouldn't tolerate any sarcasm or downright ugliness on Christmas. No one was allowed to be Scrooge with the always-smiling Jane Bennet.

When she walked out of the room, the soft tinkle of the little bell on Grunt's collar trailed behind her. She pulled her favorite fuzzy boots from the hall closet and sat on the sofa to put them on. The Bennets never dressed for Christmas, and today, she dressed casually as always, though she wore her best jeans and her favorite red sweater. Not that she wanted to look good for

Darcy! She reached for her coat; the little black furry demolition crew had settled himself on top like he owned it.

“Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t wear this for him.” Grunt continued to stare. “Okay, I don’t care if you believe me or not. I have to go. I’ll be back later, and if the tree is still standing, I’ll consider giving you a can of tuna.” He made that usual deep little grunt he always did when she lifted him off and placed him on the floor. She slipped on her coat, gloves, and scarf, grabbed the bag of gifts, which contained two bottles of wine, of course, and hurried out the door.

Charlie and Jane’s apartment was fortunately not far, so she braced herself against the bitter cold and walked quickly, crossing the street and hurrying through the park. When she reached their building, Charlie buzzed her up and opened the door as she approached.

He bit his bottom lip and shoved his hands in his pockets, looking a lot like a puppy expecting a spanking with a newspaper. “You made it. Jane was worried you would oversleep.” Elizabeth had planned to harangue him and Jane when she arrived, but why did she suddenly not have it in her?

“No, I managed to drag myself out of bed this morning.”

He took the bag from her, and she took off her coat and other winter gear, hanging them on the hooks inside the hall closet door. “I told Jane that you didn’t stay long enough at the party for too late of a morning, but you know your sister, she always worries that things won’t be perfect.”

“She’s always been that way. She wants everyone happy.” She followed him into the kitchen where Jane was putting the candied pecan topping on the sweet potatoes with her cell phone propped to her ear.

“Yes, Mom, Lizzy’s coming over today. Didn’t you get to wish her Merry Christmas this morning?”

Elizabeth began waving her hands back and forth and shaking her head madly. “No!” she mouthed. She hadn’t missed her mother’s call, she’d simply not answered. She’d speak to her mother later, when she wasn’t suffering from a hangover. To deal with her mother now would only drive her to drink more.

When she finally caught Jane’s attention, her sister rolled her eyes. “Lizzy isn’t here yet, but I’ll tell her to call you when she gets the chance.” Jane nodded. “Well, I won’t sit her down and force her to speak to you. If you don’t hear from her by this evening, I’d call back. I’m sure you’ll catch her then . . . Okay, I’ll do that . . . Yes, I promise . . . Tell Dad I love him. I love you too . . . Bye.”

Jane set down the spatula, turned off her phone, and huffed. “Elizabeth Shae Bennet! You shouldn’t avoid our mother on Christmas and you know it!”

Charlie chuckled while he dug the wine out of the bag and set it on the island, kissing Jane on the cheek before disappearing into the living room with the gifts.

“I just couldn’t this morning, Jane. I woke up with my head throbbing. I would’ve screamed if I had to listen to any more gossip about Mom and Dad’s neighbors. I don’t care if Mrs. Long

is having an affair with her lawn boy, or that Mr. Goulding has been elected mayor of Naples and his wife wore the ugliest outfit ever to his inauguration. One of the many reasons I don't live in Florida is because I need distance from Mom or she'll make me crazy." She shook her head while Jane pursed her lips in an effort not to laugh. "I'm not kidding."

After covering the dish, Jane wiped her hands on a nearby dishtowel. "I know Mom can be trying, but you should have more patience with her."

"Mom could try the patience of a saint. I promise to call later or send a message."

Jane exhaled and her shoulders gave way as she let the air out. Yes, Jane was disappointed in her, but not everyone had her patience or kindness. "I have everything prepped. Let's go open the presents. I can't wait for you to see what I got you. You're going to love it."

She grabbed Elizabeth's hand and pulled her into the spacious living room where they sat on the floor around the tree. Charlie played Santa and passed out the gifts one at a time, so they could watch each other open their presents. Jane and Elizabeth had always gone searching for the perfect gift for one another, so they always wanted to see the look on the other's face when that gift was opened. Elizabeth couldn't help but grin when Jane opened the periwinkle blue off-the-shoulder cashmere sweater. Jane had talked about wanting a blue sweater for months but never could find just the right one. When Elizabeth found this one at Bloomingdale's, she didn't hesitate to buy it. It was so Jane.

“I love it!” Jane clutched it to her chest while she hugged Elizabeth. “Open yours.” Her sister’s eyes sparkled as she sat back on her heels. Charlie handed her the fairly large present, and Elizabeth put her ear next to it while she worked to shake the heavy box gently.

“Stop it, Lizzy! I want to see you open it!”

After a quick giggle, Elizabeth set the package on her lap and slowly began to pull at the tape. She always shook her gift from Jane, who never failed to respond in the same way. With one long rip of paper across the top, Elizabeth gasped at the picture on the box. It was the stand mixer she’d been wanting for the last year. “Where did you find it?”

“I ordered it online. I know you preferred to buy it at a store in case there was an issue, but I know how much you wanted the copper color.”

Every time they were near a kitchen store, she dragged Jane in, but they either didn’t carry the copper color, they were out of stock, or she didn’t have the extra money. She never expected Jane to buy her one. “Thank you.”

Charlie laughed. “You know she only bought it so you’ll bake for New Year’s. Did she tell you about the cherry pie she tried to make last week?” He ducked at the wad of gift wrap Jane tossed at his head. Her sister was an excellent cook, but no matter what she tried, she always ruined desserts. Elizabeth had dropped off an apple cranberry pie and another drunken pecan pie for Charlie on Christmas Eve.

“I don’t mind baking. You know that.” She hugged Jane and sat back. “Is that everything?” She set the stand mixer to her side, and when she turned back around, a familiar package was held out in front of her, its silver, glittery numbers winking up at her. Oh, no!

“I don’t know why you have that, but I told Darcy I couldn’t accept it.” She hadn’t paid attention before—blame it on the hangover—but where was Darcy? “When is he coming, anyway?”

Jane cleared her throat and took her hand. “Lizzy, he’s not coming.”

He wasn’t coming? “Yes, he is. You told me he is, and he confirmed it last night.”

“I don’t know what you said to him after you discovered that he’s your Secret Santa,” said Charlie, “but he came to me and gave me your last gift. He said he didn’t want to make you uncomfortable on Christmas.”

Elizabeth swallowed in an attempt to loosen the lump that formed in her throat. “Did he have somewhere else to go?”

“I don’t think so.” Jane picked up the scraps of paper around her and began shoving them into a nearby bag. “His sister is—”

“In Maine, with her boyfriend and his family.” A part of her wanted to crawl into a hole and hide. Because of her, he was spending Christmas day alone.

When she’d gathered up most of the mess, her sister took the gift from Charlie and set it in Elizabeth’s lap. “I know why you’re uncomfortable accepting gifts over the limit, but I’ve

gotten to know William a little since I started dating Charlie. In some ways, he's a lot like me. He's not outgoing. In fact, he's very reserved. I've also seen the difference between how he behaves in public versus a small group of friends, and I understand that his reserve is how he deals with how uncomfortable he is."

"Jane, I never thought he was uncomfortable around me. I thought he didn't like me."

"Actually," said Charlie while he shifted to a chair. "Darcy has been awkward in large groups of people since we were boys, and he's not good making conversation with people he doesn't know well."

"He does fine in business meetings with clients he's never met." Elizabeth set the gift back under the tree. "He might be uptight, but he's not rude."

Charlie leaned forward and rested his forearms on his legs. "He's uneasy in meetings, but he has a goal, something he needs to accomplish. He does what he has to for the good of the company. I know he was appallingly rude to you on your first day and I'm not excusing it, but in his defense, he didn't know you were there. He would've never said those things to your face." He took in a long breath. "Believe me. He regrets it more and more every day."

She stared at the gift under the tree. She couldn't take her eyes off of it—like it called to her and she couldn't resist the pull.

"You know you want to see what it is," whispered Jane near her ear. "You've loved every gift he's given you. You may have felt

guilty over the cost, but he has never asked me for advice on what to buy. He did all of it on his own.”

“Other than have Charlie rig the Secret Santa.”

Charlie’s laugh broke a little of the tension in the room. “I thought he owed you after you overheard that remark.”

She stood and sat on the sofa, so she was directly across from Charlie. “And how do I know that his feelings for me didn’t get me the promotion?”

Charlie all but bolted from his chair as he pointed at her. “Stop right there! You will never ever say that again, and I’ll tell you why. If someone overhears you, they might believe it’s true and tell everyone around the office then no one would take you seriously. You also need to remember how long I’ve known him. He would never promote or hire someone based on a personal relationship. He is well aware of his responsibility not only to his employees, but also to his stockholders. He can’t afford to hire and fire based on personal feelings and never has he even considered dating anyone who works for the company until you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, that’s not going to happen. I’ve never met a man who makes me more uncomfortable than he does.”

Her sister narrowed her eyes at her and tilted her head a little to one side. “How do you mean?”

Elizabeth shifted back and scratched at an invisible mark on her favorite pair of jeans. “It doesn’t matter.”

Jane kept her eyes trained on Elizabeth. “Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Charlie looked between them. “I don’t get it.”

“Lizzy’s attracted to him.”

“No, I’m not!”

One side of Jane’s lips tugged upwards. “By her denial, I’d say big time.”

Seriously! She didn’t come here for this! Why was she even putting up with it? At Charlie’s chuckle, she threw her arms up, stood, and walked into the kitchen, heading straight for the cabinet containing the wine glasses. Jane walked in and leaned her hip on the island while Elizabeth set the glass on the counter.

“It’s just the two of us. Tell me what has you so worked up.” Jane placed another glass next to hers, along with Darcy’s present.

Elizabeth ignored Jane while she concentrated on opening the bottle of wine. Once she poured herself and Jane large glasses, she took a big sip. “Why?”

“Because you’ve always laughed off most people’s comments, but William’s really bothered you. You’ve always taken everything he’s said so personally. You also confessed to me a while ago that none of the men you ever dated had that spark. Does William Darcy?”

“How am I supposed to know? I haven’t kissed him, you know.” She took another gulp of wine, but as she pulled the glass away, Jane took it from her hand.

“Has he ever touched you, even if you simply handed him paperwork and your fingers brushed against each other?”

Her cheeks burned as if she were sitting directly in front of a blazing fire. She took the glass of wine back from Jane and took another sizeable drink.

“Well?”

“He put his hand on mine last night.” She wrapped her free arm around herself. The mere mention of it tickled her skin. “I’ve thought he was good-looking, hot even, but I never thought it was because of an attraction. I convinced myself that he didn’t like me at all, and I . . . I thought the way I reacted was because of how much I didn’t like him.”

“You get goosebumps, a certain heat from his touch, butterflies in your stomach?”

A nod was all she could manage.

“I think you should open this,” said Jane softly, pushing the gift closer. “He put so much thought into each and every one of those gifts. He wouldn’t go to so much trouble if he didn’t care. Charlie even told me that in the past, William had his assistant buy his Secret Santa gift, but he insisted on seeing to each and every one of yours himself. If he wanted to try to buy you, he could’ve hauled out the big guns and purchased jewelry or a car, but he didn’t. His gifts weren’t super expensive, but his priority was to find something you’d adore. Don’t you think he deserves a fair chance at your heart?”

Elizabeth set down the wine and picked up the thin box.
“When we touched, I felt like I lost control of myself.”

“But that’s not a bad thing. You’re always in such control of everything. Sure, you’ve had crushes or dated, but since you’ve been an adult, you’ve never let yourself fall for someone. School and your career came first.”

“No man has made me feel that way.”

Jane gave a crooked smile. “No man has ever pissed you off so much in the past. I think that was the biggest clue right there. I’m still amazed it never occurred to me.”

Her eyes burned and blurred a little. “He really stayed home today because of me?”

With a shrug, Jane swallowed her sip of wine. “That’s what he told Charlie.”

She sucked in a breath, tore at the end of the package, pulled out the box, and lifted the lid. Once she’d pulled back the tissue paper, she froze, staring at what was inside. How did he know? With shaky fingers, she lifted the single ticket.

A whistle came from Jane. “Before you say anything, I never told him it was your favorite. I don’t think I’ve even told Charlie.”

Elizabeth put the lid back on the box and hurried into the hall, grabbing her coat, hat, and gloves. “I need to talk to him. He must hate me after yesterday.”

“I doubt it. You might want to ask Charlie where he lives before you run out the door, though.”

She stepped around the corner. “Charlie? Where does Darcy live?”

He looked over from the football coverage on television. “On Riverside Drive. Do you remember when you, Jane, and I went walking to the park and you pointed to the large grey stone house on the corner and commented on how much you adore it?”

“The one with the ornate dormer windows?” she squeaked.

Charlie laughed. “That’s it.”

Maybe she should just bang her head against the wall now. Shit! That house was insanely big and he lived there by himself? She took the present from Jane and kissed her on the cheek. “With any luck, I’ll be back with an extra mouth to feed.”

Jane opened the door and called, “Good luck!”

§

She shook the entire walk but it wasn’t from the cold. The house wasn’t far. She’d passed it often enough when going to Riverside park or for a jog. She loved that house.

Her eyes roved over the exterior when she approached and this fluttery feeling started in her stomach, but before she could chicken out, she climbed the steps and rang the doorbell.

After a few moments, an older lady answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, I need to speak with Mr. Darcy. Is he in by any chance? My name is Elizabeth Bennet.”

The woman shook her head. “I’m sorry, but he isn’t at home.”

Of course, he wasn’t. He’d probably made other plans after she’d abused him last night. “Could you please tell him I stopped by? I need to speak with him.”

After a nod and a Merry Christmas, the door closed in her face, and Elizabeth’s shoulders dropped. She would have to try again later. She really needed to speak to him—apologize to him for being such a blind idiot. While walking back to the sidewalk, she looked back and forth. Maybe she’d go for a walk in the park before she went back to Jane’s.

“Miss Bennet!”

She whirled around. It was the driver from the night before who walked up behind her. “Carson? Is that right?”

“Yes, miss. I’m sorry about my wife. She was only doing what Mr. Darcy asked. This morning, he told her he wasn’t at home to guests, but I think if he knew it was you, he’d make an exception.”

“I don’t want to get her into trouble,” she said, shaking her head.

With a smile, he motioned her inside. “I’m letting you in. I promise I can take the heat if I’ve overstepped.”

Before she could overthink it, she followed him inside, glancing up at the decorative trim in the entry and the high ceiling and marble floors of the foyer. She followed him down a flight of stairs and around a corner where a clanking sound echoed through the hall. Carson opened a door and stood to the side so she could enter.

“I believe the two of you need to talk.” The words were spoken quietly before he left her standing there by herself. What the heck? How much had Darcy told him?

The clanking sound made her turn and—oh my stars and garters! She peeked back down the hallway. Why would he just leave her like that? She turned back and forced herself to clamp shut her lower jaw. Didn’t Carson realize that Darcy wore nothing but a pair of workout shorts?

His back to her, Darcy lowered slightly to balance the bar across his shoulders and did several squats while she all but whimpered at the sight of his back muscles shifting and straining, not to mention his butt, which when he was at a full squat, was outlined quite well by those shorts.

She coughed in an attempt to get his attention, but he must not have heard since he put the bar back on the rack and straightened. He reached his hands toward the ceiling in a long stretch, and her eyes rested upon a black ink armband tattoo on his left bicep. Uptight Darcy, head of Darcy Holdings, had a tattoo?

The sudden quiet caused her to startle and look up to the dark eyes now watching her from across the room. He pulled a cord at the base of his neck and a wireless headphone dropped from his ear. Well, that would explain why he didn’t hear her.

“You didn’t come to Charlie and Jane’s.” Well, duh! Way to go stating the obvious!

He pulled out the other headphone. “No, I thought it would be better for everyone if I made myself scarce.”

She set a foot forward but pulled it back. Perhaps it was better to stay where she was. He wasn't exactly welcoming. "I hope you don't mind. Your driver, Carson, let me in. His wife said you weren't at home."

"It's fine," he said. He picked up his shirt from a nearby bench and slid it over his head, covering those broad shoulders from the eyes she needed to keep on his face rather than the skin buffet in front of her. It wasn't easy. He pointed to the hand that held his gift. "You opened it?"

Her hand lifted and she looked down to the box. "I did. Phantom of the Opera has been my favorite since I was a young girl, but what I can't figure out is how you knew?" Her eyes were wide when she turned them back to him.

"You don't remember?"

Her eyebrows drew down in the middle as she gave this adorable little frown. "Until dinner at Giorgio's, I can't remember ever having a conversation with you that wasn't work related."

"We didn't speak of it, but you and Miss Lucas did. I was in the elevator one day when the two of you entered, I think to go to lunch. Once you both said hello, you turned around and proceeded to continue the argument you must've been having before the doors opened."

A small curve appeared to one side of her lips. "Charlotte and I are always having some completely trivial and nonsense conversation. You'll have to remind me on this one."

He picked up his towel and draped it around his neck. “I believe the contested topic on this occasion was whether Josh Groban would make a better Phantom or Raoul. Miss Lucas was of the opinion Groban should be the Phantom, and you—”

“I think his voice is more suited to Raoul.” She gazed back down at the ticket. “I’d completely forgotten about that.”

“I thought someone with such particular opinions on the subject must be a fan.” He grabbed his water bottle and stepped closer, not stopping until he stood directly in front of her. She’d definitely surprised him when he turned around. He hadn’t expected her to call him, much less come to his house, but he wasn’t upset over it. It made him hope as he hadn’t let himself hope before. Her perusal of his backside that he caught when he turned around only fueled that fire.

She gave a tight smile. “You seem to know so much about me, but I know hardly anything about you.”

“I’m not that interesting.”

“I doubt that,” she said softly. If only she would look at him instead of continuing to stare at the ticket.

He held out his arm so she would accompany him back upstairs. “I have the other ticket in my desk. If you’d like to take Jane or perhaps Miss Lucas, I’d be happy to give it to you.” His stomach knotted up as he said the words. He had to offer, but he so wanted to be the one beside her if she’d let him.

She paused on the steps and faced him. “You have another ticket?”

“Yes, even though I debated whether or not to tell you the night of the party, my original plan was to find some way to give you the last gift without revealing myself. I wanted to surprise you at the theater. I thought it might give us an opportunity to talk outside of the office. Of course, I didn’t know you’d be uncomfortable about the other gifts. Last night, when I was trying to decide whether or not to wait, you discovered me with this.”

Her fingers fidgeted at the box. “I owe you an apology for the argument. I don’t know why it made me so angry.”

“No, I deserved it. I shouldn’t have said what I did when you were hired, I completely disregarded the rules for the Secret Santa, and I did put you in an awkward position. I didn’t consider how others might perceive the situation.” He stepped up and she followed suit until they were again in the foyer and she fell in behind him when he turned and entered his study. He opened a drawer on his desk and picked up an envelope. When he held it in front of her, she eyed it as if it would bite.

Her teeth wore at her lips, and she glanced back at the box in front of her. “I think you should keep it.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, withdrawing his hand.

She nodded and finally met his eye. “I am. If you would still like to accompany me, I would . . . well, I think I would like that.”

That warmth—the one that settled in his chest when he looked at Elizabeth—spread throughout his body at her shy smile and acceptance. The grin that overspread his face must’ve been ridiculous, it was so large.

Elizabeth looked around the room—the floor to ceiling dark stained bookshelves, the moldings around the ceiling, and the top of his desk. Was she looking for something or just avoiding his eye? “In the meantime, you should get dressed. We have a Christmas dinner to attend.”

**Want to read the whole story?
Support the author and find
“*Unwrapping Mr. Darcy*”
available on Amazon.**

About the author

L.L. Diamond is more commonly known as Leslie to her friends and Mom to her three kids. A native of Louisiana, she spent the majority of her life living within an hour of New Orleans before following her husband all over as a military wife.

Louisiana, Mississippi, California, Texas, New Mexico, Nebraska, England, Missouri, and now Maryland have all been called home along the way.

Aside from mother and writer, Leslie considers herself a perpetual student. She has degrees in biology and studio art but will devour any subject of interest simply for the knowledge. Her most recent endeavors have included certifications to coach swimming, certifying as a fitness instructor and indoor cycling instructor, personal trainer, and corrective exercise specialist.

As an artist, her concentration is in graphic design, but watercolor is her medium of choice with one of her watercolors featured on the cover of her second book, *A Matter of Chance*.

She is also a member of the *Jane Austen Society of North America*. Leslie also plays flute and piano, but much like *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet, she is always in need of practice!

A quiet conversation

by Joana Starnes

“Shall we have our brandy in the library, Mr Bennet?” Darcy asked and his father-in-law readily agreed, their voices ringing almost too loudly, once the boisterous contingent had left the table and followed Elizabeth out of the dining room.

It was only Frederick who took his time in folding his napkin, which could not fail to put a faint quirk of amusement in Darcy’s lips, despite his enduring ill-humour. It was plain to see that his son was hoping to be asked to stay and be deemed a man at last, now that he had returned from Harrow a year older, and the best part of three inches taller.

The quirk of amusement grew into a genuine smile. It was good to have him back, and Edmund likewise. This was as it should be: all of them at home. For Christmas was coming.

Edmund had been perfectly content to quit the dining room along with his sisters, and rightly so. He was only twelve, and had no expectations of being regarded as an adult for a fair while. At the advanced age of sixteen, Frederick seemed to harbour different notions. He finally looked up from his employment when Mr Bennet chuckled, “That will do nicely, do you not think? Eh, Frederick? You will wear that napkin thin if you smooth it for much longer.”

With a perfunctory smile for his grandfather, Frederick squared his shoulders and came to the point:

“May I join you, P— Father?” he asked, and Darcy was hard-pressed to suppress a grimace.

The swift amendment was yet another claim to maturity, and he could not but find it as dispiriting as it was conspicuous. There was naught amiss with ‘Papa.’ The customary appellation had served them well enough these many years. Frankly, it would have pleased him a great deal better. Why ever must they be in such a deuced haste to grow up?

“For brandy? No, I should imagine not,” Darcy muttered, then straightened in his seat and endeavoured to be fair. After all, it was not Frederick who had soured his enjoyment of the day. So he forced a smile and added, “But you need not go into the drawing room as yet if you have no taste for tea and parlour games. Have some time to yourself if you prefer. I am quite certain that your mamma will understand. She would much rather have a quiet chat with you later in the evening. And so will I. In fact, what say you of a game of chess before we retire?” he suggested, and was glad to see his son’s mien brighten.

“I would like that. Just like the old days,” Frederick said, and Darcy smiled.

The lad had asked to be taught ‘that game of squares’ when he was barely four because Anne had learned to play, and at that age he was all too eager to follow in his sister’s footsteps. By nine he had become proficient enough to mount a good defence and pose a challenge. Before long, daily games had become a habit. Those were the ‘old days’ that Frederick spoke of. But then, he

was a youngster of a lively and impatient disposition. Early days of childhood must seem to be an eternity away.

Mr Bennet's wizened countenance creased even further into a highly diverted grin. Yet, to his credit, he pursed his lips and held his peace until Frederick excused himself and left them. It was only then that Mr Bennet gave free rein to his amusement.

“Ah, the ungenerous candour of youth,” he chortled once the door was closed. “If those were the ‘old days,’ the dear boy must think that Methuselah and I were children together.” He shook his head, drained his glass and left his seat. “Come along, Son, and let us give praise that these ancient feet can still carry me to the library.”

That mode of address was not new at all. The old gentleman had casually introduced it a long time ago – and it had brought mixed feelings to begin with. There had been an odd ring to it – very odd indeed, and far from comfortable – for the word did not belong on Mr Bennet’s lips, to Darcy’s way of thinking. It was his departed father’s word. It seemed profoundly wrong that someone else should claim it, and be allowed to use it. And yet it was heart-warming all the same. A sign of trust, affection and acceptance. The greatest compliment that Elizabeth’s doting father could have paid him.

The years had flown, and the sense of discomfort had ebbed away. The gratitude remained. To this day, none of the other sons-in-law had been vouchsafed that honour. Not even Bingley.

“I shall stick to port, I think,” Mr Bennet observed as he sauntered across the library to avail himself of a seat by the fire, and Darcy gave a wordless nod.

He poured generous measures for both and carried the glasses to the small table at Mr Bennet’s elbow, then took a seat as well and stretched his long legs before him. For a fair while, they sipped their drinks in companionable silence. One of Mr Bennet’s most admirable traits was that he rarely spoke unless he had something to say.

He did have something to say, as it happened, but he might have timed his question better. Darcy very nearly choked on his mouthful of port when Mr Bennet drawled, “Might I ask what – or rather who – has put your nose quite so severely out of joint? Young Montrose, perchance?”

Rather glad that he had not disgraced himself by spluttering ruby liquid everywhere, Darcy sat up, placed his glass back on the table and answered his father-in-law’s question with another.

“What makes you think so?”

Mr Bennet shrugged.

“’Tis fairly obvious. He is here at all hours and never leaves Anne’s side.”

Darcy frowned and forced himself to give a dismissive gesture.

“That is nothing out of the common way. The pair of them have been playfellows ever since they were children,” he argued,

only to cringe at the false ring of confidence in his voice and at the full extent of his wilful self-deception.

True to form, Mr Bennet missed nothing. Brow arched in amused indulgence, he tutted.

“Not like you to blind yourself to the world around you. They are not children any longer, are they?”

Darcy turned his head to glower at the fire as he muttered, “I shan’t speak for Robert Montrose, but Anne is barely out of the schoolroom—”

“Elizabeth was less than two years older when you first set foot in Meryton.”

This time, the dismissive gesture was as prompt as it was instinctive.

“That is neither here nor there. Two years make all the difference. Besides, Elizabeth was wise beyond her years.”

Mr Bennet chuckled.

“And Anne is not? She will not thank you for that estimation. But you may look at it this way and see if it brings you comfort: at least she has no plans to wed some tight-lipped stranger and live halfway across the country.”

“There is that,” Darcy nodded, a half-smile tugging at the corner of his lips. But the change of perspective was humbling, and the deep breath he drew came out in a long sigh.

How did a man bring himself to step back and entrust his beloved child’s happiness to another? It was hard enough to

imagine Anne leaving his home and his protection to live at Hadley, a mere twenty miles away. Even though he had known Robert Montrose ever since the lad was born. Heaven forfend that Anne should have become attached to goodness knows who from goodness knows where!

He flinched and leaned forward to stare into the fire, his elbows on his knees and his chin on his folded hands. How had Mr Bennet borne it?

The logs in the fireplace settled with a thud, sending sparks flying and making him start. Darcy shifted in his seat and fixed his eyes on his companion.

“Thank you for trusting me with Elizabeth’s hand all those years ago,” he said with quiet energy. “I thought I understood at the time just how much I was asking. Now I see that I did not know the half of it.”

A misty smile fluttered on Mr Bennet’s lips.

“Life has a way of making us stand in other men’s shoes,” he said, and then his eyes regained their mischievous twinkle. “I hope you will take comfort from this too: you are in your prime and not given to excesses, so there is every chance that you will be around to see Anne’s husband huff and puff as he comes to terms with the thorny issue of suitors for his daughters.”

Despite himself, Darcy gave a bark of laughter. He leaned back and retrieved his glass, giving silent thanks for his father-in-law’s sense of humour and for the fact that he only had to fret over Anne for now. Thankfully, Madeleine and Flora were far too young for suitors.

“May I ask, what has brought this on?” Mr Bennet resumed after a short silence. “Merely Montrose’s eagerness to scurry away with the ladies after dinner and dance attendance on the girl? Or did he give you any indication that he aims to declare himself?”

“Lord, no,” Darcy shot back, heartily wishing that the boy would not harbour any notions of the kind for two more years at least. “Nay, it was Mrs Webb—”

Mr Bennet tutted yet again.

“Was it? Hm. I rather thought that Kitty had long conquered her penchant for speaking without thinking—”

“I beg your pardon, I meant old Mrs Webb, the vicar’s mother,” Darcy hastened to correct the misapprehension and clear his sister-in-law’s name.

“Ah. I see,” muttered Mr Bennet, and Darcy could not doubt that the older gentleman had indeed noted the similarities between Kitty’s mother-in-law and her own mother, not least the propensity to speak out of turn.

Mr Bennet drained his glass and gave a rueful chuckle.

“Well, you must own that there is joy in meddling when one lacks better employment. What did Mrs Webb do, then? Nudge you to pay heed to matters you would much rather not investigate too closely – not yet, anyway?”

“Something of that nature,” Darcy acknowledged with a grimace. “She spoke to me at church earlier today – spoke of Anne’s marriage to Montrose as a certain event, as though only the date was yet to be decided. She pointed out that there has

not been a wedding at Pemberley since Georgiana's and Vernon's, and said it was high time that the present Miss Darcy followed her aunt's example."

"Ha! Now there is a fine way to set the cat among the pigeons," Mr Bennet quipped. "And what did Anne say to that? Or Lizzy?"

"They were several yards ahead. I doubt they heard. And I have not had the chance to mention any of this to Elizabeth as yet."

Without warning, the familiar warmth spread through him, soothing as ever, and healing, and uplifting.

"I do not doubt she will surprise me. She always does," Darcy said softly, as though to himself, and his tense countenance brightened into a smile.

THE END

About the author

Joana Starnes lives in the south of England with her family. She swapped several hats over the years (physician, lecturer, clinical data analyst) but feels most comfortable in a bonnet. She has been living in Regency England for decades in her imagination, and plans to continue in that vein till she lays hands on a time machine. She loves to look for glimpses of Pemberley and Jane Austen's world, and to write about Regency England and Mr Darcy falling in love with Elizabeth Bennet over and over and over again.

She is the author of eleven Austen-inspired novels and a contributor to the Quill Ink Anthologies. Joana's novels are all available on Amazon in Kindle Unlimited and in paperback, and some have also been released in Audible.

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Visit her Facebook Page *All Roads Lead to Pemberley* to discover places and details that have inspired her stories.

An excerpt from
«The Knight Before Christmas»
by Marilyn Brant

It may have been a mid-December weekend in a small Midwestern town, but Emma Westwood was like a military commander, undertaking a mission of grand international scope and importance. She laid out her action plan for the day and then set about making a miracle happen.

But even military leaders and miracle workers could run into major obstacles during the holidays.

Despite having canvassed all of the businesses in downtown Crystal Corners, Minnesota, used her substantial networking skills to get names of potential helpers, and attempted to call in long-overdue favors from numerous and sundry sources, Emma still turned up empty-handed.

Ginger Mae had a cousin in Rochester who could build furniture both beautifully and quickly, but he was booked solid until March.

Adele had a good friend who was married to a professional carpenter, only the couple was in Aruba for Christmas and wouldn't be back in Minnesota until after New Year's.

And Jason worked with a local set designer who was neither overbooked or away on vacation, but just when Emma was about to get her hopes up, her friend explained the bad news.

“Unfortunately, Leo got injured while working on this collapsing set for a production of *The Play That Goes Wrong* in St. Paul. Broke his right hand and is out of commission for at least a month.”

Kent, who was finishing his Saturday afternoon lift at the gym as Jason and Emma conversed next to him, set down his free weights and caught his breath. “I think I’m getting old,” he muttered. “I only managed to do three sets of twelve reps.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Yeah, at the ripe old age of thirty-two. Stop being vain and focus here. Emma needs our help. Who can she get to build this cabinet thingy in, like, ten days or less?”

Kent fiddled with his black-and-red workout towel and patted his forehead as he considered the question. “Does the display case have to be exactly like the one that got destroyed in the fire? Because if you just needed shelving, then maybe a bookstore or library could let you borrow—”

“No,” Emma said stubbornly. “I’d envisioned it this way for months and designed it very specifically to be what I needed. Not just lovely to look at but sturdy and safe. You remember how unstable the other display case was? It almost crushed a toddler last year. No, I’m not doing it that way again.”

“But maybe you could take the whole event inside,” Jason suggested thoughtfully, “rather than having it out by the town tree. Then the shelves could be secured and—”

“Definitely no,” Emma snapped, her patience fraying after a long day of struggles, although she deeply appreciated her friends trying to brainstorm alternate ideas. “The point is for this to be a

shared community experience for the children. We don't have an indoor venue large enough for all the local kids to gather around a Christmas tree. The Crystal Corners Theater stage is too narrow—you know that, Jason. The Town Hall assembly room is too small. And the community center's gathering spaces are already spoken for this holiday season. I can't displace the volunteers and service groups who've already committed to—"

"Okay, okay. We get it, kiddo. You need the display case you want, and you need it just the way you'd ordered it. Let me think," Kent said, his lean, chiseled face getting all scrunchy as he concentrated. "Hey, have you talked with Austin Knightley yet about a donation to the community gift chest? Because the guy runs a construction company. He probably knows a good builder, or he might even be able to make it himself."

Absolutely not, Emma wanted to shout, but she knew Kent was just trying to help. So, she just shook her head and said, "I haven't yet asked him about a donation, but I really don't think he's the guy to help build this cabinet. He constructs big things, like ramps and sheds and stuff. Plus, I'm sure he's got his hands full with his parents and family and business and all. I don't want to bother him."

Jason raised one thin dark-blond eyebrow in obvious disbelief. "Seriously? I mean, I love ya like a sister, Em, but since when do you not want to 'bother' someone if they can help you get what you want?"

Kent smothered a laugh. "What he means to say—and far more tactfully—is just think about it, Emma. Only if you run out

of other options, of course,” he added quickly. “But don’t rule out any viable paths just yet, all right? You might be surprised by, um, what’s possible.”

“I suppose if I’m desperate,” she conceded, but she didn’t think she’d ever reach that point.

She was wrong.

By the nightfall on Sunday, Emma had to admit that desperate was exactly what she felt.

She’d reached out to so many residents in town. And almost all of them had tried their best to come to her aid. Her failure thus far wasn’t for lack of effort or friendliness or desire on their parts, it was simply that what she needed right now wasn’t readily available. And neither her charm nor her money could get it—at least not in the limited timeframe she had to work with.

It was dispiriting, but if she had no other choice, she’d do what she must.

So, as early on Monday morning as was reasonable, Emma showed up at the Knightley family residence and knocked at the door.

Austin’s mom answered. “Why, hello, Emma. How nice to see you,” Pam Knightley said, ushering her inside the house and out of the cold. “What brings you over today?”

“I—um, I had a question for Austin.” She glanced around the quiet front room, featuring a beautiful fresh-cut Christmas tree adorned only with a string of colored lights, but she did not immediately spot the person she came to see. “Is he, uh, here? If

not, that's totally fine." She took a few steps in the direction of the door, her courage starting to flag, which was highly unusual for her. "I can visit later or, maybe, call—"

"Don't be silly, dear," Mrs. Knightley said with a laugh. "He's just bringing in some firewood from the garage. He'll be back in a moment. Here, let me take your coat. Would you like some hot coffee? Tea? Cocoa?"

"Oh, no, thank you. That's very kind. I'm fine, though. Really, I'm not planning to stay long, I just needed to ask him—"

"Hey, Mom, I saw a car in the drive. Who's—" Austin appeared in the doorway and stopped abruptly. The friendly expression fled from his face, and Emma felt a shudder of trepidation. She may have been desperate, but she wasn't stupid. Austin Knightley disapproved of her. She wasn't quite sure why, but his reaction to seeing her standing there was as clear as a beacon, and it wasn't positive.

Immediately, she regretted coming over. If it were only about her, she would've snatched up her cloak and sped out of the house without a backwards glance.

But it wasn't only about her. And, apparently, this was something she had to keep reminding herself of when she was in Austin's judgmental presence.

She cleared her throat. "Hello, Austin."

He blinked at her and then walked to the stone fireplace in the corner of the room and set down an armful of logs. When he straightened up again, he nodded at her slowly. "Hi there, Emma."

And then...silence.

“She came here to talk to you,” his mother said brightly. She turned toward Emma. “Are you sure I can’t get you something hot to drink? It’s so cold out there. I’m making myself a butter-rum latte. Hot milk, a little coffee, this delicious sweet creamer. It’s my new favorite winter drink.”

That did sound good, but Emma wasn’t sure she could swallow anything at this point. Being around Austin and having to speak in coherent sentences was challenging enough without managing a beverage, too. She didn’t remember having had this difficulty when they were in school together. Why was it happening now?

But to his mom, she just said, “No, but thanks again.”

“How about you, honey?” Mrs. Knightley asked her son. “Some coffee? Tea?”

He shook his head mutely, not taking his suspicious gaze off of Emma.

“Okey-dokey, then,” his mom chirped. “I’ll just be going into the kitchen now to clean up. You two call out if you need anything, you hear?” And with that, the only smiling face in the room spun on her heels and walked away, leaving Emma with an inhospitable Austin.

“So, what brings you here, Emma?” he asked, his voice polite if emotionally detached.

“Well, I had a—an unfortunate circumstance occur this past week,” she began, filling him in briefly on the warehouse fire

and the subsequent destruction of the pretty display case she'd ordered. She pulled out a picture of the original and held it out to him. "It looked like this, see?"

He barely glanced at it. "Yeah. I'm very sorry to hear about the fire. The owner must be reeling. I hope no one was hurt."

Emma could answer this, having read over the letter from the furniture company upwards of three thousand times since Friday night. "Thankfully, no. All humans and animals on the property at the time of the blaze were brought to safety, but my rotating cabinet was not."

He breathed a long, slow sigh before responding. "It's a very sad thing, of course, that you lost the piece of furniture you were expecting, but I really don't understand why you're coming to me with this. I'm not familiar with the company or their products."

She almost rolled her eyes. Couldn't he take a hint? Did she have to spell out everything to him? Most men in town weren't half this obtuse, even the ones who weren't naturally as intelligent as Austin.

"Well, I was hoping that, perhaps, you'd be willing to lend a hand in its reconstruction," Emma said carefully. "Particularly someone as talented with wood and nails and stuff as you." She sent him her most winning smile.

He scowled in return. "Wood and nails and stuff..." he repeated. Then he shook his head. "I don't think so, Emma. But, uh, thanks for thinking of me. I'm sure there are lots of other people you know who'd jump at the chance to assist. But I have my hands full here."

She licked her lips, which were incredibly parched. Maybe she should have taken up his mom on that hot drink offer. Then she exhaled and tried again, planning to go just a little heavier on the flattery this time. “Actually, I’ve spoken with quite a few townspeople and...and your name came up as the person best suited to build it. You’ve been very successful at constructing things, so when my other possible contacts didn’t come together as quickly as I thought, I really wanted to bring up this project with you.”

“You’re saying I’m your last resort?”

“Oh, no, no, of course not, Austin. Just that, um, time is of the essence with this. It needs to be ready by Christmas morning for a community event.” She hoped by telling him this that it would activate his charitable side, but he didn’t look any closer to committing.

Instead, he surprised her by bringing up something completely unrelated. “I ran into Mack Morales the other day. He told me a really interesting story about how he and Lila Harris became a couple.”

“Yes,” Emma said, grinning at that particularly delightful matchmaking triumph. “They’re such a perfect pair. I just knew when I suggested they go out for that first date that they’d be happy together.”

“You seem well accustomed to people being amenable to your, er, suggestions,” he said, narrowing his eyes at her. “Perhaps a bit too accustomed.”

What was he saying? It almost sounded like he was implying that she was manipulative. Which was just plain mean. Not to mention ungrateful.

“Aren’t you and Mack friends, Austin? Would you have wanted him to b-be lonely? Or un-unhappy?” she sputtered.

“Of course not,” he said sharply. “But I think your ‘projects’ need to be contained to individuals who welcome them. I don’t think I’m that person.”

“I wasn’t asking you to do this for free,” she said. “I mean, naturally, I’ll pay you for your time and work.”

“I don’t need your money, Emma. I’m not mercenary, and I can’t be bought.”

“But this isn’t for me—it’s for the community,” she insisted, once again trying to allude that he could be more gracious and sympathetic to the needs of others.

He was having none of it.

“Sorry,” he said simply. “I’m not your guy.”

And there was nothing left for her to do but leave—confused, frustrated, and feeling uncharacteristically misunderstood.

Why wouldn’t he help? Why was he so unreceptive? Anyone would think that a man trying to reintegrate into his hometown would be anxious to want to be of service to his community. But, no. Not the high and mighty Austin Knightley.

She wrinkled her nose. That almost rhymed, and she didn’t like the sound of it. At all. Besides, she fully intended to bring him

down a peg or two. She just wished she didn't need his assistance quite so much.

Want to read the whole story?

Support the author and find

“*The Knight Before Christmas*”

available on Amazon.

About the author

Marilyn Brant is a New York Times & USA Today bestselling author of over 20 books in the genres of contemporary women's fiction, romantic comedy, and mystery. Her debut novel about Jane Austen won the Romance Writers of America's prestigious Golden Heart Award® (2007), and she was named Author of the Year (2013) by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English.

She's a travel addict, a music junkie, an insatiable book collector, and a great lover of chocolate. For more about Marilyn's writing, including her Austen-inspired novels *According to Jane; Pride, Prejudice and the Perfect Match; Pride, Prejudice and the Perfect Bet; The Knight Before Christmas*; and most of the stories in the *Mirabelle Harbor* romance series, please visit her website:

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An excerpt from
«Mr. Darcy's Christmas Surprise»
by Debra-Ann Kummoung

It was late the next evening when a concerned Adams sought out Mr. Bennet. He knocked on the library door. Mr. Bennet answered his door, “Adams! Whatever is the matter? You look rather wild.”

Adams replied, “Mr. Bennet, I am concerned about my master. After he returned to his room last night he refused dinner before resting. This morning when I tried to rouse him, he shook me off and said that he was tired and asked me to let him sleep. I have not seen him leave the room at all today and I am afraid he might do himself harm in some way.”

Mr. Bennet surged to his feet and called out urgently, “Come, lead me to your master. I wish to be sure that he is well.”

The two men quickly hurried upstairs to Darcy's bedchamber. Adams opened the door quietly so as not to disturb his master. Softly Mr. Bennet asked, “Has Mr. Darcy moved at all, or still wearing the same clothing as yesterday?”

Adams studied his master. “He has moved a bit. I say, what is that on his hand?”

Mr. Bennet followed the direction in which the valet was pointing to something on Darcy's right hand. He studied the

younger man's hand and face before he let out a sad chuckle. "It is ink. I believe that Mr. Darcy has been writing in his journal."

Adams looked around the room and put a finger to his lips and then pointed to something across the room.

Mr. Bennet crossed over to what Adams was pointing at, a small stack of books. He flipped through the books without reading them. Mr. Bennet pointed to the door and for Adams to follow him.

Adams quietly followed the gentleman back to his library where he offered the younger man a glass of whiskey.

Mr. Bennet turned to Adams. "Your master will be fine. He is merely exhausted. Apparently, Mr. Darcy took Lizzy's suggestion to write down memories of Miss Darcy to heart. The small stack of books are more journals that he seems to have gone to Meryton and bought today when we were both otherwise busy. All those journals were full of his thoughts and memories. I imagine that he is trying to get it all written down now for fear of forgetting something precious."

Adams inquired, "Mr. Bennet, forgive me for asking, but what can I do for him? I have never served someone in mourning before. I have only been with Mr. Darcy these last three years. His father's valet had served him prior to me and I was hired when he retired."

Mr. Bennet replied, "I would first judge how he appears in the morning. If he does not awaken at his normal time, I would suggest giving him another hour to rest and then wake him. Send word to me when he is awake and I will have him join me in my

library. My eldest daughter and her husband should be returning next week. I think that perhaps I should have one of the gifts delivered earlier than planned.”

Adams guessed, “The puppy, sir?”

Mr. Bennet agreed, “The puppy. Perhaps having the little one to cuddle and love on will help him. I will also suggest that Lizzy and Mary spend time with them. Mr. Darcy seems most at ease with them.”

“I would normally never share this, but when Mr. Darcy first opened the journal,” Adams replied. “He stated that he wished he had met Miss Bennet sooner so that he could have introduced her to his sister. He conjectured that, if he had, things might have been different.”

Mr. Bennet wrinkled a brow. “How would Jane meeting Mr. Darcy’s sister change anything?”

Adams clarified, “Your second daughter, sir, Miss Elizabeth. I believe that, without trying to, she has captivated my master. She is kind and compassionate, but still insistent that my master must move forward. I believe that if he allowed himself, he might permit himself to fall in love with your daughter.”

Mr. Bennet smiled. “Yes, she does have that effect on people. I suggest that we throw them together as much as possible. Now, I suggest you retire for the evening. I will make arrangements for the puppy to be delivered tomorrow afternoon.”

Adams bowed. “Thank you for your assistance, sir. I am sorry to have troubled you so late at night.”

§

The next afternoon, Darcy, Elizabeth, and Mary were in the garden when Mrs. Hill came hurrying out. She bobbed a courtesy. “Excuse me, Mr. Darcy. There is someone at the door to see you.”

Darcy, surprised, pointed a finger at himself. “Me? Someone is here to see me? How odd. Very well, I will be right there.” He turned to Elizabeth and Mary, “Excuse me, ladies. It appears I have a caller to see to.”

Mary smiled. “We understand, sir. We will continue our stroll. If you are able, to and if you wish it, I hope that you will rejoin us.”

Darcy bowed. “Of course ladies. I shall, as soon as possible.”

Elizabeth waited until Darcy was out of sight, “I am curious as to how the proper Mr. Darcy will react when he discovers that his guest is, in fact, his new puppy.”

Mary giggled and the sisters resumed their walk about the gardens.

Elizabeth and Mary were just about to start another circuit about the garden when Darcy rejoined them. Elizabeth saw his face was tight and asked, “Are you well, sir? Is all well with your visitor?”

Darcy exhaled. “I am well, Miss Bennet. My caller was more of a surprise than I can say.”

Mary asked, “What do you mean, sir?”

Darcy slowly pulled open his greatcoat and withdrew something small and fluffy. "This is my guest. This is another one of those mysterious gifts that I have been receiving."

The sisters rushed over to Darcy. "Oh sir, what a lovely gift! Is it a boy or a girl? Do you plan on keeping it?"

Darcy laughed. "According to the note that was around her neck, it is a little girl and she does not have a name yet. As it is a gift and I do not know who it is from, I do plan to keep her. However, the note did warn that she is the runt of her litter and would not likely be a good hunting dog."

"Would this prevent you from keeping her?" Elizabeth asked.

Darcy shook his head. "No. I have several dogs that are kept for hunting, but growing up there was at least one dog we kept in the house as a pet. This little lady just became the newest member of my small family."

Elizabeth placed a hand on his arm. "Is that why you looked upset, sir? That the puppy is a replacement for the one you lost. If that is what you thought, perhaps you should consider that by someone gifting her to you, they have saved her life as many runts do not live very long lives."

Startled, Darcy replied, "No, actually, that thought had not even crossed my mind. I do not mind adding the puppy to my family. My concern was the fact that she was a runt, but as my sister was small and ill at her birth, I will do everything in my power to ensure that this little girl will grow healthy."

Mary asked, “What will you call her?”

Darcy shrugged. “I am not sure. I first need to ask your father if he will allow me to keep such a young animal in his home. As for her name, I thought to wait for a day or two to see if I can see what kind of personality she has. I want her to have a name that reflects her personality.”

Elizabeth replied, “So, if she is quiet and refined you can call her Jane... Or you could find one of Shakespeare’s characters to name her after.”

Darcy astonished exclaimed, “I could never name a puppy after Mrs. Bingley! She might be insulted.”

Mary snickered. “Careful Lizzy. If the puppy is in any way playful or impertinent, Mr. Darcy might name the puppy after you.”

Elizabeth affected a regal manner and decreed, “All the best people are playful and impertinent. I would not be offended, but Mary let Mr. Darcy name his puppy whatever name makes him most happy.”

“I beg your pardon.” Darcy excused himself, “I am going to speak to your father and take this young lady inside. I hope you will join me soon.”

§

Darcy was confused and not sure what to do with his life. He had made the acquaintance of several people of Meryton and while they were not people he would have associated in the

past, they had all treated him with kindness or in some cases an extended family member. Darcy was so used to having to consider Georgiana's wishes around the holidays that for the first time in a long time he had the option to do as he pleased. With Christmas coming up next week, he decided that he should arrange for some small gifts for his new friends.

Darcy called out, "Adams, I would like to ask you to take this list of items that I would wish to have ordered from Town to be posted."

"Very good, sir. Here are some letters that just arrived for you. Is there anything else you require?"

Darcy shrugged. "Your help with a name for the puppy would be appreciated. I cannot keep calling her 'little girl'."

"What names have the Miss Bennets suggested, sir?" The valet asked.

Darcy smiled. "When I first received the puppy, the names suggested were Jane, Lizzy, or something from Shakespeare. However, I wanted to wait until I was around her a bit to see what her personality was like before naming her. Sadly, I am no closer to deciding on a name for her."

Adams covered a laugh with a cough. "Forgive me, sir, but I believe you have already decided what you wish to call the puppy. You are simply afraid that you will offend the young lady."

Darcy laughed. "Ironically, I had thought to originally call her Georgie, but after watching her steal Miss Bennet and Miss Mary's flowers and leave a trail of petals and water across Mrs.

Bennet's drawing room yesterday made me think that Lizzy would be the perfect name for her. I shall visit Mr. Bennet beforehand to make sure he will not be offended on his daughter's behalf."

"Very good, sir." the valet bowed as he took his leave. "I shall just take your letter into Meryton to post. The shops get busy this time of year."

Darcy replied, "Thank you. I had forgotten that."

Before leaving Longbourn on his way to Meryton, Adams stopped by Mr. Bennet's library and knocked on the door.

Mr. Bennet looked at him in surprise. "Adams? Is there something I can do for you?"

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mr. Bennet." Adams bowed. "I am running an errand for Mr. Darcy and thought I would check to see if you needed anything in Meryton while I am there."

Mr. Bennet nodded. "Yes, thank you. I have a letter on my desk that I must be delivered. Come in and let me collect it off my desk."

Adams entered the library and closed the door. "I apologize for the subterfuge, sir, but I wanted to let you know that Mr. Darcy just received a letter from his cousin, who appears to have arrived in London. The return address was the earl's townhouse."

Mr. Bennet adjusted his spectacles. "Well, well. I will need the good colonel's address. I do believe I owe him a letter."

Adams bowed again. “Very good, sir. I must hurry. Oh, and you should expect a visit from my master soon regarding the name for his new puppy.”

Mr. Bennet rumbled a laugh. “I see. Well, I will not ask you to disclose the name, but I imagine that I can guess it. Thank you, Adams.”

§

A short time later, Darcy knocked on Mr. Bennet’s library door and entered when bidden. Seeing his host, he bowed and greeted him, “Good morning, Mr. Bennet. I wondered if I might have a word with you.”

Mr. Bennet studied the younger man, “Is something the matter, Mr. Darcy? How may I assist you?”

Darcy replied, “Mr. Bennet, you and your family and much of Meryton have been so kind to me. I must confess that in the past such kindness was usually a ploy to get closer to me or rather a way to compromise me in one manner or another.”

The older man’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “Really? For what reason?”

Darcy shared, “Mainly for my family estate and fortune. Most people do not care for me personally, as I am unsociable by nature.”

Mr. Bennet nodded in understanding. “I can see why you would question such kindness. But I believe I distracted you from your true purpose. You sought me out to ask me a question.”

Darcy nodded, "Yes. As you are aware, I have been given a small puppy I have yet to name. First, I would like to thank you and Mrs. Bennet for allowing the puppy to stay here. I know that she has made your life here even more... interesting, I believe is the word I am looking for. I finally decided the puppy's name, but I fear my choice might offend you and your family. That is why I am here, sir; to put the name I chose for her under your consideration."

Mr. Bennet chuckled. "Mr. Darcy, you have my blessing to call the puppy Lizzy. That little dog has brought a smile to every member of this household. Her antics are quite amusing even when you are trying to chastise her."

Darcy gapped in shock. "How did you know that was the name I wished to call her?"

Mr. Bennet smiled. "Mary shared with me the conversation you had when you were first presented with the puppy. The way Lizzy acted told me it would be fitting if you did indeed name the puppy after her. I believe that, in time, your Lizzy will have a companion and, if I am not mistaken, that puppy will be named after your dear sister. It is just too soon and too tender a memory for you to do so."

Darcy agreed, "You are correct. I had thought to name her Georgie, but I could not. As it is, I feel guilty about finding happiness without my sister. She has not been gone six months yet and in the final days of my mourning for her, you and your family and the people of Meryton have rallied around me to show me that I am not alone, that I am still part of a family."

Mr. Bennet quietly asked, “When does your mourning end, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy gulped. “The day before Christmas Eve. I come out of mourning during the festive season which is a time of families getting together.”

Mr. Bennet placed a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “Well, your friend will return any day now and I know that while it has been a trying time for you, remember you will always be welcome into the families of Meryton. Now, this parcel had just arrived. It is for you. It seems that these mysterious gifts continue to come – no matter where you are.”

Darcy took the parcel he was handed and opened it to reveal a sheet of music that had been folded into an intricate flower. He showed it to his host, “Whoever is sending these gifts is quite creative. I never know what I am going to receive next. I think I know what the message is supposed to be, but I need a few more clues to be sure.”

Mr. Bennet reluctantly asked, “I am aware that this is ill timing for you and that you probably will not wish to attend, but since your mourning ends the day before Christmas Eve, will you be attending the ball that is planned for that evening?”

Darcy considered for a moment, “I believe I will. Yes, it is still hard for me, but I cannot honor my sister if I do not find happiness. I should go to the ball and dance with your daughters.”

Shrewdly Mr. Bennet asked, “All my daughters, Mr. Darcy, or just one in particular?”

Mr. Darcy colored. “I believe I have taken enough of your time, Mr. Bennet. Thank you for your understanding.” With that, he withdrew to ponder Mr. Bennet’s implication.

§

Elizabeth took the letter from her father and added it to the stack of outgoing post. She was quieter than was her wont. Mr. Bennet observed, “Lizzy, I do believe that you miss Mr. Darcy since he returned to Netherfield with his friend.”

Elizabeth looked at her father, “I do miss his company, Papa. Aside from you, he is a well-read man who seems to enjoy our debates.”

Mr. Bennet asked, “Were you upset that I allowed him to name the puppy Lizzy?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, Papa. I thought it was sweet that Mr. Darcy thought the puppy was impish like me. Since we gave him the puppy earlier than expected, I have finally found his gift for Christmas Eve.”

Mr. Bennet sat forward. “Well, Lizzy, what will be your gift to him?”

Elizabeth smiled. “I found a small frog figurine that I thought would be perfect.”

Her father chuckled. “Yes, I can see why he would enjoy such a gift. Since he shall receive it right before the message is complete, it will not matter if Mr. Darcy guesses that you were the person behind all these presents.”

“Have you heard anything from his cousin? Is he still planning to stay here when he arrives?” Elizabeth inquired.

Mr. Bennet replied, “He plans to arrive early on Christmas Eve and attend the ball once it is underway so that Mr. Darcy is not aware of his arrival.”

Elizabeth gnawed on her lower lip. “Papa, do you think Mr. Darcy will be upset with us or me for what we have done? I know he is a very proper gentleman and what we are doing does go against the rules of propriety.”

Mr. Bennet pondered the question for a moment, “I do not believe so, dearest. You have managed to do what you planned. You made a grieving man find joy in life again. Mr. Darcy will always miss his sister, but he now understands it is well to live life again, find joy and love again. I understand he plans to call this afternoon to speak with you.”

Elizabeth blushed. “Then I shall stay here and help Mary finish trimming her dress for the Christmas Eve ball.”

§

Darcy and Elizabeth strolled the gardens at Longbourn with Mary trailing behind as a chaperone. Darcy studied Elizabeth for a moment before asking, “Miss Bennet, my first social event coming out of mourning will be the Christmas Eve ball. Might I request a dance with you?”

Elizabeth glanced at him. “I would be honored to, sir, as long as it will not make you uneasy to dance so soon.”

“You are all kindness to think of my pain, but I have discovered that I need to live my life and not wallow in the past. The gift of the journal from your family was of great comfort to me and I was able to write down a great many things.” Darcy acknowledged.

“I am glad that it was of help to you. We had only meant for you to jot down a few random thoughts, but it sounds like you have already filled up the pages.”

Darcy flushed. “I did, yes. In fact, I went out and bought more journals and filled their pages as well. I discovered that once I started writing I did not wish to stop.”

Elizabeth said nothing and continued to walk by him in silence for several minutes.

“Miss Bennet,” he spoke a moment later, “a while ago you asked me what happened to my sister. I think I am ready to tell you if you still wish to know.”

Elizabeth raised a hand. “Sir, it was not my business and I should not have asked such an insensitive question at such a time. I beg you to forget I ask and forgive me.”

Darcy studied her closely. “Miss Bennet, you are a kind and caring lady and you did nothing wrong. I think that had my sister lived, she would have enjoyed your company. Now, may I tell you of my sister, Georgiana?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Of course, sir. I would be honored to learn of your sister.”

Darcy proceeded to spend the next hour walking the gardens with Elizabeth talking of his sister. He spoke of what it was to have such a big age gap between brother and sister and in spite of it, the closeness that they shared and the love and respect between them. By the end of his conversation, Darcy felt a lightness of heart that he had never felt before.

Elizabeth spoke up after he finished speaking. "I can understand why this was so difficult for you. I hope that you will come back and visit your friend often. My father and I have enjoyed your company over the last few weeks."

Darcy smiled. "I hope to do so. Now, I must beg your pardon and depart for your father mentioned that you were attending a dinner party with the Lucas's this evening. Before I depart, I wish to secure my dances for the ball. Since you have agreed to dance with me, I would like to request the first if you are not otherwise engaged and then ask for the supper set as well."

Elizabeth gasped in surprise, but replied, "I am not engaged for those sets."

Darcy bowed. "I wish you and your family and pleasant evening."

Mary joined Elizabeth as they watched Mr. Darcy depart and observed, "Lizzy, I do believe that Mr. Darcy is in love with you."

§

Darcy picked up his most recent gift. He could now guess the message that everyone in Meryton had been a part of –

Wishing you a Happy Christmas and a joyous New Year. Your friends and neighbors from the Village of Meryton. Think of the past as remembrance gives you pleasure. Darcy was now certain that Elizabeth was behind the gifts. For today's gift and the last phase were both things that she had been a part of. When he had first met her, Elizabeth had used that phrase and today's gift was a small cute green frog. It could only be her. Darcy could not wait for the ball. Darcy had never been excited about a ball before, but he was anxious for this evening's ball to begin. He was officially out of mourning and he was ready to live life to the fullest.

Want to read the whole story?

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“Mr. Darcy’s Christmas Surprise”

available on Amazon.

About the author

Debra-Ann Kummoung fell in love with Pride & Prejudice when she read the book in high school. By day, Debra-Ann is an administrative assistant and an avid reader when not busy plotting her next book. It was during one of her plotting sessions, she realized that she had married her very own Mr. Darcy - who had a dash of Colonel Fitzwilliam too.

When not reading or writing, Debra-Ann can be found spending time with her husband, Jeff, and their German Shepherds - Fitz and Lizzy (yes, the dogs are named for the characters - they even act like them too!). If you would like to contact Debra-Ann you can follow her on her social media:

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A Roguish Rescuer

An excerpt from «Step Lively, Mr. Darcy»

by *Laura Hile*

John and Isabella Thorpe (from Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey) are distant cousins who have been invited to spend Christmas with the Bennets at Longbourn. Oh dear!

“I have never understood,” grumbled Charles Bingley, “why one cannot make a morning call until well into the afternoon.”

“Presumably because you would not wish to catch the Bennet family at breakfast,” said Darcy. “Especially on the morning after an assembly.” A gust flapped the lapel of his riding coat. “It looks like rain,” he added.

“As I said, we ought to have come earlier. But there’s no point in crying over spilt milk. Come on.”

Charles urged his horse into a canter. Darcy followed suit.

Longbourn house, built of mellow red brick, stood well in its own land. The surrounding park featured magnificent mature trees, bare against the gray December sky. Beneath one of them Darcy noticed a flash of color. He slowed his pace. Whoever it was wore a blue cloak. Something about the woman was familiar.

“You go on ahead,” Darcy called to Charles. “I’ll come presently.”

Charles reined in. “Horse cast a shoe?” he shouted.

Darcy waved him on. Such was Charles's ardor to see Jane Bennet that he complied without question.

Sure enough, the woman was pressed against the trunk of an enormous oak, as if she were hiding from someone. This was a ridiculous impression, but Darcy could not shake it.

He could also see that his initial thought was correct: here was Elizabeth Bennet. He swung out of the saddle and approached her on foot. "Good afternoon," he said quietly.

She whirled to face him. "Mr. Darcy?"

Her shoulders sagged—could it be with relief? "Thank goodness," she said. "I thought you were someone else."

Darcy's lips twisted into a smile. "A novel experience for me. I am usually recognized at once, no matter how badly I wish to hide." He looked a question.

Elizabeth caught his meaning. "If it were summer—and if this were a tree in the orchard—I would be tempted to climb into the boughs. It is a convenient way to remain out of sight."

"I see," he said politely. "I take it that concealment is a matter of some importance."

"It is." She paused, as if debating whether or not to continue. "My cousin, whom you met last night, is taking his gig to the stables and will return with a saddle horse. He intends to give me a riding lesson—whether I want one or not."

"You consented to drive out in his gig?"

"Nonsensical, I know. But here I am."

“Forgive me, but after the way he behaved at the assembly—”

“I had no choice. Thank you for rescuing me, by the way.”

“It was my pleasure.”

“Although, you did add fat to the fire by insisting on two dances.”

“But then, so did Mr. Thorpe,” Darcy pointed out.

Again she sighed. “Most unfortunately.”

“This does not explain why you agreed to drive out with him.”

“If I did not offer, he would have asked Jane. He is quite taken with her, and she is too kindhearted to refuse.”

“A fellow like that?”

“Jane is influenced by Mama’s concern for our future and—” Elizabeth stopped. “It appears we’ll soon have a storm.”

“What better time to take out the gig?” Darcy grumbled.

He was rewarded with a smile. “My cousin meant to hunt for mistletoe, but when he learned that I do not ride, he was overcome. If it begins to storm soon, my lesson will not happen. Never have I been so eager to pray for rain.”

“How is it that your sister rides, yet you do not? I should have thought that you are an intrepid horsewoman.”

“I had the misfortune to take a rattling fall. After that, no one was able to convince me to learn.”

Darcy could teach her, oh but he could! “A fall is the fault of the instructor,” he said firmly. “Not the student.”

“And with Mr. Thorpe, I will doubtless take another tumble.” She put up her chin. “And if you think that I shall consent to ride a pony, you are wrong.”

“A blow to the pride?”

She laughed merrily. “Indeed yes. How like you to guess! I am heartily glad that we do not own a pony. Or a saddle horse that will meet with Mr. Thorpe’s approval. He is a stickler, you see.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Because he must announce his expertise at every opportunity. Believe me, if I were able to ride, I would steal your horse this very minute and gallop away.”

Darcy could not help but smile. “Leaving me to hunt for mistletoe with Mr. Thorpe?”

“It would be very bad of me, but yes. You are right to despise me, Mr. Darcy.”

Despise her? This could not be farther from the truth!

§

The black clouds looked threatening, and gusts sent autumn leaves scurrying across the lawn, yet Mr. Darcy remained by her side. Elizabeth knew she ought to return to the house, but when she learned that Mr. Bingley had come, she held her ground. Jane

must have the opportunity to speak with him. If their noisy cousin were to come barreling into the drawing room, he would ruin all.

Then too, it was not unpleasant to converse with Mr. Darcy. Apparently, Mr. Bingley planned to invite her family to dinner. “We have no proper hostess,” he explained, just as John Thorpe’s voice came trumpeting through the trees.

“Hallo-allo.”

With a shiver, Elizabeth turned to face her cousin. But where was the saddle horse? John Thorpe was driving his gig, and in typical fashion, came tearing up to them. Only at the last instant did he rein in.

“That fellow, Ned (or whatever his name is), hasn’t a proper riding horse anywhere,” he shouted. “Only a slab-faced slug that has no business being called a horse.” Mr. Thorpe gave a braying laugh. “So we’re back to driving in the gig.”

He jerked a thumb at Mr. Darcy. “Who’s he?”

“You met him last night at the assembly.”

“Him and a score of others. How’s a fellow to remember them all? Besides, I took notice only of the pretty women.” He reached down to pull Elizabeth into the gig, but it was Mr. Darcy who took her hand and assisted her.

Mr. Thorpe’s face clouded. “By Jupiter, he’s the gent who danced with you. Not once, but twice.” He lowered his voice. “I’m not sure I like him.”

“He’s Mr. Darcy,” said Elizabeth mildly.

John Thorpe shifted in his seat. “How do?” he called. “I’m Thorpe, Elizabeth’s cousin. A kissing cousin, you might say. Har-har!”

Elizabeth saw Mr. Darcy flinch, and he gave Mr. Thorpe the slightest of polite bows. How delightful that the man knew how to depress pretension!

Unfortunately, John Thorpe had no use for social niceties. “What do you think of my gig, Darcy? A neat one, is it not? Curricles-hung and town-built too. Not quite the thing for the country, but no one cares for that.”

To Elizabeth he said, “I borrowed a knife to cut mistletoe. That fellow Ned tells me there’s some growing in the apple orchard, as if I know where that is. Mighty unhelpful folk you have here.”

“The trees are bare, Mr. Thorpe. Clumps of mistletoe should not be difficult to find. The orchard,” she added, “is to the south of the house.”

Mr. Darcy was now mounted on his horse. “I shall come with you,” he said. “Bingley is keen to find mistletoe. He is from the north, where it is not as common.”

“Bingley,” grumbled John Thorpe. “Is that someone else from the assembly I’m supposed to know?”

“He is Jane’s friend. And ours too, of course.”

“Oh. That chap. Not sure I like him either.”

“He has taken Netherfield Park until Michaelmas.”

John Thorpe digested this. “A man of means, is he? Oho! Does my sister know about him?” Again he broke out laughing.

Elizabeth could not believe what she was hearing. Even Mr. Collins had better manners than this!

“I say, that’s a fine bit of horseflesh you have, Darcy.” Mr. Thorpe dug his elbow into Elizabeth’s ribs. “Now that’s what I call a horse! If your stables had one such as he, you would have your lesson, Cousin.”

Mr. Darcy’s brows came together in a scowl. “You cannot be serious, surely. This is no mount for a beginner.”

Mr. Thorpe’s only response was to laugh noisily and whip up his horse. “To the orchard!” he cried, as drops of rain began to fall.

§

The light rainfall was a mercy, for it cut short their expedition. Elizabeth’s cousin was pleased with his harvest, and he announced his determination to adorn Longbourn House straight away.

“Plenty of opportunity to be of use, eh?” he crowed, smiling widely. “So many pretty cousins to kiss! A honeyfall for me!”

The way he looked at Elizabeth made Darcy’s temper boil. Moreover, Thorpe’s fondness for neck-or-nothing driving—which he boasted about repeatedly—kept Darcy on the alert. If Thorpe broke an axle and pitched Elizabeth into a ditch, he would have much to answer for.

The gig came blazing into the carriage drive, with Darcy close alongside. Thorpe pulled up, jumped down, and helped Elizabeth to do the same. Mistletoe in hand, he went bounding toward the house.

Darcy surrendered his horse to the man from the stables and offered his arm to Elizabeth. “I apologize for being ill-equipped,” he said quietly. “You ought to have had an umbrella.”

“I am too relieved to care. The hateful riding lesson did not take place, for which I thank God. This blessed rain,” she added, “was an answer to my prayers.”

Darcy took a step toward the house, but Elizabeth held him back. “I ought to warn you. Mr. Thorpe’s sister has been asking questions.”

His eyes met hers. “Questions,” he repeated. “About me?” Now why was he smiling?

“I assured Miss Thorpe that you are not only proud, but also very disagreeable. In other words, you are not worth her time.”

“Thank you.”

“The trouble is, because of your wealth and social standing, she obviously thinks that you are.”

“I promise to be on my guard,” he said gravely.

“Will you? May I point out, sir, that it is not in your best interest to smile?”

Darcy lowered his voice. “Not even at you?”

“Especially not at me. She is the sort of girl who takes pleasure in stealing another girl’s suitor.”

Darcy felt a blush rise to his cheeks. Wonder of wonders, was this how Elizabeth saw him? “Am—I your suitor?” he managed to say.

“Certainly not. Why should you be?”

“Actually, I . . .”

“I am merely saying that Isabella will stop at nothing to—”
The sound of an opening door interrupted.

“Why, Mr. Darcy,” called Miss Thorpe.

Darcy choked on a laugh.

“Oh dear,” said Elizabeth. Her cheeks dimpled adorably.

“How lovely of you to call! Do come in out of the rain. I cannot imagine why you are standing out here in this stupid way.”

“Can you not?” said Darcy. “I assure you, I have a very good reason.”

“You have no such thing,” whispered Elizabeth.

“Oh, but I do.”

Elizabeth narrowed laughing eyes at him. “How untruthful you are! And here I thought you prided yourself on honesty.”

Darcy could not resist; the opportunity was simply too perfect. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll prove it.”

With his free hand he cupped Elizabeth's chin. He then leaned forward and gently pressed his lips to hers. He did not immediately pull away.

Miss Thorpe gave a cry.

"Stay a moment," Darcy murmured, his lips against Elizabeth's. Sure enough, the main door soon gave a satisfying slam.

Elizabeth drew back. Her eyes were wide. She was obviously flustered, and so was he. Why on earth had he kissed her?

"Thank you for rescuing me," he said. "I shan't have any more trouble with her."

"You are not only proud and disagreeable," sputtered Elizabeth, "but you are also a rogue. Yes, and a scoundrel too."

Darcy felt his lips curve into a smile. "So I am," he said humbly.

"You are a good deal worse than Mr. Thorpe!"

Darcy brushed a lock of damp hair from her cheek. "The things a man discovers about himself."

"Moreover," she went on, as if he had not spoken, "my sisters were likely spying on us through the window. And heaven only knows who else."

Here was a happy thought. "Is Wickham in there? Is he looking out now? I'll gladly return the favor and rescue you from him."

“Odious man! I am not in need of rescue, sir, from anyone!”

“With the exception of Thorpe.” Darcy offered his arm.
“Shall we go in?”

She gave a sigh and tucked a hand under his elbow. “How I am to face them I do not know.”

“I should not worry, my dear. Your cousin came in with his mistletoe, and you know how loud he is. The only one who saw us was Miss Thorpe.”

“Is that not enough?”

“Ambitious women do not like to advertise their failures. I have met enough of them to know.” He covered her hand with his and added, “I am sorry you disliked the kiss. I am sadly out of practice when it comes to kissing.”

“I did not precisely—” She broke off speaking. “Very well. We shall agree to let bygones be bygones, sir. As long as it never happens again.”

“Ah,” said Darcy, smiling. “I can promise you many things, Miss Elizabeth. But I am unwilling to agree to that.”

“You are not sorry?”

“Come now. What sort of a rogue would I be if I were?”

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About the author

Readers are loving Laura Hile’s joyous Regency novels. Her signature style—with intertwined plots, cliffhangers, laugh-out-loud humor, and clean romance—keeps them coming back for more. The comedy Laura comes by as a teacher. There’s never a dull moment with teen students!

Laura lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, garden, and a collection of antique clocks. One day she would like to add a cat—or three!

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The Snow Angel

by Suzan Lauder

The world outside had changed while Elizabeth had danced and enjoyed herself at the Netherfield ball, yet she barely noticed. It could have turned into summer as far as she was concerned, yet it had become pure winter. All the while, her mind was spinning with all this new, off-putting knowledge! Distracted though she was, she still tugged her cloak tighter around her shoulders to ward off the biting cold. Oh, no! She nearly slipped on ice. The gravel that had previously been damp from three days' rain had frozen, making for a treacherous walk to the carriage. That would teach her to be oblivious to her surroundings.

After a gasp at the beauty around her, she stuck out her tongue to try to catch a falling snowflake. They were fortunate the snowfall was light thus far, and the Bennet family would be home prior to any accumulation. With luck, tomorrow would be sunny, melting the ice and snow and leaving no trace of this weather by early morning. She needed her walk to ponder the new information that muddled her thoughts, and it could not be curtailed by an icy path.

She had waited to ride with Mama and Papa per Papa's instructions while her sisters went ahead to Longbourn and returned the carriage. Mama was incensed. She had wanted Jane to be among the last to leave; she was planning for Jane to marry Mr. Bingley and believed it paramount that the two be together until the last minute—which was three in the morning.

In the carriage, Papa's voice was as tight—almost as tight as Mr. Darcy's body had been when he had given them the recitation earlier that night in the Netherfield library. Of course, Mama refused to listen to Papa's explanation.

“No, no, you must be mistaken. Mr. Darcy must be lying. Four thousand pounds spent in three years? Oh, my. How could Mr. Wickham even accomplish such a feat? I could not, and I have five daughters to spend my money on.”

“Madam, have you ever considered what sort of dissolute life would steal away such a sum? Yet that is not the end of the story. That part just proves that we must warn our friends and neighbours of his proclivities as a gamester.”

“You make him sound so terrible when you speak so. He could not have been so wild.”

“Listen, and listen well, Mrs. Bennet. He is more corrupt than you can imagine, for not only did he spend that money and demand the living, he also trifled with ladies.”

“You have heard that he is courting that horrid little Mary King rather than one of our girls. Well, she will not hold his interest for long, and he will soon return to court one of my daughters. You will see.”

“I should hope he will never again set foot near one of our daughters. In fact, he is banned from Longbourn and from being within ten yards of our girls.”

“Ten yards, Mr. Bennet? Do not be ridiculous! How are they to catch a husband when the best of the officers is to be so far away?”

“Listen and you shall know that he is a danger to them.” Then Papa proceeded to tell Mr. Darcy’s story of a gentleman’s young daughter with whom Mr. Wickham had attempted to elope, all for her great fortune of £30,000. The girl was left broken-hearted when Mr. Wickham found he could not access the money, his sole aim. However, Mr. Darcy was also clear that Mr. Wickham had abandoned many a young lady in a family way, so he should never be alone with any girl of any station. “The crime of stealing an heiress, and worse. That is why we shall no longer associate with that licentious rascal of a man.”

Mama’s mouth opened and closed several times following the recitation. “Mr. Darcy is certain of this?” she asked when she regained the use of her tongue. “There can be no mistake?”

“He indicated some specifics I am not willing to divulge that convinced me, madam, and he has a reliable witness.” Mr. Darcy had revealed that the lady with whom Mr. Wickham had tried to elope was his sister, Georgiana, and that his motive had also been revenge upon Mr. Darcy. His cousin, a colonel in the army, was able to verify the story. Elizabeth had been shocked, nonetheless, she and Papa would never tell anyone the details about Miss Georgiana Darcy.

After having remained tight-lipped and allowing Papa to lead the narration, Elizabeth could no longer hold her tongue. Mama had to be convinced, or danger to Lydia and Kitty was

guaranteed since her two youngest sisters were enamoured of Mr. Wickham and were ridiculous flirts as well. She and Papa needed Mama's aid in dampening the girls' enthusiasm for the awful man. "The idea of him trifling with one of my sisters in their naivety frightens me, Mama. He could do the same to them."

"They have no great fortune. They cannot be of interest."

"But they have been of interest to Mr. Wickham. I have been as well. He convinced me with his silver tongue that he was the one who was wronged, and in the process, made me prejudiced against a good man."

"Who is this good man?"

"Mr. Darcy. He gave Mr. Wickham £3000 for his education, and even Mr. Wickham says he is good to his sister. Mr. Darcy is also a good friend to Mr. Bingley, and we desire Mr. Bingley's friendship too, do we not? He deems Mr. Darcy better than we have given him credit for. Then tonight, he was honest with Papa and me to save our family from harm. He may be proud, but he is a steadfast man."

§

The next morning

The view from the top of Oakham Mount was spectacular today, with the entire world carpeted by a few inches of snow. Textures on the ground showed here and there where the snow had not stuck to the peaks of plowed fields but gathered in the ruts. A boulder appeared to wear a hat, and the trees of the lane sparkled with hoar frost. Elizabeth's breath was frosted, and she

twirled about to enjoy the beauteous sights, though she was grateful for her wool pelisse and muff to protect against the slight bite in the air.

After rising much earlier than the others in the house, she had come here before breakfast with the hope of making some sense of the conflicting thoughts in her mind, all to do with Mr. Darcy's recitation of the night before and her changing regard for him.

Usually, she would find a log to sit upon when she needed to think, but now no seat was to be offered her that was not going to dampen her bottom. She creased her brow and pursed her lips as she took a few paces one way and then the other. All she was doing was ruining the pristine snow of the level portion at the top of the mount. An idea struck her, and she grinned. With a great deal of care, she lay down in a clear area and stretched her arms out wide, then moved her arms and legs in a fanning motion to make a snow angel. A little bark of laughter escaped her as she settled in the middle of her creation to think.

When she had challenged Mr. Darcy about Mr. Wickham last night during their dance, he had taken her by surprise when he asked to speak to her in the library.

“Alone? Do you not care for my reputation, sir?”

“Bring your father. He should also hear what I have to say.”

Mr. Darcy had been so severe when he spoke of his history. His countenance was pained while he described Mr. Wickham's actions at university, yet he had not been able to disclose this dishonourable style of living to his dear father, who thought of

Mr. Wickham almost as another son. How that made her heart hurt for him. He had fisted his hands and adopted a stiff attitude while he spoke of the near elopement of his sister, and Elizabeth could not help the tears in her eyes. When she had taken a peek at her father, he too had been moved.

Her previous opinions of both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham were due to her prejudice, and she made a point to consider her earlier interactions with each of them.

When she had spoken of Mr. Darcy to Mr. Wickham, she had been the one to first mention Mr. Darcy's pride. It was her fault Mr. Wickham had been comfortable in speaking openly of his supposed wrongs and lying to her about his past with Mr. Darcy.

What of Mr. Darcy and her history with him? She had to admit that she had found him attractive from the first moment he had entered the Meryton Assembly, and her disappointment in his comment towards her being merely tolerable had to be swallowed and made light of, otherwise she would have been hurt in a dreadful way.

While Jane was ill at Netherfield Park, her heightened awareness of Mr. Darcy caused her to want to please him, so she avoided her feelings with teasing. She should have guessed something was different when her mortification over her mother and younger sisters' visit and Mama's treatment of Mr. Darcy made her wish to disappear.

How could she believe herself so clever when she had been fooling herself all along? Mr. Darcy was enigmatic in a magnetic way—for some reason, she could not stop herself from thinking

about him, even when she was certain she disliked him. Those feelings could never have been called respect or esteem, yet she favoured him in some impossible way, and it made her crazy!

How was she to deal with him now that she had discovered this about herself? Wickham was easy. He would get detachment from her at best, and indignation if he made any effort to overcome her intent to cut him.

Hoofbeats pierced the still silence of the morning. Someone was approaching on a horse! She scrambled to rise from her prone position, partially spoiling her angel. Who could be riding so early?

§

When he approached the clearing, the presence of another person caused Darcy to slow his horse to a walk. It was Miss Elizabeth Bennet! My, she was an early riser! He dismounted and tied Hercules to a tree, then walked over to bow to her in greeting, to which she replied with a curtsey.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy.”

“Good morning to you also! I see you have been enjoying yourself!” Darcy pointed to a slightly damaged snow angel near Elizabeth’s feet.

“I rose in a hurry, so it is not quite perfect. I find I am often inspired by my young cousins.” She would not look at him. Instead, her eyes remained trained on her impaired yet perfect snow angel.

“‘Tis always enjoyable to sample some of the flavour of youth once in a while.”

When she offered a tight smile, he fought so he would not confess the contents of his heart to her. Oh, goodness. Had he really developed that depth of emotion so soon? A certain attraction had grown over time, of course, but he had been convinced her lure was no more than physical. Was he growing fond of this lady? The powerful feeling in his breast surely implied so.

“I confess I required a place to think, and there was nowhere to sit that was not covered in snow, so I decided that I might as well rest on my pelisse as anything else. I admit, I enjoyed making the snow angel, as it helped reduce some of the anxiety of my thoughts.”

The lightness in his heart sank. He must adjust to her mood and make appropriate conversation. “You were contemplating all I told you last night in regard to Mr. Wickham.” He released a shuddering sigh. “No wonder the snow angel is unhappy. Do you have any questions for me?”

“No, sir. You were rather thorough in your recitation to my father and me. I now know that I had chosen to believe the one who had all the charm and looks of an honest man and to spite the actual worthy man.”

“I do not deserve your compliment, nevertheless, I thank you.”

“I should have known. By all accounts and by observation, you seem fastidious, and you have stated that the last thing you

would like is to open yourself to ridicule. All Mr. Wickham's allegations pointed to the opposite."

"You are correct. I am in fact, careful about my reputation and upon reflection, can be prideful to a fault."

"When did this reflection take place?"

"Most of last night. I got little sleep thinking of your charges over the time I have known you."

She blushed. What had he said that caused her discomfiture? Or rather, had what he had said led to a thought in her mind? "I had a similar set of thoughts as I rested upon my angel. I had been mistaken about you and me, and I am sorry for it."

Ah. To be able to read those thoughts! Would she elaborate? He remained silent for a short while in hope that she might say more, but she offered nothing further. The mistaken ideas must be secrets or cause her further mortification. Either way, she would not divulge them now.

"What of my narrative was the most convincing?" he asked.

"All of it was eye-opening. The part which upset me the most was the tale of your sister's failed elopement. I nearly wept for the poor girl. I did weep once alone in my chamber."

"As did I, as soon as I was away from them. Does that shock you?" Were his deep sentiments towards his sister and the resulting pain too much of a confession?

Gazing downward, she brushed her hand over her muff then tucked it back inside. "Not so much anymore. You are a more

complex and compassionate man than I had previously assumed. Your help towards Mr. Wickham's education was the first inkling of such a revelation. Deep empathy towards a sister is sure to follow. I must assume the two of you are close?"

"Yes, we are. Much like you and Miss Bennet, if my observations are correct."

"Jane and I are sisters as well as the closest of friends, so your comment is astute. I suppose you will spend Christmas with Miss Darcy at Pemberley."

"That was my plan. However, Bingley tells me he will spend the time at Netherfield, and he is like a brother to me. I have considered collecting Georgiana and bringing her to Hertfordshire so we can be together here, except Wickham's presence makes that an impossibility."

"And forfeit the beautiful Pemberley?"

"It is my home and has many traditions. I am attached to the servants, most of whom are long-serving, and take pleasure in spending Christmas with them as much as I do Georgiana. I also enjoy the visits with the tenants at Christmas—no other time can replace that special trip. On the other hand, Bingley is like family."

"You could invite him to Pemberley instead."

"He has his reasons for staying in Hertfordshire. I observed a likewise state of mind on the part of your sister last night." He was relieved indeed that he would not have to separate Bingley from Miss Bennet. Her mother had been pushing them together

for mercenary reasons, but the look in Miss Bennet's eyes when she spoke to Darcy of Bingley was that of pure love.

"It sounds as if you are torn." Her eyes possessed a subtle glow and her tone indicated empathy.

The truth was, the longer he stood here speaking with her, the more he longed to stay with her. Netherfield was winning the race for the preferred location for Christmas. Unless...no, it was too foolish, too impulsive to invite her to Pemberley and take her from her family for such an important time. She was not even acquainted with his sister yet. If they were wed...no, now he was truly becoming carried away with wild ideas! How could he even think that far ahead?

"I must be on my way now. I am to London today, and then to Pemberley," he said.

"In all this snow?"

"If you are from Derbyshire, you would not consider two inches of snow to be a great burden during travel." He turned his face towards the pale grey sky. "The sun is fighting to break through the light clouds. The snow will melt soon enough. At least the roads are not muddy at the moment."

"But how can you even see the road when you start out?"

"The grass grows alongside it, much higher than the snow. Do not worry, Miss Elizabeth, we will move along slowly and with care. My coachman would tell me if it was unsafe to travel."

"Very well. Adieu."

Noting her still-creased brow, he held out his hand in hope that she would place hers in it. When she untucked it from her muff and did so, he kissed the back of her glove as he bowed. The touch provided a sense of intimacy with her he had never encountered before. Perhaps she would feel the same, and the sensation would provide her some comfort.

§

Almost a fortnight later

The summons to her father's library at such a late hour was unusual. Elizabeth made haste to respond and found him standing by the fire with a letter in his hand. Surely this missive must have something to do with the need for her swift appearance.

“Ah, there you are, Lizzy. Good, good. I have a curious letter in hand, and a great deal of its content pertains to you.”

“Is it from my uncle?”

“No, in fact, it is from Mr. Darcy, and just arrived by express from town.”

For some reason, her chest knotted up at the name. “Mr. Darcy? Why on earth could he be writing to you about me, and why is he in town and not Pemberley?”

“Well, you do recall that we expected Mr. Bingley to return until Miss Bingley sent that letter to Jane that left you sceptical about her motives?”

“Indeed, I do.”

“Mr. Darcy reports that we can expect Mr. Bingley’s return to Netherfield Park, along with that of Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy, for Christmastide. The Hursts and Miss Bingley will not be joining them.”

“Not joining them for Christmas? That is rather extraordinary.”

“They go to Mr. Hurst’s family instead. Mr. Darcy mentions that Mr. Bingley had strong personal reasons for returning to Netherfield as soon as he could, and that he and Miss Darcy had similar areas of interest in the neighbourhood and wished to join him.” Papa pulled off his glasses and squinted at Elizabeth. “I wonder what draws Mr. Darcy to leave Pemberley at such a time?”

“Can he be aware that Mr. Wickham is no longer with the —shire?”

“He is. I wrote to him and told him of my discussions with Colonel Forster, the colonel’s investigations and discoveries of the petty thefts, as well as Wickham’s subsequent abscondment with Miss King’s pin money. But that is all familiar to you and we need not discuss it. I tease you when I ask what draws Mr. Darcy to visit at Christmas since I know the answer. He has requested in his letter that you be made aware that he intends to call on you the morning after his arrival at Netherfield, on 12 December.”

“He wishes to...to...call on me?” Her heart was now crawling into her throat since it had no space to beat within her tightened chest. It made her have trouble speaking.

Papa put his glasses back on and perused the letter again, then smirked. “With the desire to continue your friendship and make his sister known to you—that is how he put it.”

“Oh!” Could she be more mortified? If only she could cover her face with her hands to hide the blush that had surely occurred there—the heat of her cheeks evidenced that fact.

He leaned against the mantle, his bushy brows raised. “Now, my dear, I always thought you were at odds with Mr. Darcy until you defended him to your mother on the way home from the Netherfield ball. Even then, I assumed that you were merely contrasting his excellent character against that of Mr. Wickham to prove Mr. Wickham’s comparative level of distastefulness. Now I do not know what to think. Mr. Darcy seems to believe he will be in receipt of a positive greeting when he appears on our doorstep with his sister three days hence.”

“Mr. Darcy and I had a brief talk on Oakham Mount the day after the ball. We resolved some misunderstandings, and I no longer think severely of him. In fact, I believe him to be a respectable man, though I am as astonished as you are that he would pay any attention to me.”

“I am not surprised at his notice of you, my dear, if you are over your previous aversion. You are the sort of lady who suits Mr. Darcy well, and he is showing good taste in acknowledging the fact.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“He is a learned man of the world, yet he has a difficult time due to his uncertainty with strangers. You are a witty and

vivacious young lady whose merits balance his own well. Your clever mind will have him never wanting for entertainment that matches his own intelligence. My only misgiving is that the inequities of station could bear problems.”

“His family might not accept me.”

“This is true. But if you are his choice, I suspect that he is the sort of man who will not care and will build the necessary bridges himself. But this only matters if you intend to give him the opportunity to court you. What say you to this?”

“I believe I shall. I am interested in knowing Mr. Darcy better.”

“Then I know how I shall reply.”

§

24 December 1811

With a long stretch, Elizabeth flung back the counterpane and rose from her bed with an eagerness that was even more pronounced than in the past. She had always been an early riser, enjoying the first light of the day and going for walks to view the changing mood of the scenery as the sun rose in the sky. During recent days, those walks had been forestalled to a later time as she breakfasted first, waited for the gentlemen to call, then walked with Mr. Darcy. Miss Darcy also joined them on a few occasions as well.

The floor was cold where she stepped off the rug towards the washbasin, but the water was warm since the maid had expected her to wake at this time. Not every maid was so kind, but Elizabeth had an affinity with the lady's maid that served the Bennet daughters. The Abigail must have heard her stirring since she came in to assist her in dressing and fixing her hair. From the first day of Mr. Darcy's and Mr. Bingley's calls, special attention had been given to her and Jane's preparations for those morning visits. Jane would sleep another hour, though, while Elizabeth fidgeted in her father's library, unable to focus on anything but spending time with Mr. Darcy.

When she peeked out the window, a layer of fresh snow had fallen overnight and now covered the garden. Her young Gardiner cousins, who had arrived the day before with their parents, would love to play in the snow. Perhaps Mr. Darcy would not mind the children accompanying them on their walk. In fact, she would take the young dears outside as soon as they breakfasted and dressed, and Mr. Darcy could join them in the garden when he arrived.

As per usual, at the earliest polite time to make a call, two fine horses came up the drive. Their riders dismounted, and one waved to her and made quick work of covering the ground to where she played with the children whilst the other made his way into the house. My, she was full of anticipation as his tall, trim figure approached her! Her whole body felt light and warm at the same time at the sight of him, and a fluttering within her breast took place. Was she taking on some of her mother's nerves? No, it was not like that at all.

When Mr. Darcy kissed her gloved hand, the usual tingles happened. She could not describe them, but they were all part of the mystery of her attraction to this man from Derbyshire.

“I see that an army of snow angels is the goal of the day,” he said.

“Indeed, sir, and you are fortunate the children are now engaged in such a friendly occupation. Earlier, we engaged in a snowball fight over by the hermitage.” She pointed to the area so he could see the disorder they had left behind. “I fear you would have been ambushed had you arrived then.”

The tallest child came running over to them. “Excuse me, but could the gentleman make a snow angel as well? He is so great and tall, it would be the best of all the snow angels.”

Elizabeth giggled behind her hand as she gazed from the girl’s pleading face to Mr. Darcy’s bemused countenance.

“I have not done such a thing since I was a child,” he said.

“Alethea, gentlemen do not make snow angels. Mr. Darcy is the master of Pemberley, and he is rather proud and proper. It would not do for him to get covered in snow, now, would it?”

“I suppose you are right.” The small girl’s expression fell, her little shoulders dropping.

“Wait,” said Mr. Darcy. “I do believe I could manage, if you will help me to stand afterwards so my angel is not ruined. It is more difficult to stand up without destroying one’s snow angel when one is large.”

Elizabeth managed to contain a gasp, but could not help but grin as he gave her a little wink. Mr. Darcy winked! What magic children could do to him!

Alethea grabbed one hand from each and tugged at them so they would follow to a clear area of the lawns. The other three children held back initially, too timid to draw close to a stranger. By the time Mr. Darcy lowered himself onto his back and stretched to make his snow angel, everyone had drawn near. He was clearly struggling not to laugh, and his captivating grin made it difficult not to giggle along with the children.

“He is very tall!” said the smallest boy, and all agreed.

“Should I remain here and contemplate my troubles, like some have done?” he asked of Elizabeth once he had fanned his arms and legs.

“Not today. Christmas Eve is for fun!” she replied. “Am I right, children? Are we to enjoy ourselves in the snow?”

A general round of “yes,” then boisterous “hurrah’s followed as the energetic little ones danced near the prone Mr. Darcy.

When his angel was deemed acceptable by the children, they all took his hands and helped him to rise rather awkwardly, though he did fall back once, to the general sounds of woe of his audience.

However, Mr. Darcy did not fully gain his feet, but remained upon his knees as he moved from the snow angel. Alethea brushed some of the snow from his back. “I thank you, Miss Gardiner. Children, pray, come close.” He was still taller than all of them,

so he bent over slightly to address them. “Now that I have made the biggest angel, you must make another one each while I talk to Miss Elizabeth. Pray, go find the best spot and make your best angel ever.”

They clambered for a good spot, and a little argument broke out between the boys on their favoured piece of unspoiled snow, which was settled with the help of their older sister Alethea. Elizabeth was positively charmed by how well Mr. Darcy spoke with the young ones, almost as much as she had been by his genuine attention to her over these last days.

The calls had been pure heaven. So much interest had never before been paid to her, and yet it was not overdone or cloying—Mr. Darcy seemed to be interested in her as herself and nothing more. Their conversations had been animated and interesting, and she had found her fascination with him deepening to the point where she could no longer be without him. He was all she thought of when they were apart. Was this love? She believed it was so. The recollection made her entire body tingle as if it had a chill, and she caught herself before she shivered.

“Miss Elizabeth...Elizabeth, my love.” His voice interrupted her thoughts in as shocking a way as she could have ever imagined. What could he mean by such an address? He had shifted so he was no longer on both knees, but on one of them. Her eyes had, no doubt, popped wide at the sight. How could they not? She swallowed deeply, unable to determine what she ought to say. Fortune helped her, as Mr. Darcy saved her from having to speak. “You have captured my heart, and when I saw you with your snow angel, I believe that was the moment when my captivation with

you became obvious and has since grown and solidified through our courtship. You have made me change for the better, and I can no longer go back to the man I was without losing my heart. I admire and love you and wish for you to become my wife.”

What else could she say? “I love you too, and accept your proposal.” Did she really sound that breathless?

He rose, took her in his arms, and twirled her so her feet flew off the ground. The spinning motion only added to the ecstasy that enveloped her. Before he could even set her down, they were being tugged at by the children, who now begged and pleaded to be twirled themselves.

“Well, Fitzwilliam, I see you have found an activity that is preferable to making snow angels!” she said while he was twirling the two youngest boys at once.

“My preference would have been to give you a kiss to go with your twirl. But for that, I need to find some time when we can be alone.” This time, she did shiver.

“On Christmas morning, we could meet on Oakham Mount.”

He gave her an intense gaze that held a great deal of promise for a loving future. “That is a fine plan, my Elizabeth.”

Perhaps they could make snow angels together as well and recline in their creations contemplating their situation. However, instead of deliberating on the past, they would dream of their future Christmases together.

THE END

About the author

A lover of Jane Austen, Regency period research and costuming, yoga, fitness, home renovation, design, sustainability, and independent travel, cat mom Suzan Lauder keeps busy even when she's not writing novels based on Austen's Pride and Prejudice, all of which are published by Meryton Press.

Suzan, Mr. Suze and their rescue tabby split their time between a loft condo overlooking the Salish Sea and a 150-year-old Spanish colonial casita in Mexico.

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An excerpt from
«Mr. Darcy's Present»
*by **Regina Jeffers***

“I assumed you would be up early,” her father remarked as Elizabeth slipped into his study.

“Everyone else is still abed,” she explained.

“And your curiosity could wait no longer,” he replied with a wink.

Elizabeth shrugged her response. “One of my faults.”

“Then I suppose it is best to discover something of the sender before the others come down for breakfast.” He reached behind a stack of books on a nearby table to retrieve the parcel. “I think it is best if I do the honors. I would not want you to become too attached to whatever is within as I must return it.”

Elizabeth’s anticipation rose as her father carefully removed the string and unfolded the paper.

“It is a book. Just as we expected.” he murmured as he turned to the title page. “Cowper, Gray, Goldsmith, and several others. Poetry.”

She eyed the book with longing, but did not reach for it, for she knew her father would disapprove. “Is there no card?”

“None I see.” Her father scanned the first few pages, but no card or signature was evident. Then he lifted the book from the

paper, exposing not only a card, but also a cloth wrapped item. He folded back the cloth to expose a small ruby pin. Elizabeth had never owned a jewel, only a pearl necklace handed down to her by her paternal grandmother, and she wished to examine the pin more closely. Mr. Bennet palmed the card to read it. “It appears, my dear, you have won the heart of one of England’s finest.”

He handed her the card, and she realized how her fingers trembled when she reached for it. As she read his name on the inscribed calling card, Elizabeth was tempted to trace it with her fingertip. At length, realizing her father studied her response she turned it over to read the message: I learned so much of myself through you. I pray the wedding bells you desire will bring you joy.

“So what lessons did you provide Mr. Darcy?” her father asked.

“In truth, I do not know,” she admitted on a breathy exhale. Elizabeth could not withdraw her eyes from the card. “We were often at odds. I would say the sky was blue, and he would declare it the deepest rose.”

“You must have enticed the man unknowingly,” her father reasoned. “Mayhap your resistance was what fascinated him. A man who can have everything he wants must find a woman who dislikes him a challenge. Come to think upon it, other than Bingley’s sisters, Mr. Darcy stood up with no other of the neighborhood at the Netherfield Ball, and I recall he also asked you to dance at Sir William’s entertainment. Even so, I cannot

think a man of his character would suggest a tryst. Did he never express a fondness for you?"

Elizabeth had finally succumbed to rubbing her thumb forth and back over his name on the front of the card. She said in distraction, "I knew nothing of his regard until Mr. Darcy proposed."

Her father choked on the coffee he sipped. "Mr. Darcy proposed? When was this?"

Elizabeth glanced up at his dear features. "At the Netherfield Ball. In the garden. But I refused him?"

"And why, pray tell, would you refuse a man of Mr. Darcy's consequence?"

"I thought him too judgmental. I took him to task, for I overheard him and Miss Bingley discussing Mr. Bingley's leave taking, and I knew such would devastate Jane. And we are both aware of the grievances Mr. Wickham speaks of the man," she argued.

"As to Bingley, I am pleased he returned to Jane's side, but if he was not of the nature to be led, even one of Mr. Darcy's reputation could not convince him. I have great pleasure in thinking Bingley and Jane will happily settled if they choose to join. I have not a doubt of their doing very well together. Their tempers are by no means unlike. They are each so complying that nothing will ever be resolved, so easy, every servant will cheat them, and so generous, they will exceed their income." Her father's voice plainly showed how really happy he was with Jane's situation, but he remained not so pleased with Elizabeth's. "It

appears you no longer find Mr. Wickham's tales to your liking. Or have I erred in my estimation?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Mr. Bingley knew Mr. Wickham at Cambridge. He recently shared his observations. They deviate from the lieutenant's version of the events in several important areas."

"So what do you wish me to do with Mr. Darcy's gift? His sending of this fairing cannot be permitted without a response. You have a reputation to maintain, and we know how society would judge your sisters if you are viewed as less than pure. I can quietly return the items and demand the man not seek you out again, or I can send Mr. Darcy a note saying I will expect his call in the next few days. But the choice is yours, Lizzy. I will not force you into a marriage you do not desire."

"May I think upon it today? It is Christmas and a messenger is not to be had. It will sound odd for me to say aloud, but over the last sennight, Mr. Darcy's presence has never left me. He comes to mind often, and I must decide whether this is for the good or the ill. Moreover, Mr. Bingley says the Darcys are promised to his uncle, the Earl of Matlock, and are not in London."

"As you wish, Lizzy, but we cannot falter in a decision. If you do not respond, the gentleman can force you into a marriage by making this giving of the presentation public."

Elizabeth rose to return to her room. "You should know Mr. Bingley spoke only a few evenings past of his addressing all the cards for the presents Mr. Darcy chose to dispense this Christmastide. Mr. Bingley, therefore, holds knowledge of the gift and its recipient. Moreover, Bingley reports Mr. Darcy plans to

marry his cousin, Miss De Bourgh. In fact, he may have already proposed to the lady.”

§

They arrived home as the afternoon moved to the evening hours. There had been little conversation in the coach, for he and Georgiana had shared it with Sheffield, and Mrs. Annesley, Georgiana’s companion, but upon reaching Darcy House, he suggested, “Please join me in the morning room. I will ask Cook to send up something simple for our meal. I will not disturb the celebration below stairs.”

And so in three-quarters of an hour and without the usual servants, whom he had excused for Christmas Day, he and Georgiana dined upon hard cheese, dark bread, sliced cold meats, nuts, and fruit. “I thought we should speak of what occurred at Rosings.”

“I acted foolishly,” Georgiana rushed to say.

“Your feelings are never foolish. At least, not to me. I would have you speak openly in all matters.” He paused to choose his words carefully. “I fear your encounter with Mr. Wickham stole away the ‘bud’ of confidence you showed promise of developing as you left the schoolroom behind.”

Georgiana’s eyes dropped in regret. “I am always questioning my choices.”

“I beg to differ,” Darcy corrected. “On this very day you displayed great compassion for our cousin when I refuted Lady Catherine’s demand for a proposal for Anne. You did not question

whether you should act or whether Aunt Catherine would approve. Your instincts were to provide comfort for Anne."

"But I do not always choose so wisely," she protested.

"None of us do," he insisted.

"You do," his sister argued. "I cannot recall a time you did not practice prudence."

Darcy smiled knowingly upon her. "Permit me to chronicle the sum of the errors I have executed in the last few months." Over the next half hour he presented his sister an edited version of his snub of Elizabeth Bennet at the Meryton assembly, his growing interest in the woman, and his bumbling proposal after the Netherfield Ball. Georgiana marked his story with a series of gasps and giggles. In the end, he spoke of how she had received the card meant for Elizabeth.

"I cannot imagine Miss Elizabeth would have appreciated the sentiment the card held any more than I did," Georgiana observed.

"Neither the present nor the card were meant for the lady's eyes," Darcy confided.

Georgiana studied him carefully. "Then whose card did Miss Elizabeth receive?"

Darcy found himself blushing. "That is not important. Just know the card speaks of my wish for her to know the wedding she desires. The card carries my name. I must do my duty by the woman. But Miss Elizabeth's heart is set upon another. She will not be happy her choice to marry has been removed."

“How could she think another man superior to you?”
Georgiana demanded.

Sadness colored Darcy’s reply. “The man who has filled Miss Elizabeth’s head with tales of my abuse is...”

“Mr. Wickham,” his sister finished his thoughts.

“How did you know?” he asked in amazement.

“Mrs. Annesley. The dear lady has spent many hours listening to my ramblings and explaining how the intentions of some men are very insincere. It was hard for me to admit Mr. Wickham never held me in regard, but rather he looked only to my dowry. In truth, I held such great hopes.”

“Mrs. Annesley is a jewel if she led you to a better understanding of Mr. Wickham’s deception. What I cannot comprehend is why he chose Miss Elizabeth Bennet? The lady’s dowry is nothing for a man such as Wickham. I pray he does not take undue advantage of her and then desert her.”

“Mayhap Mr. Wickham realized something of your interest in Miss Elizabeth,” his sister reasoned. “Mrs. Annesley claims she once knew two brothers, one of whom was so jealous of the other he attempted to ruin the reputation of his brother upon multiple occasions.” Darcy made a mental note to increase Mrs. Annesley’s salary. The woman had achieved small miracles. “No matter the lady’s opinion, you must extend your protection to Miss Elizabeth. Can we not join Mr. Bingley at Netherfield? I have long wished to view Mr. Bingley’s estate, and I am very interested in taking the acquaintance of a woman who has set your renowned reasoning off kilter.”

“Did you not hear me say Mr. Wickham is part of the Meryton militia? I cannot place you in a position where you would encounter him again,” Darcy protested.

“Then how will I ever practice the confidence you claim I carry?” his sister said with a stubborn set of her jaw, which reminded Darcy of their father. “I will not seek out Mr. Wickham, but I should not hide from society because he is in the neighborhood. Doing so, would present him dominance over us.” She smiled weakly at him. “What is more, I must accompany you for someone must counsel you on how to speak to Miss Elizabeth in order to win her heart.”

§

He had created an anomaly. Where only yesterday his sister had cowed in the presence of Lady Catherine, today, she chattered happily over the some three hours of their journey from London to Hertfordshire. Darcy, on the other hand, could barely swallow. He thought he knew something of a condemned man’s heart, not because he wished to evade the parson’s noose, but because he feared Elizabeth would not permit him to embrace his hopes for marital felicity.

“Oh, William, it is quite charming,” Georgiana gushed as he assisted her from the coach before Netherfield. “Mr. Bingley must be very pleased with the manor house.”

“You must ask Bingley of its suitability,” Darcy grumbled. “Here he comes now.” He noted his friend’s look of confusion as he approached.

“Darcy. Miss Darcy,” Bingley called as he descended the steps. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I apologize for the lack of notice, Bingley,” Darcy said in serious tones. “Miss Darcy and I found ourselves no longer welcome in Kent.” He returned Bingley’s bow of respect.

Bingley’s eyebrow rose in curiosity. “Did your cousin not take a liking to the music box?” he asked in bemusement.

“The story is a bit more complicated than a music box. Mayhap we might go inside for my explanation. I pray you can provide us lodging for a few days.”

“Most certainly,” Bingley declared. He extended his arm to Georgiana. “You are in time to take the acquaintance of the lady I intend to marry, Miss Darcy. I hope you will approve of her.”

“I am certain I will, Mr. Bingley,” Georgiana gushed. “Darcy has spoken of your lovely Miss Bennet.”

Darcy shook his head in disbelief as he followed his sister and Bingley up the steps to the main entrance. An anomaly, for certain! he thought. He would never understand the mind of the female sect nor the many facets of their personalities.

While his sister settled in and freshened her clothing, Darcy met with Bingley. “So tell me,” his friend asked, “what precipitated this visit? I offer no complaint. I hoped to ask you to stand up with me if Miss Bennet accepts my proposal.”

Darcy swallowed the rising trepidation claiming his breathing. “I came to Hertfordshire, for I have a proposal of my

own to deliver.” He paused to steady the pounding of his heart.
“To Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Bingley collapsed into the winged arms of his chair. “You mean to claim Miss Elizabeth because someone thought you sent her a present? Neither the lady nor her father has expressed any indication of receiving the gift. Although I dined at Longbourn yesterday, I said nothing of the parcel. Are you certain it was delivered?”

“Mr. Sears reports his rider presented the package to the gentleman of the house. And I will not propose from a sense of duty, but rather from affection,” Darcy corrected.

“You affect Miss Elizabeth?” Bingley asked in awe.

Darcy did not respond. He had said more than he cared to share. “I will likely require you to collaborate the inscription on the card. I doubt either the lady or her father will believe me.”

“Why ever not?” Bingley questioned. “The greeting was quite innocent.”

“It is not as you think,” Darcy explained. “You see, one of the maids knocked the cards from the table before the items were wrapped. I had a confrontation with Mrs. Osborne’s intended, Mr. Cohn, when he interpreted my reference to past encounters meant for Miss De Bourgh as being an invitation for Mrs. Cohn to remain my mistress after her marriage.”

Bingley’s eyes grew large in amazement. “Accompanied by your wish for similar encounters in the future It is a wonder the man did not call you out.”

“It is a wonder I did not do the same to him. Mrs. Osborne has made a pact for a future with Mr. Cohn the man has no intention of providing.”

“Then whose greeting did Miss De Bourgh receive?” Bingley asked in customary bemusement. Darcy supposed his friend enjoyed Darcy’s fall from grace.

“The maid originally claimed only two cards fell to the floor. I naturally assumed only Mrs. Osborne’s and Cousin Anne’s greetings were affected. However, at Rosings, Miss Darcy broke into tears when the one meant to accompany the book was embedded in the wrapping of her circlet. My sister thought the inscription’s formality meant I was withholding my approval, even though the greeting spoke of admiration and respect,” Darcy chronicled.

“Ah, the mystery of the female mind,” Bingley observed.

Darcy shrugged his response. He wished to be finished with his tale so he might test Elizabeth’s willingness to accept him. He was not certain his courage would last much longer. “Lady Catherine accuses me of coddling Miss Darcy too often, while I feel Miss De Bourgh could do with a bit of affectionate care.”

“What occurred with Miss De Bourgh?”

Darcy sighed heavily. “Cousin Anne received the note meant for Georgiana.”

Bingley stated, “The one which said she was always meant to be a Darcy.”

“I was forced to be very cruel to Anne in order to stifle Lady Catherine’s insistence upon my marrying my cousin. Thankfully, Miss Darcy tenderly soothed Miss De Bourgh’s anxiousness. In truth, I believe my cousin was relieved I refused her mother’s manipulations.”

“And so the presentation delivered to Miss Elizabeth contains which message?” Bingley requested.

“The one meant for Mrs. Osborne. It says something to the effect I had learned much of myself through her observations, as well as a hope wedding bells would bring her joy.”

§

“Whose carriage might that be?” Kitty observed as she watched out the window.

Mrs. Bennet looked up in anticipation. “Likely Mr. Bingley. It will not be long before he makes himself known to Jane.”

Elizabeth glanced to her eldest sister who remained at the table. As expected, Jane did not look up from her needlework, but a soft blush caressed her cheeks.

“It is Mr. Bingley,” Kitty announced to the room. “But there is another gentleman with him. I wonder who has joined him today. Mayhap one of the officers.”

After hearing Mr. Bingley’s reprimand of Lieutenant Wickham, Elizabeth would be surprised if Bingley welcomed other officers of the militia into his home, unless they were accompanied by Colonel Forster.

“Some acquaintance or other, my dear,” Mrs. Bennet said as she placed her sewing away in the basket.

“La!” replied Kitty. “It looks just like the man who used to be with him. Mr. What’s-his-name—that tall, proud man.”

“Good gracious!” Her mother rushed to the window. “And so it is, I vow!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “Well, any friend of Mr. Bingley’s will always be welcome here, to be sure, but I must say I hate the very sight of Mr. Darcy.”

“I, on the other hand,” Aunt Gardiner declared before Elizabeth could offer a caution to her mother, “I am most eager to claim the gentleman’s acquaintance.”

“As am I,” Mr. Gardiner added.

Elizabeth was the only one with understanding of the reason for his coming, and awkwardness attended her. She knew her father was at this very moment addressing a letter to the gentleman for, as promised, she had given Mr. Bennet her decision early this morning. Uneasiness scurried through her blood. Not even her father recognized how her sentiments had changed over the last month. Despite her vows to despise Mr. Darcy, she now regarded herself with an interest if not quite so tender, at least as reasonable and just, as what Jane felt for Bingley.

“There is a lady with the gentlemen,” Kitty reported. “My, how stylish is her dress. And look. I believe her cloak’s hood is lined with satin.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank. Mayhap he had come to silence any claim she might have on him. Was the lady his cousin Miss De

Bourgh? Had he brought his intended to prove himself above Elizabeth's connections? She had but a brief moment to compose her features before the trio was shown into the sitting room without even a notice of their appearance from the maid who directed them inside.

“Mr. Bingley, how kind of you to call upon us,” her mother said with glee. “And Mr. Darcy,” she pronounced in cold politeness. “We did not realize you returned to the neighborhood.”

“I arrived earlier today,” he said simply.

Elizabeth knew her color had increased, but she could not will it away. Until this very moment, she did not realize how much she had missed his now familiar countenance.

“You are well, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked quietly.

“Tolerably so,” she murmured. Then recalling her relations, she said, “With your permission, sir, I would give you the acquaintance of my uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner.”

The introduction was a stroke of civility for which she found herself quite unprepared. Everything was now so awkward between her and Mr. Darcy.

“Mr. Gardiner is familiar with my father,” Bingley explained.

“And my aunt is from Lambton,” Elizabeth added to establish a common starting point.

Mr. Darcy bowed properly. “I was not aware of Miss Elizabeth’s connection to Derbyshire,” he admitted.

The girl shifted at his side, and Mr. Darcy smiled down upon her. In spite of her efforts to remain immune to the man, Elizabeth discovered jealousy as part of her emotions. She wished him to bestow one of his cherished smiles upon her. The girl appeared younger than Elizabeth expected for Miss De Bourgh, but who else would Mr. Darcy escort to Longbourn? The lady was tall and on a larger scale than was Elizabeth, but her figure was formed and her appearance, womanly and graceful.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy reclaimed her attention. “Please permit me to introduce my sister to your acquaintance.”

Elizabeth knew the others in the room studied their exchange carefully, but she was simply thankful her legs did not give away in relief at learning the girl’s identity. “Miss Darcy, I have heard your brother speak often of you. I am pleased to claim your acquaintance. Come. Permit me to make you known to my sisters.” She caught the girl’s elbow and walked to where Jane, Kitty, and Mary waited. As she made the necessary introductions, she was aware of Mr. Darcy joining the Gardiners, while her mother saw to the tea service.

She waited for a few minutes to settle Miss Darcy in a conversation with Kitty and Mary on music and on fashion before she and Jane joined Darcy beside where Aunt Gardiner sat with Mr. Bingley. Mr. Darcy did not even look in her direction, but at length, he excused himself from her aunt’s company to direct Elizabeth’s steps from earshot of the others. “I must speak to your father,” he said in quiet tones.

“I know,” she admitted.

“I never meant to force you into a joining you had shunned previously,” he whispered. “There is not time for a full explanation at this moment, but I will answer all your questions.”

She nodded her head in acceptance. “My father’s study is further along the hall. The third door upon the left. I believe he is composing a letter meant to your notice.”

His gaze studied hers, and Elizabeth attempted to keep her expression blank. At length, he looked upon his sister. “Miss Darcy declares her confidence in meeting others, but I will ask, if Mr. Wickham makes a call upon Longbourn while I am in with your father, you will protect her from him. She is more fragile than she cares to admit.”

His words startled Elizabeth. “May I know something of your complaint?”

Mr. Darcy did not hesitate, which was a revelation in itself. Even with a month’s absence, their relationship had progressed to one of close association. “The story should be hers to share, but know Mr. Wickham attempted to woo Miss Darcy when she was but fifteen. It is my belief Lieutenant Wickham encouraged an elopement in order to claim my sister’s large dowry.”

Elizabeth’s gaze returned to the girl. “And Miss Darcy was too young to recognize the gentleman’s lack of sincerity.”

She expected Mr. Darcy to comment on Elizabeth’s inability to do the same, but he did not. Instead, he took the blame for a similar deficit. “It is a difficult lesson to learn. It took me several years to know it perfectly.” It was so like him. Why had she not recognized his humility equal to his pride?

She observed the anguish in the gentleman's features and meant to give him release. "The last I heard of Mr. Wickham, he was to join Mr. Denny's family in London for the Christmas meal. I am uncertain of when he will return to the neighborhood."

He nodded his understanding before presenting her a sad smile. "I place my sister in your tender care," he said with a straightening of his shoulders. "We will speak of this and more after I address Mr. Bennet's concerns."

§

He tapped on the closed door and waited for her father to bid him entrance. At last, a muffled "Come" granted the permission Darcy sought. Opening the door slowly, Darcy stepped forward. "Might we speak, Mr. Bennet?"

The gentleman glanced up at the sound of Darcy's voice. "Mr. Darcy," he said as he removed his spectacles from the end of his nose. "How fortuitous. I was arranging a letter to you."

"So Miss Elizabeth tells me," Darcy replied with more calm than he possessed.

"You spoke to Elizabeth?" A wrinkle of confusion ridged Mr. Bennet's brow.

In reality, it was a foolish question. It would be impossible for Darcy to be in the same room with Elizabeth and not seek her out. He would walk through the fires of Hell to be at her side. "Miss Elizabeth entertains my sister."

A muscle tightened in her father's jaw. "I suppose you should come in. Close the door. I find it keeps out some of the spontaneity." Darcy did as instructed, assuming the chair to which Mr. Bennet gestured. "Obviously, your presentation to my daughter has Elizabeth on sixes and sevens."

"That was never my intention," Darcy offered.

"Then perhaps you would explain what was your intention."

Heat claimed Darcy's cheeks. "In truth, I purchased the items to ease my bruised pride. They were never meant to be posted to your daughter."

Mr. Bennet tilted his head as if to study Darcy. "How did that come about?"

Darcy held up his damaged hand. "My staff thought to serve me during my recovery. Bingley addressed the cards for each gift I chose. Unfortunately, he returned to Netherfield before the posting occurred, and I was under the influence of laudanum when I provided my valet Miss Elizabeth's name for the parcel before you."

"Did your man realize your regard for Elizabeth?" Bennet demanded.

"Mr. Sheffield assumed I assisted Bingley in my friend's pursuit of Miss Bennet, and I had made previous arrangements with Miss Elizabeth to send the gift ahead."

"And the nature of the message on the card?" Mr. Bennet asked in defensive tones.

The observation stirred an odd jolt of protectiveness in Darcy. If a man had written such an intimate note to Darcy's daughter, he would hunt the scoundrel down. "I understand your concern, sir, but know I would never purposely do anything to disparage your daughter's reputation. I hold Miss Elizabeth in the highest regard. When my staff arranged for the fairings to be posted, a maid mixed up the cards of four of the gifts. Miss Elizabeth received the card meant for a longtime acquaintance who means to marry after the first of the year."

"I assume you addressed a card for Elizabeth." Mr. Bennet's frown deepened, not that Darcy could blame the man. Darcy's tale was difficult for him to believe, and he lived it. "What did you mean to say to Lizzy?"

Darcy emphasized, "Again, I did not plan to send the card. When Bingley asked me what message I would choose to send with the gift, I could think of a thousand things I would say to Miss Elizabeth if opportunity proved itself, but none were appropriate for our relationship. In case you are worried, Bingley was not aware of the person for whom I purchased the gifts. He was purely my scribe. I had him write something very staid. I stated Miss Elizabeth was a woman who held my respect and admiration. Unfortunately, that particular card appeared in a gift for my sister, who thought it too formal for our connection."

"Not the most intelligent decision you ever made," Bennet observed with a smirk.

Darcy remained off balance, but he responded in earnestness, rather than with false propriety. "Mr. Bennet, I cannot claim one

logical thought since I took Miss Elizabeth's acquaintance. I doubt anything in my life will ever make sense unless your daughter is at my side."

"Elizabeth is a clever girl. She will never bend her will to yours," her father warned.

"I am well aware of the lady's temperament," he admitted. "Please accept my suit of your daughter. I will do everything in my power to make her happy."

Unholy amusement glistened in her father's eyes. "I will not force Elizabeth into a marriage. You must convince her to accept your hand. In fact, my letter to you included her decision in the matter."

A hint of exasperation crept into Darcy's tone. "May I know Miss Elizabeth's wishes?"

Mr. Bennet stood. "I think Lizzy must deliver her decision." He tossed the letter he was composing into the fire. Darcy wished to scoop it out so he might read his fate, but he made no move. "Wait here. I will send Elizabeth to you."

§

Within minutes, she appeared in the open door. "Mr. Bennet says you are desirous of speaking to me." Mr. Darcy stood to greet her, but her anxiety still occupied Elizabeth's mind. Everything had changed since she and her father had opened Mr. Darcy's present. Had the gentleman returned to Hertfordshire because

he still possessed feelings for her or because his actions could ruin her if others learned of his gift to her?

“Please come join me.” He extended his hand in her direction.

Elizabeth touched it gingerly. “I was most grieved to learn of your injury,” she said, noting his bandaged hand.

“Were you?” he said woodenly.

Her features scrunched up in confusion. “I fear I do not understand you, sir. One minute I think we might claim friendship, perhaps even a fondness for each other, but the next, a fatalistic grimness settles over your expression.”

He said in what appeared to be equal puzzlement, “How have I offended you?”

Wariness draped her tones, but Elizabeth had decided a good dose of honesty was required between them. “Is my touch not pleasing to you?” She removed her hand from where it still rested in his.

As if he suddenly realized what she said, Mr. Darcy scowled. “The Heavens know such would be an impossibility,” he declared.

“But you stiffened at my touch.”

“I should not say so, but I called upon my practiced reserves not to snatch you into my embrace,” he insisted. “I assure you there is little about you I do not find pleasing.”

“Even my shrewish tongue?” she challenged.

“Not my favorite,” he admitted, “but I hope with a better understanding between us, the opportunity for your chastisements will lessen. And if not, I am equally convinced your chronicling my faults is because you hold me in tenderness and wish to see me well.”

He smiled upon her, and it was all Elizabeth could do to draw her eyes from how the gesture changed his features into the most handsome face she had ever beheld. Her next question came on a thready whisper, “Did you convince Mr. Bennet you meant me no ill will with your fairing?”

“You know I am not of the persuasion to bring you sorrow,” he said simply.

“Did you encourage Mr. Bingley to return to Jane?” she asked.

He smiled again at her in what appeared to be genuine affection, and her heart did a flip in her chest. “I listened to Bingley’s confessions and offered my opinions.” He reached for her hand again. This time she permitted his fingertips to trace her palm.

“I have asked your father’s permission to court you properly, but Mr. Bennet says you have previously decided whether to accept my pledge of fidelity or to deny me once again. Either way, I will do all possible to protect you. No one, beyond my sister and Bingley, know of the presentation or of the card it holds. If it is your wish, I will take the items back to London, and you will never hear from me again.”

“You would leave me, Mr. Darcy?” she said with a bit of panic. Elizabeth did not wish him to depart before they could settle things between them.

“It would never be my wish, Miss Elizabeth.” But before he could say more, an uproar from the drawing room had them rushing to discover what was amiss. When they entered, Mrs. Gardiner attended a distraught Mrs. Bennet, while Jane, Kitty, and Mary, huddled together, and her father, uncle, and Mr. Bingley studied what appeared to be a letter.

“What has occurred?” Elizabeth demanded of her aunt.

“Your mother sent Mary to fetch Lydia for tea. Mary returned with a note stating Lydia has run off to London.” Aunt Gardiner sent an anxious look to Mr. Darcy. “Supposedly your sister means to join Lieutenant Wickham there. Lydia says they are set for Gretna Green. Your uncle and father are deciding what to do to retrieve her.”

“I will assist Mr. Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said from beside her. It was only then she realized he still cupped her hand in his. Only a raised eyebrow from her aunt signaled anyone had noticed.

“Thank you, sir. I will determine what Kitty and Mary know of Lydia’s plans.”

He nodded his agreement. “Keep my sister close until we know the extent of this madness.”

§

Without invitation to join the men, Darcy suggested, “Mayhap we should move this conversation to Mr. Bennet’s study. The news has upset the ladies.”

A nod of agreement had the men withdrawing to Mr. Bennet’s private sanctum. A glance over Darcy’s shoulder told him Elizabeth did as he asked. Although she questioned her younger sisters, her arm remained comfortably about Georgiana’s waist in a sign of protection.

Inside the study, he demanded, “Permit me to read Miss Lydia’s note.”

“We appreciate your notice, Mr. Darcy,” Mr. Gardiner began, “but it is not necessary for you to become involved in this private matter.”

Darcy ignored the man’s dismissal. “As Mr. Wickham makes it his business to maintain his connection to my family, my assistance is necessary, sir. I know Mr. Wickham better than anyone.”

“Darcy is correct,” Bingley assured the others. “You will require his knowledge of Mr. Wickham’s nature in order to outmaneuver the lieutenant.”

Bennet handed over the note, and Darcy scanned the details. “Do we know anything of Mr. Denny’s residence in London?”

“No,” Bennet responded.

Darcy instructed, “Bingley, take the coach and call upon Colonel Forster at once. Secure the captain’s directions in London. And ask for the colonel’s discretion in this matter.” Without hesitation or a doubt regarding the urgency, his friend was out the door. “Mr. Gardiner, you and I should return to London immediately. By the time Bingley returns, we should be on our way.”

“What of me?” Bennet questioned.

“As Gardiner’s business interests are in London, no one will take notice of his absence for a day or two, but as you hold the reputation of despising London society, sir, others will become curious regarding your time from Longbourn, especially the day after Christmas. You must contain the news of Miss Lydia’s leave taking. People will believe whatever truth we provide them. Until Mr. Gardiner and I return from London, Miss Lydia and, I suppose, Mrs. Bennet, have contracted a cold in their heads. Keep your other daughters near the house. Tell those who call upon the household you do not wish to infect others by being out in society. Misses Bennet and Elizabeth, as well as Mrs. Gardiner, can manage those inquiries.”

Bennet’s frown lines deepened. “What is the possibility Wickham’s intentions are earnest? I am not fond of the man, but at least, such would serve my family.”

“I have never known Mr. Wickham to approach any woman with avowals of faithfulness, unless the lady possessed a sizable dowry,” Darcy said sadly.

Before Mr. Bennet could reply, a light tap on the door brought Elizabeth to their midst. “Pardon the interruption. I thought you should know, Papa, that Kitty was aware of Lydia’s plans, as was I, but not to the same extent. I must confess on the day of Mr. Bingley’s return to Netherfield, I encountered Mr. Wickham on Bingley’s land. I apparently interrupted a meeting between the lieutenant and Lydia. I only observed a bit of a blue cloak for the departing female, but Kitty informs me while she, Mary, and I were in the village, Lydia and the lieutenant met to set their plans. To her credit, Lydia had the good sense to catch the mail coach at Sutter’s Bend rather than in Meryton. No one from the village will have viewed her departure.”

Bennet nodded his approval of his daughter’s skills at learning the truth of Lydia’s escape, while Darcy looked upon her with true admiration. She would make him an excellent mistress of his household. She would address each issue they encountered upon the estate with quiet reasonableness. No female of his recent acquaintance proved as capable as was Elizabeth.

“Sutter’s,” Bennet observed. “Such means Lydia boarded the coach at five. She must surely be in London by this time. How are we ever to recover her there? The city is so large.”

“You should also know, sir,” Elizabeth continued, “Lydia ‘borrowed’ the money both Kitty and Mary had saved.”

Mr. Gardiner said, “If Darcy and I are to London, I should order my coach and speak to Mrs. Gardiner. We intended to return to London tomorrow, and arrangements must be made for the delay.” He excused himself.

“You will return to London?” Elizabeth asked in what sounded of disappointment.

“Your uncle and I know the Capital better than does your father. Mr. Bennet will explain our plan. I should speak to my sister. I am certain all this talk of Mr. Wickham has her upset.” To her father, he said, “Might Miss Darcy remain at Longbourn until my return? I cannot permit her to reside in a bachelor household in my absence nor do I wish to subject her to another lengthy ride to London, especially if Mr. Gardiner and I must discuss strategy to recover Miss Lydia upon the journey. Moreover, Miss Darcy’s visit with your daughters would disguise my leaving so soon after arriving in the neighborhood.”

Elizabeth replied in her father’s stead. “Miss Darcy can stay in Lydia’s room until my sister is recovered.”

Darcy squeezed her arm as he passed her. “Thank you. Miss Darcy will enjoy the company.”

§

“I must say, Lizzy, your young man possesses a good head on his shoulders,” her father observed when Mr. Darcy returned to the parlor.

She swallowed against the tears rushing to her eyes. “I fear Mr. Darcy is not my young man.”

“Did you not accept Darcy? You instructed me to inform him you would entertain his proposal. Have you a change of heart?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “Mr. Darcy did not possess the opportunity to make me an offer. Mama’s hysterics kept him from pronouncing the words.”

Mr. Bennet offered immediate reassurance. “Then he will make his honest avowals when this business with Lydia is resolved. A few days’ delay will not matter in a lifetime as Mr. Darcy’s wife.”

Her mouth trembled in a weak smile that did nothing to disguise her anguish. “Do you not understand, Papa? Lydia will never be easy until she has exposed all of us to shame. Lydia’s unguarded and imprudent manner will destroy our respectability in the world. Her wild volatility. Her disdain of all restraint. Can you not see Mama’s lenient nature has placed Lydia beyond the reach of amendment? She is the meanest of flirts, one without any attraction beyond youth, but one operating from the ignorance and emptiness of her mind, wholly unable to ward off any portion of that universal contempt which her rage for admiration will excite. In this danger, Kitty is also comprehended. She will follow wherever Lydia leads—vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrolled! Oh, my dear father, can you suppose it possible their sisters will not be often involved in the disgrace?”

Her father looked upon her with sympathy, for Elizabeth had placed the whole of her heart in the subject, and he affectionately caught her hand in his. “Do not make yourself uneasy, my love. Wherever you and Jane are known, you will be respected and valued. You will not appear to less advantage for having a couple of—or I may say, three—very silly sisters. When Lydia is recovered, she will either rejoin my household where I assure

you no gentleman will cross the threshold until she reaches her majority, or my Brother Gardiner will arrange a marriage between Lydia and Mr. Wickham. Your Mr. Darcy will return to your side soon."

"If only such were possible, but dearest Papa, you do not understand what has occurred. Lydia's impetuous adventure has ruined everything between Mr. Darcy and me. He cannot claim me to wife if Lydia is marked as a fallen woman. Nor can he make me Mrs. Darcy if my sister is Mrs. Wickham, for Wickham has betrayed Mr. Darcy in every way possible. Mr. Darcy can never be brother to Mr. Wickham. He will praise the day he escaped a marriage to me."

§

"I shan't be longer than necessary," Darcy said quietly. "The Bennets have agreed it is best for you to remain at Longbourn during my absence from the neighborhood. Even with Mrs. Annesley as your companion, rumors could arise about your residence in a bachelor's household."

"I would enjoy the opportunity to learn more of Miss Elizabeth, but is this your wish, William? If you convince Mr. Wickham to marry Miss Lydia, Lieutenant Wickham will claim the role of brother. To you. To both of us," Georgiana reminded him.

"Would it bother you so, dearest one?" he asked in real concern.

His sister edged closer. “I have never observed you as you are with Miss Elizabeth, except of course, when you are with me at Pemberley. I wondered where this particular aspect of my brother had disappeared.”

“Which aspect is that?” Darcy asked with a lift of his brows.

“The part that yearns for family,” she confessed softly. “It is as if when Papa died you died with him. I do not criticize. I know you lifted a great responsibility solidly upon your shoulders with our father’s passing. And you have performed in an exemplary manner to the estate, but I must admit I miss the Fitzwilliam Darcy who would rush to entertain me with a snowball fight in winter or who would assist me in gathering wildflowers from the hillside behind the manor in springtime. In truth, I think the reason I turned to Mr. Wickham was because I wanted to recapture that part of my childhood in which he participated.”

Darcy did not know how to respond. It had never occurred to him Georgiana could be longing for “home” as much as he. He had assumed once he set his life in order, hers would naturally follow.

Georgiana leaned closer to say, “I suggest you explain to Miss Elizabeth that Miss Lydia will always be welcomed at Pemberley, but Mr. Wickham will not. It seems to me, we possess more than a few relations we rarely entertain or are fortunate enough never to encounter. Mr. Wickham shall be one of those. It is important, William, that you claim happiness with Miss Elizabeth, for I wish first to be a sister and then, before long, an aunt. And I wish to do so before you become an uncle.”

“Plan upon my becoming an uncle in the far distant future,” Darcy emphasized.

“Go find Miss Lydia. Bring her home to Longbourn and then marry Miss Elizabeth. It is time our lives began again. Father would not wish us to be so distant from his precious Pemberley.”

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About the author

Regina Jeffers, an award-winning author of historical cozy mysteries, Austenesque sequels and retellings, as well as Regency era romances, has worn many hats over her lifetime: daughter, student, military brat, wife, mother, grandmother, teacher, tax preparer, journalist, choreographer, Broadway dancer, theatre director, history buff, grant writer, media literacy consultant, and author. Living outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, Jeffers writes novels that take the ordinary and adds a bit of mayhem, while mastering tension in her own life with a bit of gardening and the exuberance of her “grand joys.” Check out all 57 of her novels (both JAFF and Regency) through her socials and official website:

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Meeting in a Library

by *Laraba Kendig*

February 13th, 1812

London

“You will adore Hookham’s library, Lizzy,” Miss Jane Bennet declared with a fond glance at her favorite sister. “There are literally thousands of books.”

Elizabeth Bennet leaned forward eagerly and returned, “And I believe you said that the catalogue includes many Gothic novels too?”

“Indeed,” her aunt, Mrs. Annabelle Gardiner, assured her second eldest niece. “Many, many Gothic novels – not just Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole, but many less known authors and authoresses. Of course, I have no way of knowing if such novels are well written, but they are available, at any rate.”

“If they are published, I believe they will be a pleasant enough way to while away a few hours,” Elizabeth said optimistically. “Oh Aunt, I cannot thank you and Uncle enough for inviting me to London for a few weeks!”

“It is, of course, our very great pleasure,” the older woman assured her. “Indeed, you and Jane are a true gift to our family, as your little cousins adore you.”

“And I adore them,” Elizabeth said fervently.

“Hookham’s is just ahead,” Jane declared, causing her sister to peer eagerly to the left of the carriage. A minute later, the hack came to a halt, and the three ladies exited the carriage into a cold February day. Elizabeth pulled her pelisse closer to her and looked up with pleasure as snowflakes danced and twirled in the air, only to land with gentle grace on the pavement, roofs, and trees. London was often rather gray due to the smoke of thousands of chimneys, but with the snow covering the soot, the street looked entirely charming, with warmly dressed inhabitants scurrying to and fro in the pale winter light.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Annabelle Gardiner said to the driver, handing him his fare along with the generous tip. “Come along, girls.”

Elizabeth forced herself not to rush ahead, though it was difficult, eager as she was at the prospect of looking over so many books. Her heart, which had been cast down for some weeks, was lightening by the day, surrounded as she was now by the happy company of both her London relations and her dear sister, Jane. She had come to London only a week previously and had enjoyed every minute. Her home of Longbourn, where her father, mother, and three young sisters dwelled, was not always a cheerful place due to her father’s indolence, her mother’s endless whining, and her sisters’ foolishness.

Jane herself had been in resident at Gracechurch Street since the beginning of January, and while the eldest Miss Bennet was renowned for her cheerful, steady disposition, she too had been unhappy of late. The previous autumn, Jane had fallen in love with Mr. Charles Bingley, master of the estate of Netherfield

near her home, and had been in eager expectation of an offer of marriage from the gentleman. But alas, in late November, Bingley had decamped to Town along with his sisters, brother-in-law, and friend, Mr. Darcy, and Jane had seen nothing of the man since his departure.

Miss Caroline Bingley, younger sister of Mr. Bingley, had acted the part of intimate friend to Jane while they were all in Hertfordshire. Here in Town, however, the lady's true character and disposition became known. She had treated Jane with cold civility during their two short meetings, and Jane had realized that Miss Bingley had no interest in continuing their close acquaintance.

It had been a painful blow for Jane, and Elizabeth, while sad, was also angry. Mr. Bingley had abandoned her dear sister for no reason except a want of resolution. Elizabeth was certain the gentleman truly had loved her sister, but Bingley's social climbing sisters, and his proud, arrogant friend, Mr. Darcy, had proven too discouraging, for Bingley was an amiable man who was far too ready to bend and sway under the direction of stronger characters.

“Here we are,” Mrs. Gardiner said, and Elizabeth shook her head a little to clear her thoughts. A moment later, she gasped in wonder at the sight before her. The library was genuinely immense, stretching some one hundred feet in one direction, and at least forty feet in the other. Colonnades held up the roof and shelves upon shelves held a glorious variety of books. Sprinkled throughout the great space were comfortable chairs and tables, which permitted patrons to rest, read, or even talk. Indeed, though it was not yet noon on a Thursday, there were already at least two

dozen patrons in residence, mostly ladies, with a few gentlemen sprinkled among them. Elizabeth smiled at the sight; there were precious few places where reputable ladies could gather in Town, but the circulating library was one of those places.

“Where would you like to look first?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“Oh, the Gothics, I think,” Elizabeth said. “I am in the mood for some escapist literature.”

“They are over there,” Mrs. Gardiner responded, pointing toward the southeast corner of the library. “Jane, what do you wish to peruse?”

“I will go into the Reading Room to explore,” Jane said decisively. “I am working on my French, Lizzy, and Hookham’s carries *L’Esprit Des Journaux*.”

“My dear Jane, how very intellectual of you! You put me to shame!”

“I read Gothics last month before you came to London,” Miss Bennet declared, giving her sister a gentle push. “Now do go and enjoy yourself, Sister. Aunt, where will you be?”

“I will be sitting on that green settee right there,” Mrs. Gardiner said, gesturing with one graceful hand. “You can come and find me when you are ready to leave, my dears. There is no hurry, so do not rush yourselves.”

Jane and Elizabeth nodded and separated in search of their own reading material. Mrs. Gardiner made her way to her chosen seat and sank down with relief. Her youngest child, Luke, had been up the previous night, probably due to teething pain. The

child's nursemaid was ill with a cold, and Mrs. Gardiner, always a diligent mother, had stayed up much of the night with the little one. She was tired today, but she would not dream of delaying the trip to Hookham's as she knew Elizabeth had been looking forward to it enthusiastically.

The main door of the library opened, and Mrs. Gardiner shivered as the cold wind blew through it. She realized that her chosen sofa was rather close to the door, which was no doubt why it had been left unoccupied. Ah well, her pelisse was a warm one, and she had grown up in Derbyshire in the north, where substantial snowfalls sometimes blocked roads for days on end, and thus was quite resistant to the cold. She smiled a little as two gentlemen entered the room from the front door, the delicate snowflakes already melting in the warmth. Winter was truly beautiful.

§

“Gothics?” Charles Bingley asked in open surprise.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, grinned and said, “I fear so, Bingley. Georgiana has access to both the libraries at Darcy House here and Pemberley in Derbyshire, and yet she longs for Gothic novels.”

“And you, being the excellent brother that you are, are willing to find them for her,” Bingley said jovially.

Darcy smiled, but his stomach lurched uncomfortably within him. He had not always been a good brother to his sister. Indeed,

less than a year ago, he had almost lost Georgiana to a greedy, roguish fortune hunter, who had almost succeeded in stealing away with her to Gretna Greene. Georgiana was still not entirely recovered from that near catastrophe, and Darcy was thus eager to do whatever he could to cheer her up.

So, he would borrow Gothic novels, though he found them an inferior form of literature.

His carriage came to a halt, and a moment later, his footman opened the door. He and Bingley stepped out onto the pavement, and Darcy said to his coachman, “Return in one hour, if you will.”

“Yes, sir.”

Darcy took a deep, welcome breath of cold air as he and Bingley began climbing the stairs to the library door. The snow was falling more thickly now, though he was confident that the roads would be little affected given that numerous carriages and coaches continually traveled the way.

For a moment, his thoughts shifted to his beloved Pemberley in Derbyshire. When he was a child, he and his parents were accustomed to skating on a nearby pond and then rushing indoors afterwards to warm themselves by the fire and drink hot chocolate. It had been too long since he skated, too long since he had been so carefree. Now, as master of Pemberley, he had no time for such pursuits. And yet, perhaps he could steal a few hours sometime soon and go skating with Georgiana. She would enjoy it.

The two gentlemen stepped into the door of the library, and Darcy said, “Do not feel you must accompany me to look at

Gothic novels, Bingley. I will find a few that Georgiana has not read before, and then move on to the Reading Room.”

“As you know, I am not a great reader,” Bingley said with a grin, “and that includes Gothic literature. I will go ahead to the Reading Room and look over the periodicals. I daresay there are some on sport which I will find interesting.”

Darcy nodded and stepped through the door into the vast space of Hookham’s library. He felt his shoulders relax as his usually serious countenance relaxed into a smile. He was owner of two fine libraries, but nonetheless, he found great joy in being in the presence of so much unknown literature, even if some of it was considered ‘sensational’ and ‘uncultured’.”

He turned toward the southeast corner of the library, eager to find some new books for his beloved sister. And who knew, perhaps he too would glance within the pages. The last months had been difficult ones for him as well; first with Georgiana’s near disaster at Ramsgate, followed by several difficult months in Hertfordshire with Bingley. His friend had nearly succumbed to the charms of Miss Jane Bennet, an impoverished lady with no true affection for his friend, and he himself had been badly discomposed by Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the lady’s next younger sister. Even now his mind could conjure Miss Elizabeth in an instant; her beautiful dark eyes, her pleasing figure, her graceful movements, her dark curls clustered underneath her favorite white bonnet. She was a most unusual young woman, Miss Elizabeth, who delighted in debating with him, and he had been strangely affected. Darcy had hoped that the passage of time would whisk away such fond memories, but he still dreamed of her many a

night. For a gentleman who prided himself on regulating his own heart and mind, this was both shocking and discouraging.

Darcy rounded a freestanding shelf of books and found himself in the Gothic section. It was empty save for one young woman who was turned away from him, a book in her hands, her head bent. For a moment, his breath caught in wonder. The lady looked like... like... no, certainly not. It was disquieting that his imagination would play such tricks on him as to fancy that a random young woman should be Miss Elizabeth. And why should his mind return to think of her? Was she in fact that remarkable? He sighed to himself, perhaps a bit too loudly.

The woman turned around and gasped aloud, which matched Darcy's own indrawn breath.

“Mr. Darcy!” Miss Elizabeth exclaimed.

“Miss Elizabeth!”

§

Elizabeth had been happily poring through *Clermont*, by Regina Maria Roche, when an odd premonition prickled the back of her neck, and she turned to observe the tall, unwelcome form of Mr. Darcy of Pemberley.

“Mr. Darcy!” she exclaimed with more amazement than courtesy. “What are you doing here?”

Darcy, so taken aback by the sight before him, gaped briefly before recovering sufficiently to bow and say, “Erm, Miss Bennet,

good morning. I came in search of some books for my sister. I hope you are well?”

Elizabeth flushed at this response and managed a returning curtsey. There was no excuse for being rude, even toward a man she disliked profoundly. “I am indeed, sir. Does Miss Darcy enjoy Gothic novels?”

She thought it unlikely indeed that Miss Darcy, supposedly a haughty young lady who could boast of a multitude of accomplishments, would peruse such plebian fare. She was therefore surprised when her companion said, “Yes, indeed, she is very fond of Gothics. She enjoyed *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Romance of the Forest*, both by Miss Ratcliffe. I am hoping to find something else on these shelves to pique her interest.”

Elizabeth found herself smiling a little at these words. For all that Mr. Darcy was a proud, even cruel man at times, it seemed he truly cared for his younger sister. Many a gentleman would no doubt sneer at the thought of wandering into Hookham’s library, which was generally filled with women, and those women, while they included some members of the gentry and nobility, also included some of the middle class.

“Excuse me, Miss Bennet, but may I inquire – are you quite alone here?” Darcy asked uneasily, his heart beating faster. The lady, who was wearing a simple muslin yellow gown with a dark red pelisse over it, with a red bonnet on her head, was always beautiful, but when she smiled, she was glorious.

“Oh no, indeed not,” Elizabeth returned, then added archly, “I am certainly well known for tromping the glorious countryside

of my home, but I would not be so fast as to wander around London alone. My dear aunt from Gracechurch Street is seated near the main door of the library, and Jane is in the Reading Room.”

Darcy goggled in horror. “Miss Bennet is in the Reading Room?”

Elizabeth tilted her head, and one eyebrow flew up. “Indeed she is. Is that a problem, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy gulped and turned, tempted to rush over to Bingley. A moment later, he turned back with a grimace. It was too late, of course. Bingley would have met Miss Bennet by now. He could only hope that the lady’s handsome countenance did not sway his friend too much.

“Is it possible that your friend, Mr. Bingley, is in the Reading Room?” Elizabeth Bennet inquired, her expression now cold.

“Erm, yes, Miss Elizabeth, he is,” Darcy said awkwardly.

“I think you need not worry about your friend, sir,” the girl returned, tossing her head angrily. “It is obvious that a man who abandoned my sister after paying her such open attention, who did not even bother to bid her farewell, who has ignored her these last weeks, who allowed Miss Bingley to treat Jane with such wanton courtesy, will be able to manage a short meeting with my older sister. And Jane, for all that she was heartbroken by Mr. Bingley’s desertion, is far too genteel a lady to cause a scene in a library. I have no doubt they will bid one another courteous greetings and farewells, and your friend will escape without even so much as a prick of conscience.”

Darcy goggled more at this incredible speech. He had thought, no, he had been certain, that...

“Miss Bennet was truly attached to my friend?” he blurted out incredulously.

His companion’s eyes flamed with outrage, and Elizabeth said, “Of course she was! She truly loved him as she has never loved a man! But do not worry, sir; she is a saint, my dear sister Jane, and she has forgiven Mr. Bingley, his sisters, and you for the disdain shown toward her.”

Darcy swallowed hard and then turned to stride hastily toward the Reading Room. He had conspired with Bingley’s sisters to keep his friend unaware of Miss Bennet’s presence in London, certain as he was that the lady wanted Bingley only for his fortune. It seemed he was terribly wrong. Furthermore, it was his fault that his friend, usually the most gentlemanly of souls, was now guilty of abandoning a courteous and beautiful gentlewoman.

He was dimly aware that Miss Elizabeth was following him as he wended his way through the people in the library. A minute later, he found himself stepping inside the Reading Room, just as Bingley rose to his feet and pulled Miss Bennet’s hands to his own lips, kissing the gloved fingers passionately.

“Darcy!” the man exclaimed, his eyes shining like stars. “Darcy! Miss Bennet does love me, I just asked her to marry me, and she said yes!”

Elizabeth cried out in excitement and rushed past the master of Pemberley and into the arms of Jane Bennet, who was now weeping, her face alight with joyous wonder.

“Darcy, is it not wonderful?” Bingley exclaimed.

Darcy, his gaze now fixed on Elizabeth’s Bennet’s ecstatic face, felt his face flush and his heart beat faster at the sight of that winsome countenance. He realized, with shock, that he was not just attracted, but enchanted with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

“It is wonderful indeed,” he told his friend huskily and swallowed hard. He realized that he could not live without her. God on High had brought the two gentlemen here today, and he could only believe that in time, he would claim the second Miss Bennet as a bride.

It was a glorious thought.

THE END

About the author

Laraba is a scientist by training, but a writer at heart. She writes stories similar to the ones she enjoys reading. They are interesting but light, romantic but not steamy. She is a super fan of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and has been having a wonderful time writing P&P variations, exploring how new circumstances affect the beloved characters. She has published 13 novels, all available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

The Darcys and Miss Smith

by Monica Fairview

January 1815

It was to be our first visit to Rosings Park since we were married. Because we spent our honeymoon in Italy, William and I were unable to visit Lady Catherine at Easter as was the custom. The compromise was having to leave London and spend the end of Christmastide in Kent. I would rather have stayed in London with Georgiana, Jane, and Bingley, but such are the sacrifices one makes to placate angry relations. I had no intention of preventing William from carrying out his duty to his aunt.

In any case, it proved to be a good opportunity for the two of us to huddle under a layer of blankets together, with hot bricks warming our feet. There were other ways to stay warm as well, I quickly discovered. Wrapped up in each other's arms, we were able to keep the cold away.

As we approached Dorking, the place of our next stop, the shadow of Box Hill towered above us. It was snowing, as it had been for the last two hours at least, and the snow had deposited a thin layer like iced marchpane on the ground. In the pale winter daylight, it had an unreal look to it.

“Do you not think the hillside resembles a wall of candied ice?” I said to William.

“If you meant to consult me about a metaphor, I find it is too fanciful. What about the trees? How do you explain the trees that are sticking out of the confection?”

“They are barks made of chocolate.”

He shook his head, smiling, and gave me a quick kiss. “Your imagination is running away with you. Why can it not simply be a chalk hill interspersed with trees?”

“Because that is the dullest way imaginable to describe it, Mr. Darcy.” I kissed him on the nose. “And you will not convince me that you are dull. Inside this hard exterior I know there is a romantic heart beating.”

“Very true. And it is happily beating fast in your presence. I will readily admit I am romantic, but that does not mean I must be fanciful.” He leaned back against the squabs. “How about making the trees sticks of cinnamon?”

“I cannot bring myself to think of them that way.” I looked out. We were approaching a bridge, and beyond it, I could make out the outline of an inn. *The Fox and Hound*. My stomach gurgled happily at the thought of warm food, as well as an opportunity to stretch my cramped legs.

The snow was growing heavier. Big large snowflakes like pieces of paper were fluttering down from the heavens. I pulled down the window and put out my hand, watching as the white flakes settled on my fingertips and then melted.

“Come back, Elizabeth,” said my Darcy, his tone purring and content and half-sleepy. “You are letting the cold in.”

“I will do so presently.”

The icy weather made clouds of my breath, and a moment later I began to crave the warmth of my Darcy’s arms. I was about to slide the window shut when a movement in the snow caught my eye and I thought detected a woman’s form.

“There’s someone out there. It looks like they have fallen. We must stop the carriage.”

William threw off his blankets and signalled the coachman with his walking cane. The carriage came to a halt just before the bridge. William swung the door open at once and peered out in the direction I was pointing.

I frowned as I searched the ground. “There.”

“Stay inside, Elizabeth. I will take a look.”

I had no intention of staying behind. What if the woman was badly injured? He would not be able to bring her back alone. William threw me a look as I jumped down. He sighed loudly, but he knew by now it was no use arguing with me when my mind was made up.

“I wish you would listen,” he muttered, between his teeth. “Now your coat has mud on it.”

“There was a time when you liked that.” I gave him a cheeky look.

“I liked the way your eyes sparkled, not the mud.”

Mostly it was snow rather than mud, which was just as well, since I did not wish to arrive at Rosings looking like a hoyden. As

for walking a few paces in the snow, fortunately, I was wearing half-boots. They were sturdy enough to prevent me from slipping, but there were places where the ground was frozen with patches of ice, and I did not have thick soles like William did.

As we approached, the woman sat up and waved.

“Good afternoon, madam,” said Darcy. “Do you require assistance?

It was a silly question, really, since she could not be lying on the ground in the snow out of choice.

She smiled, her eyes twinkling as if she had guessed my thoughts. “I do. I have twisted my ankle, I believe, and I am unable to stand up without help. I have been trying to catch someone’s attention, but very few people are out in the snow.”

“I would be happy to help. I am Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. And this is my wife, Elizabeth.”

“And I am Miss— Smith,” said the woman. “I am delighted to meet you.” There was something mischievous about the way she said it. It was obviously not her real name. She had chosen to be anonymous by using one of the most common names in England. I sensed a mystery, and immediately felt challenged to discover it.

“Very well, Miss Smith,” said Darcy, always inclined more to be practical. “Let us see if you can walk to the carriage with our help. Elizabeth, if you will go on one side, I will go on the other of Miss Smith, together we will endeavour to bring this lady to her feet.”

With each of us taking hold of one of her hands, we were able to pull her up. She gave a small cry of pain as she put her foot on the ground, but otherwise she seemed uninjured.

“I jumped down from the wooden stile, then slipped as I reached the ground. I hit my head, so I think I may have fainted. But I feel perfectly well now.”

“There is an inn very close by. We were planning to stop there to eat and change horses. You will be able to warm yourself by the fire there.”

“I know the inn,” she said. “I am staying with some friends at Juniper House. Do you know it?”

“I do not,” I said. “I am not familiar with the area.”

“No, of course you are not,” she said.

It was an odd thing to say, and I felt even more curious to discover more about her.

With Miss Smith between us, one arm around Mr. Darcy’s shoulder, and the other around mine, we managed to walk her to the carriage. In the course of a few minutes, she was in the carriage, and then, with the help of the coachman, we were able to carry her into a private dining-room inside the inn.

In the candle-light, and the light of the fire, we could see that Miss Smith was a lady with a sharp nose and a pale face, probably in her late thirties. Her clothes were fashionable but unremarkable, except for a long feather she was wearing in her hat. As soon as she settled into an armchair, she penned a quick note to her friend at the Juniper Hall to send a carriage for her.

Meanwhile, William ordered dinner. Slowly, the pallor of Miss Smith's face faded as the fire burned merrily and warmed up her limbs.

"How was it you were walking in the snow alone, Miss Smith?" William was accustomed to females who would walk in any weather, so his tone held no sign of censure.

"I cannot remain cooped up in the house for too long. I like to take long walks."

"So do I," I said, feeling that I understood her perfectly.

"Yes, I believe you do." Again, she gave me that strange look, as if she knew many details about me.

"Have we met before?" I asked, puzzled.

"I have not had that pleasure," she said, inscrutably.

I tried to remember if I had met her, but with a name as undistinguished as Miss Smith, I could summon up half a dozen acquaintances. None of them seemed to fit.

"So where are you travelling to?" she asked. "Let me take a guess. Kent?"

Again, I wondered how she could have known that.

"We are indeed," said William. "Are you familiar with Kent?"

"I know of a place called Hunsford, and a Lady Catherine who lives there."

"Ah, then you know my aunt."

The woman gave that enigmatic smile, and we fell into silence, while the fire crackled and sparked and danced a merry dance.

“How is your ankle? Is it causing you pain? Should we send for a physician?”

“It is very kind of you, but there is no need. My friend will be sending a carriage soon, and she will summon a physician if needed. Please do not let me delay you from your journey. I am sure you would wish to be on your way before it grows dark. I am quite content to sit by the fireside and read until the carriage arrives.” She took out a small book from her reticule to prove it.

I did not often see ladies who carried books around with them on their walks. “Are you fond of reading?”

“Very much so,” she said. “I could spend my whole day reading if I could.”

“Then that is another thing we have in common. I love to walk, and I love to read.”

“Do you write as well?”

“I enjoy writing letters. As does my husband. His letters are very painstaking, and his penmanship is excellent.”

I sent William a significant look, and he gave a little grimace. It was a private joke. We were both remembering the day when Miss Bingley cornered him in the library and insisted on complimenting him constantly on his writing.

Again, her eyes twinkled. “Is it really? Do you also think his penmanship good?”

I was not sure what she meant by ‘also’, but I considered her question. “It is very precise, and the lines are very even. As for the content of his letters, I have no opinion of them. I have only read one letter of his. That particular letter had several ink blotches and was rather hastily written.”

“That is hardly fair.” William looked embarrassed “It was written under very particular circumstances.”

“Hmm,” said Miss Smith. “If I may hazard a guess, I imagine he was writing a confession of some kind. Something that was meant to be a secret. That would account for the blotches.”

I looked at her in astonishment. He was writing indeed about a secret -- his sister’s projected elopement. “How did you know?”

“It is a reasonable deduction.” Her face was placid, but her eyes were full of mirth.

Again, I had the odd feeling that she knew more than she was letting on.

“You said you wrote. What kinds of things do you write?”

“I am a novelist.” She spoke proudly, with a confidence I could not help admiring.

“Ah. And are you working on anything now?”

“I am. I have a story I am struggling to write.”

“May I know what it is about?”

“It is a melancholy story, about a young lady who gives up the man who loves her because he cannot support her. They meet many years later.”

“And do they have a second chance to be together?”

“They do not.”

“That is certainly melancholy,” said Darcy. “I believe when two people truly love each other, they will do everything they can to stay together. Love overcomes all obstacles.”

He looked at me, his eyes full of affection.

“Do you think so?” Miss Smith was regarding him intently. “I have not found it to be like that in real life.”

“I have,” I said. “I believe strongly that a healthy love will always find a way.”

“Perhaps,” said Miss Smith, doubtfully. “But the hero of my story is obliged to marry another young lady – a relation of the first – when she falls and becomes incapacitated. Surely love cannot change the course of the story?”

“Does he love the new young lady?”

“No, but he has led her to believe he will marry her, and he cannot - and should not - back down. It would be dishonourable.”

“There must be a solution, surely? Perhaps the female relation can fall in love with someone else and break the engagement herself.”

Miss Smith gave a broad smile.

“I can see that the two of you believe in happy endings. Are you truly happy? Have you really found joy in love, or has your life been full of obstacles?”

“I cannot speak for my husband, but I have never regretted our marriage for a moment.”

William put his hand on mine. “Nor I.”

She leaned back in her chair and sighed contentedly.

“Perhaps I can be persuaded to change the ending of the story, in that case. Perhaps the young lady deserves a second chance.”

“Have you published any of your works, Miss Smith?”

“I am certain you have not seen my name in print,” she replied.

I was rapidly growing convinced that I had before me an author that was famous, but who did not wish to reveal her name.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“A carriage has arrived for you, Miss.”

She struggled to get to her feet. William was at her side at once, helping her.

“You are very kind, sir.” She beamed at him.

I stood up and slipped her other arm around my shoulder. She leaned on me.

“As for you, Mrs. Darcy, you have exceeded my expectations. I would advise you never to allow anyone to intimidate you, no matter what happens. Even if they call you obstinate or headstrong.”

“I can assure you, any attempt to intimidate me makes my courage rise.”

Miss Smith looked pleased.

We helped her out to the carriage. The snow had stopped, and the world was glistening with freshly laid snow. As she bid us farewell, she reached her hands to both of us at once and gripped our hands in a tight grip.

“At Christmas everybody invites their friends about them, and people think little of even the worst weather. I feel as if I have acquired two excellent friends today. Seeing you together, knowing you have truly found happiness even after you married, has persuaded me that happy endings are possible after all. I wish you a joyful Christmastide with Lady Catherine.”

Something about the words she had spoken sounded familiar, and I recalled who had said them. It was Mr. Elton in *Emma*.

I suddenly knew who she was, the author who was standing before us. As she stepped into the carriage, I called after her.

“Are you by any chance called Miss Harriet Smith?”

She laughed, her eyes dancing. “I am acquainted with Harriet Smith.”

I chuckled. “Then please give my regards to Emma. She is delightful.”

“I am glad you think so.”

And with that, she disappeared inside.

“Who is Emma?” asked Darcy as the carriage drove away.

“Just a mutual acquaintance.” I snuggled into his arms, relishing his warmth as it wrapped around me.

“At Juniper Hall?”

“At Highbury.”

He looked puzzled, and I could see he was mentally going over the map of the area to see if there was something he had missed.

I had just borrowed a copy of the newly published *Emma*, written by a Lady, from Hatchards, and it was still fresh in my mind. I would not divulge the author’s identity, even to William.

It was my secret to keep.

THE END

About the author

Monica Fairview writes Jane Austen sequels and variations as well as magical *Pride & Prejudice* fantasies. Her biggest claim to fame is living in Elizabeth Gaskell's house in Manchester, long before the house was restored. After graduating from the University of Illinois, she worked as a literature professor and then as an acupuncturist in Boston before moving to London.

In addition to her love of Jane Austen, Monica enjoys reading fantasy and post-apocalyptic novels but avoids zombies like the plague. She loves to laugh, drink tea, and visit historic properties.

Most importantly, she is convinced that her two cats have the uncanny ability to read her mind.

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Wedding Night in Bristol

by Kelly Miller

Author's note: This is the wedding night scene that was cut from my *Persuasion* variation, *Captive Hearts*.

Bristol
25th December 1815

“We have arrived, Anne.”

“Oh.” Anne Wentworth blinked, lifted her head from Frederick’s shoulder and covered her mouth as she yawned. “Excuse me; I must have been drowsy.” She gave her husband a sheepish smile.

“You are welcome to use me as a pillow whenever it suits you.” Frederick pointed to the window, which offered a charming view of a stone cottage and small park spattered with patches of snow—the sort of idyllic setting that inspired artists to apply paint to canvas. “What do you think of it?”

“It is lovely.” She leaned up to give him a quick kiss, but his arms enveloped her waist, and a succession of kisses followed her initial one.

They alighted and Monty—the cocker spaniel puppy Frederick had given her as a wedding present—scampered off to explore the grounds. Frederick led her towards the cottage via the stone walkway lined on both sides with melampodes in full

bloom. He swept his arm towards the hills east of the home. “I selected this house for its proximity to the Mendip Hills. I thought it would appeal to you more than the larger ones closer to town.”

Anne scanned the bluffs dotted with limestone outcrops. “I could not have chosen a better location.” She turned back to regard the stone two-story residence, built in the Palladian style. An elaborate Venetian window near the entrance drew her admiration. “And the house looks perfect.”

He beamed at her, thus enhancing his already handsome countenance.

She crouched to pick up Monty, and they entered the cottage. After touring the ground floor and the common rooms upstairs, they proceeded to the four spacious bedchambers. Each room featured a different view of the verdant countryside.

When they entered the last of them, a question stole her focus: what sleeping arrangement did Frederick prefer? Her parents had shared a large bedchamber with separate adjacent dressing rooms on either side, but many married people kept separate bedrooms. She set Monty upon the floor and stood and strove for a nonchalant tone. “Would you...that is...do you anticipate that we shall sleep in the same room?”

He moved opposite her and rested his hands on her shoulders. “It will be as you desire. When I went away to school, I became inured to sleeping in the same room with many others. Years later, when I became a lieutenant, I earned the right to my own, albeit tiny, stateroom. Back then, I welcomed the privacy and considered it a great advantage. Now, my preference is to

share a bed with you this night and every night thereafter—but only if that suits your wishes.”

“I prefer to sleep with you always—wherever we may be.” She leaned against him and rested her temple against his chest. His hands explored the plane of her back, generating delicious sensations.

“Oh, Anne. To hear you say that—I cannot tell you what it means to me.”

She wrestled for a moment, uncertain of how frank she dared to be. She hid her face in his coat collar. “It may be impolitic—even improper—to admit this, but I have anticipated this evening since we became engaged.”

He groaned.

Her head jerked up. “What is wrong?”

A russet hue deepened his complexion and extended to his ears. “Nothing...except, I could do with an activity to take my mind off...that is, would you like to go for a walk?”

“I should love that.”

They left the cottage soon thereafter. Anne held Monty until they descended the front steps. They took a path along the banks of a stream that veered off to meander over hills and through a meadow. Monty’s tail never stopped wagging whilst he sniffed the ground, tasted the snow, and inspected every bush, mouse-hole, and tree in his path. Several times during their journey, Monty halted, in a state of apparent exhaustion. On those occasions, she

or Frederick carried the puppy until he squirmed to be set free again.

Their cook—whom Anne had hired for their stay on the recommendation of the Croft’s housekeeper—prepared a simple dinner featuring Cornish hens, roasted vegetables, and brown bread; their wedding feast in Bath had included traditional holiday fare. They sat at one corner of the rectangular dining table and discussed areas they would visit in the future, including London, Ramsgate, and Manchester. Frederick suggested a trip to Portsmouth to introduce her to several friends, show her his old haunts, and the bucolic area where they could live should the navy assign him there.

Frederick consumed the final mouthful of his gingerbread and set the plate aside. She took periodic nibbles from her own plate of the dessert whilst he related an anecdote from an overnight trip he took with his uncle twenty years ago. Sated from the meal, Anne set down her fork and placed her napkin on the table.

“...and then the innkeeper told my uncle—” His eyes flared. “Are you ready to...um...go upstairs?”

She bit back a smile. At another time she would ask him to finish the story, but now her husband had another priority. “Yes, I am. I thought before we got changed, we would exchange Christmas gifts.”

With a short laugh, he nodded. “Yes, of course. I had almost forgotten what night this is—aside from being our wedding night.”

They had chosen one of the middle bedchambers as their shared bedroom and sitting room; the adjacent chamber would serve as Frederick's dressing room. She glanced at him as they entered their room. "May I present my gift first?"

"By all means." Frederick gestured towards the next room. "But please give me a moment to get yours."

"Yes, of course." She went to the closet, retrieved the rectangular package covered in brown paper, and held it loosely against her chest. Frederick returned with a small bundle wrapped in a red silk cloth trimmed with a gold floral design. They took seats on a mahogany settee, and she handed him the package. "Happy Christmas, my love."

He set aside the red bundle and accepted the present. "Thank you, my love. Happy Christmas." He untied the twine and unwrapped the paper. With a solemn expression, he held the painting out at arm's length and studied it in silence.

Anne took a ragged breath after having inadvertently held it. "I imagine many of the details are wrong; the sails and the rigging—"

"No, it is wonderful; I am amazed. How did you manage it?" Frederick brushed the pad of his forefinger across the name *Laconia* on the stern of the frigate.

She straightened her spine. "Croft assisted me. I told him my intention, and he obtained a model of a 28-gun frigate from a friend and let me borrow it."

He peered at the cannons. “And yet you painted a 32-gun frigate.”

“Yes. Croft described the differences between the smaller ship and the *Laconia*.”

“I had no idea I married such a talented artist.” Frederick grinned at her. “I have never received a finer gift. I shall treasure it.” He rose to set the painting gently upon a chest of drawers. He returned, embraced her, and kissed her forehead. “You must have spent many hours painting it. Thank you, my love.”

“You are most welcome.”

He retrieved the red bundle and held it out.

She presented her open hand. He placed the bundle in her palm but kept hold of it. “I hope you like this, but if it does not suit you, I shall take you shopping to pick out another.”

“If you chose it for me, I am certain to love it.”

He released the red silk fabric, and his brows shifted lower. “In truth, I bought this ten years ago.”

“Oh, I see.” She unfolded the soft fabric to reveal a stunning jewelled cross on a gold chain. “It is beautiful. Thank you very much.”

“I wondered if you might deem it gaudy. Although the design is fairly simple, it is comprised of diamonds.”

Her fingers gripped her own gold cross—a gift from Lady Russell—adorned with a small topaz in the centre. “No, not at all.” She turned her back to him. “And if you will assist me...”

“I am at your service.” Frederick unclasped the chain of her topaz cross and secured the diamond one around her neck.

She shifted towards him again and touched the new, more substantial cross. “How did you come to purchase this?”

“Whilst in Lisbon, I approached a jeweller’s shop and saw a man race out of the business. I heard the proprietor yell at the man in Portuguese. Although I did not comprehend the words, I presumed what had taken place. I managed to overtake the man and stop him. The jeweller caught up to us and demanded the return of a ruby bracelet. The man tossed the bracelet to the jeweller and fled. The jeweller thanked me profusely and offered to sell me anything I desired at half the marked price. I entered the shop more out of politeness than with any intent to buy, but I noticed the cross and liked it. It occurred to me that, in all probability, I should get married one day and this would make a nice gift for my future bride.”

“It is an exceedingly fine gift.” Although he wore a smile, she had to blink back tears. He would have given her the cross in the year eight if she had not broken their engagement. “I am delighted and honoured to wear this. Thank you, my love.” She leaned closer and her mouth met his in a heady kiss.

In time, he detached from her with a sigh. He glanced at the door to the next chamber. “How much time do you need?”

“Thirty minutes is sufficient.”

His eyebrows inched up. “Are you certain?”

“Do you need more time?”

He chuckled—a deep, hearty, delicious sound. “No, indeed, Mrs. Wentworth.” He lifted her hand to leave a soft kiss on her palm and departed for his dressing room.

Thirty minutes later, she dismissed her maid and sat in a chair by the fireplace. Her fingers smoothed the delicate, gossamer silk fabric of her night-dress—a gift from Mrs. Musgrove. Anne had chosen it—the most revealing of all the new night garments—earlier in a moment of daring. It hugged her form in a way that left little to the imagination. Even with the matching dressing gown, the two layers were almost transparent. She had asked Lady Russell’s opinion of the flimsy garments. Her friend had not blinked an eye, declaring them to be “appropriate for the occasion.”

She raised her feet upon her chair, wrapped her arms around her bent legs, and rested her chin on her knees as a spate of doubts smothered her earlier enthusiasm. Now, alone in their bedchamber with the moment almost upon her, long-suppressed fears crept in to bedevil her. How would she compare to the women Frederick had known in the past?

After Mama’s death, Anne had been left in the care of a disinterested father. Hence, she had enjoyed free rein over the contents of the library at Kellynch—a vast collection that had been accumulated over several generations by Elliot men with varied inclinations. Due to her broad interests and innate curiosity, she had availed herself not only of socially acceptable fare such as, *An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, but also the odd obscure instructional manual meant to guide husbands in their marital duties. She had even dared to read novels declaimed to be

indecent like, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. So, she had a fair notion of the behaviours common in gentlemen and not discussed in the presence of ladies.

Long ago, she had accepted the likelihood that Frederick—a handsome, successful Navy Captain—had been intimate with one or more women.

These women, who Anne presumed to be courtesans or widows, would have been skilled in the art of pleasing a man. After all, it would not suit Frederick's character to take a maiden's virtue. How then could she, a novice beset with nervousness, not be a disappointment to him in comparison?

The sound of a soft knock upon the door interrupted her thoughts. She flinched and bolted to her feet.

“Anne?”

She wrapped her arms around her waist and infused an affected air of confidence into her voice. “Come in.”

Frederick entered the room dressed in a white lawn shirt and breeches. She froze, her eyes riveted upon the novel sight. The informal state of dress—or undress—enhanced his masculine allure in a way she could not have predicted.

His lengthy strides covered the distance between them in a moment, and his warm gaze probed her. “My love, you are beautiful.”

“Truly? You do not think this is not too much—or rather too little?”

“It is perfect. You are perfect.” He caressed the locks of her hair unbound tresses. “So lovely.”

She braced her posture. “I...um...opted to leave it down, though I did not know what you would prefer.”

“I hope you will always keep your hair down when we are alone.” He took her hand. “Come.”

She walked with him, not to the bed but to the settee. He sat beside her and retained her hand in his larger one, brushing her palm with his thumb.

“I thought we should talk.”

“You want to talk—now? But I thought...” She pressed her mouth shut.

“I know. Yet I cannot help but wonder what happened to the confident lady I left here a half-hour ago.”

“Oh yes.” Her teeth closed upon her lower lip. He knew her so well. She managed a weak smile. “She is here...somewhere.”

“My love, has anyone told you what to expect tonight?”

“Yes. Lady Russell spoke with me last evening. Nothing she said alarmed me. She warned me the first time may be painful, but I already knew that.”

A fold formed between his brows. “I dearly wish I could prevent you from experiencing any pain.”

“It does not matter; I am not afraid. Lady Russell had a happy marriage. She said the physical closeness shared by two people in love is wondrous.”

“Then why are you apprehensive?”

His expression, so reflective of affection and compassion, spurred her heart to swell with love for him. She would tell him the truth. “I...I fear I shall disappoint you.”

“How could you think so? You know you are the only lady I have ever loved.”

“Although I am educated, well-read, and adept in many of the duties associated with running a household and an estate, in this particular activity, I am entirely inexperienced.”

His lips quirked up. “I am glad to hear it.”

“Yet I suspect you have been intimate with others who were skilled.”

He moved an errant lock of hair away from her face. “My dear, I believe your imaginings have strayed far beyond the reality.”

“In that case, I should like to know the truth.”

Frederick rubbed a hand across his rigid jaw. At length, he cleared his throat. “Are you quite certain?”

Was she? Could she endure hearing of his past paramours? Yes, she wanted no secrets between them. “Yes, I am.”

“When I was eighteen, the boatswain on my ship took me and several other sailors to a brothel. We all availed ourselves

of the services offered. While the experience provided a physical satisfaction, the cold and impersonal nature of the transaction left me uncomfortable. I had no desire to repeat the experience, and I never did.”

Her breath expelled with force. She had tormented herself for years with the belief that the bitterness which drove Frederick from Somersetshire in the year six would have sent him to the arms of another woman—or many women. “Then you never... there were no other women? Not even...not even after we...after you—”

“No.” He used a quiet tone. “Within two weeks of leaving Somersetshire, I returned to sea. We stopped in Valletta, and I spent the evening with a group of officers drinking in a tavern. When the hour grew late, most of us were in our cups. Someone suggested we go to a nearby brothel, and all of us went. I selected a woman with dark hair who bore a vague resemblance to you. I suppose I had hoped that, in a convoluted way I might banish you from my mind. But in my first moment alone with her, I knew I should not go through with it. I could not look at her without memories of you dominating my thoughts, and the mere notion of touching her repulsed me. Though I had convinced myself that you did not love me, I could not bear to betray the fantasy of you that abided in my heart.” The line of his mouth hardened. “Now you know how low I once sank. Have I disgusted you?”

Anne lifted her hand and gently traced the pads of her fingers over his neck and throat, normally hidden from view. “Not at all. I appreciate your frankness.” She placed her other hand

over his heart, which pulsed rapidly below her palm. A flickering glint within his eyes held her focus.

“I hope you are convinced you have no reason for worry. I expect that, in the marriage bed as in other aspects of our life together, we shall acquire skill over time.” A provocative smile lightened his expression. “No doubt a great deal of practice will be necessary.”

She leaned closer and pressed her lips to his. His thudding heart pulsed against her hand. Her arms encircled his waist, and the space between them disappeared. Their kiss continued and deepened, with delectable sensations migrating to her core and beyond, eliciting a shiver. All else fled her consciousness save her desire—her need—for him.

Then Frederick broke their kiss, provoking an immediate and startling sense of loss. “If you agree, I think it is high time I took you to our bed.”

“I heartily agree.”

Frederick scooped her into his arms and stood, lifting her with apparent ease as though she weighed a pittance. Not since her childhood had anyone held her this way. She grinned and tucked her head against his neck. “I like being aloft in your arms.”

“Then I shall carry you often.” He placed her upon the bed and blew out the bedside candle before lying beside her.

They reclined on their sides face to face. His hand traversed down from her shoulder and halted at the curve of her waist. “I love you, Anne.”

“I love you, Frederick.”

The lambent blaze from the fireplace in the wall opposite them provided a distinct view of his familiar look—the one she associated with his love, his protection, and his judgment that she was...beautiful. And honestly, under the glow of such an adoring gaze, how could she not be?

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About the author

Award-winning author Kelly Miller is a native Californian and Anglophile, who made her first visit to England in 2019. When not pondering a plot point or a turn of phrase, she may be playing the piano, singing, or walking her dogs. Kelly Miller resides in Silicon Valley with her husband, daughter, and their many pets.

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Christmas at Pemberley

by Sally Smith O'Rourke

Elizabeth skipped down the stairs, still unable to stop smiling after three weeks of marriage. She laughed, she really was blissfully happy. She already felt at home, helped no doubt by the fact that Mr. Darcy seemed to be just as happy.

She stepped into the breakfast room, a small west facing room already warmed by the morning sun. It had been Mr. Darcy's favorite room in the house. A slight blush warmed her face for he had told her that their bedroom was now his favorite.

She picked up the envelope tucked next to her plate on the table set for just the two of them. It was a letter from Jane. At the window she snapped the seal and unfolded the small paper.

Darcy stood in the doorway; she was breathtaking; the sun glistening in his wife's hair. He smiled at the thought then silently crossed the room. Elizabeth startled slightly when he bent and kissed her neck. A small whimper escaped her throat as he continued the soft butterfly-like kisses up to her ear, then whispered, "Good morning, Mrs. Darcy." She turned and kissed him full on the mouth, stopping only for her own greeting, "And good morning to you, too, Mr. Darcy."

"What has your sister to say?" He asked gesturing to the letter.

“Jane would very much like to come as soon as possible rather than Christmas Eve and they would like to stay through Twelfth Night.”

“Is there a problem at Netherfield?”

“Jane does not say it but even her sweet tempered nature and Mr. Bingley’s patience are, I am sure, sorely tested by my mother and Aunt Phillips.”

“Then come they must.” He paused slightly, “That means Bingley’s sisters and Mr. Hurst will come as well.”

Elizabeth sighed, “Mr. Bingley and I are now brother and sister and so I must accept his family as my own.”

He gently lifted her chin and gave her a light kiss. “You are very wise my dear.”

She smiled, “Mr. Bingley must find a home away from Longbourn.”

Darcy looked over her head and out the window, but she saw the sly smile light his face.

“What scheme are you brewing?”

“It is not my scheme.” He whispered, “But shall I tell you a secret?”

“Yes, you shall or I will tease you unmercifully until you do.”

“Bingley has already purchased an estate not twenty miles from here.”

Her eyes lit even more brightly, “Only twenty miles from Pemberley?” Elizabeth threw her arms around his neck, “Thank you, thank you.” Only slightly surprised by his wife’s spontaneous embrace, he encircled her with his arms.

“Why are you thanking me?”

She gave him a knowing smile, “Mr. Bingley does nothing without your counsel, advice and approval.” She laughed and kissed him again.

Over breakfast they discussed Christmas. The new Mr. and Mrs. Darcy were excited by the prospect. Darcy and his sister had, since the death of their parents, kept Christmas subdued; generally spending Christmas only with each other. Elizabeth’s were a bit more hectic due mostly to the size of the family. This year she would be hostess in her own home and they both looked forward to it.

This year the house would be filled with family. Georgiana was arriving tomorrow with Jane, Mr. Bingley, Caroline and Mr. & Mrs. Hurst shortly thereafter. Col. Fitzwilliam was expected to follow within a day, as were Elizabeth’s parents, sisters and the Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and their children.

Although nothing pretentious, the house would be filled with evergreens, a tradition from the pagans who brought boughs into the house to help lighten the dark of winter and celebrate the winter solstice. Darcy smiled at his wife, amused by the reference to the pagans.

Not just pine and juniper. Ivy carpeted the floor of Pemberley woods. Lizzy planned to entwine it around the stair banisters, as

well as the chandeliers, accented by red ribbon. Ivy would be used extensively. Junipers with their blue berries would add a festive touch to the mantels. Boxwood hedgerows were incorporated into the landscaping on the estate and the shiny, dark green leaves made beautiful wreaths and swags.

A ‘kissing bough’ of holly and candles was suspended in the archway leading out of the entryway. Lizzy had made a concession to the church and used holly instead of mistletoe for a ‘kissing bough’ because the Church of England considered it unholy, as it is a parasite. However, Lizzy voiced her suspicion, that it had more to do with the fact that the Druids used it in fertility rituals. So, too the Vikings revered it because it sometimes grew on the sacred oak. Viking warriors who found themselves under such an oak with mistletoe were to disarm themselves and embrace even if they were enemies. So it is a combination of these two legends that makes mistletoe the branch under which you kiss. Darcy laughed. Elizabeth glared at him, “You find humor in my conversation?” He leaned across the table and kissed her. “Not by your conversation, but by the subject. Only you, my dear, would remember such details from your extensive reading.”

Lizzy, heaved a contented sigh, looking out the window at the prospect she had so admired, and was now her home. She looked at her husband, and could remember no time in her life when she had been happier, and wished all the world could know this same kind of happiness.

New Year's Eve at Pemberley

by Sally Smith O'Rourke

If Elizabeth had looked at her husband's face at that moment she would have seen such a look of love in his eyes that she would have been unable to stop the blush that surely would have warmed her cheeks. Intent on not disappointing him or their guests, her sweet voice filled the room, accompanied by the lilting strains of the song performed by her new sister, Georgiana.

Darcy's rapt attention to the two women he loved above all else did not go unnoticed by Caroline Bingley who's jealousy was more than a little difficult to control and was inflamed by being forced to take part in the holiday celebration here at Pemberley. As enthusiastic applause greeted the end of the Darcy women's song, she watched him go to the piano and kiss his sister's cheek, Caroline cringed, Georgiana would never be her sister. But when she saw the look on Mr. Darcy's face when he took his wife's hand, it was more than Caroline could bear. In desperation she rose and moved to a window that overlooked Darcy's vast estate, an estate to which she had dreamed of one day being Mistress; now that dream was gone forever.

Hoping the outdoor view would help relieve her rage and disappointment Caroline was instead met by the sight of her brother and Jane walking arm and arm in the cold December afternoon. She bit her lip to stop the tears then quietly but quickly left the music room and ran up the stairs. The maid had told her that the guest room had been made up especially for her by Mrs.

Darcy. She threw herself on the bed and allowed the tears she had been holding back to flow prodigiously.

Mrs. Darcy, a title that would never be hers, an estate where she would forever be nothing more than an unwanted guest and with her brother's marriage, even to the sweet Jane, she was no longer Mistress of his house. She had nothing. No one. What would become of her? The tears dried but she remained in the room until she was called to dinner.

Darcy slipped out of the library where he, Bingley, Mr. Bennet, Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Hurst were enjoying brandy and went to his mother's writing room. He stood in the doorway and watched his wife play a game with the younger women of the party. Jane sat demurely in a chair as Elizabeth gently drew Georgiana into the game with Eliza's sister Kitty. In the short time his sister had been with them he had watched his wife, with her natural exuberance and kindness, bring Georgiana out of her shell, something for which he had hoped and was grateful.

He looked at his pocket watch; it was a quarter before the hour. He and Elizabeth had decided on a small celebration for the New Year that would include an old fashioned custom they hoped would become a Darcy family tradition. He and his wife had discussed several things for the holidays that they hoped would become treasured family traditions. The New Year tradition would start tonight, their first New Year as husband and wife. Interrupting the game he asked all the ladies to join him in the west sitting room and then returned to the library with the same invitation to the men in the family.

Maids poured elderberry wine made especially for the festivities. Near the stroke of twelve Mr. Darcy, with a smile to his wife, asked Mr. Bennet (for it must be the family patriarch) to go to the front door. Looking strangely at his new son-in-law he then glanced at his daughter whose playful smile made all questions flee his mind. He was followed in his progression by the entire party. The clock in the grand entry struck the twelfth chime and Darcy asked Mr. Bennet to open the door, thereby allowing the old year out and the New Year in. In the doorway they all toasted the New Year as the bells from the village church rang in celebration.

Before stepping on to the porch to join his guests, Darcy took his wife's hand and drew her just out of sight of the others and in his own high spirits and joy kissed her, "Happy New Year, Mrs. Darcy." Without embarrassment or concern for propriety Elizabeth kissed him back. In her husband's embrace she remembered telling her sister that nothing but the deepest love could ever induce her into marriage. A radiant smile spread across her face, she had found that love and could not imagine being any happier than she was right now.

THE END

About the author

Sally Smith O'Rourke is the pen name given the collaborative team of Sally Smith and the late Michael O'Rourke.

Working together for over two decades, the couple created *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*, *The Maidenstone Lighthouse* and *Christmas at Sea Pines Cottage*, before Michael's death on November 14, 2001.

After Michael's death Sally went on to write other novels, including a sequel to *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen (Yours Affectionately, Jane Austen)* and *Days of Future Past*, a story of reincarnation that reminds us things are not always what they seem.

However, *Christmas at Sea Pines Cottage* (originally titled *Meteor's Tale*) is a particularly special story to them because it was crafted by Michael and Sally (Cubby and Da) for their grandson, Nicholas Reno.

Learn more about Sally and her work through her official websites:

sallysmithorourke.wordpress.com

www.austenticity.com

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that an author in possession of a good novel, must be in want of a translator”

About the editor

Cristy was born in Mexico and for the past few years has been living in Washington with her beloved husband, her faithful companion in adventures.

After studying at the Autonomous University of Querétaro and working as an English teacher for a few years, she decided to venture into the area of literary translation, inspired by Sally Smith O'Rourke's novel *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*.

She is founder and director of the company Cristrtranslates, whose mission is to bring great classical and contemporary works to Hispanic and Latin American audiences.

She has taken courses and diplomas at master's level in translation from the University of Guanajuato and the Mexican Association of Literary Translators (in collaboration with UNAM).

Some of her most outstanding translations into Spanish:

Nefarious by Nicole Clarkston

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