



ANTHOLOGY
**CHRISTMAS
CELEBRATIONS**

SHORT STORIES OF
**JANE AUSTEN
FAN FICTION**

Jennifer Redlarczyk

Nicole Clarkston

Maria Grace

Cristina Almario

Fernando García Pañeda

Amanda Kai

Summer Hanford

L.L. Diamond

**EDITED BY
CRISTY HUELSZ**

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

Christmas Celebrations

Second Anthology



Short Stories of Jane Austen Fan Fiction



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Foreword by Christina Boyd



Edited by Cristy Huelsz

Edited by Cristina Huelsz © Cristranslates

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Thanks to my authors: Jennifer, Nicole, Maria, Cristina, Fernando, Amanda, Summer, Leslie and Joana. You are amazing and I can't wait to continue working with you in the future.

Special thanks to Christina Boyd for your kind words and your support.

Thanks to my family and my husband for all their support and to my dear sister Mariana for her beautiful cover designs in the English and Spanish editions.

To our faithful readers, thank you for your kind words and support.
This anthology is for you.

We wish you all a great read, a Merry Christmas and
a happy and hopeful New Year 2022!

Cristy Huelsz



About the editor

Mexican born Cristy Huelsz, translates books for pleasure. She has loved reading all her life, so she did not hesitate to make a career change to pursue literary translation after being an English teacher for some years.

She studied English teaching at the Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro and has a diploma in translation from the Universidad de Guanajuato. She is currently taking a diploma course in literary translation at the Asociación Mexicana de Traducción Literaria (Mexican Association of Literary Translation) and translating JAFF books and Historical Romantic literature.

She is happily married and lives in Seattle.

You can follow her in Facebook @Cistranslates and Instagram @cistranslates.

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Foreword

“I sincerely hope your Christmas...may abound in the gaieties which the season generally brings...” —Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

For over two hundred years, readers have loved Jane Austen’s six novels. Though determinedly entrenched in her time and the environs she lived, Austen’s themes remain timeless and relevant through the ages. Is it any wonder that readers and writers alike crave more of her work or stories inspired by her themes? *Christmas Celebrations, Short Stories of Jane Austen Fanfiction* was created as a Christmastide treat for the Jane Austen pastiche enthusiast.

This miscellany of original short stories inspired by the charm of the Christmas season, and more than a nod to *Pride and Prejudice*, joins a cornucopia of published novellas, short story anthologies, novels, etcetera. Curated and edited by Spanish literary translator Cristy Huelsz, this is her second effort at the helm; Huelsz’s first anthology (same title) published in 2020. A good balance of yuletide sentiment and sweet romance, this second collection includes original stories from some of Jane Austen fanfiction’s most accomplished authors like Nicole Clarkston, Maria Grace, L.L. Diamond, Amanda Kai, Jennifer Redlarczyk, and Summer Hanford, in concert with aspiring debut writers Cristina Almario and Fernando Garcia Pañeda.

Though Christmas was not nearly as commercialized as it is today, Georgian England celebrated the season with various traditions originating from Holy Days, as well as regional superstitions, and revelry lasting into the new year. The *Introduction*, perfect for reading groups and Janeites, enlightens the reader of these holiday traditions, gleaned from author Maria Grace’s deft research for her website *Random Bits of Fascination*, and adds contextual color to the tales herein.

As an editor of seven Austenesque anthologies and nearly fifty novels, I adored these sweet tellings, breathtaking romances, and poignant fables. Like any box of chocolates, you, dear reader, might relish some more stories more than others, but together, this Austen-adjacent collection is a perfect companion to tuck in with a cup of chocolate, tea, or even Regent’s punch, during this most festive of all seasons. Happy Christmas! —**Christina Boyd, author, editor, great reader.**

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Introduction

Regency Christmas Traditions: Special Days of the Holiday Season

Each year it seems we complain that the holiday season begins earlier and earlier with some shops bringing out holiday goods even in the last months of summer.

The holiday calendar during the Regency era was a little more clearly defined, with a very predictable set of dates and events for celebration.

Holiday celebrations and traditions extended from a week before Advent all the way through to Twelfth Night in January. During the entire season people held a wide variety of festivities including balls, parties, dinners, house parties and visits, skating and card parties as well as smaller gatherings and even weddings. As is the case today, not every one celebrated every particular date and family traditions varied widely.

Stir it up Sunday

The season unofficially started with Stir it up Sunday, which took place on the Sunday before the beginning of Advent (the fourth Sunday before Christmas.) On this day, the family would gather to make Christmas puddings which needed to age before they were served, flaming, at Christmas dinner. The day became known as “Stir Up Sunday,” not because of the great deal of stirring done, but because the opening words of the main prayer in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549 for that day are: ‘Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people...’

December 6th: Saint Nicholas Day

In a tradition from Northern Europe, the day might be celebrated with the exchanging of small gifts particularly for children. Not everyone participated in this tradition. This was also the traditional date for Christmastide visiting to begin.

December 21st: St. Thomas Day

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St. Thomas' Day was a day for elderly women (often widows) to go 'a'thomasing' at the houses of their more fortunate neighbors hoping for gifts of food or money. Oftentimes, wheat was cooked and distributed to the 'mumpers' who came begging.

With the high price of wheat, the gift was specially appreciated. This practice had become especially common during the early 1800's. The Napoleonic wars may have contributed to the practice by dramatically increasing the number of widows.

December 24th: Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve, the decorations and greenery were put up throughout the house. Traditional greenery included holly, ivy, rosemary, evergreen, hawthorn, bay leaf, laurel, and hellebore (Christmas rose). Some households fashioned kissing boughs from evergreens and mistletoe, adding apples and pretty ribbon bows for decoration. The greenery remained in place until Epiphany when they were removed and burned lest they bring bad luck to the house.

December 25th: Christmas day

Christmas Day usually began with a trip to church. Though gifts were not typically exchanged on this day, small gifts might be given to children. Cottagers would sometimes give generous landowners a symbolic gift for Christmas Day as well.

Christmas Dinner was a feast to be anticipated. It often opened with a toast that included the servants who received their Christmas gifts at this time.

Boar's head, roasted or brawn—a kind of potted meat dish—often took center stage. Roast goose was another Christmas dinner favorite. The size of the bird often required it be cooked by a baker with a large oven and picked up on the way home from church.

Many also considered mincemeat pies, also known as Christmas or Twelfth Night pies, staples for a Christmas feast. The pies contained chopped meat, dried fruit, spices and sugar. Leftovers from the Christmas feast would be used to make pies for the twelve days until Epiphany. Eating minced pie every day of the twelve days of Christmas was said to bring twelve months of happiness in the new year.

At the end of the meal, the Christmas puddings made a month earlier would make their appearance. When the pudding was served, a sprig of holly was placed on the top of the pudding as a reminder of Jesus' Crown of Thorns that he wore when he was killed. The pudding would be doused with brandy and set aflame, a key theatrical aspect of the holiday celebration.

December 26th: St. Stephen's Day or Boxing Day

Giving 'Christmas Boxes' to charity and servants was the custom on St. Stephen's Day, now called Boxing Day. Old clothing and extra items were boxed up and handed out to servants and tradesmen who visited that day, and servants were often given the day off. Boxing Day was also a traditional day for fox hunting. Theaters also opened their Christmas Pantomimes on Boxing Day.

December 31st: New Year's Eve

A number of traditions formed around New Year's eve and New Year's day. Not all were practiced by everyone, and some varied by county. Some celebrated with the family or their party gathering in a circle before midnight. At the stroke of the midnight hour, the head of the family would open the door and usher out the old and welcome the new. Some who held to old superstitions would remove ashes, rags, scraps and anything perishable from the house so that nothing was carried over from one year to the next. In this way, they would preserve their good luck and banish any poor luck.

Some Scots and folks of northern England believed in 'first footing'—the nature of the first visitor to set foot across the threshold after midnight on New Year's eve affected the family's fortunes.

A tall, dark, and handsome male stranger was the best omen, especially if his feet were the right shape. High-insteps implied that "water would run under"—that is bad luck would flow past. A flat foot meant bad luck, as did women in most cases.

These omens were not fully agreed upon as for some blonde or red-headed, bare-foot girls were bringers of good luck. Whoever was the first-footer had to be greeted with proper ceremony and a rhyme to welcome the New Year and bring good fortune.

The "first footer" entered through the front door. Tradition held that no one spoke until the 'first-footer' wished the occupants a happy new year. The first-footer would leave through the back door taking away all the old year's troubles and sorrows.

January 1st: New Year's Day

New Year's Day was considered a predictor of good fortune for the next year. One custom was to hook a flat cake on the horns of a cow. If the cake fell off in front of the cow, it foretold good luck; if behind, bad.

In some regions, young women raced to draw the first water from the well in a practice known as 'creaming the well.' Possession of this water meant marriage within the coming year, particularly if the object of the young woman's affections drank it on New Year's Day. Some believed the water had curative properties and even washed the udders of cows with it to insure productivity. In Hertfordshire, at sunrise on New Year's Day, a hawthorn bush would be burned in the fields to ensure good luck and bountiful crops.

January 6th: Twelfth Night

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Epiphany or Twelfth Night was the exciting climax of the Christmastide season, a time for putting away social norms. It was a feast day to mark the coming of the Magi, and as such was the traditional day to exchange gifts. Decorations were to be taken down and burned by midnight on this day under risk of facing bad luck for the rest of the year. Some believed that for every branch that remained unburned a goblin would appear.

Revels, masks and balls were the order of the day and night. Elaborate and expensive Twelfth day cakes covered with colored sugar and pastillage figures were served amid the parlor games and dancing, sometimes with very rowdy celebrations.

Sadly, the celebrations became so riotous that in the 1870's, Queen Victoria outlawed the celebration of Twelfth Night in fear the celebrations had become out of control.

To learn more, check out *A Jane Austen Christmas* by Maria Grace at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00PJ17EEA>



Twelve Days

By Jennifer Redlarczyk



Day one

*Darcy House
The breakfast room
25 December, 1811*

Sitting in his favourite chair, Fitzwilliam Darcy quietly browsed through the newspaper while sipping his morning coffee. The touch of his wife's hand on his shoulder interrupted his perusal, and he glanced up, appreciating the mischievous sparkle in her dark eyes, along with the musical sound of her laughter.

Quickly rising and taking Elizabeth into his arms, he thoroughly kissed her before asking, "To what do I what have the honour of your teasing ways, my love?"

"Teasing?" She arched a brow in his direction. "I could ask the same of you, my dear husband. Instead I shall simply express gratitude for my very unusual present."

"Unusual present? Elizabeth, I am sure I do not understand your meaning."

"Why I am referring to a partridge in a pear tree now residing in the solarium," she giggled. "Do you intend to shower me with all the gifts which are mentioned in that old rhyme? If such is the case, I fear we shall have an excess of birds, and Cook will not be happy." Again she giggled.

"Elizabeth, there must be some mistake," he puzzled. "Though I would have no problem showering you with gifts for twelve days, I assure you I did not send a partridge in a pear tree. Was there no message?"

"No, husband, there was not. I naturally assumed the gift was from you. Shall we go and take a closer look?"

"With pleasure," he offered his arm. "I wonder if this is some trick of Richard's. As a youth, he was known for such pranks." Darcy continued to elaborate on the merits of his cousin's mischief while accompanying his wife to the solarium. Entering the room,

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they were greeted by the screeching cries of the partridge being chased by a distraught footman.

“Walters, what the devil is going on here?”

“Forgive me, Mr. Darcy,” the footman responded while trying to regain his composure. “I was standing watch as Mrs. Darcy instructed when all at once the bird came down from his perch and started fluttering to and fro. I tried to catch him with the intention of restraining him in this box, but to no avail. As you can see, the bird has begun to create a mess with his droppings and has damaged some of the leaves on the potted plants.”

While Walters was speaking, Elizabeth had her own idea of what to do. Moving to a corner table, she quickly removed the items resting on top freeing the tablecloth.

“Mr. Walters, please try using this cloth to subdue the bird.” Following several attempts, five minutes later, the task was accomplished.

“I shall take this bird to Cook at once.” Yet embarrassed, Walters quickly bowed and took his leave.

“Elizabeth.” Darcy was not happy. “I believe it is time to send Richard a note.”



Day two

The study
26 December, 1811

Darcy was busy sorting through his mail when his wife stepped into the room. “Fitzwilliam,” she called out in a sing-song sort of voice. She smiled radiantly and hurried to his desk where he took her by the hand and pulled her onto his lap for a lingering kiss.

“You are very happy today. Is there something I should know, my love?” He questioned.

“Another present has arrived, and I thought I would try to soften you before breaking the news.”

“Oh?!” He scowled. “I suppose it is the two turtle doves.”

“Yes it is.” She bit her lip before continuing. “And ... there is another partridge in a pear tree.”

“What!” He bellowed. Removing his wife from his lap, Darcy rose and began to pace the floor in agitation. “Elizabeth, I shall not tolerate this. Richard has gone too far this time. I tell you, I refuse to have our house filled with unnecessary trees and birds. This nonsense must stop!”

“I agree, but if it is any consolation, Georgiana thinks that the two turtle doves are very pretty and would be happy to keep them as pets.”

“Humph! Richard must have received my message by now.” Darcy pinched the bridge of his nose hoping to stave off a headache. “I shall send him another note, and if he does not respond today, I shall have no choice but to go to Matlock House on the morrow and confront him in person.”

Elizabeth quickly moved in front of her husband in an effort to stop his pacing. Grabbing his hands and putting them around her waist, she smiled and pulled his face down to hers for another kiss. “Fitzwilliam, I am determined not to let your mood spoil our day. Walters has taken care of the new partridge, and we shall deal with the tree later. May we not take a long walk this morning? It is a lovely winter day, and I am sure the fresh air will make you feel much better.”

“Forgive me.” He kissed her again. “A long walk followed by some time alone with you in our chambers would be very much to my liking.”

“Then let us leave at once.”



Day three

*Matlock House
27 December, 1811*

“Darcy, what brings you here today?” Colonel Fitzwilliam’s voice was husky and barely audible. “Sorry if I seem to be under the weather.”

“Richard, you look terrible! I was about to ask why you have ignored my messages, but now I can see for myself. Should you not be in bed?”

Taking out a handkerchief, he sneezed before complaining, “Devil of a cold. Sorry, I have yet to read my mail. Tell me, in my limited capacity, how may I be of service today?”

“Actually, I came here to accuse you of a prank, but now I am not so sure.”

“A prank?”

“Yes, for three days, Darcy House has been besieged by unusual gifts. It all started on the twenty-fifth with a partridge in a pear tree. I must admit the bird was very tasty and Cook did make splendid pear butter, but that is hardly the point. Yesterday, we were gifted with two turtle doves AND another partridge in a pear tree. Finally today, the three French hens were delivered in addition to two more turtle doves and...”

“Let me guess, a partridge in a pear tree.”

“Just so!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed so hard that he broke into a fit of coughing. “Priceless!” he barely choked out. “I am sorry to say it was not me who sent the gifts. I only wish I had the resources to be so creative.”

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“Richard!” He glared. “More importantly, the question is how do I stop these gifts from coming? Tomorrow’s offerings will most likely be the four colly birds, and you know what a noisy lot they are. Can you imagine what kind of chaos will prevail at Darcy House if this continues on for twelve days?”

Trying not to cough, the colonel teased, “I cannot help but wonder where you will put the six geese-a-laying, as well as the seven swans-a-swimming. Your aviary will never house all of those birds and the pond area is hardly adequate. Too bad you are not at Pemberley. At least there you could pass on some of the gifts to your tenants.”

“Please!” Frustrated, Darcy raked his hand through his hair and continued. “I am at a loss here. I have no idea if I should enlist the aid of the Bow Street Runners to find the source of these deliveries, or if I should resort to having my footmen stand porter outside my house. What do you suggest I do?”

“Perhaps both. Although I am not feeling my best, I still have a meeting scheduled with one of my aides later this afternoon. Let me see what I can do.”



Day 6

The Club
31 December, 1811

Darcy could hardly believe the attention he garnered as he walked into Whites. Strange sounds imitating clucking chickens and cawing birds could be heard beneath the din of quiet laughter while patrons bowed with exaggeration or winked in fun. Was there no person who had not heard of his dilemma at Darcy House or had not read about it in the gossip papers? Walking into the lounge, Darcy spotted his cousin sitting at a small table with another gentleman.

Rising, the colonel said, “Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, please allow me to introduce Mr. Morris, the investigator I hired on your behalf.” Greetings were exchanged, and Darcy took a seat.

Morris appeared nervous as he spoke, his voice high-pitched. “Thus far, I have had difficulty tracing the monetary transactions for your gifts any further than the various establishments where they were purchased. In the case of the partridges and the pear trees, the proprietor indicated that an elderly gentleman placed the order on behalf of a client who preferred to remain anonymous. I also discovered that more than one shop was contracted in the acquisition of the French hens and the colly birds. As for the five gold rings, a collection of eight sets were ordered by a woman. I regret to say, your benefactor has been rather clever.”

“You said eight sets of gold rings, Mr. Morris?” Darcy’s voice began to rise in agitation.

“That is correct.” He winced.

“I care not what it takes. This has to stop. Hire additional investigators, if you must. As of today, I have received a total of six partridges and six pear trees, ten turtle doves, one of which bit my sister’s finger, twelve French hens, twelve colly birds, two sets of five gold rings and just this morning, six geese-a-laying. The way these gifts are compounding, my property is abounding with fowl, and we are only half way through the twelve days!”

“Darcy, calm down.” The colonel grabbed his cousin by the arm as he spoke, forcing him to sit. “Even if we cannot stop the gifts for the time being, Mother has offered to take the birds so that they may be donated to one of her charities. There are many who are in need of food in the worst part of the city, and she will be sending over one of her footmen to collect them for distribution. Rest assured, we shall put an end to this madness.”

“Humph!”



Day 10

*Darcy House
The Study
4 January, 1812*

“Elizabeth, please come in. I have had another note from Richard. Apparently, the nine ladies dancing who were sent yesterday and today’s ten Lords-a-leaping, are hired performers who have been without regular employment since the fire at Drury Lane. Richard assures me, for a small fee, the actors will gladly resign their positions and not return for the remaining two days of their performance. It is also my understanding that Mr. Morris has finally put an end to the birds.”

“Thank goodness for that, but does he know anything about the eleven pipers piping or the twelve drummers drumming?”

“That, my lovely wife, remains to be seen. I am hoping Morris will be able to locate the musicians and stop them from coming here as well. Each day our street has become more crowded with spectators who wish to take pleasure and laugh at our expense. I tell you, Elizabeth, were it not for my aunt’s ball on Twelfth Night, I would gladly whisk you away to Pemberley this very day.” Darcy reached for his wife, pulled her into his embrace, and kissed the top of her head.

“Fitzwilliam, it still puzzles me as to why anyone would go to all of this trouble and expense to try to embarrass us in this fashion.”

“Those, too, are my thoughts. It makes no sense.”

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“Then again,” she playfully teased while trying to wiggle free, “perhaps you have a former lover who is disgruntled over our marriage. Tell me, Mr. Darcy, could that be the problem?”

“I think not, my dear.” He held her firm and kissed her soundly on the lips. “Rest assured, Elizabeth, you are my first and only love. In truth, Mr. Morris believes this entire fiasco is the work of two people. To be precise, they are a man and a woman who have donned several disguises.”

“Two people?”

“Yes. Hopefully, they will be caught in the end.” He sighed. “Next year, do let us stay in the country for the holidays. I am weary of Town.”

Elizabeth reached up and touched her husband’s face. “With pleasure, my love.”



Several Days Later

“Miss Bingley, the gentleman and lady you were expecting have arrived. Would you care to see them now?”

“Yes, Forsett, please show them in.” Caroline quickly folded up the missive she had been reading from her brother’s solicitor and put it to the side. Before leaving on holiday with his wife, Charles had authorized Mr. Knox to release additional monies for her use during the holiday season. After all she would need to make purchases for Boxing Day, gifts for a few relatives and certainly some new winter necessities for herself. For some extra coin, the solicitor had turned his head the other way when Caroline presented him with her very unusual list of purchases. This particular letter was confirmation that all of her bills had anonymously been paid in full.

Picking up a folded copy of the latest gossip paper, she greeted her guests. “I was just enjoying a bit of tattle about Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy.” She gleefully chuckled. “It seems they were besieged with unusual gifts during the holiday season.”

“So we have heard,” the gentleman drawled purposely nodded to his companion.

“Perhaps you would care to read it for yourself,” Caroline simpered, handing the man her copy of the publication. The man grinned as he eagerly took the paper and opened it to make sure that what he came for was between the pages.

“Ah, yes, I believe I shall enjoy this article very much,” he answered, tucking the paper and monetary contents in his breast pocket. “Very much indeed!”

“Be sure that you do. Should I have need of your services in the future, where may I contact you?”

“Why, Younge’s boarding house—Prusom Street, on the east side of Town.” The man then graciously tipped his hat, the lady politely curtsied, and the two of them left as quickly as they had come.

~ **Finish** ~

Note: The best known version of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” was first printed in English in 1780 without music and was recited as a chant or rhyme. It appeared in a little book for children called “Mirth without Mischief” as a Twelfth Night memories-and-forfeits game. The standard tune now associated with this poem is derived from a 1909 arrangement by English composer Frederic Austin. There are twelve cumulative verses, each describing a gift given by “my true love,” starting on December 25th. The gifts not only have a playful meaning but symbolize religious events pertaining to the life of Christ.



About the author

I am a private music instructor living in Crown Point, Indiana where I teach voice, violin and piano. As a teen, I was introduced to Jane Austen by my mother who loved old books, old movies and old songs. In the summer of 2011, I stumbled upon Jane Austen Fanfiction at a local book store and became a loyal fan of this genre. Since then, I met several talented JAFF authors and devoted readers who were active on social media and eventually became a moderator for the private JAFF forum, DarcyandLizzy.com. It was there that I first tried my hand at writing short stories. I have the greatest appreciation for the creative world of Jane Austen Fanfiction and am thrilled to be a part of the JAFF community. You can find me at: DarcyandLizzy.com, Facebook, and YouTube.

Jennifer Redlarczyk (Jen Red) ♪

Link to Amazon Author Page: https://www.amazon.com/Jennifer-Redlarczyk/e/Bo7BPCBHMQ?ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_2&qid=1634244789&sr=8-2

For Book2Read or Draft2Digital I don't have a universal link for an author page with listing of books. As far as I can tell, they list individually. Here is my link for the Spanish Book on that format: <https://books2read.com/u/47XJpj>

Una Muy Alegre Confusión: Una Novella Corta Sobre Orgullo y Prejuicio



A Christmas Story

By Nicole Clarkston

Elizabeth Bennet rested her chin on her hand and gazed out her aunt's parlor window at the chilly London streets. She ought to be reading or playing with her young cousins. That was why she had come, was it not?

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner had spent a fortnight in Hertfordshire for Jane's wedding to Mr. Bingley, and they could be away from home no longer. However, the children had been so sorry to leave their Bennet cousins at Christmas that Elizabeth had been invited to return to Cheapside with them.

She suspected, however, that it was probably not merely for the children's pleasure that she had been invited to come away from Longbourn for a time. Somehow, a rumor had started around Meryton that Elizabeth had suffered a great disappointment; a wild speculation that vexed her to no end when she first heard it. Mercifully, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner had been most solicitous to her.

Elizabeth sighed and rested her forehead against the cool of the window. If only Mr. Darcy had accompanied his friend to Hertfordshire this autumn. Not that she had truly expected him to. In fact, it was miracle enough that Mr. Bingley had been permitted to renew his addresses to Jane. Mr. Darcy must certainly have given his approval, or at least withdrawn his objections, for did not Mr. Bingley mention that he had seen Mr. Darcy in London only the day before he came back?

And yet, Mr. Bingley had come alone.

One day, she would have to accustom herself to this feeling. It must become her natural existence now, to learn to live with such a bitter void. But for now, she went about her days with the cold, empty sensation that a rather large part of herself had gone amiss, that matters had not settled as they were meant to, and that any moment, she ought to be expecting the culmination of all her longing.

But the firmer such a conviction took hold of her, the less sense it made. Mr. Darcy would not—could not—have more to do with her. He had settled two of her sisters; one honorably and the other less so, but settled at his very great expense, nonetheless. Though her heart whispered that he had done that for her, she should no longer hold out hope that he might overlook the taint of her family's scandal. He was a Darcy of Pemberley, and

he had been foolish enough to offer her his hand once before. No man alive would renew his addresses after everything that had happened.

At least Jane was happy and Lydia was safe. She would forever thank Mr. Darcy for the part he had played in her sisters' fortunes. As for herself, it seemed time to forget about the best man she had ever known. Time to find some other direction for her life.

"Lizzy? I thought you were upstairs with the children."

Elizabeth looked up at her aunt's entry. "Oh, forgive me. I suppose I was woolgathering. I will go at once."

"That was not what I meant. We did not invite you here to play the nursemaid. However, I am not accustomed to seeing you so idle."

"I find I have few ambitions at present," Elizabeth sighed.

Mrs. Gardiner came to sit beside her. "You know, I spoke to your uncle earlier and he said he was surprised that you had not taken the carriage out for some shopping as you usually do. Did not your mother send with you a list of her wants? And you have not been to the book seller's, either."

"It is true," Elizabeth admitted. "Usually, I can hardly be kept away."

"Well? Shall I have James bring the carriage round?"

Elizabeth studied her aunt—the careful smile, the veiled hope in her eyes. Mrs. Gardiner was trying to cheer her in the best way she knew; by offering a bit of unchaperoned freedom. "I suppose it is as good a day as the next. Perhaps I will go into Mayfair, where I may walk easily between my favorite shops. Would Uncle mind?"

"I daresay he would not. Oh, I would come with you, but I have much planning to do this afternoon for our party."

Whether that was true or not, Elizabeth could not say. All she knew was that it was time to stop staring out of windows, hoping Mr. Darcy would one day appear in her view.



"Darcy, there you are! Egad, man, do you mean to leave your study at all this week?"

Darcy glanced up when his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, announced himself at the door. "I have work to do."

"You always have work to do. I am here to inform you that you have a deal of living to do as well. Did you know that Georgiana thinks you have consumption?"

Darcy scoffed. "Why would she think that? I do not keep to my bed, nor do I have a cough."

"Perhaps it was the ghost-like complexion that did it. When was the last time you got out of doors?"

Darcy stared at his desk. George Wickham's "wedding," if one could call it such, had been Darcy's last public outing. Oh, he had called on the earl and countess once, and

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twice he had been to Bingley's townhouse, before he left for Hertfordshire. But since then, Darcy had largely kept to himself.

"I tell you what," Fitzwilliam said, "why don't we take Georgiana ice skating? She would like that, would she not?"

"She is terrified of skating. She nearly broke her ankle last winter, and it still troubles her when she strains it overmuch."

Fitzwilliam's face fell. "I forgot. Well, somehow you must get out. Shall I take you for a spin at Hyde Park? People may have forgotten that a real man resides at Darcy House and they may begin mistaking the place as haunted unless you make an appearance now and again."

Darcy frowned and put his pen away. "As a matter of fact, I had some shopping to do before Christmas. Perhaps you will be satisfied to come with me."

"I could use a new hat," Fitzwilliam mused.

"I am going to the book warehouse."

"Then, forget it. I haven't the patience to watch you read half a book before deciding whether or not you like the style of print. Are you certain I cannot persuade you into a round of billiards at the club?"

"I can play billiards here."

"You can read a book here, too." Fitzwilliam frowned, then poked a finger at Darcy. "It's a woman, isn't it?"

Darcy's neck grew hot. "What is?"

"The reason you hide here day after day. I always said when you found a lady you admired, you would go after her like a business deal, and heaven help you if she declined to transact with you. Is that what happened? Your, ah, 'merger' failed, and now you think to simply fold up shop?"

"It is nothing of the kind," Darcy answered stiffly. That was as far from the truth as East was from the West, but he was of no mind to discuss Elizabeth Bennet with his cousin.

"Well, that is odd, because I cannot think of another reason for you to suddenly have so much work to do that you only leave your study to sleep and eat. Enjoy your shopping trip this afternoon. You are going, are you not?"

Darcy drummed his fingers on his desk. No, he had not meant to go out today, but his cousin would let him have no peace if he did not. "Yes," he lied. "I was just about to ring for my carriage. Are you certain you do not wish to come?"

"Someone has to keep Georgiana company, I suppose. I believe I will entertain myself with a bit of her playing and something from your cellars."

Darcy rose and straightened his jacket with a jerk. "Suit yourself." That was a relief. If he must go out, he could do so with only his own thoughts to keep him company: thoughts of Elizabeth Bennet, and the life with her that he was missing out on.



Elizabeth asked to be driven to the haberdashery first. Her mother had requested a few trifles that were not easily had from Meryton, and since they were all small items, Elizabeth reasoned that she could afford to purchase them from one of the shops near Mayfair. It would delight her mother to know that her buttons and thimbles had come from the same shop where lords and ladies procured their items.

When the coachman handed her down, she stopped and spoke to him before continuing her errand. "James, I expect I shall be some while in this shop or the next. There is no need for you to stand attention here in the street. Is there somewhere you and the horses could rest?"

He touched his hat. "I'll go round to the mews, Miss. Shall I come back in an hour?"

Elizabeth looked thoughtfully up the street. There was a dressmaker next door, and Mama would want her to examine the latest fashions in lace and ribbons. The bookseller's was up the street and on the opposite side, still well within walking distance. She would save that treat for last.

"Make it two hours, James. I shall be waiting for you at that corner by the book shop."

"Yes, Miss." He mounted the box and clucked to the horses, and the carriage moved off. She was alone.

Elizabeth did not hurry. It was a bittersweet pleasure, being able to wander alone in her thoughts even while appearing to be sociable in public. She was free to ruminate all she wished, and yet appear no different from any other happy young lady out shopping. No one would look on her in pity.

And so, she passed a leisurely hour looking for the things her mother had requested. She had the parcels wrapped to be held for her driver, and bet her steps up the street. Her reward lay not fifty yards away: the bookseller's.

It was a fine day for shopping. The weather was crisp but not frigid, and the skies were clear for the moment. Indeed, there was nothing to trouble her in the least, apart from the usual ice and snow on the pavement. And this, she discovered, was a very great bother, for even her warmest boots were not equal to the icy pothole she accidentally stepped into while browsing the shop windows.

"Oh, how ridiculous!" Elizabeth groaned to herself. She was hopping on her dry foot now, fumbling away from the hole into which her foot had slipped. Icy water had poured into the top of her boot and was seeping halfway up her stockings. She could not even pull her boot off to dump out the water, standing in the street like that. The best she could do was to lean against the building and hope no one could see her face. She could not possibly walk into the bookseller's with her hem six inches deep in ice! Her humiliation would know no bounds.

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But when she tried to set her foot down, she discovered that she had grander problems than a chilled foot. People were staring at her from all around. And not just any people. These were London's most fabulous ladies, hiding tittering smiles behind kid gloves and fur muffs.

She knew better than to try to speak to any of them. No one would associate themselves with such a scene, so she started backing away. Somehow, she would have to get word to James that she needed to go home right away, but none of the faces before her seemed friendly. She kept backing up.

And that was when her back encountered something solid. Solid and very warm, with a voice she knew as well as her own.



Darcy had his carriage set him down at the corner and tipped his hat to another gentleman passing by. The bookseller's would be a welcome diversion this afternoon, and he was beginning to look forward to a leisurely browse through the aisles. But as he started for the door, a young lady just outside the shop had an unfortunate mishap.

He was at hand to see the whole thing. She was transfixed by the window display, and not watching where her feet were going. Perfectly understandable, as the pavement ought to have been in good repair, but apparently it was not. The poor lady stumbled and soaked her petticoats.

Darcy rushed up almost at once, meaning to offer help, but just then, the young lady looked up, and he beheld her face.

Elizabeth!

She was here, in his very neighborhood! She did not see him at first, preoccupied as she was with her frozen boot. Darcy's heart beat thick and fast in his chest. If she were a stranger, he could simply help her to her carriage and see her safely off. But this was Elizabeth. His heart and soul.

He would not be content just walking her to her carriage.

People were starting to gather round her, and Darcy could see the shock and embarrassment in her manner. She did not wish to make a scene, so she was trying to slip away with as little fuss as possible. And she was backing directly toward him.

Darcy put up his hands until her shoulders met them, and she froze in alarm. "Miss Bennet, may I be of some assistance?"

She spun around, her eyes wide with amazement. "Mr. Darcy!" she mouthed.

Darcy looked straight into the eyes of the fine ladies all gathered around, whispering behind their hands. What he did next would echo in every drawing room in Mayfair by evening, but he no longer cared. He would risk gossip gladly for another chance with Elizabeth.

"May I see you home?" he asked humbly.

Her eyes flicked down to her sodden skirts, the splattered mud that now froze her right boot. "You are very kind, but I would not wish to trouble you, sir."

"It would be my honor," he assured her, extending his elbow.

Those wondrous eyes that had haunted him for so many months traveled his frame--from his hand to his chest, and finally, her gaze met his. Slowly, with a warmth growing in her face, she raised her hand to rest it on his arm. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy."

There were a few gasps from the onlookers. More astonished whispers. But Darcy put his hand over Elizabeth's and refused to look at anyone else. "Come, my carriage is just here."

His driver got down at once to assist the lady, but Darcy would not have it. He settled the block with his own hands, then gently supported her as she stepped in. Her eyes never left him. After he joined her and the door closed, he held his breath, hoping she would speak first. She always had a finer way with words than he did, and the feelings jumbling together in his heart defied any attempt of his to piece them into speech.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Darcy," she began. "It was very kind of you to come to my aid... no." She closed her eyes and her fine white teeth sank into her lower lip. "No, that is not what I wish to say to you."

He sat forward, his hand reaching for hers in concern. "Miss Elizabeth?"

She shook her head. "I am grateful, for this kindness among so many others, but if I have been given a short chance to speak, though I may never see you again, there is something of more import I must say."

"I do not understand," he said slowly, his heart strangling in panic. "Never see me again?" Was she trying to tell him that she could not bear his presence? That the past was too painful to recall?

"I once told you that you were the last man in the world that I could ever... Well. Some things are better left unsaid. You would be well within your rights to nurse some bitterness over my treatment of you. However, I would have you know that I was wrong."

His fingers tightened around hers in hope. "You were?"

"I think you the finest man of my acquaintance," she said firmly. "And I heartily repent of my former opinions. For all that it is worth from one who once mocked you, please accept my apology for--"

"Elizabeth!"

She stopped speaking, and her glorious eyes started to fill with tears. "I know I must shock and embarrass you with such speech, but it is the truth, and I hoped most ardently to have one chance to tell you. I could not bear for you to be alive in the world and thinking I despised you, but you are free to think of me as you wish. I ask nothing more than for you to believe that."

"But I shall ask something of you," he said, reaching for her other hand. "Marry me. I beg you, as I have never begged anything in my life. You can little understand how I have ached for you these many months."

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More tears sparkled in her eyes, and she leaned forward to touch her forehead to his. “Yes, I believe I can understand,” she whispered. “I love you, Mr. Darcy.”



About the author

Nicole Clarkston is a book lover and a happily married mom of three. Originally from Idaho, she now lives in Oregon with her own romantic hero, several horses, and one very fat dog. She has loved crafting alternate stories and sequels since she was a child, and she is never found sitting quietly without a book or a writing project.

Three of her novels have been translated into Spanish, as well as three of her short novels under the name of Alix James. All of them are available at Amazon Kindle.



Darcy and the Harlequin

By Maria Grace

Darcy laid his newspaper aside, exchanging it for the minute crystal glass of port that he had poured all while telling himself he would not need it.

He had been wrong.

The deep burgundy liquid glittered in the parlor's candle light and burned the back of his throat, just enough to remind him that all was not well with the world. The parlor's soothing greens and blues and polished mahogany paneling tried to remind him all was all. Indeed, it was true. Miss Bingley should not have worried. Her little Christmastide dinner party hardly garnered any notice at all in the society pages. A few brief words of Sir Andrew's and Lady Margaret's attendance and little more.

Would she be gratified that her dinner was deemed worth of mention, or offended that it garnered no more notice than a few brief sentences? It was difficult to predict.

As difficult as most of her reactions were.

No doubt he would find out soon.

His mother's white marble and ormolu mantle clock chimed. The reclining cherub atop it stared accusingly at him, as though he should be jumping up, urged into action by the alert just sounded. Father hated that clock. Despised it. Occasionally, ordered it moved out of the parlor to some out of the way room in a little used part of the house. And always it reappeared, without remark, without ire, just a silent raised eyebrow and wry smile from mother.

It had been a very long time since the clock had moved.

Had he been traveling with his parents, they would have left by now. Mother had always been determined to arrive early when they went to Drury Lane. The crush of people seemed less that way.

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But it was not for her sake that she insisted. She knew he found crowds very unsettling and made every effort to help ensure he would enjoy venturing out of the safe quiet bubble he preferred.

Some things had changed very little, even decades later. Years of practice made it no easier for him. He could wear a mask of civility a little longer now, but that was all.

Mother had always been comfortable in a crowd, much like Bingley... or Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She seemed to know what to say and what to do to make people around her at ease. How did she do that?

The cherub clock chimed the passing of another quarter hour. Procrastination would not make things any easier. The Christmastide pantomime would begin at 6:30 and arriving later would only make the teeming masses harder to navigate. He called for his carriage to be brought around.

The ride to the theater passed quickly, too quickly, and he descended into the milling throng outside the theater. The late afternoon sun made it easy to scan the crowd for Hurst and Bingley's sisters. Several ladies wearing ostrich feathers and pearls turned toward him with inquiring glances. They followed his gaze into the crowd, as if trying to discern who he sought. He winced and pinched the bridge of his nose.

No, not her!

The short, stout woman in the outlandish purple hat with far too many feathers contributed to the society pages. The hat was new, but the abundance of feathers was the shrew's trademark, appearing in far too many of Darcy's nightmares. No doubt his innocent outing to the panto would be the subject of her pen, probably even tonight.

The crowd packed in tightly, but perhaps he could make his way back to his coach—

No. A white plume caught his eye, bobbing in the sea of well-dressed entertainment seekers, weaving its way toward him. Beneath it, Miss Bingley, with the Hursts tagging behind, approached. Damn shame that Bingley himself could not join them tonight. Socializing was always easier when he was about.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Darcy." She and her feather dipped in a small curtsy. "How kind of you to join us." A dark velvet cloak covered most of her evening dress which was pale in color, low in cut, and abundant in adornment.

"I appreciate Bingley's invitation." He did not like to lie, but sometimes it was unavoidable.

"Shall we find our box—before any more children arrive?" Hurst cast furtive glances about the milling crowd, his upper lip pulled back. "Dashed inconvenient thing that these performances draw so many children who should be in the nursery."

Children who often behaved better than their parents once the performance whipped spirits into a frenzy. Young ones rarely incited a riot. But that was most likely an opinion better kept to himself. Hurst could become disagreeable when opposing opinions were offered.

“At least we shall have none in our box.” Miss Bingley tapped her lace fan on her palm.

“You do not like children?” Darcy struggled his brow from furrowing, having been warned, by none other than Miss Elizabeth Bennet, that it made him look intimidating.

“What is to like or not like? They are necessary. That is why nurses and governesses and boarding schools are employed.” Miss Bingley shared a knowing glance with her sister.

“Hear, hear,” Hurst waved his hand, ducked his chin and waded into the crowd.

Darcy ushered the ladies to follow Hurst and stepped behind to bring up the rear.

It should not bother him that Miss Bingley did not like children. A woman of her rank had little need to. She was entirely correct. Nurses and governesses and tutors could relieve her of all need to interact with any offspring.

Mother had not felt that way about her children, though. How many times had she stolen away into the nursery for the opportunity to read to him from his favorite book? The nurse used to assure her there was no need for the mistress to trouble herself.

Still, Mother would not be gainsaid. Sometimes, Father would join her. He would fold himself in a tiny nursery chair to sit with them as she read.

Some of the servants thought the arrangement peculiar, but Mrs. Reynolds would not permit that sort of talk below stairs. He had once overheard her scolding a maid who dared criticize his parents for paying far too much attention to the goings on in the nursery.

What man did such a thing?

The kind of man Darcy wanted to be.

But that would require a wife. And more importantly, one who wanted to do more than merely birth her children.

Miss Elizabeth drew children to her. Walking on the streets of Meryton, nursery maids brought their charges to her. Miss Elizabeth would drop to a knee to address them eye to eye. He had never been close enough to hear what they said to her or how she replied. But their laughter and looks of delight said enough. She was not the kind of woman to become a disinterested mother.

They slowly made their way through the three large doors that lead from the hall into the theater rotunda, flowing against the stream of at least a thousand others intent on the

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same errand. Two thousand people in a single building including those in the pit, lower and upper galleries! He rang a finger around his collar, gasping for air. The open rotunda's open arched ceiling and tall Corinthian columns helps his breath come easier. Hurst plowed on through the rotunda, eventually leading them to the box-corridors and finally, their box.

The noise level plummeted like the temperature on the crest of a winter storm. A weight sloughed off his shoulder and he sucked in a chest opening breath. The crowds would soon file it, but he would enjoy the moment for what it was.

The three levels of two dozen boxes each ringed the pit and the gallery in a three-quarter circle around the stage. The majority of the theater had been trimmed in dignified green, with gold accents. But the relief carvings on the boxes boasted a treatment of rich crimson—a garish sort of color all told—reminding all of the wealth and rank kept from the ordinary rabble beyond those half-walls.

“What say you, Mr. Darcy?” Miss Bingley settled herself into the well-padded green and gold chair beside her sister.

What was she talking about?

“For heaven's sake, Miss Bingley, do not bother the man so. I have no doubt he does not care about the state of Mrs. What's-her-name's daughter's hat.” Hurst flipped the tails of his coat out of the way and sat behind his wife. He gestured to the chair beside him.

A flash of purple in the next box over! Darcy's gut twisted. Did Hurst recognize her, too? Not sitting next to Miss Bingley was a very good idea. He settled himself on the velvet covered chair.

The theater filled and soon the curtain parted. The crowd hushed, ready to be transported by the magic of the players.

He leaned forward, studying the stage, lit by magnificent lamps held on triangular pedestals, lighting the stage from front and ends of the stage, rather than from above in chandeliers. But the stink of smoke and candle tallow more pronounced.

It was worth it though for the clearer view. Mother would have approved. She had a remarkable eye for detail. She would whisper in his ear about this bit or that. It had been a game they played, who could discover the most about the details of the stage before the first player came out.

Miss Bingley preferred noticing the details of the other ladies who attended.

Masked characters entered the stage, Cinderella and her father. The masks and costumes were excellent and different to what he had seen before. Fascinating.

Miss Bingley pressed her shoulder to her sister's and whispered something. “There, in the lower gallery seats, the fourth row,” she gestured with her chin. “Do you see?”

Were they paying any attention to the production at all?

“I believe I do. In the pink dress? Sitting between the children?”

“Yes, yes. Do you think...”

Darcy shifted, leaning on his elbow. Who were they looking at? He peered into the crowd, following their directions.

“Why yes, I think you are right. Oh, Caroline, what are we to do?”

How could they recognize someone by the back of her head, and why ever would it be so significant? Stuff and nonsense!

Darcy leaned back and returned his attention to the pantomime. Harlequin, in a black mask and bright red and green patterned costume, waved the slapstick. The dainty Fairy Queen waved her arms, spoke her magic words and transformed not just Cinderella and her father but the setting as well.

Masks and outer robes fell away, set pieces turned and tipped and transformed. The world of the harlequinade appeared.

The corner of his lips rose just a mite. As a boy, this was his favorite part of the entire show. There was something innately appealing about such change being so easy and effortless, even if it was just a stage illusion.

“Here we are again!” Clown cried from the stage and vaulted from one set piece to another.

The children in the audience, especially the youngest ones, jumped to their feet squealing and pointing. The young woman sitting in the fourth row below them turned to speak to the little girls beside her.

Heaven forefend!

Jane Bennet.

What was she doing in London?

When had she come and how long was she to be here?

More important, was her sister with her?

Darcy leaned as far forward as he could and peered into the crowd for any sign of Miss Elizabeth.

Not that he had any intention of speaking to her, no that would surely appear in the society pages. No, any public meeting with her would be impossible. But it would be pleasing to see her, to simply know she was in town.

“She said she had an uncle in Cheapside.” Did Mrs. Hurst realize she sounded just like a hissing cat? Perhaps she was merely capturing the spirit of the merry chase scene

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below them. “No doubt she is staying with them. I can only guess her intentions are toward continuing her pursuit.”

Cheapside? That was not very far. He could perhaps contrive to walk in that direction ... regularly. No matter if she were in the city, Miss Elizabeth would arrange to take a morning walk, somehow. She was a creature of habit.

But she would not go out alone, a maid, or perhaps her sister, or even the children would accompany her. She might walk out with the nursery maid, or she even take the task from the maid altogether and entertain the children entirely on her own. Perhaps she would walk with them all the way to the Tower Green. The little boys would no doubt enjoy the opportunity to stretch their legs in a good run.

Mother had sometimes taken him there when they stayed in town. How invigorating it had been to indulge run as far and as fast as he liked there. Confinement indoors had been one of the things he least liked about their visits to town.

Tower Green was the kind of place where one might accidentally encounter any number of persons. One might even have a brief conversation, an entirely unremarkable conversation.

What might one say in such an encounter?

A contented murmur rippled through the crowd. Pantaloon placed Columbine’s hand in Harlequin’s. Cheers rose, all was now as it should be.

Darcy stood with Hurst and applauded, still searching the crowd for signs of Miss Elizabeth.

The remaining acts followed, ending with a rousing musical chorus. The audience joined in, encouraging far too many repetitions. At last, the players disappeared back behind stage.

Slowly, like cold treacle from a spoon, the crowd trickled out of the theater.

Miss Bingley pled a dislike of the crush, and insisted they remain in their box until much of the theater cleared. Mrs. Hurst agreed, so there was little to be done but wait for their leisure.

Perhaps, though, it would be best for him to be seen leaving alone. That could go far in clearing up misunderstandings by Purple hat and feather about the company he kept today. He rose.

“Pray, Mr. Darcy, do not leave us yet.” Miss Bingley looked up at him, batting her eyes.

He knew that look far, far too well. Bingley was definitely wrong about his sister’s intentions.

“Forgive me, but I definitely must go.” He probably should not have come in the first place.

“Wait, I beg of you. There is a matter of very great import which we must discuss.”

He took half a step back. “I have no idea to what you refer.”

“Did you not see what we did, there in the audience below us? Jane Bennet.”

“I observed a young woman who looked much like Miss Bennet.”

Miss Bingley’s cheeks flushed. “She did not look like Miss Bennet, she was Jane Bennet. I have no doubt whatsoever. Have you already forgotten why we insisted Charles keep to London and eschew his country house?”

In truth, for a moment, he had.

“I fear this is a most serious situation, very serious indeed. You were so integral to convincing Charles to remain in town. I beg your assistance again. We must ensure that he does not become reacquainted with Miss Bennet here in town. I am entirely certain he will not agree to yet another change of venue.”

Darcy returned to his seat. “I understand your concern, but I hardly think it likely they should meet by some chance encounter. As I understood, her aunt and uncle are not often in company, and he is in trade. How many opportunities do you have to rub shoulders with tradesmen? No, I think it quite unlikely indeed. You have no reason for concern.”

“You underestimate Charles’ attachment to Miss Bennet. I have no doubt that should he learn of her being in the city, he will make every attempt to renew his acquaintance.”

Was Bingley so very attached? It had not seemed so. But if he was, did that change anything about the situation? “He well knows the danger such connections might pose to your family’s standing. Surely he could not wish for Mrs. Bennet as a mother-in-law.” A shudder snaked down Darcy’s spine.

That would truly be an awful fate. That possibility alone should be enough to render any Bennet woman entirely undesirable. And yet...

The Darcy name and connections were recognized, well able to withstand a ridiculous connection or two. Not at all like the fragility of the Bingley line, so newly established amongst good society.

Miss Bingley fluttered her lace fan. “One would think he had the sense to realize, but I am not entirely sure. We must agree to keep this news amongst ourselves. Charles must not suspect that she might be anywhere nearby.”

“I abhor disguise—”

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“I understand that, sir, and I hold your character in the greatest of respect. Consider what is at stake, though. Moreover, there is no deception being practiced here. We are merely choosing not to speak, not speaking falsehoods.” A thin smile crept over her face, and she blinked a little faster.

The line between the two was very, very fine, perhaps too fine to truly distinguish. Deception, active or passive, was deception, and as such was an affront to the Darcy character.

So, then what was he to do? Should he go out of his way to mention that he had seen Miss Bennet?

No, that would not do either.

“So long as he does not specifically ask if I have encountered Miss Bennet at the theater, I will hold my peace.”

It was an uncomfortable compromise, but it was tolerable.

And necessary.

“I admire your principles, Mr. Darcy. I cannot imagine asking more of you. You are a good friend to my brother. We appreciate the way you are guiding him into society.” She batted her eyes again.

“If that is all, then, pray excuse me. Good evening.” He bowed.

Her features drooped just a mite. “Good evening, sir.”

He turned and strode out as quickly as he could without breaking into a run. The sooner he left Miss Bingley’s presence, and the longer he stayed out of it, the better it would be.

The long staircase was relatively empty. A definite blessing, given his frame of mind. Having to pick through a crowd might have left him running entirely mad.

Outside, he gulped the cooler, crisp night air, exactly the balm he needed for Miss Bingley’s attentions. Except for Purple hat and feathers lingering near the theater doors.

Must find the coach!

Good man! His coachman had the coach near the street light, waiting exactly where it should be, and he climbed in. Purple hat and feathers had observed his hasty exit from the theater and followed him at a discreet distance. She kept looking over her shoulder, as though she expected to find Miss Bingley trailing after him, or even more dramatic, left somewhere, crying bitter tears in the wake of his rejection.

What a truly vile creature!

Even the possibility of seeing or meeting with Miss Elizabeth hardly outweighed the risk of being subject to that harpy. He needed to return to Pemberley soon, before the surveillance of the gossips drove him barmy.

But to do so without seeing Miss Elizabeth? That was hardly more acceptable.

He had several more social engagements demanding his presence. Leaving before those would cause more problems than it would solve. Surely, he could find out whether Miss Elizabeth was in town during that time.

He would; and then he would leave and be done with the intrigues of the ton.

THE END



About the author

She stumbled into Jane Austen fan-dom in the mid '90s with Emma Thompson's Sense and Sensibility film, having somehow graduated HS without ever having read Austen. It was only a short leap then to consume all of Austen's works, in all their various media forms. In the hopes of discovering more works by Austen, she stumbled into the fan fiction forums, which naturally led to asking 'What if...' herself. Twenty nine books later, she still asks that question.

She writes gaslamp fantasy, historical romance and non-fiction to help justify her research addiction.

You can find more about her books in her webpage: [Books - Random Bits of Fascination](#)



A Wedding for Christmas

By Cristina Almario

Mr. Bingley's engagement to Jane Bennet caused a great stir. The appearance of Lady Catherine sweeping through Longbourn had consequences for Elizabeth. Leaving her heartbroken, for the first time Lizzie could not bear such degree of joy and happiness that filled the house. She asked her wish and it was granted to immediately settle for a few weeks in London, at the home of the Gardiner's.

Trunks were packed and within two days she was on her way north. It was a pleasant surprise to her aunt and uncle when she appeared at their door. They were delighted for Jane's and Lizzie's presence; they were like daughters to them. And they were so attentive and enjoyed the company of their little cousins.

The Gardiner's saw Elizabeth somehow discouraged, but blamed it on Jane's approaching liaison and how she would lose her sister, friend, and confidant. Actually Lizzie was happy for her sister, but at the expense of her own happiness. Her heart belonged to Mr. Darcy and she supposed he would come to Longbourn in order to share his friend's happiness when the engagement took place. However, he never showed up.

As for Mr. Darcy, he remained in London. After his aunt's visit and the distortion of Elizabeth's words, he decided to settle at Pemberley until the first snowfall. What Elizabeth could not have guessed was the unhappiness that filled Mr. Darcy. Fitzwilliam felt sorry for him.

Georgiana was happy to spend more time in her brother's company and not just with Mrs. Annesley's, but he seemed more serious than usual, even with her.

The cold came and forced the Darcys to spend the rest of the winter in London, not before a missive arrived from his best friend Charles Bingley, telling him of the date of his marriage, asking to join him in their happiness by being his best man. The wedding was to be held in Hertfordshire during the Christmas season. A Christmas wedding. Charles was unaware how little Darcy wanted to spend Christmas away from his beloved Pemberley.

Months in gray London meant cold and occasional snow.



One day, while in London, Georgiana insisted on taking a walk in Hyde Park and Darcy reluctantly agreed to accompany her.

Elizabeth, unable to take long walks along her favorite paths in Hertfordshire, changed her habits and decided to get to know every corner of every park in London during her stay with the Gardiners.

It was on that day that, surprising not only Mr. Darcy, they came upon Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth. Both Darcy and Elizabeth were astonished; they seemed to be destined to repeat the same story as that at Pemberley. Having Georgiana hanging on his arm, it forced him to pull himself together due to her bewilderment.

“Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Bennet what an unexpected surprise.”

Elizabeth had not yet recovered from the astonishment of finding him there. Her aunt noticed and spoke for her.

“Yes, my niece has been wanting to take a walk in Hyde Park for days, it's one of the few ones she has left to see.”

“And is it of your liking?”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy,” she managed to answer with difficulty.

“I thought you would be with your family, given Mr. Bingley's engagement with your sister, Miss Jane Bennet.”

“Yes, I was present at the engagement, but I wanted to come to London.”

“I see. And are you enjoying your stay here?”

“Yes, I always enjoy being with my aunt and uncle,” Lizzie replied.

“We're glad to hear that.” They didn't take their eyes off each other.

“Miss Darcy, it's such a pleasure to see you again,” said Lizzie turning to the young lady.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet, I was sorry... well, we were terribly sorry about missing your company so early in the summer.”

“I'm sure Miss Bingley was also saddened by our hasty departure.”

“She was terribly sorry,” Georgiana laughed.

“Would you allow us to accompany you on your walk around the park?” Darcy asked.

“It would be a pleasure,” replied Mrs. Gardiner, who took her place beside Georgiana, yielding her spot to Mr. Darcy, who did not hesitate to offer his arm to Lizzie. At this, she blushed.

“And do you plan to stay long in gray London?”

“Do you intend to get rid of my company so soon?” Elizabeth attempted to joke.

“Not at all.” Elizabeth blushed again.

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

“If I am honest, we have not set a date yet to return to Longbourn, except for the days around Jane and Mr. Bingley's wedding.”

“Of course. I... had not considered arriving at Netherfield so soon, but I suppose not. If it is not too much to ask, I would be honored to be able to spare a seat in the carriage so you ride with us.”

Lizzie was surprised at the offer. “It would be such an imposition on my part.”

“Not at all, I offer it freely.”

“I must decline your offer, I am at my aunt and uncle's disposal.”

“I understand. We are leaving in a few days, I must settle a matter before the wedding.”

“Of course.”

Finishing their short walk, Darcy and Georgiana gave a farewell to Lizzie and Mrs. Gardiner. In the remaining days of their stay in London, as much as Darcy continued to stroll through Hyde Park, he did not meet Miss Elizabeth Bennet again.



The ride to Hertfordshire was certainly pleasant, the roads were still passable, although it was now mid-December, and snow generously covered the landscape. Colonel Fitzwilliam joined the Darcys on the road. Netherfield Park had been generously decorated with all types of Christmas decorations; mistletoe filled several rooms at Caroline's expressed request. Upon entering the front door, the guests could sense the holiday spirit as the house was filled with the smells of freshly baked gingerbread cookies, the brightness of natural plants that decorated the staircase and other parts of the mansion with holly, butcher's broom and mistletoe.

After dinner, Darcy retired with his friend to the billiard room where he had to confess his sister's secret to Bingley; he would have to ask the Bennets the next day not to invite their youngest daughter and her husband Wickham, or he would have no other choice but to leave Netherfield.

That first night at Netherfield was just right for Caroline's plan. She abhorred the idea of her brother being engaged to Jane Bennet, but she would not stand idly by for the one thing that would make her happy.

As soon as they were all in their rooms, a note would be sent to Darcy to compel him to come to his sister's room, which actually was Caroline's. At the same time Charles would be lifted from his comfortable bed, thanks to Mrs. Hurst, and led like a lamb to the slaughter to meet Darcy in his “sister's” room.

Everything seemed to go correctly that night, tucked up in her bed, in the dark with only the faint light of the moon peeping through the window. Thus, by the time Darcy would realize that she was not Georgiana, he would already be at her bedside. Then

Charles would arrive, and surprised for that scene, he would insist on doing a quick wedding to avoid any scandal. The Darcy name would help to obtain a special license. She would probably have to make do with the small village church, but in the end, that would hardly matter.

After a few minutes, footsteps stopped in front of her door. Caroline was expectant, in a few moments her fate would be sealed and she would be the new mistress of Pemberley.

There was a light knock at the door. She pretended to have a terrible cough, barely managing to speak to let her future fiancé in. The doorknob opened and he entered.

Louise had been standing attentively in the darkened hallway and when she heard someone approaching her sister's door, she hurried to wake her brother and have him come to Caroline's room. Charles, in his good faith, did not hesitate at his sister's alert and quickly, dressed in a robe, went to attend an ailing Caroline.

Meanwhile, in the other room.

“Georgiana? Georgie?” Darcy whispered.

Caroline could hardly hear anything but a voice inside her saying: “Mrs. Darcy. Mrs. Darcy.”

At that precise instant, the door burst open. Only then Caroline dared to come out of her hiding place, and then she saw her mistake.

“Colonel!” everyone gathered there shouted almost in unison. Richard was startled, barely able to speak.

“I... Georgiana?”

“What is the meaning of this, Colonel, why are you in my sister’s room?” exclaimed Charles.

The screams woke Darcy up, and wanting to make sure it wasn't Georgiana, quickly he was at the door where the screams were coming from, only to find with surprise of seeing Caroline in bed, with the Colonel at her side.

“Richard?”

“It's not what it looks like, I was handed a note from Georgiana, saying she wasn't feeling well, it said this was her room.” He handed the note to Darcy, who needed a candle to read it in detail.

“It’s similar to Georgie's handwriting, but she has never called me Fitzwilliam on paper.” At that moment, the alluded one came forward and took the note out of his hands.

“This is not my handwriting. I did not write this. Brother, what does all this mean?”

“I think they got the wrong addressee. I think the letter was supposed to be for me, but it was mistakenly delivered to Richard. They got the wrong Fitzwilliam.”



CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

The next morning, the whole house awoke with considerable activity. Only the housekeeper and the butler had come to the room the night before, taking with them a strong impression, but after promising not to divulge anything of what had happened, the ladies returned to their rooms.

Bingley had not the slightest doubt that the Colonel had no intention of marrying Caroline, so he decided to send Caroline to Scarborough to her aunt. After the offense committed against his best friend, and which could have had dire consequences towards the Colonel, he felt he owed them a great apology.

“Gentlemen, after my sister's terrible outrage under my roof, I have decided to send her to Scarborough with our aunt this very morning. Mrs. Hurst decided to accompany her, and I cannot say much for my brother-in-law, but he too has departed with them. I do not wish for their presence at my wedding.”

“I think it was for the best. We are fortunate that the staff knows nothing of what happened,” said Darcy, knowing that Bingley paid his housekeeper and butler generously. Charles had tried to do his best for Caroline, but under the circumstances, he needed to have a steady hand. Soon, it would be their wedding and he deserved to be away from his sisters.

It was just that morning that Elizabeth arrived at Longbourn with the Gardiners. At the beginning, their plan had been to arrive the following week, but the snow had begun to fall heavily in London.

Jane was the happiest about Lizzie's return. She had missed her younger sister terribly. Christmas without her sarcasm and infectious joy was not the same.

Later that afternoon, Bingley and Darcy came to the Bennet's, after making sure Caroline, as well as the Hursts, had packed all their belongings, and were heading away from Netherfield. Mrs. Bennet invited them into the parlor, and before they could discuss trivial or prearranged matters, Darcy asked to speak privately with Mr. Bennet.

Certainly, Bingley and he did not wish Wickham's presence at the wedding, but that was not the only subject he broached with Mr. Bennet. They were not long in their meeting. Crossing the threshold of Mr. Bennet's door, Darcy made his way to the parlor. There he found Bingley inviting the ladies for a short walk and he joined him in the invitation. Only Jane and Elizabeth decided to accept the offer, so they went upstairs to change their clothes as well as to suitably shod themselves for the weather.

The first few feet of snow had fallen. Darcy and Elizabeth walked in awkward silence. Elizabeth was too embarrassed by everything that had happened with her little sister and how she had judged all of her companion's actions. Even under rather difficult conditions, they soon left Bingley and Jane behind. Outside they could see houses covered with snow, as well as roads and trees, now whitish in color. A heavy storm had already left everything covered, transforming it into a beautiful and peaceful landscape.

“Mr. Darcy, I would like to thank you for your presence and help with my sister's wedding.”

“Miss Bennet,” replied Darcy, “I must say you give me more credit than I deserve, for it is also my friend's wedding.”

Elizabeth felt awkward to carry on with a casual conversation. The truth was the snow began to be impassable and they couldn't go much further unless they took the main road. Thus, they stopped and Darcy seized the moment.

“Miss Bennet, I know we've had many disagreements in the past, but I can only push my luck. I know there was a time when I was disrespectful to you, and you made me see my great mistake.”

“Mr. Darcy... you are not the only one who has made a mistake. I owe you an apology.”

“No, you don't have to. I'm the one who needs to apologize, and tell you that not a single day has gone by when I haven't thought of you. You have opened my eyes for wanting something more in life, now I see that everything I have is nothing if I have no one to share it with.”

Darcy placed one knee in the cold snow. He only had eyes for Elizabeth. At the distance, Bingley and Jane were aware of the scene before them.

“My dearest Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would you do me the great honor of accepting me and becoming my wife?”

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, yes. A thousand times yes.”

Darcy rose and clasped both gloved hands before he kissed them. Jane ran to her sister's arms, her eyes tearing up.

“Although, I must ask one last favor of you both. If they wish to, could we join your sister Jane and Charles, and have a joint Christmas wedding?”

“Oh yes, yes, of course we could. What would be better than sharing this moment with my dear sister,” said Elizabeth, smiling.

“I think it would be fitting,” interjected Bingley, cheerfully congratulating Darcy.”

They quickly returned to Longbourn, where they gave the good news to the family. Mrs. Bennet could hardly believe her luck. She will have her two daughters married with two gentlemen of great fortune.

The gentlemen went back to Netherfield to inform Georgiana and the Colonel of the good news. She was overjoyed when they told them. By the next day, all of Meryton knew about the fortune of the second Bennet sister, but heavy snow fell again and the gentlemen were unable to return to Longbourn.

Once the weather allowed it, Darcy was to send his valet to London with the task of acquiring the special license for his wedding, but it was Colonel Fitzwilliam himself who offered to carry out that task, as well as to bring something from Darcy House.



CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

Days before Christmas, the gentlemen tried to go with Georgiana to Longbourn, as long as the weather allowed it. The snow was beginning to pile up and making it difficult to pass through, even on horseback.

Darcy had to make do with the small stores in Meryton to buy some gifts for Twelfth Night for his future family, as well as some sheet music for Georgiana. He regretted not having enough time to go all the way back to Pemberley for his mother's, Lady Anne's ring, for his betrothed, but at least he was grateful for his cousin's promptness in obtaining the special license.

On Christmas Day, they celebrated with toasts and a great dinner, bringing together the Bennets, the Gardiners, the Darcys, the Colonel, and Bingley. Georgiana was so delighted to have a new sister, that she played merry tunes for hours at the pianoforte. Shortly, the Bennets had to leave because the next day was the most anticipated one. The snow did not stop falling. It showed no respite and early in the morning several workmen shovel in hand, began to clear the road, so they could reach the little church at Meryton.

At the place, Darcy heard the high-pitched voice of his mother-in-law-to-be, meaning his Lizzie was about to be here. Nothing could have prepared him for his reaction after seeing Elizabeth attired in such a fine dress. If he had thought she was beautiful, now dressed in such an exquisite attire, surely a gift from the Gardiners, Darcy was overjoyed. Suddenly, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Cousin, I think you will need this," Fitzwilliam whispered, handing him a small box. When he opened it, Darcy saw his mother's ring.

"I thought it was at Pemberley."

"Well, no, it turns out it was in London."

Darcy thanked him for the gesture and turned his attention back to the big event. Likewise, Bingley was surprised to see his beloved Jane, who kept smiling beside her sister. The ceremony for both couples was short but full of emotions. Next, the couples with their witnesses and the parson went to the vestry to sign the register.

At the end, all proceeded to Netherfield, where the wedding breakfast was served. Fit for a King, it consisted of exquisite dishes such as liver pie, game pie, foie gras, and the latest of fashion imported for George III himself, including potatoes.

To the newlywed's relief, the weather calmed down, allowing the Darcys to begin their wedding trip. Elizabeth and Darcy headed to London, accompanied by Georgiana, while Jane and Bingley remained at Netherfield.



Once in London, Darcy approached his housekeeper and his cook, asking them to have dinner ready for his weddingnight, and rooms prepared: one for him and another one for the new Mrs. Darcy. The housekeeper asked Elizabeth if she was bringing her maid to

help her with her clothes. Darcy replied that his wife would require a maid, but for tonight, he would handle it.

“So, would you like us to prepare a room or two, sir?”

“Elizabeth?” Darcy was holding his decision, amused at the situation they were in.

“Well... I think... A single room would be more appropriate,” barely stammered Lizzie. The housekeeper and cook withdrew. Lizzie was still red.

“That was interesting,” he said once they were alone.

“Darcy!” she exclaimed. Darcy laughed sonorously. As of that morning, the great Mr. Darcy had been in an unbeatable mood.

“Don't tell me my dear, am I upsetting you so soon and have no sympathy for your poor nerves?” he said, imitating Mrs. Bennet.

“Fitzwilliam Alexander Darcy, the liberties you are taking! Have I been wrong in marrying you today?”

Darcy's face of pure happiness could not be fabricated. “Not at all, I am innocent of all charges, Your Honor. I was just presenting some facts. I believe my future, our future, will be filled with great joy.”

“I hope so, dear, I hope so.”

THE END



About the author

Cristina Almario lives in Spain with her two children and her husband. This year, she published her first book “*Más que orgullo*” (More than Pride), a sequel of Pride and Prejudice.



Swinging Emma

By Fernando García Pañeda

Just after waking up, she looks out of her bedroom window and admires a white cover over the entire garden: it has been snowing during the entire night. Before going out, well equipped with boots, coat and scarf she turns on the lights of the tree and the façade, to absorb in a suggestive spectacle of nature. She wanders through flowerbeds and snowy bushes, feeling delighted with every step she takes, as if she had magically stepped into one of those old postcards her mother used to collect.

She keeps enjoying the mystical silence of the scene when she hears the gates opening and sees him enter, determined and discreet. She had thought it would be a long time before she would see him again, but it has barely been a week since the bitter separation took place. It was a very good or a very bad sign. Being more mature than her age would indicate, the latter seemed more fitting. Hence, her surprise was no greater than her trepidation.

“Merry Christmas, Emma,” he walks to her, and, before long, they are standing face to face.

“George! Merry Christmas... What a surprise! I didn't know you were back.”

“I've just arrived. I didn't even stop by the house to drop things off.”

“Good heavens! -But they say the roads are impossible.”

“No road is impossible for my old Land Rover”, he replies with a half-smile.

She remains silent for a few moments, wondering what this hasty return means. But he remains silent as well.

“Then, you'll come tonight to Midnight Mass?”, she encourages him with the first thing that comes to her mind to break the silence.

“Yes, of course.”

“And to tomorrow's lunch?”

“Of course. We Knightleys have attended the Woodhouse Christmas lunch for a hundred years. No snowfall or storm can stop us.”

Something about his tone was wrong. It lacked sincerity, and his usual liveliness. His smile was forced, too, when he proposed “Shall we go for a walk? You don't see snow like this every decade.”

“Of course. But aren't you cold?” She worried, he was only wearing an oxford shirt and a Barbour.

“Cold? What's that?” he replied while buttoning his waxed coat.

They go outside, strolling along the road and through the surrounding park. George's face, still silent, and hesitant, seemed almost disgruntled. And she can't stand that silence, so out of character when they are together. She tries to smile again and says:

“You know, I'm going to tell you something that will blow your mind.”

“You think so?” he said calmly, looking at her again. “Well, surprise me then.”

“There's a wedding in sight.”

Again a brief silence. He thinks Emma is trying to build suspense and won't continue. But today he's not in the mood for games.

“Frank and Jane's?”

“Mother of God! But... how did you know?”

“Just this morning I got a phone call from Alice Pollock and...”

“Pollock? What a gossip! And what's your relationship with her? How...?”

“She wanted to ask me for a small favor from the record company on behalf of her nephew, a silly thing. And before she hung up, she couldn't resist telling me the news.”

“Oh... Well... What a surprise, isn't it?” she said hesitantly before adding with her face lit up: “No, it really isn't. Especially for you. You had warned me more than once and I got angry with your suspicions. One must be a fool...” And she continued lowering her voice: “I wish I had listened to you. In this as in so many other things.”

George approached her and took her gently by the shoulders.

“No, Emma, everyone makes mistakes sometimes. In this case I had that intuition about him and I was right, but I've been wrong a million times.”

Deeply moved and melancholic, Emma was immersed in his eyes and mutters: “How charming, by God's sake...” And, against his expectant gaze, she continued: “You? Messing things up? I'll die old before I see it. Or rather not, I won't die of old age, but of pure foolishness. So young and so foolish.”

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“My dear Emma, so young, yes, but you're by no means a fool. You have all the common sense needed,” he said touched. “You'll see, time will heal and erase your wound.”



Emma Woodhouse is not only intelligent and beautiful, but also has the good fortune to have been born and raised in a fine home, in one of the wealthiest families in Surrey (and perhaps in the United Kingdom). What's more, she seemed like the vivid picture of good fortune, for she has experienced to few upsets in her twenty-two years of life.

I have a very similar fortune, growing up in a happy home in a similar social standing to the Woodhouses and in the same town of Esher. In fact, the two families' estates adjoin each other and their relations are excellent, if not perfect. That was the reason I first saw her graceful features at her christening on Victoria's Day when I was almost eleven years old. Such fortune has endured till this day, as a confidant and a friend, almost as a big brother.

Only one shadow hung over her life: the untimely death of Mrs. Woodhouse. At the age of fourteen she lost her mother, which deeply affected her education and character. Her only sister –older and, curiously enough, the wife of my younger brother– has a more independent and detached character, less wild and affectionate; hence Emma has been the apple of Mr. Woodhouse's eyes, compliant to her every wish –justified or not– that had come across his youngest's way. Nonetheless, she had the good fortune, again, of having a sound judgment and a perfect heart to balance her conduct and condition.

However, that sound judgement was not present when, at the verge of turning seventeen, she left Headington School, despite being an advantageous –and irregular– student, to be accepted in the famous Lucie Clayton Charm Academy modeling school. This turn of events, so decisive in her life, was due to the scanty influence of Harriet Smith, a friend two years her elder, and from a rather unappealing social background. Emma met her during an excursion to London in the Spring of '62, when she entered Bazaar on King's Road, where Harriet worked as an apprentice. She was dazzled by Emma's natural elegance and spontaneous gaiety, and Emma admired Harriet's extraordinary beauty and the glamour of her job. And so, an awkward friendship was born; one that would be of no benefit to either one of them. While Miss Smith bounced from one job to the next, without benefit or improvement, Emma made the most of the instruction she received at Lucie Clayton and, in little more than a year, the best photographers and the most prestigious fashion houses sought her collaboration.

In fact, it was something about her perception of beauty, art, and nature that gave her such advantage. She was more than a decade ahead of her time; the new fashion of

the crazy 60's: her short dresses (almost an extension of a child's wardrobe), the colors, a daring imagination that, put around her shoulders, depicted great elegance. The cameras of Sir Cecil Beaton, Richard Avedon, David Bailey; the collections of Givenchy, Courrèges, Dior, the covers and articles of Vogue, Elle, Harper's Bazaar, the runways of London, Paris, New York were all too familiar for her. In the course of a few years, the fashion world had been consort to the brilliant, funny, and intelligent model. Emma represented freshness, vitality, modernity, and the lively impulse generated in our culture since the beginning of the decade. Plus, her amiable ways made her pleasant to work with no matter how difficult or reckless the challenge were. Needless to say, the cameras loved her grace.

Evidently, a curious and vivacious eighteen-year-old girl could not take on such a wave of admiration and popularity by herself. Mr. Woodhouse, who found it hard to leave Hartfield Manor and was sickened by the thought of leaving the island of Great Britain, begged me, from the beginning of her career, to accompany her during her travels and watch over her. I was the right person: "Not only because you're so sensible and almost like family, but because Emma won't tolerate anyone else giving her advice or looking out for her" he pleaded. And he wasn't wrong. Although my opinions, warnings, and sometimes reprimands rarely received a warm welcome from her, at the end, she usually paid attention. I had earned such a privilege, for I played with her and listened to her in her childhood years and, above all, I was at her side after the loss of her mother. Perhaps, that is why she felt pleased to listen to me and embrace my ideas and reasoning. However, listening to me falls far away from obedience. Achieving both was almost exceptional.

I temporarily abandoned my position as Executive Producer at Parlophone Records to become the squire of one of the most beautiful icons of the Pop Revolution and made my true residence, until then only sporadic, in London, the epicenter of the socio-cultural earthquake that shook the rest of the western world in those days. New songwriters, transgressors of fashion, or architects of the transformation of the social fabric were living in Chelsea and Soho, on King's Road or Carnaby Street. A scenario built on fragile foundations of colors, music, optimism, miniskirts, freedom, and imagination. An exuberant fishing ground for low-cost talent scouts was a hub of emotions for beginners like Emma.



"A wound? What wound?" she asked, confused.

He didn't want to elaborate. Besides, it seemed completely unnecessary. She understood all too well what he meant.

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“Oh, I see. Actually, no. There is no injury, George. If anything, there’s embarrassment. Yes, shame for how I’ve behaved. Shame for my blindness, for saying and doing pitiful things. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“It was all because of that scoundrel! You’re angry at me. I know. But now, I can’t be silent. He’s the kind of guy who sullies the description of a man, and disgraces the rest of us. An execrable idiot, a cannon fodder, an imbecile capable of trampling on such a pure heart... I hope he rots in hell for—”

Emma interrupted him, covering her face with one hand: “Oh, no, no! That can’t be! I’ve given excuse for gossip and disgusting rumors, haven’t I?” she lamented before continuing, her eyes widening in alarm. “Listen, I wasn’t in love with Frank, if that’s what you mean. No! Nothing could be further away from the truth. I could never fall in love.”

He listened in silence. Emma, realizing his confusion, took a moment to calm down and continued explaining: “The truth is that I deserve no forgiveness from God. I admit I got carried away with his flattery, his compliments. He made me feel like the queen of a fictitious world... The queen of vanity, rather, overblown by so many witty phrases, so many compliments, all that partying. Yes, I’m a fool, a total fool! Nothing new, right? And it happens to many women, but I thought: “Nonsense! That will never happen to me.” You’ve always claimed I’m very intelligent, but I’m not, not really. All the more shame if I were—”

George remained silent. His face concealed an expression unfamiliar to her, one she could not interpret. She couldn’t resist his silence any longer.

“Jo, say something, please,” she begged him. “Don’t be silent. Tell me I’m stupid, an imbecile for behaving like this, just don’t remain quiet, please, I can’t stand it...”

“So...” It was hard for him to start. “You and Frank aren’t... isn’t he...?”

“What? No! Of course not!” she interrupted him. “I’ve told you the whole truth, Honestly. It was nothing more than a game for him. And, for me... it was only a frivolity, an embarrassing... coquetry.”

He found it hard to come out of his own thoughts, or to let them escape. Until, in a more relaxed tone, almost as if it were his usual voice, he said: “I stand firm on the ill opinion I have of that man, and, now, I have no reason to wish him any harm. But you have to admit he is a lucky guy.”

“Lucky you say?”

“Yes, he’s one of those people who misbehaves with everyone, and I’ve never known why everyone was happy to forgive him and even support him. He’s not particularly talented at what he does, but he makes up for it with his personal charm. And when his meager creativity won’t show up, he offers himself as a model. Anyway—”

“Yes, it's true. That's him.”

“Even now, after winning the affection of a woman far his superior in every aspect, for whom many would break their necks, and she does not feel alarmed by his trifle character... Rest assured, Frank is the favorite son of good fortune.”

She remained thoughtful, hesitant to respond. Finally, she says: “If I didn't know you well, I would say you envy him.”

“Yes, of course I do.” he replied firmly. “For one particular reason, I assure you, I envy him indeed.”

Instantly, Emma regretted having provoked him. She wondered once again why didn't she bite her tongue when she should have. Somehow, she had fallen into a trap she wanted to avoid at all costs. She failed to avoid the ghost that haunts her.



Reminiscing the number of embarrassing situations, anecdotes and emotional moments that I had shared with Emma or on her behalf over the years would be enervating; from attending an invitation from Buckingham Palace to participating in a feminist rally or starring in an act of protest against the intervention of our country in the war in Biafra, not to mention the famous scandal in Melbourne...

Emma had been invited by the Victoria Racing Club Melbourne to participate in two events organized in their Spring Festival of '65: as a judge of a fashion contest and as a celebrity in their Derby Day. The length of the dress she chose for the occasion was four inches above her knees. In addition, she wore no hat, nor gloves, nor stockings, all of which were mandatory for women according to the usual protocol. For accessories, she only wore a man's watch (mine, in fact). I must say it was something done without any malice or desire to provoke. It could be said that the dress –white, simple and precious– was even demure in comparison with what came later; and if she did not wear hat and gloves, it was simply because we did not have them in her luggage, since no one had taken the trouble to warn her (to warn us) about the strict protocol accustomed at the derby. Covers and articles in newspapers and magazines all over the world reported the incident and expressed opinions –some of them very passionate– of all kinds, which boosted the fame of a naive and admirable Emma.

It was not surprising that a legion of men were captivated by her image, her manners, and spirit. I received dozens of letters with the most varied contents, from intense expressions of admiration to frankly, ridiculous declarations of love, passing through abominable obscenities. Fortunately, she agreed to let me manage this written welter, and only the less embarrassing writings escaped the fire and reached her sight.

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Of course, some true gentlemen and people in good standing fell for her sparkling grace. I remember what Sir Cecil Beaton himself told me after one of the photo sessions he did with her: "Young man, if I had found this woman when I was thirty years younger, like you, I would have stopped being myself in order to live for and with her."

The only thing escaping my management during these recent times has been the appearance of Frank *Cheshire* Churchill. Cheshire (for his ability to appear and disappear inopportunistically) is one of those people everyone talks about but so few know well, especially around the close-knit world of suburban Esher. The Churchill family had been close friends with the Woodhouses, until they rather lost contact when the first moved to a more central part of London.

The fact is, the subject had a certain relationship with Emma: they had attended Claremont Unitary School together and had met in some family celebrations or had school friends in common. According to what she confessed to me, there was even a manifest inclination from the Churchill family to join the two families somehow. But the subject faded away and he dropped out of sight... until, as the famous cat, he reappeared.

After failing in several professional projects, Cheshire ended up being one of the designers working for Quorum, Alice Pollock's establishment, occasionally (when inspiration failed him or his wallet dwindled) modelled for other designers. And, after meeting Emma at a David Hockney exhibition attended by the top fashion world of London, he presented himself as inseparable from her through his flirtatious attitude, which turned to be quite effective, being so good-looking. Together, they were a couple worthy of the attention from cameras and spotlights, and soon the tabloids declared them "couple of the year," even though they were not so.

I'd never had any relations with Cheshire, but you didn't have to be specially perceptive and it didn't take long to become aware of his fickle character and to notice his snobbery and permanent imposture of a bohemian artist. His character had all the defects of old England but none of its virtues. However, I got to hear from Emma's mouth about his many amusements and extravagances whenever they were together. Of course, I did not hesitate at any time to reveal to her my opinion of such *friend*. *I was quick* to censure everything that would do any good to his reputation; and she, of course, rejected all my arguments, which gave way to more than one disagreement. Although I knew they were not a couple, I didn't want to ask (I wouldn't dare) what she really felt for him, and if they would ever indeed become a couple.

As if that were not enough, at the time Emma had wanted to take charge of sponsoring her friend Harriet, whose professional career had been truncated by dint of her clumsiness in the many job opportunities that came her way. That's why she had to bear the incompetence of that stunning counter girl every time she escaped with the troupe of Eltons, Westons, Bates, Pollocks, or Waymouths that always surrounded Cheshire.



Harriet's ghost haunted her –or so she thought– until she fell into a trap she desperately wanted to get out of. Emma didn't want to know anything, she preferred not to. So she tried to change the conversation.

“I only hope they'll be happy,” she said without much conviction, “and I hope Jane will be happier than Frank, deservedly so.”

But he surprised her by carrying the conversation from there: “You're not being the inquisitive, curious Emma I know.”

She didn't understand what he meant and he saw the disbelief in her eyes.

“You aren't asking me what I do envy him for,” George clarified.

“No... It's just that I...”

“In another time, you would have tortured me until I confessed it,” he tried to joke without much conviction. “But now... Now, I'm the one who wants to say it. And I'll probably regret it as soon as I say it, but I need to.”

“No, wait! I don't want you to regret anything... not with me,” she made haste to comment. “If you will regret it, don't say it, don't say it, please. Since I can't be your usual Emma, be my discreet and sensible George.”

They continued walking. Silence surrounded them again.

She assumes she has displeased him, that he is hurt. She noticed how, from time to time, he looked at her from the corner of his eye, as if he wished to read on her expression something unknown to him.

The joy of knowing that Emma's heart is not grieving or compromised by the infamous Churchill was not enough for him, for he sensed a discordant note. Perhaps, she had not told him the whole truth? No, that is not like Emma. In fact, if they had disagreed –even quarreled– on a number of occasions, it was provoked by the candor they always bestow on each other. So, what was going on, he wondered.

Since Emma couldn't bear the thought of hurting him, let alone hurting him on purpose, she had to face the truth, regardless of the cost. Perhaps, George wanted to consult her opinion about Harriet before telling her... At that moment, she came up with a plan: without having to speak ill of her friend, she could remind him of the preciousness of his bachelorhood, his independence, she could speak in general of the beauty ever-doomed to wither or of the intellect which only nature gives and cannot be improved if it does not start from a suitable level. George has always trusted her judgment, even if she

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disagrees sometimes with his conduct, and so she will be able to unbalance the scales if she sees him indecisive. A shudder shakes her from head to toe...

“Do you want to come in?” he asked as they returned to Hartfield's door and saw her girding on her scarf. “It's getting very cold.”

“No, not yet,” she answered, determined to chase away those ideas that are tormenting her. “I feel like walking around a bit more. You don't get to enjoy this view every day, do you? The snow, the illuminated houses... It's like being in a fairy tale.

No, clearly she's not herself. That was not her natural way of speaking and behaving. She sounded corny as hell. And it was obvious he'd noticed. Of course, hence her attitude. So, after taking a few steps, she continues: “Jo, I'm sorry. George, forgive me... A moment ago I interrupted you with untimely rudeness. If you want to tell me something, or ask my opinion, or anything, I'm here to listen. Whatever it is. I will always listen and tell you what I really think, as all the time. That's what I always do and would like to continue doing so as a friend.”

As a friend, George fretted even more.

“Because we're friends, aren't we?” Emma continued: “As we'd told the gossips, we're not an unseemly couple because we're not siblings, although sometimes it seems that way,” she laughed mirthlessly.

“Siblings? No, certainly not...”

“Then—”

“Emma, what I'm afraid of...” he interrupted her: “A word... But what the hell! I've already gone too far to keep hiding it.”

Suddenly, she dropped her eyes from his and looked away afraid she'll burst into tears as soon as she listens what he has to say, showing the good manners of a damsel. She cannot allow it, neither for his sake nor for her own. She had to pull herself together.



Relationships got deteriorated and estrangement seemed inevitable.

I could stand less and less the dangerous emptiness of the circle of friends Emma was entering. Although she was very intelligent and also more careful than most her age, the illiterate yokels who remained attached to “the couple of the year” were real parasites, addicted to alcohol, psychedelic drugs and scandals of all kinds. And no one was infallible. Inadvertently, she could let her guard down, get involved in the middle of some mess and ruin her reputation. I warned her once, but she seemed to regard me as an unwanted tutor. She rebutted all my advice and opinions, as if I were an ignorant, and old fogey. The

occasions on which she apologized or acknowledged her impulsiveness were few and far apart, and those on which she acted contrary to my opinion were increasing.

It was towards the end of November when Cheshire had the idea of arranging a party at Esher with Jane Waymouth's help. Jane was the most coveted single woman in the kingdom combining beauty and the ownership of a substantial, real, and personal property. But, thanks to another combination that I consider more admirable, that of sound judgment with sensitivity, she had frightened off a thousand suitors and gold diggers for many years, although she maintained a formal courtship with a somehow peculiar fellow, a university professor and heir to one of the most highly valued companies in the Stock Exchange. She owned, among others, the *Granny takes a trip* boutique in Chelsea's World's End, a gathering place for the entire clan, but also one of our city's finest old-style apartments. Cheshire convinced her to hold a party at the apartment with the refrain of a return to her origins and the pretext of Christmas, inviting a whole legion of acquaintances. I was among the lucky ones, although I wanted to decline the invitation, which came to me through Emma (she had *carte blanche* to invite whomever she wanted), finally I only attended because she insisted enough.

All the acolytes of the *de facto* host were there, plus a few Esher neighbors who were eager to soak up with the swinging London glamour. And, even though I had made up my mind to attend without any negative predisposition, I disliked the atmosphere from the very first moment. The overabundance of alcohol and drugs of various kinds and the excessive relaxation of manners could almost be inhaled. There was not even a trace of December decorations, so it was not a Christmas celebration, but a real pagan party. Cheshire and Waymouth, as hosts, were out of their minds with infatuation, and rather brought to mind Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in their prime. I felt very sorry for her.

At dinner time, which was spread out over several tables, they seated Emma and me next to them, as well as Harriet and two other people I didn't know. Unfortunately, Emma got caught by the fake good-natured nonsense that pervaded everything. So much so that, for no reason, Cheshire, she and one stranger involved for far too long in banter at the expense of Harriet and the poor decisions she was taking in her professional career. The sarcasm came to the point of making Harriet leave the table in tears. I was so outraged that I also left shortly thereafter. Emma could tell how angry I was by my expression, my absolute silence, and my leaving without a word.

At the last moment, a thought came to mind: I had to behave as a loyal friend and counselor, and trust that she would realize how right I was... or I would regret it for the rest of my life. So, after leaving the table, I called her aside with a gesture and told her unreservedly what I thought of her conduct toward a friend. "I think I must... yes, I must, while I can, I must tell you those truths that no one, not even your family, no one else in the world will tell you." It did not become her. How could she have been so cruel, so harsh

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to a friend who was well below her station, who deserved compassion in any case, and in no way ridicule?

I know that she had never, at any time in her life, felt so nervous, mortified, and dejected after that umpteenth sermon, and as she watched Harriet walking away in tears she realized what a serious mistake she had done. Her shame so confused her, that she could not utter a word, she did not even know how to react. I interpreted that attitude, that turned back, as indifference or irritation at my reproach.

I took my coat and left immediately. Seeing me leave, Harriet begged me to help her find a cab back to her apartment in Portobello. But it was too late and I was tired and listless, so I took her to my parents' house to spend the night in one of the guest rooms; she could leave in the morning. And so it was. In fact, after thinking about it, I took her in my vehicle and I settled back in my Hampstead apartment determined to stay away from everything. What I did not suspect was that hosting Harriet at my parents' house and accompanying her to London, as an act of mere kindness, would somehow ratify the rumor that had been spreading about a "more than possible" intimate relationship between Harriet and myself.

During the previous months Emma had ignored her friend's affairs and had entrusted me with the ingrate task of being her manager, if not her nanny. And it seemed, her friend had not only changed some of her habits, her dress and language, so that everything were more alike mine, but also she never stopped proclaiming my kindness to anyone who would listen. I was unaware of this situation, concerned as I was about Emma's uncertain drift; but it had not gone unnoticed by the rest of my friends and acquaintances. The fact that after spending that night under the same roof and returning to London together had finally convinced not only the filthy minds, but also the upright ones like Emma of the possibility of a relationship between Harriet and me..



George paused, as if he were choosing the correct words, or perhaps looking for emphasis. He even stopped walking.

"Well, then, at least as a friend... Although as a friend I know you may find it strange or absurd what I... Emma, tell me... Tell me if I could ever have a chance, at least some hope..."

Emma was paralyzed by what she intuited in those words, by the look and agitation with which he covered her.

"Emma, my dearest Emma," he continued in the same way, "because you will always be the dearest person to me, no matter what happens today after this conversation.

My dearest, my dearest Emma..." he had to interrupt himself again, seized with shock. "If not, tell me as soon as possible, don't be afraid. I am ready to hear it."

And, as if an effect from a technicolor movie was prepared, the lights on Hartfield's façade began to twinkle and flicker.

She was unable to say or do anything. She could barely breathe, before her was an utterly unfamiliar George. He was not the confident and determined man she always relied on, but an insecure and vulnerable young man who had given her his heart and soul. Feelings and thoughts overwhelmed her: tenderness, bewilderment, happiness, disbelief?

"You are not saying anything," he said, bewildered. "Well, you don't have to, not right now, of course."

Shocked almost to the point of fainting, Emma held one of his arms as if she was afraid of falling. At a loss for words, her eyes pleaded for confirmation of his words, for them to be true, to be real, for her not to be immersed in some kind of dream or confusion.

George, not knowing her feelings, continued to say in an affectionate and more serene tone: "You know I'm a man of few words. Sometimes the more I feel, the less I speak. But I have always been and still am sincere with you for better or for worse. When I reproached you for something, it has always been out of affection and care, and you have borne my reproaches as no one else would have done... I know I am embarrassed while trying to declare myself with this awkwardness and pitiful spectacle. I do not know how to speak or behave like those arrogants that you know, and not because I am older, but for the infinite respect I feel for you. A respect that has become the most indomitable and true love... the only one I have ever really felt. I only ask you, whenever you want, whenever you can... A single word will suffice me as an answer, whatever it may be."

So I made a dreadful mistake! It was not Harriet, or anything else, that he wanted to talk about; that was not the reason why he had come back so unexpectedly and under such difficult conditions; that was not the reason of his lack of courage and valor. After he had realized Frank's shooing away, his feelings, kept at bay with fortitude and bitterness, had overflowed and nothing could hold them back now, not even a day more. He came concerned about her, dreading the way she would have taken the news, ready to comfort her; and now what he feared the most was that he might need that comfort himself.

But George could not have found a heart more in love than Emma's, a heart more willing to accept his. She would not consent to his suffering a day or even a minute longer. Letting go of his arm, she held his face in her hands and gave a long, sweeping kiss on his surprised, longing lips, and embraced him as if her life depended on it; a response infinitely greater than he had ever dared to dream. She also wanted to give him the words he had begged for.

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What would her answer be? Exactly what it should be, of course. After all, she is a lady.



It was the nobility and simplicity of her eyes the first anchors that grabbed my heart. Already as a child, she attracted my gaze without any possible resistance on my part. Contemplating her gestures and actions, listening to her words, watching her play... the balm of simplicity, beauty, and joy that her mere presence provided, became an addiction for me.

As the time passed, one by one, the rest of her anchors found their way into my heart, until I was completely hooked. Her wit, her sense of humor, her sensibility, the abundance of affection for her loved ones, the mischievous nature of her extraordinary intelligence, all seemed designed to trap my senses and emotions under the shelter of her life.

During the time I spent accompanying her evrywhere, stalking and shooing away the countless flies that hovered around her, the affection, the love that she provoked in me grew effortlessly. The certainty that so much attention from everyone was indifferent to her, only increased the desire to remain in perpetuity in that situation that allowed me to occupy a preferential place in her life, and nothing would keep me away from her.

To see how the most charming of all human beings, my imperfectly perfect Emma, listened to the attentions, and pretensions of a subject who in no way deserved her became unbearable. And with a certain cowardice, I ran away to avoid witnessing such tragedy. I even went so far as to ask to be readmitted in Parlophone. Enduring once again the genius and childishness of the likes of Gerry and The Peacemakers, the Hollies or the more mature version of The Beatles would entertain me enough to learn to be indifferent, and maybe to forget. And I stayed there stubbornly, for days that seemed like years, even willing to spend Christmas there, wether it meant listening to my neighbors' Christmas carols from my bed. It was going to be the first Christmas we didn't spend together or with family.

A phone call pulled me out of my voluntary retirement, which was more like a prostration. Alice Pollock wanted to order some records for her favorite nephew, a Merseybeat fan, and called me while I was still sleeping. Along the way, she told me the latest juicy gossip: Cheshire Churchill and Jane Waymouth had been in a secret relationship and shortly after the party at Esher (which, unbeknownst to anyone, was a farewell party), had eloped, apparently to settle in the United States.

Then, along with the enormous joy –free of all scruples– that came to me when I heard that story, there also arose a concern for Emma's state of mind; a concern so

intense that I would not allow myself to spend a single day more away from her. I was bursting with happiness for that Cheshire was out of her life, but also with rage and contempt for the insult that human scum had afflicted my only love with.

Despite the unusual snowfall and blockages of most of the roads in Surrey and surrounding counties – nothing the Land Rover I inherited from my grandfather could not handle– I returned to Esher as fast as I could. Freezing and anxious, I went straight to Hartfield Manor and, as on so many occasions, went in without knocking or asking permission, but with one big difference: I did so not with the nonchalance of a family friend, but gided by my pounding heart.

As soon as I entered, saw her crestfallen and more beautiful than ever, wandering like a fairy in her garden, I barely managed to utter three very simple words, old-fashioned and hackneyed, but full of intention.

“Merry Christmas, Emma.”

THE END



About the author

Fernando was born in Bilbao (1964) and lived his early years in an industrial city, destined to be one of the beings mimicked with the gray of the building façades and the clouds in the sky, but he was lucky enough to find an interdimensional portal: books.

Critics have singled him out as a writer who deftly handles different genres with his own elegant and simple style, which he calls romantic realism.

He has several novels published, among them *Agony and Hope*, an intertext or retelling of *Persuasion* updated to the 21st century in Venice. Visit his website: <https://fernandogarciapaneda.com/>

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Christmas at Hunsford Parsonage

By Amanda Kai

The chilly December air whipped Charlotte Collins' cape as she walked through Hunsford Village. Cheerful voices rang from a group of schoolchildren playing in the square. A spirit of merriness and joy filled the air as people went about their business.

In the center of the village, a large Christmas tree was being decorated, reminding everyone that Christmas was only a few weeks away.

As she went about her errands, Charlotte thought about what she might do to make this Christmas extra special. This would be her and William's first Christmas together since they were married. William had no family nearby, and Charlotte's family lived even further away. Charlotte's family didn't set much store by tradition, though she would be sorry to miss the big Christmas dinner her parents usually gave at Lucas Lodge.

William probably expects us to join Lady Catherine and Anne for Christmas dinner, she thought with a frown. If it were up to her, it would be just the two of them this year, spending Christmas at Hunsford Parsonage.

Or rather, just the three of us.

Charlotte felt the lightest flutter in her belly. She patted her stomach gently, a small smile on her lips. She was presently a few months along.

Another blessing of our marriage.

They had also declined an invitation from the newly-wedded Mr. and Mrs. Darcy to spend the holidays at Pemberley. If Lucas Lodge was too far for Charlotte to travel in her current state, Pemberley, at more than twice the distance, may as well have been Africa. Perhaps next year the Collinses and their new little one might be able to make the journey. For now, Charlotte decided she would content herself with making this a memorable Christmas for her and William here in their little village.

Wandering through Thompson's Mercantile, Charlotte spotted a barrel of yarn on sale, and it inspired her. Perhaps now would be an excellent time to try her hand at knitting something for the baby. She had never knit anything before, but there was no better time to learn a new hobby with the long winter days approaching.

As she rummaged for yarn in pastel colors, another idea occurred. She could knit a scarf for William, as his Christmas present!

It cannot be too difficult, can it?

A lovely red yarn seemed to leap out at her from amidst the kaleidoscope of colors. It would be perfect to brighten her husband's dreary black ensemble that he usually wore.

Knitting needles and a little booklet titled 'how to knit' were conveniently displayed next to the yarn, so Charlotte added both to her purchases.

Charlotte began working as soon as she arrived home. The basic stitch was easier to master than she expected, and although she got the yarn tangled a few times, she was soon knitting at an effortless pace. Charlotte became so absorbed that she startled at the sound of the door. She quickly hid the scarf.

"Ah, Charlotte!" William exclaimed on entering the drawing room. "Glad to see you have returned. I had hoped you could have joined me for tea with Lady Catherine just now, but when it was time to depart, you were nowhere to be found." "Yes, I am afraid my errands took longer than expected," Charlotte explained.

"You should have come up to Rosings as soon as you returned my dear," William said. "What have you been working on?"

"Oh," Charlotte giggled. "Merely some knitting. For the baby."

It is not an outright lie, she told herself. After all, she planned to make things for the baby also.

William's interest in her knitting was cursory. He quickly returned to his recent visit with Her Ladyship and all that they had discussed over tea. Through this, Charlotte learned that Lady Catherine and her daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh, would be gone over Christmas this year. Lady Catherine planned to make an early departure for the London Season to give Anne an advantage in making valuable connections there. Given the lateness of Miss de Bourgh's entrance into society, it seemed a wise plan on Lady Catherine's part.

So much the better for us, as well, Charlotte thought. With their benefactress gone, they would not be expected to spend Christmas dinner at Rosings. The relations between the parsonage and Rosings had improved since their falling out last summer, when Charlotte's determination to rescue a group of fallen women had caused a major upheaval in their town. Yet despite the normalcy that had returned to their lives, William's

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relationship with his patroness was no longer grovelling and submissive as it had once been. Thank heaven! William had come into his own as a man, and yet he still managed to retain a sense of respect for Lady Catherine. Miss de Bourgh, too, had learnt to stand up to her mother. According to William, it was she who insisted on having a London Season against all her mother's protests that her health was too frail. And, although Lady Catherine's mind was bent on finding a husband for Anne, Anne planned to use her time in London to find investors for Magdalena House-- the home she and Charlotte had established to help fallen women begin anew. Anne was blossoming to Charlotte's delight.

"What would you like for Christmas this year, my dear?" William's question caught Charlotte off-guard.

"Oh! I am not very particular, I suppose. Anything will do, really." Charlotte did not often think of her own desires, and though she knew William loved to spoil her, she found it hard to request the things that she secretly coveted. In her mind, however, the image of a darling embroidered silk shawl appeared.

She had spotted it the other day when she visited her friend Vanessa, a former harlot who was now a successful modiste. As Vanessa emerged from the back room of the shop, she noticed Charlotte admiring the delicate blue silk shawl in the window display.

"That would suit your complexion nicely," she told Charlotte.

"It is exquisite! But impractical. I have little need for silks here in Hunsford, you know." She shook her head with a smile.

Vanessa took the wrap from the mannequin and draped it ceremoniously around Charlotte's shoulders. "Come now. You deserve it! Besides," she winked, "I can offer you a generous discount."

"I shall think about it, really," Charlotte promised. "For now, just the two calicos I ordered, along with the new underthings."

Vanessa nodded. Charlotte had kept Vanessa busy lately, what with her sudden need for a wardrobe that would serve her expanding waistline. She had not counted on needing new clothes so soon after finding she was in the family way, but it gave her a reasonable excuse to update her attire. The shawl was too extravagant though, Charlotte thought, and ought to be put off until a later time, when they were not already spending so much money.



William whistled as he lumbered down Hunsford Lane. He had several calls to make to his parishioners in the village.

The weather was just as one would expect for the week before Christmas-- a light dusting of snow and icicles that made the town look like a fairy wonderland.

William finished his first few visits quickly, then turned down the lane that went through the center of town. As he passed by the shops, he recalled that he still had not selected a gift for Charlotte. He considered perfume or scented soap but a visit to the peddler turned up nothing worth purchasing. Mrs. Perry's suggestions of new handkerchiefs or gloves seemed too trivial for a woman as wonderful as his angel. *Charlotte needed a gift as lovely and divine as she is*, William maintained. Before she left, Lady Catherine had impressed upon him the need to get a gift suitable for the wife of a minister.

"Nothing too extravagant," she had said, "a minister's wife has no need of diamonds and other jewels. Yet, it cannot be a mere trinket, either. Something practical, yet elegant, possessing the dignity befitting the wife of the town's *second* most prominent citizen," Lady Catherine had sniffed, presuming herself to be the first prominent member. William could still hear her voice echo in his mind as if she had spoken only moments before.

Passing by Vanessa's Custom Creations, the vivid blue shawl on display caught his attention. William could seldom keep all of Charlotte's beautiful dresses straight in his mind, but there was one particular one, with blue flowers on it, which leapt out in his mind as being the perfect color to match that shawl.

He timidly pushed the door open. He did not often venture into a modiste shop; in fact, this was only the second time, the first being when he and Charlotte had offered Vanessa a loan to help her business succeed.

Vanessa was happy to assist William, and she agreed (her eyes lighting up a certain way) that she was *certain* Charlotte would love that shawl for Christmas. But when he mentioned the dress he had thought of to match it, Vanessa spoke up.

"You may want to consider, Mr. Collins, that the dress might not at this time, er, fit your wife very well," she said delicately.

"Nonsense, my wife has the figure of a goddess! Why on earth would it-- oh, yes, I do see." His cheeks reddened to the shade of an apple as the realization dawned on him. It had not escaped his notice that her luscious curves had been growing more voluminous, much to his delight, as a result of the child within. But it had not occurred to him that women's fashion required some alteration to accommodate. Chiding himself mentally, he asked Vanessa for her suggestion.

"I know the gown you speak of, sir. I have seen Charlotte wear it many times. I am afraid there is not enough material to alter it to fit her at this time. I can, however, show you something more suitable."

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She quickly sketched out a design.

“This is the pattern I have been using for all of Charlotte’s new dresses,” she told him. “But, if I make the sleeves this length here,” she showed him, “and add a panel down the center, then drop the neckline down like this,” her pencil worked furiously, “then the style would be entirely suitable for an evening at, say, Rosings Park.” Her keen eye glanced at the rector. Clearly, the remark had won him over.

“And what fabric might you suggest for this creation? And can you have it finished in time for Christmas?”

Vanessa assured him that she could, and hurried to bring down a bolt of muslin, light and airy, with gold threads casting a metallic sheen that glimmered in the lamplight. As William fingered the delicate material, Vanessa added the blue shawl to her sketch. William admired the completed concept. *Yes, yes! Charlotte would look like a goddess in the blue and gold ensemble!* He thought. *And Lady Catherine would certainly approve of new clothing as being both practical and appropriate.*

He put down a deposit for the dress and shawl. He could not wait to see the look on Charlotte’s face when she saw the new outfit!



The cardinal-red scarf was coming along nicely, Charlotte thought. She had worked hard on it for three weeks now, whenever she had time apart from caring for her household and visiting needy families in the parish. It was more difficult to keep it a secret from William than she had imagined. For one thing, now that the weather was cold, he no longer spent countless hours in his garden. And with Lady Catherine and Anne de Bourgh out of town, his outings were less frequent. She had resorted to stealing in some stitches after William fell asleep at night and bringing her knitting basket with her when she paid calls.

“You are quite diligent in your work,” was Mr. Collins’ remark when he saw her leaving the house daily with her basket.

“I am surprised you noticed.”

“It is a good thing, I suppose,” he added. “Our little one will have plenty of blankets and things by the time he-- or she-- arrives.”

“Er, yes,” Charlotte agreed, before hurrying out the door. William said nothing more on the subject, leaving Charlotte to feel she was in the clear from then on.

When William left to make his weekly rounds to the parishioners, Charlotte took advantage of her chance to work on his scarf uninterrupted. She had been working

steadily when there was a quiet knock at the front door, almost too soft to be heard. Charlotte glanced to see if her housekeeper Mrs. Perry had heard it. As it appeared she had not and Charlotte did not feel the need to call out for her, she answered the door herself.

On the doorstep was a little girl. Clutched in her arms was a tiny kitten.

“Why hello there, Cora!” Charlotte recognized the child as one of her Sunday School students. “What do we have here?”

The child sobbed. “I found him under the steps behind our house. He was all alone and cold and hungry. But Mother says I mayn’t keep him! She says there are too many mouths to feed as it is, and he will get underfoot. But he won’t cause any trouble, really! I can feed him scraps from my plate and share my milk with him, and I’ll keep him out by the shed where he won’t get in Mother’s way. Oh, please, Mrs. Collins, you’ve got to help me! You will, won’t you?”

Charlotte cringed. “Oh dear, I think we had better come in.” She took the child and cat to the kitchen and gave it a dish of leftover cream. The animal lapped it up as if it had been starved its entire existence.

“Now then,” Charlotte said to Cora once they were seated at the table with a plate of gingerbread biscuits at hand. “What shall we do about this cat of yours?”

Cora took a large bite out of her gingerbread before answering. “I do not know, Mrs. Collins, but Mother says I must get rid of him and that I am not to feed him, or else he shall become dependent. She says if I try to keep him in the shed or give him scraps, she’ll ask Father to take him out in the woods and leave him there. But the poor baby will freeze! I cannot abandon him to a wintery death! Please say you will help me, Mrs. Collins.”

“I am not certain what I could do,” Charlotte said hesitantly. Cora’s pleas were heart-wrenching, but Charlotte did not want to meddle in Mrs. Cooper’s parenting decisions and get the girl in trouble.

An idea sprang in the child’s mind. “You could keep him here! Oh, he’d be no trouble, I promise. Just until spring returns-- or, or, at least until I can persuade my mother to change her mind.” Cora saw the worry in Charlotte’s face.

“You can even keep him in your stable, if you like. He’s sure to grow into a great mouser.”

Perhaps. But for now, he would more likely get under the horse’s hooves and be crushed, Charlotte thought.

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She looked from the sweet child's plaintive expression to the big round eyes of the fluffy kitten beside her. "All right then," she conceded. "I shall keep him here. But only temporarily. You must do your part to find another home for him in the village."

"Oh, Mrs. Collins, thank you!" Cora cried, throwing her arms around Charlotte's neck. The girl skipped off happily with a handkerchief full of gingerbread, leaving Charlotte wondering what she had gotten herself into.



"What's that, a kitten?" William asked, when he returned home and Charlotte told him about their new houseguest.

"Why, yes, I suppose it can stay," he agreed. "I'm not particularly fond of cats, but I see no reason why you should not care for it, for the time being, if it pleases you to do so."

"Thank you," Charlotte said. "I did not see what else I could do, with little Cora Cooper being so upset over it."

"Indeed. Your kindness does you credit, my love. Now if you will excuse me, I need to finish preparing my sermon for Christmas Day." William slipped away to his study, thankful that he had evaded any questions from Charlotte about the mysterious parcels tucked under his arm. With Christmas now only two days away, he had been nervous that perhaps Vanessa would be unable to complete the dress for Charlotte in time. But, when he stopped by on his way home from his weekly parish rounds, Vanessa had it ready for him as promised, along with the shawl. He tucked both boxes away in a little corner of his bookshelf. Charlotte seldom came into this room anyways. She would never spot them. William shivered slightly as he sat down at his desk to begin writing. He must remember to dress warmer when going out. He drew the curtains and buttoned his jacket over his waistcoat, turning the collar of his shirt up for added warmth.



Confident that William would be occupied until dinner, Charlotte dared to break out her knitting basket again. She sat in her favorite chair by the drawing room fire, where the little black and white kitten had curled himself up to sleep. Presently, though, he awakened from his catnap and began toying with the ball of yarn at Charlotte's feet.

"No, cat," she scolded. Placing him further away, she took the ball and placed it up on her footstool. This did not deter the little furball. The kitten leapt onto the footstool and resumed playing with the new toy he had found. He swatted it across the room, then

dashed after it. Charlotte sighed and set down her knitting. She crossed the room and picked up the yarn. Then, she had to extricate the long thread from the kitten's paws and rewind it. A wiser Charlotte would have set aside her knitting until another hour, but she was so determined to finish her project before Christmas, she left the scarf unattended in her chair and went to see if Mrs. Perry might have something she could make into a cat toy to keep her new houseguest occupied.

Mrs. Perry found some frayed ribbons in the rag bag and fashioned them into a sort of knotted ball with tassels. Hoping the cat would be pleased, Charlotte returned to the drawing room to give him the prize...and was rewarded with an ugly scene.

Yarn was strewn everywhere. All the pastel colors for the baby had been unwound and criss-crossed from corner to corner. And through it all wove a thread of the brightest red hue. The scarf, or what was left of it, lay at the end of the tangled web, with the knitting needles yanked out from it. Three weeks' worth of knitting, gone. And Christmas, right around the corner!

Charlotte tried hard not to cry as she began untangling the mess. From behind the settee, the kitten peeked its head out. It seemed to know that it had done wrong. It kept its head down and its ears back. Try as she might, Charlotte could not scold the adorable little kitten.

"You just wanted to play, didn't you?" she asked him.

William's door opened suddenly. He passed through the drawing room and towards the stairs, not even glancing at the mess.

Charlotte frowned. "Are you all right, William?"

"I find that I am not feeling well," he called as he ascended to their bedroom. Charlotte hurried up the stairs after him and caught him at the landing.

"Let me see." She felt his forehead. "Why, you are burning up! You must get to bed at once. I shall have Mrs. Perry send up some tea and broth. Shall I send for the doctor?"

William waved her off. "No need, my dear, I am certain. All I require is a little lie-down, and I shall be well."

Charlotte helped him into bed, and then went down to speak with the servants about his needs.



William was coughing when Charlotte returned to check on him.

"How are you, dear?" Charlotte asked.

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“Not so well,” he replied in a hoarse voice. “I called on the Hopkins family yesterday. Three little ones down with something. I fear I may have caught whatever it is they have.”

“Oh, dear!” Charlotte exclaimed. “You should not have called upon them when there was illness in the house.”

“You are right, as usual, Charlotte,” he smiled weakly. “But their mother asked me to pray over the little ones. Her sister had written that there is influenza in Maidstone. Ten babies and elderly, already gone, and many more waylaid. I told her we are so far from Maidstone, it cannot be the same thing, but she remains fearful.”

A chill went through Charlotte’s bones at the mention of influenza. It could not be, not here in Hunsford!

“Would you fetch me the basin, quickly, Charlotte? I fear I may be about to lose my luncheon.” William asked.

She hurried over with it, just in time. Charlotte patted her husband’s back while he heaved, all the while, her worry growing.

“I must send for Dr. Ames,” she said.

The surgeon arrived within the hour. He gave William a thorough examination.

“I fear it may be as you suspect, Mrs. Collins,” Dr. Ames whispered to Charlotte.

Her eyes widened. “Influenza?”

He nodded. “Perhaps. It is too early to be certain, but he has all the symptoms. We must keep a close watch on him in the next twenty-four hours, to be sure. In the meantime, I must call on the Hopkins family, to ensure their care as well, and to find out who else they have been in contact with this week. If it is influenza, we could be facing an epidemic.”



Charlotte refused to leave William’s side, despite Mrs. Perry’s fears that she should not be in the sick room in her condition. All her attention was on William, her ruined scarf forgotten. The doctor came once more to check on him. His report on the Hopkinses was not favorable. All five of them were ill now, and the family next door to them whose children they often played with were also beginning to feel unwell.

William’s fever had risen considerably. He had severe chills, and was having difficulty keeping liquids down. The doctor had warned Charlotte that if he became too dehydrated, it could have fatal consequences. He told her to continue urging the patient

to take what little water or broth he could swallow, so she followed his advice with all diligence.

“Charlotte? Is that you?” William called out, rousing from his fitful sleep.

She raced to his side and took his hand. “I am here, William. What do you need?”

“Must, must finish,” he muttered.

“Finish what, my love?”

“Sermon. Need to finish writing. Christmas coming.” His voice was growing weaker.

Charlotte shook her head. “You needn’t worry about that, dear. Come now, will you not try another sip of water, now that you are awake?” William accepted the water that she offered, but hadn’t drank too many sips before it all came back up again.

Charlotte sighed. She wiped his mouth and handed the basin to Mrs. Perry to be cleaned again. “Try again, just one sip.” William obliged, and this time, it stayed down. He laid back against the pillow again, but could not fall asleep. He tossed and turned, fretful and restless. He murmured things occasionally, but in his delirium, none of it made sense. The vomiting continued, as did the fever. Charlotte mopped his brow with a damp rag and prayed silently for the Lord to deliver him from this illness.

As the morning rays inched over the horizon, William at last fell into a restful sleep. Charlotte closed her eyes, intending only to rest them, but exhaustion took over. She awoke with full sunlight streaming in the room to Mrs. Perry, informing her that Dr. Ames had arrived. The doctor entered with a hopeful countenance.

Upon examining Mr. Collins, he said, “the fever has broken. He is sleeping naturally.”

“Does that mean he will recover?” Charlotte asked.

“I should think so. I saw the Hopkins family this morning, and all of them are on the mend too, as well as their neighbors. It appears I was wrong about it being influenza. It is merely a ‘winter vomiting disease’ such as those I have seen, which generally run their course in about a day or so, with symptoms not unlike those of influenza.”

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief and raised her eyes heavenward in silent gratitude to the Lord.

William finally awoke in the late afternoon, happy to be feeling well again. His appetite was enough that he drank two bowls of broth, some bread, and a heaping bowl of freshly-made applesauce.

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“And now,” he said, “if you would please bring up my sermon notes from my study, Charlotte, I must finish what I was writing.”

Charlotte tried not to laugh. “Surely, the doctor will not permit you to preach tomorrow morning, not in your condition.”

“But Charlotte, it is Christmas! One cannot cancel Christmas, you know.”

“No one will expect you to perform after having just recovered from an illness.”

But try as she might, she could not persuade William otherwise, and when the doctor returned a final time that evening to check on him, he gave his approval for William to preach Christmas morning. Thus, Charlotte was forced to concede.



William got to work putting the finishing touches on his sermon, with strict instructions to go back to bed as soon as he finished. Meanwhile Charlotte made her way downstairs to see about getting a cup of tea.

“By the way,” Mrs. Perry remarked as she handed Charlotte her tea, “there was a visitor earlier.”

“Who was it?” Charlotte asked. “And why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Well, I did not want to disturb you when you were with the rector,” she explained. “It was Mrs. Cooper, you know, little Cora’s mother.”

“Oh?”

Mrs. Perry nodded. “Yes. It seems she had a change of heart after she saw how much Cora loved that kitten, and she decided to give it to her as her Christmas present. She came to fetch it earlier.”

Charlotte smiled. “So, the kitten is gone now?”

Mrs. Perry nodded. Both women could not help feeling relieved. Besides the mischief with the yarn, Charlotte had heard a report that the cat had gotten into the cream in the larder and nearly ruined an entire chicken.

She hoped that Cora might be able to teach the kitten to behave better, lest he again be at the mercy of Mrs. Cooper.

Charlotte took her tea to the drawing room. She noticed that someone—likely Mrs. Perry— had taken the time to untangle the mess of yarn and wind it back up neatly. The unfinished scarf lay on top of the knitting basket. She hadn’t had time to complete it-- and tomorrow was Christmas! Charlotte examined it. The damage was less than she had originally thought; there was still a foot or so of completed stitches.

It was foolish, she knew, to attempt to redo what had taken three weeks to complete, but she had to try.

Settling into her chair by the fire, she quickly fell into rhythm, knitting along the rows. Pleased that her progress was going well, she worked methodically, losing track of the time. She paused only briefly to stoke the fire and stretch her aching neck. She worked and worked, her eyes growing more and more bleary and a headache began to twinge. She could not stop though, not until the scarf was finished. She would work all night if she had to. Knit, knit, knit. Knit, knit, knit...



“Charlotte, my love. Wake up,” William whispered. “Merry Christmas, darling.”

Charlotte opened her eyes slowly. Her back felt like a cart had run over it and her feet were numb. She realized she had fallen asleep in her chair. The fire had long ago gone out. She glanced down and saw that she still had the scarf-- or rather, half of one, laying in her lap, knitting needles still attached.

“Oh, no!” she cried. “I fell asleep and did not finish your present!”

William’s face grew puzzled. “My--my present? But this is for the baby, I thought.”

Charlotte smiled. “I am working on things for our baby, also. But this crimson scarf was meant for you, my dear. I’ve been working on it in secret these past few weeks. It would have been finished, but there was an, er...*incident* involving the kitten.”

Now William smiled also. “I see. It matters not that you did not complete this. I am touched, truly, to know that you put so much effort into crafting something for my benefit.” He took the unfinished scarf and flung it around his neck while holding onto the end with the needles to model it for her. “See? I will look rather dashing in this, do you not agree?”

“Yes! Yes, I do!” Charlotte laughed.

William returned the craft to her hands. “Wait a moment, I have something for you also.”

He swiftly went to his study and retrieved the parcels he had purchased from Vanessa.

Charlotte let out a gasp at the large box tied with a beautiful green ribbon, and the smaller one beside to match.

“Thankfully, Vanessa has already wrapped these beautifully, for I surely would never have been able to do it justice,” William grinned.

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Charlotte tenderly undid the ribbon on the smaller box first.

“Oh, my!” she exclaimed. “It is the shawl I had my eye on! How did you know I wanted it?”

“Oh, I think a little birdie might have given me an inkling,” he winked. “She was most helpful in selecting your second gift, also, I might add.”

Charlotte eagerly opened the large box. She gasped as she drew the lush silk gown out.

William beamed proudly. “I thought perhaps you could wear it to church this morning and for Christmas dinner.”

“Oh, William! It’s beautiful!” Throwing her arms around him, she rewarded him with a tender kiss.

“But,” she said, “now I feel even worse that my gift for you is not ready.”

“My darling,” William said, “there is no greater Christmas gift I could receive than having you with me, as my wife. From the beginning, you have loved me, for better or for worse, through all my blunders and even through sickness. I chose you because I thought you fit the qualities one ought to have to be a rector’s wife. But little did I know that in reality, God was the one who chose you to be my wife, because you are the only one who could love me so thoroughly and make me so utterly happy.”

Tears were forming in Charlotte’s eyes as she let William take her into his arms and kiss her slowly, drinking in all the sweetness that their love had to offer. Theirs might have begun as a marriage of convenience, but it had fully blossomed into a marriage of the deepest love and admiration.

Feeling squished by his parents’ embrace, the product of their love decided to announce his presence with a firm kick, causing Charlotte to gasp.

“Oh!” She patted her belly lovingly. “He’s moving. Would you like to feel him?”

William placed his hands on her belly and was rewarded with the thrill of feeling his child’s wriggling for the first time. A look of awe spread over his face.

Charlotte and William cuddled together on the settee and continued to enjoy their child’s small movements.

Soon, William would preach the Christmas Day sermon for the people of Hunsford and Charlotte would sit proudly in the front row to listen, wearing her new dress and shawl. Later, they would enjoy a sumptuous feast complete with ham, plum pudding, and cherry pie.

But for now, it was enough for the two of them to rest in silence and enjoy the miraculous Christmas gift that they had in their love for one another.

~Finish~



About the author

Amanda Kai's fondness for storytelling, combined with her love of period dramas and classic literature, inspires her historical romances and other romances. She is the author of several stories inspired by Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. She also wrote *Love at the Library*, a contemporary romance about a Jane Austen fan who falls for a librarian. When she's not diving into the realm of her imagination, Amanda lives out her own happily ever after in Leander, Texas, with her husband and three children.

If you enjoyed this story, you can read all about Charlotte and William's first year of marriage, how they met Vanessa, and the struggles they faced in helping her and other women to find redemption, in [*Marriage and Ministry: a Pride and Prejudice Novel*](#).

Sign up in her email list, and get her FREE novella [*Elizabeth's Secret Admirer!*](#)



A Wish for Jane

By Summer Hanford



1

Elizabeth Bennet pulled her shawl tight in a somewhat futile attempt to mitigate the chill that seeped through the little window in the bedroom she shared with her sister Jane. Frost coated the edges of each windowpane, crowding corners to make a mosaic of ovals looking out into the slumbering world. Elizabeth studied the star-spattered night sky, mind too roiled by the events of the evening for sleep.

Behind her, Jane did slumber, a smile curving her lips. Undoubtedly, she dreamed of dancing with Mr. Bingley, likely Jane's only memories of the ball they'd attended at Netherfield that evening. Sadly, Elizabeth could recall so much more and worried for the happy future with Mr. Bingley that her sister deserved.

Foremost, the behavior of their mother, who'd loudly bragged about Jane's impending betrothal to Mr. Bingley as if it were a set thing, which it very much was not. Then there'd been their younger sister Mary's horrible singing, and their father's even more embarrassing public decrying of Mary's performance. Not to mention their youngest sisters, Kitty and Lydia, who'd been generally silly and officer-obsessed all evening, and their bungling cousin, Mr. Collins.

In fact, aside from Jane, not a single member of Elizabeth's family had managed to behave well. Worse, Elizabeth could arguably add her name to the list of those who'd potentially harmed Jane's chances. Despite her best resolve, or perhaps because of it, Elizabeth had badgered Mr. Bingley's greatest friend, Mr. Darcy.

But she'd no choice. If Mr. Darcy insisted on being so supercilious, so highhanded, and so determined not to see that he shouldn't manage the lives of others, as he'd done to poor Mr. Wickham, a gentleman Elizabeth found pleasing in every way, then Elizabeth must offer correction. Mr. Darcy might like to think he could get away with treating people

poorly, as he had when he'd denied Mr. Wickham a living willed to him, but Elizabeth did not agree.

The Mr. Darcy's of the world ruined everything. He'd certainly ruined the ball for Elizabeth. By watching her family with disdain. By keeping Mr. Wickham away despite that fine gentleman's resolve, and by dancing with Elizabeth.

At least Mr. Darcy had proven to be a fine dancer. She could offer that one modicum of praise.

Well, that and that he was handsome. Even she couldn't deny that.

A flash in the night sky caught Elizabeth's attention. A shooting star. It streaked through the heavens, bright, dazzling and full of hope.

With a slight smile for the absurdity of the act, Elizabeth murmured, "Oh falling star, I wish for Jane's happiness, and if that requires Mr. Bingley, then I wish for Jane to marry him."

The star flared brighter, then dropped from sight below the horizon. Smiling at her silliness, Elizabeth left the window. She climbed back into the bed she shared with Jane, careful not to disturb her sister, and fell almost instantly into sleep, somehow comforted by what could only be called a childlike act, wishing on a star.



2

Caroline Bingley tried not to check the mantelpiece clock in the breakfast parlor at Netherfield a thirteenth time, but couldn't resist. Her brother Charles had said he wanted to leave for London early and she'd welcomed the opportunity to move breakfast up. She didn't prefer to rise before noon, especially the day after putting on a ball, and their sister Louisa and her husband were still asleep, but today an early morning was necessary. Caroline wanted her brother gone from Hertfordshire as soon as possible, before he made the horrible mistake of asking Jane Bennet to marry him.

Not that there was anything wrong with Miss Bennet. A perfectly lovely girl who would make a pleasantly biddable sister-by-marriage. Unfortunately, her entire family was horrendous. Worse, she didn't bring any of the advantages Caroline required to help her marry up. No wealth. No worthwhile connections. Only relations Caroline would be forced not to acknowledge.

Half eleven. Why would Charles ask for an early breakfast when he didn't intend to come down until ten and still sat at the table gabbing with Mr. Darcy at half eleven? Even the presence of the handsome, very wealthy and well connected Mr. Darcy, who always rose early, couldn't mitigate Caroline's ire. Charles must leave Hertfordshire immediately.

Then, she and Louisa meant to ensure they all followed. Soon, this cursed country house would be empty again. If Caroline had her way, they'd never be back. She was

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already working on a carefully worded letter to Miss Bennet. One that would crush her hopes soundly enough to keep her and her family from attempting any contact, for the rest of them certainly had the ill manners to try.

“Charles,” Caroline said the moment there was a lull in the gentlemen’s conversation about the cotton market. “Would you like me to send for your carriage?”

Her brother swiveled to look at the clock. “Is that the time?” He turned to Mr. Darcy. “Pardon me, Darcy, but I truly must be off. I need to make London in good enough time to conclude my business there by tomorrow, so I can return with immediacy.” A dreamy look stole over Charles’ features.

Caroline exchanged a long suffering look with Mr. Darcy. They both knew about whom Charles thought and Mr. Darcy didn’t approve any more than she did.

She called for her brother’s carriage, which took an excruciating length of time, then she and Mr. Darcy saw him off. As much as she normally would like to monopolize that gentleman, Caroline wanted to work on her letter. The sooner she broke Miss Bennet’s heart, the sooner they could all move on. She went to her room for her writing supplies and the draft she’d already composed.

She pulled open her desk drawer.

Something small and brown leaped out.

Caroline shrieked.

Another mouse came out, and another.

She jumped up on the bed. A maid ran in, and Mr. Darcy, then Louisa, and the mice all disappeared down a little hole in the molding beside the wardrobe, leaving Caroline screaming, standing on her bed.

Mr. Darcy yanked the drawer open wider. All that remained inside was completely ruined, illegible, shredded paper.



3

After the excitement of the ball and her initial inability to sleep, Elizabeth remained in bed far later than usual. When she finally came down, it was to find that she was the last to breakfast. Only her mother and Lydia, usually the latest sleepers, even remained at the table.

Elizabeth sat down to join them, but before she could even ask if the tea was still warm, her cousin, Mr. Collins, came in. Ignoring both her and Lydia, he marched up to their mother and bowed. Mrs. Bennet stared up at him with mild confusion at the formality.

“May I hope, Madam, for your interest with your fair daughter Elizabeth, when I solicit for the honour of a private audience with her in the course of this morning?” Mr. Collins asked when he straightened.

Lydia covered her face with her napkin, her eyes full of giggles.

Mrs. Bennet turned a triumphant look on Elizabeth.

Elizabeth shook her head no, heat working up her neck and threatening her face. She would not, ever, accept a proposal from her obnoxious, condescending, servile, awkward cousin.

Mrs. Bennet opened her mouth to speak.

A knock sounded on the front door.

They all swiveled to look in that direction. A maid hurried past the parlor. In the entrance hall, the front door swung open.

“Mr. Bingley to see Mr. Bennet,” Mr. Bingley’s familiar voice said.

Mrs. Bennet jumped to her feet, Mr. Collins entirely forgotten in her joy at finding Mr. Bingley, a much more prestigious match for one of her daughters, at her door. She rushed past Mr. Collins and into the hall.

Collins turned to Elizabeth. “Cousin Elizabeth, I—”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth interrupted and followed her mother into the hall. In the parlor, Lydia’s chair scraped back.

“Mrs. Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Bingley greeted warmly, though his expression appeared slightly dazed. “Is Mr. Bennet at home? I have something of great import to discuss with him.”

“He is. He certainly is,” Mrs. Bennet cried. She turned to the maid who’d opened the door. “Take Mr. Bingley’s coat and hat. Bring fresh tea. I’ll go fetch Mr. Bennet.” She rushed off.

The maid turned to Mr. Bingley, then frowned slightly.

Elizabeth followed her gaze and asked, “Mr. Bingley, whatever has become of your hat?”



Darcy returned to the breakfast parlor after the chaos in Miss Bingley’s room, leaving cleanup to the maid. He took up the paper to read with his coffee, pleased to have the parlor to himself. Though good manners forbade it, he couldn’t help a slight smile at the memory of Miss Bingley standing atop her bed shrieking, at the mere sight of a mouse. He’d never seen her permit such a disadvantage of appearance. If she didn’t insist on such fine cotton paper, the mice wouldn’t have wished to make a nest of it.

Shortly after Darcy poured his next cup, the front door opened without a knock. He looked up with a frown. Had Bingley returned? Who else would enter thusly?

Suppressing a sigh, Darcy put down his paper. He’d best investigate. Apparently, he would have no peace this morning.

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He went out into the hall and, to his surprise, spotted Bingley's carriage driver.

"Mr. Darcy," the fellow said rushing forward, cap in hand. "I don't mean to disturb you, sir, but there's been an accident."

Tension raced through Darcy. "An accident? Mr. Bingley?"

"He seemed well enough, sir, but he wandered away."

"What do you mean?" Miss Bingley's voice cried from the top of the staircase, high and brittle. "What sort of accident? Wandered away where?"

The driver turned to look at her, squeezing the brim of his hat tight. "A stag, biggest hart I've ever seen, leaped out into the roadway right in front of the horses. They reared and tried to bolt. I did my best, Miss, Sir, but the carriage broke a wheel, then snapped an axel, and I looked back to see Mr. Bingley sitting in a shrub on the side of the road."

Miss Bingley gasped.

"I got the team steadied and I ran back, and Mr. Bingley seemed well enough. He started looking for his hat. Then, all the sudden, he says he sees a white fox, of all things, on a path. I says, I don't see a fox, or much of a path, but Mr. Bingley asks if Longbourn isn't that way. I says, it is. He told me to report back here and off he goes. So I settled the horses and here I am, but I'll need help bringing them and the carriage back."

Miss Bingley turned an alarmed look on Darcy, who somewhat shared the feeling. "Mr. Darcy, you must go after him. He was thrown. If his hat is gone, he may have struck his head. He may not be thinking clearly. You must stop him."

"Stop him, Miss?" the driver asked.

Miss Bingley turned to him. "Go request Mr. Darcy's horse be saddled."

"Then collect whomever you need to help you with the carriage and team," Darcy added when it appeared Miss Bingley wouldn't.

The driver nodded and rushed away.

"I'll get my coat," Darcy said. He had to stop Bingley from throwing away his future on a woman who, while pretty and kind, would marry him more for his wealth than out of love.



Darcy rode up the drive to the Longbourn attractive, if a bit small, manor house. Even from a distance, he could see the silhouettes of a man and woman standing in the front parlor and recognized them as Bingley and Miss Bennet. While Darcy couldn't see much more of the room, he suspected they were alone.

He urged his horse faster. Movement streaked into his vision from the right, then stopped in the middle of the drive. A rather large badger. It looked directly at Darcy, eyes glinting like stars, and growled.

His horse reared. Darcy struggled for control. The horse whirled, front hooves pawing air.

Finally, after several precarious moments, Darcy restored his mount's calm.

The badger was gone. Darcy shook his head, bemused, and urged his horse forward.

He reached the top of the drive and dismounted. Long legs carried him to the door, his gaze more on the silhouettes in the parlor than where he was going. Just before he reached the steps, Bingley's silhouette dropped to one knee and reached for Miss Bennet's silhouette's hand.

Darcy stifled a curse. He was moments too late. Even as he knocked, he could hear Miss Bennet's exclamations of joy within. The door swung open to reveal Elizabeth, expression alight with happiness.

"Mr. Darcy."

"Miss Elizabeth."

Her gaze slanted in the direction of the front parlor. "You knew Mr. Bingley was here? He told us about his carriage."

Darcy nodded. "I came to ensure he's well."

"Did you?" Her eyebrows winged upward. "What a good friend you are. Would you care to come in?"

Why did she look so suspicious? Did she realize he'd hoped to stop Bingley? Her face became entirely neutral.

"Thank you," Darcy said, and went in to join the celebration.



Caroline looked about the dingy little parlor as she waited for the Bennet women. Charles may have asked them to remain in Netherfield to organize his wedding breakfast for shortly after Christmas, but that didn't mean she had to enjoy the task or make it pleasant for the Bennets. Her first goal, to see them leave quickly today, she hoped to achieve by not having a fire in the cold, dusty back parlor she'd selected.

She also planned to keep the wedding breakfast small by offering the use of the here-to-now unused space. Caroline didn't want Charles squandering money on an event that ought not even take place, or to be forced to congregate with of the rustics of the district any more than necessary.

"...parlor Caroline and I thought would be perfect," Louisa's voice said, coming down the hall.

Caroline moved to stand before the unlit fireplace and plastered on a neutral expression. It wouldn't do to sneer openly at the family of Charles' betrothed.

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“It seems awfully far from the entrance hall,” Mrs. Bennet huffed, clearly a bit out of breath.

“But so close to the kitchen,” Louisa replied.

Louisa led the rounded Bennet matriarch, an admittedly beautiful Miss Bennet, and several aggravating and silly younger Bennets into the parlor. Apparently, they’d left the boring, plain one at home. Caroline greeted them with all the indifference she could muster as they began to look about the room.

“But I thought Mr. Bingley wanted to have the breakfast at Netherfield so the party could be quite large,” Mrs. Bennet cried.

“I’m certain this will be a lovely space,” Miss Bennet said with the amiability that would make her a malleable sister-by-marriage.

The youngest and silliest Bennet daughter, Lydia, rubbed her arms, teeth chattering dramatically. “It’s freezing in here.”

Caroline made a sweeping gesture, encompassing the room. “I will, of course, have it cleaned. I felt this space would be easiest for everyone.”

Miss Elizabeth, the annoying little hoyden who’d somehow caught Mr. Darcy’s fancy, studied Caroline with an insultingly amused expression, as if she knew the exact reasons they stood in a small, cold parlor.

“A fire would make it more cheerful,” Miss Kitty, the other silly one, muttered, rubbing her arms, too.

Caroline rapped her knuckles on the mantel. “Certainly, on the day of—” She broke off with a shriek as something gray and fluffy shot out of the fireplace and ran right between her feet. She jumped onto a footstool, screaming, as another scuttled out, and another.

Louisa was screaming too, standing on a couch. Squirrels, Caroline realized they were, raced about the room. Two shimmied up a couch, little claws tearing the fabric. More gave similar treatment to the curtains. Caroline shrieked, too scared to know what else to do, Louisa’s voice a higher counterpart to hers.

“Good Heavens,” Mrs. Bennet cried. “Kitty, Lydia, block the doorway. We can’t have them all over the house. Elizabeth, open that window. Jane, pillows. Give me some, too.”

The youngest two girls filled the parlor door, holding their skirts as wide as they could. Miss Elizabeth struggled with the unused latch for a moment, then pushed open a window. Couch pillows in hand, Mrs. Bennet and Miss Bennet ushered the squirrels out. As soon as the last went through, Miss Elizabeth swung the window closed.

“Bravo,” a man’s voice said.

Caroline, gasping for air now, looked over to see Mr. Hurst, Mr. Darcy beside him, looking over the heads of Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia. The youngest Bennet girls stepped to either side and turned to look at the gentlemen, who were dressed for riding.

“Steven,” Louisa cried, still standing on the couch. “It was dreadful.”

“I could see that, Dear,” Mr. Hurst answered. “Good thing not everyone lost their heads or the whole house would have been ravaged by squirrels.” He gestured, the motion taking

in the shredded curtains and furniture. Several down feathers drifted lazily through the room and little charcoal footprints seemed to cover nearly every surface.

Mr. Darcy came forward and for a heart stopping moment Caroline thought he meant to offer her a hand down from the footstool. Instead, he folded to peer into the chimney. "They must have a nest up there." He straightened and looked about the room. "Some upholstery work will be required, and new curtains."

Expression as neutral as Caroline had earlier made hers, Miss Elizabeth met Caroline's gaze and said, "What a shame. We'll have to select a different parlor for the wedding breakfast, and I bet this was the very smallest, coziest room."

Teeth ground together and embarrassed at Mr. Darcy seeing her screaming atop a footstool, Caroline nodded. Anger filled her and she felt the glimmer of a new plan. One that would put an end to this wedding Miss Bennet nonsense for good.

Wasn't that terrible Mr. Wickham somewhere to be found in Hertfordshire?



Dressed for riding, Darcy strode through the halls of Netherfield as quietly as he could. Not sneaking, exactly, because that would be beneath his dignity, but definitely with the goal of not garnering attention. Ever since the squirrel incident, Miss Bingley had been particularly trying in her pursuit of him. She obviously recognized that she'd appeared to great disadvantage, especially by comparison to the Bennet women, who'd all remained surprisingly calm. Even their matriarch. Their quick, levelheaded behavior somewhat increased his opinion of the family and decreased his objections to Bingley wedding Miss Bennet.

Not that he'd any doubts before the incident of Elizabeth's wit and sensibility. One look into those alluring, intelligent eyes, or at those lovely full lips with their wry curve, and her quality was readily apparent.

"Mr. Darcy, there you are," Miss Bingley said, popping out from around a corner.

Darcy contained a grimace. He'd let thoughts of Elizabeth Bennet distract from his goal of escaping for a ride without enduring Miss Bingley.

"Join us in the parlor?" She batted her lashes. "We must have a fourth for cards."

"I'm going for a ride."

"Let me change. I can join you."

"A short ride. I shall return before you have time."

"Why, then, I can meet you in the stable and we can go for a second ride, together."

She had him. He refused to be outright rude to Bingley's sister. "Certainly."

Her expression filled with triumph. "I'll see you in the stable."

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Darcy escaped the house. Although the late November air proved chill and a light layer of snow blanketed the ground, he found some measure of peace riding in solitude under the leaden sky. Spotting fox tracks, and recalling Bingley's white fox, he followed the prints. They drew him in the direction of Longbourn, but after what he deemed sufficient time for a woman as vain as Miss Bingley to change, he reluctantly turned back and caught sight of George Wickham at the edge of a pine grove, beckoning him over.



8

As she wandered through the trees, basket in hand, Elizabeth focused on how happy she was for Jane. And she truly, truly was. Her sister deserved a man as kind and dedicated as Mr. Bingley. They would be amazingly happy together.

And Elizabeth would be left with only her father for reasonable company, and him only when he felt like being reasonable.

She let out a sigh, pushing aside thick branches of evergreen, and looked about. She'd come too near Netherfield. This was a grove mostly of pine. When she'd left, she promised to return with at least three balls of mistletoe to help with Christmas decorating. Mr. Bingley was due back from London soon and the entire Netherfield contingent was to dine with them on Christmas.

Unfortunately, that meant that Mr. Bingley sisters and the odious Mr. Darcy would dine with them as well. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were simply snobbish and petty. Mr. Darcy was vile enough to withhold that living from Mr. Wickham in a way which bordered on criminal.

Even if he was quite handsome in riding clothes and a good dancer.

At least Christmas would be augmented by the absence of her odious cousin, who'd somehow convinced Elizabeth's dear friend to be his wife in Elizabeth's place. Augmented as well by their relations, the Gardiners. Elizabeth dearly loved her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and all her cousins. It would be a good Christmas.

Especially if she returned with the promised balls of mistletoe.

She turned to go back. A rabbit hopped onto the tracks, studying her footprints in the light snow. It looked up at her, ears twitching.

Elizabeth went still. She didn't want to scare it.

"I assume you've waylaid me for a reason?" The voice was Mr. Darcy's, but filled with even more coldness and disdain than usual.

Elizabeth turned her head slowly, peering into the pines around her, trying to guess the exact direction in which Mr. Darcy stood. She certainly didn't want to walk into his conversation.

“Well, it’s not for the pleasure of your company,” Mr. Wickham’s voice replied, also sounding different. Gone were all traces of his usual amiability. The rabbit’s eyes went wide and it hopped away.

“Why did you beckon me over?”

“I have information I deem very important to you.”

“And?”

“How much will you pay for it?”

Elizabeth stifled a gasp. Mr. Wickham would sell gossip?

“I’ve paid you, and for you, enough.”

“That living was worth more than the three thousand you paid me. You knew that when I asked for it. You should have given me more.”

Elizabeth blinked rapidly. Mr. Wickham hadn’t told her that Mr. Darcy had paid him for the living, at Wickham’s request.

“I also paid well over a thousand meeting the debts you left all over Derbyshire, bandying my father’s name,” Mr. Darcy said coldly.

“And you’ll give me more if you want to know what Miss Bingley is paying me to do, to stop her brother’s wedding.”

Elizabeth had to squeeze a hand over her mouth to keep from crying out in shock. Would even Miss Bingley stoop so low? And why was Mr. Wickham being so awful?

“It best not be anything like Ramsgate.”

“You’ll never forgive me for Ramsgate,” Mr. Wickham said bitterly.

“For trying to elope with my fifteen year old sister to get her dowry? Likely not.”

“It wasn’t only for Georgiana’s money.” Wickham’s tone held venom now. “It was to hurt you.”

“What do you want, George?” Mr. Darcy sounded tired, as if they’d had the same conversation before.

“I want to make up for Ramsgate, in some small way,” Mr. Wickham, too, had softened his tone. “I do love Georgiana, you know. Not...well, not in the way I convinced her I did, but I do.”

“Tell me what you came to tell me.”

“Miss Bingley approached me about a week ago. She offered to pay me a thousand pounds if I compromise Miss Bennet before her wedding, making her unfit to marry, or five hundred if I compromise Miss Elizabeth, and even two-hundred and fifty if I do the same to one of the younger sisters. Plus, five hundred more if that manages to stop the wedding.”

Shocked silence filled the forest, as if even the animals couldn’t believe what they’d heard. Elizabeth’s heart pounded. She put a hand to her chest, half worried the gentlemen on the other side of the trees would hear.

“Is there more?” Mr. Darcy’s voice grated out.

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“Yes. She said she’ll be at Longbourn for Christmas dinner. She means to let me in through the library window so I can complete the task. She said everyone will be there to see whatever scene I make.”

“You will not go within a mile of Longbourn on Christmas,” Mr. Darcy stated.

“If you could simply see your way to lending me a few hundred pounds, I wouldn’t have to.”

“I will see my way to giving you one thousand, but this is the last time and I only grant it on the provision that you leave Meryton.”

“But my commission.”

“Two thousand and your word of honor that neither I nor Georgiana will ever see you again, and I mean it, George.”

“Bring me the two thousand and we have a bargain.”

“You’ll have it before Christmas.”

Footfalls moved off, fortunately away from Elizabeth. A moment later, tack creaked, then the pound of hooves on snow packed earth sped away. Elizabeth stood where she was for a long time, stunned.



9

Elizabeth struggled under the weight of her emotions, unable to remain still as they waited for the contingent from Netherfield to arrive. In the days since, she’d quickly realized she could deem the conversation she’d overheard nothing other than full of honest truth. And, in confirmation of that, yesterday Mr. Wickham had resigned his commission and left Meryton.

Both before and after his departure, Elizabeth’s mind had relentlessly toiled over every interaction, every word she’d exchanged with him or Mr. Darcy. And anything she’d heard about either man. She could come to only one conclusion. She’d been a complete and utter fool.

Even worse, the more she considered Mr. Darcy in this new light, the more she came to esteem him. He was upright, honorable, apparently willing to part with his money to keep her and her sisters safe, even though Elizabeth felt certain he’d tried to prevent Mr. Bingley from proposing to Jane. Or maybe he’d simply sought to delay the act? It had happened quite quickly.

Regardless, he’d been amiable enough since and Elizabeth had decided she must apologize to him. Most of her transgressions had been of perception, but she’d definitely been in the wrong to badger him about Wickham while at the ball. For that, at least, she could offer amends.

But when the contingent from Netherfield arrived for Christmas dinner, Mr. Darcy wasn't with them. Mr. Bingley said he'd sent his apologies for needing to run an errand and would arrive soon. Miss Bingley, for her part, looked about the parlor rather than sit, her lips moving slightly as she seemed to count them.

Finally, Miss Bingley turned to where Jane sat with her brother and said somewhat loudly, "Miss Bennet, may I borrow you to show me the library?"

Jane started to rise, expression touched with reluctance.

"I'll show you," Elizabeth offered. Did Miss Bingley not realize Mr. Wickham had left? Had his departure been a ruse? Where was Mr. Darcy? If anything happened, Elizabeth would need him to confirm her version of events.

Miss Bingley turned an annoyed look on Elizabeth. "Really, if dear Jane would simply—"

"She seems very happy where she is," Elizabeth interrupted brightly before Jane could agree. "I'll show you."

Miss Bingley's eyes narrowed. "Very well."

Elizabeth led the way to her father's library. As they passed under the ball of mistletoe outside the door, Miss Bingley's lips curled in derision. Elizabeth ignored the expression and led the way into the little room. Miss Bingley moved to the center, looking about.

After a moment, she said, "It's terribly stuffy, don't you think?" Not waiting for a reply, and ignoring the low burned fire that offered little light and even less warmth to the room, she crossed to open a window. Cold air rushed in. Miss Bingley turned back to say, "Do you know, I forgot what I'm looking for. I'll go ask Louisa."

"I can show you the way?" Elizabeth offered.

"No. You remain. I'll return shortly."

After Miss Bingley hurried away, Elizabeth looked from the window to the door. Miss Bingley obviously thought her plot would still play out. Had she hired some other ne'er-do-well? Would Elizabeth and her sisters have to be on constant guard until the wedding?

No. Elizabeth would put an end to this.

She went into the hall, leaving the library door open. She would see who, if anyone, came in the window, then run back to the others before he could reach her.

A tall shape filled the window, but not enough light spilled out to see who stood there. Elizabeth held her breath, ready to run the moment she saw a face. The shape leaned closer to the window.

Mr. Darcy stuck his head in.

"Mr. Darcy," she exclaimed, too surprised for silence.

"Miss Elizabeth." He craned his neck to see all corners of the room. "You must wonder why I am at your library window."

"I would assume to ensure Miss Bingley's plot is not carried out."

His attention snapped to her.

Elizabeth smiled, unable not to with him looking so surprised and yet behaving so dashing. "Do come in, Mr. Darcy." She gestured to her right. "The entrance hall is that

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way. We can open and close the front door for appearance when we get there. Or do you have your horse with you?”

He shook his head. “It was the oddest behavior I’ve seen in him. He wouldn’t veer from the drive. I left him out front with your groom and said I wanted to stretch my legs before coming in.”

“Are they stretched?”

He stepped through the window, his long legs making the act easy, then closed it. Elizabeth studied his face as he crossed the room to her. How had she ever thought his features cold? They revealed an array of emotions now, foremost a strange heat as his gaze fixed on her.

He halted in the library doorway. “How did you find out?”

“I overheard you and Mr. Wickham.” She gestured upward. “I was out gathering mistletoe.”

New emotions crowded his eyes, worry foremost. “About my sister.”

“I will never tell a soul.”

“Thank you.” He stared down at her. “You found it, then.”

Her heart beat in triple time. To have him so close was nearly dizzying. “Found what?” she asked, her voice a whisper.

“Mistletoe.”

“I did,” she said, and gave in to the urge to kiss him.



Caroline waited. No shout or scream came, nor did Miss Elizabeth return. Where was Wickham? When he arrived, he was supposed to orchestrate a scene that would bring everyone running.

Outside, an owl called. No one else seemed to hear, deep in conversation as they all were. It called again. Would Elizabeth hear through the open window? Would the sound make her think to close it? Worse, were Wickham in the midst of actually compromising the chit, would the sound break whatever spell he’d cast over her?

The owl called again. Unable to bear the suspense of not knowing if her plan was working, Caroline slipped from the parlor and crept across the entrance hall. At the mouth of the corridor leading to the miniscule library she stuck her head around the corner, and immediately pulled it back, filled with glee.

In the hall, illuminated by what little light spilled from the open library door, Elizabeth Bennet stood kissing a man in a greatcoat.

Wickham had done it. He’d actually done it. Not only was that snooty little Elizabeth being compromised, by the glimpse Caroline had caught, she was enjoying it.

Caroline wouldn't wait for a shout or a scream. She wanted everyone to witness how wanton Elizabeth truly was. She returned to the parlor and said in a low, fervent voice, "Come quick. I was on my way back to the library and there, in the hall, a man is kissing Miss Elizabeth."

Faces went slack with surprise. Conversation stopped. Mrs. Bennet shot to her feet. The others followed. They all rushed past Caroline, through the brightly lighted entrance hall and into the dimmer corridor. Caroline followed slowly, savoring the moment.

"Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Bennet's voice exclaimed in shock.

"Lizzy," Miss Lydia screeched. "You're kissing Mr. Darcy."

"What?" Caroline squawked. Coming up on her toes, she peered over the others.

Mr. Darcy, wearing a greatcoat with the collar turned up against the cold, stood side by side with Miss Elizabeth, her hand clasped firmly in his. Completely composed, he said, "Mr. Bennet, I'd like to speak with you about your daughter."

"Mr. Darcy is going to marry Elizabeth," Mrs. Bennet cried. "Our Elizabeth. Mr. Darcy marrying Elizabeth and Jane marrying Mr. Bingley. This is the best of Yuletides."

"I can't agree more," Charles said, taking Jane Bennet's hand. "A very happy Yuletide to all."

This was met with cheers and happy agreement, and Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth smiled at each other as if truly in love. Caroline coiled her fingers into fists and tried to smile, hoping no one would look at her.

What had happened to her perfect plan?

Outside, an owl hooted.

The End



About the author

Having known from a young age that she wanted to be a writer, Summer currently writes Regency Romance (which a touch of adventure...or sometimes a lot of adventure), Pride & Prejudice retellings (with a touch of humor...and sometimes a little adventure) and High Fantasy novels (action, adventure, romance and danger!)

Summer is currently working on her new High Fantasy Series, Rise of the Summer God (book one, Daughters of Awen), her Action Packed Historical Romance Series, Children of the Wald (book one, Kestrel) and writing quirky Pride & Prejudice variations with

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Renata McMann. Summer lives in New York with her husband and compulsory, deliberately spoiled, cats. The newest addition to their household, an energetic setter-shepherd mix, is not yet appreciated by the cats, but is well loved by the humans. For more about Summer, visit www.summerhanford.com.



The Christmas Wish

By L.L. Diamond

The parlour at Netherfield was bursting with cheer. How could they not when we were so fortunate as to be a part of Jane and her Mr. Bingley's first Christmas Eve celebration? The newly wed couple sat side-by-side on a sofa and whispered to one another in a perfect example of marital felicity. Jane wore a slight smile and appeared blissful while Charles's gaze remained on his bride rather than her relations, which was as it should be in my opinion. After all, the two were only wed a month prior.

"I told everyone how it would be! Jane was destined to be mistress of Netherfield. I knew she would catch Mr. Bingley's eye, did I not, Mr. Bennet?"

I rolled my eyes. Of course, Mama had forgotten how she lamented Charles's departure from the neighbourhood after the Netherfield ball.

"That dreadful Mr. Bingley had used her poor Jane ill," she had cried. None of that mattered now, of course. He had returned and all was again right with the world.

Papa sipped from his glass of brandy and shook his head. "You did indeed," he said in response to Mama's ridiculous proclamations. He had surrendered long ago when it came to Mama. After all, she did not require an answer. She often did not leave enough time for a response anyway.

"Jane, may Miss Darcy and I play the pianoforte?" Mary's bright eyes and eager countenance were all Jane needed to agree. Thankfully, Mary's playing interrupted Mama's incessant chatter and prevented her from continuing her bragging. Meanwhile, Mary's fingers moved across the keys in a much-improved fashion than they had a mere six months ago. Thank goodness for the master Charles had hired! Just a few lessons had already wrought a marked improvement in her playing. Every inhabitant of Longbourn was indebted to Charles for the thoughtful birthday gift whilst Mary was overjoyed to have such an opportunity.

When the first tune ended, Mary waved to their younger sister. "Kitty, would you accompany us for the next?" Elizabeth smiled when Kitty bounded up beside Mary and they spoke in low tones over the music sheets.

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“Oh, I do hope she sings ‘The First Noel,’” said Jane. “I heard them practicing two days ago and it was lovely.” The entire family was still shocked to discover Kitty possessed a clear, strong voice that would pass in even the drawing rooms of the ton. Under Lydia’s influence, Kitty had never attempted to perform in the past. Lydia never cared to do so, and Kitty followed suit.

I gazed upon my family, my heart full. I was pleased they were well and happy, yet I bore a weight I had not shared with a living soul. Who knew the burden I harboured would appear in the guise of a Christmas guest? I had never dreamt Mr. Darcy would return. My gaze travelled to where the gentleman sat near the fire and my chest tightened. Neither Jane nor Charles had mentioned to me that Mr. Darcy would journey to Netherfield for the holiday.

Why had he come? Was something amiss that he could not celebrate the holiday in his own home? I took a deep breath in an attempt to release the tension. His presence had a terrible effect on my equanimity, and despite the company of his sister, which I found enjoyable, I could not bear his presence.

“Lizzy?”

I started and turned to Jane. “Did you say something?”

“Are you well?” she asked. “You seem distracted. I must have said your name three or four times before you noticed.”

I shook my head. “Forgive me. You caught me wool gathering.” Dear, sweet Jane nodded, but she watched me for a moment before she turned her attention back to Charles.

Without her eyes on me, I returned to my previous preoccupation. I could not say why I insisted upon torturing myself. The longer I watched him, the more my heart split and bled. He turned in my direction, and my eyes darted back to Jane and Charles. My chest constricted even further. I could not breathe.

Mr. Darcy had not come when Charles returned for Jane. He had not come to their wedding. Illness was the supposed culprit. Did I believe the excuse? No. Deep down, I am certain he wished to avoid me. He had not come. How I wish those words would stop echoing in my mind!

That dreadful morning, when I learnt of Lydia’s elopement, was the last time I set eyes upon Mr. Darcy. He had been solicitous and kind, ensuring I was well and sending for my aunt and uncle, but then he left. He hastened from my side as though I had some contagion.

How he must despise me—sister to Wickham! His every principle must revolt against such a connection! A connection between us was surely an impossibility in his mind.

My heart pounded against my ribs and my chest pained me. How could I endure the next fortnight in Mr. Darcy’s company? Was his intention to torture me with his presence? If I had not been so prideful and vain, I would have accepted his proposal at Hunsford. We could have been wed...

“Lizzy!” called Charles, “will you not play for us, or at the very least, sing. We have not heard from you yet this evening.”

Georgiana Darcy jumped from the bench beside Mary. “Oh yes, I so enjoyed hearing you play at Pemberley. Would you please?”

Was Mr. Darcy looking at me? I had no way of peeking in his direction, but the side of my face tickled as it had when he first resided at Netherfield. I began to tremble. Why was I giving him so much power over me? He was the one who chose not to return with Charles.

But why would he? He could not know I loved him—not that such tender sentiments were welcome now. My heart held Mr. Darcy dear, and it always would. I had attempted to persuade that fragile part of me to feel otherwise, but all my efforts were in vain. No matter who he married or whether he continued to love me in return, I belonged to him, body and soul. I was a wretched being indeed!

“Lizzy?” Dear Jane! I had never shared my heartache with her. She would have understood, but I could not cause my dearest sister distress when she was, at last, happy. “I would enjoy hearing you sing as well.”

I clasped my hands together. How could I play when they would not stop their incessant shaking? “I will sing if you do not mind accompanying me, Georgiana?”

Georgiana’s expression lit. The dear girl had been so thrilled to be in my company once more, and while I was pleased to see her, I had great difficulty associating with her brother. I had avoided his company since I could not pretend him to be an indifferent acquaintance. Such a deception was beyond my capabilities.

My legs wobbled as I stood and crossed to the pianoforte. How I wanted to peer to the side—to see if he regarded me with the same expression as when we were in company at Pemberley!

I thumbed through the sheet music and found a piece my aunt purchased a few years ago as a Christmas present. Perhaps if I sang in French, my mistakes would not be as noticeable?

With a smile, Georgiana took her place at the instrument and played a short introduction. I inhaled deeply, swallowed the nerves, which had risen to my throat, and closed my eyes.

*Un flambeau, Jeanette, Isabella --
Un flambeau, courons au berceau!
C'est Jésus, bonnes gens du hameau.
Le Christ est né; Marie appelle
Ah! Ah! Que la Mère est belle,
Ah! Ah! Que l'Enfant est beau!*

As I sang, my eyes fluttered open. Mr. Darcy stared straight at me! His sky blue eyes locked with mine, and I gasped, inhaling in such a way that I choked. My vision blurred

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and a tear rolled down my cheek whilst I attempted to clear my throat, but a tickle continued to plague me. Just as the cough would begin to subside, it would start anew.

My face burned. “Forgive me!” I choked out. With my hand upon my mouth, I rushed from the room and hastened to the library. There I placed one hand upon the desk and the other upon my stomach.

After a few moments, a full glass of brandy was held before my face.

“A sip might help clear what ails you.”

That voice! I whipped my head in its direction. Mr. Darcy stood beside me, his brows furrowed. His eyes held—was that worry in their depths?

“Do not feel you must, but I have found spirits beneficial in the past.”

“I merely choked.”

“Your singing was lovely until the cough forced you to stop. I am exceedingly sorry my presence has disturbed you so.”

I cradled the glass in my palms and took a scalding gulp. “I had not expected you to journey to Netherfield for Christmas—especially after you declined to attend the wedding.”

“I penned a letter with my regrets. I was ill.”

Something simmered within me. Perhaps it was the brandy, but it was of no matter. “You did not wish to set eyes upon me.”

“I beg your pardon?” His low voice dropped a step.

Another sizeable swallow was taken from the glass. “Do you truly require me to repeat what I said?”

“Yes, in fact, I do.” His tone was harsh and stern.

I could not do this! I would only start an argument, and a nasty one at that. I downed the last of the brandy and placed the empty decanter upon the desk.

“I cannot...”

Without finishing, I turned and began to walk for the doorway, but the room lurched before I could reach the door. A hand grasped my elbow and turned me around.

“Perhaps I should order some coffee before you rejoin your family.”

He was so handsome! I traced every detail of his beloved countenance with my eyes. He would depart soon enough, and I did not want to forget even the tiniest freckle in the lonely years to come. A part of me was angry with him, but how could I remain so when Lydia was the one who ruined all my hopes and dreams.

I peered up at a lock of hair that curled over his forehead, but I was distracted by a sprig of greenery just overhead.

“Mistletoe,” said Mr. Darcy following my line of sight towards the ceiling.

I swayed and reached to put a hand on his shoulder. Our gazes met, and without thought, I wobbled onto my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his.

He started but did not pull away. His body was rigid and one hand remained at my elbow as the other stayed suspended near my side. How could I have kissed him? He did not want this. How mortifying! I was going to die right here in this spot.

But how could I remove myself without further embarrassment? Such a feat would require all the bravado I possessed. If only he would disappear, so I could fall to the floor and weep!

When I pulled myself free, I would have to run for my chambers. I would feign a cold until Mr. Darcy returned to London or Pemberley. I would not continue to pine over him. I was making a fool of myself!

I made to withdraw, but when I pulled away, he groaned as though he were in pain and lunged forward, claiming my lips as he pulled me into his arms.

If my head was spinning before, it was nothing to this! My knees knocked, my toes curled, and I leaned against his solid chest while the fingernails of my free hand dug into the shoulder of his jacket.

His lips shifted against mine as his hand grazed around my side to press against the small of my back, holding me closer as he deepened the kiss.

He pulled back a hairsbreadth. "Elizabeth?" His voice was a raspy whisper. "Does this mean you do not blame me for your sister's elopement?"

I rested my forehead against his. "Why would I blame you for Lydia's foolhardy actions?"

"Because I kept Wickham's true nature from those in Meryton. I, who knew what he was, concealed it to protect my sister and myself."

His eyes were wide and honest. The poor man!

My fingers threaded into his hair. "How could I hold you responsible when I did the same? You informed me of Wickham's past, and I told no one save Jane. Neither of us felt it necessary to inform the neighbourhood as the regiment was to depart Meryton."

His head dropped to my shoulder. "You have no idea how much I wanted to return with Bingley, but I convinced myself that you blamed me for your sister's predicament. I could not face you."

I cradled his face in my palms and lifted it. "And I thought you could not stomach being a brother to Wickham. I was certain you did not attend Jane and Charles' wedding to avoid me."

He sighed. "I confess I did, but because being in your presence would have rent my heart in two. I almost did not journey here for Christmas, but Georgiana would not allow me to send my regrets. You know not what torture the last two days have been."

My eyes blurred and a warm, wet tear landed upon my cheek. "But I do, for I endured the same affliction."

He leaned forward and placed a tender kiss to my nose and, at last, my lips. "Will you grant me my Christmas wish?" he whispered between kisses.

I gave an impish grin. "That depends on your wish, sir. I am not known for bestowing just any request or favours, for that matter, on the gentlemen of my acquaintance."

A rumble of a chuckle shook his chest. "Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

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With a sob, I buried my face in his shoulder while he held me in a warm but gentle embrace. When I could control my tears, I rose back to my tiptoes.

“That is one wish I would be pleased to grant as it matches my own so perfectly.”

His eyes shown, and the most beautiful smile adorned his face as he lifted me and twirled me around. When he returned my feet to the floor, I placed a hand to my head.

“I should not have drank all of that brandy.”

The tell-tale padding of slippers running down the corridor startled us, but when we both whirled around, no one was there. A loud squeal echoed from the parlour along with my mother’s cry of “Ten thousand pounds a year! I shall go distracted!”

I covered my face and dropped it against his chest.

“Perhaps we should return to your family. I have a suspicion your father will desire a word with me.”

I sighed. “Must we? An elopement sounds ideal at this moment.”

“Do not tempt me,” he growled.

The End.



About the author

L.L. Diamond is more commonly known as Leslie to her friends and as 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 endeavours have included certifications to coach swimming as well as a fitness instructor and personal trainer. As an artist, her concentration is in graphic design, but watercolour is her medium of choice with one of her watercolours 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 and the Romantic Novelists Association. Leslie also plays flute and piano, but much like Elizabeth Bennet, she is always in need of practice!

Visit Leslie’s website ldiamondwrites.com.

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We hope you have enjoyed our anthology as much as we enjoyed working on it.

We wish you a joyful holiday season with your loved ones.
We will see you next year with more authors and more great JAFF stories.

The authors and the editor.