**The Forfeit**

Caitlin Williams

*“To be fond of dancing was a certain step to falling in love.”*

­—Jane Austen

She was almost home. Elizabeth Bennet was nearing the lane that led to Longbourn’s front door and she longed to be warm again. Despite the thick snow that covered the fields surrounding Meryton, she had volunteered to take a note from her mother to Lady Lucas, reasoning that it was a short walk to Lucas Lodge, and the fresh air might restore her spirits.

Christmas festivities were rapidly overtaking Longbourn. Fires were lit in every room, the smell of baking pies permeated the air, and her small cousins—brought from Town by her uncle and aunt Gardiner a few days previously—were busy making decorations and noisily chasing each other about the house. It was usually her favourite time of year, when everyone was predisposed to laughter, love was limitless, and much joy was to be had from simple pleasures. She was generally a social creature and enjoyed all the parties and dinners along with the opportunities for dancing and music they afforded. This year, however, she was struggling to embrace the yuletide with the same delight.

Mostly because her elder sister was unhappy. Though she smiled and remained her affectionate, generous self, it was not difficult for Elizabeth to see the hole that had been left in Jane’s heart. Mr. Bingley had gone; Jane was deserted and bereft. Then there was Elizabeth’s dear friend Charlotte Lucas’s engagement to Mr. Collins, which made her both sad and a little angry at the world. Charlotte deserved a better life and a worthier companion than the pompous, ridiculous, obsequious, portly little man she had settled for.

In this reflective frame of mind, Elizabeth had walked to Lucas Lodge through a calm, picturesque, winter country scene. Yet after she had delivered her note, she had made the mistake of sitting with Charlotte for too long. When she chanced to look out the window, she saw that heavy snow had begun to fall atop the thick blanket which already covered the ground. Concerned that the lanes might become unpassable, she had immediately donned her outdoor clothes and hurried home.

Elizabeth knew every tree and hedgerow and could cut her way through them quickly, but she stopped abruptly just as Longbourn came within easy reach, taken aback by the curious sight of a carriage which had slid into a snowdrift.

She recognised the livery as Mr. Darcy’s, and her astonishment was altogether complete when she realised Mr. Darcy, in his elegant great coat and tall hat, was pushing the carriage from behind with one of his servants while his driver and groom encouraged the horses from the fore. Their efforts were proving to be in vain; the carriage would not budge an inch.

She thought to go back and retrace her steps, to walk the long way around till she was at the back of the house where she might go in through the kitchen door. Detestable man that he was, she had no interest in exchanging pleasantries with Mr. Darcy. She deliberated for too long, however, giving Mr. Darcy the opportunity to look up and notice her.

He started in surprise but recovered quickly, bowed, and tipped his hat. “Miss Bennet.”

“Mr. Darcy, I confess I never thought to see you in our small part of Hertfordshire again.” Nor had she wanted to. She had said a private good riddance to the man less than a month ago when she had heard of his leaving for London after the Netherfield Ball.

“I have stopped only briefly on my way North. Mr. Bingley had a matter that needed personal attention at Netherfield. I merely came this way to be of assistance to him, and now I travel on to Matlock.”

“Ah, but at this present moment, you appear to be travelling nowhere.”

“A minor accident. We shall be away in a moment. The snow will stop shortly.”

After a quick glance up at the sky, she gave him a doubtful look. “I should not count on it doing so merely because you have told it to, Mr. Darcy. The weather may prove less pliable than your friends.”

His brow wrinkled as if he were confused. He stepped forward till he loomed over her, causing Elizabeth to remember what she had noticed the very first time they had met: he was decidedly masculine. None of his features were pretty, everything about him was dark—his hair and eyes were almost black. He was much taller than her, at least a foot, and his chest was broad. His shoulders were straight, his hands large and strong. Mr. Darcy had presence. Even when he was silent or ensconced in a corner, he was impossible to ignore.

She was conscious of her attraction to him. It rose up to vex her at their every encounter. He *looked* like the sort of a man she could lose her heart to—might be willing to entrust with her hand, even. It was fortunate she had quickly discovered he found her only tolerable. Otherwise she might have made a complete fool of herself over him and discovered his hateful character all too late. What worse tragedy could befall a girl than to be madly in love with a man before she discovered he was thoroughly detestable?

“The road North dips into a valley about a mile further up,” she told him. “I should imagine it will be impossible to get through now, though I wish you the best of luck.”

“I have excellent horses and a skilled driver in whom I have great faith. All will be well. Merry Christmas, Miss Bennet.”

His “merry Christmas” was so sombre, so incongruous with the sentiment expressed that it made her smile. She wished him the same, offered him a small curtsey, and walked on.

They had not really exchanged the proper niceties; nobody had asked after anyone’s health. Though perhaps that was a good thing. If she were to enquire after Mr. Bingley, she doubted she would be able to do so with any equanimity.

She had not gone ten feet, however, before she heard their resumed efforts to rescue the carriage come to naught. There was much heaving and mutterings of oaths, but it seemed firmly stuck.

Turning around, she raised her voice to be heard above the wind, which was now blowing in all directions, whipping snow up at her face. “Mr. Darcy, these roads and the surrounding terrain are as familiar to me as the lines on the palms of my hands. It would be foolhardy to continue. You will get no further North today and would do better to return to Netherfield.”

“The house has not been readied,” he shouted back. “I was there only for a few hours to conduct some business. I am certain there is not even a bed made up. I should not like to bother the staff.”

“Would not a house, even one that is shut up, be better than freezing to death out on the road?”

Mr. Darcy glanced in the direction of Netherfield before a sudden gust of wind knocked him a step sideways. Elizabeth battled with it too and was fortunate to remain on her feet.

“You should not be concerned for my welfare, Miss Bennet. I ought to be concerned for yours and see you safely to your door.”

“I am just a few moments away from safety. I beg you to take my advice and go back to Netherfield.”

“Do you, Miss Bennet? I thank you for concern.” He smiled, and she could not determine whether it was rendered strange because she had so rarely seen him smile or because he was staring at her so intently.

“I should worry for anyone who was attempting to travel in such weather. It is fast becoming a blizzard. You ought to make haste, whatever you decide.”

At last he seemed to take notice of her warnings and glanced at the carriage and then at his men. One of them was not much more than a skinny boy who was shivering and stomping at the ground, clapping his hands together in an effort to keep warm.

“Unharness the horses, we will ride back to Netherfield and take shelter there,” Mr. Darcy shouted. His groom quickly jumped to do his bidding.

Elizabeth tried to walk away, reasoning that he was a grown man with two other strapping men, a young lad, and some fine horses to assist him. After a few steps, though, she chastised herself. She ought to be charitable. It *was* Christmas, after all.

“Mr. Darcy,” she said, hoping he could not tell she spoke through gritted teeth. “You are all wet and cold. At Longbourn you might dry off while your men can have something hot to eat and drink in the kitchen, and the horses might rest in the stables. Netherfield is three miles yonder, which is an easy distance in good weather but a thoroughly unpleasant one in this storm.”

He shook his head proudly, but another strong gust of wind seemed to sap his resolve. His shoulders sagged. Though he did not deign to offer any thanks, he and his attendants began to follow her.

Mr. Darcy caught her up after a few moments, and she noticed him regard Longbourn suspiciously as they neared it, as if he were a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Perhaps her mother terrified him, Elizabeth mused. Having witnessed Mrs. Bennet’s desperation and determination to see her daughters well wed, he might fear being trapped and held to ransom until he agreed to marry one of them. She shuddered. Being wed to Mr. Darcy was not a fate she should wish on any of them, no matter how much she sometimes despaired of Kitty and Lydia.

“Mr. Bingley could not come himself?” Elizabeth enquired, having to raise her voice to be heard over the wind.

“Oh, I suppose he might have, but I offered to spare him the trouble, as I would be passing nearby. He has no intention of returning to Netherfield in the near future and wished for me to speak to his steward.”

“It would be better for the neighbourhood if he were to give it up altogether then, so we might see a new family settled there.”

“I am glad we agree on this matter, Miss Bennet. Bingley and Netherfield were not a good match.”

“It is difficult to settle in a new place, no matter how attractive a proposition it presents, if one’s family and friends oppose it.”

Mr. Darcy stopped and turned to face her. They were now only a few feet away from the house. “He would be foolish to disregard the feelings of those closest to him altogether. That would show a great deal of arrogance. A man must consider the duty he owes to his family before he makes any important decisions. Mr. Bingley took the lease of Netherfield on a whim, which is his way. He would do better to wait for an estate he might purchase outright—one that will complement his position in society or even enhance it.”

*Hateful man!* Elizabeth fumed. She was quickly regretting her decision to extend a welcome to him. They were talking of Jane; he knew it as well as she did. “Perhaps he had an emotional attachment to the place,” she said crossly, losing her composure. “He might have been exceedingly happy there if others had not made their displeasure so obvious.”

“Yes, and no doubt he will see some other estate a few months hence that he becomes just as attached to. Netherfield is a good house but has some residual issues and difficulties attached to it.”

Her temper was flaring, and who knows what she might have said next. Fortunately for her but unluckily for him, he was then hit directly on the nose by a large mound of snow. The attack was followed by some high-pitched giggling and a scurrying of boots in some nearby trees. Mr. Darcy looked both affronted and quite ridiculous as ice dripped from the end of his nose. He brushed it off with as much dignity as he could muster, while Elizabeth tried not to laugh. The snowball had most likely been thrown by her young cousin George, though she wished she had been brave enough to have launched it herself.

“Come on in now, George,” she called out. “The weather grows worse and it is time for tea.”

The butler, perhaps having heard voices from outside, opened the door. She quickly directed the man to show Mr. Darcy’s servants where the stables and kitchen were and was relieved when Mr. Darcy went with them to see about his horses.

\*\*\*

Most of the family were gathered in the parlour and, once she had changed out of her boots, she joined them and was given a prized seat by the fire. When she told them of the invitation she had been forced to extend and to whom it had been extended, Kitty and Lydia both groaned while Mary congratulated on her Christian charity. Her father’s and Mrs. Gardiner’s eyebrows rose in interest, and her mother began a long speech detailing her dislike of the man.

Even through her thick boots, Elizabeth’s stockings had gotten damp on her walk and her toes were cold. Comfortable in the familiarity of her family, she slipped off her shoes and rested her feet on the edge of the hearth.

Mr. Darcy took a long while to join them and walked in warily. However, he extended all the proper thanks and apologies, and he was polite when introduced to those he did not already know. Elizabeth watched him carefully as he greeted her uncle and aunt. To her surprise, he did not recoil in disgust and instead shook hands courteously with Mr. Gardiner, even going so far as to ask after his line of business.

When he took a chair, though, he retreated to a corner of the room and seemed content to be overlooked as the conversation began again and went on around him.

“Lizzy,” Jane whispered into her ear, making her start. When Elizabeth looked at her sister, Jane nodded at her feet. Realising her stockings were on show and that her skirts had ridden up to almost her calves, she straightened in her chair and slipped her shoes back on. Mr. Darcy, when she glanced over at him, was looking at the hearth at the exact spot where she had been warming her toes. He seemed to be deep in thought before his head rose to meet her gaze, and colour flooded his cheeks. Elizabeth moved to find a seat a little further away from the fire. A half hour before, she had been chilled down to the bone; now she felt very hot indeed.

\*\*\*

He was to stay for dinner, of course, for the storm showed no signs of abating. His promised presence at the table caused a great deal of furious whispering amongst the Bennet girls as they descended the stairs after dressing. It was eventually decided by Lydia that it was Elizabeth’s duty to take the seat next to him. It was somehow her fault that the “dreadful bore that no one cared a fig for” was stranded amongst them.

“What would you have her do, Lydia?” Jane whispered softly. “She could hardly leave him struggling to free his carriage until the cold had turned him to stone.”

“No, I could not,” Elizabeth sighed. “Though I wonder if anyone would notice any difference.”

It made all of them laugh but Jane, who tried, yet failed to bring them to order. They burst upon the drawing room, colourful and loud. Mr. Darcy flinched. They were, Elizabeth suspected, too much of an assault upon his senses.

He was an almost silent dinner partner, though he ate heartily and, before the ladies rose to leave the men to their port, he thanked Mrs. Bennet most sincerely for the meal and complimented her on it most elegantly.

Their mother, who was always as eager for praise as she was for news of single young gentlemen in the neighbourhood, softened with alarming fickleness under his words. Once the ladies were alone with their sewing, she began expounding on his qualities and manners with as much energy as she had decried them earlier. Elizabeth was left musing upon the beneficial effect a few kind words could have. It was a shame that some people did not exert themselves to be so generous more often.

\*\*\*

Sleep did not come easily. How could it when her tormenter lay in a bed just down the corridor? The thought caused her to toss and turn until the early hours of the morning. When her fretful mind did finally allow her some rest, she had the oddest, most disturbing of dreams.

Thankfully, he was absent at breakfast, having gone out early and taken his own men and every able-bodied man at Longbourn to recover his carriage except for her papa, who had claimed himself busy and retreated to his library. Elizabeth expected her father would remain there for the best part of the day and felt like following him. They would likely be confined to the house for the foreseeable future, and spending the day engrossed within the pages of a good book seemed a capital plan.

She lingered over her toast and pushed her eggs around her plate listlessly. When she saw Mr. Darcy trudging back up the front path, a furious expression on his face and his hat in his hand, she swallowed the last of her tea quickly and decided to make good her escape. She was choosing a book when she heard some colourful language being used beyond the library window. Both she and Mr. Bennet looked out to see Mr. Darcy throw his hat upon the snow and then kick it across the park in frustration.

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “It was cold enough to give the devil a chill last night. Even if he extracts his carriage, the roads will be frozen solid. The ice will prove too treacherous for his horses, as he knows only too well. Mr. Darcy, I suspect, will be our guest this Christmas, Lizzy. How ever shall we amuse him?”

\*\*\*

Elizabeth had once heard Mr. Bingley remark that he did not know of a “more awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions, in particular places; at his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening when he has nothing to do.”

Not that she had any respect for Mr. Bingley’s judgement of late, but in this he was proved correct. Mr. Darcy, constrained and imprisoned by the snow, had become a brooding, restless creature who frightened small children. Upon seeing him enter the drawing room, her cousins would hide under tables or scamper from the room.

Though she could not very well take refuge beneath the furniture, Elizabeth tended to follow their example. She ran from Mr. Darcy whenever the opportunity of escape presented itself.

The man had trouble sitting still. He roamed Longbourn’s corridors while scowling at his watch. He would examine the skies through every window he passed, perhaps hoping the next might offer a view that showed particular signs of a thaw that the window three feet away which he had looked out moments before did not.

Clearly, he liked occupation, to be always doing something, and presently he had nothing to expend his energy on. It was as if he were a spring, being wound tighter and tighter by his imprisonment. Jane, with her soft smiles and calm manner, managed to soothe him somewhat, and he amazed Elizabeth by seeking her sister out when even he seemed to be irritated by his own pacing. He would sit beside her while she sewed, offering the occasional comment, asking the odd question, but generally, he was silent.

Her father tried to ply him with port in an effort to put at him ease, only to discover he was not much of a drinker.

Her mother tried to ply him with food, but there were only so many puddings and pies a man could eat in one day without feeling ill.

It was Mrs. Gardiner who eventually managed to draw him out, to exchange with him just enough words as might legally constitute a conversation.

They were sat in the drawing room in the late afternoon while most of the family were engaged in a game of cards with the exception of Elizabeth, her aunt, and Mr. Darcy. He was supposedly reading, but his book did not seem to hold his attention, for he shifted in his seat and frequently gave a heavy sigh.

“It is a shame you will not have Christmas at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy. Such a beautiful house, and how pretty the grounds would be, all covered in snow,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

“You have seen Pemberley, Mrs. Gardiner?” he asked, immediately shutting his book without bothering to mark his place.

“Oh yes, Mr. Darcy. I grew up in Lambton, not five miles from Pemberley.” She smiled at him before modestly informing him that he would not remember her family, for they would have moved in very different circles.

Elizabeth half expected him to sniff and open his book again, but he grew animated and there followed a long exchange with her aunt. Elizabeth had never seen him so lively as he spoke of horse chestnut trees, smithies, tors, rivers, and beauty spots they both knew.

“I dearly love the countryside around Pemberley, Mrs. Gardiner, but I was not headed there. We have not had Christmas at Pemberley since my mother died. She had methods of making it special. She would hide presents around the house for me to find. Ridiculous gifts, silly things such as a pine cone, a bag of dried fruit, or a handkerchief. I gained far more enjoyment from searching out those small presents than I did any expensive item from my father. Since her passing, my sister and I have joined our family at Matlock almost every year. While we have a pleasant time, it has never been quite the same. Another family’s customs and traditions can never mean as much as your own.”

This speech made Elizabeth oddly emotional—she had no idea of when Mr. Darcy’s mother had died or what the family at Matlock were like—but her imagination conjured up an image of a happy young boy running around a grandiose house looking for trinkets one year, then walking mournfully around, his hat draped in black crepe the next. She saw him being driven from his home to spend Christmas with austere relatives, his baby sister opposite him in the carriage on a nurse’s knee; the baby blissfully unaware but the boy desperately missing his mother.

She had a sudden urge to go and kiss her own mother, a feeling which, she shamefully acknowledged, rarely overcame her, and she managed to easily resist it.

Instead she got to her feet. “One of our customs, Mr. Darcy,” she said, clapping her hands to gain everyone’s attention, “when Christmas draws so near, is the singing of carols. We have been neglecting our traditions, and that must be remedied.”

Mary, as eager as she always was to display her questionable skills, made a dash towards the pianoforte. Elizabeth was lighter on her feet, however, and beat her to the stool, where she sat down triumphantly. Mary sulked while everyone else seemed relieved. When Elizabeth began to play, the mood of the room lifted. They laughed at each other when they went wrong, applauded Mr. Gardiner’s perfect baritone on the lower notes, and managed some true harmony, not always in their song, but in their sentiments and feelings.

Mr. Darcy was urged forward to join them several times but declined. He moved to the card table, where her nephews, who did not enjoy the singing, were busy trying to make a pyramid out of cards. Taking a seat between them, he began to assist.

By the time the carols had made the singers all thirsty and they stopped to refresh themselves, the tower was several stories high, and Mr. Darcy did not look quite so foreboding as he had previously. His shoulders had been almost as high as his ears, but now his posture was loose. He smiled when she came near him, stopped her to tell her how much he had enjoyed the music. His unspent energy, the frustration which had looked fit to consume him, appeared to have dissipated.

What had caused the change, she could not say—Mrs. Gardiner’s speaking of Pemberley, his time with the children, the carols perhaps? Whatever it was that was making him more amiable by the minute, she could only be glad of it, and she was pleased his congenial mood carried over into the morning.

When Elizabeth nonchalantly mentioned during breakfast that she had liked his mother’s idea of a Christmas treasure hunt and how the Gardiner children might enjoy such an activity—confined to the house as they were—he immediately jumped up, found paper and pen and started planning one for them.

Caught up in the excitement, Elizabeth worked alongside him at every turn. They hid treasures and made maps together at a table; their elbows bumping as frequently as their intellects while they turned phrases over and thought up clues. They sat next to each other at the top of the stairs when the hunt commenced, enjoying the excitement they had created and smiling at each other as George held the chubby hand of his smallest sister, helping her along rather than selfishly dashing off to seek his own prizes.

“I am willing to forgive the snowball incident,” Mr. Darcy said. “He is an excellent boy.”

Elizabeth could only smile; she was unusually lost for words. He was as much of a puzzle to her as the game they had created for the children—who were now more inclined to run after him rather than away from him. They would tug at his coattails and call his name, beg him to swing them around—and he would put aside his dignity and do so, no matter how many times they asked.

Was this really Mr. Darcy? The same despicable Mr. Darcy whose officious interference had ruined Jane’s chances of happiness with Mr. Bingley? The same Mr. Darcy who had acted so dishonourably towards Mr. Wickham? She realised with a jolt that she had rarely thought of Wickham in the last few days.

Then he was there! Mr. Wickham himself, along with two or three other officers, at the front door of Longbourn. As there had been no callers for three days, their arrival was greeted with astonishment. Shrieks of laughter and delight were heard from Kitty and Lydia, who ran out into the cold to greet them. When Elizabeth went to the door, she saw they had acquired a sledge from somewhere and had attached to it two great shire horses.

They looked delighted by their own ingenuity and were showing off, standing atop the sleigh while declaring that nothing could keep them from calling upon their favourite ladies. Wickham, Elizabeth was glad to note, was more circumspect, not so loud or bragging, and came towards her with a sheepish smile. He bowed gallantly and apologised for his companions’ boisterousness.

“Though I own I was equally eager to call, as I ….” He stopped mid-sentence as something over her shoulder caused a look of fear to cross his countenance. “Darcy. You are the last person I expected to see.”

“And the last one you wanted to, I imagine,” Mr. Darcy replied from behind her. “Might we speak in private, Wickham?”

Though she remained with Kitty and Lydia—determined to ensure they did not lose all sense of propriety—Elizabeth managed to observe Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham talking in a far corner of the hall. She could not hear what was said, for it was all carried on in hushed tones, but it looked very much like Wickham was receiving a lecture.

When he came into the room to join the rest of the party, Mr. Wickham took a seat next to her. He rolled his eyes and leaned towards her, whispering, making her his conspirator.

“Not content with having stolen everything from me, he sees fit to play the role of my lord and master. How I abhor the rich and the power they wield over us! I confess I would be happy with fifty pounds a year, a small piece of land I might call my own, and a few chickens and geese to roam upon it. Yes, how content I would be then, as long as God granted me a beautiful partner in it all. Someone with whom I could share my interests and passions, someone who understood me.”

He smiled at her softly. “Do you deplore me for not telling Darcy off, for not standing up to him as I ought? You see, I still cling to the hope he might gain a conscience and reward me with something, as his father would have wished him to.”

She made no reply but found herself wanting to move away. Previously, she had enjoyed their talks, the easy intimacy that existed between them. His flirting, his manners, everything had pleased her immensely. Yet now, for a reason she could not quite determine, she was uncertain of him.

“Do you know he had the temerity to warn me off you? I am apparently banned from going within ten feet of a Bennet girl! Shall we pretend to be madly in love to spite him, Miss Elizabeth?”

“I am afraid I am not adept at acting, Mr. Wickham,” she replied. “Is it something at which you excel?”

He blinked and appeared alarmed, could not look at her for a few moments. “Please tell me he has not turned you against me as he has the rest of the world? I could not bear that. You must know I have hopes, hopes I cannot yet voice.”

He was so handsome, his voice so lyrical and his manners so good that it was difficult not to feel flattered by his addresses. “I am not against you,” she replied quickly. “Yet I must tell you that, on becoming further acquainted with Mr. Darcy, I feel I may have been unfair. Not that I forgive his trespasses against you, but I do believe I begin to understand his disposition better. I cannot quite hate him as I once did. There is a certain kindness about him which is incongruous with some of his past behaviour.”

“As I have said before, he can be liberal and generous when he chooses to be,” Wickham said blithely. His attention was then caught by the general conversation that was occurring on the other side of the room, and he turned away from her to better hear it.

Elizabeth only half listened, as she was busy watching Mr. Darcy enter the room. The frown that had been missing all day had returned to his countenance. Why did he have to be so dour?

“She has ten thousand pounds left to her by an uncle. I wish someone would die and leave me ten thousand pounds,” Lydia cried, leaving Elizabeth thoroughly ashamed of her. She thought to quiet her, but Lydia went on before she could intervene. “All the men will want to dance with her and will want to kiss and romance her, but they will not mean it, for she is such a nasty little freckled thing. No one could truly admire her.”

Wickham laughed at Lydia’s speech. “Who do you speak of?”

“Mary King, of course,” Lydia announced. “Wait till you see her, Wickham. She is not very pretty. Oh, what a shame Colonel Forster’s party on Christmas Eve will not be possible.”

“The party is to go ahead,” one of the officers said. “Have you not heard? The house he has taken is so conveniently situated in the centre of Meryton that a great number of the guests can walk to it.”

Kitty pouted. “We cannot walk.”

“Then we shall send the sleigh for you, and you will be conveyed home on it afterwards,” Wickham declared, to the delight of almost the entire room. Mr. Darcy’s frown grew deeper.

Elizabeth interjected that her parents might object to the plan, but no sooner had she given voice to the caution than Mrs. Bennet entered. Upon being told of the scheme, she squealed as loudly as Lydia had. Mr. Bennet would agree to almost anything if it meant his wife would leave him in peace, and so it seemed they were to go.

“You will not join us I suppose, Darcy?” Wickham asked. “Music, dancing, levity, and conversation. Not your favourite pastimes, are they?”

“On the contrary, if the invitation extends to me, I shall be there,” Mr. Darcy replied, before rising from his seat, bowing to the room and leaving them.

 \*\*\*

Their visitors remained less than an hour. The days were short, and darkness was falling rapidly. As soon as they had been waved off, Elizabeth found her warmest coat and hat and decided to risk a short stroll in the shrubbery, the paths of which had been partially cleared. It was still freezing, cold enough to rob her of her breath, but she could bear ten minutes without if it meant some fresh air. The layers of snow made everything still and quiet, and so she heard Mr. Darcy’s approach long before she saw him.

After a remark on the beauty of the scene, with which she concurred, he walked a few feet away as if he were about to go on without her, but then changed his mind, turned, and stopped. “It is no business of mine, but may I take the liberty of cautioning you against Mr. Wickham? I have heard your sisters tease you about him, and he does appear to favour you, but I should not count on his attentions lasting. You are too poor, I am afraid, to be a serious object with him.”

Her mouth hung open in shock at his bluntness.

“Money is his motivation in all things, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy continued, moving closer to her. “I hope you will not feel too wounded when he transfers his affections elsewhere.”

“Mr. Darcy, to have reduced him to his current state is crime enough, must you seek to slander him too? He has not the means at present to think of a future with any lady, but that may not always be the case, and he is not fickle. He is most loyal to the memory of your father, which is why he will not publicly expose you.”

“His curious way of not exposing me, Miss Bennet, is to relate his story of my supposed misdeeds to everyone he meets.”

Her temper, which has been in full flow, suddenly had the wind knocked out of its sails. For he was right! Mr. Darcy had made it easier for the residents of Meryton to dislike him by standing about disdainfully at every gathering, but it was Mr. Wickham’s tales that had truly confirmed him as a villain in everyone’s eyes. Wickham had not been discreet, not at all.

“Who is this girl with the ten thousand pounds?” Mr. Darcy asked.

“Mary King.”

“Miss Bennet, I have no doubt you will look exceedingly pretty tomorrow night. You will be as charming and witty as ever. You will dance or sing or play beautifully, yet Mr. Wickham will not single you out. He will not spare a thought for your feelings or feel the slightest guilt when he transfers his attentions from you to Miss King. He is without conscience.”

“I think you are wrong, Mr. Darcy,” she said but, truthfully, she felt less sure of herself with every passing moment. “Perhaps you try to lessen the effect of your own crimes against him by sabotaging his character.”

“Shall we have a wager on it?”

“For money?” she exclaimed.

“Oh, no. I would not take money from a lady. If I am wrong, I will pay you a forfeit, and if you are wrong, then I will extract a forfeit from you.”

“Do I get to choose the forfeit?” she asked warily.

“Why not? Please, go ahead.”

“Very well. If Mr. Wickham does not single Mary King out tomorrow night, you will write a letter to Mr. Bingley. In it, you will inform him that my sister will be in Town after Christmas, staying with my uncle, and you are certain she would welcome a call from him.”

Mr. Darcy was smug. “If I am wrong, Miss Bennet, I will go to Town myself for the express purpose of encouraging the call.”

“And you will withdraw your opposition to my sister? You will not interfere between them at all? It is no use denying it, Mr. Darcy, I know that you have.”

“I will not deny it, yet I do regret it.”

Her head snapped up in surprise. “You do?”

“I have heard your mother previously, Miss Bennet, talking about my friend Bingley as if he were nothing more than a walking, talking pound note. I wrongly assumed your sister regarded him in the same manner.” He sighed and leant on his stick. “I did not imagine his leaving would cause her any great pain. I now see that it has. I will gladly pay my forfeit if I lose, but I will not lose.”

Elizabeth nodded in satisfaction. “I am certain that I will not either, so it hardly matters but, out of interest, what is to be my forfeit?

“Oh, I have not decided yet.” He straightened up and began to walk away. “I shall let you know when I do. Enjoy your walk, Miss Bennet,” he called over his shoulder.

Diverting from the paths, kicking up snow and making her petticoats wet, Elizabeth spent longer outside than she had first intended. She needed time to think through all he had told her—about Wickham, about Bingley—and about that which most perturbed her. Somewhere, during their odd exchange, had he really described her as witty, charming, and pretty?

\*\*\*

It took very little to excite Kitty’s and Lydia’s sensibilities and, as they sat down to breakfast on Christmas Eve, they did so with the prospect of dancing with handsome men in red coats, of escaping Longbourn for a few hours, and of a sleigh ride. It was too much to expect any decorum. They could barely sit still, and their feverish anticipation of it all was only bound to increase as the day went on.

Elizabeth shuddered to think of how it would be: endless giggling over nothing, shouting and running about, in and out of bedrooms with arms full of skirts, stealing ribbons, gloves and jewellery as they went. For her two younger sisters, the process of getting dressed to attend Colonel Forster’s party was likely to last longer than the party itself. They talked over one another at the table, argued about which of the officers was most handsome, and they mocked Mary when she declared such pleasures puerile and insisted that they would do better to remain at home in order to “strengthen their intellects by reading.”

Mr. Darcy had taken up a newspaper as soon as he had finished eating, his face hidden for some time. Elizabeth thought—in fact she had prayed—that he had not been paying much attention to Kitty and Lydia’s nonsense, but now he lowered the pages to look in Mary’s direction. “I see you and I share a similar turn of mind, Miss Mary. Perhaps we ought to form an alliance this evening to protect ourselves from the evils of too much merriment. If we must dance, and I fear it will be demanded of us, perhaps we might stand up together and discuss something valuable and sensible while we go through our steps? Will you do me the honour of the first dance?”

The table fell silent and all eyes turned to Mary, who blushed furiously but nodded her acceptance. She thanked him in a voice so small and high-pitched it was in danger of shattering the water glasses, then excused herself and almost ran from the room.

All was still for a few moments, though Elizabeth detected a slight shaking in her father’s shoulders as if he were trying to hold in a laugh.

“So, are you going to dance with all of us, Mr. Darcy?” Lydia asked. “Or stand about stupidly like you did when we first met you?”

Both Elizabeth and Jane opened their mouths to admonish her, but Mr. Bennet was quicker, and his dressing down was surprisingly efficient and effective—so much so that Lydia spent the rest of the meal with her head cowed over her plate.

Mr. Darcy seemed thoughtful as he finished the last of his coffee and declined another cup, telling them he intended to walk to the turnpike to assess the state of the roads.

After he had left the room, Mrs. Bennet whispered furiously at Mr. Bennet, telling him she thought Mr. Darcy might be in love with Mary. In reply, their father rolled his eyes and looked as if he could not decide who was more ridiculous: his wife, or himself for having married her.

Elizabeth passed Mr. Darcy in the hall just as he was preparing to go out. “I suppose you go to the turnpike to see whether it would be prudent to travel yet. I cannot blame you for wanting to flee.”

He shook his head. “I require the exercise—and six ladies readying themselves for an evening party! I know enough of such things to realise I would be an annoyance and in everyone’s way if I were to remain.”

“’Tis true. It takes a great deal of preparation and fuss for some of us Bennets to make ourselves *tolerable* enough to appear in company.”

He put a hand to his chest and bowed. “A hit, madam. Well deserved.”

“I am a little unfair.” She smiled, and he looked at her for a long moment with an odd expression in his eyes that she could not quite fathom. “My apologies, Mr. Darcy.

“No, do not apologise. You must allow me to make some reparation for that ill-judged, hasty remark, else I fear I may never be allowed to forget it. Let me say that in your case, Miss Bennet, no preparations are necessary.” He reddened, started to say something more but then seemed to change his mind. “Your smiles give you an unfair advantage in our wager. If I did not know Wickham so well, I might be more worried about losing.”

She coloured herself, recognising his awkwardness. He was not used to giving compliments; they did not come lightly or easily to him as they did other gentlemen. It took a moment for her to recover. “You are not backing out of our agreement are you, Mr. Darcy?”

“Not at all, madam.” He stuck out his hand. “We did not shake on it before. Let us do so now.”

She put her hand into his without thinking. Neither wore gloves; his were still hanging out of his coat pocket. The contact was not fleeting, and he clasped her fingers for longer than was polite or necessary. The feelings his touch generated did not shock her. Of course, she should feel hot and overcome! Something oddly familiar, yet thoroughly exciting, coursed through her veins, but then, he was a handsome man; the sensations were natural. Strangely, she was both relieved and disappointed when he let go, bowed his head, and walked quickly to the door.

Once he had gone, she ran up the stairs to immediately choose a gown, then ran down again with it in her arms to see about getting it pressed. She bothered the busy upstairs maid to discuss how they might later style her hair and went to ask Jane if she might borrow a particular pair of earrings. Then she called for a bath. It was only when she was sunk deep into the iron tub that she realised she had spent the last two hours in much the same fashion as Lydia and Kitty, minus, thankfully, some very silly giggling.

\*\*\*

It was dark when the sleigh arrived to collect them. Mr. Darcy went out first, a lantern in his hand, to inspect it closely. He frowned a great deal but at last declared it safe and, when it had been loaded with hot bricks from the fire and many rugs, they were all allowed to climb into it. He did not appear to trust the driver, however, and made the man move over on the front bench.

Taking up the ribbons himself, he gave them an elegant flick, clicked his tongue, and the horses moved forwards. They all gave a gasp of delight as they were driven out of the park and into the surrounding lanes towards Meryton.

Elizabeth turned her face up towards the sky. The moon was bright and the stars shone down upon them, guiding their way. She listened to the scraping noise made by the sleigh’s runners as they moved over the ice and knew she would always remember this journey, even when she was grey and old. Perfect wintry night skies and that particular sound would forever remind her of this moment.

Sadly, the beauty of it all was soon eclipsed by Lydia’s whining.

“We are going very slowly, Mr. Darcy. All the officers will be already engaged for the first dance by the time we arrive.”

“Shush, Lydia,” Mrs Bennet said. “I am sure he is being careful for Mary’s sake. I am certain he would not want any harm to come to her.”

\*\*\*

Colonel Forster’s party could not be described as a ball as such, but everybody had arrived inclined to dance. The Bennets burst upon the scene just as the musicians were about to begin. They all went in hurriedly, to be greeted by their friends and neighbours, who exclaimed with pleasure as if they had not seen them for months rather than mere days.

The efforts they had expended in simply getting there made everyone determined to enjoy themselves. The room was not big and they were rather tightly packed into it, but it was prettily decorated with bunches of holly and garlands made from ferns and berries.

Mr. Wickham, upon seeing Elizabeth, immediately came forward and asked her for the first dance. She readily acquiesced and, when they took their place in the set, she could not help but look down the rows of couples for Mr. Darcy, who was stood opposite Mary. Their eyes met, and she gave him a smile she hoped was as smug as the one he had worn the day before. He only nodded at her in return.

Her triumph, however, was short-lived. They had not been dancing more than five minutes before Wickham asked her to point out Mary King to him. He laughed when she did and pretended no interest, but neither did he seem to care for anything else Elizabeth had to say. His eyes frequently wandered in Miss King’s direction.

“What do you think, Mr. Wickham? Is she ‘a nasty freckled thing’ as Lydia has described her?”

“Your sister is too harsh whereas I, as a gentleman, am not. I am certain the young lady has many attractive qualities.”

“Oh, yes,” Elizabeth replied. “Ten thousand of them.” She tried to smile as if it were a joke, but she was disappointed in him and her tone was harsher than she intended.

He was taken aback but only laughed before returning to his usual ways with her. They flirted and joked, yet Elizabeth did not do so with any honesty. Instead, it became a courtly game, one that must be played out until they reached the end of their half hour together. Elizabeth was relieved when he did not linger with her at the end of the dance.

Wickham joined the throng of officers who were vying to stand up with Mary King. As charming and as handsome as he was, Elizabeth strongly suspected he would prove victorious. As she stood by her mother, she saw him work his way stealthily to the lady’s side, then hold out his hand. He made his request with a wolfish smile and was readily accepted.

Mr. Darcy, likewise, had a new partner and was leading Jane across the room to dance. After this, he asked Kitty, and then Lydia. Elizabeth was dancing herself and most likely annoying her partner by almost never looking his way. Yet how could she when the horrifying spectacle of Lydia and Mr. Darcy dancing was so near? So mismatched were they, such opposites in every respect, that they were uncomfortable to watch. Even so, she could not stop staring at them.

Upon re-joining her friends, Elizabeth took a deep breath and straightened the sash on her dress. He would come now, she thought, if he was really to dance with them all. It was surely her turn to be asked and Mr. Darcy did take a step her way but, before he was even halfway across the room, a Lucas son, home from Cambridge for Christmas, tapped her on the shoulder and requested the honour. She could hardly refuse and let herself be led away, only to look over her shoulder and see Mr. Darcy approach Charlotte.

Would he never sit down? Could he not stand on the side and look them all over critically as he was once wont to do? Why did she feel so aggrieved, so full of rage? Was this *jealousy* she felt? How silly to be envious of Charlotte, who had already made her somewhat dubious choice of mate! Yet the set ought to have been hers—it was her turn to dance with Mr. Darcy.

How many dances were left? Not many, she feared. They had taken supper already, and this gathering could not last much longer. The guests would have to consider travelling home in the inclement weather. Some of the older ladies would take an early leave, and their sons, daughters, and husbands would go with them.

Added to the problem of the snow, some of the officers were growing rowdy. Colonel Forster had recently ordered one of his men—who had looked quite green in the face—to bed. If they continued to drink, they would soon become unfit for the company of ladies; all those with reputations to consider would withdraw and leave the men to their own kind of revelry.

Elizabeth’s despair grew greater when Mr. Darcy decided upon Mary King for his next partner. Her mother, standing next to her, was equally disappointed. “Oh, he has only danced with our Mary once, and now he chooses Miss King. I begin to doubt his admiration.”

“I begin to doubt everything, even myself,” Elizabeth replied, before being approached by a stout, young officer. She gave her hand to him with a sigh.

As she had predicted, for some of gathered families, the end of the next set was the end of the night. The Lucases departed, along with a few others, giving their “merry Christmases” and wishes for a safe journey home.

The officers were keen to keep the dancing alive, however. One of them climbed upon the shoulders of another and was given a great cheer when he hung a small sprig of mistletoe from a beam.

Elizabeth knew what was to follow. This was the country, not a formal gathering in Town. There would be a reel or a jig, something fast, and at the end of it, as the couples took their final steps down the line, the lady would bestow a kiss on the cheek of her partner. A harmless Christmas ritual in Meryton, probably not the thing at Matlock or Pemberley. Yet when Mr. Darcy came near, she could not breathe for wondering what he would say or do.

All he did, however, was to tug at his cuffs and stare at the scene before him. Partners were being selected—more carefully than ever before, as gentlemen sought out their favourites.

“You may want to look away, Mr. Darcy. I have no doubt you will heartily disapprove of what is to follow.”

“I suppose the entertainment being what it is, you will win our wager. Your faithful Mr. Wickham will no doubt be along in a moment to ask you to dance.”

The moment he had finished speaking, Mr. Wickham did step in their direction. Elizabeth’s heart stopped briefly. Then he smiled tightly, almost apologetically at her, before approaching Mary King with sickeningly false humility and a pretence of shyness.

“Congratulations, Mr. Darcy. You win,” she said, leaving him to go over to a chair in the corner. She sank into it with an air of defeat.

“I have won nothing.”

She looked up to see he had followed her. He glanced around the room before crouching down beside her chair. “You are much better rid of him. I pity the poor lady he does marry. His tale—of the living he was supposed to have? What he always neglects to omit is that, after my father died, he declared he never wanted to take orders. Instead, he asked for financial recompense. I gave him a large sum of money, which he has now most likely squandered.”

His voice dropped to a mere whisper. “One day when we are alone, I will tell you of another wrong he did me which I have had to keep secret for the sake of someone who is very dear to me.”

“I am thoroughly ashamed of my own lack of judgement. How could I be fooled so easily?”

Mr. Darcy sighed. “My father was a great and truly wise man. Yet, to his last breath, he adored that scoundrel. I myself was friends with Wickham for many a year before I saw just how despicable he can be. Do not blame yourself and do not hide in a corner. This is no place for you. Come along.”

She did not give him her hand; he took it from her lap, and she followed him silently to the dance, which had already begun. He pulled her into the throng of whirring couples. Normally an excellent dancer, she was so surprised by the quickness of his step that she stumbled. He was forced to put his hand on her waist briefly to steady her.

“You must try and keep up with me, Miss Elizabeth.”

She laughed. “I thought you did not like to dance, Mr. Darcy?”

“I do not generally. Though any chore is made easier and more enjoyable when there is the promise of a reward at the end of it.”

Speech was thus rendered impossible; *looking* at him was rendered impossible. It was all she could do to put her feet where they ought to go. The room grew hotter, the dance faster. Everything else fell away: the loud, colourful room, the other couples turning as furiously, the noise of a dozen shoes on the floorboards, the laughter. All she could think of was that they were coming to the end. They were moving down the set, the mistletoe looming ever nearer. There was applause and louder laughter as the first kiss was bestowed, and then another, and then another. Of course, she would do the same. She would kiss his cheek. It *was* Christmas, after all. When they were finally under that little sprig of greenery, she stood on the tips of her toes to reach him, expecting him to offer his cheek.

Instead he quickly caught her face between his hands and kissed her, properly, fully on the mouth. His lips felt firm and tasted sweet, and that was all she was conscious of before he let her go, and then mortification took hold of her.

The laughter that followed their encounter was louder than ever, the applause even stronger. Knowing it would be worse to make a fuss, that she would do better to laugh and for her neighbours to think she did not mind, she smiled and shrugged.

He muttered a hushed apology as they walked away, their dance complete, though he did not look entirely sorry. She was at a loss as to what to say or do, was, left wishing for a hole in the floor to appear and swallow her up.

Thankfully, Jane appeared by her side and ushered her into the hall for some air, where they could speak without others hearing.

“You look as if you might faint, Lizzy.”

“How dare he?”

Jane only smiled and took out her fan, waving it in Elizabeth’s face. “He is in love with you. A man in love ought to be forgiven some impetuousness.”

“No! You are wrong!” Elizabeth shook her head. “I know not his reasons. He is all arrogance and conceit. He thinks he may do whatever he…” She wanted to protest more, but her shoulders sagged. “Everyone will be talking of it for weeks.”

“Come now! Everyone has had too much wine for it to matter much. There is hardly anyone left here that we know.”

“Even so, I am sure they will get to hear of it. Oh, it is so embarrassing!”

“A little perhaps. Though now you will be the girl Mr. Darcy kissed rather than the girl Mr. Wickham threw over for Mary King.”

“I shall never live it down.”

Jane took Elizabeth’s face between her hands, much as Mr. Darcy had just done, and forced her to meet her eyes. “It matters not. Will you listen to me? Where has your cleverness gone? He is in love with you and you with him and, may I say, I mightily approve of your choice.”

“I should like to go home,” was all Elizabeth could say.

In her absence, it seemed Mr. Darcy had decided that was exactly where they were bound. Her mother and other sisters burst into the hall seconds later, laden with coats and hats, and they were all soon back in the sleigh for the return journey to Longbourn. Mr. Darcy drove them again, his face buried deep in the collar of his coat. He said not a word as he handed all the ladies out.

Elizabeth, torn as she was between anger and confusion, jumped down without assistance and dashed inside. She immediately declared herself ready for bed, going upstairs before Mr. Darcy had even come in.

Yet she did not go to bed. She took a seat by her window and pulled the heavy curtains back so she might see the stars again. Some people believed they could predict the future. But the more Elizabeth looked up at them, the less she knew.

After a while, she heard Mr. Darcy’s deep baritone in the hall below. He had such a distinctive voice, and she had come to know it above all others. He was speaking to her father, she thought, and then she heard two sets of heavy steps move towards his library, followed by the peculiar squeak the hinges on that particular door always made when it was opened. Then she heard it being firmly shut.

\*\*\*

Bleary eyed and with a thick head from too little sleep, Elizabeth came warily down the stairs the next morning, only to be met by the sight of Mr. Darcy’s trunks in the hall. He was there too, but not dressed to go yet. She was so surprised she forgot to be angry at him.

“It is Christmas morning,” she said. “You are not going?”

“As you see.”

“You cannot travel today.”

“The turnpike, when I went yesterday, was just about passable. I confess I worry for my sister who is at Matlock without me. My family there are not the warmest of companions. She will not have been as fortunate as I…to have been so graciously received by you all, after the way I previously behaved…well, I have been much humbled. I have said as much to your mother this morning and your father last night.”

“You cannot make your servants go so far. Tomorrow should be their day of rest.”

He smiled. “You are good to think of them, but know that I am a generous master and they will be well compensated. May I speak to you elsewhere, before I leave?”

She nodded, and they walked down the hall to a small parlour at the front of the house. They passed Jane on their way. Elizabeth had kept Jane awake much of the night discussing everything that had passed. Her sister stifled a yawn and then smiled at Elizabeth in an encouraging way.

Mr. Darcy opened the door for her and shut it behind himself when they were both inside. She put a hand to her chest, feeling it pound in uncertainty, realising only in that moment that he had asked to speak to her alone and that she had followed him, unthinkingly, without stopping to consider what it might mean.

“I was not very gentlemanly last night. You have every right to hate me.” He paced over to the window, stopped, and turned. “Do you hate me?”

“No,” she said hesitantly. “Though I was angry, embarrassed.”

He bowed his head. “I made a dreadful first impression on you, most likely a terrible second, and now an even more awful third. What I would wish for is the opportunity to remedy matters. There was a time when I did not care who I offended, but I have come to admire you. And, through you, I have learnt a different way of seeing the world. It is a gift you have given me—a Christmas present,” he said, his voice breaking. “I will be honest and confess I once thought you beneath me, yet now I see your worth. I understand how fortunate I would be…”  He stopped to clear his throat. “Mr. Wickham would express himself so much better.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “but I find I no longer care for his speeches.”

“Of that I am glad. I have spoken to your father.”

She must have coloured deeply, for he did too.

“Oh, no, you mistake me. I made such a bad beginning that you and I barely know one another. It is too soon, and I would not have you so unsure of me. Though the look of relief you now wear has me perturbed.”

Her heart seemed to have moved into her throat, robbing her of speech. She could say nothing but, when he held out his hand, she slid hers into it. It was a glorious feeling when his fingers closed around hers.

“I shall be at Matlock for a time, then Pemberley. After which, I will travel to Town and speak to Mr. Bingley. Be assured, he will call upon your sister at the Gardiners, though after that I intend to leave them to their own devices.”

“But that was your forfeit, and it was I who lost the bet. You never told me what my forfeit would be and how I should pay it.”

He smiled, the seriousness was gone from his countenance. It had been replaced by a devilish expression. “The forfeit I really wished for, you have already paid.”

In his cravat, she found a place to hide her embarrassment and stepped closer to him. “A young lady imagines her first kiss quite differently, Mr. Darcy.”

He laughed. “I see my error. May I ask how she imagines her second?”

It was too much for her. She withdrew her hand and stepped back but favoured him with a smile. “A different forfeit, if you please.”

“Very well, then,” he said, not missing a beat. “What I asked from your father was permission to write to you while we are apart. Your forfeit to me is a letter by return, upon receipt of mine. I will not be happy, madam, if there is much delay in your correspondence. You have seen me at my worst. You know how dreadful my temper will be if I do not have at least a few lines from you by the end of January.”

He was as charming in his own peculiar way as a thousand Wickhams, and she suspected she trembled from the force of her emotions. She *was* in love, and what she loved most about him was that he expected no more of her than a letter.

He had come to understand her in these few strange days when he had been trapped at Longbourn. She did not want him to go but wondered if it was selfish to ask him to stay. He left for the sake of his sister. For that, she adored him all the more, but he would be missed.

“We will see one another at Easter,” he told her. “You are to go and see your friends at Hunsford. I will go to Rosings Park to visit my aunt there. There is only a lane separating the two properties.”

Elizabeth laughed. “As I have been told, many times.”

“We might walk together often. The countryside is beautiful. The company I cannot truthfully recommend, but the paths and groves I think you would very much enjoy.”

Again, he put out his hand and, again, she took it. The stars knew nothing. Elizabeth could foretell the future from his touch. This was how it would be.

He released her then and, going around the house, quietly offered his goodbyes. When he had finally driven away, Elizabeth escaped back to her room, supposedly to ready herself for church. Instead, she threw herself upon the bed and cried for a good long while, as she had not done since she was a child, till her emotions were spent. She did not rouse until she heard her mother pass by her door, exclaiming to no one but herself.

“Ten thousand a year! Now that makes for a very merry Christmas indeed.”

[**CAITLIN WILLIAMS**](https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B011PXNHXW) is an award-winning author of *Ardently,* *The Coming of Age of Elizabeth Bennet*, *When We Are Married*, and *The Events at Branxbourne*, that all spin the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* around but keep the characters just the same. Originally from South London, Caitlin spent thirteen years as a detective in the Metropolitan Police but is currently on a break from Scotland Yard so she can spend more time at home with her two children and write. She now lives in Kent, where she spends a lot of time daydreaming about Mr. Darcy, playing with dinosaurs, and trying not to look at the laundry pile.