

## Excerpts from *The Darcy Monologues*, Edited by Christina Boyd

### REGENCY

#### “Death of a Bachelor” by Caitlin Williams

Darcy’s hand was caught, and he followed Elizabeth, not unwillingly, into an under-stairs cupboard. “We must hide,” she said, before shutting them in. His eyes were slow to adjust to the dark, but his other senses came alive. She smelt wonderful, of soap and flowers. Her fingers curled around his. He tightened his grip upon them.

“Must we hide?”

“I am sorry. Is it beneath your dignity?”

“I find my dignity bears it well. ’Tis no bad thing to be confined to a small space with you.”

“Is all your business done?” she whispered, after a few moments of silence.

“Yes. I am sorry I was not here sooner.”

“No matter. I am glad you are here now.”

She understood, bless her dear heart, that there was only so much of Longbourn a sensible man could take.

“You know, you might kiss me now,” she said, a tad breathless. “I should not wait for another opportunity today. It might not come.”

“I fear if I were to start kissing you now, I might not stop.”

“I might not want you to stop,” she said quickly.

“I meant that I might not stop—at just kissing.”

“Oh, well...” was all he heard before the door was flung open by a young Gardiner—a handsome, grinning boy of perhaps ten who pointed an accusing finger at them.

“Found you, Cousin Lizzy and Mr. Darcy. You are not very good at hiding.”

There was nothing to be done but leave the closet. Darcy did so reluctantly while behind him he heard Elizabeth sigh. She reached up to pluck a cobweb from his hair before they were parted by a shrill call of “Lizzy” from her mother that could not be ignored.

#### “From the Ashes” by J. Marie Croft

“You heard me. The point, however, is moot. I assume congratulations are in order and that you are impatient and restless to see your betrothed and for the intimacy of—”

“I say again, Anne, you know *nothing!*”

“Oh, lud! I *have* read *those* sorts of novels, you know.” Suddenly sheepish, she added, “Keep that under your hat, will you? Mother would have hysterics.”

“Anne—”

“Have no fear, Fitzwilliam. I like Miss Bennet and support your choice. Pray, do send her my best regards for fulfilment in . . .” She giggled, covering her mouth. “That might be a bit gauche in a love letter, I suppose.”

“Anne!”

“I am off,” she said, springing to her feet, “and impatient to finish my naughty novel. Do get some rest, Cousin. You will need strength to deal with Mother. She *will* have hysterics, you know, when you announce your engagement to anyone other than me.”

With that, she flounced out of the room, leaving me shaking my head at her presumptuousness and wondering how she knew my business at the parsonage.

Sighing, I settled at the desk to close the letter and bid my love goodbye.

**You may possibly wonder why all this was not told you last night. But I was ~~out of my mind~~ heartbroken enraged not then master enough of myself to know what could or ought to be revealed. For the truth of every thing here related, I can appeal more particularly to the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who from our near relationship and constant intimacy, and still more as one of the executors of my father's will, has been unavoidably acquainted with every particular of these transactions. If your abhorrence of me should make my assertions not worth the paper they are written upon valueless, you cannot be prevented by the same cause from confiding in my cousin with whom you seemed quite intimate rather cosy entirely too comfortable; and that there may be the possibility of consulting him, I shall endeavour to find some opportunity of putting this accursed letter in your hands in the course of the morning. I will only add, ~~Have you still~~ God bless you.  
Fitzwilliam Darcy (~~the last man in the world whom y~~**

Under the circumstances, I thought my adieu was naught but kindness itself. Whether she, in her small-mindedness, might appreciate such charity, I gave not a fig.

*Henceforth, her pert opinions must mean naught to me.* But the thought of casting off Elizabeth sent *me* adrift. Obviously, I— akin to a certain bridge spanning the Thames—was falling to pieces.

The blighted pages on the desk before me looked as though they had been penned in the most carelessness of execution by either Bingley or a crazed, drunken wretch. “Hah!” I mumbled, “They *were* written by a crazed, drunken wretch!”

### **“If Only a Dream” by Joana Starnes**

The church filled with low murmurs interspersed with Collins’s pompously declamatory tones. A sigh escaped him, and it was only then that Darcy noted he was intently listening to pick out hers. He scowled once more at his shocking folly and belatedly added the rumble of his own voice to the general chorus—only to see her suddenly start at the distinct addition. His chest tightened. There was no way of knowing why the sound of his voice had made her jump, but now that his eyes had come to be fixed on the back of her neck, he could not force himself to look away. Head bowed in prayer as instructed, she was perfectly still—and the entire world seemed to grow still around them as he sat staring like the most pitifully besotted mooncalf. At least that was what reason claimed—the last shreds of reason growing quieter by the minute; drowned out, along with the real voices all around him. He could not even hear hers any longer. It might have been subsumed into the rushing sound faintly ringing in his ears, much like the so-called murmur of the ocean they had once told him as a boy that he could hear in a conch shell. Or perhaps she had ceased praying to puzzle over his reasons to grow silent. A very different sort of prayer—most certainly not for the sick and dying—rose within him as his gaze remained fixed on the delicate wisp of hair curling at her nape, just underneath her ear. Chestnut brown with auburn tints, in the sharpest contrast to the creamy skin around it. Silky-soft skin, no doubt, warm to the touch. Warm under searching lips dropping light kisses in a caressing trail to the delicate lobe of that perfectly shaped ear ... along her jaw line to her chin, to find her full mouth and lose himself into her intoxicating sweetness. The perfect loveliness of her.

His chest ached and his senses reeled. And before he could resume some tenuous control over the latter and ask himself what on Earth he was doing, allowing himself to sink into this insanity—in a *church*, moreover!—her hand shot up to brush over the square inch of creamy skin and the enticing little curl. It was as if she could feel his burning gaze, as if it had already left a tangible mark there. She made an instinctive move to turn but instantly suppressed it, and sense finally gained the upper hand enough to make him tear his eyes away. Darcy leaned back, releasing a long breath into an incautiously loud rush; far too loud, upon reflection. To his renewed mortification, her shoulders tensed at the sudden sound, and so he was compelled to suppress the heavy sigh of exasperation at all the ways he seemed to find to make himself conspicuous.

### **“Clandestiny” by KaraLynne Mackrory**

“Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?”

It took quite an estimable degree of effort but I managed to keep my expression to a raised brow. *What was Miss Elizabeth about?* Though her own admixture of pertness and challenge was, as always, entirely bewitching, I had begun to suspect tonight’s performance contained a bit more of an edge. Her sharp tongue, delightful as it was, was aimed with precision at myself. The dance afforded me a moment’s reflection after my riposte, as the ladies performed a fleuret, allowing me the pleasure of seeing Elizabeth truly glide through the movement, the ribbons hanging down from her bodice the length of the gown accenting her trim waist, before she again placed her delicate hand upon my own gloved one.

I kept my gaze forward, as was proper for the dance, but could not help noticing the twitch of her lips as she then answered my question.

“Both,” replied Elizabeth archly, “for I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition; unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the *éclat* of a proverb.”

Clever girl. Clever, teasing girl. It was all that I could do not to tug on the four fingers within my own and prompt her to stumble into my own *unsocial* arms, the amazement of the whole room be damned. She was like a heady drink I could not seem to refuse. Even now as she smugly arched her brow at me, her neck curving up to my inspection as she anticipated my reply—God in heaven, but she was temptation personified!

What was she about though, to be flirting so in full view of the room? I began to suspect the warmth climbing up my neck to be less from the exertions of the dance and more from the ministrations of a certain lady’s carefully, though publicly, performed allurements. I experienced a moment’s pang for this most certain evidence of her raised expectations—ones I absolutely could not fulfill—before I stamped them from my consciousness. This was to be a onetime indulgence. One dance—before adding the healing balm of many miles between this siren and myself as I left Netherfield on the morrow.

### **“The Beast of Pemberley” by Melanie Stanford**

I stood at the altar, stiff and upright. Tense. Anxious. Nervous. Excitement overpowering the throbbing from my scars. The clergyman in front of me avoided my face. I had a mask on, but still he would not look at me. The elaborately knotted cravat that Cogsworth insisted upon for my wedding day felt tight, and I tugged at it.

The chapel on Pemberley’s estate had been unused since my mother died but had been aired and thoroughly cleaned. Cogsworth had helped me into my wedding coat, and I fitted the mask over my face myself, the stiff black leather covering everything but my eyes and mouth. I only glanced in the mirror to make sure it was straight, but that was enough for the flash of anger and self-loathing to tumble through me. Handsome no longer. But better the mask than the scars.

The doors opened, and a sharp wind blew in, piercing the stillness. I turned . . . and there she was.

Enchanting.

Alone—because I made it so. And brave. I did not want anyone else gawking at the man in the mask with scars snaking from his coat sleeves.

Her gown was white lace adorned with flowers. The bodice was tight, enhancing the swell of her breasts, a golden cross resting on her neck. The skirt fanned out, lightly brushing the floor as she walked. Her hair was arranged with baby’s breath and coiled into a floral crown. She carried a bouquet of borage and dahlias in her hands. For courage and dignity?

Her slippered feet barely made a sound as she made her way down the short aisle—leaving silence in its wake. The only guests in the pews were my servants. She would not look at me.

I could not take my eyes off her. The parson spoke, but I heard nothing. She stared blankly ahead when she recited the words betrothing herself to me. I wondered how she could say the words she so evidently could not mean. Even when she was forced to face me as the marriage ribbon was tied around our hands, she would not meet my eyes. Her hand was warm in mine, soft against my scars. Yet, she did not flinch at the sight, and I adored her even more for that.

The ceremony ended. My servants rose with a smattering of applause. Elizabeth yanked her hand from mine, the ribbon stinging against my wrist, and she fled the chapel.

“Attend her,” I murmured to Mrs. Reynolds. The servants left, and I was alone. Married.

### “A Resentful Man” by Lory Lilian

“Dear Aunt, I am not averse to discourse with you, but this matter is irrelevant.”

“Then I shall not persist. However, have you any news for me? Catherine is writing to us weekly, asking of you, insisting of your increased attachment to Rosings. You cannot keep Anne in such uncertainty for too long.”

“I do not keep anyone in uncertainty, Aunt.” I congratulated myself on maintaining my equanimity and yet, I continued. “Anne knows she cannot expect any engagement from me. And I repeatedly told Aunt Catherine that I will always keep Anne under my care and protection, but I have no marital aspirations with my cousin. It is only Aunt Catherine who perseveres.”

“Just like Miss Bingley.” Lady Matlock smiled.

“Quite.”

“But . . . you must allow me: Is there any reason why you are against your marriage with Anne? All the circumstances would be in favour of such a union and I know you have great affection for her. And I never noticed you paying particular attention to any young lady. Might your interest and hopes lie elsewhere?”

I frowned again and my patience betrayed me. I could not bear to speak on that subject any longer. “Dear Aunt, I believe we have spent enough time with a conversation that will lead nowhere. Might I offer you another drink?”

She shook her head, and as I stepped to refill my own drink, I felt my aunt’s gaze. With glass in hand, I took a chair at the corner of the room, grateful to Lady Matlock for not following me.

The music started again, and I gulped my brandy, attempting to calm myself. “You must allow me,” my aunt had said, the words cutting me. “*You must allow me . . .*” I had said those same words three months before. They were the preamble to my surreptitious fall. The storm that started at the parsonage had ravaged everything. I had no marital interest nor hopes. *She* had burned them all and only ashes remained.

### **“In Terms of Perfect Composure” by Susan Adriani**

“Honestly, I am in love with her.” That he found himself able to speak the words aloud nearly shocked him into silence.

As he had expected, Mr. Gardiner appeared unsurprised by his revelation, and so, with a wry turn of his mouth, Darcy persevered. “No doubt you already deduced as much yourself. However, despite my hand in Mrs. Wickham’s marriage, no understanding exists between Miss Elizabeth and myself, but know that I would ask for the honour of her hand tomorrow if I believed there was any chance she would say yes.”

A full ten seconds passed before Mr. Gardiner found his voice. “You mean to tell me,” he said slowly and carefully, “not only are you *not* engaged to my niece, as my wife and I anticipated would eventually come to pass once the dust settled from Lydia’s union, but you believe Elizabeth would actually *refuse* you?”

“My fears are not the least bit unfounded, I assure you.”

Mr. Gardiner gaped at him. “You realise, of course, that you must do a hell of a lot better than that, Mr. Darcy.”

Mortification and irritation caused a flush of heat to spread from beneath Darcy’s cravat to the tips of his ears. He reminded himself this was Elizabeth’s uncle, that he loved her as well, and was therefore entitled to be protective of her. Rather than lash out, Darcy swallowed his pride and admitted in a quiet, clipped tone:

“I have already been once refused.”

“By Elizabeth?” Mr. Gardiner cried incredulously.

Pursing his lips into a thin, hard line, Darcy merely inclined his head.

“Good Lord, when? Does her mother know?”

### **“Without Affection” by Jan Hahn**

I turned over, leaving my back to her. I spent some time wrestling the covers until I had settled, all the while thinking a monk’s life would be easier than mine. At least, the good brothers were not required to sleep with temptation!

Elizabeth sighed and moved about on the bed. Each time she did, her scent washed over me. At length, she stilled, and I closed my eyes, praying to be overcome by sleep. Silence ensued for some time. I startled when I felt the touch of her hand on my shoulder.

“Did I surprise you?”

“No,” I said in a defiant manner.

“I just have a question: Who told you I would die if I gave birth again? The doctor or the midwife?”

I knit my brows together and turned over on my back. “I did not need to be told, Elizabeth. I could see for myself.”

“And so, no one made the pronouncement?”

“Well . . . no . . . but—”

“Because neither the doctor, the midwife, Jane, nor anyone else warned me of the mortal danger giving birth to another child would cause. Could it be that you have assumed more peril than really exists?”

“That is utterly false! You have forgotten how you suffered, how you had to fight to live.”

My eyes had adjusted to the dim light, and I could see her smile.

“Not true, my love.” Her voice softened. “But the memory fades as I recall the joy I experienced when the pain was over, and Will was placed in my arms.”

“You were never more beautiful,” I whispered.

“And I never loved you more.”

“How could you love me? I did that to you.”

“You did not act alone. I remember being quite willing . . . in truth, more than willing.”

I sighed. There was no winning an argument with the woman, and we were drifting into conversation that had an unsettling effect upon me. Once again, I turned my back to her. She remained quiet for some time. And then, just as I felt my eyelids growing slightly heavy, I heard her voice again.

“Fitzwilliam, are you awake?”

“Yes,” I said grudgingly.

“Did I ever tell you that I learned more about the marriage bed from my mother’s housekeeper than I ever did from my mother?”

*What the dickens was she talking about?* I fumed silently.

“Hill told Jane and I what we needed to know about the wedding night, and she also educated us regarding childbirth. She said most daughters were shaped like their mothers.”

I almost snorted aloud. Elizabeth’s beautiful figure looked nothing like her mother’s!

“She said if a mother has narrow hips, oft-times her daughter will, and each will struggle more in childbirth. Hill said Jane’s birth was long and difficult, and my mother declared she would never go through that again. As we know, she gave birth four more times, and Hill said each birth became easier. She said with practice a woman’s body seems to perfect the skill.”

*Could that be possible?* I wondered. No, that was simply the unschooled word of an old servant, and she, most likely, told that tale to reassure her young charges. It was not the word of a doctor. I would not encourage Elizabeth by giving credence to her statement. I remained silent.

“Fitzwilliam, are you listening?”

I grunted.

“There is another fact we should consider: we were married over a year before I became with child. Do you recall that I had begun to worry since Jane was ready to give birth on her first anniversary?” When I did not answer, she continued. “Perchance, I am not as fertile as most women.”

Oh, how my wife could conjure up arguments! Whether she had a child once a year or once a decade, the danger remained.

“When you place all these facts together—my mother’s history, my fertility or lack thereof, the fact that I am feeding Will and plausibly protected against conception, and the actual truth that neither the doctor nor midwife said it was dangerous for me to have another child—it seems that we are denying ourselves comfort and pleasure without need.”

I heard her words, but my mind was set on Elizabeth’s protection, and I would not countenance arguments against it. I began to breathe evenly, feigning sleep.

“Dearest? Are you awake?”

I could feel her drawing near me, sitting up in the bed to peer over my shoulder. I continued my deception until she sighed and lay back down.

“What a pity you are asleep when I am making such good sense,” she fumed softly. I smiled in my false sleep. Oh, but she was adorable! Whether she made sense or not.

## **OTHER ERAS**

### **“Hot for Teacher” by Sara Angelini**

But back to my point. Ms. Bennet could be relied upon. And, frankly, I was beginning to find her, well . . . *pretty*. I suppose this is related directly to her apparently distancing herself from Wickham, which raises anyone in my estimation. If she can see through his self-aggrandizing and false charm, then she must be a sensible woman. Who also happens to be damned attractive.

What’s more, she seemed to return my feelings. While I had not yet asked her to go to coffee, we did often sit across from each other at staff meetings, and I was beginning to feel a real connection with her. She always laughed at my jokes . . . always had a witty retort at the ready. I sometimes felt giddy just being near her. I told myself that I would ask her out to dinner, eventually, but that I was content to let the flirtation flourish in a natural way.

To wit, our exchange just yesterday:

She: “Of course I will be at the homecoming dance. I wouldn’t miss it. I never went to my own homecoming.”



I: “You won’t already be out . . . on a date?”

She, after a pregnant pause: “No, I won’t.” Another pause. (*I believe she likes to create anticipation.*) “I will be there; no ifs, ands, or buts.”

I: “No ifs, ands, or buts? What a pity. I rather appreciate a good butt.” (*See what I did there?*)

She: “That doesn’t surprise me. You have ass written all over you.”

The mild sexual innuendo might be slightly inappropriate, but we are, after all, adults. And I think she likes me. A lot.

### **“You Don’t Know Me” by Beau North**

December 1961

*Exile.*

I tried not to look at the situation in such grim terms, but there was just no getting around the fact that compared to my sleek office in Manhattan or my Park Avenue townhouse, Buffalo looked a lot like exile. But hey, it was only one year. I could handle anything for one year. I’m a Darcy, for crying out loud. Hell, I’m *the* Darcy.

It was one moment, one stupid mistake at the office Christmas party that landed me in Buffalo for a year. My whole life turned upside down in less time than it takes to get off the sofa and turn the dial on the television set. The whole affair has made me forswear mistletoe for life. I’d just as soon burn the damn stuff than stand under it.

My boss, Catherine (who incidentally is also my aunt), felt my banishment was important enough to deliver in person the next morning.

“You’re lucky I’m just sending you north for the year while this whole thing blows over,” she said, pursing her lips at my hastily tied robe. Maybe it was my unwashed hair or the smudge of lipstick still clinging to the corner of my mouth where a pretty and eager woman had left her undisputed mark. The culprit was the same woman my aunt had come to inform me was not only married but was also the young bride of Rosings Communications’ biggest client.

“Rosings Communications relies on its advertisers. As Head of Accounts, you know that better than anyone. Crawford is one of our biggest clients and we have to keep him happy, and that means *not* manhandling his wife. He wanted me to fire you, so what you should really be saying right now is ‘Thank you, Catherine.’”

“I had no idea that woman was his wife. And she kissed *me!*” Recounting the facts proved useless; Catherine wasn’t buying. Truth be told, I *had* been tipsy that night. I believe “blitzed” is the word the kids are using nowadays. Gritting my teeth, I let my eyes settle on the painting that dominated my living room—one of Kandinsky’s Compositions—trying all the while to ignore the one-two punch of a splitting head and a queasy stomach. Even I couldn’t say what was worse: my hangover or my aunt’s continuing lecture.

### **“Reason to Hope” by Jenetta James**

The band struck up a Benny Goodman number and it took my mind to another place. They were a poor imitation of the original, but it didn't matter. This was music you could move to. In fact, it gave you no choice, and for a moment I was fearless. Through the crowd of bodies, I advanced towards her. A peel of laughter died on her lips as I arrived, and her friend also turned to face me. There was a silence which, logic tells me, was shorter than it felt, before Elizabeth's face softened into a polite smile and she spoke, straining to be heard above the din.

“Group Captain Darcy, this is my friend Charlotte. Charlotte, this is Group Captain Darcy. I found him in the dark a few weeks ago, walking between Longbourn and Oakham Mount, and it would appear that he was not shot by poachers, for here he is.”

After this cheeky introduction, she was silent.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Charlotte.” I shook her hand and she appeared a pleasant woman, albeit the sort that I would not otherwise have noticed. “You haven't actually introduced yourself to me, but I'm told that you are called Elizabeth.”

“That's right. My mother will tell you I was named after the Queen, or Duchess of York, as she then was, because I was born on her wedding day. But then Mummy does have rather high ideas!” The girls' eyes met and they laughed. She looked back to me. “That's the only link, I assure you.”

“Good. Well. I don't know how the Queen is at the jitterbug, but may I?”

With only the briefest of sideways glances to her friend, she placed down her drink and took my hand as I led her onto the floor with the other couples already going like wheels. Her hand in mine was warm and soft. The music roared up around us and our bodies fell into its slip stream, moving at speed and with purpose, somehow avoiding collision, pounding to the beat. Her figure was small and lithe and had no difficulty finding the rhythm. I watched the expression of slight surprise creep across her face. This was a common reaction and I had foreseen it. Nobody ever expected a man like me to be the master of this fast, fashionable dance. I had learned it attending socials with USAF men shortly after their entry into the war, and so found myself on the right side of the trend as it became increasingly popular with the British. Its frenetic nature did not allow for conversation. One was too busy trying to keep up with the swing and keep one's partner from certain injury to talk. Silence between dancing partners was the socially accepted norm and it suited me perfectly.

This wordless frenzy, however, was over too soon. As the band blended into a new dance with a new tempo, we stopped, and began to retreat. My hand hovered at the small of her back as we moved through the crowd, not touching and my eyes fixed on the sight of her delicate shoulders. When she reached the bar, she turned and opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out, like a gramophone that hadn't been wound up. Was it breathlessness, or some other incapacity? The tiniest bead of sweat had formed at her hairline and the swell of her bust rose and fell rapidly,

teasingly. A glimpse of a white bra strap was visible where her dress had moved in the dance and her thick hair was in some disarray. For an unguarded moment, I imagined it even more so. It felt wicked to look at her in this way, but I did. I could not tear my eyes away. Coming to my senses, it was in my mind to get her a drink to replace the one she had abandoned and to make a concerted attempt at conversation when Caroline appeared.

### **“Pemberley by Stage” by Natalie Richards**

*California, 1860*

The stagecoach rocked hypnotically as it jostled down the road. Leather straps swayed back and forth, hanging from the ceiling like pendulums. The creak of leather and wood made a sort of soothing music, lulling a body into a state of catatonia, at least until a wheel hit a rock or rut. It had been a long, difficult journey, one I was ready to have come to an end. Thankfully, we were on the last leg between San Jose and San Francisco.

“You will love San Francisco, Darcy. It is the most exciting place, full of opportunity, fascinating people. I am certain we shall do well there.” Bingley had not stopped repeating variations of this theme ever since we left St. Louis nearly a month previously.

His enthusiasm made me smile. “If I did not believe you the first time you said it, I would not have come.” In truth, these words belied a confidence I did not feel. Leaving my familiar, orderly life in Boston for the unknown of the West was not a decision I had made lightly. I glanced at my sister, who somehow managed to fall asleep despite the rough road. Was I mad to be taking a young girl to such a wild place? She is completely innocent of the world’s dangers. Bingley’s sister I worried about less; Louisa always landed on her feet. Why, she spent most of the trip thus far flirting with Mr. Hurst, a railway investor with the Central Pacific Railroad. Caroline, the other Bingley sister, flatly refused to leave and remained in Boston with her aunt.

Despite my misgivings, there was something about the wide open spaces of the West that called to me. Seeing the alien landscape rush past filled me with a sense of excitement and wonder.

“Hold on!”

The stage picked up speed as the driver cracked a whip—and a gunshot split the air.

### **“Darcy Strikes Out” by Sophia Rose**

“May I—um, may I get a picture of you, Mr. Darcy? Uh, please?” The boy stumbled over his rushed words as he held up a phone.

Darcy smiled. “Sure, but let’s get one together, okay?”

The boy’s eyes grew large, and he nodded vigorously before turning to give his dad a thumbs-up.

Darcy said to Liz, “Would you mind?”

“Of course not. Why don’t the pair of you stay right there. Yes, like that. Say ‘Dandy!’”

The boy giggled, and Darcy grinned at Lizzy’s smirking lips. The picture taken, Darcy grabbed a paper napkin and borrowed a pen from Liz. Asking the boy’s name, he signed a quick “For Justin,” who then thanked him and ran back to his dad. Liz murmured something about “being sweet,” and he felt a spark zing through him as she reached across the table to squeeze his hand. She removed it when the waitress delivered their breakfast. He still felt her brief touch and glowed in her approval.

Darcy appreciated that Liz had an appetite. She ordered the French toast, and based on how rapidly it all vanished, it must have been delicious. He hated when girls simpered and moved food around on their plate, rarely taking a bite. Closing her eyes as she swallowed her last bite, she licked her lips and exhaled her satisfaction. Darcy licked his lips, too, thinking he had never been so turned on by French toast.

### **“The Ride Home” by Ruth Phillips Oakland**

“Oh, you’re beyond delicious, Slick, but I’ll never admit it to *you!*”—poking him rather sharply in the chest—“Not after you said I wasn’t hot enough to waste your time on. Who is hot enough for you? Behati Prinsloo? Gisele Bündchen? Or are you still nursing some teenage crush on Heidi Stupid Klum?”

“Heidi doesn’t have a middle name, and she’s not stupid.”

Elizabeth’s laugh rang loudly through the deserted street.

He pretended not to hear her as he reached for the handle to the door, but Darcy grimaced at the memory. Yes, he’d been madly in lust with Heidi Klum when he was thirteen. Okay, so she was still smoking hot years later, but he’d long ago outgrown leggy, blonde, German women who would never be more than a fantasy. He now preferred leggy American brunettes who, when standing right in front of him, appeared to be equally unobtainable.

He pressed Elizabeth against the car to keep her from slipping down while he leaned to the side and opened the car door. When he straightened, Elizabeth was looking at him with a wide-eyed expression. “Why, Mr. Darcy! You are very”—she shifted her pelvis against him—“impressive!”

He wanted to kiss her. She was so maddeningly close and apparently willing, but she was drunk. His parents taught him that women were not objects. He twitched again. *Damn, sometimes being honorable sucks.*

“Get into the car.” He hadn’t intended for his voice to sound so demanding and he cringed at her snort of derision as she slid into the passenger seat. However, his mood lightened considerably when he found it necessary to lift her silky-smooth legs inside the vehicle. Her skin was so soft, and he decided not to be too hard on himself when he realized his fingers lingered on her calves a second longer than necessary.

He was leaning across her to buckle the seatbelt when he felt her arms wrap around his back and her face snuggle into his neck. “You’re so warm!”

This was becoming more difficult by the minute. Apparently, a drunken Elizabeth was an affectionate Elizabeth.

### “I, Darcy” by Karen M Cox

I stopped and took her in my arms. “You’re mine now, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not afraid. Not at all.” She leaned up and kissed me. “My Mr. Darcy: he’s good, he’s honest, he’s honorable. He’s handsome as sin.”

“Well, I do have to live up to my namesake.”

She laughed.

“Honestly, though, I think most any man could be the perfect Mr. Darcy, if he chose.” I leaned back against an ancient oak tree, keeping my arms around her.

“Choosing to is the important phrase, I think.”

We stood there in momentary silence, enjoying the breeze, enjoying each other’s company. Finally, my Lynley spoke:

“You have it wrong, you know.”

“What do I have wrong?”

“You men, you think everything is about you. But you’re not the only one to miss the point. A lot of people think *Pride and Prejudice* is about Mr. Darcy.”

“Isn’t it?”

“He definitely plays a role. He makes mistakes: he’s a snob, he’s haughty, and he has to eat crow. But his errors are mostly about delivery and image. Elizabeth herself says he changes very little in essentials.

“No,” Lynley continued. “The person who grows the most in *Pride and Prejudice* is Elizabeth Bennet. She learns to see Darcy for what he truly is, despite his faults and despite hers. She’s the one we watch as she dumps the chip off her shoulder, so she can clearly see the past and forge into the future.”

“Say what you will. I’m still indebted to Mr. Darcy’s example. He isn’t perfect . . .”

“Just forgiven.” She finished my sentence with a grin. “There are a million ways a man can become a Mr. Darcy.”

“True.”

“But it takes an Elizabeth Bennet to see them.”