

Lord and Lady Darcy's Ward

Sarah Collins was neither a combination of her parent's good qualities of thrift and practicality, nor did she show any great interest in matters of the church, except the singing of hymns. She had none of her mother's voluptuousness, and though Mrs. Collins complained about her own weight daily, she also complained when Sarah did not finish a meal. She possessed neither the calmness of her mother, nor the elegant speech of her father. Sarah was plain, but had cheeky green eyes, yellow hair that took on an orange hue in the winter, the scrawniness of her favorite Aunt Elizabeth, and just as likely to run through a wet field in her skirts. Lady Elizabeth was not her real aunt but being the closest friend of Sarah's mother, she insisted Sarah called her Aunt Lizzy. Sarah also had a knack for being tardy due to a penchant for the circulating library's installments of the latest novels—of which Mr. Collins did not approve—and that Sarah pinched from their hiding spot by her mother's bedside.

The day Sarah arrived at the Villa Sorrento on the Italian Amalfi Coast, she spotted a wedding down on the grounds between the house and the sea, a spectacular vision she hoped to re-enact herself one day soon with some future husband, though she was not certain Edward Wickham could be that man. She sighed, and at once realized her father The Reverend, Mr. William Collins would sooner have his teeth removed than allow a daughter of his to wed anywhere else but inside his parish church at Hunsford. Besides, how could she marry Edward when she did not really love him? He was the most insufferable know-it-all and would doom her to life-long instruction. No, she would find true love as did Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Swaths of white cotton draped over several carved white columns, like the sails beyond the railing catching the Mediterranean breeze. Sarah and Elizabeth admired the scene as Uncle

Fitz instructed the footman where to carry the luggage. To their left ranged an olive orchard fronted by a stuccoed Italianate building with terra cotta clay roof tiles; they had passed the twisted tree trunks earlier on the way in. To the right of the villa and down the rocks, spread the beach between Villa Sorrento and the town of Sorrento.

“This is a vision you will not find in Gilpin’s Observations, to be sure. Come Sarah,” said Elizabeth, tugging at her sleeve. “We must get you settled. Your studies begin tomorrow with Mrs. Kendall. But first we shall have to inspect all the rooms of the villa.”

“Oh yes, madame! I mean, Aunt Lizzy.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Good, you remembered.”

While planning this trip at Pemberley, Uncle Fitz had reconsidered Italy for vacation on the Isle of Wight or Scotland instead, as the insufferable Napoleon III prevented them from travelling down the Italian boot. Sarah thought both Isle of Wight and Scotland poor substitutions for the education she would receive in Sorrento. Napoleon succeeded and the timing of the Treaty of Zurich proved fruitful; Italy was to be their summer holiday destination.

Elizabeth and Sarah ventured over the cobblestoned path to the grand front entry of the villa. Inside the four-floor, ornate terra cotta building, Elizabeth held Sarah’s hand as they toured the many rooms. Sarah chose a bedroom five doors down from the master suite. The door opened to a canopied walnut bedstead, with enough mattress to need a footstool, but it was the view of the Mediterranean which beckoned Sarah.

“I love it!” she exclaimed, and Elizabeth joined her at the window.

“Do you not think this view will distract you from your studies?”

“I hope it does, so that I can write Mama and Papa and Lady Catherine, and they will all cringe with envy!”

“I do not doubt they will cringe, but it may be from your pride. Do care to be more humble, Sarah. Instead, soak up each minute we are here. Your parents will be impressed with your Italian if you work at it and your knowledge of the arts. I dare say that Lady Catherine has been to Italy several times already.” Elizabeth looked around. “So, this is your pick? I suppose you want your peace and quiet for reading.” She waited for a response that Sarah missed, too busy watching a fisherman pulling out his catch. “Well, it is settled. I will send for your bags and see you at dinner. Do you remember how to get to the dining room?”

“I will follow my nose, Aunt Lizzy. It will take me there or to the kitchens where they can redirect me. I thank you both for your hospitality, or I should say, grazie.”

“You will do well here.” Sarah followed Elizabeth to the door. “One floor down and to the right, down at the end. Six o’clock. Uncle Fitz hates to be kept waiting.”

After dinner, the evening passed quickly as all were weary from their travels, but before she climbed into bed, Sarah peered out her window to the glittering lights in Sorrento. Tomorrow’s studies would find her somewhere within those lights.

*

Mrs. Kendall tutored three young Englishwomen, including Sarah. Victoria, from London town, was the daughter of Lord Selwyn of the House of Lords. Rebecca of Cornwall was a country girl like Sarah, only with the brightest red hair.

“Now ladies, open your books and let start with the greeting of the day. Buon giorno! Please repeat.” Mrs. Kendall began as she intended to continue.

A collective “Buon giorno” echoed in the white-washed room of Mrs. Kendall’s home. It opened to a solarium where orange and lemon trees grew from large terra cotta pots. For two hours, the girls chanted after Mrs. Kendall in Italian and noted down the words in their folios,

carefully blotting the ink. At noon, Mrs. Kendall excused herself and soon returned with a tray; a young man followed with his head down carrying another tray. They continued to the solarium and placed the trays down on a table. “Girls,” called Mrs. Kendall, clapping her hands. “Vieni qui, and before you do, note this phrase down in your books and what you think it means.” All did as Mrs. Kendall asked then ventured to the solarium. They found plates of cured meats, bread, olives, a mixture of tomatoes stewed with another vegetable which Sarah did not recognize, and a bottle of olive oil. The young man with tanned skin and sun-kissed mousy hair brought glasses and a jug to the table.

“Posso presentare mio figlio, Mr. Jack Kendall. Any guesses, girls?”

Victoria’s hand went up, and Mrs. Kendall nodded to her. “You are introducing your son, Mr. Jack Kendall to us, Madam.”

“Yes, Victoria. Thank you, Jack. Back to your own studies, please.” Mr. Kendall turned to leave, exposing the disfigured side of his face and all girl’s eyes followed him until he passed by them on his way out. Victoria and Rebecca tended to their lunches, but Sarah watched Mr. Kendall until he left the building. She glanced through the window, not knowing why he had captivated her attention beyond his facial deformity. She had never seen anything like it.

Later over dinner, the Darcys asked after Sarah’s studies. When she gave a one-syllable answer, Uncle Fitz commented, “Sarah, how will you write an adequate letter to your parents if you cannot describe your day to us?”

“Yes, sir. Well, Mrs. Kendall’s home is delightful in a coastal manner, much brighter colours than I am accustomed to in Hunsford. There are two other English students, female, and we spent the day on our Italian language skills. Tomorrow we study the Italian masters. Mrs.

Kendall says the Palazzo Donnaregina in Naples holds some of Italy's finest pieces, including Master Raphael. We venture there in two days."

"An exciting prospect, Sarah." Aunt Lizzy's eyes sparkled in the candlelight. "Your parents will be very pleased to hear this." She sipped at her soup before turning to Uncle Fitz. "I imagine Mr. Collins will have some comments on his daughter viewing nudes."

Uncle Fitz choked on his soup, laughing, while Sarah blushed. Nudes? To be sure, her letters to her parents would not include this particular fact should it be true. "My dear," he said, clearing his throat. "I imagine Naples has more to exhibit than Raphael's cherubs, and if you have not seen the fourth-floor atrium here, you are missing some sculptures to behold."

Elizabeth turned to Sarah. "Then we must venture to the fourth-floor right after dinner."

The day before their excursion to Naples, Mr. Jack Kendall tucked a note into Sarah's hand after tea. She waited until she could study it with privacy. When she unfurled the tiny rolled paper, his handwriting was both precise and Italian. Sarah spent the evening trying to extricate herself from her aunt and uncle's company, when finally, they suggested bedtime. She told them she would also retire once she fetched a mug of warm milk.

Downstairs, Sarah made her request to the kitchen help then studied each person for their likeliness to assist. Gianna, the scullery maid seemed to know more English than the others. As she heated the milk, Sarah unrolled the note. Some words were easy, like Palazzo Donnaregina, but "El Beso," a kiss, had stirred Sarah's worry. She had inked those words out earlier.

Gianna's eyes squinted at the unfurled note. "At something-something, I will meet you at the something. Que pasa? Why you mark out?"

The next day, Mrs. Kendall escorted the girls and Mr. Kendall in a mail carriage to Naples, the girls inside the carriage and Mr. Kendall atop the bench with the driver. The funny looking boy had all the makings to be handsome. Sarah had not the boldness to ask how his face had met with such a nasty accident.

Throughout the palace were such works of art of which Sarah could only have dreamed about. As she considered a landscape much like the olive groves of Villa Sorrento, Mr. Kendall stood across the room similarly observing a giant mural. She blushed at the thought of the note between her breasts, which was the only place it would go undiscovered. She stepped sideways to another landscape then Mrs. Kendall, Rebecca and Victoria ventured into the next gallery of sculptures.

Mr. Kendall cleared his throat and Sarah looked over. He tilted his head as if to beckon her. How dare he, she thought, but needed to know why he wrote to invite her to meet at a kiss...or was it for a kiss? As she approached him, all became clear. A painting by Francesco Hayez hung before them, a couple embracing in a kiss. The red heat rose to Sarah's cheeks and she turned to a window to compose herself.

"It is the most beautiful thing I have seen," he said. "Besides you."

Sarah turned, unable to cool her cheeks. His good side faced her in profile, and she gazed a moment on Mr. Kendall's beauty, just as she had contemplated Raphael's murals earlier. "I thank you for the compliment sir, but if I may be so bold, whatever happened to your face? Perhaps wild dogs attacked you."

His face dropped and Sarah regretted her inquiry.

She faced the window again and heard his steps toward her.

“My stepfather splashed a pot of hot oil on my face. It is why we reside in Sorrento now with my uncle.”

“How horrid!” She turned and covered her mouth. “So unfair!”

“I am hideous, I know.”

“No, you mistake me, sir. I only meant to say that your stepfather is horrid. What an awful man to do this to you. But why?”

“He was quick to anger. I once saw him strike my mother. It enraged me so that I clobbered him with the fire poker and then ran for my life. The next day, we both worked at Villa Sorrento’s olive building, purifying the olive oil. There, he secured his revenge.”

Sarah aghast at hearing such a story finally found her voice. “But what of him? Where is he now?”

“He’s in prison on the island of Santo Stephano.”

While Sarah found this stunning, her interest proved more stubborn and she continued her inquiries. “Do you ever see him?”

“Never! And I never wish to again. He is a monster!” With this, Mr. Kendall left the room following where the girls and his mother had ventured moments before.

Sarah then followed, not sure if she was trailing Mr. Jack Kendall or her classmates.

*

The next morning, Aunt Lizzy accompanied Sarah to Mrs. Kendall’s home before setting off for the milliners. Stepping off the phaeton, Elizabeth began to peruse the gardens surrounding Mrs. Kendall’s townhouse, and remarked on its delightfulness. This pleased Sarah though she felt uneasy with Aunt Lizzy’s company. It was not so much that she minded her aunt making Mr. Jack Kendall’s acquaintance; it was the fear of what his appearance might stir in her mother’s

best friend's judgement. However, Mr. Kendall was absent and after Aunt Lizzy left, Sarah asked Rebecca if she had seen Mr. Kendall.

Rebecca only replied, "His father."

His father? Was she mistaken? It was Mr. Kendall's stepfather in prison. What thoughts invaded Sarah's composure that day. She could scarcely pay attention to Mrs. Kendall's lessons, much less answer her Italian questions. Least of all, could she find an opportunity to press Rebecca for more details.

Finally, during their luncheon, she whispered to Rebecca. "What do you mean by Mr. Kendall's father? I thought he only had a stepfather in prison."

"Prison!" she shrieked too loud, forgetting herself.

"Hush! Do you want Mrs. Kendall to hear us?"

"You confuse me by the moment. He has a stepfather?"

Sarah now realized she had broken Mr. Kendall's confidence and was further mortified by how she might disappoint him. Mrs. Kendall entered the solarium and the girls went quiet.

To Sarah's surprise, Victoria spoke up. "Mrs. Kendall. Is your son quite well?"

"Thank you, Victoria. He's a picture of health but has gone to Florence today to see his father."

This simple statement provoked such consternation that Sarah excused herself. She ran outside to the hot sunshine. With no one present, she lifted the long hair off her neck, and let the meandering sea breeze cool her down. Her confusion kept her away from class and soon Mrs. Kendall came to fetch her.

"Whatever is the matter, Sarah? You look pale."

“Forgive me, Mrs. Kendall, but your son confided in me. He told me how his stepfather was to blame for his facial injury and now Mr. Kendall is in the very company of the man who caused such an affliction.”

If it were not for Sarah’s genuine concern, Mrs. Kendall might have found this remark impertinent, but seeing the moisture in Sarah’s eyes, the tutor softened her tone. “Sarah, Jack’s visiting his biological father. And while I dare not go into detail, I can vouch for his respectability. Mr. Kendall’s stepfather, if you can call him that, is still in prison.” She placed her hand on Sarah’s cheek. “Dear girl.”

*

After Sarah’s four restless nights, Jack Kendall returned to his mother’s home. It seemed to Sarah that all of Mrs. Kendall’s students were as excited as she by the young man’s presence. Victoria was so forward as to ask after his health in Italian, impressing both Mrs. Kendall and Sarah who repeated the words beneath her breath.

“Bene, grazie,” was all he answered before taking his usual seat in the solarium and opened his book.

At noon, Sarah received another rolled note in her serviette, but could not unfurl it until she was alone in Uncle Fitz’s phaeton. This time in English, Mr. Jack Kendall wrote:

*There is a passage in the outbuilding
at the olive groves at the Villa Sorrento.
I will be there Saturday to pick olives.*

I can explain everything.

Your most humble servant,

Jack Kendall.

Saturday could not arrive soon enough. Sarah fidgeted at breakfast to the point Uncle Fitz with a huff, asked what ailed her.

“Oh uncle, I fear I have been cooped up here and at Mrs. Kendall’s far too long. I think I have need of a walk in the fresh air. Perhaps I’ll take one in the olive groves this morning.”

He glanced at Elizabeth. “Your aunt might like to join you, Sarah. She’s very fond of walks.”

“Oh, my dear Fitz,” I would love to, but I have a meeting in the kitchen for our dining al fresco on the patio before the ball this evening. By the by, I’ve invited Mrs. Kendall and her son.”

“Well, perhaps I should inspect the groves myself,” he replied, much to Sarah’s disappointment.

Later in the groves, Uncle Fitz explained the botany of olives to Sarah while she searched for Mr. Kendall.

“...and we should be able to press a hundred jugs of oil or more.”

“Dear uncle, I fear the sun is too strong for me. I may go back to the villa to find a parasol. If I do not return, it means I am at a loss and will see you back at the villa.”

“Very well, Sarah. Tell Lady Elizabeth that I will be along shortly.”

Sarah hurried in fear that if she did find Mr. Kendall, there would be little time to hear his explanation before Uncle Fitz discovered them.

She returned through the same door but knew not which dark hallway to take. Cobwebs hung in all the corners of each, but she chose the least gloomy passageway. Oh, how it vexed her to be pursuing a story from a tutor’s son. She had no idea how it might concern her, and yet there she was.

A rattle of something alerted her to someone in the next room. She cleared her throat not knowing whether to escape or announce her presence.

Mr. Jack Kendall filled the frame of the doorway and smiled. “Miss Collins. I’m pleased you could oblige my invitation.” His smile lightened what some might consider a frightening face, but Sarah saw beyond Mr. Kendall’s scars to notice his deep-set blue eyes, the very colour of the sea outside.

“My Uncle is inspecting the groves. He should be arriving shortly.” Above all, Sarah intended to keep the propriety of a chance meeting should they be exposed.

“Then I must hurry. I have misled you, Miss Collins. My father is in a hospital in Florence. He...he has an affliction of the mind. They have tried everything to help him, bloodletting, hydrotherapy, opium, all to no avail. Painting is his only passion. My stepfather is my uncle, my father’s brother. He stepped in to help us but made even more a mess of things, as you can see by my expression.”

“You poor man.” Sarah could think of little else to say, unsure whether to leave before Uncle Fitz discovered them there.

“I wanted you to know the truth as we are to attend the ball here tonight, and I am very much looking forward to it; especially should we be able to continue our conversation.” He bowed, took her gloved hand and kissed it. “Until this evening, Signorina.” He bowed again and left.

Instead of Uncle Fitz, Aunt Lizzy entered the building from where Jack Kendall had just left. “I see Mr. Kendall was here. Is your uncle not with you, Sarah?” She looked about and as if in response, Uncle Fitz materialized from the back hallway.

“Hello, my love. It seems we are the only three present. Do they not work on Saturdays?”

They all returned to the villa, but not before Aunt Lizzy gave Sarah a long sideways glance.

*

The evening and festivities arrived at last. A quartet had set themselves up two hours before dinner in a corner of the patio closest to the water. Sarah could hear them practice as she changed into her gown, the notes carried on the sea breeze to her window. Lady Elizabeth's personal maid aided Sarah into one of Elizabeth's finer gowns made up of layers of embroidered muslin. It proved a cooler dress than the one she had brought from England on this simmering evening in Sorrento. The maid, Italian, who was not much older than Sarah, with deep inquisitive brown eyes, and a nose that could rival Sarah's mother's, yanked the last of the ties at Sarah's back. She examined Sarah. "Sei bellissima, Signorina. Would you like me to put on your shoes?"

It seemed excessive, but Sarah giggled and sat on the bed anyway. "Yes please, Lucia. It will be my first ball, and I have only an inkling of how to dance the Boulangeries. I suppose I can only accept the country dances, that is, if anyone should invite me."

At Sarah's feet, Lucia looked up. "You will have lots of dances. I know some of the guests who will be here tonight. You will be, how you say...the belle of the ball, si?"

Sarah blushed and could not imagine being the 'belle' of anything. "If it will be any consolation, these shoes are much more comfortable than they appear." She pulled Lucia up and twirled her around. "At least I can do a country dance." But Lucia could not, and as she laughed at Sarah, she tripped and fell on her behind.

Aunt Elizabeth appeared at the door, smiling at the sight of Lucia. "What on earth are you girls doing?"

"Mi scusi, Signora." Lucia scrambled to her feet.

“It’s my fault, Aunt Lizzy,” said Sarah, laughing. “I was practising a country dance with Lucia, but she has two left feet.”

Elizabeth smirked, remembering the days when she and Jane laughed until their bellies ached. “Well before you rip my dress, dearest Sarah, you had better meet some of the guests. They are beginning to arrive. And dinner is to be served shortly. Besides, we might all be learning the Tarantella tonight.”

Sarah noticed Aunt Elizabeth’s dress. To think she had not before. It was the most exquisite shade of pale blue that reminded Sarah of a robin’s egg, with a white embroidered shawl. To match her dress, a blue stone hung from a gold necklace around her aunt’s neck. “You are the most beautiful flower, Aunt Lizzy.”

“Dear girl. I thank you kindly, and so are you Sarah, only a younger, much prettier flower. But we must get on or my husband will have a fit.”

Elizabeth smiled and Sarah kissed her aunt’s cheek in appreciation. “I’m ready!” Sarah turned and thanked Lucia who curtsied.

Darcy waited for them by the staircase. He smiled up at Elizabeth then offered his arm to Sarah when they arrived at the main level. “I dare say, your aunt should lock you upstairs Sarah, and perhaps I should lock her up there with you.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “If this is your way of a compliment, Lord Darcy, you are too kind, but I suspect you will need my assistance with introductions this evening.”

“And, my love, I will need your assistance with chaperoning Sarah.”

Outside under the covered patio, Sarah was the happy girl to whom every eye turned toward. Elizabeth and Darcy made Sarah’s acquaintance to the nearest couple. And so, the first

few moments passed for Sarah who could no sooner remember people's names than she could dance the Boulangeries.

The long dining table sat fourteen guests all told, and Sarah, quite disconcerted, learned that the Darcys expected most of their guests later that evening. She sat beside her aunt, impatient for dinner to be over as Mr. Jack Kendall and his mother were neither in attendance nor mentioned despite Mr. Kendall's note.

Later outside, under the rising full moon, a dance floor surrounded by tables and chairs had replaced last week's wedding arrangement. The quartet continued to play the most magical notes as more guests arrived to mingle with the dinner guests. Sarah looked on, impatient for Mrs. Kendall to arrive with her son.

"Were Edward here, I am sure he would request the first two dances with you, Sarah."

She turned to Uncle Fitz and wondered how to answer him without offence. "Mr. Wickham is a capital dancer, to be sure, but I am an inadequate partner—two left feet, Uncle Fitz."

"Nonsense, I am certain of it. Your papa danced a pretty set in his day and likely still does ...on occasion."

Uncle Fitz's unblemished recollection foiled Sarah's attempts, yet she continued. "Yes, I know a country dance or two, but I'm sure Mr. Wickham's dance repertoire is most improved at the balls of Oxford."

"Perhaps, but he is there for more than dancing if he is to inherit Pemberley. Can you imagine yourself organizing fine parties such as this at Pemberley?" He smiled with indulgent expectation.

“Undoubtedly, no one could organize a ball like Aunt Lizzy, though I have not been to a ball until tonight. No, I cannot imagine organizing one, not at all.”

With that, Uncle Fitz’s smile turned to a frown. He bowed his head. “I beg your pardon, Sarah, I must greet some guests.”

Sarah gaze followed Uncle Fitz, feeling as though she had said too much. Her embarrassment at offending soon gave way to considerable pleasure when a happy sight caught her eyes; — Uncle Fitz greeting the Kendalls. Sarah thought it only gracious to also greet her tutor and soon joined her uncle.

“Mrs. Kendall, I’m delighted to see you!” Sarah bowed her head, and again to Mrs. Kendall’s son. “Mr. Kendall.”

Mr. Kendall bowed and as he raised his head, a hint of a smile appeared upon his unbalanced countenance. Aunt Lizzy soon joined them, and the adults led the way to a table where they all took their seats. Sarah sat beside Aunt Lizzy and Mr. Kendall sat beside Sarah. No sooner had he lowered himself into the chair, he turned to Sarah and asked, “May I solicit your hand for the first two dances, Miss Collins?”

Sarah blushed.

Aunt Lizzy’s head swivelled around, and her eyes widened with amazement at Mr. Kendall. Before her Ladyship could say anything, Sarah accepted him. Besides, she had no intention of sitting the entire ball if she refused him. When the dance music began, Mr. Kendall stood and offered Sarah his hand.

Sarah found him to be a more adequate dancer than she had imagined and could not think of where he might have learned to dance so very well. As they promenaded up the centre of the

parallel lines formed by couples, Mr. Kendall spoke loud enough for her to hear him without turning his head. "I was afraid I had frightened you with my father's situation."

"I was very sorry to hear it and wish him the speediest recovery."

"I am not sure he can recover and that is the worst of it. I only hope he can find peace in his painting."

They reached the top of the line and cast each other off to stroll outside of the couples and regain their situation at the bottom of the line.

As they met, Sarah continued. "I am sure that will be a relief to you and your mother, and I only wish his peace to arrive as soon as is possible. Do you always live here? Your accent is very much anglicized."

They twirled in the middle again, and he answered. "I return to Cambridge in September." They parted and Sarah could not have been more perplexed.

When they joined again, she asked, "So you reside in Sorrento only temporarily?" And so, it followed, the dance, joining and parting, until the music finished, and Sarah had learned little more of Jack Kendall's living. How silly it was for her to think the Kendalls were as poor as she and her parents. Her father's income had been non-existent since retirement, save for the generosity of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The Longbourn estate was still beyond Mr. Collins's inherited reach as Aunt Lizzy's father, Mr. Bennet, proved to have an extraordinary constitution for a man of his age.

The dance ended and another began. Mr. Kendall took her gloved hand and said, "Temporarily, yes. We came to be close to my father and visit him when we can."

The second dance proved to be more vigorous and talking became impossible. When it was over, Mr. Kendall escorted Sarah back to their table. As they reached their empty chairs the

Boulangeries began. Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand and pulled her up. Sarah had already forgotten the names of the remaining couple at the table. They were in deep conversation, and Mrs. Kendall was missing, likely to the powder room.

"We leave next month, at the end of your studies," he said.

"So soon?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But I had wished we would stay on. My father seems to be recovering. We visited him earlier today and he was in such a happy state, painting furiously and his works, he had them scattered all over the room like Caravaggio, though I do not suggest he is as violent. It is the happiest I have seen him."

He started to say something else on the subject but on raising his chin to the gate, his mouth fell open. Sarah followed his gaze to Rebecca and Victoria, who stood at the gate in glorious finery. "Oh, how nice. I was not expecting our two friends. I suppose Aunt Lizzy extended the invitation to your mother's students."

"Excuse me." With a more pained expression than his scars already produced, he rose and marched over to Rebecca and Victoria, and after bowing, began talking with Rebecca. How curious, Sarah thought, so instantly out of his seat upon spying her schoolmates.

Aunt Lizzy and Uncle Fitz returned.

Elizabeth leaned into Sarah. "What do you think, Sarah? Did our Boulangeries pass society's standards?"

"I-I, ..."

"Leave the poor girl, my darling. You must not provoke favourable answers where none are to be had."

“Never mind that. We have a surprise for you, Sarah.” Aunt Lizzy looked to Uncle Fitz and winked, most unfemininely. Sarah checked back to the entrance, but the three had disappeared, and wondering where they had all went had erased any curiosity for the surprise from Sarah’s mind.

“Pardon me,” she said, and flew away to the villa, leaving her aunt and uncle wondering if Sarah had guessed the surprise and went looking for it.

Inside, Sarah could not fathom where they might all have gone and began opening all the doors. The halls were dark, with only candles lighting the way. Long shadows gave the appearance a medieval quality. Sarah stopped at the fifth door, the library, upon hearing voices within. Just as her hand reached the knob, a voice startled her from behind.

“Scusi, Signorina.” It was Lucia. “What do you look for...while the party...”

“Lucia! You gave me a start! Did you see where my three friends from my lessons went?”

Lucia shook her head, no.

The voices behind the door continued and a man’s voice raised and asked, “And where is she now?” It was not the voice of Mr. Kendall, but who could it be in Uncle Fitz’s library when he was still outside?

As Lucia looked on from behind, Sarah turned the doorknob ever so slightly and push the door open an inch wide. With Lucia against her back, Sarah peered into the library to see her three friends with a fourth individual.

“Sarah!” Rebecca’s voice startled Sarah and she practically fell into the room with Lucia pushing her from behind.

Sarah blushed and righted herself, then bowed her greeting. “Rebecca. Victoria. It is my immense pleasure to see you tonight.” As she faced the guests, a fourth person’s back faced her. It was a man. Was it Mr. Kendall senior? Or worse, the uncle?

He slowly turned to face her, and instead of him being Mr. Kendall’s father or uncle standing there, it was Edward Wickham.

“Sarah, so nice to see you again! I was just coming to look for you when I came upon your friends.” He stepped over and bowed deeply then kissed her gloved hand, and when he rose to face her, Sarah could not help noticing how much Edward had matured. Since four years ago when she had last seen him, he had lost the bumps on his face, his hair was less lanky and more groomed, his shoulders were not as slender as she remembered, and his visage seemed to express sheer pleasure with their reacquaintance.

“I am quite surprised.” She looked beyond to Mr. Kendall, then to Rebecca and Victoria, who both seemed starstruck by Edward’s appearance.

“I’m afraid I am the surprise of the evening,” he said. “But I’ve managed to spoil it. Uncle Fitz will be most annoyed with me.”

“I am completely confounded. You were my surprise? My goodness, I would have never guessed it. And now you have met my friends.”

“Well, yes, in a manner. They burst in here exposing my hiding place, and now you have done the same. But I dare say, it has made a sweeter surprise for me.”

Sarah blushed with the compliment. Quite bewildered by both the secrecy of her friends and the secret of Edward’s arrival revealed, Sarah felt quite faint. She made her excuses and left the room at once.

Finding her way back to the patio with swirling thoughts blinding her passage, she found herself facing her aunt and uncle, about to come in.

“Sarah! Where have you been?” Elizabeth glanced beyond Sarah and a wide smile replaced her frown. “Edward!” She grabbed Sarah’s hand and whirled her around. Uncle Fitz greeted Edward first with a robust handshake then Edward greeted Elizabeth with kisses to her cheeks. Elizabeth looked between them and said, “So you’ve already met with each other. How on earth did you discover Edward, Sarah?”

When Sarah faltered, at a loss for words, Edward stepped in. “Imagine my surprise. Sarah and a maid chancing upon me in the library. A lost hankie, was it not?”

With a laugh barely concealed, Sarah nodded. “Why yes!”

Before the Darcys could question her, Edward asked her to dance and she accepted. Fitz and Elizabeth’s expressions turned to ones beaming at their own matchmaking scheme, while Sarah wondered quite how she had forgotten Edward’s handsomeness.

The dance whipped by too quickly. From that moment on, little did Sarah think of her friends. After a short while, the friends left the ball early without Sarah noticing. When the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing room later after smoking their pipes in the library, Sarah and Edward shared much between themselves, and she found his humor exceedingly entertaining. They remembered Christmases spent with their families when they would hide behind curtains and jump out to scare cousins, aunt and uncles, or worse, their parents; when they both learned to ride and Edward was bucked from his horse; when Edward’s father challenged Uncle Fitz to a duel and fell backwards into a pile of manure; when at eleven-years-old they once stole his mother’s gothic novel, *The Monk*, and read to each other the shocking pages. Each story they remembered began peals of laughter. They spoke into the wee hours.

Edward said one last thing to her before retiring. "I was afraid we would not find ourselves as amiable as this. I must say, I am becoming quite fond of you, Sarah. Will you answer my letters from Oxford?"

"Indeed! I would be delighted."

When Edward returned to Oxford four days later, Sarah returned to her studies for the remainder of the summer with Mrs. Kendall. She saw little of Jack Kendall, who visited his father more often. Rebecca was the expert of his comings and goings and Sarah soon learned that Rebecca had promised herself to Jack. Sarah could not understand Mr. Kendall's earlier interest in herself, but did not give it much further thought, embarrassed by her own curiosity on that subject. She had learned more lessons in Sorrento than Italian.

On returning to England, William and Charlotte who had read Sarah and Elizabeth's letters, knew of Sarah's adventures in Italy. Sarah and her parents paid a visit to Rosings. Sarah spoke of Italy, but Lady Catherine was more interested in the Darcy's news.

When Edward visited Pemberley, he often rode down to Hunsford to visit with the Collinses. Upon his graduation, Edward proposed to Sarah by the lake at Pemberley. They were married three months later upon the grounds at Pemberley, a scene that made the wedding in Sorrento look like a picnic. Much like the white swaths in Italy, silk covered the Darcy's patio, and fine weather blessed the ceremony, but the dinner and ball afterwards included hundreds from miles around. Lady Catherine attended with Anne, escorting Sarah's parents, and Edward's family, and extended family, the Bennets, the Bingleys, the Gardiners, and even Sarah's Grandmama and Grandpapa Lucas attended, though they retired to bed well before the others. *It was a day unlike any other*, Sarah had written in her diary. Along with:

*Notes from young suitors may duly rest,
Now that truer hearts have chosen the best.*

The End.

www.joanneyordanou.com