Customer Appreciation

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

In the course of business, Darcy and Lizzy fall for the sexy voices they hear on the phone. Oops!

Short story written to the Blind Date Disaster prompt at another site. Modern-AH

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“The contract will expire as of the fifteenth, Mr. Darcy. Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

*Her voice is like liquid sex*, he thought. If only he had some more contract terms for her to validate for him, he could keep her on the phone a while longer.

Darcy squirmed in his seat before responding. “No, thank you, that’s it for now. I’ll call again if I need more help.”

“Call any time, Mr. Darcy. If I’m not here to assist you, one of our other staff members here at Longbourn Commodities will be glad to step in.”

“What hours are you typically in the office? I prefer to work with one representative who is well-versed in FGD’s contracts.”

“I’m here nine to five, eastern standard time zone.”

“Thanks again. I really appreciate your help.”

“Thank you for your business, Mr. Darcy.”

He hung up, still entranced by her voice. *She sounds like a siren every time I talk with her, and she’s whip smart, too. If only I could ask her out. Wait, I don’t know anything about her. Could I simply stop in Longbourn’s offices and learn more about her first?*

Darcy was still a little warm under the collar after his last call to Longbourn. It didn’t dawn on him for another fifteen minutes that dropping by Longbourn would make him a creepy stalker. Self-hate kicked in upon this realization; he sulked and brooded for much of the afternoon feeling lonely, frustrated, and sorry for himself.

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“Yes, sir, that contract will also expire in two weeks. It’s no problem at all, glad to be of service.”

She couldn’t think of any reason to keep him on the line. It wasn’t every day a girl was flattered simply for picking up the phone. And his voice — it was like speaking with a god.

Lizzy fanned herself, a little hot and bothered after she ended the call. Would he ever come into the office, she wondered? Or maybe she’d run into him at the next Longbourn customer appreciation event; she could only hope. She hadn’t had a customer who worked her up like that in quite some time.

She was still thinking of him later that evening as she ran on her treadmill, working off the day’s stress. If only she could work out her tensions on her favorite customer… it had been far too long since she’d been on a date, let alone in a relationship. Perhaps she shouldn’t have offered to take customer calls that week.

Like so many nights before, Morpheus embraced her within his soporific arms after a warm shower, a cup of green tea, and a little hot-and-fluffy romance novel reading.
Internal backfilling for FGD’s personnel by management team members had been a genius idea in more ways than one. Not only did executives gain a better perspective of the entire business, but relationships with suppliers and customers improved.

Though the trader assigned to the commodities desk had returned from her maternity leave, Darcy asked for all mail from Longbourn to be forwarded to his office. He jumped on the customer appreciation day invitation the same afternoon it arrived at his desk. Of course he should go, he rationalized; it was his firm that did millions of dollars of business every year with Longbourn, after all, and he’d yet to attend any of their events. This time he would go, and he would make the most of their gratitude.

Besides, he was long overdue an evening out. He’d been stuck in a rut, working too late save for the nights he went to the gym.

There were plenty more reasons he could use as excuses for attending. He never once mentioned his intense curiosity about a certain Longbourn representative with whom he had spoken dozens of times over the last three months.

Tom Bennet had just coaxed his wife into taking her meds. Her all-too-famous nerves had been getting under his skin, and he had more than enough reason to be anxious on his own without Fran winding up his stomach’s acid production.

For the first time since FGD’s progenitor George Darcy had passed away, the current president and CEO of FGD would be visiting Longbourn. Tom knew nothing about George’s son who had taken over the business, except that the boy — well, he was still a boy from Tom’s perspective — had continued to run the investments firm as competently as his now-deceased father. In fact FGD had become Longbourn’s largest customer in terms of sales over the last five years; Tom had much gratitude to express, and he was happy that for once someone from FGD would attend their annual customer appreciation event.

The office suites had been cleaned with extra care. Dividers between the biggest executive conference rooms had been pulled back and the meeting tables put in storage. The small jazz band, caterers, and wait staff had arrived and were setting up the now-enlarged common space to accommodate a crowd of several hundred business persons and their significant others.

Tom Bennet’s partner and heirs — his brother-in-law Edward Gardiner, and the Bennet daughters — were all dressed to the nines and ready to greet their customers, along with the rest of Longbourn staff.

And most importantly, primped and painted Fran Bennet was now lying down on a plush and comfy chaise in Tom’s executive suite, eyes closed, breathing deeply as a medication-induced nap overtook her. He’d wake her up once all the guests had arrived and the key note speech had been delivered.
“We’re so glad you could join us this evening. We’ve truly missed your father, but we’re happy to know his firm has been in such good hands.”

“Thank you, Tom. FGD has been pleased with the profitability of business we’ve done with Longbourn. We look forward to continuing our long and prosperous relationship.”

“Oh, I don’t know if you’ve met my daughters yet. Jane here is our Human Resources director. Mary heads our research department. Lydia and Kitty are still interning in our customer service department.”

Darcy shook hands with each of the Bennets, every one of them highly attractive. None of them were the representative he was looking for, though.

“Oh, here’s Elizabeth now — Lizzy, our sales director. She and her uncle Ed lead our sales team. You may deal with her from time to time.”

His first impression was of clear, dark, and intelligent eyes that could see into his soul; his next impression was a broad, bright smile, combined with a sweetly arched, quizzical brow. It was as if something clicked, locking him into place. Darcy could not form words, his tongue frozen as he continued to shake hands with Elizabeth.

Surely this must be the representative he spoke with...but no. He had not spoken with anyone named Elizabeth or Lizzy.

His hand tingled as heat spread across his cheeks. How embarrassing, he thought, she’s gorgeous and I’m acting like a dork.

“I’m pleased to meet you finally, Mr. Darcy, and very thankful for FGD’s continued business.”

No, definitely not her, though her voice is every bit as lovely. Darcy had still not choked out a word in greeting as he continued to look into the sales director’s fine eyes.

“Here, let me introduce you to the representative handling the FGD portfolio. Charlotte?”

Another woman turned in response. Though close to the same height and similar in coloring, Charlotte was a drab imitation of Lizzy. She had pleasant but nondescript features — a gentle if irregular smile, a wide forehead, and academic-looking glasses that hid her eyes’ humor-filled glint.

“This is Mr. Darcy, the president and CEO of FGD. I believe you’ve been dealing directly with him recently on his account.”

“Yes, I have. It’s so nice to meet you in person, Mr. Darcy. I’m glad to be able to put a face to your name at last.”

Darcy took her hand and shook it, this time relinquishing his overwarm grip in short order. Words finally spilled from his mouth. “It’s nice to meet you, too, Charlotte. I’ve learned a lot about my own company that I didn’t know before while working with you on some of our contracts.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m even happier to be of service, then.”
He had all he could do not to sigh right to her face. Yes, this was the sexy, throaty voice he had enjoyed each time he worked on the FGD-Longbourn contracts, a voice like gently warmed honey. But there was no chemistry between them; Charlotte seemed only as interested in him as he was in her. She was already looking past him toward Lizzy and other Longbourn customers.

There was a hell of a lot of chemistry with the sales director, though. Darcy stepped away after meeting Ed Gardiner, accepting a glass of punch from a waiter before slinking off to a corner to watch Lizzy at a distance.

He spent the next hour drowning his self-reproach about making assumptions while staring at Lizzy as she worked the room.

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After fishing out two ibuprofen from her desk drawer and washing them down with sparkling water, Lizzy reclined in her chair, enjoying the relative quiet of her office. The clients and significant others had all been greeted, the speeches were done, the buffet set with hot dishes, the jazz band played on. She should be able to enjoy herself now.

But no — Fran had been revived by Tom. With a little rest and now some wine in her system, her mother was at her most obnoxious. Thankfully all the clients were also liquored up and relaxed a bit and would probably discount Tom’s wife since she had no regular, active role in the business. The two youngest daughters had also gotten into the sauce and were a bit too chatty, giddy, and loud. Lizzy had called a town car to escort them home since they were minors and shouldn’t have been drinking in the first place. Between Fran and her two sisters, Lizzy’s once-mild tension headache had intensified.

She had all she could do to keep things running smoothly between staff and customers, while keeping Fran and her sisters from embarrassing the entire company with their ignorant, too-loud commentary about the economy, their customer base, and their staff. It was hard to tell if she had successfully kept them from offending their most important customer, though. Will Darcy kept to himself most of the evening so far, and he watched her like a hawk watches its prey.

The last straw, though, was finally meeting the customer with the golden voice.

What a butthead Hunsford Company’s Bill Collins had proved to be in the flesh, a waste of vocal talent. He had a nice line of patter to offer every woman he spoke with. Once he realized that Lizzy was to be named vice president of sales upon Ed Gardiner’s retirement, Collins had glommed onto her like a tick on a dog. He was effusive in his praise, too personal to the point of being offensive. She couldn’t shake him without going to the ridiculous extreme of lying about needing to take a call in her office.

She definitely needed to go to her office, all right. That’s where the ibuprofen was kept.

Lizzy sat there in dim light of her calm office, her stockinged feet up on her desk, and her eyes shut as she she massaged her temples while focused on relaxing the tension in her jaw. What she would give for this somewhat disappointing night to be over.

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“Miss Bennet! There you are! I wondered where you had gone! I’ve been looking all over the building for you. I’ve so enjoyed meeting you this evening, and I wanted to tell you once again how very pleased our largest client, De Bourgh Co, has been with the nature of contracts that Longbourn has offered—”

“Thank you, Mr. Collins. However I’m taking a conference call right now.” Lizzy quickly removed her feet from her desk, turning her head to look toward a phone conference station on her desk, pressing a lit button. “I’ll be right back, please continue without me for a moment,” she said toward the station.

Thank the stars I had that device installed, she thought, worth every penny. Should have shut my door, though, damn it.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy!” Lizzy’s eyebrows rose with her surprise at seeing Will Darcy standing just behind Bill Collins; his name sprang to her lips unbidden.

Collins turned sharply at Lizzy’s exclamation. “William Darcy, son of George Darcy, president and CEO of FGD Investments? Nephew to Catherine De Bourgh, ex officio director at De Bourgh Company? May I say how very happy I am to make your acquaintance, sir! I just saw your aunt yesterday and must tell you she appears to be in good health. If there’s anything we at De Bourgh can do for—”

“Yes, thank you — Collins, is it? I’ll be sure to speak with my aunt if there is anything FGD needs.” Darcy glowered at Collins, noting the tension in Lizzy’s forehead as well as her lips drawn tight in a straight line.

“It looks like Miss Bennet appears to be in the middle of something. Perhaps I can have you talk with the Longbourn person who is most familiar with FGD’s accounts.”

“Oh — oh yes, why certainly, sir, I’d be happy to make the acquaintance of the representative on your account. I’m sure Mrs. De Bourgh and the rest of De Bourgh Company would be only too happy to have us extend our business olive branch so to speak through Longbourn to FGD—”

Darcy was nearly dragging Collins down the hall by this point, looking over his shoulder with a sympathetic smirk at Lizzy through the glass windows surrounding her office. She rolled her eyes and smiled at him, waving her thanks for his assistance.

Any man who would rescue her from the likes of Collins without any prompting must be a pretty sharp character. He’d needed no cues whatsoever to understand the situation and had willingly stepped into the breach.

Lizzy pulled out her smartphone and sent a text to Charlotte.

LizzyB: Need a favor, entertain Bill Collins-DBC? Have Fran-ache, need 15 more min quiet.

Char-Luck: Sure, on it. See him now w that fox Darcy. Think fox wants u, btw.

LizzyB: Ri-ight.

Char-Luck: Fox staring at you all eve, like very hungry fox O.o tasty chicken.

LizzyB: OMG stop. Tks tho, owe u a lunch.
The sound of a glass being set on her desk roused her from the edge of sleep. Lizzy bolted upright in her chair, realizing as she snapped to that she had almost fallen asleep. The last several nights had been quite late, what with the preparations for customer appreciation festivities and a number of big contracts expiring. A lack of sleep and stress had finally caught up with her.

As she blinked away her drowsiness she realized she was not alone in her office. There sat Will Darcy in a chair across from her desk, sipping on a glass of punch. He must have put a glass on her desk when he entered.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I must have gotten too comfortable.” Lizzy checked the time on her phone. “Oh my gosh, I’ve been in here too long.”

“Don’t worry, just relax. I’m sure you’ve been really busy. At least Charlotte Lucas said you’ve been the powerhouse behind tonight’s event. She sent me back here to ‘meet with you’,” he gestured making quote marks in the air with a smile. “Char’s a sharp cookie. If she wasn’t working for you, I’d hire her away.”

“Yeah, she is, she’s a real treasure. She’s also been a close personal friend since we were kids. I don’t like to toot my horn about nebulous factors like friendship, but I’ll bet it would take a lot to draw her to FGD. We adore her here.” Lizzy smirked, knowing that Char had a small ownership stake in Longbourn as well as the love of her friends and family around her at work.

“Hard to put a price on that, for sure. I know I’ve been burned by someone I thought was a friend. The experience made me value real friendship and the love of family more than ever.”

Lizzy could sense the weight of the disappointment in Darcy’s body language. He looked away as he sipped on his punch, his shoulders hunched forward ever so slightly. She wanted to comfort him; how odd he could elicit this kind of feeling from her in such a short window of time.

“Well, I think I may have made a new friend this evening,” she said, grinning over her own cup of punch.

“Who, Collins?” Darcy huffed, biting back a guffaw at the idea of that sycophantic weirdo Bill Collins being Lizzy’s friend.

“No, silly. You.”

“What?”

“You rescued me from his overzealous attentions, and I didn’t even have to ask, or make crazy, desperate, flaily gestures for help.”

“Oh, that. I’m often swamped by fangirls. I know what it looks and feels like to be cornered by people with whom one has only limited interaction and less interest. I’m not bragging about the fangirls, mind you. I’m no catch. I know I’m a curmudgeonly stick-in-the-mud, at least that’s what my sister and cousin tell me.”
“Yeah?”

“Yup. But you know what they say. ‘A single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,’ and the paparazzi help every media outlet advertise that I’m wealthy and available.”

Darcy sighed with frustration as he looked into his punch glass. “I’m actually surprised there weren’t photographers outside tonight, harassing me upon arrival.”

“That’s because I consider this a private event. The people who need to know about it are all here in attendance. I don’t send press releases about our customer appreciation parties to the media. I want all our customers, vendors, and staff here in attendance to develop real relationships based on open communications and trust. They can’t do that if they are hiding from scrutiny by the press.”

“I like the way you think, Miss Bennet. No wonder you can retain smart staff like Char on your team.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. Coming from you that’s a compliment.”

“I’d like to work on developing those real relationships to which you aspire. Are you available for dinner tomorrow evening, Miss Bennet?”

Lizzy tried to hide her surprise. It seems Charlotte was right after all, once again. “Just a moment, let me check my calendar,” she replied as she pulled out her smartphone.

Darcy grinned as he waited.

“Yes, I’m free tomorrow night.”

He passed his phone to her so she could punch in her number.

“Great. I’ll call you with details mid-morning tomorrow.” He stood, offering his hand to her. She rose to shake hands. “Thanks for a pleasant evening. I’m glad I got to meet the team here at Longbourn. It was long overdue.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Darcy.”

“Will. Call me Will.”

“And you can call me Lizzy.”

They were still holding hands when he noticed a light still flashing on her desk. He smiled broadly before leaning in close and placing a soft kiss on her cheek.

Darcy chuckled at the surprise on her face as he turned to leave her office.

“You’re a pretty damned smart cookie, too, Lizzy Bennet. You’re going to make a fine VP.”

“What makes you say that?”

“That Polygon 1000 on your desk — the fake phone conference station on your desk that you use to chase off unwanted visitors to your office.”
“Oh. You got me there. It works pretty well most of the time. Collins is probably the only guy who can’t take a hint, let alone a cluestick to the head.”

Darcy laughed.

“I’ll keep that in mind if he ever ends up visiting my office. I’ve got a Polygon 1000 also.”

He winked then spun on his heel to walk out the door, whistling as he went down the hall.

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Char-Luck: Glad that’s over for another year.

LizzyB: Me too. Exhausted. I’ll be w you in a sec once I close my office.

Char-Luck: No hurry. Yr dad and uncle are happy, yr mom is drunk, customers smiling & leaving.

LizzyB: Good. And tks for assist w Collins.

Char-Luck: NP at all. Guess who has a date tomorrow nite?

LizzyB: OMG did he tell you?

Char-Luck: What?

LizzyB: I’ll be right there.

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“Okay, spill it, Char,” she said as she put her phone in her pocket after reentering the main party room.

“I’ve got a date tomorrow night with Bill Collins.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Um, I wondered if Will Darcy had mentioned he asked me out on a date tomorrow night.”

“I TOLD you he was interested in you! All that staring all night long meant something. Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet. No offense, Char, but I’ll tell you afterward. Let’s download on Sunday afternoon.”
“Ah, gotcha. Collins sure was nosy about Darcy. I won’t tell him a thing.”

“Thanks, Char. I probably owe you two lunches now.”

Char looked closely at Lizzy over her horn-rimmed glasses. “Make it Chinese on Wednesday. If I play my cards right, I may have breakfast lined up on Sunday and a lunch date on Tuesday.”

Lizzy rolled her eyes, shook her head, and snorted as she headed for the door to say goodbye to departing guests..

Charlotte chuckled at her best friend’s disgust. “You know what they say, Lizzy. One girl’s disappointment is another girl’s date, and all cats are grey in the dark. Unf, that voice—”

The two friends’ familiar laughter rang over the fading strains of jazz band’s last set. While Longbourn’s team had expressed gratitude to their customers that evening, they would be deeply appreciated Saturday night.

And again Sunday morning...

~ Finis ~

End Notes

Author’s Note: Sadly based on true life experience. He thought I sounded much older than my 20 years; I didn’t think he sounded like a hard-bitten chain-smoking whisky-drinking truck driver. Ah, the life of a traffic dispatcher...a very naive one, at that.

Thanks to my betas Andrew and Nathan for making it most of the way through this. I know I owe you something like a gruesome horror or creepy science fiction story next.

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