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**Much Ado About Sandcastles**

by Shrubbery_Girl

**Summary**

Fitzwilliam Darcy takes his family on a seaside holiday and a group of avid matchmakers, inspired by Shakespeare, try to find a new project.

**Notes**

This is ostensibly an English setting, but is really a giant love-letter to many wonderful seaside holidays spent in the Netherlands in the 1990s, which may distort the Englishness quite a bit, I fear.

Also, for whatever it may be worth, the year is supposed to be 1997.
Chapter 1

Fitzwilliam Darcy was not particularly amused. When he had proposed a cosy sea-side holiday, he had somehow envisioned himself and his wife, frolicking in the waves or enjoying the sunset during a walk on the beach. He had, for the duration of these fantasies, completely forgotten that his wife had borne him three children, who, upon hearing of their father’s plans, turned into a band of screeching banshees and were not to be silenced until their mama let them run around in their bathing suits for the rest of the afternoon. He had also forgotten that months ago, his beloved wife had made plans with her sister to spend a vacation together, and that said sister was also endowed with a husband and two children. That the husband was one of his best friends only slightly alleviated his pains, because, apparently, Charles Bingley always spent his holidays with his sister, and could not be dissuaded from inviting her. Fitzwilliam, in turn, thought that if everybody else brought their family, it was only fair that he should invite his cousin, who, having recently returned from a longer stint abroad, had difficulties settling in, and his sister, who in turn invited her boyfriend, from whom she could not bear to be parted.

Thus, Fitzwilliam Darcy was facing the difficulty of arranging sleeping arrangements for eight adults and five children in the giant bungalow he had rented, not to forget, of course, the labrador, the stroller, the pram, a crib and a collapsible travel-bed. Directly after their arrival, Charles had made himself scarce under the pretense of renting bicycles for the three eldest children (thankfully, he had taken them with him), and Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam’s adorable wife, had taken their youngest son (a strapping lad if ever there was one) to one of the many bedrooms in order to feed him, whilst Jane had taken her son inside to change his nappies. Georgiana and her boyfriend had not yet arrived, and so had Caroline and Colin, leaving Fitzwilliam with only Henry the labrador for help.

Fitzwilliam heaved another suitcase out of the back of his mini-van (how he missed his jag!) and set it down on the dried grass in front of the bungalow. Henry, tied to a fence-post, wagged his tail in a vaguely helpful manner.

‘You’re right,’ Fitzwilliam conceded. ‘It doesn’t make much sense to unload things if I don’t know where to put them.’

Henry looked at him expectantly.

‘Quite right,’ Fitzwilliam agreed.

He went inside, trying to remember in which bedroom his wife was.

‘Elizabeth!’ he yelled.

‘Back here,’ came a cry from the back of the house, ‘and try to be quiet!’

He made his way to a small but comfortable bedroom facing east, with a double bed and an armchair, in which his wife was currently seated.

‘He just fell asleep,’ she whispered and nodded at the bundle in her arms.

Fitzwilliam contemplated the bundle and felt, yet again, overwhelmed by the fact that he and Elizabeth had, for the third time now, produced such a perfect creature.

‘I love you, do you know that,’ he said softly and kissed her hair.

‘Do you, now?’ she said. ‘How terribly interesting!’
‘Do you, now?’ she said. ‘Looks very nice.’

‘It’s the best of the lot,’ Elizabeth said, ‘and there’s room for the crib in the corner. So naturally I secured it for us.’

‘Atta girl,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘Where are the others sleeping?’

‘I think Jane has taken a liking to the bedroom just off the kitchen,’ Elizabeth said, ‘and she says it’s large enough to put Andy’s travel-bed in the corner. And I suppose Georgiana and Mark will want to have the one in the front, because it’s furthest away from all the other rooms.’

‘The one with the twin beds?’ Fitzwilliam asked. ‘Excellent.’

Elizabeth slapped him playfully on the arm.

‘You promised,’ she said.

‘Yes, yes, alright,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘What about the terrors?’

‘If you mean our wonderful children,’ Elizabeth said, ‘the room next to this has a bunk bed, which I’m sure they’d love, but -’

‘Bunk bed?’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘With a ladder?’

‘It has a railing and everything,’ Elizabeth said. ‘But, that would leave the three-bed room for Colin, Caroline and Jenna, and I’m not sure whether that would work.’

‘Caroline can sleep on the sofa,’ Fitzwilliam suggested.

Elizabeth pondered this.

‘It would not be fair, though,’ she said. ‘And besides, that would still leave us with Colin sharing a room with a five-year-old girl who hardly knows him.’

The door opened.

‘Lizzy,’ Jane said, ‘have you seen Charles – oh, Fitz. Here you are.’

‘Charles went to rent bikes for the kids,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Fitz and I were just discussing sleeping arrangements.’

‘Oh, I thought that Jenna and Anne could share the room with the bunk bed,’ Jane said. ‘Wouldn’t they love that? Jenna has been going absolutely nuts at the prospect of sharing a room with Anne.’

‘Yes, but that leaves Colin, Caroline and James in a room,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Do you think that would work?’

‘Caroline could sleep on the sofa,’ Fitzwilliam suggested again.

Jane frowned.

‘I don’t think she’d like that, particularly,’ she said. ‘But I bet James would love sharing with Colin. He adores him.’

‘That is a thought, actually,’ Elizabeth said. ‘But that still leaves us with Caroline to dispose of.’
'We’ll let her choose,’ Fitzwilliam decreed. ‘Either the sofa, or she can share with Anne and Jenna.’

‘Hm,’ Jane said. ‘Oh, I suppose they will work it out. Oh, now I recall – Fitz, since Charles isn’t here, could you perhaps get Andy’s travel bed from the car? He fell asleep on the bed, but I don’t want to leave him there, he might fall out of it.’

Back outside, after having brought the bed to Jane, Fitzwilliam continued unloading the mini-vans, both theirs and the Bingleys’. He lifted a large plastic sack stuffed with miniature buckets, toy shovels, a little rake and at least a dozen animal-shaped molds out of the car, followed by what had to be the world’s largest beach-tent (his wife had insisted on buying that), when he noticed that his new neighbour was similarly afflicted. That man was just then trying to pull a tricycle from where it had been wedged on top of several suitcases. His mini-van was the same brand as Fitzwilliam’s, only the colour was different. Upon seeing Fitzwilliam look over, the man waved. Tentatively, Fitzwilliam waved back. He did not think much of sea-side friendships. The man pulled again at the tricycle, but to no avail; it was stuck. Fitzwilliam wondered what Elizabeth would do now.

‘Eh – do you want a hand?’ he asked hesitantly.

It was apparently the right thing to do. The man smiled and accepted graciously. Together, they managed to free the tricycle.

‘I don’t know how she does it,’ the man said. ‘My wife, that is. She’s stuffed this to the brim. Yours seem remarkably empty, comparably.’

‘Oh, my sister is coming later with more luggage,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘Of course, what with Henry’s travel box, and everything.’

‘Of course,’ the man agreed. ‘I almost had to bring five guinea-pigs, but luckily, we could leave them with my brother.’

Fitzwilliam shuddered at the idea of guinea-pigs. He was lucky in that his offspring were content with the one animal, at least so far.

‘So, with, what, two mini-vans, and your sister’s car, you must be quite a lot of people, eh?’ the man said.

‘Thirteen, altogether,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘Eight adults and the kids, of course.’

‘Blimey,’ the man said. ‘We’re only six, that is, we will be, once we’ve picked up my father-in-law from the ferry.’

Fitzwilliam shuddered at the idea of having in-laws other than Jane coming on holidays with them.

‘How old are yours?’ the man asked.

‘The twins are five,’ Fitzwilliam said proudly. ‘And my youngest is only six months.’

‘Twins,’ the man said. ‘That must be quite a handful.’

‘Oh, yes,’ Fitzwilliam agreed. ‘They’re quite the rascals, too. Full of ideas. Rather bright, as well. I believe Anne has already started reading.’

‘Robert is just the same,’ the man said.
‘So, eh, how old are yours?’ Fitzwilliam asked.

‘Oh, Robert has just turned six,’ the man said. ‘Katherine is four, and William is almost two.’

As if on cue, a girl and a boy – Fitzwilliam presumed them to be Robert and Katherine – came running out of their bungalow and started talking to their father, both at the same time.

‘Now, that’s enough,’ the man said. ‘If your mother says Robert is to have the top bunk, then that is what you will do. And Robert, we will go to the beach when I have unloaded the car. You can both get your rucksacks from your seats and bring them to your rooms.’

He pulled a large suitcase out of the car and shrugged apologetically.

‘Sorry, I’ve got to go,’ he said to Fitzwilliam. ‘I suppose we’ll run into each other pretty soon at the beach.’

By the time Georgiana arrived, Fitzwilliam had unloaded both mini-vans, walked and fed Henry and made most of the beds. Charles had returned triumphantly with three bicycles and three kids, plus one knee already scraped. Fitzwilliam had risen to the occasion and prepared a late lunch for everybody (thoroughly disgusting, of course – fishsticks and pasta, bought hastily from the tiny supermarket around the corner) whilst Elizabeth had treated her son’s injury, where, according to James’ own testimony, ‘one could almost see the bone coming through.’

When Georgiana pulled her car into the drive-way, all children, miraculously, were asleep, having been told that they would go to see the sea after their naps. With a little horror, Fitzwilliam saw that not only the trunk, but also the backseat of the car was stuffed with more luggage, amongst it, or so it seemed, collapsible beach chairs, a giant umbrella, and an assortment of stunt kites. Two surfboards were precariously tied to the car’s roof. Georgiana grinned awkwardly when she saw her brother’s look.

Elizabeth, having secured her youngest in his crib, came outside to greet her sister-in-law. To her surprise, it was Caroline, not Mark, who exited the car with Georgiana. She looked slightly green in the face and, upon being told where it was, made a dash for the bathroom.

‘She got ill on the ferry,’ Georgiana said. ‘Apparently, boats really don’t agree with her.’

‘But why is she in your car in the first place?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Well, Mark and I met her and Colin on the ferry,’ Georgiana said. ‘And in the best interest of everyone concerned, and seeing how she wasn’t feeling very well, we thought it best if she rode with me for the last bit.’

She pummeled her brother.

‘I don’t know what you were doing, deciding those two were to ride together,’ she said. ‘If they’d ended up killing each other, we would have laid the blame on your doorstep.’

‘What?’ Fitzwilliam asked. ‘What did I do?’

‘Apparently,’ Georgiana said, ‘you forgot to mention to both of them just who they were riding with. Caroline was under the impression that you would pick her up, Colin was under the impression he would be picking up Jane, and neither of them was aware the other was coming, or they’d never have agreed to this, and I quote, ‘completely dumb ego-trip of Fitzwilliam’s anyway,’ end quote.’
‘So?’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘I’m sorry if there was a misunderstanding, I was busy packing. So what does it matter?’

‘Are you just thick,’ Georgiana asked. ‘Or do you honestly not know?’

‘Know what?’

‘You really don’t know?’

‘Know what?’

‘They almost hooked up,’ Georgiana explained. ‘Colin and Caroline did.’

‘They what?’ Elizabeth exclaimed. ‘Caroline and – no way.’

‘Oh, they did,’ Georgiana said. ‘On your wedding party, in fact. I suspect that alcohol was part of the equation, but, anyway, after you had gone, there they were, sitting at your now deserted table, stuffing their faces with wedding cake and loudly toasting the two of you – it was rather pathetic, actually.’

‘Then what?’ Elizabeth said. ‘What happened?’

‘I’m surprised you didn’t hear about that bit at least,’ Georgiana said. ‘He got up on the stage, grabbed a mike from one of the band and started singing ‘Lady in Red,’ which caught the attention of quite a few people.’

Elizabeth groaned.

‘Caroline had a wine-coloured frock, had she not?’

Georgiana grinned.

‘And then?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘Did they, eh -’

‘Well, they intended to, at least,’ Georgiana said. ‘Or so it looked like. When he’d finished the song, Caroline dragged him off the stage and they started snogging on the dancefloor while the band played ‘Time After Time’ and ‘Everything I Do, I Do It For You’ - by the way, I told you not to hire that band, but would you listen?’

‘What next?’ Elizabeth said. ‘What then?’

‘Apparently, they decided to go upstairs to Caroline’s room, or at least, Caroline did, whilst Colin went to the front desk in order to find out if they knew of a chemist’s still open so he could buy, you know – and that’s it.’

‘That’s what?’ Elizabeth asked.

She and Georgiana now noticed that Fitzwilliam was staring at them both, eyes wide open.

‘Colin and – Caroline?’ he mumbled.

‘Never mind him, what then?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘For some reason, Colin never made it upstairs,’ Georgiana said. ‘Caroline must have emptied the mini-bar, or maybe she had sneaked some of the champagne upstairs, I don’t know. When I came by the next morning to ask if she had a spare t-shirt I could borrow, I found her fast asleep on the bathroom rug, a note from Colin shoved under her door that he ‘was off to the States, would be
seeing her around.’ And she didn’t spend time alone with him again until he came to Charles’ place this morning to pick her up, so go you, Fitz, for organising that.’

‘How was I supposed to know?’ Fitzwilliam asked. ‘I mean, it’s not exactly, you know, something anybody ever mentioned to me.’

‘You could’ve let people make their own plans,’ Georgiana said, ‘instead of just telling them what to do.’

‘Where are Mark and Colin, anyway?’ Elizabeth said, trying to defuse the situation. ‘What’s keeping them?’

‘Oh, they wanted to pick up things from the supermarket,’ Georgiana said. ‘Crates of beer, pounds of meat – apparently, Colin packed a barbecue set or something, and they want to test-run it tonight.’

‘Disgusting,’ Caroline, who had just come out of the house, groaned. ‘As men are wont to be.’

‘Are you feeling a little better?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘Georgiana said the ferry didn’t agree with you.’

‘No, I’m feeling rotten,’ Caroline said.

Elizabeth noticed that she was still rather green in the face.

‘Can I make you a tea or anything?’ she said. ‘Fitz, get a bottle of water for Caroline.’

‘Actually, I just want to lie down,’ Caroline said. ‘I tried to find my room, but there seem to be kids everywhere. Where do I sleep?’

‘Eh, you see, Caroline,’ Elizabeth began. ‘Actually -’

Random Information: Georgiana is studying German literature. She loves quoting Goethe, especially when nobody understands her. She’s also an avid e-mailer and is convinced that the internet is going to be the Next Big Thing, even though her brother is a sceptic. Georgiana also prides herself in having a very sophisticated taste in music. Nevertheless, she owns several Spice Girls singles. She’s currently wondering how she can go to see the movie when it comes out without anybody finding out.
The kids soon woke up from their naps and, Mark and Colin having arrived, everybody but Caroline made their way down to the little harbour, where boats and seagulls and the like could be observed. Charles, of course, insisted on treating the children to chips from the fish shop (and in the process, bought himself some as well) but Jane put her foot down at the proposed ice-cream, saying that the children should get acclimatised to their new surroundings first. There was much crying at this decision, but the children’s mood was soon lifted again when a day-cruise boat returned from an excursion and there were disembarking passengers to be observed. Jane and Elizabeth, handling the pram and the stroller, hung back a little from the group, for Elizabeth wanted to relay to Jane everything that Georgiana had told her.

‘Can you believe we never even heard about it?’ Elizabeth said. ‘I mean, it was our wedding, after all. You’d think people would tell you something like that.’

‘You know, now I think about it,’ Jane said, ‘I believe Louisa mentioned something like that once, but at the time, I thought she was just teasing Caroline.’

‘Well, now we know better,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I still can’t quite believe it – Caroline and Colin. I’d never have thought of it!’

‘They would be quite sweet together, though,’ Jane admitted. ‘I mean, with all that teasing and witty remarks they always exchange -’

‘Jane!’ Elizabeth exclaimed. ‘They are close to killing each other, there is nothing sweet about that.’

‘Hm,’ Jane said. ‘Do you think so?’

‘Not, of course,’ Elizabeth continued, ‘that I can blame Caroline. That is an awful way of getting – well, not exactly dumped, but at least thoroughly dismissed.’

‘I wonder why he did that,’ Jane said. ‘I mean, he must have had some reason, don’t you think? He wouldn’t just do that without a reason, wouldn’t he?’

‘Well,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Georgiana says she once brought the topic up with him, and he mumbled something along the lines of how he got cold feet and couldn’t go through with it, and then wouldn’t talk about it anymore.’

‘Oh, the poor thing!’ Jane exclaimed. ‘He must be in love with her, don’t you see?’

‘Jane!’ Elizabeth said. ‘He was a complete jerk, don’t you see that? I know, normally he doesn’t behave like that, but in this instance, he was a jerk. A very drunk jerk, I’ll grant you that, who probably wasn’t thinking with his brain, which is why I won’t be too harsh with him, but a jerk nonetheless.’

The bungalow had a back garden that, apart from the paved patio where Colin and Mark were installing the barbecue, consisted mainly of parched grass, a few weeds and a couple of miserable-looking shrubs. A hedge of wild roses separated it from the neighbouring yards. Elizabeth stood on the patio and observed the children. Far from being tired from their excursion to the harbour, they were now playing some sort of game that involved several croquet balls, one of the sand-buckets, and Henry, who was made to lie behind one of the shrubs. Anne, her face screwed up in
concentration, would distribute the croquet balls on the lawn, and then hide with Henry behind his shrub, whilst James, Jenna and Andy, playing father, mother and child, collected the balls in the bucket. Elizabeth watched on as Jenna, with a solemn expression in her face, handed Anne the bucket again whilst James led Henry behind his shrub once more.

‘Elizabeth, do we have that cooling stuff?’

Elizabeth turned around. Her husband had stepped out onto the patio. She raised an eyebrow in question and he turned around and showed her his neck, which was bright red.

‘It’s in the blue bag next to my bed,’ she said. ‘Didn’t you use sun-tan lotion?’

‘I did,’ Fitzwilliam said, ‘but I forgot the neck, because you told me to make sure I had covered James’ ears. And it’s not in the blue bag, I looked.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Elizabeth said and sighed. ‘Colin, could you have an eye on the kids for a moment?’

‘No problem,’ Colin said. ‘No, no, wait, I think that thing goes into that slot -’

The cooling lotion was of course in the blue bag, where Elizabeth knew she had packed it, and after rubbing it into her husband’s neck and giving him a quick kiss just to make the pain better, she quickly checked on her youngest, who was still sleeping the sleep of the just, and made her way outside again. Blinking, she adjusted her eyes to the still bright light of the sun.

‘Everything alright here?’ she asked Mark and Colin, who were now fiddling the grille in position.

‘All quiet,’ Colin said. ‘Did you, eh, happen to see Caroline?’

‘She’s still lying down,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Georgiana was bringing her a tea just now.’

‘Look here,’ Colin said. ‘I don’t know what Caroline’s said, but -’

Three short figures, a toddler in tow, came running towards Elizabeth and hung themselves on her arms.

‘Mama! Mama! Aunt Lizzy!’

Elizabeth crouched down and looked into the grass-smeared faces of her children, niece and nephew.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Henry!’ Anne said quickly, before the others could interrupt her. ‘Henry is gone.’

‘What do you mean, gone?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘You made him hide behind that shrub, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but now he’s gone!’ James cried. ‘We can’t find him!’

‘Did you look behind the other shrubs?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Yes!’ James cried, frustrated at his mother’s lack of understanding.

‘Colin, did Henry go inside?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Who’s Henry?’ Colin asked. ‘Another kid?’

‘The dog,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Brown, hairy, about this size?’
‘Oh, you mean the smelly one,’ Colin said. ‘No idea.’

‘I don’t think he went past us, Lizzy,’ Mark said, ‘but I’m not completely sure.’

‘He’s go-o-one,’ James wailed.

‘He’s not gone,’ Elizabeth said firmly. ‘He’ll still be somewhere in the garden. We’ll look for him.’

She picked up Andy and hoisted him onto her hip. The other children following, she stepped onto the grass. Anne and Jenna began peeking into the shrubs with great care, calling Henry’s name, whilst James clung to his mother’s hand.

‘He’s not he-e-ere,’ James cried.

‘He will be here somewhere,’ Elizabeth said, although privately, she had to agree with her son’s assessment of the situation.

‘Maybe he went down a hole?’ Anne suggested.

‘Or a tunnel?’ Jenna added.

‘Or maybe,’ Elizabeth said, ‘he slipped past those two inattentive creatures with their barbecue. Come, let’s see if perhaps he got inside the house.’

Anne and Jenna running ahead, they went inside. Jane and Charles were standing in the kitchen and preparing salad for their dinner.

‘Mummy, guess what?’ Jenna said and stood next to her mother. ‘Henry’s gone and we’re going to rescue him!’

‘Henry what?’ Jane asked. ‘Here, let me take that young man from you.’

‘Henry disappeared from the backyard,’ Elizabeth, handing over Andy, explained. ‘Did you see him in here?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Charles said. ‘And I’m sure he’d have begged for a carrot if he’d seen us here.’

‘Well, he must be somewhere,’ Elizabeth said. ‘At least we know he can’t have got in the street, thanks to that absurd mural construction.’

‘Is that the doorbell?’ Jane said and frowned. ‘I didn’t know this place had a doorbell, let alone one that played ‘Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot’.’

‘Probably someone complaining about the smoke the boys are creating,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I’ll go see who it is.’

She answered the door to a woman about her age, accompanied by two small children and a brown lab.

‘Hi,’ the woman said. ‘We found this one in our backyard – would he be yours?’

The two children, a boy slightly older than James and Anne and a girl slightly younger, stood at each side of Henry, who, wagging his tail furiously, seemed mightily pleased with himself.
‘Oh, thank goodness,’ Elizabeth said and grabbed Henry’s collar. ‘Thanks for bringing him over.’

‘Oh, no problem,’ the woman said. ‘He’s such a sweetie, my kids are in love with him already.’

She crouched down.

‘Now, Robbie, Katherine, say goodbye to Mr Dog, this is where he lives.’

The boy immediately flung his arms around Henry’s neck, and Katherine solemnly pulled her thumb out of her mouth and patted Henry’s head. Henry, obviously enjoying the attention, sat down and let himself be showered with affection.

‘Henry!’ James cried and came running towards the lab.

He flung himself around his neck as well.

‘You’re back!’

‘His name is Mr Dog,’ Katherine said.

‘Yes, sweetie,’ her mother said, ‘but you see, Henry is his first name.’

She gave Elizabeth an apologetic grin.

‘Sorry for holding you up, but they’ve wanted a dog for ages,’ she said.

‘Oh, no worries,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I’m really grateful you brought him back here, after all.’

‘He’s our dog,’ Anne, who had now come to the scene, said possessively. ‘His name is Henry Darcy.’

‘Now, come, Robbie, Katherine,’ the woman said. ‘Let’s go back, daddy wants to find a place where we can have dinner.’

‘Actually,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I mean, seeing how your kids love Henry and all – why don’t you join us? We’re having a barbecue, and really, there’s more than enough for everyone to eat. My sister is making potato mash for the children, too.’

‘I wouldn’t want to be intruding -’ the woman said.

She broke off and observed how her children were completely fascinated by the salivating dog.

‘No, not at all,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I’m sure the children would love to play too. I’m Lizzy, by the way.’

‘Emma,’ the woman said and held out her hand. ‘We’re next door.’

Caroline, wrapped in one of Georgiana’s cardies, sat on a chair in a corner of the patio and looked grimly at Colin, who was turning sausages and burgers on the barbecue.

‘Dear Lord, what is that?’ she asked with a wrinkled nose. ‘It smells disgusting. Did you buy it from a knacker?’

‘It’s baby seal,’ Colin said. ‘It’s all the rage now with the New York housewives. Shouldn’t you know that, seeing as you cater to frustrated women all over the country?’
‘Baby seal, eh?’ Caroline said. ‘I suppose being all macho, you clubbed it to death personally? Well, lucky for you it was a baby, otherwise it probably would’ve clubbed you, and what a shame that would have been.’

She turned and saw James, his eyes frozen in shock, coming out on the patio. He was holding a large, stuffed toy that, Caroline now realised, was a baby seal.

‘Is that really baby seal?’ he asked, lip trembling.

‘Oh, sweetheart, no, it isn’t,’ Caroline said.

In spite of the lingering sickness in her stomach, she quickly got out of her chair and crouched on the ground in front of him.

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘It’s sausage. Your uncle was only trying to make a very stupid joke, weren’t you, Colin?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Colin said quickly. ‘A very stupid joke, mate, nothing more.’

‘It’s not baby seal?’

‘No, no, sweetheart,’ Caroline reassured him.

She led him over to the barbecue.

‘See? Just good old bangers,’ she said. ‘Uh, I think I have to sit down again. Do you think you could ask your aunt to make me another tea?’

James nodded and quickly made his way back into the house.

‘Are you still not well?’ Colin asked. ‘You don’t look too good, to tell you the truth.’

‘Don’t worry, seasickness is not contagious,’ Caroline snapped, ‘unlike, I suppose, many other things that women around you probably are bound to catch.’

‘What’s up with your sister?’ Emma asked Elizabeth later. She was helping Elizabeth scooping vanilla and chocolate pudding for the children’s desserts.

‘Jane?’ Elizabeth asked frowning. ‘No chocolate in that one, Anne doesn’t like it. What’s the matter with Jane?’

‘Not Jane,’ Emma said. ‘No chocolate? How odd. No, I meant your other sister, Caroline.’

‘Oh, she’s not my sister,’ Elizabeth said. ‘She’s Jane’s sister-in-law. Actually, Anne’s never liked chocolate much. I think Caroline’s just sea-sick.’

‘Poor girl,’ Emma said. ‘So Caroline’s not your sister – that means Colin is your brother, right? Shall I give Anne an extra scoop of the vanilla?’

‘Yes, do,’ Elizabeth said. ‘No, Colin’s my husband’s cousin – what makes you think he’s my brother?’

‘I just thought -’ Emma said, then paused. ‘Oh! They aren’t married?’

‘Who?’ Elizabeth asked, confused.
‘Colin and Caroline,’ Emma said. ‘I just assumed -’

‘Colin and Caroline?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘God, no! I’ve got some ice-waffles, do you think your children would like some? What made you think they were married?’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ Emma said. ‘I don’t know, they just – there seemed to be something between them.’

‘No waffles for Andy, please, he’ll just spit them out,’ Jane said. She had entered the kitchen without either of them noticing.

‘I know,’ Elizabeth said. ‘See, his bowl is ready here.’

‘Great, thanks,’ Jane said. ‘I really don’t fancy cleaning him up again. Shall I take some more bowls?’

She picked up another bowl and made to leave again.

‘Oh, Jane,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Emma here is of the same opinion as you where Colin and Caroline are concerned.’

‘See, I told you, Lizzy,’ Jane said. ‘They’d be great together.’

‘Now, I didn’t say that,’ Emma said. ‘I just said that there seems to be something between them.’

‘Well, they do have a past,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Sort of.’

‘Who has?’ Georgiana asked. ‘Lizzy, is some of that vanilla stuff left or is that just for the kids?’

‘Must you all sneak up on me?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘Help yourself, your boyfriend bought the stuff in abundance.’

‘He knows what’s good for him,’ Georgiana said. ‘Who’s got sort of a past?’

‘Colin and Caroline of course,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Didn’t you tell me all the sordid details yourself?’

‘I would so love to hear them,’ Emma said. ‘But I’ll be a good girl and not pry.’

She sighed.

‘Ah, it’s more a tale of missed opportunities and unclear intentions,’ Georgiana said. ‘Plus, a lot of wine. I tell you, it was ugly.’

‘Ah, shame,’ Emma said. ‘Then they probably won’t want to renew whatever it was now.’

‘Hm, I wouldn’t say that,’ Georgiana said. ‘Now I think about it … it would be an idea.’

‘You’re all three crazy,’ Elizabeth said. ‘But please, do keep on plotting. Don’t mind me, I’ll go feed the hungry herd all on my own.’

Random Information: Emma actually is American. She crossed the Great Ocean when she was ten and her father was offered a post as a university lecturer this side of the Atlantic. Emma really wishes they would bring back Doctor Who on telly; for her, it was one of the best things about growing up in England. Apart from George, of course. He was the one who took her to see Star Wars seven times her first summer in England when she was feeling so terribly home-sick. She has heard that they’re going to make a prequel for Star Wars, but she’s not convinced it’ll work.
‘Elizabeth,’ Fitzwilliam whispered, much later, when the house had gone quiet and his wife was half asleep next to him.

‘Hmm?’

‘How exactly did you meet this Emma?’

‘I told you,’ Elizabeth muttered. ‘She came here with Henry. He’d gotten into their garden.’

‘So you didn’t know her before?’

Elizabeth groaned, then turned around so she was facing her husband.

‘No, I just met her today. Must we discuss this now?’

‘No, no, of course not,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘Sorry.’

Elizabeth groaned again and turned back on her other side.

‘Only -’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, isn’t that a bit – you know – risky? I mean, with the children and all? If we don’t properly know them?’

Elizabeth rolled over once more.

‘Sweetheart,’ she said, placing a hand on her husband’s cheek. ‘You liked George well enough when you talked to him, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, pleasant guy. Nice to talk to. I helped him unload his car earlier.’

‘And Emma did strike you as a sensible woman, didn’t she?’

‘Yes, quite,’ her husband admitted. ‘The accent’s a bit grating, but otherwise -’

‘And the children were sweet and well-behaved, weren’t they, and got along well with our brood, wouldn’t you say so?’

Fitzwilliam had to admit that she was right once more.

‘So there,’ Elizabeth said. ‘There’s nothing suspicious about them, and let’s face it, the children would have met and played in the street anyway. Better that we met the parents beforehand, wouldn’t you think so?’

‘You’re right,’ Fitzwilliam admitted.

‘I always am, sweetheart,’ Elizabeth muttered. ‘And anyway, Jane and I already arranged with Emma that we’d meet them on the beach tomorrow.’

‘So you like this Emma woman then?’ Fitzwilliam asked.
‘I do, yes,’ Elizabeth said. ‘And Jane and Georgiana hit it off very well with her too. Now they’ve got it in their heads that.’

She paused and Fitzwilliam felt her shifting under the covers.

‘What?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Stupid idea of them really, wanting to play matchmaker for Caroline when I’m sure Caroline.’

‘Must we talk about Caroline now?’ Fitzwilliam asked.

‘No, sorry,’ Elizabeth said and moved a little closer to him.

Her husband placed an arm around her shoulders and brushed a kiss on her nose.

‘I’m sorry I woke you just so I could fret,’ he muttered in her hair. ‘Go back to sleep.’

‘Actually, sweetheart,’ Elizabeth said, ‘I’m rather awake now.’

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‘I’m cycling into the town today,’ Caroline announced the next morning over breakfast. ‘Well, town may be a bit much, but it seems that there is sort of an urban area in the centre of the island.’

‘You do know that there won’t be no Harrods there, do you?’ Colin asked. ‘Probably not even an M&S, not that you would consider that worthy of your notice.’

‘In the interest of furthering your knowledge about normal women,’ Caroline said, ‘M&S do a line of very sturdy and affordable knickers – but since there is, you know, actual fabric on them, I doubt you’ll ever have seen them in action.’

‘Funny, I had no idea that sturdiness was what you looked for in your knickers,’ Colin said. ‘I wonder why it is that particular quality that’

‘Pas devant des enfants,’ Elizabeth hissed, then, turning to Caroline, asked, ‘why do you need to go to town? Is there anything you need?’

‘Earplugs,’ Caroline said, giving Anne and Jenna a pointed glance.

Both girls giggled.

‘And I want to find out if there is an internet café there,’ Caroline added. ‘Or any place that has an internet connection, really.’

‘Funny, I’d never thought you to be the type that hangs out in front of screens all the time,’ Colin said. ‘Isn’t that very bad for the complexion?’

‘You’d know,’ Caroline said. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you, is it true that there are women who, for a certain amount of money, will engage in all sorts of sordid behaviour while on-line? I figured, if anyone would know, it would be you.’

‘I could now make a remark about you looking for a new line of work,’ Colin said, ‘but you must know that if you offer too easy a bait, I will not bite.’

‘No, really?’ Caroline retorted. ‘I’d always had the impression that the easier the bait, the better, was your personal motto.’
‘Ah, now, in the light of recent implications made about your undergarments –’

‘Je vous ai dit, pas devant des enfants,’ Elizabeth hissed. ‘Go outside if you need to give in to any impulses; otherwise, cut that sort of remark.’

‘Why do you need an internet café?’ Jane asked quickly.

‘If I find one,’ Caroline said, ‘I can send an email to my office that I’ll be able to make the deadlines for my column.’

Colin opened his mouth, but Elizabeth jumped in before he could say anything.

‘What do they do if you can’t make it?’

‘Oh, I’ve prepared some in advance,’ Caroline said, ‘but I’ve been asked to do some with a vacation-angle – with a juicy bonus on the horizon if I can make it happen.’

Charles sat on the sofa in the living-room and was generously rubbing sun-tan lotion onto his feet. Fitzwilliam filled Henry’s water bowl in the kitchen and then sunk into an armchair opposite Charles.

‘Where were you?’ Charles asked. ‘You wanted to take a quick walk before breakfast and you were gone for almost an hour.’

‘I lost my way, alright?’ Fitzwilliam mumbled. ‘Stupid signposts.’

‘You lost your -’

Charles caught the meaning of Fitzwilliam’s furrowed brows.

‘Alright, I won’t mention it again.’

‘Where is everybody? Did I miss anything?’ Fitzwilliam asked. ‘Where’s Elizabeth?’

‘She’s is getting your children ready for the beach,’ Charles said. ‘She’s none too happy about your absence, if I may add. Jane’s packing her beach-bag, or whatever it is. Georgiana and Mark have already left, I think for the beach. Colin’s gone, no idea where. Caroline’s left on a bike for the town centre.’

‘So, it’s only you, me, Jane and Elizabeth going to the beach?’

‘The kids, too, in case you have forgotten,’ Charles said. ‘And apparently Emma and George from next door are coming too. Awful clever fellow, that George. I think he writes real books. Don’t tell him about Dino the Rhino.’

‘I won’t,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘Is my wife very angry?’

‘Uh-huh,’ Charles said. ‘But I’m not sure if she’s more angry with you, or Colin and Caroline. They, err, misbehaved at breakfast. Lizzy had to intervene. She, uh, spoke French.’

Fitzwilliam winced.

‘That bad?’

‘Apparently so,’ Charles said. ‘She seemed to think the conversation was not fit for the children’s ears. I didn’t catch all of it, but apparently they were discussing Caroline’s underwear –’
'I say, Charles, have you ever talked to Caroline about -'

He was interrupted by the voice of his wife calling from the bedroom.

'Is that you, Fitz? Have you finally found the time to crawl back to your wife and children?'

Fitzwilliam winced again.

'I'd better go and apologise,' he said.

Georgiana was pretty sure that the giant yellow umbrella she could espy in the distance was hers; which would mean that at least part of her family was to be found there. Deciding to take a break from surfing, she informed her boyfriend, secured her board and made her way over to the giant umbrella, where, sure enough, she found Elizabeth, Jane and Emma, together with their youngest children, the women settled on towels and collapsible beach chairs, the kids sleeping in the tent behind them. Henry was tied to the pole of the umbrella and snoring loudly.

'- really nasty cramps,' Emma was saying. 'Much worse than before, actually. I always thought that nursing would prevent it, but -'

'Oh, no, it was the same for me,' Jane interjected. 'Back to normal after six months, even though I was breastfeeding, and -'

'After the twins, I couldn’t get back to a normal rhythm for ages,’ Elizabeth said, ‘it was really annoying, especially seeing as we actually wanted more, and there was no predicting when -'

'It was just the opposite for me after I had had Robbie,’ Emma said. ‘I thought I was safe, because I was still nursing and Robbie wasn’t a year yet, and the next thing I knew, the doctor was congratulating me. George was beside himself with joy of course -'

'I bet you could’ve strangled him,’ Jane said.

'Oh, I was that close to it,’ Emma said. ‘I mean, I was just at that stage where I was beginning to feel normal again -'

'Men,’ Elizabeth snorted. ‘Fitzwilliam thought that as soon as I was out of the hospital, I’d be the same as I was nine months before -'

'If you are discussing what I think you are discussing,’ Georgiana said, ‘I don’t want to hear anything of it; especially not if my brother is involved.’

'Your brother is no different from other men,’ Elizabeth said.

'And on the whole, men are, well -’ Jane apparently did not quite know how to finish that and in the end, settled for, ‘different from women.’

'Funny, I had noticed that,’ Georgiana said. ‘Is it really true that the difference in equipment has something to do with babies? Some of the girls at school said so, but it sounded too weird for me to believe it.’

She reached for one of the spare towels and unfolded another chair.

’No, it’s because men are from Mars and women are from Venus,’ Emma said. ‘Is my son still sleeping?’
Jane peeked into the tent.

‘Like a log,’ she said. ‘All three of them. Quite cute, actually.’

‘Where’s the rest?’ Georgiana asked.

‘Flying kites with their dads,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Or so they said. Probably eating junk-food by now. I just hope Fitz takes care James gets the same food as yesterday. New things always make him uneasy.’

‘Speaking of men and women,’ Emma said, ‘any news about our two lovebirds?’

Elizabeth groaned.

‘Don’t ask,’ she said. ‘They were at each other’s throats all over the breakfast table this morning.’

‘Why, what happened?’ Emma asked.

Jane giggled.

‘They began discussing Caroline’s knickers,’ Georgiana said.

‘Okay, now I have to be a bad girl and pry,’ Emma said. ‘They did what?’

Georgiana summarised the discussion for her.

Elizabeth snorted again.

‘I’m certainly not opposed to them having a little fling,’ she said. ‘I mean, there’s nothing wrong with having a bit of fun. But that is just ridiculous. They’re behaving like teenagers. In front of my impressionable children, no less. And I could tell James was really flustered because he couldn’t tell what was going on. I mean, Anne, she takes every new development in stride, but my son thrives on order.’

Emma giggled.

‘Coming back to Colin and Caroline, however, I find that I must retract my statements from last night,’ Elizabeth continued. ‘There is something other at work than pure jerkism.’

‘True love,’ Georgiana said and sighed exaggeratedly.

‘True love was not what I had in mind,’ Elizabeth said. ‘It was more along the lines of – now how do I express this in a way that does not shock my innocent young sister-in-law?’

‘You’re too cynical,’ Jane said. ‘What if they really are in love – or at least if there is a possibility that they could fall in love?’

‘And they’ll never find out if they don’t admit it to themselves,’ Emma said. ‘Now that would be sad.’

‘Maybe they’d just need to talk about it,’ Jane suggested. ‘If they were faced with what our impression is.’

‘Ha!’ Elizabeth said. ‘Good luck with telling Caroline you think she’s secretly in love with Colin, and by the way, you’ve told him just that. Do I get your tape of Much Ado after your unfortunate demise?’
Georgiana jumped up.

‘That’s it!’ she said.

‘That’s what?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘What did I say? I was only joking around!’

‘No, we’re going to give them the full Benedick-and-Beatrice treatment,’ Georgiana said.

‘That is -’ Elizabeth began.

‘- unusual,’ Emma finished for her.

‘Yes, but it works,’ Georgiana said. ‘I mean, look at Shakespeare. He knew what he was writing about. And if they choose not to act on it, they can simply ignore what they know about the other.’

‘I’m game,’ Emma said. ‘It sounds like fun.’

‘I don’t know,’ Jane said. ‘I mean, if they really only need a nudge – I wouldn’t want to be in their way -’

‘Nudge is a very interesting way of saying what they need,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Are you game or not?’ Emma asked.

‘I’ll give you one try,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Just one. If that doesn’t work, we’ll leave it be. I’m not going to do any further unsolicited meddling with their lives.’

She did not add that Fitzwilliam’s unsolicited meddling had nearly cost Jane Charles, because she had never shared that particular secret with either Jane or Georgiana.

‘I can live with that,’ Georgiana said. ‘Because it will work, I know.’

‘So all we need to do is talk about how Colin loves Caroline while she’s listening in?’ Jane said. ‘That doesn’t sound too bad.’

‘Yes, but what about Colin?’ Emma said. ‘Do you think Fitzwilliam could drop a hint to him -’

‘No, no,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Fitz would never tell Colin anything like that -’

‘Anything like what?’

Elizabeth turned around and her face flushed bright red.

‘Fitz!’ she said. ‘I didn’t hear you coming. Where are the kids?’

‘Just behind me,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘Charles insisted on buying them ice-cream. They’re bringing some for Andy and William too.’

‘Oh, no, I told him not to -’ Jane said.

She got up and walked to meet Charles. Elizabeth too rose.

‘What is that?’ Fitzwilliam asked and gestured at her body.

‘We call it a swim-suit,’ Elizabeth said.
‘Yes, but didn’t you use to have one that was – I don’t know – smaller?’

‘Are you saying I look fat?’

‘No – just – it’s a different cut than the other one, isn’t it?’

‘The other one, Fitzwilliam, was a bikini that I wore on our honeymoon,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I don’t know if you noticed, but I gave birth to three little elephants, the last one not even a year ago. I’m not going to wear that bikini again any time in the near future.’

‘This one looks very pretty on you,’ Fitzwilliam said hastily.

Georgiana lazily punched her brother in the calf, the only bit of his body she could reach from her beach-chair.

Random Information: George has always been Emma’s Boy Next Door; unfortunately, she didn’t always realise that. He fell in love with her when she crashed her first car into his when he was visiting his parents. George was in Berlin when the Berlin wall fell and has a piece of it to prove it. Largely influenced by his long-time mentor, Emma’s dad, George is now a university lecturer as well.
They made their way back from the beach in the late afternoon. Fitzwilliam felt like a particularly packed mule, with everything his wife asked him to carry, but he knew better than to complain. He was happy making up the rear of the trail; his wife, carrying their younger son, was walking at his side. He noticed that they were slower than the rest of their group, but he did not mind very much.

‘Elizabeth,’ he finally said. ‘Listen, I’m sorry about what I said earlier, I didn’t - ’

‘Do you really think I’m fat?’ she cried.

‘Of course not!’ he said emphatically.

‘I know I don’t look like what I did when we met,’ Elizabeth said. ‘It’s not that I haven’t noticed that - ’

‘You are the most beautiful woman in the world,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘A couple of stretch marks won’t change that, and as for certain other changes – well, I’m certainly not averse to those either, quite the contrary in fact - ’

He was panting only very slightly from the weight of the bags he was carrying.

‘Really?’

‘Of course,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘And if either of us had any hand free, I’d be giving you ample proof of that right now.’

‘Oh, Fitz,’ Elizabeth said.

‘What is the matter with you?’ Fitzwilliam asked. ‘Is it anything I said – did I somehow make you feel – you know how I always say the wrong things - ’

‘It’s nothing,’ Elizabeth said and she sounded more like herself, he was happy to note. ‘I was just being silly.’

‘Tell me, then.’

‘Oh, really, it’s stupid,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Only - ’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s just that there’s – I don’t know if you noticed, but somehow,’ she said. ‘Somehow, it seems that before very long, Colin and Caroline will either murder each other or end up in bed together and - ’

‘That bothers you?’ Fitzwilliam asked.

‘Not as such, no,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I mean, they’re more than welcome to enjoy a little fling. I certainly don’t want to moralise here or anything. I mean, it’s not as if it’s a bad thing to, you know, gain carnal knowledge of each other – I don’t know if it’s just that for them, or if there’s
something more – which the girls seem to think – anyway, either thing would be fine, I suppose, as long as they’re both on the same page about this, which I’m not sure they are, but it’s not really my business anyway, I mean, they’re old enough to sort that out themselves -'

‘You’re blathering,’ Fitzwilliam pointed out.

‘Sorry,’ Elizabeth said. ‘It’s just that I was reminded of how we were when we first met and began going out and I was – I guess I simply was wondering if you’d still look at me like that, if you saw me like I’m now, instead of what I was. I mean, if your past self would see the present me -’

‘My past self,’ Fitzwilliam said, ‘was a complete jerk. I thought we’d settled that.’

Elizabeth gave a tiny laugh.

‘My present self, however,’ Fitzwilliam said, ‘loves you to distraction and considers you the most wonderful woman he’s ever had the fortune to lay eyes on.’

‘You’re not exactly ugly to behold either, you know,’ Elizabeth said.

Fitzwilliam was glad that she sounded like herself again.

‘Thank you for bearing with me even when I’m silly,’ Elizabeth said.

‘You have borne so much more with me,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘A little silliness is nothing in comparison.’

It took time to thoroughly de-sand the children, but eventually, they were all washed and re-dressed, diapers had been changed and the babies had been fed. It had been settled the night before that Emma and her family would come over for dinner once again, seeing as the children had not yet had enough of each other. When the bell rang, Elizabeth opened the door to find only Emma and George standing there.

‘The children decided to take the way through the hedge,’ Emma explained. ‘Apparently, they found the hole Henry got through.’

George shrugged his shoulders.

‘We brought this,’ he said and held up the two six-packs of beer he had been carrying.

‘Splügen,’ Elizabeth read. ‘Is it any good?’

‘No idea,’ Emma said. ‘We bought it for the laughs.’

‘I don’t think I’m getting the joke,’ Elizabeth muttered. ‘Come in, anyway. The others are already sitting on the patio.’

Georgiana took one look at the bottle of Splügen, giggled and handed it to Mark, who gave a loud ‘ha!’ and handed the bottle to Colin, who held the bottle up.

‘Splügen!’ he exclaimed. ‘Queen of beers!’

‘Is it?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘With such a name,’ Colin said. ‘How can it be anything but fabulous?’
‘I don’t think I’m getting this joke,’ Caroline said.

‘Me neither,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Care to enlighten us?’

‘It’s an Italian beer,’ Georgiana said. ‘Made to look like it’s traditional, and called Splügen.’

‘So?’

‘That word makes no sense whatsoever,’ Georgiana said. ‘It’s exactly what an American would think a German word looks like – consonant cluster, umlaut – but it has no meaning at all.’

Emma gave her a sharp look.

‘I’m sorry,’ Georgiana hastily added. ‘I didn’t mean to imply –’

‘Nah, it’s fine,’ Emma said. ‘I’m the one who found it after all. My German may be a bit rusty, but I think my father taught me enough to know that Splügen is not a word.’

Elizabeth frowned.

‘Where is your father, by the way?’ she asked. ‘Didn’t you say he was going to join you?’

‘Was going to, yes,’ Emma said. ‘I knew I shouldn’t have suggested that he follow us by train, and I most certainly shouldn’t have accepted this when he gave it to me.’

She pulled a black phone out of her pocket.

‘Sleek,’ Mark said. ‘It’s the 8110, right?’

‘It’s a pain in the you-know-what, that’s what it is,’ Emma said. ‘I accepted it because he talked of emergencies with the children, but what he does is phone me thrice a day to delay his plans. Now he talks about taking the train tomorrow. We’ll see.’

‘He doesn’t particularly like travelling,’ George explained.

‘Then he should’ve said he didn’t want to come with us from the start,’ Emma said. ‘Instead of making me dance like a puppet here.’

‘I like the slide,’ Georgiana said. ‘I think I’ll get one too when we’re back. I’ve wanted a mobile phone for quite a while now.’

‘Complete nuisance,’ Fitzwilliam said.

‘I got him one so he could phone me when he ran late, but he always forgets it in his office,’ Elizabeth said. ‘What good is it there?’

‘I’ll do the dishes,’ Caroline said after dinner. ‘No, really, it’s fine. You stay here.’

She went inside only to notice that Colin was following her.

‘What do you want?’ she asked. ‘Do you even know how to use a tea towel?’

‘Actually, I was going to finish my post-card,’ Colin said and pointed at his writing utensils on the kitchen table.

‘Someone in a shabby Vegas motel eagerly waiting for a sign of life?’ Caroline asked. ‘How
‘Come you’re actually honouring her request this time?’

‘It’s to my cousin,’ Colin said, unmoved. ‘Surely you’re not insinuating I ever left her in a shabby motel.’

‘No, not *her,*’ Caroline muttered under her breath.

She generously doused the dishes in the sink with soap before pouring hot water over them. Soon, everything was covered in a thick, frothy layer of bubbles and Caroline reached for a sponge and began cleaning the dishes. Colin was watching her from the table.

‘You’ve used too much soap,’ he said.

Caroline ignored him.

‘Careful that you don’t ruin your manicure,’ said Colin.

Caroline did not react to this either, but scrubbed the plates with more vigour than was necessary. Colin got up from his chair and moved behind her, observing her hands act amidst the bubbles. Caroline shot him a nasty glance over her shoulder. Colin reached for one of her curls and tugged at it. Caroline swatted his hand with her sponge.

‘I have never seen it curly,’ Colin said defensively. ‘I just wanted to see if it’d bounce. How come it’s curly?’

‘That’s its usual state,’ Caroline said shortly, not looking at him.

‘No, it’s not,’ Colin said. ‘Normally it’s sort of flat and sleek-like and -’

‘That’s called straightening,’ Caroline said. ‘I wonder that you’ve never seen any of your lady friends do it – but I forget, they’re not the sort that stays for breakfast and grooming sessions.’

‘Is not that getting old,’ Colin asked, ‘all this implying that all I do is frolic with various trollops?’

‘Frolic with trollops?’ Caroline repeated. ‘I always knew you had very strange ideas about the interactions between men and women – I only didn’t know that you got them from reading Harlequin Regency romances.’

‘Well, you’d know,’ Colin said. ‘Isn’t that sort of the staple reading fodder for frustrated middle-aged women?’

‘I may be middle-aged, I grant you that,’ Caroline said. ‘But who says that I’m frustrated? That I don’t have revolving doors installed in my bedroom does not mean that I’ve lived the life of a nun.’

‘Now I’m curious,’ Colin said.

‘A lady never tells,’ Caroline said. ‘Of course, you wouldn’t know, not having had much contact with women who actually deserve that epithet – oh, I forget. Your conversation partners do not regularly use words with more than two syllables. I am sorry for inconveniencing you.’

‘Now that’s a blow for poor Fitz,’ Colin said. ‘Or does he not count as a conversation partner because he’s not a fellow novelist – that is what you call someone who analyses the tragedies of home-made perms gone wrong, right?’

Caroline snorted.
‘Honestly, Colin, you know that’s not -’

‘No, wait, I can prove it,’ Colin said.

He reached for his wallet and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

‘I knew I had it somewhere,’ he said and began reading out loud.

‘Ladies, we all know this trouble – faced with the alternative of paying ridiculous amounts of money, we decide to do what we know to be a messy job from the beginning, in our own, all too often tiny, bathroom. Then there we are, much later, thoroughly exhausted, a good dozen towels soaked with horribly smelly chemicals, our hands reeking just as much, and the result is just the opposite of what the package promised -’

‘That was ages ago,’ Caroline huffed. ‘I can’t believe you kept that – is that some bizarre twist on nostalgia?’

‘On the contrary,’ Colin said and shoved the piece of paper back into his wallet. ‘It’s a source of never-ending amusement to me. The very idea of Caro’s Style Corner - I mean, I too have always pondered just how to find out what shade of nail polish suits me -’

‘In your case, it’s easy,’ Caroline said. ‘It should reflect your personality, so I’d suggest a sort of murky, greenish brown – no shimmer to it, it should be completely dull -’

On the other side of the opened French doors, unknown to them, Colin and Caroline were watched closely.

‘What are they talking about?’ Emma asked. ‘Is there something I’m not getting?’

‘My sister writes a newspaper column,’ Charles said.

‘About perms?’ Emma asked.

Elizabeh grinned.

‘That’s a part of her past Caroline would like to forget,’ she explained. ‘You know, when I met her – when we both were much younger, I should add – Caroline, freshly out of university and with an idea to change the world, had just been hired by a larger paper to write a weekly column for them. Caroline was beside herself with smugness – at least until she discovered that what she’d eagerly agreed to do was to write for the budding Style & Fashion section of that paper.’

Emma laughed.

‘Poor girl,’ George said sympathetically. ‘Does she still do that?’

‘Goodness, no,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Shortly before Fitz and I got married, Caroline landed herself a much better deal. I’m not sure what the actual contract for her new column is, but her new employer is giving her pretty much free rein with what topics she chooses – these days, they even pay her a bonus if she writes more columns during her holidays.’

‘Am I likely to have read her column?’ Emma asked. ‘What’s the title of it?’

‘Ah, she insisted on it having no title,’ Charles said. ‘It’s just her column, and Caroline Grey signed underneath it.’
George gave a whistle of acknowledgment.

‘He loves her pieces,’ Emma said. ‘Reads them first thing every Sunday morning.’

She patted her husband’s knee.

‘And you never knew, honey,’ she said, ‘that you’ve had dinner with Caroline Grey twice now.’

‘I told Caroline that would happen if she insisted on a pen name and no photo of hers on the column,’ Charles said.

‘Pen name?’ Emma said.

‘Our mother’s maiden name,’ Charles explained. ‘She – err – she didn’t want her real name, uh -’

He looked at Fitzwilliam for help.

‘I’d better walk the dog, he’s getting restless,’ Fitzwilliam said hastily, pointing at a snoring Henry. ‘Will you come with me, Charles?’

‘You should have a word with Colin,’ Fitzwilliam said when they had walked a bit.


‘Your sister,’ Fitzwilliam said.

Charles looked completely non-plussed.

‘Why that?’ he asked.

‘You don’t want her to be hurt, do you?’ Fitzwilliam asked.

‘No, of course not,’ Charles said. ‘But what has that to do with Colin?’

‘They – ah – well, it seems that they – ah – almost had a – you know -’

‘They what?’

‘Well, apparently Colin, ah, left before – ah – well, and Caroline apparently didn’t – ah – take it too well, Georgiana tells me and – ah -’

Charles frowned.

‘And you think I need to talk to Colin about this?’

‘She’s your sister!’ Fitzwilliam said.

‘He’s your cousin,’ Charles countered.

‘Yes, but, ah -’

‘Oh, very well,’ Charles said. ‘I’ll mention it to him if the opportunity comes up, otherwise you’ll never regain the ability of speech.’

Random Information: Everybody thinks Jane is a pre-school teacher, but actually, she teaches
advanced maths. She was on maternity leave, but is excited to be going back to work from next term on. Charles stays home and looks after the kids. He used to teach primary school, but he liked being a stay-at-home dad better. Jane loved being pregnant and having her kids, but she doesn’t see any more in her immediate future. Jane thinks that Sean Connery should still be James Bond, the others do nothing for her.

Chapter End Notes

Splügen really does exist. I drank it in Italy a couple of years ago. The most remarkable thing about it is the name, though.
When they returned from their walk, they found Colin sitting with the others on the patio; Caroline was nowhere to be seen.

‘- and thus, I had not only bought a donkey instead of the olives I wanted,’ George was just saying, ‘apparently I had also offered a spectacular amount of money for the man’s spinster sister.’

Everybody laughed.

‘Yes, that was my honeymoon,’ Emma said. ‘With a newly-wedded husband who insisted he was fluent in Greek.’

‘I did learn Greek at university!’ George protested.

‘It shattered all my illusions,’ Emma said. ‘Until then, I was convinced that George knew everything and could do everything – I mean, I was young and naïve back then.’

She patted her husband’s knee.

‘Yes, and then Emma took up the negotiations with the old farmer,’ George continued for her. ‘They conversed in the most abysmal French I’ve ever heard – for some reason, the man knew a little French.’

‘Yes, and not only did I manage to buy the olives,’ Emma said, ‘he also gave us cheese and olive oil for free.’

‘And thus, sheer stubbornness and a great deal of fluttering of eyelashes won over an attempt to be polite and converse in the native language,’ George said.

‘Oh, Fitz,’ Colin said. ‘There you are again. I wrote a card to Aunt Catherine – do you want to scribble anything underneath?’

‘I can’t say I want to,’ Fitzwilliam said. ‘But I suppose I had better do so.’

‘It’s on my bed,’ Colin said. ‘Stick the stamp on it when you’re done. Oh, and there’s also one for Anne, if you want to add anything to that.’

Fitzwilliam went inside.

‘Where’s Caroline?’ Charles asked.

‘I think she wanted to lie down,’ Jane said. ‘Or she wanted to read? I’m not sure. She said not to take it personally, but she didn’t feel like sitting here with us, didn’t she, Colin?’

‘Hm, what?’ Colin said. ‘I thought she wanted to touch up her manicure or something.’

‘Ah, okay,’ Charles said. ‘Eh, Colin, could I talk to you for a moment?’

‘Sure, what’s up?’ Colin asked.

‘Eh, in private,’ Charles added.

Jane looked at him with confusion, so he mouthed, ‘later.’
‘Okay,’ Colin said, obviously equally confused.

He set down his bottle of Splügen.

‘Shall we go inside?’

They closed the French doors behind them.

‘Well, then, Charlie,’ Colin said. ‘What can I do for you?’

Charles blushed furiously.

‘Eh – this is about Caroline,’ he said.

‘Caroline?’

‘Now, please don’t take this the wrong way,’ Charles said hastily. ‘I, eh, I don’t mean to interfere or anything -’

‘There’s nothing between your sister and me,’ Colin said, emphasising the second word.

‘I know, I know,’ Charles said. ‘It’s just – eh – whatever you do, don’t, you know, hurt her. I mean, I don’t want to play the big brother here or anything, it’s just, eh, she was really crushed the last time and if you don’t feel the same way, I mean, just don’t, eh – you know.’

He blushed furiously and ran his hand through his hair.

‘Uhm, that’s all,’ he said. ‘I guess I’ll go back outside. Coming?’

‘In a minute,’ Colin said. ‘I think I got something stuck under my contact – I’ll just sort it out.’

He rubbed at his eye, more in pretense than anything, until he realised that he had indeed got something stuck under his contact. Angrily, he made his way over to the bathroom only to find the door locked. He could hear the tap running inside and knocked on the door. There was no reaction inside.

‘Oh, come on,’ he groaned. ‘I only need to clean my contact, it won’t take a minute.’

There was still no reaction.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, there’s no reason to be a prude,’ he said. ‘I mean, it’s not as if you had anything I haven’t seen before, is it?’

The door was ripped open from the inside.

‘I cannot fault you there,’ Caroline said, ‘although I don’t see why you feel the need to brag about it all the time.’

Even with just one contact in, he could clearly see that she was wrapped in nothing but a thick yellow towel that ended far above her knees. Her hair clung to her head and neck; it was still wet, he presumed. There was an angry red bruise on her shoulder. Maybe an insect had bitten her, or she had got sunburnt, he could not tell.

‘Sorry, I didn’t know it was -’

‘Who did you expect?’ Caroline snapped.
‘Fitz,’ Colin said.

The scent of something fruity hung in the bathroom air. If pressed, he would say that it was lemon, although there seemed to be something else mixed into it. He wondered if it was her shampoo or her soap.

‘Oh, well, then,’ Caroline said and let him enter the bathroom. ‘But be quick.’

He stumbled after her. The mirror was still fogged. He knew he had placed the solution for his contacts somewhere to the left of it and tried to look for it.

‘You won’t see a thing like this,’ Caroline said and rubbed a bit of the mirror clean for him.

It was grapefruit, he thought, not lemon. She reached for a small jar with white content and began dabbing some of the white stuff at her face. She was standing so close that he could see drops of water running out of her hair and down her back. Her skin was already slightly tanned; thin, paler lines down her shoulders showed where her bikini straps had been.

‘Shouldn’t you be looking in the mirror if you want to get your contact out?’ Caroline asked.

‘I’ve already got it out,’ he said. ‘I need to get it cleaned and back in.’

He held out his hand to show her the contact resting on his finger tip. He could see the bottle of solution now. Forgetting that he was still balancing his contact and concentrating more on the vaccination scar on Caroline’s shoulder than on the solution, he reached for the bottle and promptly sent both it and his contact flying.

‘Don’t move!’ he cried and knelt down to look for the contact.

‘Oh, damn,’ he muttered.

‘What?’ Caroline asked.

‘I’ve already got it out,’ he said. ‘I need to get it cleaned and back in.’

He held out his hand to show her the contact resting on his finger tip. He could see the bottle of solution now. Forgetting that he was still balancing his contact and concentrating more on the vaccination scar on Caroline’s shoulder than on the solution, he reached for the bottle and promptly sent both it and his contact flying.

‘Don’t move!’ he cried and knelt down to look for the contact.

‘Oh, damn,’ he muttered.

‘What?’ Caroline asked.

‘I’ve lost the other one as well.’

‘Wait, I’ll help you,’ Caroline said and knelt down as well.

Her face was inches from his now; it was so close that he could see how her thick eye-lashes curled upwards, how there was a faint trace of freckles across her long, thin nose, how the pout of her wide lips made her look a little like a duck.

‘God, you’re beautiful,’ he panted.

‘Yes, and you’re blind as a bat,’ Caroline said. ‘Besides, idle flattery won’t help you here. You’d better start looking for your stupid contacts.’

Dutifully, he placed his hands on the floor again. He leaned forward and heard the all too familiar sound of a small object breaking.

Jenna and Anne giggled when they sat down at the breakfast table.

‘What’s up with the two of you?’ Georgiana asked.

‘Aunt Caro helped us dress,’ Anne explained.

‘And we had some girly time,’ Jenna said. ‘We painted our nails.’
Proudly, both girls held out their right thumbs, the nails of which were painted a deep, dark red.

‘We did Aunt Caro’s feet too,’ Anne added.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ Caroline said to Elizabeth and Jane. ‘But I thought just one finger couldn’t hurt.’

‘Nah, it’s fine,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Thanks for being such a good sport about sharing the room.’

‘Uncle Colin never does girly time,’ James complained. ‘He snores and he looks like a panda.’

‘A panda?’ Georgiana asked.

‘Ye-es,’ James said, now a bit confused.

He had been quite sure that he knew what a panda was. He placed his fingers around his eyes to show his aunt what he meant.

‘Glasses,’ Elizabeth mouthed.

‘Oh!’ Georgiana said. ‘That kind of panda! What happened to his contacts?’

‘Trampled on them,’ Caroline said. ‘I must say, I haven’t seen the glasses. What do they look like?’

‘You heard it, my dear,’ someone said behind her. ‘Like a giant panda.’

Colin entered the kitchen, wearing, as James had indicated, a pair of thick black horn-rimmed glasses.

Upon seeing him, Caroline giggled.

‘Actually,’ she said, ‘you look like one of those East German politicians.’

‘If I could entertain you, I’m happy to be of service,’ Colin said.

‘That’s all?’ Caroline asked. ‘No shrewd observation about out-dated world views? No reprimands about prejudices about our European neighbours? No defense of your choice of accessory?’

‘I like to surprise you,’ Colin said.

‘Confuse me, rather,’ Caroline said. ‘Uh, my shoulder itches. It appears I forgot to put lotion on it.’

She reached across her chest to scratch her shoulder.

‘I’ve got after-sun lotion, if you want some,’ Colin said.

Caroline let her hand drop and stared at him.

‘No, this is not how it works,’ she said. ‘You’re now supposed to remark that some women will do everything, even risk their health, for a tan.’

‘I think your tan suits you very much,’ Colin said.
‘Did he, uh, s-m-o-k-e something?’ Caroline asked Georgiana. ‘Did he bring any w-e-e-d or stuff?’

‘I can still understand you, you know,’ Colin said. ‘You’ll need to get a more sophisticated code if you want to keep me in the dark.’

‘Now that’s more like it!’ Caroline exclaimed. ‘Are you all going to the beach again today?’

‘Yes,’ Elizabeth said. ‘We’re meeting Emma and her family in half an hour. Do you want to join us?’

‘I’ll come later,’ Caroline said. ‘I’ll cycle into town first; I’m expecting an e-mail and I want to pick up some stuff.’

‘Well, I think we won’t be difficult to find,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Just look for the bright yellow umbrella. What about you, Colin – coming with us?’

‘Eh – Georgiana has offered me her board, so I was thinking about going surfing,’ Colin said. ‘Unless you want me to come to town with you, Caroline?’

‘Oh, dear me, no,’ Caroline said. ‘Please, go surfing, Herr Honecker – if you can, with those glasses.’

Jane filled her bucket with sand and emptied it over the giant heap of sand Elizabeth was trying to mold into a fortified structure. Emma patted down the walls of what was meant to be the moat. Georgiana lay flat on her stomach and scraped sand out of the moat into her bucket.

‘Remind me again why we’re doing this,’ she groaned.

‘Because your brother promised his children they’d have the biggest sandcastle on this beach,’ Elizabeth said.

‘So he’s your husband, you could have stopped them,’ Georgiana said.

‘Stop squabbling,’ Emma ordered. ‘Tell me how our love-birds are doing before the men return with the children.’

Elizabeth shook her head.

‘I have no idea what is up with them,’ she said. ‘Colin behaved very weird this morning.’

‘Yes, almost as if he were courting Caroline,’ Georgiana added.

‘No more Heyer for you,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Or you’ll suggest that Charles should ask Colin about his intentions next.’

‘Uh -’ Jane said and accidentally upended her bucket in the moat.

‘What’s the matter?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘And don’t do that. It’s supposed to be the deepest moat in world history.’

‘I think Charles, err, actually did ask Colin about his intentions,’ Jane said. ‘Not my idea, I should add.’

‘He didn’t!’ Emma said.
‘I’m afraid he did,’ Jane said. ‘Apparently, it was all on Fitz’s urging.’

Elizabeth groaned.

‘I told him that I didn’t think it was our business,’ she said. ‘What exactly did he make Charles say?’

‘Something about that he didn’t want Caroline hurt, and if Colin wasn’t serious about this -’

Georgiana giggled. Elizabeth gave her a questioning look.

‘It seems that was the wake-up call Colin needed,’ Georgiana explained. ‘Rather like Benedick, wouldn’t you say?’

Caroline made her way through the deep sand towards the large yellow umbrella she could espy in the distance. The sun was burning hot on her back and she was looking forward to getting into the sea as soon as she had unloaded her bag and got out of her dress. As she came nearer, she heard voices from behind the umbrella. It was positioned in such a way as to block her view, but she guessed that it was only the women sitting behind it.

‘ - so I guess there is no need to let Caroline know about Colin,’ Elizabeth was saying.

Caroline froze to the spot.

‘Not much, no,’ Emma agreed.

‘But wouldn’t it be fair to tell her he’s, you know, fancying her?’ Jane said. ‘Now that he’s -’

‘Jane, this isn’t sixth form any more,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Let them work it out for themselves, I say. They’re old enough.’

‘I think Jane has a point though,’ Georgiana said. ‘I mean, he’s giving her all those smoldering glares and she has no idea. If she knew, she could decide what to do about it.’

‘Yes, but what if she decides not to act upon her knowledge?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘She’d be incredibly awkward around him, trying to avoid him so as not to hurt his feelings, whereas if she doesn’t know, she can act around him like she always does.’

‘But she’s mean to him!’ Jane said.

‘And he’s mean to her,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I think that’s just their thing, really. It won’t hurt him if she snaps at him just like she always does, he’s used to it.’

‘There must have been a reason he fell for her in the first place,’ Emma added. ‘It won’t have been for her sweet temper, I suppose.’

‘Pah,’ Georgiana said. ‘Perfection is overrated anyway, if you ask me. Nothing’s more boring than a perfect person.’

‘And besides, if he wanted her to know, he could tell her,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Which I gather he hasn’t done yet, so -’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ Jane conceded. ‘It’s just – it seems unfair, somehow -’

‘I’m sure it’ll all work out, some way or other,’ Elizabeth said.
‘And if it doesn’t,’ Georgiana said, ‘we can always give her a clue when – oh, bugger –’

A bucket rolled out of the shadow of the umbrella and Georgiana ran after it. She caught the bucket, then looked up and saw Caroline standing there, still rooted to the ground.

‘Hi, Caro,’ she said lamely.

Caroline gave her a long, unblinking look, then turned without a word and ran towards the dunes.

Random Information: Charles is a writer. He writes the 'Dino the Rhino' children's books series, under the name 'C. Bingley' (Hence Caroline’s desire for a pseudonym). Elizabeth used to be a literary agent, that's how they met. She clashed horribly with Darcy when Charles asked Darcy to go over some contracts Elizabeth provided.
‘Uh, that didn’t go too well, eh?’ Emma said.

‘Why?’ Georgiana said. ‘I think she heard exactly what I would’ve wanted her to overhear, and now nobody has to have any scruples about whether or not we should lay a trap for her or not.’

‘She didn’t seem very impressed,’ Jane said.

‘She’ll come round,’ Georgiana assured her. ‘How much deeper do we have to dig?’

‘I think Anne intends to hide in the moat,’ Elizabeth said. ‘So, deeper.’

‘We should organise a romantic date for them,’ Emma said. ‘Wait, what am I doing? I said I wouldn’t meddle anymore.’

‘A romantic date, yes,’ Georgiana said. ‘Any suggestions for a first date?’

‘Charles took me to see a movie on our first date,’ Jane said. ‘*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. I thought that was very nice.’

‘Yes, because you have a crush on Sean Connery,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Lizzy’s right, we need a better movie suggestion,’ Georgiana said. ‘A more romantic movie perhaps -’

Elizabeth made a dismissive sound.

‘Fitzwilliam took me to see *When Harry Met Sally* on our first date,’ she said. ‘It was the worst date I’ve ever had.’

Georgiana dropped the bucket and sat upright.

‘I’ve never heard that story,’ she said. ‘Spill.’

‘There’s not much to tell,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I was in New York, for work reasons, and I ran into your brother one day. I didn’t know many people there, so when he suggested that we go to the movies together, I agreed. I didn’t even know it was supposed to be a date, I thought we were just two legal aliens spending a night together missing dear old Blighty. Well, Fitzwilliam picked *When Harry Met Sally*, which had just come out, because someone had told him it was a perfect relationship movie -’

‘Well, it *is* not bad,’ Emma said.

‘Shh!’ Georgiana interrupted her.

‘I even might have liked it,’ Elizabeth continued, ‘but the fact was, by the time Fitzwilliam came to pick me up, I was furious with him. I’d found out some things about him that, well – not nice things, anyway, and while I was still contemplating whether I should just confront him with them or not, somehow we were on our way and in the cinema and I didn’t want to make a scene, so I decided just to go along with it and leave as soon as I could. Fitzwilliam went the whole way, bought me popcorn and all, and just when I was about to change my mind and think that maybe, just maybe, I had misunderstood Col- that is, the colleague I’d spoken with – just then, Fitzwilliam, well -’
‘Well what?’ Georgiana cried.

‘He proposed to me!’ Elizabeth exclaimed. ‘In a dingy New York street, out of the blue, the idiot had the guts to propose to me on what I now realised was our first date. And, what is more, he did not even use his own words.’

‘Whose words?’ Emma asked eagerly.

‘Billy Crystal’s,’ Elizabeth said. ‘He actually was presumptuous enough to give me the whole Billy Crystal speech, you know, that whole nonsense about the rest of your life, almost verbatim, and expected me to be delighted by his advances!’

She rolled her eyes.

‘Thank goodness he pulled his act together,’ she said. ‘If he were still the same man as then – mind you, I had come to some very false conclusions about his character, so that reality check helped us both in the end, but still. Well, our second first date was nice enough, and very memorable, so we prefer to only think of that one.’

Jane shot her sister a meaningful glance.

‘Was that the one where -’

‘Yes,’ said Elizabeth with an indignant expression.

‘Oh, the one on -’

‘Yes, Georgiana, the very one,’ Elizabeth said.

‘You make me curious,’ said Emma.

‘Me too,’ Georgiana added. ‘I’ve never heard the full story. Please, Elizabeth – and I promise, I’ll make this the deepest moat mankind has ever seen.’

Elizabeth sighed in defeat.

‘Oh, very well then,’ she said.

Emma clapped her hands in anticipation.

‘No clapping,’ Georgiana said. ‘Dig, or she won’t tell the story.’

‘Shh,’ Jane said. ‘This is good. I want to hear it.’

‘So, then,’ Elizabeth said. ‘This was a couple of months after that first date in New York. We were both back home and, well, a lot of things had happened. Fitz had realised he’d been behaving like a complete idiot, and I had realised he wasn’t a complete idiot – but anyway. We’d just recently met again because he needed me to go over some contracts with him – or I had asked him about some contracts, I don’t quite recall – anyway, there were some papers we needed to look at together.’

‘Get to the point,’ Georgiana said. ‘I mean, the actual meeting.’

‘Dig faster then,’ Elizabeth said. ‘As I said, we wanted to look at some papers together and for some reason or other, we agreed that he’d come by Jane’s and my place after work. Now, I knew that Jane would be out that evening with her new boyfriend -’
For some reason, Jane grinned.

‘- and I really, really wanted Fitz to stay for as long as possible, without actually telling him so,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I wasn’t sure whether this was an actual date or not, or what it was -’

‘Oh, it was a date, definitely,’ Georgiana said. ‘You should’ve seen him beforehand. He got home from work early and shaved and changed his shirt thrice and then kept asking if I thought he should’ve gone to the hairdresser’s. I ended up shoving him out of the door and locking it behind him so he couldn’t come back and change his shirt again.’

‘Yes, but I couldn’t know that, could I?’ Elizabeth said. ‘All I knew was that he might want to get this done with as quickly as possible. So I got some curry from the take-out and heated that in the kitchen; I set the table and everything and waited. And waited.’

‘Because Fitz was still busy fretting about whether to wear a tie or not,’ Georgiana said.

‘As I said, I couldn’t know,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I was worried I’d misunderstood, or that maybe he had stood me up because he wasn’t interested anymore, and so I went into the other room and switched on the telly to distract myself, when finally, he rang the door.’

‘Gee, I was almost worried myself now that he wouldn’t come,’ Emma said. ‘What happened then? Did you talk?’

‘Not at first, no,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Well, we talked, but we didn’t talk. We ate the curry and made small-talk over that – horribly stilted, that was, and we ended up talking about nothing but the weather, really. Then we had a look at whatever documents they were and did whatever it was we needed to do with them and suddenly, out of the blue, Fitz asked me if I’d like to go and see a movie.’

‘Oh, what movie did you see?’ Emma asked.

‘None,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I agreed of course and grabbed my coat and my handbag and we were just about to leave when I noticed that in the other room, the telly was still running.’

‘So?’ Emma asked.

‘Ah, Lizzy’s been withholding crucial information,’ Georgiana said. ‘Emma can’t know what happened next without it.’

‘What then?’ Emma asked. ‘What information?’

‘It wasn’t just any old Thursday in November,’ Georgiana said.

‘It’s my story, I tell it,’ Elizabeth said. ‘You dig.’

‘What next?’ Emma asked. ‘I’m on tenterhooks here!’

‘As Georgiana said, it wasn’t just any old Thursday in November. It was the ninth of November,’ Elizabeth said. ‘1989.’

‘Oh!’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Elizabeth said. ‘When I came into the living-room, there was live footage from Berlin on the telly. I was so shocked, I even forgot about Fitz for a moment, I just stood there, watching what was happening. Fitz followed me to see what was keeping me – probably thought I was getting cold feet by then – and also needed just one look at the telly to be silent. Then we
sort of ended up sitting next to each other in the sofa, both still wearing our coats, gaping at the telly with open mouths. I still couldn’t believe it, but somehow, it came to me just what this meant, just how incredible this was and -'

‘- you started crying like a baby,’ Jane finished for her.

‘I didn’t!’ Elizabeth said. ‘Well, a little perhaps. A very little.’

‘And then Fitz comforted you,’ Jane said.

‘No!’ Elizabeth exclaimed. ‘Well, yes. He did. Sort of. Somehow. Anyway, we ended up kissing rather violently and err – well, eventually I needed to breathe again and I just looked at him and said something like, ‘what the hell was that?’ and we began discussing just what it was and that it was a good thing and we wanted it to continue and that sort of thing, and then, we, err, kissed some more and, uh, eventually discarded the coats and, uh, more, until -'

‘- until the door burst open,’ Jane said.

‘Yeah, until the door burst open,’ Elizabeth said. ‘And someone shouted -'

‘Someone shouted, ‘switch on the telly, Lizzy, you’ll never believe what just happened!’’ Jane finished.

Both sisters began to giggle.

‘So that was you then?’ Emma asked.

‘Yes, and Charles as well,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Storming into our flat like a herd of elephants, when Fitz and I were not entirely dressed for company and -’

‘Well, we had no idea of knowing that,’ Jane said. ‘You never told me he was coming over, or I’d have rung the bell before.’

‘I didn’t want to tell you!’ Elizabeth said. ‘I had no idea if it was a date or what it was, and I didn’t want to jinx it.’

‘Anyway, it was so funny,’ Jane said. ‘Lizzy went red all over, not just her face, and Fitz made a noise like an over-excited rabbit, and Charles just stood there, gawking at the two of them, and all the time, the telly was still blasting live pictures from Berlin -'

‘And then finally, Fitz got his act together,’ Elizabeth continued, ‘and he sort of stammered, ‘it’s not what it looks like!’ because Charles was still gaping at us and Jane had begun to giggle like mad -'

‘And then Lizzy started giggling too,’ Jane said, ‘and she looked at Darcy and said, ‘actually, sweetheart, I think it’s exactly what it looks like,’ which would have sounded way cooler if she hadn’t been desperately searching for her -’

‘Yes, no need to go into detail,’ Elizabeth interrupted her. ‘I think they got the gist. How’s the moat doing?’

*Random Information: Currently, Elizabeth is on maternity leave; she's not quite sure yet when she'll return to work. Fortunately, Darcy earns enough for her to take her time. Elizabeth contemplates having another child; they grow up so quickly. Elizabeth's guilty pleasure is watching Friends. She'll tape the episodes when they're broadcasted and then watch them at night*
when she's nursing the baby. She really hopes Ross and Rachel will get together for good eventually.
‘If this were Much Ado About Nothing, now would be the time for Claudio to accuse Hero of being unfaithful,’ Georgiana said to her sister-in-law when they were cleaning the dishes. ‘The stage is laid out, they both know how the other feels – now they’ve got to act!’

‘You will, if you please, not instill some fanciful notion about me within my husband,’ Elizabeth said.

‘I hadn’t meant to!’ Georgiana said hastily. ‘I’m sorry, Lizzy, if I gave that impression -’

Elizabeth laughed.

‘I believe that Fitz’ and my relationship is healthier than that,’ she said. ‘However, my dear, I also believe that there is nothing you can do right now – nor anything you should.’

‘But it’s so frustrating!’

‘Georgiana, if the pitiful beginnings of my romance with Fitz tell us anything, it’s that these things will happen in their own time,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Can’t you find something else to obsess about?’

Georgiana frowned.

‘There’s this book that Emma lent me,’ she said. ‘Something about an orphaned wizard in a wizarding school? She said it was just newly out and she picked it up because she thought it was a picture book, only it wasn’t, and then she stayed up half the night reading it and couldn’t put it down at all.’

‘Well, then,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Why don’t you read that?’

‘But didn’t you see how Caroline blushed to the roots of her hair when Colin asked her for the salt?’

‘I did,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I also saw how Colin upended the sugar bowl when Caroline accidentally touched his shoulder, and I saw how Caroline accidentally stirred jam into her coffee this morning when Colin entered the room.’

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,’ Georgiana said. ‘We’ve got to help them. They’re hopeless!’

‘Georgiana, they’re adults – older than you, in fact.’

‘But they’re seriously romantically impaired,’ Georgiana argued. ‘Do you know, Caroline still thinks that C.C. is the heroine of The Nanny, and that the real question of the series is whether she’ll end up with Maxwell or with Niles.’

Elizabeth laughed.

‘Nevertheless, I’m not going to meddle anymore,’ she said. ‘And I’d ask you to do the same, please, Georgiana. Trust me.’

‘Right then,’ Georgiana said. ‘I’ll read that stupid wizarding book. But I don’t think I shall like it.’

‘Join us outside for coffee when you’re done pouting,’ Elizabeth said.
‘Any news from your father?’ Elizabeth asked Emma, who was just flipping her phone shut.

‘Indeed,’ Emma said and groaned. ‘He can’t come tomorrow, he forgot to return some library books. But he’s certain he shall be coming the day after.’

‘Right,’ George said, observing the children on the lawn. ‘I’m all anticipation. What is my son doing there?’

‘He’s getting his nails done, I believe,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Ever since Caroline let the girls paint their thumb-nails, they’ve been playing manicure, and now your son’s their latest victim.’

‘They’re not using actual nail polish, are they?’

‘Just crayons,’ Jane assured him. ‘And I see your son’s chosen a dark blue, so no need to fear about his masculinity.’

‘A Splügen on that!’ George said and raised his glass.

‘A Splügen on what?’ Caroline asked, coming out on the patio. ‘Colin not here?’

‘Ah, he’s digging for his contacts prescription in his suitcase,’ Charles said. ‘But he said he left that book you’d been wanting to read on your bed, in case you were still interested.’

‘He also asked if you really didn’t want that after-sun lotion,’ Georgiana added. ‘He said it’s in the bathroom if you wanted it.’

‘Oh, how can he -’ Caroline wheezed and rushed back inside.

She found Colin in the room he shared with James, bent low over a suitcase in which he was rummaging.

‘How dare you?’ she cried.

‘How dare I what?’ Colin said and stood up.

‘You know!’ Caroline exclaimed. ‘All this! Being nice to me! That’s not – that’s not right.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know being nice was a crime!’

‘It is, when you have these kind of feelings for me!’

‘I can’t help having whatever feelings I have for you!’

‘Oh, yes, you can,’ Caroline said. ‘You can.’

‘Then tell me why I should,’ Colin said. ‘Maybe I’m happy the way I feel.’

‘You have no right to that!’

‘I don’t?’

‘No,’ Caroline shouted. ‘None at all! Because if you did care about me – if you really cared about me – you wouldn’t have not showed up and then shoved that stupid letter under my door, like I was just one of your countless little adventures!’

‘You are an adventure alright,’ Colin said hotly. ‘But never, ever just a little one. And I did show
‘Ha!’ Caroline exclaimed. ‘When was that, in your dreams?’

‘No, that very evening!’ Colin shouted. ‘I admit, I was a bit late, but I was there. I knocked on your door for hours, but you wouldn’t open, and the reception said they couldn’t phone you because you’d told them you didn’t want to be disturbed.’

‘Yeah, of course I didn’t want to be disturbed,’ Caroline said. ‘I was expecting you, wasn’t I? Only you weren’t there! I waited for hours, but you didn’t come!’

‘So maybe I was a bit late then!’ Colin said. ‘But that was no reason to dump me like that, without even a note. If you’d had second thoughts, you could at least have told me in person. I wasn’t that late, I’d gone to have just one drink before, just to calm myself.’

‘Was the prospect of being with me so very frightening then?’

‘You have no idea how frightening – I mean, Caroline, I’d known you for ages, and suddenly, in the months before the wedding, you were so completely different and I just knew, if I went into your room that night, and messed it up, there would be no turning back – I knew that whatever happened that night, if we crossed that threshold -’

‘Do you think it wasn’t frightening for me?’ Caroline shouted. ‘Because it bloody was! I knew that you coming to my room would change everything between us, forever, and I was completely scared of ruining it! I mean, I wouldn’t have emptied the whole mini-bar otherwise, would I, and passed out on the bathroom rug, would I?’

‘Why on earth did you do that?’

‘Because I love you, you complete idiot!’

‘You love me?’

‘Yes, and I don’t care if you like it or not!’

‘Fine then!’ Colin shouted. ‘I love you too, you nonsensical shrew!’

He took a step towards her and she one towards him. They were now standing so close their noses where almost touching.

‘Fine then,’ Caroline said.

She leaned a little forward so that her nose was brushing his. Colin reached for one of her curls and tugged at it.

‘Shall we risk it?’ Colin asked. ‘What do you say, will it be worth the risk?’

‘We won’t know unless we try,’ Caroline said. ‘So, what do you say, shall we?’

‘Hell, yes!’ Colin exclaimed.

‘And now?’

‘I believe that after such declarations, it is customary to, eh -’

‘Well then,’ Caroline muttered and leaned her forehead into his. ‘Wouldn’t want to go against tradition, would we?’
She carefully reached for his glasses, pulled them off his nose and tossed them onto the bed.

‘No, we wouldn’t,’ Colin breathed against her cheek. ‘Hysterical hag.’

‘Insensitive git,’ Caroline whispered before her lips touched his.

James stood in the door of the patio and looked at his parents.

‘What’s the matter, young man?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘I want to go to bed,’ James said.

‘Teeth brushed?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘Face washed?’

James nodded.

‘Then into your jammies and off to bed with you,’ Elizabeth said. ‘If you’re quick, I’ll come and read you a story before you sleep.’

‘Can’t,’ James muttered.

‘Why not?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Uncle Colin’s tie is tied to the door,’ James said.

‘His what?’ Elizabeth said, thinking she had misheard.

‘His tie,’ James said and pointed in the general direction of his bedroom.

Elizabeth got up and went inside, followed by everyone else still on the patio. Just as James had said, there was a striped tie fixed to the doorhandle of the room he was sharing with Colin.

‘Well, then, Jamie,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I think this means you’ll sleep in Aunt Caro’s bed tonight.’

‘And Aunt Caro?’

‘I don’t believe she’ll need her bed tonight, Jamie,’ Georgiana said.

*Random Information: Darcy secretly hates ’Dino the Rhino’ but he hasn’t yet had the guts to tell anybody.*
Chapter 8

~Ten Years Later~

‘They’re here! They’re here!’

Elizabeth hastily stepped aside as her fifteen-year-old daughter rushed down the stairs and to the front door.

‘Where’s my cape?’ another voice came from upstairs. ‘Mum, I can’t find my cape!’

‘I put it on your bed, darling!’ Elizabeth called. ‘Where is your brother?’

‘I’m coming,’ James said, as usual the only one not resorting to shouting. ‘Mum, can you please tell Anne that that’s my phone?’

‘Nobody’s taking their phone tonight,’ Elizabeth said. ‘You’ll just lose it in the queue.’

‘But what if Jenna texts me?’ Anne asked.

‘You’ll see Jenna in thirty minutes, you’ll survive,’ Elizabeth decided. ‘Now, look, there’s Robbie coming up to the door, why don’t you open it for him?’

‘Mum!’ Anne squealed, suddenly turned shy at the mention of Robert Knightley.

James, always far too good for this world, opened the door for his sister, and greeted his friend with a complicated hand-shake that reminded Elizabeth of a secret brotherhood.

‘Hi, Robbie,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Where’s your mum?’

‘On the phone with grandpa,’ Robert said. ‘Something about how he thinks he may have caught SARS?’

He shrugged.

‘Cool shirt,’ he said in Anne’s direction, with promptly sent Elizabeth’s eldest blushing.

‘And Kathy didn’t want to come with us?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘My daughter thinks she is too cool for children’s books,’ a voice came from the doorway. ‘She’s at a pyjama party where they’ll be fawning over some vampire or other.’

‘Oh my God, Emma, what are you wearing?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Cool, isn’t it?’ Emma said and swirled around in her many skirts. ‘I’m Bellatrix Lestrange, see?’

‘I only have this,’ Elizabeth said, reached for one of her more skewed attempts at creating a wizard’s hat and sat it on her head.

‘Mum, this is like, so embarrassing,’ Anne said.

Robert only shrugged. He’d long given up on his mother.

‘How’s George?’ Elizabeth asked.
‘Same as ever,’ Emma said. ‘He’s spending a boys’ night with William. He’s going to explain the rules of cricket to him, or so he says.’

She rolled her eyes. Elizabeth gave a good-natured laugh.

‘Right, is everyone ready?’ Emma asked.

‘I should think so,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Kids, do you have everything? Are the computers switched off? Mobile phones left here?’

‘Mum!’ Anne groaned.

‘My cape!’ Richard cried.

‘Darling, it’s on your bed,’ Elizabeth said, ‘quick, go and get it. I’ll just get Emily; she fell asleep in her car-seat.’

‘We’re still dropping Emily off at Jane’s then?’ Emma asked.

‘Yes, Fitz just couldn’t make it,’ Elizabeth explained. ‘But Jane says she’s delighted, and I know Charles loves having his readership around, and since we need to go there anyway to pick up Jenna -’

‘And Andy doesn’t want to come?’ Emma asked, following her friend into the living-room.

‘Just like William, he just doesn’t get what the fuss is about,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Right, I’ve got her diaper bag, I’ve got a change of clothes, her teddy-bear – oh, wait, the cooler with the milk – just a moment -’

Emma followed her friend into the kitchen.

‘I’ve just been on the phone with Georgiana,’ Elizabeth said. ‘She says she’ll save us spots in the queue, just in case it gets really full before we get there.’

‘I can’t wait to see her again,’ Emma said, ‘it feels like ages.’

‘She’s thriving,’ Elizabeth said. ‘And do you know, she just told me the best of news.’

‘Do tell!’

‘Guess who’s pregnant!’

Emma thought for a moment.

‘No!’ she finally said. ‘Surely not -’

‘Oh, yes,’ Elizabeth said and grinned. ‘After all these years of saying she’ll never, ever have kids -’

‘She’s happy though about it?’

‘Thrilled,’ Elizabeth said, ‘from what Georgiana told me. And Colin no less. They’ve already started renovating the spare room. I’m going to ask her for coffee next weekend, do you want to come?’

‘Do I!’ Emma cried. ‘Of course I do. I want to hear all the details. When’s it due?’
‘Christmas, so I heard,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Apparently, Caroline’s already been asked to write a column about her pregnancy, so you’ll be able to read everything about it soon enough, from the surprise at the gyno’s office to all the grisly details of her confinement.’

‘Of course,’ Emma said and grinned. ‘Does that mean that Colin will finally make an honest woman of her?’

‘Not in this life, if she has any say in it,’ Elizabeth said. ‘And from what Georgiana told me, they’re both decided that the current situation won’t change that.’

‘And I suppose we should be off, before the kids leave without us,’ Emma said. ‘Here, let me take Emily’s bags for you.’

‘Thanks, that’s better,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Right, my mini-van or yours?’

Random Information: Baby Emily was very much a surprise for both Elizabeth and Fitz, who’d given up hoping for another child about ten months before her birth. Fitz still gets an incomprehensible thrill out of contractual law. His wife doesn’t understand it, but she’s sympathetic. After all, he never complained the day he had no clean shirts to wear because she was too caught up with reading Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. Elizabeth is still very much a house-wife, and loving it. She has, however, done a proof-reading stint for Caroline when the latter’s first compilation of snarky columns hit the book-market. Charles continues to be the most popular parent in school pick-up runs. His wife was recently promoted to deputy headmistress. When young William was old enough, Emma joined the work-force again. She got her first gig as a photographer through Caroline’s contacts in the newspaper world, for which she’s eternally thankful. Georgiana has long broken up with Mark, but she has recently added him on facebook. She completed her studies in German and managed to secure a position with the government. It’s not clear what exactly she does there. She tells people she’s responsible for the cow census in Essex, but nobody knows why she would need an expertly forged Swiss passport for that, where her name is given as Anthea. Colin has lived at various ends of the world, wherever his company saw fit to send him. Caroline accompanied him on all of those trips and gained much fame with her ‘Caroline Grey Abroad’ columns, which formed the base of her much-acclaimed first book. She is currently working on the second compilation, hoping that Elizabeth will help her with the editing once more. Colin and Caroline returned for good about a year ago after Colin was promoted, bought a snug little cottage and renovated it themselves. It has a beautiful office where Caroline can write and a vegetable patch where Colin can release pent-up aggressions from the office. They’re going to name their child Beatrice if it’s a girl and Benedick if a boy. Dino the Rhino continues to be the second most popular series of children’s books ever.

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