

A
NOVEL

MIDNIGHT IN
Austenland

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AUSTENLAND AND PRINCESS ACADEMY

BLOOMSBURY

*midnight in
austenland*

A NOVEL

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B L O O M S B U R Y
New York Berlin London Sydney

prologue

NO ONE WHO KNEW Charlotte Constance Kinder since her youth would suppose her born to be a heroine. She was a practical girl from infancy, only fussing as much as was necessary and exhibiting no alarming opinions. Common wisdom asserts that heroines are born from calamity, and yet our Charlotte's early life was pretty standard. Not only did her parents avoid fatal accidents, but they also never locked her up in a hidden attic room.

At the very least, she might have been a tragic beauty. Though she eventually grew into her largest inheritance (her nose), she was never the sort of girl who provoked men to do dangerous things. She was . . . nice. Even her closest friends, many of whom liked her a great deal, couldn't come up with a more spectacular adjective. Charlotte was nice.

Eventually Charlotte met a nice man named James, whom she was convinced she loved passionately. They had a very nice wedding and two children who seemed perfect to their mother and adequate to everyone else. After raising them to the point that they no longer needed her constant vigilance to stay alive, Charlotte wondered,

what now? That's when Charlotte Constance Kinder, who was nice, discovered that she was also clever.

She started a Web-based business, grew it to seven employees, then sold it for an embarrassing profit. With Lu and Beckett in elementary school, she had time, so why not start another? Her retirement fund was flush. She gave to charities. She bought James a fancy car and took the kids on cruises. Charlotte was content—toes-in-the-sand, cheek-kiss, hot-cocoa-breath content. Her childhood wishes had come true, and she wonderfully, blissfully, ignorantly reflected that life just couldn't get any better.

Until it didn't.

We may never know what turned once-nice James away. Was it the fact that his wife was making more money than he was? (A lot more.) Or that his wife had turned out to be clever? (That can be inconvenient.) Had Charlotte changed? Had James? Was marriage just too hard to maintain in this crazy, shifting world?

Charlotte hadn't thought so. But then, Charlotte had been wrong before.

She was wrong when she assumed her husband's late nights were work-related. She was wrong when she blamed his increasingly sullen behavior on an iron deficiency. She was wrong when she believed the coldness in their bed could be fixed with flannel sheets.

Poor Charlotte. So nice, so clever, so wrong.

Charlotte came to believe that no single action kills a marriage. From the moment it begins to stumble, there are a thousand shots at changing course, and she had invested her whole soul in each of those second chances, which failed anyway. It was like being caught in her own personal *Groundhog Day*, only without the delightful Bill Murray to make her laugh. She would wake up, marvel anew at the bone-crushing weight in her chest, dress in her best

clothes, as if for war, and set out with a blazing hope that today would be different. Today James would remember he loved her and come home to the family. Today she would win back her marriage, and her life.

Eventually the time came when Charlotte sat in the messy ruins of her marriage and felt as weak as a cooked noodle. She would never be nice or clever enough. Hope had been beaten to death. She dried her eyes, shut down her heart, and plunged herself into an emotion coma. So much easier not to feel.

Once numbness shuts down a damaged heart, a miracle is required to restart it. Things would prove rough for our heroine. Her only hope was Jane Austen.

LET'S SKIP AHEAD. NO NEED to dawdle over lawyers and assets and custody, the sound of ten-year-old Beckett crying in bed, the glazed expression that thirteen-year-old Lu was perfecting. No need to belabor the Valentine's Day Charlotte alphabetized her magazines.

But before we leap too far, pause for one moment. Charlotte has just stepped out of the shower. The mirror is breathy, the air stifling. It's been months since her heart has felt Stonehenge-heavy each time she thinks of James; frankly, it's been some time since she's felt anything at all. She wipes the fog off the mirror and freezes, struck by the eyes of a woman she doesn't know. Does she always look this way? That line in her forehead—is she scowling?

Charlotte concentrates on the muscles in her brow, telling them to relax. Still they bunch up. She rubs the spot. Is she having a muscle spasm? Should she see a doctor? Then—oh. She understands. She can rub all she wants, but that line isn't going away.

"Wrinkle," she whispers. She didn't look the same as she had the last time she was single.

That's what she was thinking when her college friend Sabrina took her out to lunch.

"Kent is a couple of years younger than you, but really great," Sabrina was saying while salting her cheesesteak. "He's a paralegal, rides a bike to work, and, you know, only has as much baggage as your average unmarried thirtysomething."

Charlotte rubbed at the wrinkle between her eyes, pluckily trying to erase it again. It was this same can-do spirit that secured her the Ohio Woman Entrepreneur of the Year (or OWEY) award.

"I'm not getting remarried," Charlotte said.

"Marriage schmarrriage. When are you going to let a little romance into your life?"

Romance. That word seemed silly to Charlotte now—so cheap, mass-market, high-discount. It was temporary insanity caused by the brain. It was a biological trick to ensure the survival of the species.

"One date," said Sabrina.

"Yeah, sure, okay," she said, then added, "Thanks," so Sabrina would feel she was doing Charlotte a favor instead of manipulating her into volunteering for torture.

Friday night arrived after Thursday, just as the calendar warned it would. Charlotte changed her comfy work-at-home clothes to irritating look-at-me clothes and found a mirror to take stock of herself. Her hair looked awful. It just hung, floppy, off her head, like . . . like . . . It was so pathetic that when she tried to think what it was like, her mind got overwhelmingly bored and slipped off to think about something more interesting. Such as the tax code.

Being single was ridiculous, with all its demands of blind dating and stock taking and hair doing. Could that be why James had left? Because she hadn't taken her coiffure seriously enough?

Charlotte flat-ironed her hair, rubbed at her brow wrinkle, and met Kent at a sushi bar.

She called Sabrina as soon as she got home. “I’m damaged. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Charlotte, what happened?”

Not much. Surely other women would have found Kent’s informal lecture on the merits of homemade dog food fascinating, but Charlotte left the sushi bar with mild food poisoning and a heart that threatened to feel again. And what it almost felt was not good. She shut that right down. Be numb, cruel heart.

“I’m dumpy,” Charlotte said without emotion.

“You’re not dumpy,” said Sabrina. “You’re five eleven. How can you be dumpy?”

“I feel dumpy.”

“Wait . . . did Kent call you dumpy? I warned him to keep his mouth shut.”

“No, he was fine. I’m done complaining. And done dating. For now. Sorry. Thanks.”

But it wasn’t over. Word had gotten out among Charlotte’s female network: she’d been on a date! That meant open season. Those weekends each month when Lu and Beckett were with James found Charlotte dressed up and trundled off on blind dates. To clarify, no men actually asked Charlotte out, but every married woman of Charlotte’s acquaintance had a reserve of unmarried men just waiting to take her out once and never call again. Well, some called, but those were the “artists”—hopeful novelists, painters, glassblowers—who found dating women like Charlotte more convenient than applying for grants.

Charlotte was standing in the supermarket checkout, contemplating a strategy of dating avoidance that mostly involved never

answering her phone again, when she saw a women's magazine advertising the article "10 Tips to Saying NO!" She bought it. The ten tips were mildly helpful ("Be gentle but firm, like a good flan! After all, no one wants a slouchy custard."), but it was a different article that tipped her world upside down.

Common wisdom used to assert that a son needs his father more than a daughter does. Someone to play catch with, right? Well, don't neglect the daughters. New research warns that daughters of divorced parents can suffer from a dangerous drop in self-esteem.

"Whether they like it or not, teenage girls do identify with their mothers," offered Dr. Deb Shapiro, researcher for the Minneapolis Center for Family Studies. "When her father leaves her mother, a girl often feels she is being rejected too. We're finding more and more that these girls can be desperate for male attention and approval, and are much more likely to become teenage pregnancy statistics."

The accompanying photo gave Charlotte chills: a pretty, somewhat sad teenage girl dressed in a short skirt and halter top, sauntering past a group of ogling boys. "This could be your daughter!" the photo seemed to scream. "She is out there fishing for affection in a swarm of sharks and it's YOUR FAULT because you weren't interesting enough to keep her father home!"

Charlotte put down the magazine and cracked the door of her home office. There was Lu on the couch with her new boyfriend, Pete, her legs dangling over his. Charlotte had instituted a no-boyfriend-behind-closed-doors policy, but what was this boy doing when Charlotte couldn't keep an eye on him? The thought haunted her like an overdose of MSG. She was not a woman who could statically fret—she had to *do* something.

Coming home from an errand the next afternoon, she just happened to pass by Pete's house. Oh so casually she parked across the street and watched for a few minutes. Or an hour. When a Jeep pulled up and Pete hopped in, Charlotte followed it to another house. She sneaked out of her car and peered in the basement window. Three boys, including Pete, were sitting on a couch playing a video game.

This is crazy, Charlotte, she told herself. You're crazy. You've lost it.

You really have, said her Inner Thoughts. You weren't this paranoid before James left.

I know, Charlotte thought back, hoping her Inner Thoughts would shush up and leave her be. If she stuck to Pete, she'd discover a secret, a greasy side, something she could tell Lu that would convince her to stay away from boys until she was older. Say, twenty-five.

It was getting dark. Charlotte crouched down to wait. A bush hid her from the neighbors, and with the lights on inside, surely the boys couldn't see out. Wait, where had the boys gone? The couch was empty.

She turned.

Pete was standing in the backyard holding a can of cola, squinting at her.

"Mrs. Kinder?"

Charlotte stood up, brushed the grass from her skirt, and said with forced nonchalance, "Hm? What was that? Oh, hello, Pete. Do you live here?"

His squint became even tighter. "It's my cousin's house. Are you looking for Lu or something?"

"No, no, I was just examining the various landscaping styles of various properties in various neighborhoods and so on and so forth. You know. For my work."

Without looking away, he took a long, slow drink from his soda.

“Okay then, nice to see you again, Pete. And such a great placement of a juniper bush! Excellent roots and foliage. Very healthy.”

She hobbled down the slope of the front lawn, her heeled shoes aerating the grass. Not very practical footwear for examining various landscapes in various neighborhoods. Maybe he hadn’t noticed.

No more stalking, Charlotte! her Inner Thoughts demanded.

Sure, okay, but by the way, did you know there’s an entire section in the yellow pages devoted to private investigators?

Two weeks later she received an envelope of information and photos: Pete with his friends in the mall, Pete getting on a school bus, Pete at soccer practice. What had she been expecting? Pete sneaking into seedy motel rooms or sliding paper bags under bathroom stalls?

She put the PI’s file into the shredder then went to find her daughter, who was in the basement, watching commercials on TV. It was time to try the direct approach.

“Hey, Lu. How are you doing?”

Lu sighed and pushed Mute. “Mom, if you want to talk to me, don’t try to be all sneaky about it.”

Charlotte sat beside her on the couch. “I have some concerns about Pete.”

“Of course you do. He’s a boy and you’re my mom and Dad left. It all makes sense.”

Charlotte shut her eyes and recalled an image of a three-year-old Lu in pigtails, twirling unselfconsciously in the living room of their old apartment.

“You’re fourteen, honey,” Charlotte said, returning unwillingly to reality. “That’s just so young to be serious with a boy.”

“Mom, please. Can’t you remember being fourteen? You were my age once, and you came out okay. So lighten up.”

Did I really come out okay? Charlotte wondered. For Lu’s sake (and for fear of legal repercussions if she were caught hiring men to take photos of a teenage boy), she tried to remember what it was like to be young. That Easter weekend, when they visited her mother in North Carolina, she dug out some old boxes and uncovered a diary from her middle school years. The first page arrested her:

Things to do before I’m 30

- Get married [check]
- Have a baby [check, check]
- Walk in high heels without wobbling [check]
- Climb Kilimanjaro [um . . .]
- Understand physics [check-ish]
- Help save whales or other animals in danger [check!
Thank goodness for those Greenpeace donations!]
- Read Jane Austen [???

It was strange discovering forgotten goals in her own handwriting, as if she’d woken up at a dance club wearing fishnet tights with a group of strangers who called her “Sahara.” Some of the goals made sense—who doesn’t like whales?—but, Kilimanjaro? Wasn’t that a bit much to ask? Jane Austen was doable. The only author Charlotte had read as an adult was Agatha Christie.

She'd inherited a fifty-book set from her grandmother and slowly worked her way through them whenever circumstances demanded a book. She couldn't remember why Austen had intrigued her younger self but was curious enough to take a trip to the bookstore. Jane Austen wasn't hard to find.

The next weekend the kids went to their father's, and Charlotte played the sick card to get out of blind dates. She was alone in the house for forty-eight hours and spent most of them with a book in her hand. She read like a woman drinks water after nearly dying of dehydration. The stories pulled out of her sensation after sensation: a fluttering in her belly, a laugh on her lips, a pounding in her heart. Austen's books made her *feel*, and that was new, and intoxicating too. And so hopeful. Hope had been that thing with burnt feathers buried in her soul, but now it was waking up, stretching, beating fresh wings in the ashes.

Maybe . . . maybe it would be all right to allow herself to feel . . . just a little? Not immediately, nothing rash. But fluttery hope suggested that when she was ready to open back up, perhaps all emotions wouldn't be stoness-pressing-chest horrible. She had no specific expectations. She just contemplated that bird's heart-beat inside her and considered it was time to take a chance.

THE CHANCE CAME THAT SUMMER.

"Take a trip, Charlotte," her sister-in-law Shelby said over the phone. "When the kids are with James, go somewhere exotic. Meet someone."

There was no one Charlotte wanted to meet. Except the characters in Austen's books. Which was a ridiculous idea. Right? Wasn't it?

"Maybe I'll go to England," Charlotte said.

She called Sunny, the travel agent she used for business trips.

"I have three weeks this summer and I'd like to go to the U.K. Maybe . . . I don't know, do they have Jane Austen tours?"

"Oh sure," Sunny said, sounding up to her name. "There's some super great tours that take you through towns where she lived or places from her books. Bath is popular. It's so effin' quaint."

"That sounds nice." Maybe if she stood in the places where Austen wrote, where her characters lived, she could feel again as she had when reading her books—not like a girl who'd been waded up and tossed aside, but like a woman with possibilities.

"Divorced nearly a year and never a vacation," Charlotte said to fill the silence while Sunny clicked away on her computer. "I should stop feeling like I don't deserve it and just do it. And it's not frivolous; it's literary, right? I mean, Sunny, have you read Austen?"

"Sure—well, not since high school." *Clickety-click.*

"There's something about those stories. That's where I want to be right now. Even if just for a minute, to be there would be so nice."

Sunny's keyboard stopped clicking.

"Charlotte, hang on a sec, okay?"

Hold music. Disco. Charlotte's toes tapped along. Charlotte's toes loved disco.

The phone clicked and a new voice spoke—deeper, velvety.

"Ms. Kinder, this is Noel Hess, owner of Endless Summers. Sunny told me of your desire for an Austen vacation. I have a suggestion for you—one we reserve for our exclusive clientele."

Charlotte listened. Charlotte swallowed. Charlotte rubbed the goose bumps on her arms. This Austen vacation would cost four times what she'd thought she'd spend. But Charlotte was breathless. She felt as if she were Ponce de León being guided to the fountain of youth and invited to dip in his toes. Surely Ponce de León would have preferred full immersion, but, hey, immortal toes are better than nothing. Even if they love disco.

The travel agent overnighted a glossy pamphlet emblazoned with a grand estate, a man and woman in Austen-era clothing walking arm in arm. It wasn't a drawing. It was a *photo* of an actual, brick-and-mortar, flesh-and-blood venue.

Charlotte opened the pamphlet and read the scripty font:

Pembrook Park, Kent, England. Enter our doors as a houseguest come to stay two weeks, enjoying the country manners and hospitality—a tea visit, a dance or two, a turn in the park, an unexpected meeting with a certain gentleman, all culminating with a ball and perhaps something more . . .

Charlotte closed her eyes and clutched the pamphlet. Lately the nonfictional world had been thin and drab. But in Austenland, life could be lived in full color. It was real! Well, real-ish. If she went, would the dead and frozen part of herself revive? Austen's words had started the thawing process. Imagine what could happen if Charlotte could actually step inside the story.

Everything was about to change.

austenland, day 1

AN ASTON MARTIN, COMPLETE WITH hatted and jacketed driver, picked her up at her London hotel. She'd been in the city for a week, ostensibly to start her vacation early, though she spent most of her time working on her laptop. Why relax and think when there was wonderful, numbing work at hand?

She'd been to England once before, while touring Europe after college with a backpack, a rail pass, and a "best friend" who'd ditched her in Vienna for a guy from Albania. She'd had no romantic notions of England then, her experience mostly revolving around the question "Will it rain before I can book it to the next hostel?"

Now she looked over the landscape with expectation. With hope.

Come on, she willed through the car window. Come on, change me. I dare you.

They entered a drowsy countryside of low green hills and hedged pastures. Trees engulfed any sight of the nearby town, and a building styled as an inn came into view. A woman of sixty waited in the threshold. She wore an Empire-waist dress, a lacy

cap over her hair, and a smile that seemed to pinch a bit. Charlotte wanted to pat her on the back and say, Don't worry, you don't have to smile on my account.

"Welcome to 1816," the woman said as Charlotte stepped out of the car. "I am Mrs. Wattlesbrook, proprietress of Pembroke Park and your hostess for the next two weeks. Please come in."

The inn was cozy and quaint, with a fire in the fireplace, a table set for tea.

"Have a seat and refresh yourself while we get acquainted," said Mrs. Wattlesbrook.

"Would it be all right if I changed first?" It was weird standing there in jeans beside Mrs. Wattlesbrook in her old-timey attire, like being the only person at a dance who'd worn a costume. (Tenth grade: Charlotte went as a disco queen.)

Mrs. Wattlesbrook sniffed but escorted her to an upper room, where an ancient maid awaited. A full forty-five minutes later, Charlotte was dressed: socks, garters, boots, bloomers, chemise, corset, dress. The maid scooped Charlotte's shoulder-length hair into a well-pinned twist, and Charlotte inspected herself in the mirror. She squinted. She gaped. She flared her nostrils menacingly. Nope. No significant change yet. Her insides still felt chilled. She might as well have been dressed as a disco queen.

So it's not the corset that does the trick, she thought. It's not the dress. But it's a start.

Lately she'd become the Divorced Woman. She'd let herself be defined by what James had done to her. Now it was her chance to redefine things.

I choose this, she told the reflection.

The reflection didn't change. She hoped it wouldn't take its time. She only had two weeks.

Charlotte returned to the tea table. The corset was as stiff as a life vest. She couldn't lean back comfortably or bend easily to

scratch her ankle. Which was the point, she supposed. Austen ladies didn't have itchy ankles or desires to lounge. Austen ladies were grandly pretty—like marble statues.

She kind of hoped she was pretty. She'd forgotten to check for that in the mirror.

Mrs. Wattlesbrook opened her folder and reviewed etiquette rules and the schedules for each day and, with the help of two silent maids, taught her to play the card game whist.

"You have read all of Austen's works?" Mrs. Wattlesbrook asked, playing a card.

"Mm-hm," said Charlotte.

"And in your papers, you selected *Pride and Prejudice* as your favorite."

Mrs. Wattlesbrook had sent her a thirty-page questionnaire to fill out beforehand, requiring more information than if she'd been applying for Special Forces.

"It strikes me as a completely perfect novel," Charlotte said.

"So it is," Mrs. Wattlesbrook said, making Charlotte glad she had chosen it.

Initially *Pride and Prejudice* had been her favorite, but two other books had impacted Charlotte even more upon rereading. *Northanger Abbey* made her laugh out loud. And *Mansfield Park* resonated because it was the only Austen novel that had an actual affair—married Maria Bertram with single Henry Crawford. The affair was exposed; Maria was ostracized and divorced. The starkness of it put into relief the rest of Austen's era, when marriage usually lasted all life long. No one in Austenland would pat Charlotte's hand and say soothingly, "Don't feel bad. Half of all marriages end in divorce, you know." In Austenland, leaving your wife for another woman would be shocking! She wanted to live in such a place, even for just two weeks.

"By the way, my dear, have you given thought to what you

would like your name to be?” Mrs. Wattlesbrook played the winning card, a slight gloat in her voice. “If there is no particular name that takes your fancy, I can design one for you.”

Charlotte was relieved she wouldn't have to carry around the burden of *his* last name, not here anyway. She'd kept it after the divorce because it also belonged to her children. But it pinched, like Mrs. Wattlesbrook's smile. It reminded her each time she reported her name to the bank teller or insurance agent that she'd been someone else once, a missus to someone's mister. She'd been a wife, a lover, a companion—so much so that she'd abandoned her parents' name and taken his. Become for him.

An unwanted name was a heavy thing to bear.

“I could be Charlotte Cordial.”

“Lovely,” said the proprietress.

It was the first name to pop into Charlotte's head, her maternal grandmother's surname. Charlotte had been named after her grandma—a lovely woman with a wicked laugh and a keen eye, whom everyone had called “Candy.” Now it sounded like a stripper's moniker, but in the early twentieth century, “Candy Cordial” was a darling name.

“But you wish to retain your Christian name?” Mrs. Wattlesbrook asked, peering over the top of her reading glasses.

“Sure.”

“Hm . . .” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook, as if to say, *So, you're one of those*. “‘Miss Cordial’ it is.”

“Actually, better make that ‘missus.’”

“Miss,” Mrs. Wattlesbrook said firmly.

“Missus,” Mrs. Cordial said more firmly. She didn't care about disowning James, but in 1816, a “miss” could not have children and be accepted in society. She could change her name, her hair, her dress, her way of being, but one thing she could not

change was her status as mother. She felt it etched into her very face, as indelible as her brow wrinkle.

“Mrs. Cordial,” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook with a sniff, her approval rapidly dwindling. “A widow?”

Charlotte nodded. “Yes, my husband died tragically. It was a gruesome and exceedingly painful demise.”

For the first time, Mrs. Wattlesbrook really smiled, and in such a way that Charlotte half expected the woman to extend her fist to knock knuckles.

“It is a shame when they die young,” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook.

Charlotte nodded with mock solemnity, but she couldn’t help smiling a little as well. She had a feeling Mrs. Wattlesbrook *understood* about unfaithful husbands. Maybe Mrs. Wattlesbrook was a fellow jilted wife.

The smile lasted a lightning flash, then the woman cleared her throat and cleared her face of expression.

“So, Mrs. Cordial, I would have you know that I take extreme pains to ensure all my Guests have a Satisfying Experience,” Mrs. Wattlesbrook said, certain words clearly capitalized. “From your detailed profile, I have matched you to a gentleman character suited to your temperament and personality. My clients enjoy discovering their intended Romantic Interest and pursuing an innocent love affair under the rules of Regency Etiquette. We have had troublesome clients in the past. I trust you will not be one?” She raised her eyebrows.

“I don’t think so. Generally I’m not . . . troublesome.”

“Good.”

“Can I ask you a quick question? What does ‘Regency’ mean?”

Mrs. Wattlesbrook pressed her lips then inhaled deeply through her nostrils. “In 1811, King George III was declared unfit,

and his son ruled by proxy for nine years. He was the Prince Regent, and thus this era is known as ‘the Regency.’”

“Aha! I am so clueless. Why was King George unfit?”

“Because he succumbed to madness.”

“Oh,” said Charlotte, feeling as shocked as a nineteenth-century woman who’d just heard the news. There was nothing like madness to make her feel unsettled. Madness and plane crashes. And ghost sightings. Also toxic mold and flu epidemics. And carbon monoxide leaks.

“If that is all, allow me to acquaint you with some of the characters in your session.” Mrs. Wattlesbrook scanned some papers, speaking as she flipped through. “Mr. Thomas Mallery dotes on his dear aunt”—she indicated herself—“and has come to visit me at Pembroke Park. Mr. Mallery has invited his old schoolmate Edmund Grey along, as well as Mr. Grey’s sister, the young widow Charlotte Cordial.”

“I have a brother?” Charlotte asked. Clearly this Mr. Grey would not be her Romantic Interest. She was relieved there would be at least one safe gentleman in the house. She supposed romance was an integral part of the Austen Experience, but she was pretty well done with setups.

“You have a brother,” Mrs. Wattlesbrook confirmed. “And note that while Etiquette demands a woman address a man properly, by his surname and with the designation of *mister*, Edmund, as your brother, may be addressed in the more familial sense.”

Charlotte blinked. “What?”

“Mr. Grey’s sister would naturally call him ‘Edmund.’”

“Oh.”

She doubted that would be natural, even if she *were* his sister. She had a prejudice against formal-sounding names, especially ones with an abundance of hard consonants. “Edmund” did not roll off her tongue. Neither did “Slobodan.” Or “Abednego.”

“There will be two other guests at Pembroke Park during your stay. Miss Elizabeth Charming has been with us for . . . some time. Miss Lydia Gardenside is new to Pembroke Park, like yourself. She is suffering from consumption and is here to convalesce in our peaceful country estate.” Mrs. Wattlesbrook made herself busy, rearranging papers, looking down while she spoke. “I believe Miss Gardenside is a girl of some renown in the cities and in the papers, but at the Park she needs relaxation and anonymity. No hustle and fuss to disturb her recovery. We understand each other?”

Mrs. Wattlesbrook peered at Charlotte over her reading glasses.

Charlotte blinked. Was Miss Gardenside a famous convict recently released from an English jail? Or perhaps royalty?

“Of course,” said Charlotte. She just hoped that this duchess or countess or whatever wouldn’t feel slighted when Charlotte had no idea who she was.

Charlotte didn’t have long to wonder. A manservant entered, dressed in a tailed jacket and white wig, and informed Mrs. Wattlesbrook that the carriage was ready.

“Very good, Bernard. Fetch Miss Gardenside from her room.”

The servant bowed and went into a back room.

Charlotte finished her tea, brushed the crumpet crumbs from her chest, and looked up to see on Bernard’s arm the very person whose poster hung on her daughter’s bedroom wall, whose face graced Lu’s school notebook, whose rainbow-colored name was imprinted on Lu’s sheets. It was *her*, the twenty-year-old actress from the celebrity magazines, the Grammy winner, the television star. The British girl who’d gotten millions of American teens to use “fancy” as a verb and “brilliant” instead of “cool.” So famous she only had one name: Alisha.

“Oh, it’s you!” said Charlotte’s mouth, completely without her permission. Because, of course, if Charlotte had been in control

of her mouth, she would have smiled nonchalantly and said, “How do you do?” or something politely formal and indifferent. Oh, traitorous mouth! Now it was too late to appear unaffected by this incognito celebrity.

“It is I?” Miss Gardenside asked innocently. Her accent was more formal, like the queen’s, than the rougher tone Charlotte had heard her use in interviews. Nevertheless, there was no mistaking a face that famous, though her long black hair was twisted up and set with silver pins. Her dark skin glowed against the yellow of her gown, and her black eyes looked simpler without her trademark long fake lashes. The girl was extremely thin but still very pretty. Charlotte considered putting an Alisha poster on her own wall.

“I am sorry, have we met?” asked Alisha—or rather, Miss Gardenside.

Had they met? No . . . but then again, she wasn’t really Mrs. Cordial, and Mondays didn’t usually find her in a corset and bloomers. Those fake-lashes-less eyes seemed to plead, I’m not Alisha, please pretend I’m not Alisha . . .

“I think so,” said Charlotte, trying to play along. “In Bath last year? We were introduced at the assembly by . . . by Miss Jones?”

Miss Gardenside only blinked before saying, “Yes, I remember now. Of course. That was a lovely evening. If I am not mistaken, you were wearing a fetching little cap fit with cherries and a tiny cupid.”

“Exactly,” Charlotte said sportingly.

“I recall you danced *three* dances with that tall mustachioed officer, you scandalous thing!”

“Just so,” Charlotte said, not without reservations.

“And you were so bold at the dance, humming out a tune for the quadrangle until the musicians finally arrived.”

“Uh-huh,” Charlotte said, losing heart.

Miss Gardenside clapped her hands. “I was simply enchanted

with you at the time, and swore in my heart that if we met again, I would keep you forever at my bosom. So now it is official. You will always be Charlotte to me, and I Lydia to you, and I claim you most fiercely as my dearest friend and confidant.”

There was barely a trace of the hair-swinging, shimmying superstar. It would break the game to compliment her outright, but Charlotte wanted her to know that she was doing a good job, so she gave her a sincere smile.

Miss Gardenside took her arm. “Bosom friends,” she said resolutely.

The carriage ride was short, too short for Charlotte’s liking. It felt so perfectly surreal to be wearing a bonnet and jolting along a country lane—frankly more like a Terry Gilliam movie than a *Masterpiece Theatre* episode, but all the same, still very *interesting*. She and Miss Gardenside gasped in unison when the manor house emerged from the greenery.

Charlotte had been to parties in some impressive mansions back home, but they were weak sauce compared with this big, old stone house. A few dozen windows faced front, the glare from the sun making them opaque. Perhaps it was all those blind windows and the mystery of what might wait on the other side, or perhaps it was her mental library of Agatha Christie novels, but Charlotte thought at that moment, This is the sort of house where murders happen.

A line of manservants and maids stood out front. The very thin butler opened the door as the carriage stopped and helped out the passengers.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Wattlesbrook,” he said.

“Thank you, Neville.”

“Yay!” A brightly blonde woman of fifty ran out of the house and down the stairs. “More girls!”

She spread her arms wide, her enormous bosom shaking

violently with the exercise. The woman seemed to be coming in for a hug at full speed, and Charlotte took a step back, sure she would be crushed against the side of the carriage. But with a look from Mrs. Wattlesbrook, the woman stopped short.

“May I present Miss Elizabeth Charming, our beloved houseguest,” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook, in turn announcing Charlotte and Miss Gardenside.

“How do you do?” said Charlotte with a curtsy and head bow, as she’d practiced at the inn.

“I do properly well, *rawther*,” Miss Charming said in a stressed and twangy accent of no identifiable origin. “Jolly good to have you here.”

Miss Charming’s well-lipsticked lips quivered as she spoke, and for a moment Charlotte worried that she was suffering a mild stroke.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Miss Charming is of our native England,” Mrs. Wattlesbrook explained.

“Oh . . .” Charlotte smiled politely. “I can tell from your . . . accent.” Charlotte hadn’t dared try to sound British herself. The only accent she could do was Brooklyn, and then only when saying words like “quarter” and “daughter.” James had hated it when she did her Brooklyn accent.

Miss Charming beamed. She looked over Miss Gardenside, seemingly without recognizing Alisha beneath the bonnet, and took their arms, leading them up the steps.

“This place is so great!” she whispered, her tone settling into American Southern. “And the guys are *delish*, but I get lonely for girls between sessions. I can’t wait until—”

She had to stop, because Miss Gardenside had begun to cough. Not a light there’s-a-wee-something-in-my-throat cough, but a harsh, grating, suffocating hack. She bent over, wheezing

and battling her lungs, while Charlotte stupidly patted her on the back and offered to fetch water, the universal language for you're-coughing-and-there's-nothing-useful-I-can-do.

Mrs. Wattlesbrook rushed inside and returned with a tall, blonde woman in a navy blue dress.

"I'll take her up to bed," said the woman.

Miss Gardenside appeared to be shaking her head no, but she couldn't stop coughing long enough to voice any protest, and her feet shuffled along as the woman walked her inside. Mrs. Wattlesbrook followed.

"Did you guys have popcorn in the carriage?" Miss Charming asked.

"Popcorn? Um, no. Why?"

"I once got a piece of popcorn stuck in my upper respiratory," Miss Charming whispered. "Had to go to the emergency . . . apothecary place."

"I see," said Charlotte. "No, Miss Gardenside has consumption."

"Ooh. That sounds contagious."

As far as Charlotte knew, "consumption" was the archaic term for tuberculosis, which was, in fact, quite contagious.

"But I can't imagine she would come here, and Mrs. Wattlesbrook would let her, if she really has a deadly, communicable disease. Right?"

Miss Charming shrugged. "I won't be sharing my toothbrush with her."

They entered through the front doors and into a grand foyer, where a huge staircase spilled scarlet carpet down to the marble tiles. Dark wood banisters and trim contrasted with bright white walls, giving Charlotte the impression of gashes against pale skin.

Gashes against pale skin? You're really morbid, her Inner Thoughts said.

Charlotte shrugged internally. She didn't think she was morbid by habit, but old houses did seem to bring that out in her. Given their many years of history, odds were that bad things had happened inside. Really bad things. Her imagination couldn't rest for wondering.

Mrs. Wattlesbrook returned and escorted Charlotte upstairs to her chamber. Its walls were painted a sunny yellow, her bed dressed in summery blue. A white-upholstered chair and pale wood table and wardrobe added to the perky atmosphere. Charlotte smiled. Maybe staying in a big old ponderous house wouldn't be so bad after all. Maybe it wouldn't tickle her nerves at night and make her shiver and long for home.

"Take a rest if you like," Mrs. Wattlesbrook said. "We convene in the drawing room before dinner."

"Thank you."

Charlotte smiled. Mrs. Wattlesbrook smiled. The maid left. Mrs. Wattlesbrook did not leave.

"Hm?" said Charlotte, expecting something more.

The proprietress stepped forward. "Do you have anything with you from home?"

Charlotte indicated the open trunk. The maid had unpacked her Regency attire into the wardrobe and drawers. All that was left was Charlotte's toiletries bag.

"If you have any medications," said Mrs. Wattlesbrook, "my staff will keep them in the kitchen at cooler temperatures and serve them to you with your meals."

"Nope . . . no, I don't have any medications."

"All right then." Mrs. Wattlesbrook still didn't leave.

"Was there something else?" asked Charlotte.

Mrs. Wattlesbrook cleared her throat. She looked uncomfortable—the way a boulder looks when it doesn't like where it's sitting.

“There are certain . . . modern accoutrements we don’t allow at Pembroke Park.”

“Yes, I read the papers you sent: no laptops, no cell phones. So I left all that at the inn. But when I registered, I explained that I need to call my children every few days to check in—”

“Yes, I have your request on file and we will see to it.” Mrs. Wattlesbrook stared pointedly at the toiletries bag.

“Um . . . the papers said we could bring our own makeup and—”

“May I inspect your case?” Mrs. Wattlesbrook interrupted.

Charlotte stood back and watched the woman rifle through her powders and lipsticks and toothpaste. The tampons made her blush. The under-eye concealer made her blanch. The acne cream made her want to die.

Buck up, Charlotte, she told herself. You’re not the only grown woman in the world who still needs acne cream. From time to time. No big deal or anything.

Mrs. Wattlesbrook cleared her throat, nodded, and left without making eye contact.

Charlotte shut the door and noticed that it didn’t lock. She lay on her bed, clutching her toiletries bag to her chest like a teddy bear.

“You’re an idiot,” she whispered to herself.

Then she fell asleep.

home, before

AT FIRST JAMES SAID HE was confused. He needed a break. He was unhappy at work. No, he was unhappy at home. He needed to re-center. He needed new hair products.

This dragged on for months until the truth came out.

Another woman? At least existential angst had its roots in the fine tradition of melancholy poets and misunderstood teenagers. But . . . a mistress? It was just so cliché. Charlotte, lost and hurt, wondered if she wasn't also a little ashamed that the man she loved would succumb to such a hackneyed story.

If he was going to leave her, let the reason be explosive and alluring. Let him be overcome with a passion for trapeze artistry, or take an oath of silence and settle down in the foothills of Everest.

"He's been fighting the impulse for years," she could explain to her friends over tea and scones. "But he's an artist at heart. And he's never felt so fulfilled as he is now, living in Guatemala and painting gourds that he sells to support blind orphans. We'll miss him, of course, but . . ." And she'd make a cute, bewildered shrug.

But no. It was "love."

"I'm in love," he said. "For the first time in my life, *really* in love."

How blessed for him, and how opportune. Just when life was getting a little bit crunchy, a little stretched and strained, he conveniently falls in love with another woman. No more battling with kids, no more grumpy daughter or needy young son to worry about, no more slightly saggy wife who knows all his secrets and the scent of his back sweat. Falling in love in the middle of an old relationship was such a treat!

She handled the framed photo of their family taken the past Christmas. She dropped it in the garbage can. She fished it back out, wrapped it in tissue paper, and put it away with the holiday decorations.

austenland, day 1, cont.

CHARLOTTE WOKE TO A KNOCK. The curtains were drawn, the room dark and chilly. She sat upright, hugging something plasticky that was making her neck hot.

Toiletries.

Still clutching the bag, she ran to the door, rubbing the side of her face in case the pillow had left indentations. Why should she feel guilty? Mrs. Wattlesbrook said she could rest. She smoothed out her skirt before opening the door.

"Dinner is nearly served," the maid said quickly. "May I help you dress?"

The maid was slim and petite, and Charlotte considered that she probably weighed as much as Charlotte's right leg. The maid's hair was pale, her skin and eyes were pale. She seemed to be fading away. Or Charlotte's eyes were just dry. She blinked them hard.

“Thanks, I am dressed.”

The maid looked pained to have to speak again. “It is the custom . . . to wear an evening dress to dinner.”

Oh! Right! This was sounding familiar from her Austen read-a-thon and Mrs. Wattlesbrook’s “Notes on the Regency Era.”

“Sure, thanks.”

The maid curtsied and entered, lighting several candles before going to the wardrobe.

Wow, Charlotte thought. I am in a place where people curtsy. And this is where I’m going to refind myself? In her sticky postnap haze, the prospect seemed doubtful. She went into the bathroom and closed the door. The mirror revealed the truth of her pillow face, and she employed the previously prodded toiletries before coming back out.

“What’s your name?” Charlotte asked as the maid helped her out of her dress.

“Mary.”

A common Austen name. There were Marys in several of her novels. Charlotte wondered if the maid’s name was real or applied. Were the maids actors too, or were they just . . . maids?

Charlotte was practically naked now—in her corset, chemise, and bloomers. Standing before a stranger in her underwear was never a good time, but especially not in *weird* underwear.

“How long have you been at Pembroke Park?” she blurted. It was the sort of small talk she engaged in while undergoing a pap smear. If she was talking, she wasn’t thinking about how humiliated she felt.

She made it a point to never go to the same gynecologist twice. There was always a reason to disapprove: chilly exam rooms, sweltering exam rooms, a doctor who hummed while she worked. Her most recent visit had gone smoothly, leaving her no easy excuse,

until her lab results were mailed to her on the clinic's official letterhead: "Rock Canyon OB-GYN: We're GYNO-MITE!"

"Just two months, ma'am," said Mary. "Before, I was at Windy Nook."

"What a pretty name," Charlotte said, pulling the new dress over her head so quickly she tangled her hair in a clasp. "Is Windy Nook another estate like Pembroke Park?"

"It was." Mary said it like she didn't want to talk anymore. Or wasn't supposed to.

Which intrigued Charlotte.

"What happened to Windy Nook?"

"It's gone." Mary's voice was nearly a whisper.

Charlotte didn't press her further, but her mind was buzzing now, working over the idea of another Pembroke Park, something gone, some tragedy. What a delightful diversion. Was it true, or was this a little clue that would become part of the ongoing story of Pembroke Park? How curious. That was when Charlotte began to suspect that she'd fallen down the rabbit hole.

Mary did Charlotte's hair in silence and curtsied when she left. Charlotte curtsied back. Then thought maybe she wasn't supposed to curtsy to a servant. It was all very confusing.

She blew out the candles, and her formerly cheerful room was quieted of color. A shiver chased her into the hallway. She'd slept through the remains of the day, and an overcast evening skulked outside the windows. All the doors were closed. She tiptoed down the hall, strangely afraid of disrupting the stillness with her passage.

I don't trust old houses, she told herself, as if acknowledging the fact would make her more brave.

She was intimidated by the creaky, sleepy lurkiness, the nooks and crannies and doorways and passages, the unexpected noises,

the many places a stranger could skulk. Who could rest easy in a house with wings and battlements—and, no doubt, dungeons?

A glimmer beckoned from downstairs, and she followed it into the drawing room.

At last, plenty of light—kerosene lamps (both real and electric, it seemed), candles, a fire, furniture upholstered in gaudy fabrics, and an enormous mirror with an ornate gilded frame holding court on the wall. The brightness and colors were briefly overwhelming.

“Mrs. Cordial!” Miss Charming bounced up from her sofa and took Charlotte’s arm. She leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “Now you get to meet the men! It’s the best part.”

“Good evening, Mrs. Cordial,” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook. “You look lovely this evening. I see I did well assigning Mary to you. She has a way with shorter hair. I am sorry she is such a skittish thing, but I hope you find her abilities outweigh the vexation of her personality. Yes, very good with short hair . . .”

Mrs. Wattlesbrook looked her over as if she were a cow going to market. Not that Charlotte had any personal experience with selling cows, or with *market* per se, but there just wasn’t a good metaphor in her realm of experience.

“Well,” the hostess said approvingly.

Charlotte’s smile was genuine. Perhaps Mrs. Wattlesbrook had forgiven her the transgression of wanting to be a missus.

“Mrs. Charlotte Cordial, may I present our gentlemen guests.”

At her words, two gentlemen, who had been sitting on sofas just out of sight, arose and came forward. Charlotte gasped.

In movies, we are accustomed to seeing handsome actors. It’s so commonplace on the screen, large or small, that we barely note it as extraordinary. But in life, rarely do we encounter an onslaught of beauty, enter a hive of handsomeness, find ourselves awash in an ocean of attractiveness, drowning in a miasma of hotness. Char-

lotte was unprepared. She momentarily forgot her animosity toward dark old houses.

“This is Colonel Andrews,” said the hostess. “The second son of the earl of Denton and a dear family friend.”

Colonel Andrews bowed in a very pleasing way. He was darling—fair hair, a naughty smile. He must have been at least ten years her junior.

Oh, Charlotte, what are you getting yourself into?

“And of course you know your brother, Mr. Edmund Grey.”

Apparently Mrs. Wattlesbrook only hired eye candy. While the colonel had a roguish appeal, Edmund was handsome in a cheery way. His slightest smile produced Death Star-size dimples in both cheeks, and his blue eyes sparkled in the candlelight. Not just metaphorically. Truly sparkled.

“Sister dear! How delightful that you should come. I was telling Andrews that you are jolly good company and game for anything, is that not so?”

To be honest, Charlotte didn't feel game for much. She felt as poorly disguised as Alisha, though instead of being a famous and talented starlet, she was a frazzled mommy playing dress-up. But Edmund Grey's blue eyes kept on shining, and she trusted their hopeful promise that he would get her through this somehow.

“That's right. The Greys ever were game.” She thought she should say something more, something charming, tell a witty story about Edmund when he was younger and repay him for his dazzling blues, but she felt shy in a push-up corset and low-cut dress. Should she slouch to keep her bust from sticking out so much? Would her proper posture make them think she was trying to flaunt her cleavage? At least no one was obviously looking her over. Except for Miss Charming. Charlotte caught her eye, and Miss Charming nodded in an approving way.

“And where is Mallery?” Colonel Andrews asked.

Just then the front door banged open and they could hear loud footsteps coming down the hall. A figure passed the drawing room and headed toward the stairs.

“Mr. Mallery!” Mrs. Wattlesbrook called.

He paused, then came back, his stance impatient. He was the tallest of the three gentlemen, striking in a black cloak and riding boots, his long hair held in a masculine ponytail. Charlotte added the word “masculine” to her internal description, because normally she considered long hair on men weird and maybe a little bit sweet. But everything about this man pronounced Masculinity in no-nonsense terms. While the other two gentlemen would look comfortable on a *GQ* cover, Mr. Mallery didn’t seem likely to feel comfortable anywhere—except maybe a castle on a moor. He had dark hair and dark eyes, and standing on the threshold as he was, he seemed too untamed and, well, *dangerous* to enter the prim world of the drawing room.

His look was restless, but he bowed to Mrs. Wattlesbrook.

“My apologies, madam. My horse stumbled in the field.”

“That is a shame. Is she all right?”

“Of course she is, or I would not have returned from the stables.”

Mr. Mallery’s glance took in Charlotte, then his eyes returned to Mrs. Wattlesbrook. He left without another word.

Colonel Andrews laughed. “There goes the wealthiest man in the county, but twenty-five thousand a year cannot manners buy.”

“Indeed.” Mrs. Wattlesbrook sniffed, but Charlotte observed that her sternness seemed more affected than usual. In fact, the woman was downright pleased.

The butler entered, but Mrs. Wattlesbrook waved him off.

“We shall wait for Mr. Mallery, Neville.”

“He shan’t be long, I daresay,” Colonel Andrews said. “The old boy dresses like he rides—fast and careless.”

“Not careless,” Mrs. Wattlesbrook corrected. “Mr. Mallery is never careless.”

Colonel Andrews nodded assent.

Charlotte noticed Miss Gardenside, sitting on a lounge, her feet up, a blanket over her legs. Her face was shiny, her eyes wet, and she dabbed at them with a handkerchief.

Feeling a little unready for the gentlemen, Charlotte wandered over to the lounge and took a chair beside her.

“Can I get you anything?” Charlotte asked.

Miss Gardenside smiled. “Oh no, my dear Charlotte. I have never felt so well in all my life. I swear I could dance till dawn, were we haunting dear old Bath again. Stay and talk. I do not mean to be alone.”

She shivered, closed her eyes briefly, then smiled again as if nothing were wrong in all the world.

“Your brother is the dimpled one there?” she asked, nodding toward where Mr. Grey was speaking with Miss Charming.

“Yes. Edmun—” It was such a trial for Charlotte’s tongue to perform both *ds*. “Edmund,” she said again, forcing the hard consonants. The name was too formal, too heavy. “Eddie,” she tried out.

His attention turned toward the lounge.

“We call him ‘Eddie’ at home. Don’t we, brother?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Indeed we do, Charlotte. It is good to see you. I would ask you all the news of home had I not received one of mother’s tomes just yesterday. So I meet you well informed on the number of chickens in the henhouse, the dastardly conduct of elderly Mr. Bushwhack at the reins of his new phaeton, and the mud that just will not dry on the path to church. More news than that I cannot possibly imagine.”

“Join us, Eddie,” said Charlotte, indicating the edge of the lounge. “Miss Gardenside is under the weather and could use some company.”

“Consumption, isn’t it?” he asked, sitting. “The devil take it. But yours is seasonal, I shouldn’t warrant, and so will clear up soon.” He lifted his hand as if he would place it on her blanket-covered leg but then pulled back. His look was warm and sincere as he added, “I think you brave beyond words, Miss Gardenside. I had a bout of consumption myself years past and felt as if I had one leg in the grave and would not mind tossing in the other as well. I marvel at your strength to be here amongst us and put on a cheery demeanor.”

“I prefer it . . . takes my mind off—” She started to cough, and her face took on a yellowish-greenish sheen.

The blonde woman who had taken Miss Gardenside to her room earlier approached, still in her plain-cut navy dress. She was holding a glass of water for Miss Gardenside, so Charlotte got out of the way.

She joined Miss Charming, who sat alone at the piano, picking out single notes in no discernible tune.

“Who is that other lady?” Charlotte asked.

“Miss Gardenside’s nurse, Mrs. Hatchet,” said Miss Charming.

“What a name.”

“I know. It’s weird. What’s a ‘gardenside’ anyway?”

“I meant . . . um . . . So, how long have you been at Pembroke Park?”

“Oh, I don’t keep track anymore.”

“You must really like it here.”

Miss Charming sighed. “It’s home now. Though the food hasn’t grown on me much, and I think I was a little happier before Mrs. Wattlesbrook had a special corset made to fit me.” She heaved her chest, letting her bosom rise and fall.

Charlotte didn’t mean to stare, but now that she’d made eye contact, she couldn’t look away from the woman’s squeaky-tight cleavage and the awesome expanse of her chest propped up and popping out. It was unnatural, surely. No human could support

such weight, no woman (let alone man) could manage so much breast.

“Sometimes . . .” Miss Charming’s voice dropped lower, and she looked Charlotte in the eye. “Sometimes my boobs *kill*.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened, her mouth agape. It wasn’t until Miss Charming followed her shocking statement by rubbing her chest in discomfort that Charlotte realized “my boobs kill” meant “my boobs ache” rather than “my boobs fatally maim people.” It was a natural mistake to make. After all, they really were large enough to suffocate a grown man.

“Here we are,” Mrs. Wattlesbrook said, saving Charlotte from her thoughts.

Mr. Mallery had just entered, his hair combed, but not very well. His dinner jacket and breeches were somewhat finer than his riding clothes, though he lacked silk and velvet and lace and still wore boots—unlike Colonel Andrews, in his man slippers with buckles. Apparently, there was nothing that could be done to dress up his expression. When Charlotte fell into his line of sight, she felt, frankly, alarmed. Mr. Mallery, in a word, was formidable.

“That is better, Thomas,” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook. “I cannot think what our guests’ opinion must be of you, stomping in dirty and rough at dinnertime.”

“Madam, I dress only for you.”

His gaze returned to Charlotte, and he considered her unabashedly. She turned half away.

He’s an actor, she told herself. This is a character, a part he’s playing.

The knowledge didn’t settle her nerves. It was as disconcerting as if she were watching a play and an actor scowled at her from the stage, and not for forgetting to turn off her cell phone or for fiddling with cellophane-wrapped candies, but for no discernible reason except that she *displeased* him.

“Well then, ladies and gentlemen,” said Mrs. Wattlesbrook, “let us dine.”

Eddie offered his arm to his sister and escorted her into the dining room, where Charlotte resolved to be witty and wonderful all dinner long.

She wasn't.

home, three years before

“WHO WERE YOU TALKING TO?” James asked as Charlotte hung up her phone.

“Jagadish, in India. He’s my new programmer.”

James nodded, but his expression was stern, as if he were working over a difficult problem in his mind.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” He shrugged. “The way you were talking, your tone, it was different than I’m used to hearing from you.”

Oh no, she hoped she hadn’t sounded like an obnoxious American, speaking too loudly and overpronouncing everything. Jagadish was fully fluent in English. How embarrassing!

“How did I sound?” she asked fearfully.

James started fiddling with his phone. “Confident.”