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A Weekend with Mr Darcy

Written by Victoria Connelly

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VICTORIA CONNELLY

A Weekend with Mr Darcy

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'She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow.'

Cassandra Austen of her sister, Jane.

Chapter One

Dr Katherine Roberts couldn't help thinking that a university lecturer in possession of a pile of paperwork must be in want of a holiday.

She leant back in her chair and surveyed her desk. It wasn't a pretty sight. Outside, the October sunshine was golden and glorious and she was shut up in her book-lined tomb of an office.

Removing her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose, she looked at the leaflet that was lying beside a half-eaten salad sandwich which had wilted hours before. The heading was in a beautiful bold script that looked like old-fashioned handwriting.

Purley Hall, Church Stinton, Hampshire, it read.

Set in thirty-five acres of glorious parkland, this early eighteenth-century house is the perfect place in which to enjoy your Jane Austen weekend. Join a host of special guest speakers and find out more about England's favourite novelist.

Katherine looked at the photograph of the handsome red-bricked Georgian mansion taken from the famous herbaceous borders. With its long sweep of lawn and large sash windows, it was the quintessential English country

house and it was very easy to imagine a whole host of Jane Austen characters walking through its rooms and gardens.

'And I will be too,' Katherine said to herself. It was the third year she'd been invited to speak at the Jane Austen weekend and rumour had it that the novelist, Lorna Warwick, was going to make an appearance too. Katherine bit her lip. Lorna Warwick was her favourite author – after Jane Austen, of course. She was a huge bestseller, famous for her risqué Regency romances of which she published one perfect book a year. Katherine had read them all from the very first – *Marriage and Magic* – to the latest – *A Bride for Lord Burford* – published a few months ago and which Katherine had devoured in one evening at the expense of a pile of essays she should have been marking.

She thought of the secret bookshelves in her study at home and how they groaned deliciously under the weight of Miss Warwick's work. How her colleagues would frown and fret at such horrors as popular fiction! How quickly would she be marched from her Oxford office and escorted from St Bridget's College if they knew of her wicked passion?

'Dr Roberts,' Professor Compton would say, his hairy eyebrows lowered over his beady eyes, 'you really do surprise me.'

'Why, because I choose to read some novels purely for entertainment?' Katherine would say to him, remembering Jane Austen's own defence of the pleasures of novels in *Northanger Abbey*. 'Professor Compton, you really are a dreadful snob!'

But it couldn't be helped. Lorna Warwick's fiction was Katherine's secret vice and, if her stuffy colleagues ever found out, she would be banished from Oxford before you could say *Sense and Sensibility*.

To Katherine's mind, it wasn't right that something which could give as much pleasure as a novel could be so reviled. Lorna Warwick had confessed to being on the receiving end of such condescension too and had been sent some very snobby letters in her time. Perhaps that was why Katherine's own letter had caught the eye of the author.

It had been about a year ago when Katherine had done something she'd never ever done before – she'd written a fan letter and posted it care of Miss Warwick's publisher. It was a silly letter really, full of gushings and admiration and Katherine had never expected a reply. Nevertheless, within a fortnight, a beautiful cream envelope had dropped onto her doormat containing a letter from the famous writer.

How lovely to receive your letter. You have no idea what it means to me to be told how much you enjoy my novels. I often get some very strange letters from readers telling me that they always read my novels but that they are complete trash!

Katherine had laughed and their bond had been sealed. After that, she couldn't stop. Every moment that wasn't spent reading a Lorna Warwick novel was spent writing to the woman herself and each letter was answered. They talked about all sorts of things – not just books. They talked about films, past relationships, their work, fashion, Jane Austen, and if men had changed since Austen's times and if one could really expect to find a Mr Darcy outside the pages of a novel.

Then Katherine had dared to ask Lorna if she was attending the conference at Purley Hall and it had gone quiet. For over two weeks. Had Katherine overstepped the boundaries? Had she pushed things too far? Maybe it was one thing exchanging letters with a fan but quite another to meet them in the flesh.

But – just as Katherine had given up all hope – a letter had arrived.

Dear Katherine,

I'm so sorry not to have replied sooner but I've been away and I still can't answer your question as to whether or not I'll be at Purley. We'll just have to wait and see.

Yours truly, Lorna.

It seemed a very odd sort of reply, Katherine thought. If Lorna Warwick was going to be at Purley, surely the organizers would want to know as she'd be the biggest name and the main pull because she was famously reclusive. In comparison to the bestselling novelist, Katherine was just a dusty fusty old lecturer. Well, *young* lecturer actually; she was in her early thirties. But she knew that people would come and listen to her talks only because they were true Janeites. At these conferences, anyone speaking about Jane Austen was instantly adored and held in great esteem. In fact, any sort of activity with even the slightest connection to Austen was pursued and enjoyed from Jane Austen Scrabble to Murder in the Dark which, one year, ended in uproar as it was discovered that Anne Elliot had somehow managed to murder Captain Wentworth.

Katherine smiled as she remembered. Then, trying to put thoughts of Purley out of her mind, she made a start on the pile of papers to her left which was threatening to spill onto the floor. It was mostly rubbish that had accumulated as the term had progressed. It was what she called her 'tomorrow pile' only she'd run out of tomorrows now.

With fingers as dextrous as a concert pianist's, she filed, threw away and recycled until she could see the glorious wood of her desk again.

She was just about to pick up her handbag and briefcase when there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' she said, wondering who was calling so late in the day without an appointment.

The door opened and a tousled head popped round.

'Stewie,' she said, sighing inwardly as one of her students stumbled into the room. Stewie Harper was in his first term studying English literature and he'd spent most of that time banging on her office door.

'Dr Roberts,' he said. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you.'

'No,' she said, resigning herself to helping him out of whatever literary conundrum he now found himself in. 'Come in.'

Stewie looked at the chair opposite Katherine's and she motioned for him to sit down.

'It's the reading list,' he said, producing it from his pocket. 'It says we're to read as many of these titles as possible during the term.'

'Well, as many as you have time for,' Katherine said. 'We don't expect you to spend all your time with your head in a book.'

'Yes but I couldn't help noticing that your book isn't on here.'

Katherine's eyes widened. '*My* book?'

'Yes. *The Art of Jane Austen*.'

Katherine smiled. 'I'm afraid we can't fit all the books on the list.'

'But it's *your* book, Dr Roberts. It should've been on the top of the list.'

Katherine couldn't help but be flattered. 'Well, that's very sweet of you, Stewie.'

'Are you writing any more books, Dr Roberts?'

'Not at the moment,' she said.

'But you'll sign my copy, won't you?'

'Your copy?'

'Of your book,' he said, scraping around in an old carrier bag. 'I bought it in town. I had to order a copy.'

'You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble,' Katherine said, knowing that the hardback was expensive, especially on a student's budget.

'It wasn't any trouble,' Stewie said, handing it across the desk to her.

Katherine opened it to the title page and picked up her favourite pen, aware that Stewie's eyes were upon her as she signed.

'There you are,' she said, smiling at him as she handed the book back.

He turned eagerly to the page, his eyes bright. 'Oh,' he said, his smile slipping from his face. 'Best wishes,' he read.

Katherine nodded. 'My very best wishes,' she said.

'You don't want to add a kiss?'

'No, Stewie,' she said, 'because we both know that wouldn't be appropriate, don't we?' Katherine stood up. Stewie took the hint and stood up too.

'Dr Roberts,' he said as they left her office together, 'I was thinking that I might need some extra tuition. You know – over the weekends – with you.'

Katherine eyed him over her glasses, trying to make herself look as old and unattractive as possible. It wasn't an easy look to pull off because she was strikingly attractive with porcelain-pale skin and long dark hair which waved over her shoulders. Her mouth was a problem too. It was bee-stung-beautiful and could be a terrible distraction in class when she was trying to engage her students in her

poetry readings. 'Stewie,' she said, 'you don't really need my help.'

'I don't?'

'No, you don't. Your grades are consistently good and you've proven yourself to be an independent, free-thinking student.'

Stewie looked pleased by this but then dismay filled his face. 'But surely you can't do enough studying.'

'You absolutely can,' Katherine assured him. 'Everybody needs a break – that's what weekends are for. Go and have an adventure. Go bungee jumping or parachuting or something.'

'I'd rather be studying with you.'

'Well, I'm going away,' she told him.

'Where?'

'Hampshire.'

'Doesn't sound very exotic,' he said.

'Maybe not but it's a little piece of perfect England. Goodbye, Stewie,' she said, picking up her pace and lengthening her stride.

'Goodbye, Dr Roberts,' Stewie called after her.

She didn't look round but she had the feeling that his eyes were watching the progress of her legs down the entire length of the corridor.

Allowing herself a sigh of relief as she reached the car park, she thought of her small but perfect garden at home where she could kick off her shoes and sink her bare feet into the silky green coolness of her lawn, a glass of white wine in her hand as she toasted the completion of another week of academia. And she'd almost made it to her car and to freedom when a voice cried out.

'Katherine!'

She stopped. It was the last voice – the *very* last voice – she wanted to hear.

'What is it, David?' she asked a moment later as a fair-haired man with an anxious face joined her by her car.

'That's not very friendly. You were the one smiling at me across the car park.'

'I wasn't smiling at you – I was squinting at the sun.'

'Oh,' he said, looking crestfallen.

'I'm in a rush,' she said, opening her car door.

His hand instantly reached out and grabbed it, preventing her from closing it.

'David—'

'Talk to me, Kitty.'

'Don't call me that. Nobody calls me that.'

'Oh, come on, Catkin,' he said, his voice low. 'We haven't talked properly since – well, you know.'

'Since I left you because I found out you'd got married? You're the one who wasn't returning my calls, David. You're the one who disappeared off the face of the planet to marry some ex-student. Nobody knew where you were! I was worried sick.'

'I was going to tell you.'

'When? At the christening of your first-born?'

'You're not being fair.'

'*I'm* not being fair? I'm not the one who has a wife tucked away in the attic somewhere,' Katherine cried.

'Oh, don't be so melodramatic. This isn't some nineteenth-century novel,' he said. 'That's the problem with you. You can't exist in the real world. You have your head constantly immersed in fiction and you just can't handle reality any more.'

Katherine's mouth dropped open. 'That is *not* true!'

'No?' he said. 'So where are you heading now, eh? Purley bloody Hall, I bet.'

'That's my work,' Katherine said in defence of herself.

'Work? It's your whole life. You don't do anything *but* work. Your entire existence revolves around a set of people who've been made up by other people who've been dead for at least a century. It's not healthy.'

Katherine was on the verge of defending herself again but had the good sense to bite her tongue realizing – reluctantly – that he was probably right. She knew what her life was like; she knew how many early nights together had been rejected in favour of the latest Jane Austen adaptation on the TV and how often she had burned a much-anticipated candlelit dinner at home because she'd had her head buried in a book. It bothered her when she stopped to think about it long enough because she knew that she was in love with a fictional world. Mr Darcy, Captain Wentworth and Henry Tilney were all creations of a female mind. They didn't exist. But perhaps her obsession with such heroes was because there were so few real heroes and she was standing looking at a real-life non-hero right now.

'Go home to your wife, David,' she said, getting into her car.

'You know I'd rather go home with you.'

Katherine sighed. 'You should have thought about that before you lied to me,' she said, closing her door and driving off.

Honestly, any man that wasn't safely tucked between the covers of a book was a liability. You couldn't trust any of them. Was it any wonder that Katherine turned to fiction time and time again? Ever since her father had left home when she was seven, she'd hidden away from the world

around her, nose-diving into the safety of a friendly paperback. Books had always rescued her and had remained the one constant in her life.

Before she'd been dating David, she'd had a long-term relationship with an architect called Callum. She'd thought he was perfect and that they'd be together forever like Elizabeth and Darcy but then she'd arrived home early from work to find him in bed with his ex-girlfriend. It was a betrayal that had almost broken Katherine and one she hadn't seen coming at all. It had been an act to rival the very worst of fictional villains.

'And that's *real* men for you,' Katherine said to herself as she took the road out of Oxford that led to her village. She thought again about David's words to her. He was so unfair. It wasn't as if her whole life revolved around Jane Austen. It was just – well – most of it. But she had other interests. There was her yoga class which kept her in such good shape and her weekend jogging with her best friend, Chrissie. And she had lots of other friends who weren't fictional and she was forever attending dinner parties and little get-togethers. It was just that she preferred to spend her free time with her head in a book. She wouldn't be the respected academic she was if she hadn't worked as hard as she had and, as far as she could see, there was no harm in that, was there? She'd made a very good career out of books for one thing and, as far as she knew, she wasn't doing anyone any harm.

Unlike David.

Yes, Katherine might very well be guilty of living a life that was more fiction than reality but at least she didn't lie to anyone. If there was one thing in the world Katherine hated more than anything else, it was a lie.

Chapter Two

Lorna Warwick was just putting the finishing touches to a rather amusing chapter involving a very naughty duke when the phone rang.

'Hello, darling!' a voice chimed. 'Not a bad moment, is it?'

'No, not at all,' Lorna said, saving the chapter and switching the computer off for the day.

'Good, good. Look, I've had a word with the organizer at Purley Hall and they've said not to worry – it's your call.'

'Thanks, Nadia. I appreciate that.'

'So, what are you going to do?'

Lorna sighed. 'I'm not sure yet but I'd like to give the writer a break for a while and just be me.'

'You sure that's wise? You'll be letting down a lot of fans, you know.'

'Yes, but I'd be letting down a lot of fans if they knew who I really was, wouldn't I?'

'You must be kidding! They'd go mad if they knew the truth,' Nadia said.

Lorna smiled. 'Well, I don't think I'm quite ready to face that.'

'All right, babes. It's your decision.'

'You coming then?'

'Maybe for the Sunday evening dance.'

'Any excuse to buy a new pair of shoes,' Lorna said.

'How well do you know your agent?'

'As well as she knows me.'

Nadia laughed. 'I'll see you at Purley, babes.'

'Okay.'

Lorna stood up and walked across to the window of the study which looked out over the garden. It had needed attention for some time. There were dandelions yellowing the lawn, grasses had sprouted up in the borders and there were brambles tumbling over the wall from the fields beyond. The house needed attention too because Lorna had fired the cleaner two weeks ago after she'd been caught pocketing pages of the latest manuscript. Now the desk was covered in a fine layer of dust and a pot plant was wilting quietly in the corner.

It was always the same when a book was going well. Boring old jobs like housework and food preparation got neglected. The only thing that mattered was the flow of the story and – at the moment – the story was flowing well. Nadia was going to love this latest one and no doubt Lorna's editor would too. Tansy Newman of Parnaby and Fox was Lorna's biggest fan and couldn't wait to get her hands on the latest manuscripts. Edits were usually minimal and Lorna was in the lucky position to be consulted about everything from jacket design to publication date – hardbacks were released just before Christmas and paperbacks in time for the summer holidays. Lorna was lucky; her advances were legendary and her royalties substantial. Not all writers were in such a position.

For a moment, Lorna looked at the bookshelves that lined the study walls. They were filled to capacity with

hardback editions, paperbacks, large print, audio books, and foreign editions ranging from German to Spanish and Japanese to Russian. It was an impressive collection considering that the first novel hadn't been received at all well in the press.

'Lorna Warwick is attempting to cash in on the fact that Jane Austen's Regency is a perennial favourite,' one critic wrote. 'But what we have here is a cheap imitation. It's soft porn dressed in a little fine muslin.'

The words had stung bitterly until the book had become a bestseller in the US and was now seen as the forerunner in a very popular genre of Austenesque literature which included sequels, updates on the six classic novels, and the sort of sexy books that Lorna wrote. It was a huge and much-loved industry.

Lorna's fingers brushed the spines of the UK editions. Each featured a sumptuously-clad heroine. 'All breasts and bonnets,' another critic had declared, after which sales had rocketed. The public couldn't get enough of the feisty young heroines and devilishly handsome heroes and, of course, the happy endings.

Lorna loved writing. Nothing could beat the day-to-day weaving of a new story or getting to know characters that you hoped would captivate the readers' imagination as strongly as they did their creator. But there was more to being a writer than writing and Lorna was under increased pressure to do publicity. Hence the phone call from the agent about the conference. Year to year, Lorna's publisher had tried to persuade their favourite writer that it would be a great idea to attend.

'Incognito if you must,' they'd said, but Lorna hadn't been at all sure about it. The public face of publication had

never appealed. Writing was a private thing, wasn't it? One didn't need to be endlessly signing copies and giving talks. What was there to say, anyway? Surely the books spoke for themselves? But Lorna's publisher had often spoken of how writers were now seen as celebrities.

'The public has to be able to *see* you.'

'Oh, no,' Lorna had said. 'I don't want anybody to see me.'

So what was to be done about Purley Hall? There was a part of Lorna that was desperate to go. Being a writer was a lonely job and it would be good to get out and actually talk to real live people for once. That would be fun, wouldn't it – to get away from the study and meet people?

'Katherine,' Lorna suddenly said. Katherine was going to be there. Her letter had made it very clear that she'd love to meet her favourite author and there was a part of Lorna that wanted that very much too. Over the months, they'd become very close, sharing secrets and talking about their hopes for the future. Maybe it was the fact that they were writing letters – beautifully old-fashioned, handwritten letters that one savoured and kept. It wasn't like receiving an e-mail which one reads and deletes. These were proper letters on quality paper which the writers took time to fill. They had crossings out and notes in the margins and funny P.S.s too. They were to be reread and treasured just like in the time of Jane Austen when letters were a vital means of staying in touch with loved ones.

If there was one good reason for Lorna to attend the conference, it was Katherine.

Suddenly, Lorna ran upstairs to the bedroom where a wardrobe door was quickly opened and clothes were pulled out and flung onto the bed. What to take? What should Lorna

Warwick take to the Jane Austen conference? That was a question that was easy to answer because, although Lorna gave very few interviews and never gave out author photographs, it was obvious how the public perceived their beloved author. Nothing but velvets and satins would do in rich jewel colours with sequins and embroidery. Old-fashioned but with a quirky twist. A fascinator wouldn't be completely out of place or a sparkling brooch in the shape of a peacock. Shawls, scarves, a pair of evening gloves, perhaps even a shapely hat. Shoes which were elegant but discreet. That was the kind of thing people would expect.

But Lorna wasn't going to wear any of these things. Velvets and satins were instantly rejected and shawls were totally inappropriate and the reason was simple. Lorna Warwick was a man.