

*A Gift to
Remember*

Chapter 1

She is too fond of books, and it has turned her brain.

Louisa May Alcott

Anyone who says that money can't buy happiness has clearly never been inside a bookstore. And certainly not one like Chaucer's, Darcy Archer thought proudly, glancing around the gorgeous place she was lucky enough to work in.

The space was snug and inviting, with a vaguely Dickensian feel to it by way of its floor-to-ceiling hardwood shelves and filigreed gold signwriting above each section. The Victorian panelled bay window and festive-themed window display evoked old-fashioned storefronts of times gone by, as did the scroll-effect store sign hanging just outside the entrance.

Catering to its well-heeled Upper West Side neighbourhood, the little shop carried an eclectic mix of literature in a variety of genres, early edition classics as well as popular bestsellers

for adults and children. Booklovers and gift-seekers alike adored Chaucer's; its cheerful, experienced staff and homey atmosphere made it the perfect place to spend an afternoon wandering amongst the shelves or hunting down an elusive title.

At this time of year, with just over a week to go before Christmas, the store was decked out in its holiday finest: fairy lights strung along the shelves, homemade glitter snowflakes hanging from the exposed rafters above, and the evocative aroma of cinnamon wafting from the tiny café on the first-floor.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for a book ...'

Darcy glanced up from the shelving cart to see an older woman hovering uncertainly nearby. She looked to be in her late fifties, well-maintained and manicured, dressed in an expensive coat and scarf and clutching one of the last decade's most luxurious handbags, which Darcy knew, thanks to her fashion maven Aunt Katherine, was easily worth at least three of her monthly pay checks.

Looking for a book in a bookstore? If she only had a dollar for every time she'd heard *that* one, Darcy thought to herself.

But she gave the woman a warm smile. 'Let's see if I can help. What's the title?'

The woman bit her lip. 'That's it – I can't remember, but I know it's by a female author with three names ... and there are four daughters in it, although one has a boy's name, I think. And it's Christmas-time, and as far as I know they want to buy themselves presents, but then think better of it and buy

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one for their mother ...’ The woman’s voice trailed off, and she stared at the shelves helplessly.

Darcy slipped a stray lock of raven-black hair behind one ear. No matter what she did with it – which admittedly was little – it would never stay put. ‘Is this a new release?’ she asked.

‘Oh no, my dear, it’s a classic.’ The woman’s eyes refocused and her voice grew almost haughty. ‘I’m surprised you don’t know it. Have you been working here long?’

Darcy had to smile. Actually she was manager of Chaucer’s and had been working in the store for almost six years. Yet she was supposed, with minimum description, to magically identify the book in question amongst the millions published.

Still, she did love a challenge ...

‘Now, you say there are four sisters, and an author with three names?’ she said, gently guiding the woman towards the classic literature aisle. The customer nodded. Overhead, a smooth jazz rendition of ‘It Must Have Been the Mistletoe’ played softly through the speakers. ‘Well, I’m going to go out on a limb and say you may well be looking for *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.’

The woman grimaced. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘There are four sisters in the book, and one of them – Jo – has a vaguely masculine name.’ Darcy pulled a thin red book from the shelf, the pages edged with gold, and presented it to the woman.

‘Oh,’ she said, taking it. ‘That is *beautiful*.’ She examined the book from bottom to top and inside and out, marvelling

at its rich leather binding, and the original illustrations scattered throughout.

‘Is it intended as a gift?’ Darcy asked.

The woman smiled. ‘Yes. A Christmas present for my twelve-year-old granddaughter.’

Darcy guessed that the girl’s grandmother was acting on a recommendation and had never had the pleasure of reading *Little Women* herself.

Which was a shame.

It was one of Darcy’s favourites, and Alcott’s famous quote about books turning the brain described her pretty well. Darcy was indeed too fond of books – a condition known as ‘bibliolatriy’. She always had at least one book on the go close by, and felt almost naked without a novel on her person. Darcy had been enveloped in a story every single day of her life for as long as she could remember, and tended to use every opportunity – waiting in line, eating, occasionally even while brushing her teeth – to indulge in her greatest pleasure.

It was one of the reasons she loved working in Chaucer’s.

Darcy had first made the move as a teenager to Manhattan from Brooklyn where she lived with her Aunt Katherine, to attend Columbia University and get a Master of Fine Arts in Writing – the closest form of study relating to her passion that was available. Only to quickly discover that trying to create stories herself was a world apart from the joy of reading them. Easy reading definitely didn’t equate to easy writing, and the weight of her own expectations, combined with insecurity regarding the extent of her talent (or lack thereof), soon

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resulted in writer's block, after which Darcy had to admit defeat. Following graduation, she spent some time working on *Celebrate*, a glossy New York women's magazine. Her Aunt Katherine – via her hugely successful corporate events business – was good friends with the Editor-in-chief, and had pulled in the favour for Darcy.

After two miserable years of cutting down bland, 3,000-word descriptions of shoes and handbags into even blander 300-word descriptions, as well as struggling to fit in amongst her über-cool and effortlessly chic workmates, Darcy had just about given up on turning her passion into a way of life – until one day, when she had stumbled into Chaucer's with the aim of finding a guidebook that could help with her hopeless lack of fashion nous. Being unable to pass by a bookstore without venturing inside had always been one of her major weaknesses, but this time it had turned into a blessed stroke of luck.

There had been a 'Help Wanted' sign on the door and, on impulse, Darcy had applied there and then. She was interviewed on the spot, upstairs in the café, over a cup of caramel mocha. The following morning when she got the call from the owner telling her the job was hers, she felt as though all her Christmases had come at once. Imagine spending her days surrounded by books, being able to pick one off the shelf whenever she wanted, caress the spine, smell the paper ... heaven!

Darcy quickly discovered that working in a bookstore was in reality more about unpacking boxes and rearranging

shelves than sitting curled up in a corner sampling the merchandise. Even so, she felt that she'd finally found her calling. She quickly forgot the long hours, the lousy pay, the paper cuts and the doom-laden prophecies that books were finished.

This sudden development came as a blow to her Aunt Katherine, who considered it a huge step down in both pay and career prospects. And while there was certainly some truth in the former, Darcy wasn't the least bit interested in climbing the media ladder. Unlike the formidable, high-achieving Katherine Armstrong, Darcy just wasn't made that way, and when growing up had always been happiest with her nose in a book. One of her earliest and fondest memories was of her mother reading to her before bedtime, all tucked up and cosy together on Darcy's bed. A love of reading was something her bookworm parents had instilled in her right from the start, and the family had spent many happy times curled up together escaping into wonderful fictional worlds.

Like her mother Lauren used to say, books were solid proof that ordinary people were capable of creating magic.

Sadly, Darcy's beloved parents had both died in a car accident when she was twelve years old, after which she and her aunt had been thrown together by circumstance and familial duty. As per her parents' wishes, Lauren's sister Katherine had taken her niece in and overseen her upbringing until Darcy finished school and then at seventeen moved to Manhattan to attend Columbia. During their years together the two of them had somehow muddled along – as well as a traumatised teenager and a single, thirty-something career girl could.

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A formidable figure in New York society, for over fifteen years Katherine had been at the helm of Ignite – one of Manhattan’s most prominent event-management companies with offices close to Union Square. Hence her interest in her niece’s career, and while Darcy had known from the outset that nobody got into bookselling for the money, for the sake of passion she was prepared to forego a healthy pay cheque for one that just about kept a roof over her head. Her response to her aunt about quitting the magazine six years before had been a quote from Albert Camus: *When work is soulless, life stifles and dies.*

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Darcy! Albert Camus won’t pay the bills, whereas a nice two-page advertorial on the latest Dior collection *will*,’ Katherine had said. ‘If you must, then at least aim to work in one of the conglomerate bookstores or publishers even. Yes, I’m sure being surrounded by books sounds great in theory, but really, what kind of prospects can you expect from working in a tiny independent?’

‘The prospect of spending my days doing something I love and being happy,’ Darcy had retorted sunnily. ‘That’s really all anyone can ask for, isn’t it?’

But Darcy knew her commercially-minded aunt didn’t lend herself to impractical notions such as finding joy in work simply for the sake of it, and certainly not without some kind of tangible accompanying reward. She was aware that Katherine had worked (and continued to work) ferociously hard over the years to build Ignite into the successful corporate event management company that it was today, but she

often wondered if any of it actually brought her aunt contentment or satisfaction, because she eternally seemed to have her eye on the next hurdle or challenge.

Darcy knew in her heart and soul that finding joy and satisfaction in her work was undoubtedly what *she* wanted. And she had yet to regret her decision. Besides, she had in the meantime worked her way up to manager, a dubious promotion that in reality meant more responsibility and not a whole lot more money. However, what it also meant was that she had greater creative freedom over window displays, shelf arrangements and, most importantly, free rein to choose and order any titles she felt would suit Chaucer's customers.

Now, Darcy watched the woman walk away with a copy of *Little Women* housed in one of the store's trademark purple and gold striped carrier bags and sighed contentedly. Another satisfied customer.

Just then, the front door swung open and Darcy turned to find Joshua, her workmate and relief for late opening hours, standing there with a green elf hat on. An attractive guy in his late twenties, his hair was close cropped against his mocha skin and his grey sweater tight against his thin frame, while his maroon-coloured cords threatened to slide down his narrow hips at a moment's notice. He looked like a walking Gap advert.

'Merry week before Christmas!' he intoned in a voice full of rich humour and warmth. No matter what mood Darcy might be in, Joshua always cheered her up. He'd been wishing everyone a Merry 'something' before Christmas since

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pretty much Thanksgiving weekend: ‘Merry month before Christmas’ or ‘Merry three weeks before Christmas.’

It had been exasperating at first, but now it was something she looked forward to every week; her own personal Advent calendar.

And he was the best kind of workmate – a fixer. If he suspected or sensed that Darcy or Ashley, Chaucer’s other store assistant, were feeling hassled, down in the dumps or full-on exhausted, then look out: the place would be full to bursting with his own personalised ‘Joshua bucks’ – handwritten coupons he’d slide into pockets or beside the cash register. They were always for cheery little things, like *This entitles the bearer to one free back massage* or *Cover for one half-shift*. In short, Joshua was a sweetheart, a pleasure to manage and great fun to work with. Plus his literary knowledge was extensive and he had a particular talent for obscure cult books which, combined with Darcy’s more classic bent, made them a fantastic team.

Dropping his sheepskin jacket behind the counter, he put on the purple and gold striped Chaucer’s apron, and Darcy in turn went to untie hers. Up close, he smelled like the holly-berry hand wash he’d been using ever since it went on sale at the nearest Bath & Body Works. Joshua was truly the most effeminate straight man she had ever met, and Darcy had been truly astonished when she’d first met his girlfriend a couple of years back – a stunning long-legged blonde who would have looked right at home on the fashion pages in Darcy’s old magazine job.

‘So what are you up to this evening, boss?’ Joshua asked. ‘Besides Today’s Special from Luigi’s?’

Darcy’s apartment was situated over a popular little Italian restaurant just off West Houston Street, a good twenty minutes from the store but worth what she paid in rent to be within cycling distance to work. She’d lived in three different apartments in Manhattan since making the move from Brooklyn, and although by far the smallest, her third-floor walk-up over Luigi’s was easily the best location, close as it was to Hudson River Park, a riverside oasis amidst the hustle of bustle of the city.

She loved going down there on her days off, taking long walks along the water with views out to Lady Liberty and Staten Island. And of course in the summer months, the grassy areas amongst the pretty flowerbeds were ideal for reading, and the welcoming river breeze perfect for surviving the worst of the city’s heat and humidity.

‘Actually not tonight,’ Darcy told Joshua. For once she had somewhere to be. ‘I’m headed to a book launch.’

‘Ooh, anyone we know?’ Due to the shop’s minuscule dimensions, Chaucer’s didn’t hold launch parties or literary events, but even if they did, Darcy guessed that this particular author wouldn’t draw too many of their regulars.

‘Oliver Martin, science-fiction author?’ she said to Joshua’s blank look. ‘He’s just hit the *Times* bestseller list and according to Aunt Katherine he’s a “big deal”.’ She mimed quotemarks with her fingers. ‘I’m only going because I haven’t seen her for a while and we’re long overdue a catch-up.’ Oliver Martin must

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certainly be a very big deal indeed if Katherine Armstrong was deigning to attend his book launch.

While her aunt was forever extending invites to various glamour-filled events and gatherings which her company hosted all over the city, Darcy tended only to favour the ones with a literary bent. She loved meeting authors, although it had to be said that the more successful ones were often insufferably pompous, but still it was nice to occasionally be able to dip her toe into the glossier side of her industry.

‘And you’re going like *that*?’ Joshua glanced meaningfully at her.

Darcy looked down at her grey trousers, forest-green woollen sweater and chunky leather boots. ‘What’s wrong with it?’ She pulled out the elastic from her ponytail and fluffed out her black curly hair, letting it fall loose around her shoulders. A pointless action as it would very quickly be flattened by her bike helmet on the journey downtown.

Joshua smiled fondly. ‘Like I keep telling you, if you tried making an effort now and again – maybe some eyeliner and a touch of lipstick – you could almost pass for Megan Fox’s older, chunkier sister. Oh, and lose the spinster glasses, for tonight at least?’

Darcy was well used to his teasing. ‘Not all of us are lucky enough to possess your rather ... unique eye for style,’ she said wickedly, eyeing his drainpipe trousers. ‘The literati will just have to take me as I am.’

It was true that she had no fashion sense whatsoever. Also, there was barely enough room to move in her tiny apartment,

and for Darcy the choice was simple. She'd happily sacrifice anything, even food, if it meant she could fit in more books.

While her wardrobe consisted mostly of functional work clothes (in a bookstore, paper dust clung to *everything*), she did possess a few items for special occasions – a seventies-style wrap dress she'd found in a cute little vintage store down in Greenwich, and incongruously a pair of unworn Jimmy Choo heels that her aunt had bought her a couple of Christmases ago.

Still, now that Joshua had openly pointed out her sartorial shortcomings, she guessed she was due for a similar earful from Katherine on arrival at the party, which was being held in fashionable Chelsea.

While Darcy loved her aunt and was massively grateful for everything she had done for her, Katherine's outspoken and no-holds-barred personality had also caused a certain level of heartache, because not only was she focused on an eternal attempt for Darcy to improve her career but also to improve herself in general. Not to mention a seemingly endless quest to matchmake her niece with reputable New York men.

The truth was that Darcy was perfectly content on her own and had no interest in partaking of the often terrifying Manhattan dating scene. It was a million miles from the romantic rituals outlined in her favourite novels, and while it might be wishful thinking, she wasn't willing to settle for anything less than being swept off her feet.

While she'd had relationships with guys over the years – mostly quiet, bookish types like herself – none of them had

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been especially serious, rarely lasting longer than a couple of months.

‘No flesh and blood man could ever live up to those fictional heroes you’re so crazy about,’ Joshua often teased her, and Darcy supposed there was some truth in that.

There was certainly no denying that she’d always been taken with the idea of true love and proper passionate romance like that between Romeo and Juliet, Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, Scarlett and Rhett, and her favourites, Elizabeth and Darcy, her namesake.

Later, saying goodbye to Joshua, she wrapped up warm in her purple North Face ski jacket and woollen scarf, and prepared for what was for her, unlike most New Yorkers, one of the most pleasurable parts of her working day: the commute.

Navigating Manhattan’s Upper West Side was something tourists paid good money to do on a regular basis, and Darcy did it twice a day, five days a week for free.

Going into the tiny yard behind the store, she unlocked her bike and put on her safety helmet, fastening it tightly beneath her chin. She was proud of her knowledge of New York’s streets – like the nifty shortcut via the Meatpacking District she relied upon to avoid the traffic on Sixth, or how a simple hidden passageway near Chelsea whisked her away from the worst of the Forty-Second Street hordes.

She particularly loved riding around town this time of year, with all the festive shop displays, cosy cafés and trattorias lit up for the season, white and coloured fairy lights blinking,

candles aglow, early-evening diners holding hands in window seats, or braving the al fresco tables that sat mere inches from the kerb, bundled up in thick woollen coats and gloves as they smoked a crafty cigarette.

Darcy cruised along steadily on the bike, marvelling at the colour of the sky, that bleak city blue she loved so much in the last few hours before complete darkness fell upon the city. Manhattan's music filled the air, a mix of honking horns and hissing pipes, vendors shouting and people chattering.

It was all a blur as she sped by, obeying traffic signals as she hugged the kerb. She was zinging now, the lights green, the air cold and crisp, her eyes open and alert, her long legs loose and limber. She felt truly alive.

She knew that cyclists in Manhattan, with their natural proclivity for speed and deft weaving through traffic, were generally considered by most New Yorkers – and taxi drivers in particular – as being only barely above sewer rats and cockroaches in the food chain, but Darcy wouldn't swap her beloved three-speeder – and the addictive sensation of almost flying through the streets – for any amount of abuse. In truth, much of the bad reputation was derived from daredevil city couriers who defied traffic laws and sometimes gravity, as they zipped along as if on a kamikaze mission rather than a job.

It wasn't snowing, not yet, but Darcy could feel it teasing her in the crystal sky. Slowing at the corner of Broadway and Columbus Avenue, she passed by a fancy bistro full of equally fancy patrons sitting at tables with white cloths and big glasses of rich, red wine and plates of delectable pasta in front

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of them. Her mouth watered. The air felt clear as she cycled on through streets lined with people heading home from the market, their upmarket bags brimming with organic carrots and loaves of Cuban bread or carefully boxed truffles: another night of opulence in America's favourite city.

Darcy felt like an impostor here sometimes, particularly on the Upper West Side, amongst the galleries and restaurants and bistros, cafés and high-rises and appointment-only vintage stores and photography studios. She was an ordinary person in an extraordinary place, one who ate Ramen noodles three nights a week and half-price specials from Luigi's the other four, who didn't own a car and took care of what few clothes she had so she wouldn't need to spend her hard-earned wages on new ones. And her entertainment of choice generally took place in her own apartment between the pages of great books rather than in the nightspots of New York.

But still it was all worth it, to live in the most magical city on earth. She smiled. Maybe one day she'd find someone to share in the fairytale.

Chapter 2

Her heart was a secret garden and the walls were very high. **William Goldman**

A little while later, Darcy pulled her bike up to the hip Chelsea bistro hosting the science fiction author's book-launch party. Parking it next to a lamp post, she took her bike lock out of her messenger bag and clipped it around both. Despite the media's harping on about New York crime statistics, in all the years she'd lived in the city she'd never had one stolen. Satisfied, she turned towards the entrance and inside by the door, immediately locked eyes with the only person she was likely to recognise here tonight: her aunt.

A statuesque blonde in her mid-fifties, dressed in head-to-toe Chanel, Katherine Armstrong was holding a martini glass in one manicured hand, and critically assessing every inch of Darcy's windblown appearance.

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Feeling under examination, Darcy shook out her flattened hair, straightened her coat and adjusted her bag on her shoulder, just as light snowflakes began to descend from the sky, melting on contact with her increasingly flushed cheeks. She turned her face upwards, briefly revelling in the sensation. Then, steeling herself for the inevitable assassination, she walked towards the front door, all too late noticing the salt stains on the back of her trousers.

Well, there was nothing she could do about that now, she thought as she opened the door to the restaurant and hastily brushed down the legs of her pants, hoping that her aunt wouldn't notice.

Before Darcy made it two steps inside the entrance, had a chance to scope out the room or even take off her coat, Katherine accosted her.

'Darling, why on earth are you still riding that dreadful thing in December, in the middle of winter, when it is starting to snow.' Darcy took careful note that this was a statement, not a question. 'Do you have some kind of death wish?' *This* was a question, though.

She smiled tiredly. 'No, Katherine, I don't have a death wish, and you already know why I ride my bike.' Over the years they'd had countless 'discussions' about Darcy's preference for the bike over any form of public transport, something which according to Katherine thumbed its nose at reason and indeed personal safety. But riding on public transport was actually detrimental for Darcy. Such journeys afforded her the opportunity to immerse herself in reading, and she'd lost count of the

number of times she'd gone miles past her stop and ended up late for work.

Her aunt sighed. 'You know, your parents are probably spinning in their graves, may they rest in peace. They entrusted you to me all those years ago, and what do you do to honour their wishes for your personal welfare? You pedal a bike around the streets of Manhattan, just asking to be mown down. Why can't you be like any other self-respecting New Yorker and just take the subway or a damn cab?' Darcy opened her mouth to protest, but Katherine held up one heavily bejewelled hand to silence her. 'I mean, thirty-three is a little old to be clinging on to the hippie thing, isn't it? Which leads me to my next point: what successful man these days would be interested in some sort of tree-hugger when they would have to walk her and a *bicycle* home from a date? It's like something that happens in the schoolyard. Men in this city want women as sophisticated as they are, and how would you even ride a bike to a date anyway? Those Jimmy Choos I gave you would be completely destroyed if you tried to pedal in them. Then of course there's your job ...'

Darcy shook her head good-naturedly, the litany of her aunt's complaints sailing right over her head. She had heard all of this before, and knew there was no point in trying to argue her case. If she allowed Katherine to get a foothold with the cycling thing, the lack of relationship or gather speed with the job criticism, she knew she wouldn't be able to get past the entry of the restaurant for the rest of the night.

So much for a catch-up. More like an ambush!

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‘Anyway, sweetheart,’ Katherine continued, as she took Darcy’s elbow and led her into the restaurant, steering her forward until they were in front of the bar, ‘I invited you here because there are some people I want you to meet. Actually, one person I want you to meet in particular. He’s the author being celebrated tonight. Oliver Martin,’ she said triumphantly, as if she was personally responsible for his success, looking at her niece for a reaction. When Darcy seemed unmoved, she said resignedly. ‘You know, given that you work in a bookstore, I would have thought you would know who Oliver Martin is.’ She turned to the bartender. ‘My niece will have a dirty martini, three olives, blue cheese stuffed, with Belvedere vodka.’

Darcy quickly interrupted with: ‘No, actually, I’ll just have a glass of Cabernet. Whatever the house is – no big deal.’

Katherine’s eyes widened. ‘House?’ she said, horrified. ‘She doesn’t want the house. Give her the Clos du Bois. Or the Fourteen Hands.’

‘Really, the house is fine,’ Darcy insisted to the bartender who was uncertainly juggling bottles, trying to determine who was in charge. He gave a small smile as Darcy mouthed, ‘Seriously.’ Even so, he must have figured that Katherine was the more redoubtable of the two, because he duly uncorked the Clos du Bois.

Well, at least it isn’t a dirty martini, Darcy thought, feeling a small measure of triumph. She didn’t like vodka, but no matter how many times she said it, Katherine seemed to believe that eventually it would grow on her. It wouldn’t.

‘So,’ her aunt continued, eyeing the crowd and seeing who

was nearby and worthy enough to talk to, ‘seems Oliver Martin is going to be huge.’

‘Isn’t he a sci-fi writer?’ Darcy asked as the bartender passed her a wine glass. ‘I haven’t read anything of his because I’m not interested in that genre. Not my thing.’ It was one of the few genres that she didn’t read, as Darcy would gladly read the back of a milk carton if there was nothing else available. However, possibly down to being a self-confessed Luddite, she found it difficult to immerse herself in futuristic technologically-based worlds.

Katherine waved a hand airily. ‘It doesn’t matter whether or not you are interested in sci-fi. The point is, he has recently become a *New York Times* bestselling author so I want you to meet him. Word is, he is in talks with Spielberg about something too.’ She once again grabbed Darcy’s arm and directed her through the bodies towards a corner of the room where a large crowd was gathered. Darcy did her best to manoeuvre her glass so as not to slop red wine all over someone’s Prada shoes.

‘Excuse me, excuse me,’ Katherine ordered, elbowing through people as Darcy smiled apologetically and tried in vain to put on the brakes as her aunt dragged her forward.

Finally, they reached the edge of the crowd to where the man of the moment, Oliver Martin, was holding court.

Darcy blinked. The guy standing in front of them might have been a celebrated bestselling sci-fi author, but his wardrobe choices evidently stopped at the door of his teenage closet. Not that she could talk, but at least her choice of clothing bore some

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resemblance to twenty-first-century fashion. She turned to Katherine with a pleading look, trying to convey the message that this short, greasy-haired man-child, outfitted in a Marvel Comics T-shirt and chequered blazer belonging firmly in the 1980s was a million miles from her type. While he might have been presentable enough if he decided on a shave, a haircut, a change into some adult clothes and a departure from the wide-frame glasses popular amongst the laboratory set, he was definitely no oil painting.

Not that Darcy required a man to have movie star good looks, of course, but what on earth did her aunt think that she would see in Oliver Martin? Other than they were both book geeks, they were likely to have absolutely nothing else in common.

‘Oliver!’ Katherine commanded, putting a proprietary arm around his shoulders and not in the least bit mindful of interrupting the conversation he’d been having with another guest. ‘I want you to meet my niece, Darcy Archer. With you being new to the city, I thought the two of you should have the opportunity to get acquainted.’

Darcy opened her mouth to speak, unsure of how she was going to extract herself from the situation, when Oliver beat her to it.

‘Do you game?’ he asked, looking her up and down.

She blinked, unsure of the question, and looked at her aunt who quickly smiled before she sauntered off.

Darcy smiled politely at him. ‘I’m sorry, but I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘Do you game?’ Oliver asked again, as if repeating the

question would help her understand it. ‘Gaming? On a computer, TV or gaming system?’

‘Oh.’ She bit her lip, and felt a fresh wave of exasperation come over her. She glanced helplessly over her shoulder towards her aunt, who had by now disappeared into the crowd. What on earth had Katherine been thinking?

‘No, I’m afraid I don’t. I’m a bit of a Luddite actually.’ The Vaio laptop she owned was so old it still ran on Windows 95, and was only used now and again for the creation of flyers for Chaucer’s. Darcy was completely bewildered by Facebook, Twitter or any of the social networking systems that seemed to be replacing face-to-face communication. And as an advocate of the written word, computers were almost an anathema to her way of life. To her, time spent online was precious time away from reading real books, and while she knew she was old-fashioned and out of touch, was there really anything so terribly wrong with that?

But upon this admission Oliver’s face immediately went blank, as if he had nothing else to say to her. Darcy took a sip of her wine and thought quickly for something to chit chat about. ‘So Katherine said you’ve just moved to New York. Where from?’

‘San Diego,’ the author replied simply.

‘Oh, California, wonderful,’ she enthused, nodding. ‘Quite a departure from this part of the world. Weatherwise, especially.’ She motioned towards the window where snow was now falling heavily outside, the gentle snowflakes illuminated by lamplight and mesmerising in their descent.

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Oliver's expression showed no recognition whatsoever that the New York climate was any different to where he'd moved from. 'I wouldn't know.'

Darcy swallowed. Did he not go outside then . . . ever?

'I'm originally from Wisconsin and only lived out west for one reason: Comic-Con. Ever been?' Again he looked at her expectantly.

'Um, no, never,' she said, her mind conjuring up what little she knew about the event, and she pictured a bunch of grown men dressed up as Spiderman or Thor. Not exactly her scene.

'Oh, you should *totally* go,' he said by way of a command.

She plastered on a smile, and surreptitiously glanced down at her watch. This was beyond awkward. Usually Katherine's choices in matchmaking were a little bit closer to the mark. Was she now so desperate to get her niece paired off that any man would do?

She thought back to the last author her aunt had tried to foist on her a year or so ago – a Valentino-clad egotistical thriller writer who had more in common with the macho series character at the centre of his bestsellers than any real-life person. The guy might have been wealthy, mega-successful and movie star handsome, but he had the personality of a dishrag.

'I'm not sure it would be my scene really,' Darcy told Oliver Martin. 'It's not something I know a lot about. My taste in literature is quite differ—'

Oliver cut her off. 'Oh? So what do you read then?'

'Well, I'm a fan of Jane Austen, the Brontës, and most of the

classic Regency romances – as well as Dickens and Shakespeare, of course. I do enjoy contemporary literature too. Really, my interests span across multiple genres and—’

Oliver cut her off again. ‘Have you read my books?’

Darcy felt her face flush. Authors almost always asked that question, and nine times out of ten the answer wasn’t the one they wanted to hear. She remembered the thriller author’s disbelief that Darcy wasn’t (like most of the female reading population, it seemed) head over heels in love with Max Bailey, hero of his bestselling series – a kickass crime-fighter styled as a modern-day James Bond. ‘It’s just . . . I don’t read all that much science fiction,’ she fudged. ‘I’ve heard it’s a wonderful book though, and the reviews have been—’

Oliver looked impatient. ‘It *is* good. As a matter of fact, it’s *great*. I can’t believe you prefer sappy Austen to something with real merit. What is it with all you women who’d rather read about Colin Farrell in a dripping shirt than something of substance?’

Darcy’s mouth dropped open at the man’s blatant rudeness. She was about to retort that Austen was anything other than ‘sappy’ when at that moment, her mobile phone buzzed in her pocket. ‘Excuse me.’ She fished it out and looked at the screen. It was a text from Ashley asking if Darcy wouldn’t mind moving her shift around tomorrow. The graduate daughter of a successful city real-estate developer, and thus only in the job for the fun rather than the money, Ashley was notoriously undependable, but very sweet and the customers adored her.

It meant that Darcy would be opening up first thing, but

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given that the evening had been going rapidly downhill from the outset, there was little point in her staying around here. The request might actually be a blessing in disguise.

She looked back at Oliver and realised that whatever retort she might make would be wasted on this overgrown teenager. He might be the current hot-shot in publishing and be in talks with Spielberg, but he was sorely lacking in manners, and indeed literary knowledge.

‘I think you’ll find it’s Colin Firth you’re referring to, not Colin Farrell. And you know what they say: you should never judge a book by its movie.’ Smiling tightly, she added, ‘You will have to excuse me; I need to make a call. Good luck with your book. Nice meeting you.’

Darcy made her way to the front of the restaurant and typed an affirmative response to Ashley. At that moment, Katherine approached her from behind.

‘Where are you going? Why aren’t you talking to Oliver?’

Darcy glanced over her shoulder to where Oliver Martin was now chatting animatedly with a man holding an Iron Man helmet, guessing that *that* conversation would be much more to his liking. She wondered briefly if the guy had worn the helmet on the way here.

‘Aunt Katherine, please. Before you start, I am not talking to that man because we have absolutely nothing in common. He might be involved in books, and I might be interested in books, but a match that does not make.’

Her aunt sighed deeply. ‘Oh, you are just impossible sometimes. How are you ever going to find someone? Such a

shame. You do know that the movie based on Will Anderson's books opens this week, don't you? I knew at the time that he was an incredible catch, and of course now his career's about to go even more stellar. I think he was interested in you too.'

'The same guy was already madly in love with someone else, Aunt Katherine,' Darcy argued tiredly. 'His own reflection. When are you going to realise that I'm just not interested in men who are all about success and career? I want someone who's fun and intelligent, and who can actually hold a conversation with someone other than themselves.'

'Don't we all?' her aunt replied airily. Then she said more kindly, 'I just want you to be happy, darling. This city's not an easy place to be alone, especially around the holidays, and—'

'But I'm not alone. I have lots of friends, and I have you too, don't I? OK, I know you're heading to St Barts for Christmas this year ...'

Notwithstanding that her aunt would be going out of town, she and Katherine just didn't have that sort of close relationship.

Darcy thought about their first Christmas together, over twenty years ago – not long after her parents' accident. She was still only a child though she felt like she'd grown up almost overnight upon losing her beloved family, and moving in with her mother's younger sister, who in truth she barely knew. Her forbidding and somewhat austere aunt had always frightened Darcy a little, and she seemed to possess little of Lauren's natural warmth and gentle ways.

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She recalled how, that first, sad Christmas, Katherine's modern Brooklyn condo had barely been decorated for the season; nothing but a small artificial tree in the corner of the living room and a holly wreath on the door – a sharp contrast to the usual lavish adornments of her family's classic brick townhouse in the older part of the borough.

There was no lovingly prepared Christmas dinner on the day – Katherine ordered Thai take-out. Nor was there a big fuss around the opening of presents like Darcy was used to.

In fact, it was almost as though her aunt had forgotten about the holiday altogether. Darcy wasn't sure if this was down to Katherine's still-raw grief over losing her only sister a few months before, or her bewilderment at the sudden overwhelming responsibility of becoming guardian to a twelve-year-old girl. Most likely a combination of both.

Though given her own heartbreak following the accident, Darcy hadn't felt that there was much to celebrate. Still, Christmas had always been one of her favourite times of the year and the lack of any traditional nod towards the festivities merely served to highlight her loneliness and the gaping difference between her old life and the new.

Over the years, and mostly through her own efforts, Darcy had gradually brought her aunt round to celebrating the season, though Katherine typically preferred to spend the holidays in warmer climes, whereas Darcy couldn't conceive of being anywhere else but Manhattan at this time of year.

And even though in reality she and Katherine had spent only five years living under the same roof, Darcy had always

felt that she'd been cramping her vivacious aunt's style, which was why she'd tried to stay as independent as possible and make her own way in life as soon as she could. She wasn't sure why her aunt's sense of responsibility now seemed to extend to finding Darcy a mate. Perhaps if she was coupled or married off, then in Katherine's mind that burden of duty (perceived or otherwise) would finally end? There was no denying that Katherine took a businesslike approach to most things in life. It was part of the reason she'd been so successful in navigating Manhattan's cut-throat events scene. Darcy knew that her own lack of ambition was another aspect of her character that her aunt didn't understand, but she was happy with her life and her job and her beloved books. Sure, she could do with a little more excitement in her life, but she figured most people felt like that from time to time.

Katherine put a hand on Darcy's arm in a rare show of tenderness. 'Of course you have me.' She watched in surprise as Darcy started to take out her gloves and scarf. 'You're not leaving now, are you? But you just got here! I promise I won't introduce you to any other ...'

'No, honestly, thanks, but I think I have had enough for one night. Besides, I have an early start in the morning.'

'Well, if you insist. But you certainly can't ride that bike home now,' her aunt argued, indicating the thickly falling snow outside. 'It's too dangerous and it's getting late. We will order you a cab and they can put your bike in the trunk.'

Moments later, Darcy was tucked into a Yellow Cab with her aunt peering in the window. The cab driver pulled away

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from the kerb, as her aunt hit one resounding hand on the roof of the car. Darcy waved a weak goodbye.

‘You said West Houston?’ the driver asked as he turned the corner.

‘No,’ she said resolutely, ‘change of plans. Just take me up a couple of blocks and turn right. I can get my bike out and ride home from there.’

Snowflakes landing on her cheeks was one of her favourite sensations, and she would much rather brave the elements than be cooped up in an airless vehicle.

‘In this weather?’ grunted the driver.

Darcy nodded. ‘In this weather,’ she repeated, in a tone that indicated the conversation was over. ‘But thanks anyway,’ she added, not wanting to be rude.

Moments later, as the driver unloaded her bike and she reached into her messenger bag to get his fare, her hand touched her old dog-eared copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. She felt a sudden longing to get home as quickly as possible, make a cup of chamomile tea, change into her pyjamas and get under the covers with her namesake, Mr Darcy. Her mum had been a big fan of Austen too, she thought, smiling fondly as she recalled when Lauren Archer had first introduced her to her all-time favourite novel. Darcy had been too young to understand much of the subject-matter at the time, but over the years found herself returning again and again to Austen’s famous tale, finding comfort in the story and, she supposed, viewing it as a kind of tangible connection to her late mother.

She slung a leg over her bike as the cab driver got back in

his vehicle and disappeared. Alone on the cold street, the snow fell across her shoulders and she tentatively pushed off, knowing she would have to ride with caution.

Darcy stared in front of her and navigated the empty streets as snowflakes danced in front of her, happier now in the knowledge that she was in control of her own destiny and would be home soon.

In the words of Groucho Marx, she thought wryly: *I've had a perfectly wonderful evening. But this wasn't it.*