

# Tears on Christmas Eve

"...we have not *met* since the 26th of November, when we were all dancing together at Netherfield."

--*Pride and Prejudice* – Volume 3, Chapter 2

The 24th of December. Christmas Eve ...

The yuletide season was upon them, and all the watchfulness and concern that had attended his friends in the previous weeks would, under their present distractions, be set aside for Christmas. So, it was through this not so accidental circumstance that Charles Bingley found himself alone on Christmas Eve travelling down a very dark and lonely road.

Only a few days before had provided the impetus for his escape. He had been staying at the home of his friend, Fitzwilliam Darcy, but a note had been delivered, summoning him to the Hurst's establishment, apparently, just so Charles could hear his sister drone on and on about food and entertainments and decorations and guests.

"The Newsoms," read Louisa Hurst, from one of the lists on her lap. "Mrs. Leigh and her brother, Mr. Dormer; those unfortunate Archers-Albrights, and then there is Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer and their *pretty* little niece, Miss Gladden. Charles, I am sure that *you* will like Miss Gladden; speaks French and German, covers skreens and has, I understand, a dowry in excess of twenty-*thousand* pounds."

Louisa gave him a cheeky little glance, and there was just something about the *way* she looked at him that he could not quite like. He did not know what came over him at that moment, but what ever it was, it forced him into action.

He stood, clasping his hands firmly behind his back, declaring, in very determined language that he intended to spend his Christmas Eve with Darcy.

Louisa, gathering up all her righteous indignation spoke with all the annoyance and vitriol that a sudden change of plan does to one in the throws of arranging the grandest of events.

"What do you mean? Spending Christmas Eve with Mr. Darcy? Nonsense! No! Out of the question! Absolutely not! You will do no such thing!"

He made his apologies and excuses; spoke eloquently on his obligations as a guest; made mention that Darcy had, after all, opened his house up to him and that it would be the height of bad manners to ruin his friend's carefully made plans. Of course, while saying all of this he felt compelled to turn away.

"What about my plans! You seem to have no compunction in ruining mine! You could have at least given me fair warning. I only invited the Mortimers and that wretched niece of theirs for your benefit. And here we all are, your closest family, to be abandoned and alone on Christmas Eve?"

Charles rolled his eyes; half of fashionable London in one's home hardly counted as being abandoned on Christmas Eve.

Caroline Bingley, on the other hand, took a decidedly different view of things.

"Come now, Louisa. Charles should go. He must! Think of Mr. Darcy; think of Miss Darcy who is ten times prettier and twenty times cleverer than any lady that Charles already knows." Caroline gave her sister a pointed look, which Louisa had no patience or desire to acknowledge. "Besides," continued Miss Bingley, warming to her subject, "It would look extremely discourteous for our brother to snub one such as his host and through him his relations, the Earl and Countess of \_\_\_\_\_. And what a glorious affair that shall be. I would not mind attending myself--" (Louisa's eyes bulged) "--if I had not already made my promise to you, dear sister. No, Charles, you must go, we insist! Your friendship within that circle grows stronger by the day and you can not help but benefit from such a close intimacy."

Charles could clearly see the wheels spinning round in his sister's head; she, most likely thought that his close intimacy, by default, also became hers.

Three blocks away, in a much more fashionable London square, he had used a similar, tactic with his friend: he was required to spend Christmas Eve with his family; Louisa was counting on him to fill an empty seat; he could not very well abandon her, could he? Besides, he reasoned, Christmas was for families, and he would feel so much like the fifth wheel, and he would only be in the way.

"But Bingley, this is all very sudden!" cried Darcy, towering menacingly over the chair in which Charles now sat. "You have been my guest here for the entire month and I thought it was understood that you would spend Christmas Eve with us. My Aunt, Uncle, and cousins were looking forward to making your better acquaintance. And Georgiana will be quite disappointed. What will I tell them now?"

Charles, wearied from Louisa's lamentations, yet, in the first flush of headiness in his newfound defiance, didn't give a toss what he told them. All he knew was he had other plans; plans that did not, for once, involve Caroline, the Hursts, Darcy, or any number of aunts, uncles, and cousins. And he would have told his friend all of this had it not been for the entrance of the butler bearing an urgent message leaving Darcy with no other choice but to go on his way.



It was upon a large tree, on a dark and sheltered path, where Charles Bingley tethered his horse. He had made up his mind to walk the last quarter mile to keep from being seen or heard. His pace slowed and his steps quieted as he approached the gate of the manor house, grateful to discover that the windows were all ablaze with light.

Several dogs, not too far off, barked. He stopped, listened, and waited. After two or three minutes, when he was assured that they did not approach, he made a run for it. Gaining the side of the house, he crouched down lower to the ground and inched himself quietly and carefully beneath the first window frame.

He had to see her; just the briefest of glimpses would suffice. He was prepared to wait all night if it came to it. He would see her one last time, be satisfied, and finally have done. Removing his beaver, he raised his head slowly in order to draw his nose level with the window ceil.

It had to be a Christmas miracle. The very object of his search, Jane Bennet, was sitting in her father's study, not three feet away from him, and Charles rejoiced. The side of her body faced him, her head was down, and she was busy folding sheets of parchment, fashioning them into little paper packets.

Mr. Bennet, sitting opposite, was counting out shiny new sovereigns from his strong box and distributing them into the packets made by his daughter. Jane was just about to write something upon one of the packets when her father, seized with some other thought, stopped her.

Reaching once more into his strongbox, he counted out several glimmering sixpences, placing one of them into each of the packets. Jane looked up at her father and favoured him with a small smile and a few words causing Mr. Bennet to reach out and pat her hand.

Outside, Charles could faintly hear a knock upon the door to Mr. Bennet's study

and Mr. Bennet's subsequent, though gruff, call for their admittance. It was Miss Lydia saying something that Charles could not make out. Her face was bright, she was laughing, bobbing up and down excitedly, and seemed to be urging her father to hurry.

With an impatient flick of his wrist, Mr. Bennet entreated her to go, but obviously Miss Lydia was having none of it. More urging and giggling followed. But this time it was Mr. Bennet who was having none of it. He stood up from his seat and moved in his youngest daughter's direction, shooing her from his room and soundly shutting the door.

He continued with his task of filling the packets while Jane took up a pen and ink. She was just beginning to write down what her father was telling her when Charles watched, aghast, as Mrs Bennet burst through the door without an invitation, agitation present on every feature.

Her voice was loud and high, and Charles heard just enough to make out the words: "Hurry!" and "Not even half-dressed!" and "Late!"

Mr. Bennet made a great sigh. Charles saw him turn back to Jane, and he looked as if he was telling her to finish the task in his stead, while Mrs Bennet kept entreating her husband to follow her. A moment later husband and wife were gone, and Jane sat all on her own.

He watched her closely, following every delicate movement as she dipped the pen in the inkwell and carefully wrote something on the packets. Every now and then her head would tilt to the side, and she would bite her lip, as if deep in contemplation over some great matter. The pen was now giving her a bit of trouble and, setting it aside, she stood and walked around to the other side of her father's desk to open the drawer.

This was the first time Charles noticed that she was in evening dress; in fact, she was wearing the same pretty pale blue dress she had worn to the Netherfield Ball. She looked lovely to his eyes, more lovely than he remembered in fact, yet, there was something about her eyes that he could not quite —

He watched as Jane sat in her father's chair and searched the drawer. Finding a new pen, she examined the tip closely. Seemingly unsatisfied with its point, she took up a small knife and began to mend it. Suddenly, she stopped and just stared at the pen and just as suddenly burst into tears.

Charles was now alarmed. Was she ill? Had she cut herself? Was she in distress? It was only a pen after all. Why would something so trivial cause Jane to cry? At

that moment he wished he had the privilege to offer her comfort. He would take her in his arms, letting her lay her head upon his shoulder, and he would simply tell her that everything would be better. But then he recollected that she would not likely welcome his attentions and apparently she never had.

His agony only increased as he continued to watch. Jane reached into her pocket and pulled out an embroidered linen square to dab at her eyes. The stitching on the brilliant white fabric was exquisite, its edging all green leaves and pink flowers and he could tell how much she cared for it just by the way she carefully refolded it to return to her pocket.

The door to the study opened again. This time it was Miss Mary Bennet. Jane set up a little straighter. She was now just as composed and serene as ever. Her sister asked her a question, and Jane smiled at her, said something to the affirmative and nodded. Miss Mary seemed satisfied and left Jane on her own once more. However, as if sensing herself being watched, Jane suddenly turned towards the window.

Charles had anticipated her and dropped down to the ground instantly; he dared not move or breathe. What if he were discovered there? And, heaven forbid, what on earth would he say to her? "Hello Miss Bennet, I came to peer through your windows." "Hello, Miss Bennet, I came only to stare at you." "Hello Miss Bennet, I wanted to understand why you do not love me."

It was all so ridiculous, he thought. What was he doing to himself? Why was he acting like such an idiot? Coming all this way, just to what? Just to have her father set the dogs on him? And who could blame him if he did; he would have every right to do so.

After waiting for what seemed hours, Bingley again lifted his head up to the window. It appeared that Miss Bennet's curiosity did not extend any farther for she was now applying the wax to the paper packets and placing them on a tray.

After a time, Mr. Bennet, now in evening dress, returned. He examined the packets that his eldest daughter had prepared and charged her to go forth with the tray as he followed behind.

Charles raced to the next window and eagerly peered inside only to see them move off in the direction of the dining room. He swiftly moved over to that window and again crouched down. When he raised his head again, he saw that all the Bennets' servants had gathered, standing in a line, their keen faces bright with joy and expectation.

With Jane standing to his side, Mr. Bennet said a few words, which Charles assumed were words of thanks. This drew appreciative smiles from all those assembled. Then, reaching over to the tray Jane held, one by one he handed the packets out to every servant. Accordingly, he received a bow or a curtsy and a very kindly word of thanks.

Miss Catherine appeared soon after bearing a platter of cups with Miss Mary following behind with a large bowl of punch. The two girls then busied themselves with serving as their father bid the servants to partake. When all had received their cups, the butler stepped forth in order to offer a toast. Everyone in the room smiled and appeared to be vastly happy, and Charles felt as though he was never more lonely than at that moment in his life.

After several minutes of wallowing in self-pity, Charles almost missed the fact that everyone was now on the move. People started to pass out of the dining room and from his perspective he could see them all make their way into the receiving hall to put on their coats or cloaks.

If he remained where he was he would surely be seen, only, he did not quite know where to go. The most promising option at that moment seemed to be the hedge on the opposite side of the drive, and he had just dove behind it when two large carriages pulled up to the door.

Peeking through the foliage he saw that the front doors of Longbourn were now open. Charles could hear the excited chatter surrounding the group as several people stepped out of the door and onto the gravel path and stepping up into one of the two carriages.

"I hope my aunt invited all the officers, for I shall not be happy 'til I dance with every one of them." It was Miss Catherine speaking.

"I hear that Mary King will be there. What a funny looking, freckled little thing she is." Miss Lydia.

"I must go back, I forgot my sheet music." Definitely Miss Mary.

"Why are we always so late? I am sure my sister will think that we have been set upon by robbers?" said Mrs. Bennet, fretfully.

"But surely, mamma," came Miss Elizabeth's reply, "with four footmen in livery and such a large number to our party, I doubt that even Robin Hood himself would be bold enough to set upon us this night."

“Perhaps Robin Hood *and* all his Merry Men, together,” came Mr. Bennet’s humorous rejoinder. “I would happily give over my purse when faced with the frightful countenance of Little John.”

Only Miss Elizabeth laughed, and Mrs. Bennet was obviously not amused. She merely huffed impatiently and cried, “Oh, where is my brother? And where has Jane got herself to? I swear I never saw someone so disinclined to go out! It’s all your fault, Lizzy!”

“You know Jane does not wish to go out, Mamma!” said Miss Elizabeth in frustration. “I do not understand why you continue to press her so.”

“Nonsense! I have said that she will go and so she will go! At least, Jane listens to me and *always* does as she is told!”

There it was, the truth, and Charles felt as if someone had slapped him across the face; Darcy had been right, after all.

Charles was roused from his reverie by the sound of more feet upon the gravel drive and the voice of a gentleman who Charles did not recognize calling out.

“Here we are, sister. Forgive our delay; it was my own fault. I could not remember where I laid down my hat, and Jane and my wife were helping me search for it.”

“Never mind that,” exclaimed Mrs Bennet. “We are so very late! We must be off.”

“Yes, Mamma.”

“Come along, Jane! Never mind your gloves and shawl, girl; you can put them on in the carriage?” Charles heard several things drop to the ground which only added to Mrs Bennet’s irritation. “Now look what you have done! Oh, do hurry up, Jane!”

“I’m coming, Mamma.”

With a little more fuss and bother and more running and scampering across the gravel, the two carriages made their way down the drive.

After several minutes when he was assured that no one else remained, Charles came out of his hiding place and stood there for a moment turning his beaver over and over again in his hands not knowing what to do. Should he just ride

back to London, or stay at a nearby inn, or just go off to Netherfield to sleep and leave before dawn. He had no idea what to do with himself or where to go.

He was just moving off, when, out of the corner of his eye Charles spotted something on the ground reflected in the moonlight. It was small and white and had a colourful green and pink embroidered edge. He slowly bent down to retrieve it and saw that it was Jane's handkerchief, the one he had seen her with some minutes before. And he fought valiantly to stifle a sob when he realized that it was still wet with her tears.



The 24th of December... exactly one year later

Someone knocked lightly on the door to the study. He was so intent on his task that he merely mumbled something unintelligible to bid them enter; he was in deep concentration and kept his head down; apparently, writing neatly required all of one's attention.

"There you are, dearest," came the softest and sweetest voice he had ever heard. "I've been looking for you. I wondered if you were ready to go up soon to dress for dinner."

Charles turned around and smiled at his wife... his Jane.

"I shan't be long, my love; I'm nearly finished here. You go on ahead." Charles turned back to his desk.

Instead of leaving him, she walked over to his desk and picked up the envelope he had just set aside. The ink was still wet so she blew on it before reading:

*Rossiter: coachman.*

Charles now set himself a new task and began counting out shiny sovereigns and bright, newly minted sixpences.

He felt his wife's hand move to his shoulders, and then she bent down to place a kiss on the top of his head. She was silent for several long moments before she suddenly gasped in recognition, asking, "Christmas gifts? For the servants?"

Charles nodded as he began to place one sovereign and two shiny new sixpences into each of the paper envelopes he had fashioned.



"You are not going to believe this," said Jane, a memory now forming in her mind's eye, "My father does exactly the same thing on Christmas Eve."

"I know, I saw--," but Charles immediately caught himself and amended his sentence by adding, "I mean, I saw my own father doing something very similar every year." It wasn't a lie, exactly; his father did reward the servants, but his father had been a very busy man and never had the time to do so himself. That particular duty was always left to Mrs. Bingley alone.

Jane stroked his cheek. "I wish I could have known your parents. I can't help but wonder if they would have liked me."

Charles spun around in his chair. "Liked you? My love, they would have loved and cherished you and showered you with so much affection that I would be made quite envious."

"Do you think so?" she replied, tilting her head to one side and biting her lip in that way he so adored.

"I know so," he said feelingly, taking her delicate right hand in both of his and lovingly kissing it while she ran the fingers of her free hand through his curls.

"Well," she sighed contentedly, "I should leave you to your work, unless you need my help here." She did not move as Charles continued to apply his attentions to her hand. "I really should look over the table one last time, you know."

This stopped him cold, and he looked up, incredulous. "Come now, Jane; you've looked over the table at least ten times already."

"I know, but this is my first Christmas Eve party. I do so want you to be proud of me."

Charles nearly laughed. "Now, Jane, on that score, you never have reason to fear. Not only am I *already* quite proud of you," he kissed a finger, "I am very fond of you," he kissed another, "and I think you are an angel," he pulled her down onto his lap, "and I love you desperately," he kissed her lips.

"Charles, not here" she whispered, doing nothing to stop him. "What if someone were to walk in?"

"The servants know better," he said, claiming the bare part of her shoulder.

"I mean your sisters or Mr. Hurst."

He drew back his head and arched one eyebrow. "They *should* know better." He went back to her neck while his hands went elsewhere.

"Later, Charles; later," she said with weak, unconvincing protestations.

"Very well, Jane, go if you must," he laughed, as she raised herself up from his lap. "But I shall hold you to your promise to meet with me later." He winked at her roguishly which caused Jane blush in anticipation.



Sometime later, although not the *later* that he would have liked, Charles, now dressed in his formal evening attire, found Jane in the drawing room. Hurst was nowhere to be found, but Louisa was there and doing nothing more than playing with her bracelets. Caroline was speaking in a haughty voice, busily instructing Jane in the proper arrangement of the fruit.

"I assure you, Jane, it was done quite differently in my mother's house. The oranges were placed at the bottom, the apples came next, then the nectarines, and then the pears were placed up on top."

"I am sure that was very nice, Caroline," said Jane smiling patiently, as she returned the fruit to their original random positions," but as I said before, I prefer it this way; then, those who wish an orange may have one without disturbing the pears above. Do you not see?"

For a moment, Charles thought to interrupt his sister and explain to her, yet again, that his wife was now mistress of Netherfield and that she could do things exactly as she pleased. But Jane now smiled at Caroline so sweetly, yet so archly, that Charles could have sworn he saw his sister-in-law, Elizabeth, reflected in his own wife's sweet face. He immediately knew that Jane had things well in hand.

"Jane, my love, would you come with me?" Jane merely smiled her agreement as she placed a nectarine on top of the pyramid of fruit.

"Where are you going?" asked Caroline, her beady little eyes narrowing in suspicion and not wishing to be left out of anything.

"Why don't you come along, Caroline, and see for yourself," said Charles with a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Louisa, comfortable in her current attitude and wishing nothing more, waved them out of the room. Through the main hall the three went, out the side passage and down the back staircase into the servant's hall below.

When they had arrived, Caroline nearly bolted, but Charles had the presence of mind to offer his meddling sister his other arm to prevent her escape in order for their family to appear as one united before the assembled servants.

When they had fully entered the room, Charles released the ladies' arms and nervously rubbed his palms together. He looked to Jane and instantly found comfort there in her eyes and confidently pressed on.

"Good evening, everyone."

A chorus of "good evenings" sounded around the room.

"I am sure you are wondering why I have summoned you all here together. I won't keep you long, for I know you all have your duties to attend to. But as it is Christmas Eve, the first Christmas Eve as a Bingley for one of us," he fondly looked at Jane and smiled, "I wanted to be sure to express my appreciation to you all as befits this yuletide season. Mrs. Bingley and I would like to express our thanks for all the hard work you have done since the wedding, for caring for the house when your mistress and I were on our wedding trip, and especially for assuring that the house was in order for the holiday season. You have my family's thanks, and to show you our gratitude I hope you will accept this small token of our esteem."

The Bingleys proceeded to walk down the line to thank each servant individually. Fossett, the butler and Mrs. Nicholls, the housekeeper, having already received their Christmas packets in the privacy of Mr. Bingley's study, had the forethought to arrange the other packets on a tray in the order of each servant's seniority and position in the line.

Caroline's addresses, as she trailed behind the couple, were all that were frosty and artificial. Charles knew full well that the servants were not fooled for a moment and that was one of the reasons he had for being extra generous this year.

He also knew that in some cases he was being extremely extravagant, and that his father would never have approved. However, he had never been quite so happy nor so thankful, and at this wonderful time in his life and after all of his remarkable good fortune of late, he just wanted to share his happiness with everyone.

When they both drew up to Sarah, Jane's own personal servant who had come with her from Longbourn, Charles was especially kind.

"Ah, and here we have young Sarah. I hope you are finding that life at Netherfield is not too disagreeable."

"Oh no, Master," she said shyly, while looking at her shoes. "I quite like it here."

"Better than Longbourn?"

Bingley noticed the girl's loss of composure, but Jane quickly came to her rescue.

"Mr. Bingley is only teasing, Sarah."

"Oh yes, Ma'am. But—" she paused trying to collect her words, "It is true, I do like it here, all the same."

"Well, I am glad to hear it!" said Bingley jovially. "I cannot have you running back to Longbourn, now can I? It would make your mistress very, very, unhappy."

Sarah bobbed a curtsey after Mr. Bingley had given her a pay packet. She had been one of those he had been extra generous with.

Jane had noticed that Sarah's packet was just a bit heavier than the rest, and she lowered her head and smiled to herself. Charles caught her smile and interested look and knew that he would take special delight in teasing the answer out of her later.

After they had thanked the rest of the servants and Mr. Bingley had authorized a bowl of Christmas punch for later, the Bingleys' excused themselves to return above stairs. When they reached the passage above, Caroline was quick to show her displeasure.

"Really Charles, the way you gush over the servants. One would think that you think of them as your equal." She turned to her new sister to give her the *benefit* of all her vastly superior wisdom. "Jane, you must always remind your husband that he is the master here and not the other way round. Charles would spoil everyone if given the chance. He needs to speak with a much more authoritative tone to all those beneath him."

"Well," said Charles, having had his fill of his sister for one day, "in that case,

you may go, Caroline. Your presence here is no longer required."

He had said it in a voice so masterly and so full of authority that, for a long moment, Caroline just stood there blinking in disbelief. Finally, in a huff, she moved off in the direction of the drawing room, her head held high in indignation.

When she had gone, Charles grasped Jane's hand, and quickly led her down the hall and into his study.

"It is now later, Jane and we are alone, at last!" He pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly on her sweet mouth. "There, I have been dying to do that for this last half hour. So pretty you were standing there laughing at me as I did my imitation of Lord of the Manor."

"You are Lord of the Manor, and I think you did it very well even if your sister thinks you did not."

"If I did it well, then why were you snickering at me? Do not deny it, Jane, I saw your face."

She replied brightly as she adjusted his cravat. "I was only thinking of my father at that moment; thinking of something he said before we were married."

"And what did your good father have to say?"

"Only that he thought you were a good and generous man who would always make me very happy."

"And you are happy, Jane, are you not? It is Christmas Eve, after all; everyone is supposed to be happy on Christmas Eve."

Jane's smile faltered just a bit, but her glowing countenance returned half a second later.

"It is my first Christmas Eve as your wife; I can not help but be happy." Jane laid her head down upon Charles's shoulder, sighed, and then was silent.

They stood there for a time, listening to the fire crackling in the hearth until Jane was the first to speak. "Our guests will be here shortly." She drew back slowly; trailing her palms down Charles's arms.

Sensing that something was amiss, Charles seized her hands to prevent her from

going. "What is it, Jane; you seem sad."

"No, I am not sad," she replied, smiling a smile that had no true joy about it, "I have nothing to be sad about—" pausing, she turned her head away, adding, "— this Christmas Eve."

"This Christmas Eve?"

"I am just thinking about— so many things, really— it's just tonight— last Christmas Eve..." Her voice faded away in to nothingness only to turn once again to false brightness. "Will you look at the time, Charles? I really should check the table."

His voice was firm, and his hold on her hands tightened. "Hang the table, Jane, and tell me what you are feeling!"

It was not a shout, yet, its urgent, straightforward tone surprised Jane, causing her eyes to mist over with tears. She would not look at him and Charles was gutted.

"I am sorry, Jane, I did not mean to raise my voice. But don't you see; I know something is wrong, something has made you terribly unhappy. How can I comfort you and make you happy again unless you share your unhappiness with me?"

Jane's arms flew around Charles's neck; she felt herself the perfect simpleton.

"Forgive me, Charles. Of course, you are right. But in truth I am happy, very happy to be your wife. Only last Christmas Eve—I was sad back then, so very sad. The memories—"

He drew her over to the settee and urged her to sit.

"Will you tell me about last Christmas Eve, Jane, so that I may understand?"

She seemed reluctant to share her memories, so Charles pulled her into an embrace, letting her lay her head upon his shoulder once again while he gently stroked her back. After a long pause she began to speak.

"We had been invited to my Aunt Philips' for Christmas Eve."

"Yes," he encouraged.

"I did not want to go. My mother made me."

"Were you unwell?"

"No, I was not ill. I simply did not wish to go. Lizzy urged me to stay at home; she was the only one who knew how I felt."

"You felt alone." It was not a question. He had felt that same gnawing loneliness himself last Christmas Eve.

"Oh yes, so very alone."

"Did you feel like no one loved you and would never love you?"

"I knew that my family all loved me," said Jane as she sniffed a bit.

"But you were thinking of another kind of love, were you not?"

She nodded her head against his chest. "How did you know?"

"How could I not know; I felt the same."

Raising her head from his chest, her tear-filled eyes seared into the depths of his soul. "Yes, Charles; I should have known that you would understand."

"Of course I understand, only I could not face my family or my friends so I left them to themselves and went away. I am not so brave as you."

"Yes, I did put on a brave face; I did not have the means to go away, so, off to the party I went. My mother would think me selfish not to attend."

"There isn't a selfish bone in your body, Jane Bingley."

"But if I did not go, everyone would be made unhappy."

"So, in order to make everyone else happy, you helped your father, gave joy to the servants, and bowed to your mother's wishes. And then you rushed from the house in a flurry of gloves and shawls and pale blue satin."

"How could you –?"

Her look was all confusion, but Charles, using his thumb, brushed away one heavy tear coursing its way slowly down her cheek. "Go on," he whispered,

urging her to finish her thought.

“You could not know that I—I did wear my best blue gown.” She sniffed lightly.” My mother kept urging me to hurry. I remember that all I wanted to do was to run upstairs and cry my eyes out. I was all in a muddle, so very clumsy that evening, dropping my evening bag and gloves and losing my favourite handkerchief in the process. My grandmother stitched it for me; it was the only thing I had to remind me of her. It was white with green and pink stitching around the edges.” She sobbed again and added, “I never found it; how could I be so careless? My grandmother always told me that the use of it would remind me that I was loved.”

Charles then reached into his pocket producing a white linen handkerchief embroidered with green leaves and pink flowers. “Jane, your grandmother was right; that night you were loved.”

And Jane, after seeing what was now in his hands, cried fresh, new tears. And Charles touched the little cloth to Jane’s wet face and dried the last tears she would ever shed on Christmas Eve.