“Sparkage”

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Finishing off a date at an open-air mall in the middle of December was not the most brilliant idea Christine had ever agreed to. Each puff of breath across her icy fingers told her just how ridiculous it was. Seriously, what gave Troy the notion that it was a good idea in the first place? Much less it being even remotely romantic? But whatever it was, it was enough for Troy to insist they stop by after a nice warm meal in a nice warm restaurant.

Christine vigorously rubbed her hands together for the thirtieth time in ten minutes, blew into them again, and made it thirty-one.

"Are you cold?" Troy asked as he took her right hand in his own. It was colder than hers.

"How’d you figure that out?" she muttered through clattering teeth.

"Small hints," he laughed. "It’s not that cold, Christine. Cool maybe, but not cold."

A shiver broke from her spine, up her neck, to the tips of her fingers. "You mustn’t be human!"

Troy laughed again.

*It’s not that funny,* she thought unhappily.

Troy rubbed her hand sympathetically. It was a sweet gesture and Christine appreciated it, but with the loss of one hand she could not cater to the other. She blew into her free hand and hurriedly shoved it deep in her coat pocket. Her hand still felt numb inside her garment. Even with her red scarf, black coat, thermal shirt, and boots, Christine was bitter in the brisk wind.

She glanced at Troy who was wearing a simple black blazer over one of his expensive button-up shirts that she could never see the reason in purchasing. Then again, she did not grow up in the wealthy lifestyle that he was accustomed to. Being frugal cannot be an innate trait when you are to inherit a million dollar company. Either way, he was not dressed as warm as her and yet he appeared perfectly content in the weather while she might as well be a human Popsicle.
Life was unfair at times.

As if reading her mind, Troy said, “There is a method to my madness, Babe. You gotta trust me.”

Christine nodded, although she was still pessimistic about his scheme. It was in the cold, it could not be that good.

She secretly scolded herself for being negative as they walked together. They passed store after store until they came closer to the food court. Christine was hit with the aroma of Chick-fil-a, Subway, Sonic, and other fast food meals. She inhaled deeply and, despite having just eaten not two hours earlier, relished the scent of artery-clogging food. When they passed that blessed area, they came to the final length of the mall. At this point, the shops were lined up on a small street that was usually congested with last minute Christmas shoppers. As if the world had come to a temporary stand still, no one was there to threaten to run them over for the next big sale.

“Wait here,” Troy said excitedly.

Christine agreed and watched as her boyfriend ran to the middle of the road. He glanced at his watch. The sun was falling behind him and the darkness was settling in as thick as the cold. Christine tried burying her hands deeper in her pockets as she waited patiently on him. Finally, Troy lifted his hand, still staring at his watch, and began counting,

“Five...four...three...two...one!”

Nothing happened.

“Uh...Troy?”

“Wait! Wait!”
He threw his hand in the air again but still nothing changed that Christine could see. Troy shook his head uncomfortably.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “I thought I had the right-”

At that moment the street was lit up with hundreds of white Christmas lights that were strung from each store to its neighbor across the street. Golden wreaths were centered on every fifth strand, making the sight all the grander. Christine was struck by just how beautiful it was. She could not believe she had not noticed them earlier.

*That’s what you get for being such a cynic!*

She laughed as Troy slapped his watch. “A full minute fast! Come on!”

Christine approached him and gave him a quick hug. “This is wonderful, Troy! And that blunder made it more fun!”

“Yeah, well…” he tried to shield his embarrassment but she could see he was disappointed. “I knew how much you love the holiday…”

“Thank you,” she said warmly.

He took her hand and walked her under the artificial lights. She kept her eyes on the lights, loving their contrast with the gray sky that steadily grew darker. Christine could hear Troy snicker at her mesmerized state but could not care less. They walked together for a few minutes, hand in hand, taking in the lights. Not once did she take her eyes from the sky and glance back at Troy. She was lost.

At last they stopped walking and she was forced to tear her eyes from the lights and look at Troy. There was no denying that he was handsome. His dark brown hair was virtually black with all the gel he used to master the fohawk that he was so proud of. Personally, she thought he looked more like a freshly sharpened pencil with that pointy hair but he would still look good
even if he shaved his head. Troy had the confidence to go with the look. And the confidence was the only thing illuminating his eyes at the moment.

It was sucking away her own.

Christine desperately tried to think of something to say that would disguise just how self-conscious she had suddenly become. Anything, anything at all. Something redundant even. As long as she could avert his stare from her.

"This wasn’t so bad after all," she said without giving it much thought. Not the most intellectual conversation starter but it was sufficient. It served its purpose when Troy glanced up at the lights.

"I know how much you love Christmas," he replied. "I’m sorry I forgot how much you hate the cold."

Christine shuddered and blew into her hands again. Thirty-five.

"Ah, it’s not so bad."

Just then the wind kicked up and slapped the words back into her mouth.

"I take it back!" she cried as she hugged herself.

Troy chuckled and closed her in a tight embrace. She stiffened at his touch. She knew she should have seen this coming. He had been warming up for this during the entire date. He wanted to kiss her. And this knowledge frightened her!

Christine could not understand why it made her stomach so volatile. She had kissed before, not Troy but that was irrelevant. It was nothing new to her. It should not make her this uneasy.

As if seeing the turmoil in her face, Troy leaned closer and whispered, "Is it okay?"

"Why’d you ask?"
“Last time I tried you almost punched me!”

“Did not! Only shoved you... hard.”

“Yeah, so this time I’ll ask permission.”

Christine shook her head. “Troy, I was seventeen then. That was a long time ago. Four years! We weren’t even dating then. Things were... different...”

“I know.”

That was the problem. The reason for its difference still nagged at her. Next week would be the second anniversary that the difference ended.

Two years.

Christine let the thought linger for only a minute. Two years was too long. Too long to be holding back. She started dating again six months ago, but never allowed herself to commit to anyone. It was time to take the initiative to truly move on.

Her mind was made. She took the initiative and the kiss as well.

The kiss was brief and sweet.


Christine forced a smile.

It wasn’t any good either!

Troy leaned down to kiss her again and she let him, unsure if she had actually kissed him the first time. But like the first, it wanted something magical. Or at least something to make her want to kiss him again.

They lingered together for a few more minutes talking but Christine could not return his enthusiasm. In fact, she was ready for their date to be over. Luckily, Troy had to go back to his father’s place in a half hour to do something or other. She was not really paying attention. Before
he left he asked if she wanted him to walk with her to her car. Christine excused herself from his offer, claiming she would use this opportunity to get some shopping done. To be honest, she was anxious to break away and be alone with her thoughts. He kissed her again to say goodbye. Nothing improved.

When Troy was out of sight she looked around for a place to sit. A few yards away some tables and chairs were outside the food court and encircling a small brick fountain. Her mind was so packed with wonderings that she forgot to try to get out of the cold. She sat down on the metal seat, ignored a chill from the contact, and stared at the fountain. It was still running water out of the three stone fish that lined the top. She looked down at the water but could not see her reflection in the blackness. She could make out the slight forms of the lights above. They seemed to be tiny, golden fireworks in the gushing black. It was the only fireworks taking place that evening.

Christine blew away a strand of hair from her face. This was going nowhere. She needed to talk to someone. She considered calling her mother but felt too embarrassed to confide in her about this situation. Her two best friends, Mychelle and Louise, were more suitable for this. But Christine could already predict what Louise would say in her very blunt manner. Mychelle would be more sensitive to her dilemma but would be more of a passive listener than an advisor.

She had to go with the blunt one.

“Oh! You idiot! You idiot! You idiot!” Louise cried.

Louise was always sympathetic.

Christine pulled her phone away from her ears until Louise’s voice had gone down a notch in volume.

“Thank you very much my friend!” Christine hollered back.
“I am your friend. I would not be if I didn’t tell you when you were being an idiot. Which you are! I always thought of you as an Elizabeth Bennet kind of person but now I see that you’re a Lydia!”

Any other day, Louise’s Jane Austen reference would have been appreciated by Christine. Today it lacked its usual appeal.

“That’s not right!”

“Well, what do you expect, you Wickham lover?”

I’m being insulted by literary characters!

“Chill out for a second and let me finish my story.”

“Ugh! Why? I’ve heard too much already. Ah! You actually kissed that loser! Go wash your mouth out with Listerine and disinfectant this instant!”

“Cut the drama for one second please!”

Christine could hear Louise breathe deeply on the other end. “Okay, fine. I’m calmer now. But I’ll need five minutes of free ranting for this.”

“Granted. Okay, yeah. I kissed him. We kissed... three times.”

“Argh!”

“Hold it! Hold it!”

“I am.”

“Thank you! But it didn’t... I mean...”

“No sparkage?”

“Exactly! Zip, zilch, nada! I would have gotten more ‘sparkage’ from licking a battery!”

“Ah ha! This proves what I’ve always said! Troy is not the one for you! Haven’t I always said that?”
"Yes."

"See? If you had listened to me before all this freakin’ drama happened then you wouldn’t be calling me now and telling me about this stupid light show! *Meh!* I never liked that guy!"

"Why not?"

"He’s too smooth."

"Say what?"

"Yes! Anyone that smooth has to be hiding something, something dark!"

"That’s absurd!"

"No, what’s absurd is you dating him! When instead-"

"Oh boy, here we go!"

"-you could, even now, be wrapped in the affectionate arms of the one you do belong to. Truly and eternally! And you two might have been engaged by now- or even married! And I wouldn’t be crying for my lost nieces and nephews you were supposed to be giving me!"

At this point, Christine was tempted to repeatedly bang her head on the table. She knew Louise would do this. She always did, and yet, she called Louise. Wasn’t it Einstein who defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results?

*I am insane!*

"Are you done?" Christine moaned.

"Hardly, but it’ll have to suffice. So does this mean you’ll at least break up with him?"

"I...I guess..."

"What does *that* mean?"

"I’ve always been afraid I was holding back and-"
“Holding back? You think? How long have you dated him? Months! And you just now kissed him.”

“Thanks for pointing out the obvious! Look, thanks for listening to me vent but I need to go. I have to finish some Christmas shopping.”

Louise was clearly not pleased. “Okay... but are you going to break it off?”

“I have to think about it. He’s been good to me.”

“Of course he has! He couldn’t keep you if he wasn’t! It’s part of his act! Ugh! You sound like Elinor Dashwood when you say that! Where’s the Marianne in you?”

Christine rolled her eyes. “I’ll see you next week, Louise.”

“Merry Christmas.”

“Oh yeah, you too.”

Christine shook her head. At least she accomplished unburdening herself, but she only dropped one load and lug ged on another. Why did Louise have to bring him up again?

Not wanting to lose herself to her thoughts once more, Christine left her table and walked towards the mall’s Barnes and Noble. It was the last place she had to go to finish off her shopping. She walked through the huge double doors and was immediately overwhelmed by two things: the sweet mixed scent of new books and Starbucks coffee and heat. Glorious heat! She stood in the doorway for a minute until her entire body had thawed out. Once she had feeling in her fingers, she walked over to the escalator. The item she needed would be downstairs in the music department but she felt it necessary to take a detour in the Literature section that was upstairs.

Louise’s talk about Elizabeth Bennet had reminded Christine that her favorite copy of Pride and Prejudice was currently in the campus dumpster. A friend had spilled a whole can of
Coca-Cola on it, ruining it beyond repair. It had devastated her. *Pride and Prejudice* was her favorite novel and its author a focal point in her English major studies. Losing that book was a greater loss than what she conveyed to her friend in the midst of her apologies.

Christine removed a copy from the shelf that had a picture of Keira Knightley and Matthew MacFadyen on the cover, a dedication to the 2005 movie. This would have been a perfect replacement. A picture of her favorite movie as well.

Yes, she was a little obsessive at times.

Christine sighed. Money would be very tight until payday after she bought the Christmas gift she came for. She regretfully could not afford it and replaced the book in its spot.

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“Never rely on meeting someone off campus,” Jack whispered to himself.

He took a sip of his Pumpkin Spice Latte and set it back down by his Calculus workbook. The study partner, a quirky sophomore with a bad habit of gnawing on his fingernails, was supposed to meet him at the Barnes and Noble’s Starbucks to study for their final. Jack would have never agreed to it if the kid had not been the highest scoring student in the class, and Jack was desperate to pass. Apparently it had done him no good. An hour late and not even a text message to explain.

*The kid is probably home dreaming about some Anime chick he saw on TV.*

Jack closed his book and decided to call it a night. The trip had not been a total loss; he did study and had some time to grab a Christmas present for a friend.

He was about to get up from his seat when he saw a familiar figure walking to the register. He did not get a good look at her face but he knew by the long, sandy blonde hair that it was Christine. The girl practically lived in a bookstore. Jack watched the girl pay for an item, a
CD from what he could see. Once she headed towards the exit, he called out her name. Christine stopped and looked around. He called to her a second time, allowing her to find him. With a bright smile she rushed to him, slipping the CD in her purse as she did so. Jack stood up and opened his arms. She walked into his embrace.

“Long time no see stranger,” she said as they let go.

“Yeah, it’s been a whole three days,” he replied.

“Hey, that’s a big gap during finals.”

“No kidding. Wanna sit down? Or do you have some place to be?”

“No, I’m good.” She looked at his books. “Are you studying? I don’t want to disturb you.”

“I’m done for the day. The guy who was supposed to help me out didn’t show anyway. I’m free too.”

As they sat across from each other Jack noticed her rub her hands together.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

She nodded and put her hands around his coffee cup, trying to warm them. “I’ve been here for at least ten minutes and I still feel numb!”

“Do you want a coffee?”

“I’m kinda tight right now. I don’t need to be spending five dollars on a single coffee.”

Jack got up before she could protest and ordered her a cup. A few minutes later, he was back across the table and placing the order in her hands. He moved his books to the floor so they could have more room. Jack also did that to conceal the gift he had bought earlier for her, which was leaning against his chair in clear view.

“A grande White Chocolate Mocha with extra whip cream,” he smiled.
Christine was stunned. “You remembered my favorite drink?”

“Christy, you’ve never ordered anything else.”

“True.”

Jack raised his coffee. “Guess what I’m drinking.”

“A Pumpkin Spice Latte.”

He turned his cup around and read the side. “You cheated.”

“I totally did!” she laughed. “But I would have guessed that anyway. You always were a pumpkin addict.”

Jack nodded. “Did I ever tell you about the time I stole a pumpkin pie from my grandmother’s refrigerator during Thanksgiving?”

“Was that when your mother found you eating it in the closet?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Your mom told me that one. She wasn’t happy.”

“Neither were my cousins! Good thing I was only five or they would have beat the snot out of me.”

“You goof!” Christine took a long drink of her mocha and then continued to warm her hands on it. “I will pay you back for this.”

Jack shrugged and lifted his cup. “I don’t care.” He took a drink and set it back down.

Christine started chuckling while pointing to his face. Then she picked up a napkin and brushed his upper lip.

“What?”

“You had cream on your face.”
Her fingers had grazed his mouth as she dropped her hand. For a brief second she looked unsettled by the contact but quickly let it go. So did he.

“What’d you buy just now?” he asked.

“Stuff.”

“That’s helpful.”

A playful smile crossed her lips. “Well what did you just cover up a minute ago?”

*And you thought you were smooth.*

“I’ll make you a deal. Show me what you bought and maybe I’ll let you see mine.”

“Ha! No deal.”

“Okay, well, we’re changing the subject then. Are you here by yourself?”

Christine’s eyes fell to her coffee. Her fingers began to fiddle with the edge of the lid, tracing it in a circular pattern. “I came here with Troy a while back.”

Jack’s whole body tensed at that name. Troy, of course Troy. Christine’s loyal boyfriend.

“Where’s he now?” Jack asked more coolly.

Christine’s eyes never left the lid. “He left.”

“You didn’t leave with him?”

“We took separate cars on this date.”

“Wait, you came to a mall for a date?”

“He only wanted me to see the Christmas lights. We ate earlier.”

“Troy didn’t pick you up?”

Jack could see Christine’s jaw muscles tighten. She didn’t like his questioning no more than he did. But he asked and she answered.

“I don’t like riding in his car, okay?”
“He owns a Porsche!”

“I don’t like it! Everyone stares at you when you’re in it! I don’t like that kind of attention. And that’s not the worst part.”

“What’s that?”

“He likes country music.”

“Are you serious? That pampered city-slicker likes country?”

“Yep. Johnny Cash is his hero.”

Jack laughed so hard his sides hurt. He no longer regretted asking her. The image of Troy in a cowboy hat singing “Ring of Fire” in his red Porsche was too comical to regret!

His laughter had lightened the atmosphere once more. With that advantage, Jack easily changed the subject.

“When are you going home, Christy?”

“A few days after my final. I’m going to have a small Christmas with Dad and then go home. What about you?”

“As soon as I’m done with finals! Tuesday at noon!”

“Lucky! I won’t be back until Friday.”

“At least you’ll be with your dad some.”

Christine rolled her eyes and took another sip. “Oh yeah, thrills.”

“Things haven’t improved with your dad?”

Whatever amusement had been in her beautiful brown eyes had disappeared in an instant. Jack saw it vanish and he wanted to kick himself for making it happen.

“We’ve been doing better,” Christine quietly replied. “He’s not so interested in running my life as he used to be.”
“How so?”

“There hasn’t been much need... I guess....”

Jack knew exactly what that meant. And it infuriated him.

“Since I’m not around,” he snapped.

“Hey, you asked.”

“I know. Stupid me.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Well I’m glad I could make your life easier.”

Christine’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t get angry at me.”

“Right, right. I’m the guilty one. I forgot.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“But you have many times before. And I bet your dad encourages it.”

Christine leaned forward, equally as angry as he. “Don’t you dare insinuate that I’m easily influenced by him, Jack! Yeah, he’s lightened up some since we stopped dating, but that doesn’t mean everything’s been peachy since we broke up.” She leaned back and looked away.

“Quite the contrary,” she muttered.

They both said a quick apology and then grew silent. Jack watched her but she did not return his stare. He never could understand how they could be friends almost their entire lives but found themselves torn over their breakup. A breakup over a terrible mistake that made him look like a cheater on the only girl he ever loved...and still loved.

Jack loved everything about her. Her soft hair, her straight teeth after three years of braces, even the way she wrapped her scarf around her neck. Most of all, he loved her passionate brown eyes that never failed to give away the feelings stirring inside her. She knew they gave her
away and that was why she would not look at him now or much at all for the last two years. It was her passionate nature that he missed the most since they broke up. And it was that very nature that Troy was trying so desperately, but so far unsuccessfully, to penetrate.

Things had changed a great deal in a short period of time. Two years ago they had been happily dating and Troy was nothing but an annoying pest trying to catch her attention. Now they were always on the verge of a heated argument and Jack could smell Troy’s cologne on her. The idea that the jerk had held her, and maybe even kissed her tonight, made him want to take a sledgehammer to that pretty little Porsche of his.

None of this would be happening now if she had believed him when he told her the truth. But Christine had been too hurt by her own parents’ divorce to believe that her own relationships would not be as hurtful. Still, he was certain she never really stopped loving him. Why else would she still be sitting across from him, trying to converse like the friends they used to be? What could she possibly gain except the trust she once had in him?

“Two years,” he whispered.

“Two years,” she answered.

“Next week.”

She nodded.

They finished their coffees in silence. Then Christine stood up from the table and announced that she needed to be going home. Jack asked if she wanted him to walk her to her car, knowing she was not a fan of walking alone in the dark. She accepted his offer and he accompanied her.

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Christine knew the moment she approached Jack that they would lash at each other. She was already emotional after the kiss with Troy. It could only get worse with her bumping into her ex less than an hour later. If only she had not heard him call her name or had gone straight home in the first place. But she had done neither and now she felt doubly rotten.

What was worse was the fact that she found herself drawn to Jack yet again. He had made her laugh when she was solemn, he remembered her favorite drink, and to top it off he was still as attractive as ever. She loved how his shaggy hair fell lazily over his brow and how his dark eyes had so much animation in them. But it was when she touched his lips that all the memories of their past together came cascading back to interfere in her life again. It made her feel guilty to recall kissing Jack when she finally had the nerve to kiss Troy. It had to be wrong.

But what if that was the issue and Louise was right? What if she had been wrong about Jack? What if she was wrong about Troy? How could she know?

Christine considered this as she walked with Jack under the same lights she had been with Troy. They shined just as bright as before but this time she kept her eyes ahead of her and kept him in her peripheral vision.

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They had reached her car and Jack decided it was time to say goodbye. They had not been able to talk much since they left Barnes and Noble except a few comments about how cold it was that night. There was no use in trying anymore. He turned to leave but, to his surprise, Christine called him back. He watched as she removed a plastic bag from her purse, he guessed it was the “stuff” she bought. She gingerly removed the price tags before she handed them both to Jack.
“I’m probably not going to see you before Christmas so here it is in advance, Jack. Sorry it’s not wrapped.”

Jack smiled as he looked at the gifts. Two CDs, one read *Awake Deluxe Fan Club Edition* and the other *Live and Comatose* both by his favorite band Skillet.

“I didn’t know there was a deluxe edition of *Awake!*” he exclaimed.

“Yeah, my brother has it. It only has like four more songs but I knew you’d want them.”

“Yes I do! And their live album too! Alright! No one is sleeping in my neighborhood tonight!”

Christine giggled. “Merry Christmas.”

Jack held up his hand and reached into his own backpack. He pulled out the Barnes and Nobel bag and handed it to her. “Merry Christmas, Christy.”

Jack could see her eyes double in size when she examined the book in her hand.

“Oh! Oh! You bought me *Pride and Prejudice!*”

He had done some digging online until he found the perfect edition for her. This book’s cover was dark royal blue with gold lettering etched in it. It looked like a leather bound by its thickness and texture but he was sure that at the price he paid it could not have been genuine.

“I saw your Facebook post a few weeks ago about your other one. I figured this could survive a soda attack if necessary.”

Christine stared hard at the cover for several long seconds. He could see her blink several times as if trying to hold back tears. She appeared to be considering her next move. Without another word the two friends embraced. In that embrace he could feel her smooth hair caress his hands as they settled on her back. He could smell the sweet fragrance of her shampoo and perfume; Troy’s cologne had evaporated.
The urge to kiss her while this moment lasted was irresistible.

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With her head settled on his chest and eyes closed, Christine had not felt this warm in years. Not since the night Jack first told her he loved her. Back when they were eighteen, naïve, and content with the world. They had held each other in a similar fashion and she had had no difficulty in returning his affection. She could recall with clarity the way his lips felt when they pressed against hers. How her heart had beat so hard in her chest she feared it would break her ribs. And the warmth that had run from her lips straight to her toes in an instant.

The memory was so real that she almost forgot she was not back in her neighborhood, in front of her house, kissing him goodbye. Then Christine felt his hand slip gently up to her neck. She realized then that the kiss was not an only happening in her memory but in reality too!

She gasped and jerked away from him. She cleared a good four feet before she stopped.

“Christy, what—”

“Sorry! Sorry!” she cried. “I can’t do this! Not now!”

Jack’s brow creased. “Look, I know we haven’t been on the best terms lately, but—”

“No, Jack. That’s not it. This wouldn’t be fair.”

“For Troy,” he seethed.

“I’m not really concerned about Troy right now. I’m mostly talking about us. You want me to believe you. I want to believe you, but pretending that I do won’t help anything. We should know that.”

“So this was all pretend?”

“No! No! That’s the problem! I want to believe. Every day a little more of me sides with you but until I am completely convinced, it’s not happening.”
“Oh come off it, Christine. That’s not it. You don’t believe I cheated on you any more than you believe this pavement will eat you alive.”

She firmly placed her hands on her hips. “Then what’s the problem, Jack, since you know so much about me?”

Jack calmly slipped his hands in his jean pockets. He looked down at his shoes and then up at the stars.

“Well?”

He faced her. “You know what, you’re too wrapped up with your issues with Troy right now. When you figure out your drama with that bonehead then we’ll finish this conversation.”

“Say what?”

Jack shrugged and turned away. “See you around, Christy. Thanks for the music.”

That was it. He was walking away. And Christine was left standing by her car, trying to make sense of this scene. She gave up and drove back to her house. The entire drive she was flustered by the kiss. It lasted only second but there was more “sparkage” as Louise would say than she was prepared to admit. But it was real and not just something she read in a novel. She didn’t have that with Troy, and that meant she had to find a way to walk out of it quietly. Not for Jack but for whoever she was meant to share those sparks with.

When she pulled into the driveway she put the car in park but kept the motor running. She reached into her purse and removed the novel Jack had given her. Christine opened it up to a random spot and read aloud, “I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.”

She shook her head at her own silliness and closed the book.

“This is your fault, Jane!” she muttered as she turned off the ignition.