

[Excerpt from **Seducing Mr. Darcy**. To treat the crick in her neck, Flip Allison goes to a massage therapist whose service includes "imagining yourself in your favorite book." Flip lands not just in **Pride and Prejudice** but right in the arms of Mr., Darcy himself. Flip thinks her brief fling with him as a woman named Lady Quillan is just a dream until she returns to the University of Pittsburgh library and discovers what she and Darcy did changed a very important scene in the book. She is forced to enlist the help of Magnus Knightley, a imperious Austen scholar visiting from Britain, to help unravel the mess. In this scene, they're in Flip's apartment, and Flip is trying to bargain with Magnus, with whom she's already shared a sizzling kiss, to get access to that first edition **Pride and Prejudice** locked in a curated case at the library. She's trying to keep her visit to **Pride and Prejudice** and fling with Darcy a secret, though you'll see Magnus has already found changes in his own second edition that have made him considerably suspicious.]

Flip gave Magnus her biggest smile. "I'd love for you to take me to the library now."

The corner of his mouth rose. "You think one kiss buys you that?"

"It was a bit more than a kiss, if you'll recall."

"Indeed. Almost a brand, I'd say."

There was something in his tone that made the hair on her neck stand up.

"Brand?"

"Yes, apparently Lady Quillan's lips leave quite a memorable impression. I believe Darcy refers to it as a 'brand.'"

Warmth flooded Flip's cheeks. She didn't mind Magnus knowing Pride and Prejudice had changed--it might be just what the man needed to get his ass in gear and get them into that case in the library--but the absolute last thing she wanted was him knowing any of the details of her dalliance with Darcy or, worse, Darcy's reasons for it.

"Lady Quillan's lips? H-how do you know...?"

"My much-treasured second edition seems to have been tampered with. If you're not careful," he said with a low growl, "you're going to owe me considerably more than you'll be able to repay with a kiss."

"Y-you have a second edition?" Flip felt like the air in the room had evaporated.

"I'll play along. Yes, I have a second edition. And I don't appreciate Darcy trotting about like a staghound in heat."

Flip held her breath, waiting to hear his horror over the Stourhead Garden scene, but nothing more came out.

"I've got to get into that case," she whispered. "Just take me there."

He gave her a thorough look, pursing his lips. "It's not that easy. There's a restriction on how often the book can be taken out. Effects of handling, et cetera. I'd have to bend the rules pretty hard, and to do that, I'd have to be pretty motivated. Which in my mind would include hearing exactly what this escapade is really about."

She gulped.

Then something in her bookcase caught her eye. Her salvation. She hadn't been four-time-champion of the annual Allison Family Thanksgiving Day Tournament for nothing.

"Scrabble," she said.

"What?"

"Scrabble," she said, marching over to the box. "You fancy yourself a player. I saw the board in your office. I'll play you for access."

"You'll lose."

"Then there's no risk, right?" She pulled the box out and set it on the coffee table.

"And what's in it for me?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You win; I get you into the case. I win... what?"

She crossed her arms. He had an unnervingly wolfish look in his eyes. "I don't know. Something."

"What could a woman like you offer, Flip?"

She shifted in the heat of his gaze. She wanted him to go for the wager. That meant what she risked had to be equally attractive. "Well..."

"Watering my plants for a month?"

"No," she said pointedly. "Better."

"Better is in the eye of the beholder. Have you ever been spanked?"

Her belly did a cartwheel. She'd never had and until this moment would have sworn she'd hate it, but she had to admit the thought of submitting even briefly to those

large capable hands while those knowing eyes drank her in made her nerve endings buzz. She tried to form a reply but only a breathy 'ah' came out.

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" he said. "Set up the board. First one to one hundred wins."

"Deal. But, please," she said with real feeling, "don't look at the book anymore."

Magnus hesitated for a moment, but handed it to her. She placed it on the bookcase.

Magnus opened the board and drew a letter. "T." Flip drew a "C" Flip was first. She drew six more letters--R, P, I, K, O, and S--and added to the C already on her letter rack. She handed him the bag.

Magnus paused. "Let's make it interesting, shall we?"

More interesting than getting spanked? Clearly Flip needed to get out more.

"What are the odds of making a bingo right out of the gate?" he asked. "Pretty low, right?"

"Yeah."

"Let's say if you make a bingo, game's over; you win; it's off to the library. If I win, well..." He twirled the bag in his hand.

Flip's mouth dried. Spanking? What had she been thinking? His lap was wide, and the more she stared at that hand, the more unforgiving it looked. She glanced at her tiles. She hadn't had time to think, but the mixture of letters--some vowels, a handful of workable consonants, and a high-value "K" to protect the "C"--looked good. "Yeah, sure."

Magnus picked his tiles, not one at a time as she had, but in a handful. Handful. She swallowed.

"Time per turn?" he asked.

She needed that edition fast. "Five minutes."

He nodded. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked at his watch and wrote down the time. "Go."

With a new underlying urgency, she went to work, moving the tiles around the rack with clinical intensity, looking for patterns. Magnus raised a brow at the clack, clack, clack for an instant but returned to his own letters.

A bingo was a word that used all seven tiles. Statistically, it was easier to make a bingo on the first turn since you had that beautiful blank canvas in front of you, and, in any case, it was a helluva lot easier to reach a hundred first with the advantage of the first turn.

She stared at her letters. Jesus, what sort of man chooses a spanking? Then she had her answer. "Prick." It gave her a very respectable thirty-two for the turn and a fine editorial comment on the competition besides.

She laid it down, anchoring the "K" in the center, and picked up the "S." "Prick" or "pricks"? "Pricks" only gave her two extra points but that "S" could be a life-saver later. She brought the tile half-way to the board then pulled it back. No, she decided. Save it.

She looked at him and smiled. "Prick."

He didn't bat an eye. Damned British reserve.

"Done?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Not a bingo."

Bite me. "No."

He wrote "32" on the score pad, crossed off her start time on and wrote his.

"Wait!" Her heart fell. She should have put the "P" on the center tile, spelling it from there and thereby leaving the "K" for the double-letter square on the other side of the board. "I just need to move it," she said, miming a gentle shove.

"Turn's over." He looked at her as if to ask if she had the honor to abide by the rules or not.

Well, the answer was she did, and he could take his look and shove it. She leaned back in the chair, silent but definitely feeling the sting of those four missing points.

He picked up his rack with unsettling confidence. Her blood began to tingle. She couldn't decide if she wanted to be spanked or not. No was the obvious answer, but yes had some unexpected merit as well. Looks like you'd better make up your mind soon, Flip thought, given the way he had suddenly stopped looking at his tiles and was only scanning the board. She thought about being stretched out across his hips and clutching the frame of the couch as he rucked the fabric over her--

"Flip."

She leaped to her feet. "Yes? What? I thought I'd get myself a refill."

"Don't be long. This'll be fast."

She froze. Fast was bad. It was bad in sex, and it was definitely bad in Scrabble if you were the competition. He picked up the first three of his tiles--all one could practically put down at once, even if one was going to play all seven--and stopped. He gave her an unreadable smile.

"Another thought," he said. "A sub-bet. A quickie, as it were."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I'm about to play. Could be three letters. Could be seven letters. We know, of course, what happens if it's seven. But I can offer you a bit of insurance. Small premium; big protection."

"I don't need any protection." She was relieved she'd managed to keep the tremble out of her voice.

"Quite the boast from a woman who's established her credentials with nothing more than a tiny 'prick.'" He smiled.

"I suppose yours will be established with something far more impressive."

"That, of course, is the million-dollar question. My offer is this: take the chance I'm about to lay seven --"

Had she noticed a tiny emphasis on the word "lay"?

"--or I relieve you of your panties."

"What?!"

"Your call." He settled back on the couch, arms extended along the back. She could almost feel herself wincing, waiting for that first crack. But the removal of her panties? Right now? With a hundred percent certainty? A place deep in her belly was doing a very energetic rhumba.

"No," she said. "I'll take the risk."

"As you wish." He leaned forward, rack still in hand, and clicked the first tile against the board four spaces above the "P." God, that meant a word at least five letters long!

"No, wait!" she cried.

He drew back the letter and looked at her. "Wait?"

"Yes."

He reached for his mug of tequila and emptied it. God, she wished she had hers.

He waited. She didn't move. Couldn't. It was like her arms and legs had turned to stone.

He sighed and clicked the next letter onto the board.

"No!"

His gaze cut to hers.

"Panties," she said in utter submission.

He dropped the letters onto the board. "Stripped," built right onto the "P" in "prick." Without a word, he leaned forward, ran his hands up her skirt, hooked her panties with his thumbs and tugged them over her ass. When they fluttered to her ankles, he stepped her out of them, snagged them with a finger and dropped them on the table beside him, like Bobby Fisher retiring a chess piece. Then he handed her the mug.

"I'd love a refill myself."

It was as if she had been spanked. Her cheeks burned--all four--and the trail of his touch felt like the smoldering remains of a lightning strike. Nonetheless, the risk had paid out. "Stripped" was a bingo, and she was still viewing the board from an upright position.

In the kitchen she found her mug and drained it, the smooth, spicy heat doing little to put out the embers. She poured more tequila into each mug and returned. The tile bag was on her seat. She handed him his drink, picked up the bag and sat down--carefully.

"Your turn to draw," he said.

She eyed the score. He'd gotten seventy-six including fifty for the bingo. Christ, he was one turn away from breaking one hundred. She'd better make this turn count.

The first pull was a "Q." Excellent. Then a blank. Better yet. A blank could be any letter, and a "Q" definitely benefited from a "U." She needed sixty-eight to make a hundred.

"Do we need to make a hundred?" she asked, giving him a cool, I'm-going-to-kick-your-ass look, "or break it?"

"Given the relative difference in our scores, is it really going to make a difference?" He took a sip. "Make is fine."

With a "Q" and a blank for a "U" her luck was picking up. She pulled a "U" and a "Z." Wow. Maybe "quizzing"? Then she remembered the "O" and "S" still on her rack and the hope whooshed out of her like the air out of a balloon. No "quizzing" out of these letters, and, worse, no other seven- or eight-letter word she could think of. Time to punt. But this guy was a player. No regular punt was going to do. She needed to put him on the defensive, and do it fast.

She opened her hand to show him the "Q," "Z" and blank. "Pretty fine letters," she said with a big smile. "I've got one more to draw and 'quizzing' is looking like a shoo-in to me. That leaves me with a win and you, well, empty-handed. So I'm willing to drop all my tiles back in the bag and draw again for a price."

"Not the case in the library, I hope. That's the game."

"'Quizzing' is the game, pal."

"But you have one more letter to draw.'Quizzinv'--" He stressed the "V." "--gets you nothing."

"Ah, but 'quiz' is good for sixty-one. That puts me within seven of a win."

"And I within twenty-two. And, somewhat significantly, I have a turn first."

"But you haven't drawn yet. You could end up in vowel town. A-E-I-O-U-U-U ain't gonna buy you much. You've been there, and so have I. I'm a tile away from a win. You're seven tiles away from God-only-knows-what."

He pursed his lips. "And the price?"

She had to choose one carefully, she thought. Low enough to get him to agree and high enough to keep him from getting suspicious. A fine balance--one you need to be on and he needs to be thrown off. "The answer to a question."

"What question?"

She swirled the tequila in her mug and leaned back on an elbow. "What is it about you and the Rare Book Room that has so many people talking? Simple, huh?"

She watched the calculation behind those gold-brown eyes. He knew exactly what she was asking and the answer he'd have to give. A little discomfiting, yes, but in the scheme of the game, not much. She'd struck the perfect balance. And not only would she enjoy seeing him squirm, if she were honest, she was more than a little interested to hear the answer.

He tapped his fingers, debating. "I... don't think so."

"What was I thinking? Brits are far too reserved to talk about such matters."

"Yes, we lack that charming American openness that makes places like the waiting room at the DMV and Friday night at the shopping mall such a delight."

Tucking one leg beneath her and crossing the other over the first, she drew her skirt into a second skin over her unpantied ass and shrugged. "Your choice."

He licked a lip, visibly rethinking. "Um..."

"Um'? Is that a 'yes'?" She bent toward the table that was juuussssst out of reach.

"Yes." He sighed.

"Oh, goodie. Do tell." She put her elbows on knees and clasped her hands under her chin. "I'm all ears."

"Well..." He cleared his throat and considered his approach. "It seems the Rare Book Room offers men and women with a certain, well, taste for adventure the opportunity to satisfy that desire."

"Adventure?" she said guilelessly. "Like hang gliding?"

He refused to be baited.

"Not that," he said. "A two-person effort."

"Flag football? Charades? Quake Online?"

"No," he said carefully, but hairline cracks were appearing in his composure. He searched for the word that would characterize the effort without fanning further prurient interest. "Coiting."

"Coiting?" she exclaimed. "Goodness, how quaint. I can just picture Ma in her kerchief and Pa in his cap. And what is it, might I ask, that brings such a sense of excitement to the undertaking? Is it the time of day, the position, the surroundings?"

"All of those things. Look," he said quickly, "I think I've answered your question. Are we done?"

"Almost." God, this was heaven! "And you yourself have partaken in this adventure?"

"Yes," he said with laser clarity.

"But I'm just not understanding the mechanics. Perhaps if you drew stick figures --"

"That'll be all, I think. Toss in your letters and re-draw." He shoved the bag in her direction.

Ta da! Clearly unbalanced, she thought happily and threw in her letters. A quick shake of the bag and she drew again. Dammit. No high point letters, and no obvious bingo.

She shuffled the letters quickly, as he drew his own. She could make "unlaced," using the "c" from "prick." Cripes! Was there nothing better?

Magnus Knightley, hell's timekeeper, looked meaningfully at his watch.

Her eyes raced over the board: east, west, north, south. Nope, nothing else better.

Aaaarrghhh.

She put on her best "cares-be-damned" face and laid the tiles down. At least she'd nearly emptied her rack. That gave her some hope for the next turn...if there was a next turn.

"Twelve," she said, toting her points.

He looked at the word. "'Unlaced'? Foreshadowing my next prize, are you?"

The lace bra she'd recently donned immediately popped into her head, and she wondered if he'd been watching her little de-striptease. She looked into those eyes but as usual nothing was there but wry good humor at her expense.

She said, "It's hardly gentlemanly to make mention of something that was meant to be received in confidence." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Have you learned nothing from Darcy?"

The good humor turned to blank confusion but not, she swore, before she'd seen a flash of merriment.

"I was talking, Miss Allison, about your shoes."

Insufferable prick.

"And," he said with a self-satisfied nod, "may I add to the theme?" He put down his letters, one at a time, starting with the "K" already on the board. "K," "N," "E," "E," "L," "I," "N," "G."

All of his tiles and on top of a triple-word space, she thought. It was like a seven-hundred-point play. She was screwed. Literally.

"'Kneeling'," he said.

The terror rose from her toes, turning every muscle into quivering strawberry Jell-o.

He uncrossed his legs.

Honor was honor, but bare-assed on the lap of a man she'd just met? Her belly was saying yes, but her mind was running screaming for the fire escape. Between Darcy this morning and Magnus this afternoon, this day was going to be one for the record books.

Oh, Christ! Darcy! She'd nearly forgotten about him and the damned book. All this, and she'd still not have access to the library case.

Magnus took her hand. That damned tingle again. If she wasn't careful, she would forget about the book and then where would she be? Sore-bottomed and suffering the

slings and arrows of global reader outrage, neither of which looked good on one's MySpace page.

"Look," she said, "let's deal."

"We dealt." He led her to the couch. "This is it."

"But a spanking is--"

"What I won," he said.

"Yes, but it's a lot. It's a pretty big prize." Shut up, she cried to her belly.

"I'll second that."

"And don't you want to show me the library, anyway?"

"Check with me in about two minutes. I'll be better positioned to answer the question." He made a broad Vanna White-type flourish across his lap.

The phone rang, and half of Flip knew for the first time what a prisoner on Death Row must feel like when the governor calls. The other half, however, was chugging margaritas and dancing the Macarena.

"I should get that," she said.

"The machine will pick up."

And, in fact, the answering machine lurched to life. Flip prayed for something urgent--a break-in at the Aviary or nuclear disaster, for example--anything that might delay the inevitable. Magnus held her hand firmly.

"Hey, I'm out," said Flip's voice on the machine. "Leave me a message. I'll get back to you." The beep sounded.

"Hello," said a woman, uncertain. "I'm sorry to bother you, but Magnus Knightley's admin gave me this number. I already tried his cell phone."

The color drained from Magnus's face. He leaped to his feet and pelted toward the phone.

"Anyhow, this is Betty Scott. Please tell him I've had Pride and Prejudice moved to the Rare Book Room for him. It was no problem. He can come in anytime. Thanks."

The caller clicked off just as Magnus reached the receiver.

He lifted his shoulders sheepishly. "Apparently the restriction has been suspended."

