



The First Moment of Their Acquaintance (Happily Ever After with Mr Darcy #7)

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Category: Historical

Description: From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immoveable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.

Mr Darcy is left despondent after Elizabeth Bennets rejection of him in Kent. His cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Viscount Saye hit upon an unconventional solution to help him; they believe they can fabricate a second chance for him to make a first impression on his beloved Elizabeth. Darcy returns to Meryton hoping the disguise he wears will make the man he is more clear but will it lead to a happily ever after.

The First Moment of Their Acquaintance is a short story previously published as part of the An Inducement into Matrimony anthology. The content is clean and low angst and the trope is an enemies to lovers, second chance romance.

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CHAPTER ONE

May 1812, London

From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immoveable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.

PRIDE by mid-November, they had dined in company four times, and she had spent some days at Netherfield with their party. What had not happened in that first month? She had not yet met George Wickham. Thus was her meaning clear—she did not dislike him because of anything Wickham said. No, her disgust with him was all to his own credit. George Wickham had done no more than to second her already poor opinion of him.

Accursed assembly! If only he might do it over, to properly meet her and thus not set off on the course to his own destruction.

Lady Matlock had summoned him for dinner tonight, no doubt wishing for an explanation for his recent behaviour. Darcy had been avoiding parties as much as he could, and when he did attend, he generally arrived late and departed early. By no means did he dance. The ladies of the ton were of two sorts: those who reminded him of Elizabeth and those who did not. Either sort was undesirable as a dance partner, although for different reasons. In any case, Darcy was well prepared for the

chastisement of his aunt and uncle, who had made it plain that they thought he—as well as his two bachelor cousins, Viscount Saye and Colonel Fitzwilliam—ought to marry.

He was poor company that night. He scarcely ate, though meals at Matlock House were always delicious, and for most subjects being canvassed, he remained silent. His mind and heart refused to dwell on anything but Elizabeth. He mourned her and the loss of his hopes; he relived the agony of being rejected, and he despaired of seeing her again even as he turned his mind in every which way to find a way to win her. There was nothing he could imagine proving even remotely successful, leading to an ever-increasing gloom as the evening wore on.

Lady Matlock did her best to provoke either argument or agreement from him on the subject of whether he needed to take a wife, but she was sorely disappointed. Her nephew did no more than nod meekly, push his food about his plate, and give the occasional disinterested sigh. When Lady Matlock withdrew after dinner, she cast a significant look at his lordship. “I have some letters I must answer in my study, and after that, I shall retire,” she announced. “Darcy, I will bid you a good night.”

Darcy dutifully kissed the proffered hand, and she left. As the door closed behind her, his uncle turned, studying him closely. Fitzwilliam, too seemed to be evaluating him in an uncommonly grave manner.

It was Saye who thought to dive directly into the heart of the matter. “Darcy, you are uncommonly dull these days, even for you. My brother says it is about a lady.”

“A lady?” Lord Matlock perked up, suddenly interested in his nephew’s malaise. “What lady? Who are her people?”

Darcy shot Fitzwilliam a vexed look. He had known it was a risk to confide in his cousin on their return from Kent, but he had been in such a state that he could not

stop himself.

Fitzwilliam raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "They dragged it out of me."

"Why should we not know?" Saye argued immediately. "I smell a story here and shall not rest until I know all."

Darcy shook his head. "Leave it, Saye. This is no laughing matter."

"Everything is a laughing matter if you tell it with spirit."

Darcy closed his eyes a moment. Prudence suggested he ought to leave before the whole of the affair was laid bare, and yet impulse compelled him to speak. "I met her last autumn in Hertfordshire," he began. "It did not begin well."

A quarter of an hour later, the tale was told. Saye found the entire thing funny to the point of hysteria. He wiped his eyes of the tears of laughter as he said, "You insulted her, argued with her, and encouraged Bingley to abandon her sister?—"

"Bingley is in and out of love as frequently as most gentlemen change their shoes."

"And then, on the strength of a few walks, decided to propose?" Another burst of laughter came from Saye. "Did you suppose she would marry you for your money? Or was it your good looks you thought would prevail?"

"Clearly, I was not thinking at all," Darcy replied stiffly.

Lord Matlock opined gruffly, "It seems a most imprudent match. You should be glad she refused you as she did. You have been spared the degradation of your name." When none of the younger men spared him a moment's notice, he grew offended and thus rose and took his leave of them.

“You will be relieved to know that Miss Heathcote was asking after you at that dinner at the Scott’s two nights ago,” Fitzwilliam offered.

“I do not want Miss Heathcote,” Darcy replied, his eyes fixed on the table cloth beneath his fingers.

“Taking up with a second lady is the easiest way to forget the first,” Saye informed them. “Of course, at times, you must go on to the third, the fourth, sometimes even the fifth—and by then, you have forgotten them all.”

“I cannot forget her,” Darcy told them glumly. “Inasmuch as the remembrance pains me, it is what I have of her, and so will I hold fast to it. To meet another? It will not do. Never will another lady raise in me the feelings she so ably produced.”

“Where you really erred was in interfering with Bingley’s plans,” Saye told him. “Otherwise, you could have gone back to Hertfordshire. True, you have erred quite grievously, it is true, but you are a fine figure of a man, and if your money and position do not tempt her, perhaps a bit of lust will.”

Darcy’s only reply to that was a disgusted look.

“Oh!” Saye snapped his fingers and sat up from his customary slouch. “I have it! We will have a house party and get her to stumble in on you while you are dressing. Then she will have to marry you.”

A sudden thought struck him, and he gave Darcy a suspicious look. “You do not wear small clothes, do you?”

Both Fitzwilliam and Darcy gave him a look of incredulous censure.

“Then you think of a better idea,” Saye retorted. “There are several things a man

might use to tempt a woman into matrimony. Clearly, she does not want his wealth or his position—I am merely cutting to what is left.”

“I wish for her love,” Darcy told Fitzwilliam, turning his head so as not to see his more vexatious cousin.

“Not many women could fall in love with a gentleman who had publicly humiliated her,” said Saye, refusing to be ignored. “You should have offered her an apology the moment you believed she might have heard you.”

“That is true,” Darcy agreed, growing still more morose. “I ought not to have insulted her, and I should have apologised straightaway when I knew I had. I should have agreed to the introduction and danced with her. I should have been kinder to her when we were in company together. I should have opened my mouth and spoken to her. I should have?—”

“There are many things you wish to have done differently,” Fitzwilliam concluded. “Perhaps if you could persuade her to give you a second chance?—”

“She has no inducement to do that, and even if she did, it might make her tolerate me, possibly even like me, but it would surely not make her fall in love with me.”

Saye rose, going towards the fireplace next to which hung a small decorative gilt mirror. Catching sight of himself, he struck a little smiling sort of pose and then grew sombre. “Ah! Here it is: you must somehow adopt a disguise, and present yourself to her as another, someone who is not yet known to her.”

When neither his brother nor his cousin replied, he repeated it. “Is that not a splendid idea?”

“A disguise?” Darcy asked. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Pose as another, another man, one who has not insulted her. Then you may court her as the other man and, once she is in love with you, show her it was you all along.”

Fitzwilliam immediately groaned as Darcy said, “You cannot be serious.”

“I am entirely in earnest,” Saye replied. “Might do her well to see your waggish side.”

“I do not have a waggish side,” Darcy replied. “I am a gentleman of honour. Disguise of every sort is my abhorrence.”

“We shall have to hope it is your honour which will warm your bed at night then,” Saye replied. “You must loosen up a bit, sir, if we are to extricate you from your plight. Put aside all these vain scruples so we can help you.”

Darcy turned to Fitzwilliam, intending to exchange a roll of the eyes or something of the like in response to Saye’s absurdity. To his shock, Fitzwilliam appeared to be considering it. “Fitzwilliam? Surely you see how stupid?—”

“The scheme does have some merit,” Fitzwilliam began slowly.

“I am not about to perpetrate a hoax on a lady, hoping to earn her affection!”

Darcy’s protest went unheeded. Turning to his brother, Fitzwilliam asked, “How could we possibly disguise him sufficiently to fool her? She is clever, and their acquaintance is of many months’ duration.”

Saye strolled to where Darcy sat, peering down at his cousin critically. “What about his hair? A moustache or a beard, perhaps? We must cover his face as much as we can.”

“No, I will not grow a beard,” Darcy snapped. “I am not going to pull a prank on her!”

Fitzwilliam had also risen and moved to stand over Darcy and peer at his face. “Your only alternative is to let it lie, and that I believe is a most unhappy choice. What have you to lose?”

“Assuming you have related the tale faithfully,” Saye added, “it seems she despises you rather passionately. When a woman loathes you so ardently, you can hardly sink further.”

“I shall not do it,” Darcy said, but his voice had begun to lose conviction.

“What if it were by correspondence?” Saye said to Fitzwilliam. “He might pose as Georgiana and establish a friendship using letters through which she might gain a more favourable opinion of him.”

“They are not acquainted,” Darcy informed him, but this went unheard as the two brothers continued to conspire.

Fitzwilliam shook his head. “I do not think that would work, not quickly in any case. We must make him a man she will not recognise, one whom she will know with a new mind.”

“He is too tall,” Saye remarked casually, turning his attention from the study of Darcy to again study himself in the mirror. He adopted an attitude of pensiveness, watching himself as he stroked his chin in deep thought. “It is difficult to disguise such tallness.”

“I am not so enormous,” Darcy protested mildly. “Among my family members, my height is common enough.”

“There we have it!” Fitzwilliam exclaimed. “You must be a different Darcy. A cousin perhaps? Surely she has not met any of your Darcy cousins?”

“She has not,” Darcy replied, “...because there are none.”

“Does she know that?”

Darcy considered a moment. “I do not think she knows anything of my family besides the fact that my parents are deceased and I have one younger sister.”

“Splendid,” Saye replied, changing his attitude from pensiveness to enthusiasm and delight. “What shall we name him? Something funny to be sure. What about Pego or Lobcock?”

“I am not doing this.” Darcy rose, going to the mirror and removing it, carefully placing it face down on a nearby table. Saye scowled at him. “This is not a novel or some sort of fantastical theatrics. I am not going to wilfully deceive the woman I love. That would be selfish and cruel, and would wholly support her poor opinion of me.”

“Are you not doing it on her behalf as well as yours?” Fitzwilliam asked. “You know, yours is the second proposal she has turned down, and while I should not have liked to see her as Mrs Collins, he is an eligible match for her. If she goes about ignoring prudence, she might find herself required to find employment.”

“Collins believed he could have her?” Darcy barely suppressed a shudder thinking of it. “Distasteful as it might be, I cannot behave in such an ungentlemanlike manner.”

“So what you are saying is that your behaviour to Miss Bennet thus far has been, unfailingly , that of a gentleman?” Saye raised one eyebrow, skewering Darcy with what he no doubt believed was a severe look. “You have behaved in an

ungentlemanly fashion in her presence on a multitude of occasions—what is once more, particularly if it carries with it a chance to win her?”

“A gentleman, having realised his past mistakes, would not seek to further compound his poor behaviour,” Darcy retorted, returning to his previous seat.

“She might find it amusing, this little farce,” Fitzwilliam conjectured. “She has a lovely sense of folly.”

Darcy huffed with annoyance. “I recall once saying to her that it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule. Now to play a trick like this? What will she think of me?”

“It is perfect! It will show her that you considered her rebukes!” Saye cried cheerfully.

Fitzwilliam came close again, leaning in and studying Darcy’s face minutely. With a quick motion to his brother, he said, “I think a beard should do nicely.”

Saye joined Fitzwilliam in peering at Darcy’s face. “He might cut his hair a bit, too. The sides are not so very long now, but along with a beard, I fear he might resemble some sort of wild animal.”

“I beg your pardon!” Darcy was ignored as Fitzwilliam reached over, tugging back some of Darcy’s hair to make it appear shorter.

“Shorter here and brushed up a bit there...” Fitzwilliam considered a moment. “Perhaps in a suit that was less fine, even a bit outmoded...the dress of a gentleman of lesser means.”

“To be sure!” Saye exclaimed. “For a cousin would be of lesser means, undoubtedly.

George Darcy's younger brother perhaps? A man who has studied the law?"

Darcy rose and went to the window to escape his cousins and their poking and prodding. Obviously none of this would happen. It was far too ridiculous to even imagine.

Behind him, his cousins continued to scheme. "Let us not name him anything too outrageous," Fitzwilliam said. "If someone were to call him Cornelius and he did not respond, it could be telling."

"Who would be calling him by his given name?" Saye asked. "No one should call him anything but Darcy."

"But he still requires a given name," Fitzwilliam replied. "Trust me—the key to any clandestine mission demands that these sorts of details be considered."

"My name is, and shall remain, Fitzwilliam," Darcy said firmly. It was time he took the situation in hand, and made his cousins aware that he would not participate in their farce. "I have never been one for theatricals and I do not intend to begin now."

"What about William?" Saye said to his brother.

"Of course!" Fitzwilliam agreed. "Like enough to Fitzwilliam that it would seem natural to him to answer to it, should anyone say it or refer to it. Now, Darcy..."

Fitzwilliam turned to him. "You spend most of your time at Pemberley and are very little in town. You live...on the estate somewhere and you take care of its legal needs. You also serve as magistrate."

"No, no, no." Darcy shook his head emphatically. "There is no means of success here! Imagine this bit of puffery works, and Elizabeth falls in love with my

cousin—my cousin who is actually me . Then what? Then I reveal myself and say, ‘Ha ha, what a fine joke this is?’ Then I will know what it is to earn her love and to lose it just as quickly.”

“You will need to take care,” Saye cautioned him, “that she does not just fall in love with you, but you must make her feel she cannot live without you. Make her desperate for you. Then, when she is angry at you for deceiving her, you do all you can to make amends and earn her forgiveness. Love conquers all, and you are free to enjoy a happy ending.”

“No,” Darcy replied firmly. “The risk is too great.”

“With great risk comes the potential for great reward,” Saye rejoined.

“Again I ask, what have you to lose?” Fitzwilliam entreated.

“My dignity,” Darcy replied. “Forgive me, but this is unthinkable. Now if you will excuse me, I must return home to retire.”

CHAPTER TWO

Two days later, Saye and Colonel Fitzwilliam were at their club, playing a game of cards, when Darcy entered. He took a seat at another table, selecting one of the broadsheets and reading for some time while they finished.

Fitzwilliam arrived first at his table, taking a seat and motioning to the server for a drink. Saye soon followed. Both brothers regarded Darcy carefully, no doubt seeing the evidence of sleepless nights and a headache brought on by too much brandy and too little food. They also might have observed that his man had not shaved him very well, if at all. A faint shadow of a beard extended over the lower part of his face.

Darcy, for some moments, regarded them in return. At last he said, "So this cousin of mine, must he be bearded?"

Within the hour the three gentlemen were at Darcy's tailor, offering the man a commission which puzzled him exceedingly.

"You want two suits of inferior quality, made in the fashion of two or three years past?" Mr Bridgewater enquired, his bemusement plain.

"Yes," Saye replied impatiently. "And take care you do not fit him quite perfectly. In fact, my brother here will stand in his stead at the fittings."

Darcy, who was already regretting the scheme, said, "This is foolish. Let us leave and tax this poor man no more."

“I beg your pardon, Mr Darcy!” Bridgewater mistook Darcy’s aggravation as being aimed at himself. “I assure you it will be my honour to fashion these suits for you. I was only unsure of your wishes but now I understand completely.”

Fitzwilliam decided to speak up. “It is for a caper...of sorts. Some old university mates, a lark, so to speak.” He gave the man a conciliatory smile. “Darcy is always so well turned out, of course...to wear an outmoded, unfashionable suit...”

“Something more in the way of a country style,” Saye mentioned.

“To wear a country-styled, outmoded, less elegant sort of fashion will be exceedingly amusing to us all.”

“Yes indeed,” the tailor agreed enthusiastically. “And you would like two such suits?”

“Two,” Fitzwilliam confirmed, while Saye, who had been studying the samples of the less expensive materials, pointed to two he thought would serve well.

Darcy, watching it all, shook his head, wondering if it was merely an exercise in futility, or if it would prove to be the thing that made Miss Elizabeth Bennet despise him forever.

“Darcy, I will be first to admit, I find this notion exceedingly puzzling.”

Bingley had come to Darcy's house in response to his friend's summons. Once there, Darcy had made a clean breast of his errors with regards to Jane Bennet's true attachment to his friend, and had explained the forthcoming scheme to him. Bingley appeared delighted by the former and utterly bewildered by the latter.

He was agreeable to the idea of returning to Netherfield but the particulars of the

scheme seemed to elude him. “Would I be required to have a beard as well? For I must say, I do not care for them and it is not so easy for me to grow one.”

“No, no, only I shall wear a beard.” Darcy explained.

“It still does not come in anywhere close to here.” Bingley gestured at his cheeks. “I thought surely by the age of three and twenty I should not have the downy cheeks of a callow youth but?—”

“You do not need to have a beard, Bingley. Only I require a change in appearance.”

“I could probably be shaved on alternate days and still have the smooth cheeks of?—”

“You do not need a beard, so it does not signify.”

“...a youth. My man did say, however, that many times?—”

“Bingley!”

Bingley finally stopped ruminating on his difficulties in growing facial hair and looked up at his friend.

“I need a beard because I wish to convince Elizabeth that I am—” Darcy swallowed hard “—my cousin. You will still be Charles Bingley. Your only part in my little farce is to remember that my name is Mr William Darcy, and I am a barrister.”

“How is it that we are friends? From university?”

“Um...yes. Yes, from university. Mr William Darcy is...he is younger than Fitzwilliam Darcy by...by two years. Or shall he be older? Or the same?”

“The same seems less likely,” Bingley observed reasonably. “And if he were older, I might not have known him at university.”

“You might have met him at Pemberley. He resides there, in one of the houses.”

“To be sure,” Bingley replied. “Although...”

“What?” Darcy asked.

“What about Wickham? It is one thing to perpetrate such a story on those with whom your acquaintance has been limited, but Wickham knows perfectly well you have no cousin named William Darcy, a barrister who lives at Pemberley.”

“What irony it would be to have my lies shattered by Wickham,” Darcy grumbled. “However, I am assured by Fitzwilliam that in a fortnight the regiment shall remove to Brighton for the summer. Mr William Darcy cannot appear at Netherfield until then.”

Darcy leant forward. “I must put aside my little scheme for a moment and beg your forgiveness for interfering with Miss Bennet. I should have encouraged you to seek the truth of the matter for yourself.”

“The fault is wholly my own.” Bingley cast his friend a rueful grin. “You have always given me excellent advice but I must learn to use my own sense as well.”

He chuckled. “For example, in this, your second attempt at love, I shall not follow your example. Though I am commonly the fool in love, in this instance, we shall let that be you.”

CHAPTER THREE

June 1812, Hertfordshire

How I do wish Mama would permit me to remain home. Elizabeth looked wistfully at the new book on her bed. It was not to be; Mrs Bennet was determined to marry off both of her eldest daughters by the autumn. Since Elizabeth's return from her visit to Kent, her mother had been relentless in finding opportunities to put her in front of eligible gentlemen.

Elizabeth watched her reflection for a moment as she toyed with the comb in her hair; then she rose, going to the drawer in which she had hidden his letter. She extracted it, but did not unfold it. She hardly needed to open it by now; its contents had been nearly committed to memory.

She did not regret her refusal, although the weeks since Mr Darcy's astonishing proposal had at least taught her there was much more to him than she had ever suspected. She did regret having never truly known him, and she would readily own there were likely many ways in which they were well-suited.

However, no matter what, she knew she could never marry a man so serious. If nothing else, she wished for a husband with whom she could laugh and indulge herself in teasing and mirth. She had no doubt that life with Mr Darcy would be filled with things noble and solemn and grand, but which held precious little in the way of levity or merriment. She might have misjudged many things about him, but in this was she sure. For someone who loved to laugh as she did, a man like Mr Darcy would never do.

In any case, it did not signify. She was unlikely to ever see Mr Darcy again, and if she did, he would no doubt stay as far away from her as he could. He certainly must loathe her after her refusal; likely his greatest regret was that he ever said he loved her.

A knock came at her door; it was Jane. "Our sisters have promised they will leave us if we are not soon prepared to go, Lizzy."

"Would that they should!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "I would much rather stay home and read a book."

The two sisters departed Elizabeth's bedchamber, after Elizabeth slyly tucked his letter back into its hiding place. As they descended the stairs to the carriage, Jane mentioned, "Mama is not to be our chaperon tonight. Her head is exceedingly ill, and our aunt encouraged her to keep to her bedchamber."

"Who will attend us then?" Elizabeth asked.

"Aunt and Uncle Gardiner," Jane replied. "They are eager for the diversion."

I despise beards . Darcy gave his cheeks a vicious scratching. These clothes are an abomination as well.

He looked down at his breeches. They were not well cut and pinched him right in the place a man least liked to be pinched. The material was not fine either, not the worst he had ever seen but dear lord, how did gentlemen of lesser means survive? He privately vowed that—should he ever be forced to retrench—he would choose to have one pair of well-made breeches of a fine material than to have several pairs of poor quality.

With a loud huff, he settled back into the seat of the carriage. This entire scheme is a

fool's errand. Miss Elizabeth shall never believe such fat-witted nonsense.

"Um, Darcy?" Bingley leant forwards, his face barely illuminated by the lanterns that swung outside of the carriage.

"Yes?"

"You will recall that you said I should tell you if you appeared disagreeable."

Darcy sighed. "Yes?"

"You do remember that request, do you not?" Bingley sounded anxious.

Darcy replied in a resigned tone. "I remember."

Bingley hesitated, clearly uncomfortable in his new role as Darcy's instructor in the fine art of appearing amiable. "You do appear just the slightest degree disagreeable right now. Not too frightening, not by far! Just vexed, shall we say? Yes, vexed and perhaps a bit...hot."

"Thank you, Bingley," Darcy said from between gritted teeth.

"It is not the worst I have ever seen you, but perhaps you could smile a little?"

"This blasted beard!" Darcy could restrain himself no more. "It itches and it is hot! How am I to make Elizabeth fall in love with me when all I can think of is how damned itchy and hot I am!"

Bingley chuckled. "You must try not to think of it then."

"Easy enough for you to say," Darcy growled. "You had a shave just before we

departed.”

“I did, it is true,” Bingley said soothingly. “But see there?” Bingley showed him a small mark near his neck. “My razor was dull, I fear, and I got a cut. At least you do not need to worry that you are bleeding onto your cravat.”

“This cravat is tied so stupidly, bleeding onto it could only improve it.” Darcy scoffed but immediately regretted it. This was just the sort of ill-humour that led to him insulting Elizabeth last autumn.

Hearing the sound of music, he looked out the window to see they had arrived at the assembly hall. His heart gave a quick series of thuds; looking across the carriage at his friend, he thought Bingley appeared to have gone slightly pale.

Bingley smiled grimly. “I have only one goal for this night and it is to re-establish my acquaintance and determine whether she despises me, or if there is a chance she might yet like me. Low expectations make for surer success, or so I hope.”

Darcy placed his hat on his head and gave his beard one last violent tug. “Into the breach, shall we?”

The hall was crowded, the music was loud, and the heat of summer made the air feel far too close. Darcy resisted the urge to scowl as Sir William Lucas was immediately upon them. It was only then that Darcy realised a problem he had not considered previously; he would need to deceive not only Elizabeth but the rest of Meryton as well.

“Mr Bingley! Mr Darcy! I heard that you were returned to our fair county and I?—”

“Um, forgive me, Sir William,” Bingley interrupted with a hurried glance towards Darcy. “You have called him by the correct name, but I fear this is a Mr Darcy who is

unknown to you.”

Sir William’s brow wrinkled almost comically but his simple understanding was soon satisfied. For such a man as he, to know one Mr Darcy was pleasure enough; to know two was utterly joyous. His greeting was hearty and sincere, and Darcy was glad of it.

As they finished speaking with Sir William and began to move about the room, various members of the neighbourhood presented themselves to Bingley to extend their greetings. The word of the ‘second’ Mr Darcy went through the little place like wildfire. It mortified him to be the principal actor of such a deceit, but he supposed he was too far in it now to grow faint-hearted.

Remembering that his object was to prove himself agreeable and kind, he consented to introduction after introduction, all to persons he already knew. Many offered their comments on the similarity in appearance he shared with his supposed ‘cousin’.

“Of course, Mr Darcy is a good bit taller than you are,” Mr Goulding pronounced. “Several inches I do believe.”

“Darker hair,” Lady Lucas decided. “And curlier. But other than that, you are much of a pair!”

“You are taller than he, but thinner,” determined Mr Philips. “Your cousin must have a heartier appetite.”

My ‘cousin’ is not a heartbroken man for whom food has lost all appeal . Darcy only smiled and said it had always been so since their youth.

“In any case,” Mr Philips continued. “It is good to have another man of the legal study here tonight. We have a case of some delicacy here in town, and I hope you would grant me the honour of your opinion on it.”

“Oh!” Darcy stammered. This was a complication he had not imagined. “Well, you see...that is to say...Hertfordshire is different?—”

“Nonsense!” Mr Philips declared. With no further preamble, he launched into a rather detailed account of a nearby estate belatedly discovered to be under an entail. The former master, recently deceased, had for nearly a decade been somewhat out of his wits, and his son-in-law had the run of the place. The son-in-law, having no idea of the entail, had laboured diligently, providing a rather substantive increase in the coffers, and now was petitioning for something of the increase.

Darcy hoped he made the appropriate noises and interjections, particularly when Mr Philips exclaimed, “Of course you must have known of a similar case in Derbyshire! Highcroft near Bakewell... has it been five years since that matter was settled?”

Fortunately Bingley came to his rescue before he was required to reveal his ignorance. “I have seen Miss Bennet,” Bingley hissed while drawing him away. “As beautiful as ever she was—nay! More so! One hundred times more so! How ever shall I face her? Come, you must go with me. I will ask her for a dance.”

Darcy’s heart began to beat wildly as they crossed the crowded room, intent on going where Miss Bennet stood with a small, fashionably dressed lady of about thirty or five and thirty who was engaged in conversation with Mrs Goulding. Still Darcy did not see Elizabeth, and thus was his anticipation mixed with disappointment. In a brief moment of dismay he worried what he might do if she chose to absent herself this night.

He had almost persuaded himself that his efforts for the night were to be in vain when in an instant, they all converged. Himself, Bingley, Miss Bennet, the fashionable lady...and Elizabeth. All at once and without warning, he was upon her. He schooled himself to appear calm.

Elizabeth was shocked to see him; her eyes flew wide, and her hand went to her chest. “Mr Darcy!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Though he felt immediately that he had been exposed, Darcy schooled himself to be calm. Calm and amiable, he warned himself while he offered a bow. “Forgive me, Madam, but you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Do I?”

“You appear to be acquainted with me, while I do not recall meeting you.” He smiled, doing his best to be charming. “I surely would remember an acquaintance with someone so lovely.”

Darcy turned to Bingley who had already become lost in his admiration of Miss Bennet. “Bingley, perhaps you will do me the honour of an introduction, should the lady agree to it?”

Bingley’s colour was high and his eyes could not be moved from Miss Bennet. With a vague sort of bowing gesture, he said, “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, allow me to present Mr William Darcy.”

“Mr William Darcy?” Elizabeth echoed, with clear bemusement.

Miss Bennet appeared enthralled by Bingley, and the elder lady was engaged in another conversation; thus was Elizabeth left to converse with Darcy alone—and that suited him very well.

“Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy is my cousin,” he told her.

Her eyes slowly roamed across his countenance. “You are very much alike, sir.”

“We have heard it all of our lives,” he said with a genial smile.

Her eyes swept over him again; she at last gave him an uncertain smile and a curtsey. “It is my pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is wholly mine.” His smile broadened, his cheeks aching with the effort of it.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Bingley escorting Miss Bennet towards the set of dancers just forming. “Will you do me the honour of dancing the next with me?”

Her eyes went wide again, and a spark of mischief came into her countenance. “You are fond of dancing, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy did not falter. “Given an agreeable partner, I am.”

Her lips pursed and he thrilled in delighted anticipation of being teased. “Are you certain I will be an agreeable partner? After all, we have only just been introduced. What if you come to find me exceedingly disagreeable?”

He chuckled. “I daresay I must take my chances, Miss Elizabeth. After all, nothing ventured, nothing gained, or so I have always believed. Shall we, then?” He gestured towards the lines of dancers. She nodded, taking his arm as they made their way towards the set.

The first part of their set was spent in relating to Miss Elizabeth the story that had been agreed upon. She appeared to think it true, responding to him agreeably and even warmly at times. When at last he had depleted his pre-arranged topics of conversation, they were silent for a moment. It was then that Elizabeth posed the first

question of her own.

“Sir, I wonder if I might be so bold as to ask a question of you?”

Darcy smiled, noticing that the action was becoming less forced and more habitual. “Anything you like. I am well-pleased to answer.”

“Are you in your cousin’s confidence?”

“His confidence?”

“Do you know the particulars of my acquaintance with your cousin?”

Darcy was not sure how he should answer, and thus prevaricated awkwardly. “Oh, ah, yes, he told me you were a fine lady and excellent company, and that I should seek you out at my earliest opportunity.”

“Did he?” Elizabeth asked. After a moment’s silence, she asked, “Was it recently that he said so? Since his return from Kent?”

“Oh, ahh, yes. Yes it was.”

Blast! He had thought long on safe topics of conversation and nevertheless, she had him knotted up in tangles within minutes! He did not wish for this cousin of his to put the real him in any sort of jeopardy. Did she think William Darcy was mocking her? Had he already offended her?

There were a few moments to gather his thoughts as they moved through a pattern and then, on an impulse, he said, “My cousin told me he considers you one of the handsomest women of his acquaintance.”

She glanced up at him. “Did he?”

Darcy nodded, rather too emphatically, but he felt himself on thin ice and wished to seek firmer ground. “Yes, but also he said he admired your wit as much as your beauty.”

Elizabeth looked at him rather doubtfully so he added, “He has always admired any lady who does not fear the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”

Elizabeth tilted her head up towards him to reply to his comment. In so doing, her eyes held a momentary look of interest and warmth that was intoxicating. Her neck was exposed to him, the skin creamy and soft-looking and he noted, for not the first time, how particularly dainty and well formed her ears were. He was distracted for a moment, envisioning himself placing a kiss onto the delicate skin where her jaw, her neck, and her ear were united.

He spoke without thinking. “I know you do not like to discuss books in a ballroom, but perhaps you will tell me of some of your favourites.”

She stared at him and he realised, a moment too late, his mistake. He had made reference to their conversation during their dance at Netherfield—a conversation of which William Darcy would have no knowledge.

Frantically, Darcy began speaking, in an effort to overcome his error. “That is to say, I believe most ladies would not like to speak of books in a ballroom. Is that not true? After all, are not ladies’ heads generally filled with other things in a ballroom?”

“Such as what?” Elizabeth raised one eyebrow at him. “What is it you think my head is filled with, Mr Darcy? As we have only just met, I am interested to know what it is you would imagine I think of.”

He stammered like a fool, thoroughly unnerved. “I...I am sure I do not...the size of the room or the number of couples. There are many couples I see—” He glanced around him quickly to confirm it was true, noting thankfully that it was so “—but the room is by no means insufficient for it. That is to say, it is a fine room and the couples are...well, Hertfordshire has many handsome couples indeed and... and dancing is a charming amusement for young people. Do you like this dance?”

Elizabeth stared at him another long moment before lowering her eyes. Then, peeking at him through her lashes, she remarked, “So...you talk by rule then when you are dancing?”

The conversation was too familiar to him. Had it been said before? Did she recall it? His heart began to pound while he sought to determine whether he had revealed himself. He began to stammer another response but she saved him.

“I agree. I think it would be exceedingly odd to stand up together for half an hour without saying anything. I cannot abide someone who will not trouble himself to speak to his partner.”

“I agree,” he said, his heart still hammering madly. Then he considered what she said. There was a reproof in it—was there not? An intimation of his past arrogance. He decided to rectify it immediately.

“At times, it is not the trouble which keeps a man from speaking during a dance. There are some times when a gentleman simply cannot speak.”

“Why is that?”

What did she know? It was impossible to tell. She appeared teasing... She was not angry and yet it was a chance to improve her opinion of him. He took a breath, hoping to avoid an additional misstep.

“Often times the lady with whom you most wish to dance is the self-same lady who is able to render you stupid and tongue-tied in her presence. So you are silent, not because you do not want to talk but because you cannot.”

“You must be accustomed to dancing with exceedingly formidable ladies.” She laughed. “What do these fearsome creatures do that is so intimidating?”

“Dreadful things,” Darcy replied with feeling.

“I cannot imagine a sensible, educated gentleman such as yourself to be so squeamish.”

Little did she know that she was doing it right now! He felt as though he were eighteen years old again, stuttering through his first conversation in a ballroom. “They tease,” he replied, speaking in a tone of mock reproof. “Their eyes sparkle and their cheeks blush so prettily, all the while moving through a dance which seems designed to show them to advantage. It renders a man near insensible.”

“It sounds dreadful,” Elizabeth said. “Quite heartless.”

“Just so,” he agreed. “And yet...”

Their dance ended just then and he released her hand with great reluctance.

“And yet what, Mr Darcy?” She awaited his words.

He leaned close to her. “And yet, in the society of the right lady, we would not forgo it for the world. ’Tis a most exquisite form of torture.”

He bowed to her, then offered his arm to provide escort to where her sister and Bingley were walking. When they had arrived at the little group, their chaperon, the

elder lady, was there again, once more in conversation with another matron.

They did not interrupt her conversation but stood, speaking among themselves for a moment. Bingley's dance had presumably been a success, Darcy noted. He was as enraptured by Miss Bennet as he had ever been. It was with pleasure that Darcy noted Miss Bennet's like admiration of Bingley. She stood a step too close to him, he noted, and gave small, surreptitious glances at him frequently.

"Mr Darcy, I do hope your cousin is well," Miss Bennet said. "Do you anticipate his joining you during your stay at Netherfield?"

"No," said Darcy.

"Perhaps," said Bingley at the same time. The two men shot one another a look that sent Bingley wide-eyed and worried. "That is to say, one never knows with Darcy! Fitzwilliam Darcy, I mean. Not the Mr Darcy you see before you, but rather his cousin. He blows hither and yon! I would very much like it if he joined us but now that I think of it, I suppose it is impossible for him. Yes, upon further reflection, it is most decidedly out of the question. He is exceedingly busy in town."

"Mr Darcy blows hither and yon?" Elizabeth asked. "I had never ascribed caprice to him."

Blast it, Bingley! Darcy thought. Stop talking!

"Mr Bingley," Elizabeth continued, speaking in a light tone although Darcy could see keen interest in her eyes. "I had understood it was you who was able to be off at a moment's notice. Now you tell me it is Mr Darcy who has that peculiar talent?"

Bingley looked very much like a hound caught in the kitchen. "I would not say a moment but?—"

“No, no,” Darcy hastened to interrupt him. “I assure you, Mr Darcy is most decidedly not inconstant. Once he is fixed on something,” he tried to look at her intently, wishing her to apprehend his meaning, “...he is firmly fixed. He does not waver, at least not on matters of true importance.”

“Ah, yes,” Elizabeth said, her gaze steady on Darcy’s. “I do recall once he said his good opinion once lost was lost forever.”

Darcy opened his mouth, wishing to explain himself but at the last, recalling he must speak for his cousin, not himself. “I am loath to speak for him, for I cannot know the particulars of the conversation to which you refer. However, my cousin was very lately betrayed by someone who was once a dear friend to him—to us both. I would imagine it was that situation in particular which was recalled to his mind when he said that.”

Elizabeth looked down, seeming chagrined. Softly, she said, “Oh yes.”

Bingley’s head had swivelled back and forth between them during the exchange. He clearly knew he had erred and so leapt in at the first opportunity to remedy his mistake. “I only meant to say that when Darcy is in London he is always longing for the country. One never knows when he might make an escape from the obligations of the social season.”

There was a brief pause until Miss Bennet spoke, a look of sweet bafflement on her features. “I thought when we danced, you had mentioned Mr Darcy was much occupied at Pemberley.”

Bingley shot Darcy a panicked look.

How could I have ever imagined Bingley equal to this? Darcy recovered the slip smoothly. “He was until recently, but then he came to town.”

“I see,” Miss Bennet murmured.

Was it his imagination, or did she dart a glance at Elizabeth? Darcy had the increasing sense that they were exposing his ruse and began to cast about his mind desperately for another topic of conversation. Everything he could imagine was fraught with the possibility for error and he stood, in a rather stupid fashion, until Bingley hit on the answer.

“We are leaving our partners to thirst, Darcy!” He turned and bowed to the ladies.

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth—may I interest you in a cup of punch?”

Both ladies agreed, and with much relief, the gentlemen were off to recover their senses and procure some punch.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Did you enjoy dancing with Mr Darcy?”

“I did indeed,” Elizabeth replied to her sister, watching as Mr Darcy strolled around the room, greeting people with ease and friendliness. “He is all that is amiable.”

“Do you suppose he knows of Mr Darcy’s proposal?” Jane asked. “I should think it quite odd if he did, and yet showed you such preference.”

“Did you think he showed me preference?”

Jane nodded emphatically. “You are fortunate our mother is not here; she would be calling for the banns to be read.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Let us assume he does know of Mr Darcy’s proposal—and I think surely he must—then yes, his preference would be peculiar. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

Elizabeth did not remove her eyes from Mr Darcy. “I do not recall mention of a cousin in any of my conversations with Mr Darcy.”

“Likely there is much you do not know of him.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth agreed. “However I would imagine that a cousin who lived on the same estate as he did must earn some mention, do you not? Do consider that I do not

speak only of our time in Hertfordshire, but of the weeks in Kent as well. Mr William Darcy was not discussed, not by Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, nor by any of those who must be mutually acquainted with him.”

“That is true,” Jane said. “But what can it mean?”

“In fact,” Elizabeth said, with greater vigour. “Lady Catherine scolded him for being unable to come to her more often. He always claimed the duties of his estate drew him away. Would you not think that with Pemberley in the hands of a trusted cousin, he might go where he pleases for as long as he wishes to be there?”

“He likely did not wish to be in Kent and used his obligations at Pemberley to exempt himself,” Jane said in a reasonable tone. “You have said yourself, he appeared quite disgusted to be there.”

“Your answers have far too much logic for me, Sister,” Elizabeth said, at last removing her eyes from Mr William Darcy. “I fear your sense shall overcome my fancies.”

“And what are your fancies?” Jane asked.

“Something is afoot here,” Elizabeth pronounced. “And I intend to find out just what it is.”

She turned, addressing Mrs Gardiner, who had recently finished her conversation with Mrs Jones, the wife of the apothecary. “Our dance partners have gone to retrieve some refreshments for us. I do hope you will meet them when they return.”

Mrs Gardiner gave Jane a little look. “I am exceedingly curious to meet Mr Bingley, of whom I have heard so much. And Lizzy? Was Mr Darcy your partner?”

Elizabeth smiled. “How did you guess?”

“He is very the image of his father,” said Mrs Gardiner. “I cannot claim intimacy with that family, but such distinguished personages are always known to those in the towns, even if they themselves do not recognise the townsfolk.”

A thrum of excitement coursed through her. Of course! Here beside her was the greatest proof of all. Surely a cousin would be known to Mrs Gardiner?

The gentlemen were approaching again, and Elizabeth made haste to speak to her aunt. “It may surprise you to know that it is not Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy who you see but Mr William Darcy. A nephew; I believe he is the son of Mr George Darcy’s younger brother.”

“I beg your pardon?” Mrs Gardiner looked confused. “But I did not think that?—”

The gentlemen were then upon them and Mr Darcy was first to speak, nodding respectfully to Mrs Gardiner before saying, “Miss Elizabeth, pray introduce me to your friend.”

Elizabeth gave him a wide smile and if it was a bit like the smile a cat would give to its mouse, she did not intend it to be so. “It would be my pleasure, sir.”

She made the introduction, pleased with the amiability of Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley towards her beloved aunt. Before they could introduce any subject for conversation, however, she interceded further. “Mr Darcy, my aunt spent her youth in Derbyshire.”

Her eyes were intent upon Mr Darcy’s countenance when she pronounced it, and thus she did not miss the slight widening of his eyes or the fleeting distress that marked his looks. “A town called Lambton,” she added.

“That is but five miles from Pemberley,” Bingley cried out jovially. A moment later, he grasped the implication of this news and sobered.

Mrs Gardiner stepped forward, her features showing her intelligence and kindness. “I could not claim an intimacy with your family, sir,” she said. “But we did attend the parish church at Kympton and saw them all when they were in Derbyshire.”

Mrs Gardiner tilted her head at Darcy, seeming as though she studied him closely, though politely. “My nieces tell me you are the cousin of the present Master of Pemberley.”

Elizabeth nearly laughed aloud. Mr Darcy stared at Mrs Gardiner in horror but did not speak. One could almost hear his mind spinning.

“I must own I find it exceedingly surprising. I can remember once, when I was only a girl, you... your cousin fell ill and the town was so very fearful he would not last it. Oh, how much everyone hoped and prayed! Of course, no one wished to see a child perish but I had understood it was also because there were no near male relations to inherit Pemberley.”

Mr Darcy glanced quickly at Elizabeth and she dropped her eyes quickly, not wanting him to see what she felt. She was nearly positive he was pretending to be his own cousin, but why? She could not imagine.

Mr Darcy shifted on his feet, seeming to be at a loss for words. Elizabeth waited, wondering what explanation he could, or would, give them. The silence seemed to stretch long.

Just when she began to think he would remain mute forever, Mr Bingley gave a strangled cry. He then lurched forward and his glass of punch—a glass that had been largely untouched—poured directly onto Mr Darcy. The drink, a deep claret colour,

splashed liberally over Mr Darcy's waistcoat, dribbling onto his breeches as well as colouring a small portion of his cravat and shirt.

Mr Darcy leapt backwards, his action too late to be of any help. "Bingley!"

"Oh my!" Bingley exclaimed. "What a dreadful clumsy oaf I am! Someone must have bumped me!"

Mr Darcy removed his handkerchief and began to dab uselessly at his clothes. He gave his friend a strained smile, which more resembled the baring of his teeth, but he did not get angry. "It is nothing, just a spot."

"I do hope your suit is not ruined!" Mr Bingley exclaimed. "Come, let us find someone to help!"

Mrs Gardiner stepped forward. "May I be of use? I might?—"

"No, no!" Mr Bingley took hold of his friend's arms and began to push him towards the side of the room, ignoring Mrs Gardiner. "I could not importune you, ma'am. Come with me, Darcy."

Darcy permitted Bingley to direct him towards a small room to the side of the dance floor, looking back only once to see Elizabeth standing with her sister and aunt, staring after them in astonishment.

Bingley immediately sent two servants to retrieve some water. Sir William arrived to see whether he could assist. Darcy opened his mouth, a curt refusal on the tip of his tongue, but Bingley hissed, "Amiable!" under his breath, so Darcy forced a smile.

"Nothing at all, Sir William. A minor spill. I am certain to be back among the dancers by the time the next is called."

Sir William clapped his hands, made a few silly and absent-minded remarks about not being denied the pleasure of watching them dance, and then was gone.

As soon as the door closed behind Sir William, Bingley heaved a sigh, then removed his own handkerchief and mopped his brow. "You are most welcome, sir," he said to Darcy.

"Welcome?" Darcy was incredulous. "I am welcome? You suppose I should thank you? Have you gone witless?"

Bingley reached over to dab uselessly at Darcy's waistcoat with his sweat-laden handkerchief. "I aided you in escaping just in time! What singular misfortune to come across someone who knows your family when otherwise you might have passed very creditably."

Bingley began to pace as they awaited the servant with the water. "What if you say there was a breach in the family...some time past, perhaps some blackguard of a great-uncle of sorts?"

Darcy sagged against the wall, closing his eyes for a moment. "The game is up," Darcy told him tiredly. "Elizabeth is far too quick-witted to believe?—"

Bingley shook his head, fully resolute. "We can think of some explanation. A brother who was believed dead, but after your father died, appeared suddenly?—"

"I cannot lie any more! An uncle brought back from the dead? It is too much!"

Bingley crossed his arms over his chest. "Very well then. You reveal yourself. Then what?"

Darcy sighed. "Then we...I am sure I cannot say."

“Then she is angry. She will be angry because she will not yet comprehend what is good in this little farce.”

“What good is there in this farce?”

“That you have shown yourself willing to do anything to be with her,” said Bingley.

“That you would even be another man if it would meet with her approval.”

Darcy considered that moment, then slowly nodded. It made sense, and it held promise.

“So you need only show her that you are an agreeable fellow. Then when you reveal William and Fitzwilliam are one and the same gentleman, she will realise there was more to you than she knew and that she is in love with the William part of you.”

“She may already suspect William is me in disguise.”

“Then I return to my previous point—she is behaving rather warmly to you. So whether she thinks you are William or Fitzwilliam, you have much to gain by continuing. You could win her heart either way, but in either case, it is far too early to give up.”

Though Darcy hated to admit it, Bingley was correct. Elizabeth had been alternately warm and teasing, sometimes curious, sometimes dubious, but never with indifference or spite. Bingley noted it, and yet Bingley knew nothing of his letter. Had his letter, the letter he had given her after his botched proposal, made her think differently of him?

He supposed it all must depend upon whether or not she knew he was Fitzwilliam—which was very hopeful—or whether she truly believed he was Cousin William—much less hopeful.

He could not give up until he knew, for certain, whether her teasing smiles and sparkling fine eyes were for him or for William. Who better than William Darcy to lead the discovery?

CHAPTER SIX

When the gentlemen had disappeared into one of the back rooms, Elizabeth stood contemplating the mystery she believed had been laid before her.

Upon her first view of the gentleman calling himself Mr William Darcy, she had believed, wholly, that he was in fact Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. However, his marked amiability, the ease and friendliness in his manner—all had caused her to doubt. When he flirted with her, her doubts were relieved; the man was, in no way, Fitzwilliam Darcy. He must be William, as he said he was.

Had not Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy made very plain the upright sobriety of his nature?

‘Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, they do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can’—she had said those very words to him the previous autumn, adding a challenge afterwards—‘But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without’.

Mr Darcy had replied, ‘Perhaps that is not possible for any one. But it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which expose a strong understanding to ridicule.’

Thus this Mr Darcy could decidedly not be Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy would do no such silly thing as this.

There was but one thing that gave her pause.

Surely a gentleman would know he should not flirt and make love to the lady who had so recently rejected his cousin? He claimed to be in Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy's confidence. This would surely make him more cautious in his dealings with her, would it not? She would have expected 'William' Darcy to avoid her as assiduously as his 'cousin' might have.

There were other things as well; that certain something in his manner. The attitude in which he stood, the movement of his hands when he spoke, even his speech; surely a cousin who spent most of his time in Derbyshire would have the accent of Derbyshire, would he not? And yet Mr William Darcy spoke as one who spent a considerable amount of his time in London.

A beard and an ill-fitting suit were not sufficient disguise for the nobility of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy's appearance. Mr Darcy was—she would admit this now—a very handsome man. It took a great deal more than whiskers to disguise that.

Why would he do such a thing as this? What did he hope to achieve? Surely to make her laugh at him could not be his object. Was it a sort of revenge on her?

She could not deny this: he had surprised and intrigued her. She wished to know more of him and understand what it was that compelled him to do as he did.

She would not expose him, she decided. Indeed, she wished to study him further, to see what he was about. She thought she had surely misjudged his character before and now it seemed, in thinking him too serious and staid, she misunderstood him again. Mr Darcy was proving far more intriguing than ever she had imagined.

It was entirely fascinating to see just how far he would take this nonsense of his.

She turned to her sister and her aunt. "I require your forbearance."

Both ladies agreed and stood looking at her expectantly.

“The gentleman who just left us, accompanied by Mr Bingley is, I believe, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. He has chosen to don a disguise tonight, although to what end I cannot say.”

Mrs Gardiner protested this conclusion. “Who would attempt to deceive an entire assembly of people?”

“There are too many similarities in their appearance, but not only that. There is a certain something in his air, the way he walks; it is too like the manners of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Jane said, “Cousins will often share these sorts of things, similarities in not only looks but also gestures. It is not so very uncommon.”

“Yes, but...” Elizabeth stopped herself. What she had nearly said—but would not, could not ever say—was a secret she held deep in her heart.

It had been not the first moment of their acquaintance but rather the first moment that she had seen him, eight months prior, at the assembly much like this one. She had observed him enter and felt...something. A tug, so to speak, ill-defined but exceedingly pleasing. She recalled fancying it as a recognition of souls, although she discarded the notion at once, realising he was far too high for her and she must not harbour hopes for such a man.

Then of course, he slighted her and so it went from there. However, had he not slighted her, she did not know what might have become of them. Her injured pride made her determined to dislike him.

But now she felt it again. This man, in his shabby-looking whiskers and an

unfashionable, cheaply made suit, produced another tug, still more powerful than the first.

“But what, Lizzy?” Jane interrupted her sister’s musings.

“They are returning,” Mrs Gardiner cautioned them in a hushed voice.

The gentleman tarried a moment by the window; a breeze blew and no doubt Mr Darcy hoped to dry his breeches. As the gentlemen stood there, the ladies lowered their eyes, using their particular talents to observe the gentlemen through their eyelashes whilst looking as though they saw nothing.

Mr Darcy’s breeches were bothersome to him it would seem.

“See there,” Elizabeth murmured. “You see how Mr Darcy has just adjusted his breeches?”

“All gentlemen do that,” Mrs Gardiner said under her breath while nodding at a passing acquaintance.

“Not Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth replied, opening her fan in front of her face. “I never before saw such an action, not in his weeks in Hertfordshire, and not in Kent. Yet tonight, I have seen him troubling himself several times tonight. Perhaps as many as ten times.”

Jane was not persuaded. “Mr Bingley has ‘troubled himself’, as you say it, ten times in the five minutes they have been standing there. I think perhaps you merely did not notice it before.”

“No, no,” Elizabeth insisted. “What I mean to say is that I am certain such movements can only suggest that Mr Darcy is wearing attire that is not his own.”

Mrs Gardiner had opened her fan also and spoke behind it. “Lizzy, you might not be aware of this but the male anatomy...well, it can be rather inconvenient at times—most particularly during warmer weather, such as we are having.”

“How do you mean, Aunt?” Jane asked.

Mrs Gardiner glanced around. “The heat causes sweat and the sweat can lead to...discomfort.”

“Discomfort?” Mr Gardiner had arrived, his approach unseen by any of them. His voice seemed extraordinarily loud, very nearly booming. The ladies jumped and shushed him.

“What?” he asked in a theatrical whisper. “Oh! Is it—” He glanced around anxiously. “Is it a lady’s particular discomfort?”

Mrs Gardiner laughed. “Quite the opposite in fact.”

Mr Gardiner appeared bemused but before he could speak again, Elizabeth spoke. “Whether Mr William Darcy is who he says he is or whether, as I believe, he is Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, let us go along with it.”

The other three agreed and if Mr Gardiner was wont to question further, a quickly hissed word from his wife forestalled his questions.

The gentlemen abandoned their post at the window and were approaching their little group. The two Gardiners and two Bennet ladies straightened themselves. As Mr Darcy made his way past a group of gentlemen—including the rather corpulent Mr Hatchings whom he no doubt believed obscured him from view—he again adjusted his breeches; Elizabeth noted it and gave Jane a significant look. Jane hissed, “Mr Bingley has adjusted his breeches three times in the walk over Lizzy; it means

nothing!”

“Mr Darcy, you are well recovered from Mr Bingley’s mishap,” said Elizabeth as soon as the gentlemen drew near. It was not entirely true; his waistcoat still bore evidence of the spill but it was to Mr Darcy’s good fortune that the dark colour of the garment hid most of the stain.

He bowed. “We have done our best, have we not, Bingley?”

Mrs Gardiner spoke. “Mr Darcy, pray forgive me. I believe I spoke wrongly before, confusing your family with another I knew in Derbyshire.”

“Oh.” Mr Darcy looked uncertain for a moment. “It was no matter.”

“I forget sometimes that it has been nearly twenty years since I last called that county my home.” Mrs Gardiner smiled warmly. “I hold Derbyshire in great esteem.”

With that they were able to put aside the subject of the Darcy family for a time, as Mr Darcy compared his recollections of youth in Derbyshire to those of Mrs Gardiner. The subject was ended when Mr Bingley asked Elizabeth to dance the next with him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A plan had formed in Elizabeth's mind, and thus did she consent with alacrity to dance with Mr Bingley. She was pleased to see Mr Darcy asked Jane for the same favour, although she could not imagine Jane would be of any help in eliciting information from the gentleman.

The dance began and to Elizabeth's delight, it was not one of the faster ones. Indeed, it was one that allowed for a great deal of talking in the pattern. When all the polite little nothings were dispensed with, Elizabeth sallied forth into her true subject of interest.

"Mr Bingley, I must own I am rather disappointed Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy did not accompany you to Netherfield."

"Are you?" Mr Bingley's eyes were alit with eager interest almost immediately.

"But you have said he is excessively busy and I do not doubt it. I am sure there are a great many amusements to occupy him in town."

"Yes," said Mr Bingley. "But then again, no. I do not doubt that he would much prefer to be here." He gave Elizabeth a wide-eyed look that no doubt he believed was subtle; it was not.

"Here?"

"Indeed!" he replied warmly.

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why are you so certain he would prefer to be here?” She asked with as much innocence as she could muster. “After all, would he not be here if he wished it?”

“Oh...I...”

“Perhaps you did not want him here. How silly of me to assume you had invited him!” She smiled broadly.

“No, no I did invite him but?—”

“But he did not wish to attend you. I understand completely. I do not think he was fond of Hertfordshire when last he was here.”

“He thinks Hertfordshire is second only to Derbyshire,” Mr Bingley protested.

“So you invited him and he wished to be here, and yet he is not. Why would that be, sir?”

Bingley looked panicked. He darted a glance over towards Mr Darcy.

“Oh, I see. He dislikes his cousin—is that it? Family does not always make friends, and familiarity does breed contempt, does it not?” She gave an exaggeratedly understanding nod to Mr Bingley.

“Um.” Mr Bingley looked back over at Mr Darcy and Jane who appeared to be engaged in quiet conversation. “I...I cannot say.”

Elizabeth permitted Mr Bingley ample time to gather his wits about him. He appeared to regret asking her to dance, and she did not wish to be an unpleasant partner. Thus did they spend more time speaking of subjects of little consequence.

When the dance had nearly ended, she began again. “You see, I was hoping especially to see Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy soon that I might tell him... But no, on this subject it is best to be silent.” She stopped speaking, careful to put a look of distress on her countenance.

She had piqued his interest. “What subject is that, Miss Elizabeth?”

She opened her mouth as if to speak and then stopped, shaking her head. “No, no. I must not.”

“I assure you, whatever you would say I will hold in the strictest confidence.”

“It is only that I wish...I wish I might...perhaps you could tell him for me.” She stopped, wanting to seem as though the words were being slowly dragged from her.

Mr Bingley’s eyes were alight with anticipation. “Upon my honour, whatever you wish me to tell him shall be told, with all due haste.”

She waved him off. “No, and in any case, what can it signify?”

“It can signify a great deal,” Mr Bingley proclaimed. “I would not force your confidence. However, I implore you to tell me. I assure you, he wishes to hear it.”

She wrinkled her brow. “How do you know?”

Mr Bingley spoke in a hushed voice. “I just do.”

“You cannot.”

“I assure you, I do. Just tell me.”

Time to blush , Elizabeth told herself. She purposely made herself think of the most humiliating spectacle her mother had ever raised in her presence; it worked very well, staining her cheeks a heated red. To keep the appearance of maidenly discretion, she looked to the side while she blushed.

“It is too much a secret, sir,” she said. “I should not speak of it. Pray, forgive me.”

Mr Bingley protested, extolling his discretion and keen ability to advise, but she scarcely heard him.

The dance had brought her around so she caught Mr Darcy’s eye. He danced with Jane and he spoke to Jane, but his gaze was only for her. Their eyes met; familiar and intent, it was for her alone.

It is him , she thought in amazement. I could not mistake the feel of those eyes upon me. She smiled, a small smile, and his gaze seemed to grow warmer.

Mr Bingley rattled on while she continued to gaze at Mr Darcy, and he continued to gaze at her until at last she could bear no more. She dropped her eyes, suppressing the urge to giggle or skip; her entire being felt girlish and light. She turned a dazzling smile on Mr Bingley, who appeared taken aback by it.

He was so very different, so altered; if it was indeed Fitzwilliam Darcy, he had changed considerably. For me? she wondered. Have my reproofs wrought such an alteration?

She considered what he had said earlier: ‘The lady with whom you most wish to

dance is the self-same lady who is able to render you stupid and tongue-tied in her presence.'

Had he spoken those words in earnest? Could he be so affected by her? Could such a man be in her power? It softened her to think of it.

She assumed that since handing her his letter that morning in the grove, he had likely expended significant effort in forgetting her. She presumed to know his mind, and had painted him alternately despising and disregarding her as the weeks passed since his proposal.

Evidently inasmuch as she had misjudged him the first time, so had she continued. He had written her his letter to exonerate himself, but evidently his suffering had not ended there. It was nearly two months since that fateful night in the parsonage. What had been wrought within him in that time? Could he truly still love her despite all that had gone between them?

She had been determined to tease him, perhaps even force him to admit to his little piece of mischief, but she now found that she dared not. With her improved understanding of him, it was not possible. He was in her power and she...

I daresay that I must admit that I, likewise, am in his.

Nevertheless, she was not yet ready to give up the game. She would not tease the truth out of him, cruelly playing with his sensibilities. Instead, she would try another tactic.

The dance ended and Mr Bingley bowed, offering his arm and escorting her from the floor. She thanked him when they arrived at Mrs Gardiner's side, but as he turned to depart, she stopped him.

“Pray, sir, do this for me.”

“Anything at all Miss Elizabeth.”

“If you should happen to write to Mr Darcy...Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy that is, could you tell him something for me?” She smiled sweetly at Mr Bingley, who really looked almost wild, he was beaming so broadly.

“Yes?”

“Tell him that if, from the first moment of our acquaintance, I had known what I know now, I would have behaved quite differently.”

Mr Bingley’s smile dimmed. He looked like he did not know what to make of such a statement as that.

Elizabeth, feeling quite bold, retained hold of her courage sufficient to add, “And I do hope I shall see him here soon. Very soon.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“She said what?” Darcy stared at his friend, disbelieving the words just related to him.

“That had she known what she knows...or if you knew what she knows...no, no, if she knew what you knew she knows... Blast!” Bingley gave a helpless little shrug.

Darcy ran his hand over his face, summoning his patience. “You spoke of William? Or of Fitzwilliam?”

“Both,” Bingley replied. “She asked why I had not invited you—I mean why I had not asked Fitzwilliam Darcy—to come to Netherfield.”

“I am Fitzwilliam Darcy,” said Darcy drily. “And you said...?”

Bingley looked at the ceiling as he struggled to remember it. “Then she said something about a secret.”

“A secret!” Darcy exclaimed. “That is very good!” He thought for a moment. “Or perhaps not. Perhaps it is disastrous. A good secret? Or a bad secret?”

Bingley wrinkled his brow. “In truth, I cannot say.”

Darcy let out a frustrated growl. “Bingley! You are no help!”

Primly, Bingley informed him, “You look disagreeable again.”

“I do not care!” Darcy roared at him. “Now think on this, man! Think hard, like you have never thought before. What did she want you to tell me?”

Bingley pressed his lips together, and knit his brow exerting great effort into remembering precisely what Miss Elizabeth had said. Darcy watched him anxiously, his heart leaping with excitement when his friend’s lips at last parted to relay the treasured message to him.

“Forgive me, Darcy, but I truly cannot recall it.”

Darcy’s heart sank, but he refrained from lashing out in anger. “Never mind then. I will continue on as I have been, and we shall see where it will take us.”

He turned to depart the small alcove where they had escaped to talk. Elizabeth was engaged to dance with some other young man, but Darcy was determined the next set would be his.

“There was one thing I do remember quite clearly though,” Bingley called after him.

He turned back. “What was that?”

“She said she hoped to see Fitzwilliam Darcy here in Hertfordshire very soon. That portion I recall precisely. Very soon— her exact words.”

A burgeoning sense of hope took root in Darcy’s chest as he thanked his friend and hurried off to find Elizabeth, his steps quickened by his joy.

Still, the problem of when to reveal his true identity plagued him. Now? Was it done? Could he have her? Or should he wait, show her more of the changed man he was?

Elizabeth watched as Mr Darcy came towards her, a strange expression on his

countenance. Delight? She knew not what might have delighted him. “Mr Darcy.”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he replied. “You are much sought after as a dance partner this evening.”

With a sheepish grin, she admitted, “I will own I would much prefer to sit out for the rest of the night. I am exceedingly fatigued.”

“Oh.” Delight faded and he appeared pensive for a moment.

With a gentle smile, she prodded, “It is quite warm in the room, do you not think so?”

“I do,” he said absently. “What about?—”

“Some air, sir, would be a relief.”

“I believe all the windows are opened,” he said. “Alas, the breeze is only to the advantage of those standing near them.” He looked over, and Elizabeth followed his gaze seeing that Mr Bingley had taken Jane near the windows to enjoy the very breeze they spoke of. Still, he did not take her hints and she decided she must be direct.

“Mr Darcy?”

“Yes?”

“Would you escort me onto the terrace for some air?”

For a moment he looked surprised, then abashed. With a chuckle, he said, “I am rendered insensible in your presence, Miss Elizabeth. I could not take your meaning.”

An odd sort of smile came over her lips as she took his arm. As they walked to the terrace, Darcy formed a resolution to speak in a forthright manner and see where it led. “Miss Elizabeth, I wonder if you would think me impertinent if I asked you a question.”

“Not at all, sir,” said she. “Although we have only just met, I feel as though our acquaintance has been of many months duration.”

“As do I,” he said warmly. “Well then. You will recall, of course, that you asked if I was in my cousin’s confidence.”

She nodded.

“I am. In fact, he tells me everything. Everything of importance to him, he discusses with me.” Darcy swallowed. “He told me of his failed proposal in Kent.”

She appeared undisturbed by this news.

“Forgive me, but you do not seem surprised.”

She tilted her head, regarding him coolly. “I am not.”

“No?”

She shook her head.

He studied her. Did she know? Or did she not?

“In fact,” she said, “I have wondered if he sent you here.”

“Sent me?”

“Perhaps Mr Darcy wished to learn something of my heart in this matter. I cannot know where his thoughts might tend at present, nor can he know mine. A cousin, a new friend who will insinuate himself into my good graces, might be ideal.”

“I beg your pardon if my advances have appeared anything less than genuine, Miss Elizabeth. I assure you, I have no ill will or malice towards you. In fact, I am rather charmed.”

“Mr Darcy, being that you are in your cousin’s confidence and thus fully aware of his intentions towards me, do you not think it rather bold to flirt with me? I cannot think Mr Darcy would approve.”

“Pardon me,” he said quickly. “It is not my intention to romance you. You are entirely correct. It would be inappropriate, knowing my cousin’s heart as I do.”

“What is your intention then?”

“My intention?” Darcy stammered a bit. “I...I do not know that I had any intention.” He swallowed as a breeze tickled the curls at her neck.

“You did not wish to know my mind and my heart?”

“If you wish to tell me,” he said with a grin, “I would love to hear it.”

She laughed lightly. “No, I fear it is best kept between Mr Darcy and myself, should I ever see him again.”

“You will see him,” Darcy said, taking a step closer. “I believe he will come just as soon as he knows he is welcome.”

“I believe he can guess what his welcome will be.”

“He cannot,” Darcy replied. “The time since Kent has taught him that he understood very little about himself.”

“That is regrettable indeed,” said Elizabeth. “And a feeling I apprehend all too well—I, too, wish I had understood more of Mr Darcy.”

“You do?”

Her voice low, she added, “I have sought to know more of myself since my time in Kent. As I said to Mr Bingley, had I known, at the first moment of our acquaintance, what I know now, I would have behaved very differently.”

It was maddening, the urge he had to take her in his arms. They stood close, but not improperly so, facing one another. He indulged in taking one step nearer to her. “I believe if my cousin knew of your feelings, and understood whether they were matched to his hopes and wishes, there might be a second chance at this for you both. A second ‘first moment of your acquaintance’ so to speak, and a chance to begin on the right path.”

“What are your cousin’s hopes and wishes?” To his delight, she stepped a bit closer.

“To call on you,” he whispered, moving his feet several inches in her direction.

Her eyes went wide and she stepped back, her fine eyes betraying some confusion. “To call on me?”

“Um, yes.”

She considered that a moment, her eyes turned towards the moonlight. “Previously he asked for my hand in marriage, but now he wishes only to call on me?”

“The offer of his hand was rejected, as you well know. Now he seeks only to aim for that which he might reasonably attain.”

“I see.” Elizabeth had a faint smile dancing upon her lips. “I do believe I might agree to having him call on me—but with one stipulation.”

Darcy leant in. “Anything. I mean, I know he will agree to anything. What is it?”

Using a crooked finger, she beckoned him a little closer. Leaning towards him, she whispered into his ear.

CHAPTER NINE

Though he longed to hear the words passing from her lips, for a moment, he could scarcely attend her. She had beckoned him closer and then risen up on her toes to whisper in his ear. The warmth of her body so near to his own, the sweet whisper of her breath and her scent conspired to elate and enchant him even before he heard her speak.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a lady cannot help but to love a gentleman who makes her laugh...Fitzwilliam.”

He was unmasked. There was nothing for it but to laugh, rather helplessly as they stood there, she joining with him in it. When at last he was recovered, he said, “I recall you once said that follies and nonsense divert you.”

“And I recall you once said that the study of your life was to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule.”

“Perhaps I did,” he acknowledged. “That, however, was before I learnt that the pleasure of earning your smile was well worth some silliness and loss of dignity on my part.”

She laughed, a light little laugh, and dropped her eyes, but he had not yet said all there was to say.

“Last autumn I was pleased to boast of pride, and quick enough to make mention of my temper. I declaimed any inclination towards being an object of ridicule. However,

now I have shown you how much I have changed in the latter so that you might know how I have tended to your reproofs with regard to the former.”

“I cannot hold you up to any ridicule,” she said.

“You cannot? But why?” He made a little face at her. “Do you not see me here in whiskers and these ill-fitted clothes which Bingley has seen fit to douse with punch? Does it not divert you that I have behaved in such a stupid manner?”

“It is diverting, that much I will own,” Elizabeth continued with—dare he hope?—a fond look at him.. “But as I have told you once, I cannot ridicule that which is wise and good.”

She laid her hand on his arm. He covered it at once with his hand. “You, sir, are far too much of both to be an object of ridicule, no matter what you are wearing. I may laugh with you, but never will I laugh at you.”

“Elizabeth.” He breathed her name in reverence and in love. “Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth.”

“But I have not told you my stipulation.”

“Anything at all,” Darcy vowed. “Say the word and it shall be given to you.”

“Now that I have learnt of your capacity for diverting me and making me laugh,” she said. “I will insist you keep to it. Jane and Mr Bingley may have their smiles. You and I however—we will laugh.”

“Each and every day,” Darcy said firmly. “I assure you of that. You shall never want for laughter.”

“Of course, one stipulation does beget another—would you grant me a second?”

He kissed her hand. “I am yours to command.”

“Excellent,” said she. “Then do make haste to get those whiskers off your face.”

“You do not like them?” He forced an innocence to his tone. “I had thought to set the new mode in London.”

“Truly?”

“Yes,” he said, reaching up to stroke his lower face with his hand. “I am exceedingly fond of my beard in truth.”

“I see,” she said. “Well. That settles that then.”

He smiled, pleased with his newfound talent for teasing. He would torment her a bit and then appear at Longbourn on the morrow, newly shaven and dressed in appropriate garb.

“It is a shame, that is all.”

Her tone raised suspicion in him. He looked over to see her looking rather dispirited. “You surely do not dislike it so much?”

“It is not that,” she assured him. “My uncle Gardiner had a beard for some time, and I shall admit that I thought it rather distinguished.”

“Then what?”

“No, do not make me say it.”

“You must.”

“I cannot.”

“I insist. As your future husband, I insist you tell me at once.”

“Future husband? I thought you only wished to call on me?”

“Having had such success in obtaining your agreement to that much...” He swallowed, feeling their levity flee. “I confess my previous hopes have been rekindled.”

She said nothing for a moment.

“My wishes are unchanged, Elizabeth. They have been thus for many months now but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever.”

For a moment her breath caught, and she was required to inhale deeply before saying, “My word is yes.”

It was his turn now to catch his breath and he reached for her hands, pulling them to his chest, and rested his forehead on hers. They stood a moment in silent exultation with one another.

“This brings me to my second request,” she whispered.

“Anything, I will give you anything at all,” he said. “You have truly made me the happiest of men.”

“Just that I had thought it would be nice to...well, I would not like my first kiss to be given through scratchy whiskers.”

No more needed said. Darcy bowed hastily, excusing himself from her company to find the man who had so ably assisted him in the matter of his punch-stained attire earlier.

Darcy was gone nearly half an hour. Elizabeth occupied herself in speaking to her aunt of the astonishing events which had transpired, both for herself and for her sister.

When she had finished speaking to Mrs Gardiner, she set about telling all who had gathered the truth of Mr Darcy's little farce. It was interesting to Elizabeth—particularly given her enjoyment of the study of character—to observe how the majority of those gathered pretended to have known of Mr Darcy's true identity from the first.

“Of course, I did not believe it,” Mr Goulding said. “A man of such fine tall bearing is difficult to disguise.”

“I might have believed a brother,” Lady Lucas decided. “But a cousin? No, it was not to be believed. No two could be that similar.”

“Mr Darcy has lost a bit of weight,” said Mr Philips. “But perhaps it was the effect of the cut of his coat. In any case, it confused me only momentarily.”

“Theatricals!” exclaimed Sir William, bouncing on his toes as was his habit. “How exceedingly diverting! Such a fine amusement for young people. He must consider a bit of Shakespeare for his next! He cannot deny me the pleasure of seeing him perform Shakespeare!”

Elizabeth had just completed her task when Mr Darcy re-entered the assembly. Her breath caught when she saw him.

He was the Mr Darcy she had known from the first, and yet not. He was every inch

the gentleman, with a fine, tall person draped in well-fitted and expensive clothes, as well as handsome features, and a noble mien. Elizabeth looked at him with great admiration, admiration which swelled, knowing as she did, that his manners were so very different now than they were then.

Darcy moved through the hall with one thought in his mind: to get to Elizabeth, hie her back to the terrace, and kiss her. Alas, it would seem that every person in Meryton must come to him and speak of his little farce. He had scarcely moved an inch before another approached him, exclaiming over his jest and the fact that they themselves had known the truth from the first. It might have amused him had his senses not been filled with the imagined feel of his betrothed being held within his arms.

Bingley stopped him just as he drew near to where Elizabeth stood with her aunt and uncle. The last dance was nearly through and he felt the prodding of elapsing time. "I had a very enjoyable dance with Miss Bennet."

"Excellent. Pray excuse me I?—"

"Does she still hold me in regard? Does she not? It is impossible to know!"

"Her sister says she does, so she must," Darcy said briskly. "Perhaps you ought to speak to her directly."

"I cannot, not right now," Bingley replied glumly. "She dances with Hartleigh."

"Tomorrow then. You and I shall call at Longbourn as early as may be." Darcy edged away from his friend as they spoke. Bingley moved with him.

"Tell me, what is your opinion on next day calls?"

“My opinion on what?” Darcy stretched his head in an attempt to see Elizabeth.

“Next day calls. Saye once told me that a gentleman must never call on a lady before two days have elapsed from the time of a dance.”

Darcy looked at Bingley with some confusion. “A next-day call is perfectly proper and even expected.”

“’Tis his own rule, I suppose.” Bingley shrugged. “He said himself he prefers three days, but I think that is excessive. He also said something on the order of ‘men before hens’—I had no notion what to make of that. He said he will write it all down in a book for us.”

“Saye is an idiot,” Darcy said impatiently. “Whatever book he writes will be best used as kindling.”

“But if you call on her too soon,” Bingley mused aloud, “is there not the danger of vexing her? A day or so of reflection might lead her to recall you in a more favourable light.”

Elizabeth had caught his eye, and Darcy gave her a private look. She blushed, sending a thrill directly through him. “I need to leave you now,” he said to Bingley. He turned and began to close the distance between Elizabeth and himself.

Bingley remained close to him, muttering about Saye and how long he ought to wait between dances and calls. Darcy ignored him, for soon they had converged on Elizabeth’s group, which was her uncle, her aunt, and her sisters, as well as Sir William Lucas and Mrs Goulding.

Darcy hoped the size of the group would make it easier for him to steal her away, but it was not to be so. On the contrary, they seemed to close ranks around her, making it

impossible to even speak to her privately in what he soon realised were the last moments of the assembly. They stood in pointless, annoying conversation until, at last, all hope had to be removed from him.

“Well, young ladies,” Mr Gardiner announced before too much time had elapsed. “The evening has passed with great pleasure, but I, for one, think longingly of my bed!” He began to move his party from the hall.

Elizabeth sent Darcy a wistful glance which encouraged him. He moved close, touching her arm to halt her. “Can you not linger?”

“My uncle is not one to tarry.”

“Perhaps if he knows of our changed understanding?”

“If he knew of our changed understanding, he would surely not tarry,” she said with a little laugh. Then, clearing her throat just a bit, she said, “I find I often have difficulty sleeping after such an assembly as this.”

He grinned. “As do I.”

Ninety minutes later...

Where is he? Elizabeth wondered.

She sat on the bench beneath her window, her legs curled under her. She remained fully dressed, believing he had understood her invitation—her bold, perhaps wanton invitation. Maybe not, she fretted. Or maybe he understood and was disgusted by it.

Or perhaps he is injured, she worried. Lying on the road somewhere, tossed by his horse. No, more likely, he is disgusted and wondering how he ever could have professed love to such a wanton creature.

She had nearly given up on him when she, at last, heard the approach of a horse, a horse which stopped a considerable distance from the house. Believing it could only be him, she nearly ran down the back stair, wrapping a shawl around herself as she hurried into the dark night.

He was tying his horse to a nearby tree when she arrived, and she gave him a fright. He straightened hurriedly, exclaiming, “Elizabeth! Is it you?”

“It is,” she said, suddenly feeling a bit shy. “I am sorry for startling you.”

“Never mind that,” he said. His voice was so warm and low; he sounded pleased, and all of her fears from before fled in the face of it. “I did not think I would see you.”

She drew nearer to him. “Then what are you doing here, sir? Has another of my sisters engaged you for a kiss this evening?”

He chuckled, stepping away from his horse to close the remaining distance between them. “No. I meant to say, I had supposed I would find you in the yard, not out in the lane.”

“I could not wait to meet you.”

She could barely see him in the dark night though they were no more than a foot apart. Clouds had drifted over the moon, and the night was a milk-laced black. He reached for her hand, pulling her closer to him. “Neither could I.”

Her heart thudded within her chest as he bent his head toward her. The first kiss was no more than a glancing touch of his lips on her cheek. Her body was scarcely touching his, and each of her hands remained clasped within each of his as his kiss alit upon her cheeks, a few on the left and then a few on the right. His lips were soft, much softer than she had expected, and she found herself turning her face, encouraging him to move them from her cheek to her mouth.

“This feels like a dream,” he whispered a few moments later, his mouth breaking contact with hers only long enough to utter the words. “I have yearned for you for so very long.”

She pressed herself against him, her hands linking around his neck. “How long?”

“From the first,” he said. “The first moment of our acquaintance.”

“Need I remind you how easily you then withstood my charms?”

“The first night I had been acquainted with you, I dreamt of you, of loving you, and holding you, and forever keeping you near me. It terrified me then just as much as it thrills me now, particularly as I know my dream shall become a reality.”

There was something in the obscured moonlight and the ease of his own confession

which prompted her own. “I, too, recall feeling something the first moment of our acquaintance, something I scarce could comprehend. A sense that there would be something to us, that something had just begun.” She smiled. “And so it did, even if our beginning was...uncommon.”

“Because you despised me?” His tone remained easy, but she perceived the uncertainty beneath the light words.

“Because I did not know you,” she said, drawing close again and surprising him with a kiss of her own. She was quick to learn, and in the art of kissing, there was no exception. She pulled his head down with her hands, pressing a short but ardent kiss upon him. “And how grateful I am to have this opportunity to begin anew.”

“As am I.” He said, keeping her close and continuing to press his lips to her. “A second beginning, for us to be friends, lovers, and husband and wife. Perhaps not the first moment of our acquaintance but the first moment of our life and our love.”

“Wonderfully perfect,” she agreed, and they celebrated then, a newfound understanding, as lovers do for nearly all the night long.

The End