

A Dance with Mr. Darcy: A Pride and Prejudice Vagary
Chapter One

“It is she,” he murmured as his gaze settled upon her back. Even without viewing her countenance, Darcy’s body recognized the woman some thirty feet removed. If it were not for the biting wind stinging his cheeks, he might think himself asleep, for not a night had passed since he was last in her company—and all the previous nights of their acquaintance—did he not dream of her; yet, she was not a dream, but rather flesh and blood. His breathing hitched higher.

During the daylight hours, he had prided himself upon not permitting his mind to conjure up her memory more than a half dozen times per day, but he always welcomed her into slumber’s embrace each night. Even during the fourteen months he had claimed Miss Amelia Davenport to wife, it had been Elizabeth Bennet in his arms. Often, Darcy had felt guilty for closing her eyes and pretending that his sweet, docile Amelia was the enticing maid from Hertfordshire who had stolen his heart long before Lady Matlock had arranged a joining between him and her niece.

“What is she doing some twenty miles northwest of the Scottish border?” he whispered as he watched her checking the shutters of the small, but tidy-looking, inn in preparation for the storm. “And where is her husband?”

The word “husband” left a bitter taste in Darcy’s mouth. It was some six months after her marriage before he learned of Elizabeth’s joining, and by then there was little he could do but to continue with his life, such as it was at the time. It was only the realization that her marriage was forever that permitted him to accept his Aunt Matlock’s matchmaking schemes.

“Should I ask within if the innkeeper has accommodations available, Mr. Darcy?” His footman waited several feet off Darcy’s shoulder.

“No, that is not necessary, Jasper. Even if we must sleep upon the floor, we can travel no further with the coach having a broken crank neck.” He glanced again across the busy inn yard. If he were a sane man, he would continue to the next village, which was reportedly fewer than three miles removed, according to his coachman. Walking would not be the best choice, considering the condition of his left ankle and the knowledge of the approaching storm; however, he had long ago accepted his obsession with the woman shaking out her skirts and admiring her work. Sanity and Elizabeth Bennet were in opposition. “I will speak to the lady; you speak to the ostler in preparation for Mr. Farrin and my coach’s arrival.”

“Yes, sir.”

Darcy paused before making his way across the inn yard. What type of welcome would he receive? They had so often been at odds, but he thought they had reached a better understanding when they had been together at Pemberley. Yet, the debacle with her youngest sister’s elopement had proven nearly more than he could manage. Nevertheless, he thought he had carved a path to a happy joining between him and Elizabeth, but God had a way of laughing in a man’s face when said man attempted to take control of another’s future.

“Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb,” he chastised and began picking his way across the yard. The cane he had always carried for fashion and for protection from footpads now assisted in supporting his weight. “Could not dance at the Meryton assembly now,” he repeated in ironic tones. “No matter how *tolerable* I might find the lady.”

He did not step up to the wooden walkway; instead, Darcy remained in the inn yard where he might enjoy the hitch of her skirt to expose a trim ankle as she stepped upon a low stool

to reach the upper shutter. He cleared his throat before saying, "Good afternoon, Miss Elizabeth."

Her shoulders stiffened, and he noted that her fingers clutched at the wooden shutter for support. After a long pause, she stepped down and slowly turned to face him. If he thought he might receive a warm greeting, he was sadly mistaken. "Good afternoon, Mr. Darcy. However, I must insist that you no longer refer to me as 'Miss Elizabeth.' I have been Mrs. McCaffney for nearly four years."

"I fear I never knew the gentleman's name," Darcy said in apology.

She pulled her shawl tighter about her as if to ward off his words as much as to brace against the wind that had kicked up. "I assure you Mr. McCaffney could never be accused of being a *gentleman*. All he owned was this *fine* establishment." She gestured wildly, which was quite uncharacteristic of the lady he knew. Elizabeth Bennet always displayed confidence, even when she had erred miserably.

"Nevertheless, I would know pleasure in having Mr. McCaffney's acquaintance," he said in strained politeness. He thought he would go mad when he had learned of her marriage. Bingley had encountered Sir William Lucas in Town, and Sir William had shared the news of the marriages of both Miss Bennet and of Miss Elizabeth. While Bingley had ranted and raved against the injustice, all Darcy could do was to bite hard upon his tongue and swallow the cry of anguish ripping through him. The torment had been worse than any pain he had ever suffered, including the one that never left his left leg.

"Mr. McCaffney met his end one summer night some two years back when he thought to take a boat out to meet a group of smugglers off the Scottish coast," she stated without emotions in her expression or in her voice.

"Then who is the inn's proprietor?" Darcy demanded in incredulity.

She spoke in clipped tones. "I own McCaffney's Coaching House." She nodded to his coach as it limped into the yard. "I see you require assistance. I suppose you desire accommodations also."

There was something in her tone that stifled any hope he might have experienced with news of her husband's death. "If it would not be an imposition," he replied in contrition.

"I am accustomed to those who practice impositions." Gathering her skirts about her, she turned on her heels to lead the way. "I fear with the approaching storm, I am already quite full. I have but one small room at the back of the third story passageway. It is nothing of the nature of which you are accustomed, but it is clean and dry."

He expelled a long sigh of exhaustion. The walk had claimed more from him than he had expected. And now he was to revisit his emotional connection to the woman entering the inn door without a glance in his direction to see if he followed. Perhaps God meant for him to confront his ghosts, so he might carve out a fresh path and perhaps come to know a bit of peace. Darcy had long ago given up on the possibility of happiness. With a soft grunt signaling the stiffness in his step, he lurched forward to enter the darkened common room. She waited for him behind a high legged table about three feet long and covered with a white linen cloth.

"What brings you to Scotland, Mr. Darcy?" she asked as she handed him a sharpened pen to sign the register. Meanwhile, she retrieved a ring of keys from a locked box and selected the one he would require.

"I inherited a small property some five and twenty miles north of here," he said cautiously. "It is near the larger Fitzwilliam estate. I planned to stay at Lord Matlock's manor house while inspecting the inherited land."

“Most would do so in the spring, rather than in January,” she remarked without looking upon him.

“Which is exactly why I chose this time of year? No one will have made preparations or renovations to impress me. I mean to know whether the property can sustain the livings that depend upon it.”

She turned to lead the way up the stairs. “Follow me.”

Since his accident, stairs were now his least favorite architectural element of any structure, but he could customarily manage; however, on this particular day, his leg was slow to respond to more exercise. Nonetheless, he gritted his teeth to persevere, for he did not wish for the woman slowly climbing the stairs ahead of him to view him to be as weak as he sometimes felt.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Is the Fitzwilliam estate of which you speak the colonel’s family? How fares your cousin?”

Darcy slowed to keep his balance upon the narrow stairs. “Fitzwilliam is more than my cousin. He is my brother, for he is Georgiana’s husband.”

An ironic smile turned up the corners of her lips. “Then the colonel claimed his heiress. It gladdens me to hear it.”

“I assure you, convenience was not the reason for their joining,” he snapped.

Her chin rose in predictable defiance. “I never thought a marriage between Miss Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam would be anything but a happy occasion for your family. My brief acquaintance with your sister said she would never settle for less than a comfortable marriage. I simply recalled something the colonel shared while we were all at Rosings Park.”

A familiar pain of regret caught Darcy’s good sense. “I imagine you would have accepted Fitzwilliam’s proposal if my cousin had been in a position to utter one.”

“I thought I knew something of the colonel’s character,” she said in defensive tones.

“And nothing of mine,” he charged.

Before she could respond, a familiar countenance appeared at the foot of the stairs. “Lizzy,” she called, but halted when she spotted him on the stairs. “Well, look who the cat—“

Elizabeth interruption in impatient tones, “What is amiss, Lydia?”

The girl smiled knowingly at him before she answered her sister. “Mr. Simpson and the mail coach have arrived with three passengers. He says the roads are quickly becoming impassable. He means to stay the night and perhaps longer. I told him we were full, but he insists.”

Darcy noted the girl’s “we,” and he wondered if he were also to encounter his long-time foe, Mr. Wickham.

“Tell Simpson we can put him and the others on mattresses in the private room. If others arrive, we may need to ask some of our regulars to share rooms. We always manage somehow, do we not, Lyddie?”

Her sister chuckled with a sly look. “We do very well, Lizzy.” Mrs. Wickham gave him a long look. “Will Mr. Darcy be required to share a room?”

“As Mr. Darcy has the small corner room, I doubt sharing will be necessary or even possible,” Elizabeth explained.

“I would expect nothing less,” the girl said with a lift of her shoulders in indifference before she returned to the noisy entrance.

“I fear you must forego a private room for supper, sir,” Elizabeth said as she turned back to the task at hand.

He released a long sigh. Nothing had changed: They were still from step. Following her slow progress, he said, "If it would not be an imposition, please send a tray to my room. I am a bit weary." He spoke the truth: His ankle throbbed from the nearly two-miles' walk to reach the inn. He needed to remove his boot and rest his ankle and calf muscle. "If you are too busy, Jasper can carry it up." He knew the footman would call at his room to act as Darcy's valet for the evening. "I did not ask, but I assumed there would be rooms for Jasper and Mr. Farrin."

"Above the stables, there are several small rooms created by low partitions. All have cots and mattresses. The animals keep the area warm with their heat."

What more was there to say between them. She was obviously not happy to see him upon her threshold. "Then our business is settled," Darcy announced as she handed him the room key and stepped aside.

"It is as it always was, Mr. Darcy," she said with a snit. "Your wishes are absolutes." She turned to shove her way past him while he was left wondering why she despised him so. Mayhap Mr. Wickham had created new lies to fill her mind. Needless to say, with Mrs. Wickham under her roof, it would be easy for Darcy's former friend to do so. It was as if she had learned to loathe him again. "And here I thought after our time at Pemberley that we could, at least, claim a friendship," he murmured as he closed the room door on her retreating form.

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Elizabeth caught the railing as her knees thought to buckle. She was under the same roof as he. How many times had she dreamed of encountering the gentleman again? Certainly more times than she cared to count. Naturally, in her dreams, Mr. Darcy repeated his proposal to her before sweeping her into his arms. "But dreams never become real life," she whispered as she forced a steady breath into her lungs. Despite her best efforts, a tear claimed a path across her cheek, and she violently dashed it away with her knuckles.

"I had foolishly thought he had changed—that our time together had made him less proud, but I erred," she declared to her bruised ego. "So reticent that he cannot take the time to socialize with those below him, and as Forde McCaffney's widow, I am conspicuously below him. I cannot dare to forget the gulf of life's experiences that lie between us." But even as she pronounced the words, Elizabeth's mind drifted to their meeting at Pemberley and his kindness to her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. She held such great hopes then—hopes that Mr. Darcy would renew his proposal, but her sister Jane's letter chronicling Lydia's elopement with Mr. Wickham had ended all Elizabeth's musings. Then there had been those accusations from his aunt. Lady Catherine De Bourgh had declared that she would see that her nephew would never make an offer of his hand to an "obstinate, headstrong girl." And evidently, her ladyship succeeded. He had married one of the Davenports, a noble family formed from the same marble stone as were the Darcys. No gentleman of Mr. Darcy's consequence could consider marrying into a family where a silly girl had ruined her reputation and that of all her sisters.

Moreover, had Lydia's marriage been concluded on the most honorable of terms, it was not to be supposed that Mr. Darcy would connect himself with a family where to every other objection was added an alliance and relationship of the nearest kind with a man whom he so justly scorned. "From such a connection, I cannot fault that he would shrink," she murmured. But even as she said the words, another rent appeared in Elizabeth's heart.

With a sigh of heavy resignation, she set her shoulders in preparation for her descent, but her eyes, as if by their own volition, drifted to the closed door marking his presence in her inn. "Only a day or two, my girl," she whispered to her faltering composure. "And then he will be

gone from your life forever. It is only an aberration. A temptation. The prayer the devil answers. Soon he will be gone. Returning to his very proper wife.”

When Elizabeth had learned of his marriage, she had spent three days in her room, pretending to be ill, so the others would leave her to her broken heart. It was only when Forde had threatened to beat both her and Lydia that she gathered her pride about her and rejoined the household. If Lydia’s welfare had not been an issue, she might have armed herself with the pocket pistol Mr. Bennet had secreted away in her reticule when she departed Longbourn after exchanging her wedding vows. Ironically, Forde met his death some three months after her Aunt Gardiner sent Elizabeth word of Mr. Darcy’s marriage.

She shrugged away a watery sob rushing to her throat. “Who would have thought it was I who would prove to be Lydia’s salvation, especially as her foolishness destroyed my chance at happiness?” Her poor sister had made a decision that had affected all their lives. In the beginning, Lydia did not comprehend the depth of despair draped over Longbourn, but she soon learned the lessons that only experience can provide. “We both mastered our emotions at the hands of a man not worth the cost of his burial.”

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Lydia crossed the room quickly to meet her. “How long will the *dastardly* Mr. Darcy be with us?” she teased.

Elizabeth schooled her expression. She had never told any one, not even Jane, of her greatest disappointment. She suspected only her Aunt Gardiner knew anything of Elizabeth’s long-held hope. “Until his coach knows a repair and the storm passes. A day or two at the most.”

“Do you think it more than coincidental that the gentleman appears on your doorstep?”

Elizabeth’s frown lines deepened. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I just thought that perhaps Mr. Darcy had decided that you are no longer below his notice. He showed you unwanted attentions in Meryton. Even Mr. Wickham commented on Mr. Darcy’s interest in you.”

Although she knew the likelihood of Mr. Darcy’s coming for her was an impossibility, Elizabeth had to tamp down the hope that rushed to her throat. “As you well know, Mr. Wickham’s speculations were to advance his complaints against Mr. Darcy. You must consider that your husband used both you and me to take revenge upon Mr. Darcy. As to the gentleman himself, Mr. Darcy did not plan for the damage to his carriage nor did he control the impending snowstorm. Therefore, I cannot give credence to your supposition. In fact, Mr. Darcy was unaware that Forde McCaffney was my husband. Although he is likely to have come this way previously, he was not knowledgeable of my presence at this particular inn.”

Lydia’s stubborn nature persisted. “Then why, pray tell, is he so far from his home in Derbyshire.”

“You have heard of the Fitzwilliam estate north of us.”

“A time or two,” Lydia admitted in perplexed tones. “Do not tell me Mr. Darcy owns that property also.”

Elizabeth shook off her sister’s assumption. “No, but it is owned by Mr. Darcy’s uncle, the Earl of Matlock. Mr. Darcy’s mother was Lady Anne Fitzwilliam. Mr. Darcy is on his way north to view a property he inherited that rests in close proximity to his relation’s estate.”

“Inherited?” Lydia questioned. “Should Mr. Darcy not have inherited the property when he claimed his majority? It is not as if a gentleman must wait to inherit property. He receives it at his majority.”

Elizabeth swallowed against the anguish rushing to her chest. “A man can inherit property as part of a marriage settlement. Mr. Darcy married some three years prior.”

“Married?” Lydia gasped. “I was serious earlier. Mr. Wickham thought that Mr. Darcy fancied you.”

“As with everything in his life, Mr. Wickham erred. Mr. Darcy chose to marry a relative of the Countess of Matlock. A woman from an equally noble family. I was never more than tolerable to the gentleman.”