



## Chapter Two

Mr. Darcy pulled up an equally battered rattan garden chair and carefully lowered his tall, elegant body into it. I tried not to focus on the muscles rippling under his buckskin breeches as he carelessly crossed his legs and picked up the box for another inspection.

“I met a gentleman this year when I was at Bath who was most interesting,” he said. “He believes in the science of detection, deductive reasoning and reconstruction.”

I nodded my head like I understood the science of anything. “And who is this gentleman?”

“The Marquess of Bath, quite an amazing fellow. He’s been to China and has studied Buddhism with the Dalai Lama in Tibet.”

Again I tried to nod sagely.

“And how will he help us with our problem,” I inclined my ear in the direction of the ears.

We are going to try to reconstruct your life in the past few weeks right now and see if we can shed any light upon this most interesting and blood curdling situation.”

He looked animated and happy. His proud, haughty demeanor had been replaced with the enthusiasm of a little boy and I was touched. I also felt he had never looked so appealing.

“All right,” I let out a sigh and arranged my dimity skirts. “How do we begin?”

“Now think back, Miss Elizabeth, think carefully. Have you met or talked to anyone unusual in the past few days, weeks, months?” He ran his hands through his thick, wavy hair. I swallowed. What was happening to me today? First ears in the post and now lust for Mr. Darcy? I ask you.

“I don’t know, no, wait, I did talk to a very strange man at the last Meryton assembly,” I said. He was most peculiar. He told me all about myself without knowing me at all. He was able to tell me that my father read constantly, that my mother had bad nerves, that Mary played the pianoforte and that Lydia was a flirt, although anyone could ascertain that by just looking at her,” I said a bit tartly. “He even knew I had four sisters!”

“Remarkable,” Mr. Darcy said with a smile. “Did he know anything else?”

“Why yes, he knew an awful lot about people. I don’t know how he did it, he summed up our characters and practically our thoughts just by looking at our clothes and the heels of our boots. Do you think he had the second sight? Do you think he’s the one who sent me these terrible ears?”

Darcy looked at me thoughtfully as though he was trying to decide something quite important.

“Miss Bennet,” he said, “do you trust me?”

I thought about this proud man who had refused to dance with me upon first meeting and hesitated. Even though we had mended our ways slightly could one ever really trust a man who had everything in the world he needed to be happy to excess?

“I suppose so,” I said carefully.

He laughed. “That means no,” he said, “but I’m going to confide in you anyway. You are not only the most beautiful and bewitching woman in these parts but also the most intelligent.”

I blinked. Had I heard correctly? If he kept this up I would need Mama’s smelling salts.

“You are most effusive in your compliments today, Mr. Darcy,” I said, dropping my eyes demurely. “Is that why you stopped to call? Mr. Bingley said you were engaged in business and could not attend Lady Lucas’ gathering to welcome Charlotte home for a visit.”

He hesitated and I laughed.

“Not engaged in business?” I said. “Perhaps the thought of meeting all the Bennets and Collinses under one roof was too much to bear even for a cup of tea?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders and once again I felt that frisson of attraction ripple through my overwrought nerves. Oh fustian! Let's get down to the real business at hand.

"You were going to confide something in me?"

He seemed to be deciding some issue of great importance. The effort caused a furrow to appear in his broad brow. I waited.

"Miss Bennet, you have already met the Marquess of Bath. He was attending the assembly incognito to study the people of the area. If you don't think your father would mind, I would like to ask him to visit us here today."

"Now? At home?" my voice raised a fraction. I was no green girl but the thought of the Marquess visiting our humble home might put Mama into another bout of nervous fits.

"He is as charming as he is brilliant. I am impressed with his intelligence, his devotion to detail and his dedication to improve the human race."

"He sounds most alarming in his perfection," I said.

"Not at all," he riposted, "you already met him and like him, Miss Elizabeth. Do you not agree with me that he seems a man of virtue and valor?"

So I was Miss Elizabeth when he was speaking warmly to me on a topic near to his heart, Miss Bennet when we were following the proprieties. It was so hard to follow his quick turn of mind and sentiment!

"I would like to invite him to Longbourn then, Mr. Darcy, if you think so highly of him. I have not had the pleasure of hearing you speak so warmly of anybody since we met."

He had the grace to smile, a trifle ruefully.

"You are remembering my abominable behavior from previous occasions," he said. "You must know by now that some of my feelings have changed."

Some? Had he changed his tune about Charles Bingley courting my dear sister Jane?

"If you say some of your feelings have changed Mr. Darcy, I believe you.

"Yes, we can discuss my virtues another time," he said with a smile that set my pulses racing.

"I feel this gentleman will be able to help us solve your mystery, Miss Elizabeth and I'd like to send a servant to summon him immediately."

I looked at the sundial to better judge the time and he shrewdly observed my action.

“Your mama and lovely sisters won’t be home for hours, I expect,” he said carefully, fully aware that I was aware of the possible reaction to his own august personage and to an investigative Marquess, by my dear mama and silly younger sisters.

“I should tell my father,” I murmured.

“By all means,” Mr. Darcy said.

“You will excuse me for a moment?”

“Of course,” he said and putting a steadying hand under my elbow assisted me upwards.

He followed me back into the house.

“I’ll tell my man to go deliver the message to the Marquess while you speak to your father,” he said.

I was sure my father would allow a maharaja, an anarchist or possibly Napoleon himself in our home if they would not disturb his reading. I was right in this assumption.

I poked my head into my father’s library.

“Father,” I said.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Mr. Darcy is here and he would like to invite the Marquess of Bath to stop in for tea, we have matters to discuss.”

“Indeed?” my father picked his head up and glanced at me searchingly over his book. “Flying high, aren’t we, Lizzy? Mr. Darcy and a Marquess?”

I had the grace to blush.

“He studied with the Dalai Lama in Tibet,” I said feebly.

“Learn as much as you can child,” my father beneficently offered, “but I refuse to part with you to go to the Himalayas, however rich as Croesus Mr. Darcy may be,” he said with a smile.

“Thank you, father,” I said and made my escape back to the drawing room.

Mr. Darcy was standing looking out the window. At my step he turned.

“It’s done,” he said. “I hope he will be here shortly.”

Now that we were both engaged in a situation I felt oddly uncommunicative. In those cases the best solution was a cup of tea.

“I’ll ring for tea,” I said. At least pouring tea would give me a respite from staring into the unfathomable and disturbing eyes of my nemesis.

“Tea, Nellie, please,” I said. “And we are expecting another visitor.”

She dropped a curtsey and backed out of the room suspiciously docile. I fear Nellie has a tendresse for Mr. Darcy, and who can blame her?

The box Mr. Darcy had placed on the mantle out of the prying paws of Ajax. We both glanced at it and tried to act nonchalant. We conversed about very neutral topics like the merits of Wordsworth and Blake and the sad plight of Coleridge and his addictions. The tea and the Marquess arrived at the same time and so we were spared further literary chitchat until the tea had been poured and the Marquess had poured himself onto Mama’s favorite couch.

The Marquess was tall and lanky with a penetrating grey stare that was not untinged with humor.

“Enchantée,” he breathed over my hand before lowering his great height onto Mama’s favorite fainting sofa. He looked delightfully outré in a purple velvet top-coat with tendril-like scarves trailing about his person. His breeches were made out of dull gold brocade that could have dressed Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights. I am sure his Hessian boots had not been made by any English boot maker because the tassels seemed to be made out of some coarse fiber.

“Yak hair,” he said, correctly following my gaze. At that moment I was tempted to invite my father to join us because I knew he would be vastly entertained by this unique detecting nobleman.

He drank tea and ate muffins steadily without speaking. Darcy and I sipped ours and waited. The Marquess did not appear the least interested in the size of our drawing room or the furnishings within, as Lady Catherine de Bourgh had done on one occasion when she had condescended to visit Mr. Collins who was staying with us at the time.

After he had wiped his mouth with a very curious multi-colored cloth that he had drawn out of his pocket he smiled.

“So refreshing a cup of tea when meeting new people,” he smiled at Darcy and me. “I didn’t realized I was so famished, I had quite forgotten to eat today, I was so enmeshed in solving a puzzle brought to me by the Duchess of Devonshire.”

We waited expectantly to hear about the puzzle but he only smiled and put down his cup.

“Now, dear hearts,” he said, leaning in and his long, eager nose seemed to twitch at us, “tell me about your puzzle.”

