



Debating Darcy

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“Honestly, Firoze Darcy’s right. I mean, I don’t see the lie.” The girl gave a sour-lemon twist to her perfectly lipsticked lips, and I couldn’t tell which of Darcy’s comments she was talking about—the one about Netherfield joining the public school league, or the other, more terrible one?

Tomi seemed to be thinking along the same lines, because she stood up from her seat and confronted the girl, blocking me from sight with her body. My friend crossed her arms. “How exactly do you mean?”

“You public school teams . . . !” the blonde girl said, without fully finishing her thought. “I mean, are you people even here to be serious about forensics, or just be clowns?”

“Oh, the clown thing, obviously,” deadpanned Jay, standing up now, next to Tomi.

“Funny.” The girl narrowed her eyes at my bestie. “And by the way, just some friendly advice, kindly meant? Don’t even bother giving my brother your number, my dude. You’re so not his type.”

Jay opened his mouth, then shut it again, at an uncharacteristic loss for words. Tomi made some incoherent sounds of protest, but I just sat there, my brain empty of an appropriate comeback.

The girl rolled her eyes and clip-clopped away on her perfect heels.

“I take it back,” Jay said in a weirdly strangled voice, straightening the tie I’d just returned to him. “I’m going to give that Bingley guy my number, make him fall hopelessly in love with me, and then marry him and live happily ever after, just to get back at that evil shrew of a sister.”

“Revenge is an excellent reason to choose a life partner,” Tomi

agreed, even as she lightly touched my shoulder, like she was making sure I was okay.

I cleared my throat, trying to get ahold of myself. “Also, the ‘my dude’? I mean, what *was* that?” I said as lightheartedly as I could.

“I have absolutely no idea.” Jay shook his head. “Clearly, our education is too limited at our sad public school to make use of such sophisticated vocabulariarge.”

The shame I’d been feeling before as a result of Darcy’s words was fast hardening into anger. I wasn’t that little bullied elementary schooler anymore. Finding my voice through speech competitions, and finding community in my forensics team, had changed all that. I mean, who were these snotty Netherfield Academy types to put us public high school kids down, suggest we weren’t good enough to compete with them, laugh with them, date them? They were obviously so privileged, they couldn’t even see beyond their own hateful patrician noses, their own exclusive, gated-community lives.

It was settled. Firoze Darcy was, without a doubt, the most disagreeable, horrible, nasty, evil, conceited person I had ever met. I quite detested him.

 CHAPTER 2 

IT IS A truth universally acknowledged that there are two kinds of people in high school forensics: speakers and debaters.

We speech-type forensicators (yes, it's a real word, and no, it has nothing to do with criminal science) value interpersonal connection, the written word, and emotion. Whether we're performing a ten-minute piece of prose or poetry, or a humorous or dramatic interpretation of a play excerpt, we are all about the art. High school sports teams may get all the public glory, but there's nowhere to find such pure, unadulterated teenage passion as weekend tournaments of competitive acting.

Debaters of all genders, on the other hand, are the mansplainers of the forensics world. What speech competitors are to nuance and emotion, debaters are to speed-talking, ham-fisted point grabbing. They are, on the whole, pen-twirling jerks. If we speakers are the equivalent of football, soccer, basketball, and fencing teams all rolled up in one, debaters are the equivalent of verbal wrestlers—minus the tight onesies and weird helmets. They are

all arguing, no artistry. (Also, don't be offended or anything if you're a wrestler—it's just a metaphor, okay?)

Which is why I wasn't surprised at all by the news passed on by one of our team coaches, Mrs. Bennet, who bustled up to us in the cafeteria just as Bingley's sister was walking away. A frustrated community theater actress, Mrs. Bennet now threw all her passion for acting into coaching our team.

"Forensicators, gather round!" she chirped, wedging her flower-dressed form into the cafeteria bench.

We all obediently did so. Our forensics team consisted of seniors Oluwatomisin Lucas—or Tomi—who was an original oratory speaker, and Colin Kang, who did extemporaneous speaking. Even though brainiac Colin had the entire National Forensics Association rule book practically memorized, or maybe because of that, we'd elected Tomi president of the club, and Colin vice president. Then there were Jay Galvez and me, Leela Bose, juniors who did dramatic and humorous interpretation respectively. Our other team members included one sophomore, an emo/goth reincarnation of Wednesday Addams named Mary Stewart (I jest you not). And then there were two new, kind of silly ninth graders named Lidia Rivera and Kitty Cho, who were doing prose and poetry interpretation, although what they really seemed to be interested in was flirting with boys from other teams.

"Do you want to hear the news?" Mrs. Bennet was all gleaming eyes and whispered intensity.

"You want to tell them, and I imagine they can have no objection to hearing it," said a calm voice. It was Mr. Bennet, our other coach, as pinched and calm as his wife was messy and excitable.

He had been an accountant before he'd retired early and joined his wife in forensics coaching, and he still looked the part.

"Netherfield Academy has come at last!" chirped Mrs. Bennet. "They've finally broken down and agreed to be a part of our local state forensics league!"

"Oh, we know, Mrs. B," I said with a dramatic sigh. "Their private academy is probably slumming it with us public schoolers to get more practice for all those fancy invitationals."

At their end of the table, Kitty whispered something about "invitationals" to Lidia and giggled, to which Lidia gave out a honking snort.

"We just had the inordinate pleasure of meeting some of their team." Jay indicated the far table by the stage, where the two blond Bingleys and Mr. Disapproving Desi Darcy were now sitting. The only team anywhere near them were the red-uniformed boys from Regimental, the all-boys military academy. I'd noticed Kitty and Lidia swooning over some of their competitors before, and made a mental note to warn the baby forensicators away from those Regimental dudes, who had a reputation for being bad news.

"So that golden-haired chap is Charles Bingley and next to him is his sister, Caroline, or Ro, as I believe she is called," Mrs. Bennet was saying. "This is the first of our tournaments they've attended and already the judges' room is buzzing with what a remarkable public forum debate team they are! A creative, quick-thinking duo. They *crushed* their morning opponents, from what I heard!"

Mary let out a little squeak, her pale face turning a kind of purple.

“You all right?” Tomi looked up from her knitting. (Yes, I said knitting. I told you she was crafty.) “What’s up, hon? Did your first day of LD not go well?”

Mary had just started competing in Lincoln-Douglas, or one-on-one, debate, against everyone else’s better judgment. It was heavily philosophical, something that no one but Mary thought was her forte. Not that I knew too much about debate, but LD was different from either what the Bingley siblings did, public forum debate, or the more intense and rigorous policy debate, which were both teams of two each. Also, our Mary wasn’t exactly the most polished public speaker, having bombed in all the speech categories she’d competed in as a ninth grader. But since Tomi and Colin had helped her formulate her arguments before today’s tournament, there was no way it could have gone that badly.

Unless, of course, it had. Like Mary, Queen of Scots, decapitation-level badly.

“Don’t worry, my dear.” Mr. Bennet sat down next to Mary, patting her hand in a fatherly way. “No one remembers what happened!”

“Oh, I beg to disagree!” said Colin seriously, his mouth half-full of some delicious-looking dumplings he was eating from a Tupperware. I mean, really, would it kill him to offer us some? “From what I heard, I am assured that no one who was there could possibly ever forget!”

“Colin!” Tomi clicked her tongue as she dropped a stitch.

“I’m being descriptive, not pejorative!” Colin took a slurp of a fizzy purple soda. “No offense meant whatsoever indeed, Mary!”

Mr. Bennet gave Colin a mildly disapproving look before