

A SUCCESSION OF RAIN
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"I am not indebted for my present happiness to your eager desire of expressing your gratitude. I was not in a humour to wait for any opening of your's. My aunt's intelligence had given me hope, and I was determined at once to know every thing."

Elizabeth could not help but wonder whether Mr. Darcy would ever return to Meryton, or whether his aunt's particular brand of persuasion had found its mark and convinced him of the ills of marriage so far below his station. She half-expected that Mr. Bingley would receive a letter of excuse from his friend, but instead he was able to bring Darcy with him to Longbourn before many days had passed after Lady Catherine's visit. The gentlemen arrived early, despite the rain that drenched the roads. Elizabeth was proud of herself for the composure with which she met them. She smiled at Mr. Bingley before she turned to his friend, as would be expected from the slight acquaintance she was supposed to have with Mr. Darcy.

She saw immediately that his eyes were on her, though his countenance was serious. A slow warmth and an inexplicable shyness filled her at the notion of what his aunt might have told him, if she had carried out her threat to speak with him.

Mrs. Bennet greeted them both, but without her usual coolness for Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth sat in dread of the reason. Her mother could never keep gossip to herself, nor could she be silent about anything which might add to the importance of her family. Elizabeth briefly considered excusing herself, but that might only draw attention to the situation.

Mrs. Bennet said, "Mr. Darcy, I hope your business in London was successfully concluded."

He bowed in acknowledgment. "Indeed it was, but I am glad to have returned again. London, unlike Hertfordshire, bears no great attraction at this time of year."

Elizabeth risked a glance at him, wondering if this could possibly be meant as a compliment to herself. She met his gaze immediately, raising her suspicions and hopes

that it might be the case. Embarrassed, she looked away quickly. It would not do for any of her family to notice a connection between them.

“You cannot imagine who called on us last week, Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Bennet announced with a certain pride.

“I am sure I cannot, but I hope you will enlighten me.”

“Why, none other than your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh!” she announced triumphantly. “It was most civil of her, given that her acquaintance with Lizzy was really very trifling, but she was kind enough to give us news of the Collins’.”

Elizabeth had rarely wished so hard for the power to become invisible. Her cheeks burned. If Mr. Darcy asked any questions about his aunt’s visit, she was sure she might die of humiliation.

“So I have heard, Mrs. Bennet. My aunt called on me lately in London as well, and mentioned the occasion of meeting you.”

That was it. She *was* going to die of humiliation.

Her mother then turned the conversation to her favourite topic, Jane’s nuptials. Elizabeth could hardly bear to listen, although she noticed Mr. Darcy remained civil in his replies, even when Mrs. Bennet was at her silliest. She dared not look up again, and he did not address her directly. She could not imagine what he must be thinking of her.

It was a question she asked herself again many times during the next week. Darcy called at Longbourn each day despite the inclement weather. Kitty grew fretful as the days went on without even the variety of a trip to Meryton, and Mary had taken it upon herself to offer even more moral platitudes than usual. Mrs. Bennet talked endlessly of the wedding, and Elizabeth felt each day more humiliated by her family. There was never an opportunity to speak with Darcy alone, and if he held her in any particular regard, the only sign of it was his increased civility to her family. She almost wished he would not call at all.

Darcy had several choices, as he saw it. He could call at Longbourn and drag Elizabeth bodily away from her family to some room where they could speak privately. He could take an impossible risk and ask Mr. Bennet for permission to court Elizabeth. Or he could wait for the rain to stop, and hope to get her out of doors where he might

have a chance to say his piece. The difficulty with the first two options was that Elizabeth would likely never forgive him. The problem with waiting for the weather to change was that it might drive him out of his mind.

Seven days of rain! Light rain, heavy rain, thunderstorms. Cold, nasty rain. Did the sun never shine in Hertfordshire? Or were the fates simply conspiring against him, as they had in Lambton, causing Elizabeth to leave just as he hoped they might come to an understanding? He paced the floor again.

Why was her behaviour so changed from what it had been at Pemberley? There she had smiled readily, conversed, exchanged glances, but now her eyes were downcast as often as not. Instead of having the pleasure of seeing the sparkling intelligence in her fine eyes, he was reduced to watching the blushes on her cheek and wondering what they might portend. Were they a sign of pleasant awareness of him, or the embarrassment of dealing with an unwanted suitor who kept coming back, despite her best efforts to discourage him? The question kept him from sleep and haunted his days.

Perhaps he *should* speak to Mr. Bennet. At least then he would have an answer one way or another, and if it were to be the humiliation of a second rejection, he could always leave Hertfordshire behind him forever. He rested his hand against the wall. No, that would ruin any chance he had of persuading her if she were still unsure; and if she refused him, he would never forgive himself for failing to have the patience to wait for a break in the weather.

It was unfair that Bingley had the right to spend his entire day at Longbourn in the company of his beloved Jane, whereas Darcy had to limit himself to brief social calls, then return alone to Netherfield and face his unpleasant thoughts. It probably appeared odd enough that he was calling every day.

On the seventh day Mrs. Bennet invited him to stay for dinner. It was a casual invitation, clearly aimed at pleasing Bingley rather than out of any desire for Darcy's company, but he seized the opportunity to extend his visit. At least he could enjoy watching Elizabeth, even if they could not talk privately.

Dinner started out propitiously, as he was seated next to Elizabeth. Perhaps that was a good sign. Surely they would have some conversation now. If only her presence

did not make it so difficult for him to think about anything except the curve of her neck, the scent of rosewater, and how her lips would taste.

He forced his mind back to more innocent topics. “I received a letter from my sister yesterday. She asked me to give you her regards.”

Elizabeth’s smile drew his attention back to her rosy lips. “Is she still at Pemberley?”

“Yes; though she wrote last that she wished she could join me here. She regrets that your acquaintance was interrupted, and hopes to have the opportunity to resume it in the future.” It was a slight exaggeration of what Georgiana had written, but he was certain the sentiment was accurate. He kept a close eye on Elizabeth to judge her response.

That blush again. “I wish it might prove to be the case. She is a delightful young lady.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are very amiable company as well. I was glad to have the opportunity to meet them.”

She looked up at him with that arch look he loved so well. He was so enchanted he almost missed what she said. “I understand you had the opportunity to dine with them in London as well.”

Her words took a moment to sink in, then he felt his palms grow warm. How did she know of that; and if she knew that much, what else might she know? Surely her aunt and uncle were not so little to be trusted! “Indeed I had that pleasure.” He could tell she was amused by his sudden discomfiture. “I understand you have often visited there as well.”

“I always enjoy visiting *Cheapside*.”

He let out a breath of relief. If she was teasing him, it could not be all bad. “The company there is excellent.”

Her eyes turned down again. “I believe they have much to be *grateful* for.” Then she surprised him by looking up at him. “As do we all.”

She knew. But what did she think, and more importantly, what did she feel? Now even if she accepted him, he would never know whether it was for love or from a

sense of obligation. Even the sight of her fine eyes could not make up for the disappointment.

He took a sip of wine to cover his confusion. “Gratitude is sometimes given where it is not deserved. I hope it would give no one any unease.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth?”

She glanced beyond him meaningfully. “The potatoes.”

He looked to his other side and found her sister Mary holding a dish of potatoes with an air of saintly patience. He was making a fine fool of himself tonight. He took them from her with a word of thanks, then held the dish for Elizabeth. She served herself; then, as she placed the spoon back in the dish, she paused for a moment, caught his eye, and brushed the back of her hand against his as she sat back.

It could have been accidental except for her look. He stared at her in astonishment, completely oblivious to the rest of the company, his hand burning where hers had touched it. That settled it. He *would* drag her bodily out of the company and propose to her. At least, that was what he would do if his hands were not full with a dish of potatoes.

A sly smile curled his lips as he realized she was as discomfited as he. “Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy?”

“The potatoes.”

There it was again, that arch smile. “Of course. How thoughtless of me.” She reached for the dish, but he did not release it to her until his fingertips had caressed hers for the briefest of moments. The shock of the exquisite sensation of touching her at last, even in such a limited fashion, was enough to make him catch his breath. By the flush on her face, he was sure Elizabeth was similarly affected.

But the sparkle never left her fine eyes. “Mr. Darcy, I understand you are travelling to London tomorrow. I hope the rain will not make for an uncomfortable journey.”

He dragged himself back from his contemplation of her beauty, hoping he could manage to sound at least somewhat sensible. “I believe that leaving my friends in

Hertfordshire will be a greater source of discomfort than the rain. Fortunately, I will return in but a few days' time."

"I hope you will be back in time to attend next week's assembly." She gave him a look through her lashes.

"I would not miss it for the world. But since I may not return until the day before the assembly, would it be too forward to request now the honour of the first dances of the evening?" He waited in painful anticipation of her answer, knowing it would signify more than an acceptance as a dance partner.

She tilted her head to the side, a teasing gleam in her fine eyes. "I am sure I would find the prospect *tolerable* enough to tempt me, though perhaps not everyone would share my opinion."

He leaned toward her and spoke quietly, for her ears only. "If you wish to discuss the subject of temptation, I should be more than happy to, since I have recently made quite a study of it."

Her mouth dropped open at his blatant flirtation. "Why, Mr. Darcy, I cannot imagine what you mean."

He eyed her significantly. "Perhaps we can discuss the matter in more detail on my return."

Elizabeth had dressed with more than usual care for the assembly. She had hoped that Mr. Darcy might take the opportunity to converse with her, possibly even to declare himself. It seemed ironic that this might take place in the same setting in which, little over a year earlier, he had declared her not handsome enough to tempt him.

She missed his company as well. She had hoped he would call that morning, but Bingley had come alone, saying that Mr. Darcy had been delayed, but should be arriving later today. Her lips curved with anticipation of seeing him again.

He was not at the assembly when she arrived. Two gentlemen asked her for the favour of the first dance, and she had explained it was already promised. The rest of her dance card filled quickly. She had hoped to save another dance in case Mr. Darcy should ask her for one, but she could not refuse one gentleman and then later accept Mr. Darcy. She wished he had not timed his arrival so late; they might have had the opportunity to

talk before the dancing began. But as the musicians began to tune their instruments, she began to wonder if he would claim his promised dance at all. Till she saw Mr. Bingley and his sisters arrive without him, a doubt of his being present had never occurred to her. But in an instant arose the dreadful suspicion that something other than a delay accounted for his absence.

Perhaps his journey to London had allowed him the time to reflect on the disadvantages of an alliance with her, those arguments his aunt had no doubt presented to him. He had not seemed discouraged by it before, but she might have read too much into his behaviour. Or perhaps he had seen her as a challenge, and once he assured himself that her affections were his for the asking, he had lost interest.

As the first dance formed up, one of the gentlemen whose invitation she had refused looked at her askance, clearly of the opinion she had been toying with him by saying the dance was promised. Bingley was partnered with Jane, so she could not turn to her sister for comfort. The music struck up and the dancers began to move. Elizabeth's every prospect of enjoyment of the evening was destroyed. How could she find any pleasure in the later dances, knowing what she had lost?

Wishing to avoid any more curious eyes, she fled to on the dressing rooms in the public part of the inn, where she might unleash her imagination in private. She did not emerge until the first set was nearly ended. Hoping against hope that Darcy might have arrived in her absence, she searched the room for him in vain.

She managed to put on a pretence of enjoyment for her partner in the second set. If she did not think of her disappointment, perhaps no one else would realize it either. She had deliberately avoided Jane between the dances; it would not do for her sister to know that her fiance's friend had jilted her sister. Better Jane should think Darcy of no importance to Elizabeth. She refused to allow herself to wonder if she would ever see him again.

She was circling her partner in the third set when she caught a glimpse of dark hair. Her breath caught in her throat, but she reminded herself that he had not come for the dance he had promised her, and it might have been a deliberate avoidance. With her partner, she walked down the line of dancers. Until she reached the head of the line again, Darcy would be hidden from view.

The dance, although one she normally enjoyed, seemed to take forever. Elizabeth tried to school herself not to watch for him as she reached the head of the line, but he proved impossible to miss, since he was looking straight at her. His expression was brooding. She felt his eyes on her, and was grateful that the dance gave her an excuse for looking flushed.

The dance ended, leaving her with the decision of whether she dared approach Darcy herself. Her heart told her to, but propriety spoke otherwise. Instead, she chose an intermediate course and made her way to the refreshment table not far from where he stood. For that she needed no excuse.

She felt rather than saw him come up beside her, but she did not look up at him until he spoke her name. Surely he would not make a point of seeking her out if his wishes had changed.

“Please allow me to express my deepest apologies for my late arrival. The bridge was washed out and the river half in flood – all the rain, you know. I had to ride miles upstream to find a ford that was passable. I came as quickly as I could.” The deep regret in his expression could not be mistaken.

“I certainly cannot hold you responsible for the vagaries of the weather or of the roads.”

“You are very kind. Would it be too much to hope that I might claim a different dance, even though I missed my first opportunity?”

“I wish I could oblige you, but I fear my dance card is already full.” Why, oh why, had so many men asked her to dance tonight?

“I see.” It was clear by the set of his jaw that he did not like what he saw.

Just then her next partner approached her and offered her his arm. Elizabeth gave Darcy a regretful glance as she departed.

The next dance was a lively one, and her partner amiable, but she could not help being aware of Darcy watching her. He stood alone by the wall, wearing a slight scowl which lightened only when he caught her eye. She found it difficult to look away, even as the dance took her from him.

After circling half-way around the room, she looked up from the dance again, but he was no longer where he had been. She scanned the crowd as she passed her partner by

the hand, hoping he would not notice her distraction. She finally saw Darcy's tall form standing next to her father, apparently engaged in serious conversation with him. As if they sensed her glance, both men looked in her direction, then turned to each other again.

So Darcy was not going to wait for an answer from her. Elizabeth's pulses fluttered at the thought of what he must be saying. What would her father think? Would he give his permission without asking her consent? Her cheeks grew hot at the thought that by the time she left the dance floor, she might well be engaged to Mr. Darcy.

The two men were still conversing when the dance ended. Elizabeth tried to make her feet move in their direction, but they were frozen to the floor. It was not as if she had any intention of denying his suit, but now that the reality was before her, she felt such embarrassment that she could not imagine looking him in the face. In a moment of sheer cowardice, she fled the hall and hid once again in a dressing room.

Once alone, she pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks. It was not like her to be so *Missish*, but then again she had never before been faced with the immediate prospect of being engaged. She imagined how Darcy would look at her, now that he knew she would be his someday, and it made heat rise within her.

But she could not hide forever. She took a deep breath before opening the door and proceeding down the long hallway to the assembly room. She was grateful it was unpopulated at present; she did not feel equal to making casual conversation.

"Miss Elizabeth." The deep voice of the object of her thoughts came from behind her.

She jumped and held her hand to her chest, her heart pounding. "You startled me, sir."

"Indeed." The corner of his mouth twitched wryly. He glanced up and down the hallway, then placed a firm hand on her elbow and directed her through an open door into an unoccupied room.

Quickly he closed the door behind them, and suddenly Elizabeth could see nothing but blackness. She was all too aware of his on her arm.

"My apologies. I had assumed there would be light from the street."

Her eyes, adjusting to the darkness, made out the window frame, with only the light of the stars to fill it. The clouds must have finally cleared. "I believe we are facing

the rear of the inn, sir.” She could just begin to see the outlines of the room. To her dismay, she realized this was not one of the sitting rooms; instead, she was standing directly between Mr. Darcy and a large four-poster bed. She was grateful he could not see her flaming cheeks.

She took a few quick steps toward the window, seeking to put distance between her and the bed. Not that she doubted Mr. Darcy’s honour, but if they were accidentally discovered, she did not want it to look worse than it was. But what was she thinking? If she were found alone with Mr. Darcy in a dark bedroom, it would make no difference whether he was taking advantage of her or they were discussing the weather. The damage would be done. Still, she had never before been alone in a bedroom with a gentleman, and it made her nervous.

She took another step away, but stumbled over some unseen object on the floor. Immediately Mr. Darcy was beside her, supporting her arms.

“Are you hurt, Miss Elizabeth?” His concern was evident.

“Only my dignity is wounded.” Her dignity and her reputation, if they were discovered, but somehow she found herself unable to care as he stood so close to her, only an inch or two of air separating them. His hands remained above her elbows, covering the small span between her gloves and the puffed sleeve of her dress, and her eyes opened wide as his thumbs stroked the sensitive skin of her inner arms. Did he have any idea what he was doing to her?

“My apologies.” His voice sounded unusually husky. “I did not wish to miss my dance with you.”

She struggled to collect herself. “You are forgiven, sir. I am sure there will be another opportunity.”

“I hope so, although sometimes I think the fates are as much against allowing me to dance with you as allowing me to be alone with you.”

It seemed unwise to point out that they were alone now, especially when she was feeling the light touch of his thumbs throughout her body. “Mr. Darcy, my partner will be looking for me.”

“Let him look.”

“But what if he begins a search and we are discovered?”

“So much the better.”

“Mr. Darcy!”

“If the entire world, including the weather, will insist on conspiring against finding an opportunity to speak with you alone, why should I not simply let events take their course?”

“Surely you cannot mean....”

His fingers crept under the ruffle of her sleeve. “I see three choices before you. One is that I ask your father for permission to court you. Or I could ask for permission to marry you. Or I could keep you here until we are discovered, and wait for him to demand that I marry you. Any of the three are agreeable to me, so you may choose.”

“You are all kindness, Mr. Darcy,” she murmured. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her cheek, and suddenly she ached for more.

“That does not answer my question.” His lips brushed against the corner of her jaw, so lightly it was like a butterfly’s touch. But a butterfly would not send shivers of pleasure through her.

“I thought you had already spoken to my father.”

“Tonight? True, but we were speaking of books. I thought I should have at least one ordinary conversation with him before demanding his daughter’s hand.”

She almost laughed at his choice of words. “In that case, it would seem that I have in fact only two options, since you seem disinclined to unhand me. I could wait to see what transpires, or I could scream for help.”

Now she felt the warmth of his lips on her brow. “Be warned, Miss Bennet, that should you decide to scream, I would feel obligated to stop you in the most efficient manner possible.” His caressing tone told her he did not refer to putting his hand over her mouth.

A wave of dizziness washed over her. Surely he would not dare, yet he had already dared so much. The wisest course would be to accept him officially – he could have no real doubt at this point as to her consent – but then he might stop this sweet torment of closeness. As if aware of her thoughts, his grip on her arms loosened. But it was replaced by the lightest of touches trailing up her arm, a sense both exhilarating and irresistible.

She drew in a ragged breath. “Perhaps you should speak to my father.”

She could not make out his hands in the darkness, so she gasped in surprise at his touch on the sensitive skin of her neck, tracing her collarbone.

He moved fractionally closer to her, sending the tension even higher. “Pity. I was hoping you might scream.” His hand moved again. This time his fingertips lingered on her tingling lips.

“I still might. Perhaps you should assume the worst.” What was wrong with her? She knew better than to allow the intoxication of the moment to go any further. If she reacted this fervently already, how would she possibly manage if he kissed her?

She could feel him leaning toward her, his breath on her cheek.

“I have waited so long for this.” His whisper was unsteady, but the pressure of his lips on hers was tender and warm.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. All of her being seemed to her to be concentrated at that point where their mouths met. The rest of the world vanished, and his lips were her only reality.

But then it changed. It was a moment before she felt the teasing touch of his tongue tracing along her lips. The surprise of it made her gasp, the intimacy of it causing her to clutch his shoulders for support. Despite all the novels she had read, she had never imagined such delight in a man’s touch.

It only grew as his arms went around her, pulling her to him until she could feel the strength of his body against hers. In a rush of happiness she knew *this* was where she belonged, *this* was what she had been seeking all her life.

His lips pressed against her cheek, her ear, and feathered along the pulse of her neck. “Sweetest, loveliest Elizabeth,” he whispered between kisses.

Somehow she found herself standing on her tiptoes, her hands creeping around his neck to clutch him tightly, unable to bear the thought of losing contact with him. Intoxicated by the faint scent of leather and horses that clung to him, she pressed her cheek against the starched cloth of his cravat, feeling half unable to breathe for happiness.

Jane’s distant voice calling her name barely penetrated her dazed state, but Darcy stiffened, still holding her close. “They have missed you, my love,” he said. With clear

regret he loosened his grip on her. “You must go. I will remain here a few minutes, and *then* I will speak to your father.”

Finally Bingley looked as if he was ready to depart. It was not a moment too soon. Darcy had reached the end of his tolerance for sharing Elizabeth with the rest of the Meryton assembly. Turning to Elizabeth, he offered her his arm and said, “Miss Elizabeth, your father has agreed to allow me the honour of escorting you home this evening.”

“You have been planning ahead, sir.” Her eyes danced as she took his arm.

“It seems I must, if I am to have any time with you at all.”

“I am surprised he agreed to allow me to travel alone with you.”

“Well, I might perhaps have implied we would be riding with Bingley, your sister, and Miss Bingley.” He led her outside to the street where he paused a moment to look up at the sky. “*Now* it stops raining.” Just when it no longer made a difference.

His carriage waited in line behind several others. Darcy placed his free hand over Elizabeth’s. Walking perhaps a little closer to her than propriety would dictate, he guided her to it, opened the door, and handed her in. To think he would have the opportunity to do this again and again throughout their lives! It still astonished him that after all these months, it was finally settled, and Elizabeth was to be his.

He needed to rein his thoughts in before they could travel any further in that direction, or there would be a repeat of his uncontrolled behaviour earlier when he had been alone with Elizabeth. He stepped into the carriage and seated himself opposite her, then rapped on the wall of the carriage to signal the coachman. As the steady clip-clop of hooves on cobblestones began, he leaned forward to speak to Elizabeth.

“I hope you do not object to my maneuvering for a little time alone with you. I wanted the opportunity to apologize for my earlier behaviour. I had been awaiting that moment so long, and I fear my emotions ran too high.”

There was a low laugh from the dim shape that was Elizabeth. “You need not apologize. You knew I planned to accept you, and you expressed yourself as sensibly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do on such an occasion.”

He only wished he had been certain of her acceptance, but at Hunsford he had no doubts of her, and could not have been more mistaken. The indications she had recently given him of her regard had raised his hopes, but he had not been complacent until she had spoken the words. "I thank you for your understanding, but still, I would like to think I have a little more self-control than that."

Elizabeth reached across the divide and took his hand. Obviously she had no conception of how slight his self-control with her actually was. "Sir, I was grateful for the reassurance of your affections. You had seemed less than pleased before that, and I was concerned as to the meaning of it."

"My dearest Elizabeth, you cannot expect me to enjoy the sight of you dancing with other gentlemen when I could not look forward to the same pleasure for myself." He felt the warmth of her hand through the thin white glove she wore. It reminded him too much of the sensation of kissing her. Perhaps this carriage ride had not been such a good idea after all. Unable to resist, he ran his thumb lightly down the inside of her forefinger, thinking of the day when he would have the right to strip off her gloves, to press kisses on each fingertip and to trace with his lips the fine lines of her hands that he had so admired on the keyboard at Rosings. Then he would... but no. He could not allow his thoughts to go there. "But since our time together earlier was so brief, I did not have the opportunity to tell you how very happy you have made me, and how much I look forward to the day when I may call you my wife." No. He should not have said that last part.

"I confess I have been able to think of little else myself," she said, and he could almost make out the arch smile which accompanied her words.

Did she have any idea how much of a temptation she presented? He needed to change the subject before he gave into it. "Your father was more surprised by my petition than I had anticipated."

"But no doubt less surprised than he might have been a fortnight ago, before you began to call at Longbourn so regularly."

"Perhaps I should have waited until I could speak to him in greater privacy, but I am afraid my impatience had the better of me."

“Well, all’s well that ends well.” Her hand tightened on his. “My early impressions of you have been proven to be quite mistaken. To think I once thought you to have a taciturn and unsociable disposition! Now there are times when I must say that you *talk* altogether too much, Mr. Darcy. It will not take us long to reach Longbourn at this pace.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. No one had ever accused him of being too talkative before. What did she expect him to do, if not to talk to her? Suddenly it occurred to him precisely what she expected him to do, and a great sense of lightness pervaded his being. Not to mention other feelings for the altogether astonishing woman he was to marry.

He shifted his weight and crossed the narrow space between them to sit at her side, his arm finding its way around her shoulders almost of its own accord. “In that case, my sweetest Elizabeth, I must find a better way to express myself.”

The taste of her lips was sweet indeed.