

Intermezzo



by Abigail R

Part 1

Elizabeth gazed at her reflection in the mirror, wondering if the changes of the last year showed in her face as much as she felt them in her heart. Today was a day full of memories. The last time she had prepared for a ball at Netherfield, she had taken more than usual care with her appearance in hopes of winning Wickham's heart. Now she was thankful he had never made an appearance, preventing her from making an even greater fool of herself than she had managed without his presence.

This ball would be quite different, and her preparations had not been elaborate. All eyes would be on Jane at the ball, and Elizabeth had no one to impress with her beauty. There would be no Mr. Wickham and no Mr. Darcy tonight. How blind she had been, to believe the one and scorn the other, and not to recognize the attentions Mr. Darcy had been paying her for what they were!

A familiar feeling of guilt settled over her at the thought of Darcy. Her shame over her infamous treatment of him at Hunsford had only increased during the intervening months. It began after Mr. Bingley's sudden reappearance at Netherfield in May. Anxious over the prospect of encountering Mr. Darcy again after their embarrassing parting in Kent, Elizabeth had asked Bingley on his first visit to Longbourn whether his friend intended to join them.

The look of concern which had crossed that gentleman's face had been unmistakable. *No, unfortunately, he will not, although I invited him; he is not of a sociable bent these days, he had said. He is in a very black humour; no one knows why, but he has closeted himself away and does not even receive callers. I have only seen him once myself, when he called on me to tell me...to give me some intelligence that he thought I might find useful.* Bingley had glanced at Elizabeth with an embarrassed smile then, allowing her some hint as to what that information might have been, and how it might have related to his abrupt return to Hertfordshire. *I have never seen him look so ill—I hope his spirits recover soon; he is the best of men, and I hate to see him in such distress.*

She had known that he must have been disappointed by her refusal, but she had not thought that, given the level of reservations he had expressed in his proposal, he would find much difficulty in overcoming his affections. The discovery that she had the power to cause him such suffering was a sobering one, the more so as she spent more time in Bingley's company, as Jane's chaperone, and heard his stories which often enough included Darcy, always in a most favourable light. It was clear that he thought Darcy to be the soul of generosity, thoughtfulness, and cleverness, a view which quite contradicted that which Elizabeth had held.

When, in due course, Bingley and Jane became engaged, Bingley made a trip to London to arrange matters with his

attorney and to settle some business. On his return, he was in as much of a temper as Elizabeth had ever seen him. As usual, she had been in the background when he talked to Jane, his voice raised in anger perhaps louder than he realized. *I told him of our engagement, and he congratulated me and seemed to speak with sincere pleasure at the news; but then when I asked him to stand up with me at our wedding, he refused! He said that business would not permit him to leave London, as if I would believe such an excuse. It is only half a morning's travel, and two months away—how could he possibly be too busy? I was hurt, but I remained civil, and expressed my hope that he would at least be able to attend our wedding, and he said that he thought even that unlikely to be possible. I grew angry, then, and accused him of disapproving of my choice, which he adamantly denied, saying that once he might have taken...other considerations in mind, but now he thought differently, and was nothing but delighted that I was taking this step. And when I pressed him again to come, he turned away and said, 'Bingley, you do not know what you are asking,' and then he went so far as to ask me to leave! I would never have thought it of him; I have misjudged him badly in thinking him a good friend.* Jane, with a glance at Elizabeth, had placed her hand on his arm to stop him at that point, but the damage had been done.

It had been difficult for her to forgive herself after that, to know that her cruelty towards him had been such that he would risk ending a long and valued friendship solely to avoid having to see her again. She had vowed to herself that never again would she allow herself to give in to her anger and to treat anyone so harshly.

Since there was nothing she could do to make amends, she resolved to try to put it from her mind. Her northern tour with her aunt and uncle had provided a distraction, at least until Mrs. Gardiner had taken it into her head to visit Pemberley. Hearing such a different and complimentary view of Mr. Darcy from his housekeeper and seeing the care with which the estate was run could not help but leave her with a warmer feeling about the man himself, and an odd feeling of loss that she had never had the occasion to know that part of him.

She sighed as her mind came back to the present. There was nothing to be done for it now. The opportunity would not return again, and she could not undo the past. Resolving, as she had so many times already, to think no more of it, she went to Jane's room to see if she needed any assistance with her preparations.



THE DRAWING-ROOM AT NETHERFIELD was crowded with people, all older and more assured than she, it seemed; ordinarily it was a scene that would have raised a great deal of anxiety in Georgiana, but she had come to Hertfordshire

with a goal in mind, and this ball offered her best opportunity to achieve it. She had needed to beg for permission to attend, which was granted only on the condition that she would dance with no one except Mr. Bingley and any men whom he specifically introduced to her with that intent, a compromise that Bingley hoped would be satisfactory to Darcy. Dancing was not on her mind, however. She was engaged in a dually unpleasant task: meeting as many people as possible in as short a time as possible, a job highly unsuited to one as shy as she, and employing the person best able to help her in that effort, no matter how distasteful her company might be. Miss Bingley knew more of the company than anyone else present, and was willing to devote her time to pleasing Miss Darcy.

The one person Georgiana had been happy to meet so far was Mr. Bingley's betrothed. Miss Bennet was everything that was lovely and gentle, and could not have looked happier. Unfortunately, Georgiana had so far had a notable lack of success in reaching her true goal. She was determined to discover the woman her brother was breaking his heart over, to find her and to acquaint herself with her, and then to use her knowledge to help her brother move past his infatuation. She had very little information to help her in identifying the mysterious woman—from her brother's reaction to the idea of attending this wedding, Georgiana was certain it was someone who would be in attendance at the ceremony, and likely at the ball as well. She would naturally have to be young and attractive, and presumably married, for why else would Fitzwilliam not simply ask her to marry him? No woman in her right mind would refuse him. She had a suspicion as to her first name, from overhearing her brother say despairingly, "Elizabeth" when he had thought he was alone and had touched the brandy decanter a little too heavily.

She was beginning to feel as if far too many people lived in Hertfordshire, but determinedly continued to ask Miss Bingley to introduce her to as many as possible.



ELIZABETH WAS NOT FORMED for ill-humour, and it did not take her long to recover her spirits once she arrived at the ball and was no longer subject to Lydia's complaints of how many more balls she would have been able to attend if only she had been allowed to go to Brighton. There were a number of people present who were strangers to her, friends and family of Mr. Bingley who had come to attend the wedding. Bingley introduced her to Mr. Ansfield, who would be groomsman at the wedding, and the gentleman asked the honour of her hand for the next two dances. He proved to be a very entertaining partner who regaled her with outrageous and amusing ideas of how he might disgrace himself during the wedding service, to which problems he had given serious consideration since he was to be married himself in

some months. She was sorry to relinquish his company, but had also been asked to dance by several gentlemen of her acquaintance. Although she found this a pleasurable pastime, by the end of the third set she was ready to seek some refreshment. She was feeling more than a little lonely; she was accustomed to spending time at such occasions talking to Jane, or formerly to Charlotte, but tonight her sister was the center of attention and Charlotte was long gone.

Deciding that she might as well pay her respects to the official hostess of the occasion, she approached Miss Bingley with a compliment on the entertainment. "Miss Bingley, it is a pleasure to see you once more," she said politely.

"It is a very happy occasion," Miss Bingley replied smoothly. "Miss Bennet, may I introduce you to Miss Darcy? Miss Darcy, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet; it is her sister who is marrying my brother."

Elizabeth was quite taken by surprise to discover Miss Darcy's presence; and with a moment of panic, thinking the sister unlikely to travel without her brother, she scanned the room for a tall, dark figure. Realizing that Miss Darcy was looking at her with a penetrating gaze, she drew her attention back and expressed her pleasure in making the acquaintance. She could not help but feel flustered, and was certain that her cheeks were betraying her embarrassment on the occasion, although she knew that neither of the others were likely to be acquainted with the details of her history with Mr. Darcy. "I have heard a great deal about you from Miss Bingley, as well as from your brother, Miss Darcy," she said. "I understand that you are a fine musician."

"They have no doubt been far too kind to me," said Georgiana gravely, wondering if this young woman could possibly be the one she was seeking. The name was correct, and she was apparently acquainted with him, but she was unmarried, which made it seem unlikely. Still, it was worth pursuing; if nothing else, Miss Bennet might provide leads as to who else her brother was acquainted with in Hertfordshire. "You are acquainted with my brother, then?"

"Yes, I met him when he visited Netherfield last autumn," said Elizabeth. "Is he here this evening?" She could not help but ask the question directly.

"No, unfortunately, business requires him to remain in London," said Georgiana.

Miss Bingley, feeling that this was quite enough of an acquaintance for her taste between Miss Darcy and Eliza Bennet of the fine eyes, said, "There was a slight acquaintance, it is true, from when you visited here when your sister was ill."

Elizabeth, feeling the implication, could not resist making a response. "Yes, it was but slight, though I had the pleasure of meeting him again some months later when I visited Kent. I was frequently in company there with him and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, while they were visiting Lady Catherine de Bourgh. So you see, I have quite a list of people who have told me of your prowess at the piano-

forte, Miss Darcy; it was a common topic of conversation at Rosings.”

This intelligence of Miss Bennet’s apparent intimacy with Mr. Darcy’s family clearly came as an unpleasant surprise to Miss Bingley, who chose to insert herself at that moment with a paean of praise for Miss Darcy’s abilities. Georgiana, who as a rule disliked the attention such compliments brought, for once was grateful, as it gave her the opportunity to collect her thoughts. She realized with excitement that she had indeed found her quarry—it was directly after his visit to Rosings that her brother had sunk into his gloom, not to mention that as sister of the bride, she would be quite unavoidable at Mr. Bingley’s wedding. This *must* be her; why, then, was there a difficulty? Perhaps she was promised to someone else?

Miss Darcy somehow forced herself to continue an active conversation to maintain Miss Bennet’s interest. *Fitzwilliam would be proud of me if he were to see how outgoing I am being!* she thought with a touch of irony, since it was only for his sake she was overcoming her native shyness. Luck seemed to favor her tonight, and a gentleman came to claim Miss Bingley’s hand for the next dance, leaving her alone with Elizabeth.

“It is a shame my brother could not be here tonight; I am sure that he would enjoy renewing his acquaintance with everyone he met here,” Georgiana offered tentatively, looking for a way to raise the question.

Elizabeth was discovering that she was both longing to ask about Mr. Darcy and afraid of what she might hear. “Yes, Mr. Bingley was very disappointed that he could not be in attendance,” she said by way of compromise.

“Mr. Bingley has been a very dear friend of his for some years, and I know my brother is sorry to miss his wedding, but the truth is that he has been very little in company of late,” Georgiana said, watching Elizabeth closely.

She felt a slight stab of pain at her words. “He must be quite busy, then,” she attempted.

“Not so busy, no,” said Georgiana slowly. “But he has not been himself for some months.”

Elizabeth found it suddenly hard to breathe. Surely he could not still be in such pain as that! “He has not been ill, I hope?”

“No, his health has been excellent as always—I believe it is more an unhappiness which afflicts him, but he is not one to confide in a much younger sister.” Georgiana could hardly credit what she was saying, speaking of such personal matters to a complete stranger, yet she knew as if by instinct that Elizabeth was somehow intimately involved in this.

For her part, Elizabeth was uncertain if she could bear to hear any more of this. She did not wish him to suffer; she knew that he did not deserve such suffering; and although she was the cause, she had no way of offering him relief. “I am sorry to hear that,” she said uncomfortably. “Please give him my best regards, when next you see him.”

“I will be happy to do so,” Georgiana replied. *You have no idea of how careful I will be to do exactly that!* she thought. “Your sister is very lovely; I have always wished to have a sister,” she added.

“And I have four!” exclaimed Elizabeth with a laugh, glad for the change of subject.

“Four? And are they all married?” Georgiana asked, intending to gather as much information as possible.

“No, none, Jane is the eldest, and first of us to reach the altar. All the rest of us are at home, and likely to remain that way for some time,” said Elizabeth. She pointed out her younger sisters to Miss Darcy, who seemed quite inordinately curious about them. No doubt it was interesting to her to glimpse a family so different from her own. Elizabeth found her a subject almost as interesting; she had heard at Lambton that Miss Darcy was exceedingly proud, consistent with Wickham’s description of her; yet her manners were unassuming and gentle, and if she still possessed some of the awkwardness of her age, it seemed bridged by amiability. She was grateful to discover Miss Darcy did not seem to be the acute and unembarrassed observer her brother was.

Georgiana managed to attach herself quite firmly to Elizabeth, much to the displeasure of Miss Bingley, who had never heard her utter so many words in their entire acquaintance. Elizabeth was amused by Miss Bingley’s discomfiture, but had some reservations about encouraging the friendship of Miss Darcy; she did not think Mr. Darcy likely to be pleased were his sister to return to London with news of her particular acquaintance.

She had not reckoned with Miss Darcy’s determination; she somehow convinced Mr. Bingley to allow her to accompany him on his visit to Longbourn the next day. Though Elizabeth tried to encourage her to talk to Mary or Kitty as being closer to her own age and also not as likely to incur the discomfort of her brother should their names ever be mentioned, Miss Darcy seemed to lapse into being tongue-tied and shy whenever she was not speaking directly to Elizabeth. After Mr. Bingley made a reference to her habitual timidity, Elizabeth began to wonder with some amusement what odd fate had given her this strange ability to attract members of the Darcy family. Although she found Georgiana’s company to be pleasant, she was not sad that their acquaintance would have to terminate immediately upon Jane’s marriage, given the pain which would inevitably follow any closer association between them.



THE DAY OF THE wedding came quickly. The wedding ceremony was both solemn and joyful; Jane was as beautiful as a bride could be, and Bingley could not stop smiling. Elizabeth, standing at the front of the church, felt all happiness on her sister’s behalf, and reflected that here was one

good thing which had come out of that dreadful day at Hunsford: Jane and Bingley, together as they should be. She thought with appreciation of Darcy, who had triumphed over himself sufficiently to give them this opportunity, and she felt proud of him.

Elizabeth followed the new Mr. and Mrs. Bingley down the aisle after the ceremony, her hand on Mr. Ansfield's arm. With a contagious smile, he said to her playfully, "I hope Bingley appreciates it that I made it through without disgracing myself."

"You did beautifully," she replied with a happy laugh, placing her free hand lightly on his arm for a moment. "I am certain that Mr. Bingley was quite pleased; that is, if he was able to notice anything at all beyond my sister!"

They were almost to the doors of the church when she let her gaze move over the assembled guests, stopping abruptly with shock when it came to a pair of dark eyes which she would never forget. The look in them was one she had never seen before, though—one of cold distaste which seemed to cut straight through her. All her happiness in the day seemed to vanish as though it had never been, and was replaced by a wrenching pain.

She forced herself to look away, although some part of her wanted to fix her eyes on him forever. Relying on Mr. Ansfield to guide her outside, she somehow managed to carry on, greeting guests, kissing Jane, and embracing Bingley, but all the while her thoughts were on Darcy. She had imagined meeting him again so many times; she had imagined being faced with pain and even anger, but she had never thought she would see loathing in his eyes, and the thought of it cut her like a knife. She could not say that she did not deserve it, but it pained her.

She was unusually quiet on the carriage ride to Netherfield, but fortunately this passed notice as her mother reviewed the triumphs of the wedding in detail. Elizabeth could not help thinking on the power of her reaction to seeing Darcy once more, and in so unexpected a manner. The wedding breakfast was likely to be a trial; she could not decide whether she more hoped for the chance to speak to him or dreaded it. Regardless of his behaviour, she was determined to meet him with the utmost civility as befitted a man of honour and sense whom she had wronged. Perhaps then she would at least have the comfort of knowing that he would no longer believe she thought badly of him.

On their arrival, Elizabeth found Jane surrounded by a cluster of well-wishers. Bingley was off to one side, talking urgently to the butler about some matter. She did not wish under the circumstances to stand by herself, so she sought out a friendly face. Spotting Mr. Ansfield across the room, she was about to move in his direction when Miss Darcy appeared by her side.

"Miss Bennet!" cried the girl. "You shall never guess—my brother has come, after all. He was planning to return to London directly after the ceremony, but I begged him

to stay for the breakfast, as did Mr. Bingley, and he finally agreed."

"You must be very pleased to see him," Elizabeth responded, her own heart too heavy for good cheer.

"I am—and you must come say hello to him; he knows so few people here, and you know, I am sure, how shy he is of making new acquaintances."

Elizabeth could scarcely refuse this request, but she was taken aback by Miss Darcy's words. Shy? It was not a concept she had ever thought to apply to Darcy of all people, yet it made many things plain to her, from why he had refused to dance with her at the assembly to the silences she had interpreted as pride. With some anxiety, she followed the girl across the room, thinking it might be as well to accomplish this first meeting, no matter how it should go.

"Fitzwilliam, you remember Miss Bennet, do you not? She has told me of making your acquaintance here," said Georgiana with determined cheerfulness. She had no intention of allowing this opportunity to pass by, whether for good or ill, and it was her last chance to discover what lay between her brother and Miss Bennet.

Elizabeth felt almost helplessly drawn to look at him. He was a little thinner than she had recalled, but otherwise appeared much the same. The hostility she had perceived in the church seemed to be gone, or at least well disguised; he now appeared only impenetrably grave.

He did not seem much at ease, but he made her his compliments with civility, enquiring after those members of her family he had not yet had the pleasure to see that day. She hardly knew how to reply, whether to respond to the alteration in his civility since they had last met, or to the severity of his countenance. She temporized briefly with a few words on the subject of the wedding, then said, "I had been given to understand that you were not expected here today, sir. I know it must be a great pleasure to Mr. Bingley and my sister that you were able to be in attendance."

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Bennet," he said with more than a touch of irony in his voice.

Elizabeth's smile faltered for a moment at the implication, but she was determined to be civil no matter what provocation she was offered. "Your sister tells me that business has been keeping you in Town, Mr. Darcy. Is it very quiet there at this season?"

"It is quiet enough; I am not there for my entertainment," he said coolly. He wondered how she would react if he said that he was in London because he could not face going to Pemberley without her, at least not once Bingley had decided to return to Netherfield instead of taking up his invitation to visit Derbyshire. But there was no point in even wondering what she would think; he had seen how the very sight of him wiped the smile from her face in the church, and he knew that she would not be speaking with him now had Georgiana not forced them into this position. What ill fortune that of all the people in Hertfordshire, Georgiana should choose to attach herself to *her!* She was looking at

him playfully, and he could see he was to fall victim to some of the teasing that had so enchanted him. He steeled himself to bear it.

"It was quite a surprise when Mr. Bingley returned to Netherfield in the spring, Mr. Darcy. You were very sly; you did not mention a word of it when you were in Kent," she said.

Touché, Miss Bennet, he thought. With the faintest of smiles, he said aloud, "I was not aware of it at the time. As you know, Mr. Bingley is a creature of impulse at times, so it did not come as a surprise to me when he decided to return. I understand as well that the regiment has left Meryton." He was not averse to handing back her challenge.

She coloured slightly. "I am relieved to say that is accurate, sir," she said, "although unfortunately not all of my family is in agreement with my views on the matter."

So she did believe what I told her in my letter; that is something, at least, he thought. It was good to know he had been acquitted of cruelty in that regard, at least. He tried to think of a response, but there seemed to be an embargo on every subject. Before the silence could become too awkward, however, Elizabeth excused herself, claiming she was needed by her mother. He bowed silently, a familiar feeling of emptiness settling back on his heart as he watched her walk away.

"Miss Bennet is very charming," said Georgiana with determined good cheer. "I like her very much."

Darcy's face twisted in an ironic half-smile. "Yes, she is charming," he said shortly. The last thing he wanted at the moment was to listen to Georgiana singing Elizabeth's praises. His eyes followed her as she proceeded from her mother to Bingley's best man, the one she had been laughing with so happily at the church. He wondered if another wedding was in the offing, and he tried to tear his gaze from her without success.

The meal was announced, and he offered his arm to Georgiana, who was looking oddly disappointed for some reason. In the dining room he was displeased to see that he was not seated with her, but a quick check of those who would be near her revealed no cause for concern, and he was, after all, a last-minute addition to the event. He could not help himself; as soon as Georgiana was seated, he began to scan the crowd for a sight of Elizabeth. She was not, as he had expected, with the wedding party; rather, she was seated slightly off to one side among people he did not know, her head slightly bowed in an uncharacteristic manner.

He walked around the table, looking for a card with his name. He experienced a sense of foreboding as he neared the place where Elizabeth sat, and was somehow unsurprised to discover that some mischievous fate had placed him beside her. He took a deep breath before seating himself.

Elizabeth, who had been awaiting his appearance, looked over at him. "We meet again, Mr. Darcy," she said, with a smile which would have been impish had she been more in spirits.

"So we do, Miss Bennet," he said evenly, thinking this was to be a very long meal indeed. To make matters worse, they were seated among a sea of Bingley's relatives who were unknown to him, making the prospect of other conversation poor as well. He smiled grimly, recalling dancing with her at the Netherfield ball and her challenge to him to converse with her. Well, he would show her that he had attended to her reproofs, no matter how painful it might be. "You seem to have made quite an impression on my sister," he said.

"It was unintentionally done," confessed Elizabeth, who had been wondering how to explain this very thing. "Miss Bingley introduced us, and I imagine she was feeling lonely." Realizing that this might sound like a criticism of his choice not to accompany Georgiana, she added quickly, "She is quite delightful, I must say. You must be very proud of her."

"Thank you," he said gravely. "I was surprised she wished to travel so far to attend Mr. Bingley's wedding, but she was quite insistent, even though there would be few people of her acquaintance here. She has, of course, known Mr. Bingley for a great many years, and looks to him almost as to another brother."

"I can sympathize with her; there are a great many more strangers here than I would have anticipated, but I gather Mr. Bingley has a very wide acquaintance."

"You seem to know his groomsman quite well." He had not meant his words to sound quite as accusing as they did, although it had been in his mind ever since he saw her walking down the aisle laughing with the man who had taken the place he had refused in the wedding. He had been indulging in the guilty pleasure of watching her during the wedding, storing up memories, and the sight of her clear enjoyment of another man's company had brought out an uncontrollable surge of bitterly painful jealousy. It had taken every ounce of self-control he possessed not to snatch her away at that moment.

She gave him a puzzled look. "Not well; we only met a few days ago. He is very amusing—he is to be married himself soon, and is already full of bridegroom's anxieties."

He felt a greater relief at her words than he would have thought possible. *What does it matter whether she looks at another man or not?* he chided himself. *She has made clear she wants nothing to do with you—what difference does it make who she chooses in your place?* Despite his efforts, though, he knew it did make a difference; it was hard enough knowing she would never be his, but the idea of her with another man was completely intolerable. *I should not have come*, he thought, not for the first time that day.

All subjects of conversation seemed to fail them at this point, and apart from the occasional half-hearted effort on each of their parts to comment on the food or the occasion, they remained mostly in a silence which grew increasingly painful to Elizabeth. She could not stop wondering what he was thinking of her; his countenance seemed to suggest that he was far from pleased with the current situation. She could not say why it was that she suddenly wished so fiercely

to see the sort of smile she had sometimes seen on his face when he had looked at her in the past, or some sign of the man who had ended his letter with, "I will only add, God bless you."

She looked for comfort over towards Jane, and saw her blushing becomingly, her eyes cast down, as a smiling Bingley murmured something in her ear. The sense of pleasure she felt in this sight was tempered by the unexpected realization that she could no longer imagine herself ever being in Jane's place; at some point, having refused Mr. Darcy had transformed in her mind to a knowledge that she would not marry anyone else. A deep sense of loneliness filled her, and she looked down abruptly, wondering when it had happened that she had bound herself to him in such a manner. In the cold silence of the man at her side she heard an echo from the past: *I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offenses against myself... My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.* Little had she realized when she teased him that day how painfully this very characteristic would come to play against her.

It was more than she could bear. Fearing that her composure was at risk, Elizabeth hurriedly excused herself and slipped from the room. She sought out a back sitting room where she would be likely to be undisturbed, and took advantage of the quiet to try to calm her nerves. *It is not as serious as all that,* she lectured herself. *After all, nothing has actually changed; you are no worse off than you were last night. So you no longer have his good opinion—this cannot be of importance, given that you will be unlikely to see much of him in the future.* She would have to confide in Jane, she decided; if Jane knew the circumstances, she would help her avoid Mr. Darcy's company when he might visit Mr. Bingley. She could only wish that she found these plans to be reassuring instead of acutely painful.

She did not wish to face him again, and had the event been any other than Jane's wedding, nothing would have kept her from walking home to Longbourn at that moment, but she would do nothing to detract from Jane's memories of her special day. She decided simply to remain where she was until she was calm enough to face him once more. No one would trouble her there, and she could just curl up in the window seat and look outside.

She sat there for a brief period of time until she was startled by a noise from behind her. Embarrassed, she jumped to her feet from her inelegant position only to see Mr. Darcy standing just inside the doorway, his cheeks as flushed as hers.

"Pardon me, Miss Bennet," he said in a voice gentler than she had heard from him that day. "I did not wish to disturb you, only to tell you that I have decided to depart immediately, so you may return to the dining room whenever you wish. My regrets; it was never my intention to trouble you in any way." He bowed slightly, clearly preparing to leave.

"No, wait, please, Mr. Darcy," she said quickly. "Please do not leave on my account; I know how important your

presence here today is to Mr. Bingley, whereas he may see me whenever he chooses. I will manage."

He shook his head. "I cannot allow that. I would not wish to make you uncomfortable, and I am the unexpected guest." His eyes were fixed upon her.

"Please, Mr. Darcy," she said in a low voice. "I will be far more uncomfortable if you leave early."

He looked at her, indecision clear in his expression. "If that is what you truly wish..."

"It is," she replied, aching from the tension in the air between them.

He did not look happy. "Well, then, I will leave when the other guests begin to depart, if that is agreeable to you."

"Thank you," she said.

"I shall trouble you no longer, then. Please allow me to apologize for disturbing you on a day which should have been joyful." He hesitated a moment before turning to depart.

Elizabeth felt a tight pain in her throat. "Only if you will accept my apologies as well for the untrue and unkind things I have said to you," she said.

Darcy was torn between a desire to leave and a wish to remain with her. "Miss Bennet, you are very kind, but I have long since acknowledged that the fault that evening was mine. It is not an occasion I look back upon with pride."

She had known that he must have regretted his choice to propose to her, but it was bitter to hear it so directly all the same; and she had trapped herself into a conversation which could have no happy resolution. She could think of nothing at all to say, and closed her eyes as she felt tears beginning to prick at them. "It is nothing, sir; please forget that I said anything," she said, and was horrified to hear her voice trembling. The pain in her chest only grew worse, and, realizing she could no longer control herself, she chose the incivility of turning her back on him over the humiliation of allowing him to see her cry. She could only hope that he would take her hint and leave her.

Her wish was not to be granted, however. Instead, she felt his hand touch her arm lightly. "Please, Miss Bennet," he said, his voice pained. "I am not worth your tears."

His words only heightened her own sense of loss and she began to cry harder, covering her face with her hands. He stood looking at her in indecision for a minute, feeling helpless in the face of her pain which he could not explain; and then, with an exclamation, he gave in to instinct and put his arms around her in hope of comforting her.

Part 2

She had no wish to fight him. Holding her handkerchief to her eyes, she rested her head upon his shoulder and wept uncontrollably. She knew only that his embrace offered her comfort and relief, and that she felt no desire to be anywhere else.

Darcy's heart ached for her pain, and he spoke words of consolation, urging her to calm herself; yet he found himself in the extraordinary position of both wanting to comfort her and hoping she remained in tears so he could hold her a little longer. This memory of having her in his arms would have to last him a lifetime, and he was not eager to let it go, especially after her free hand stole around his waist. He knew that she was not aware of what she was doing, but he allowed himself to imagine that she knew and was accepting him. "Please, Elizabeth, do not cry," he said, calling her by the name he always used in his thoughts, but had no right to speak. "It will not matter, it will be over soon." He only wished he understood her better, that he might have some clue as to why his appearance had upset her so deeply. "My sweet Elizabeth, I am so sorry; I never meant to hurt you," he said.

Gradually her storm of tears passed, and he waited for her to push him away, but instead she rested quietly in his embrace, making no move or protest. He tried to still his pounding heart, cautioning himself not to read anything into her choice when she was clearly still upset, but it was hard not to hope, and when hoping, to wish for more. He knew that he should release her and step away, but he could not bring himself to do so. Finally, when his conscience could no longer tolerate taking advantage of her distress, he said gently, "Miss Bennet?" She looked up at him from within his arms, her fine eyes still luminous with tears.

He could no more have kept from kissing her than he could have stopped the sun from rising in the east. Gently, tenderly, he brushed his lips against hers; and then, when she made no protest, he tasted the sweetness of her kiss again, allowing his lips to linger until he felt the intense pleasure of her own mouth pressing against his in a response that he had barely dared to dream of.

Elizabeth did not know what was the greatest surprise to her—that Mr. Darcy was kissing her, that she was allowing him to, or that the mere touch of his lips could give her such happiness. She wanted him never to stop, yet she knew they must stop, and that she should have stopped him long ago. *Just once more, and then I will stop*, she thought, and felt the pleasing rush of sensation as their lips met again. She knew if she kept looking at him she would be unable to resist the temptation he offered, so she laid her head on his shoulder once more. Her pulses fluttered as she thought of what had happened, and that she was finding happiness from being

in his arms. She wished she could ask him whether he had meant the words he had said while she was crying, but she was afraid to speak. It was as if words might break the spell, or worse yet, lead to a resumption of the quarreling, and that was a possibility she could not bear.

It seemed that he felt similarly since he was also silent, employing his time more gainfully by pressing slow, gentle kisses on her hair and forehead. It seemed far too short a time before he ceased his attentions for a few minutes and, with a formality that seemed foreign to the circumstances, said, "We have been away from the party far too long; people will be remarking on it, and it is not long before I must leave for London."

She could hear the remoteness in his voice, and it brought back in an instant the tightness in her chest. *He regrets this; he did not mean it to happen*, she thought. She could see all too easily how a man who had once had strong feelings for her would have been unable to resist the temptation she had offered, even if it went contrary to his current expectations and wishes. Well, she would not deny him his triumph; the tables had been well turned on her this time. Her pride, however, would not allow him to see how deeply she was wounded. She extracted herself from his embrace and stepped backwards, her chin held high. "I understand perfectly, Mr. Darcy," she said coolly.

He looked at her in puzzlement, but dared not ask what she meant. Instead he said only, "Shall I go back first, then?"

She inclined her head. "I think that would be best."

He could not understand her withdrawal—one moment she had been warmly compliant in his arms, and then the next as distant as the moon. Was she angry at him for his presumption? Anger did not seem to be in her mien, though. He resolved to move cautiously so as not to jeopardize their fragile understanding, and instead of the question he was longing to ask, he said humbly, "Miss Bennet, when I am able to come back to Netherfield, after Mr. and Mrs. Bingley return from their journey, would you permit me the honour of calling on you?"

The relief Elizabeth felt at his words was both extraordinary and transparent, as she realized that she had somehow misapprehended his previous expressions. For a moment she could not trust herself with words, but then she said, "I should like that very much, sir."

A rare smile grew slowly on his face, making him look quite appealing. He said softly, but with meaning, "Thank you."

Elizabeth could only watch as he turned to leave, feeling as if he were taking her heart with him. At the doorway, he paused and turned to look at her for a moment, then, without warning, he was at her side again, bending his head to kiss her once more. It was merely a light caress of his lips on hers, yet their mouths clung to each other. She was left gazing up at him longingly when he raised his head, and the

look in his dark eyes assured her that he was no happier to stop than she.

Almost without thought he brushed her lips with his one last time. "I just wanted to be certain I had not dreamt it," he said softly.

"It would be a very sweet dream, then," replied Elizabeth with more of her usual vivacity than he had seen all day.

He touched her cheek lightly. "Very sweet indeed. I do not know what caused you to change your mind, but I am very glad you did. I will await you in the dining room... Elizabeth," he said, quietly invoking her name as if it were a privilege.

The intimacy of hearing him deliberately speak her name sent a shiver through her and she could only look at him, her heart in her eyes, as he left the room.

She sank into a chair, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what had passed between them. How could so much have changed so quickly? She had been so miserable, and now she was happy. She could not wait to tell Jane.

Her mouth twitched with amusement as she realized she had completely forgotten the greater change; that Jane was Mrs. Bingley now, and Elizabeth would not be sharing this news with her that night as they prepared for bed. *No matter; it can wait*, she thought with a smile. What could not wait, she decided, was rejoining Mr. Darcy; if she had only a brief time with him before he was to depart, then she wished to make the most of it.

She stopped quickly in the dressing room to tidy herself. She splashed cool water on her face until she could no longer see traces of tears when she looked in the small mirror, but nothing would disguise the heightened color in her lips and cheeks. She pressed her hands to her face, remembering his kisses. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Finding her way back to the dining room, she felt a moment's hesitation when she entered; a sense of disorientation, as if somehow once she saw him again, he would again be the hostile stranger from the church. But as she came up to him, he turned a look of such pleasure on her that she could think of nothing else.

"Miss Bennet, I hope you are feeling better," he said with a suppressed smile.

Elizabeth saw their neighbours' eyes turned on her. "Ah...yes, thank you; it was merely a touch of headache. A little fresh air was all I needed," she said.

His eyes caressed her. "I am glad to hear it."

She coloured; and in her embarrassment she felt somewhat lost for words, until she recalled his earlier comment wondering what had changed her mind. She turned a lively look on him, and said, "Mr. Darcy, I do not believe that I mentioned to you I had the opportunity to travel to Derbyshire earlier this summer."

"Did you, Miss Bennet?" Darcy's tone was rather more suited for lovemaking than casual conversation, and Elizabeth swallowed hard.

"Yes, I was touring with my aunt and uncle, and we saw many of the sights—the Peaks, Chatsworth, Dove Dale—it is a lovely region, I must say. I even had the opportunity, at my aunt's insistence, to tour Pemberley."

His eyebrows shot upward with surprise. "*You were at Pemberley?*"

"Yes, quite a coincidence, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," he said slowly, as if uncertain what to make of this intelligence. "And did you enjoy your tour?"

"Oh, very much. The house is delightful and the grounds are quite charming," she said, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I must admit, though, that my *favourite* part was talking to your housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds."

He looked somewhat dubious. "Though I am very fond of Mrs. Reynolds, and she is a valued member of my household, I find it rather surprising that you would find *her* the most interesting part of Pemberley."

"Perhaps it was because I found her conversation very enlightening, especially on the subject of the family," said Elizabeth. Dropping her voice, she added, "She gave you what my aunt called a most flaming character. She gave *me* a great deal to think about."

Understanding dawned in his eyes, and he smiled slightly. "I clearly should recompense Mrs. Reynolds better for her services," he said. He sought out her hand under the table with his and clasped it tightly.

Elizabeth was rather startled, but not displeased, to find the sober Mr. Darcy to have an element of the playful and not quite proper schoolboy about him. He moved the conversation to obtaining her opinion of the more usual attractions of Pemberley, but as he did so, he caressed the back of her hand with his thumb in a manner which she found unexpectedly distracting.

When the meal drew to a close not long after, Darcy, although maintaining every evidence of propriety, made no effort to disguise his intention to monopolize her company until his departure. He was surprised that Georgiana did not attempt to join them immediately; she clearly was making great strides in conquering her shyness. But all too soon it was time for him to make his departure. He convinced Elizabeth to accompany him as he bid his farewells to Mr. and Mrs. Bingley.

As soon as they reached them, Bingley looked at Darcy so expressively and shook hands with him with such a warmth as left no doubt of his observation of the change between them, a fact which made Elizabeth colour and Darcy to look at him with the lively suspicion that only one who had moved so recently as he from a state of desolation to one of elation could manage. If Jane had noted any difference, she was more subtle in her reaction than her new husband, to the relief of Elizabeth, who was not yet prepared to reveal to the world in general, and her mother in particular, Mr. Darcy's intentions.

She found herself accompanying him out to his carriage. Georgiana, who had decided to ride back to London with

her brother instead of with the couple who had previously arranged to take her, stood nearby, suddenly fascinated by the trees in front of Netherfield as her brother took Elizabeth's hand and kissed it lightly. He managed to caress her fingers as he released them, and Elizabeth shivered.

"I hope we shall meet again soon, Miss Bennet," he said, his voice tender.

"I shall look forward to it, sir," she replied with the lively smile which had first attracted him to her all those months ago.

"Georgiana," Darcy said, his eyes still lingering on Elizabeth, "it is time for us to depart."

Georgiana turned, and to the surprise of all, threw her arms around Elizabeth in a warm embrace. She had watched them closely earlier, noticing first their sobriety, then their joint absence, and her brother's obvious happiness after his return. She had been relieved beyond measure to see his smile again, and amused by the realization that he was holding Miss Bennet's hand under the table.

Over Miss Darcy's shoulder, Elizabeth's startled eyes met her brother's. Georgiana whispered, "Thank you," then allowed Darcy to hand her into the carriage. With one last, serious look at Elizabeth, Darcy entered the carriage as well. As it drove off, Elizabeth stood and watched until it had disappeared from sight.

With the evidence no longer before her, she began to feel a certain confused disbelief—could it truly be that Mr. Darcy had held her in his arms, had *kissed* her. She hugged herself for a moment, then silently turned back to the house.

No sooner had she put in an appearance than Jane sought her out and drew her aside. "Dearest Lizzy, I must know—what has happened?" she said quietly.

Elizabeth's eyes danced mischievously. "What has happened?" she teased. "You have married Mr. Bingley—that is what has happened!"

"Oh, please, be serious, Lizzy—with Mr. Darcy, of course! You cannot be so cruel as to let me go away for so long without knowing," she said persuasively.

"And I am sure Mr. Bingley is waiting eagerly to hear this as well!"

Jane coloured. "Well, he *is* very concerned—he has been so worried about Mr. Darcy, and then he arranged to seat you together, hoping you would have the opportunity to work out your differences."

So it had not been a coincidence, thought Elizabeth with some amusement. "Well, then, you may tell him that his plan succeeded, and Mr. Darcy now has a good understanding of how my views of him have altered. He asked to call on me once you and Bingley have returned."

Her eyes lit up. "He did?" she exclaimed excitedly. "What did you say, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth was quite tempted to tease, but she could see how much this meant to Jane. "I told him I would like that," she said warmly.

Jane threw her arms around Elizabeth. "Oh, I am so happy! This is the best gift I could have received today."

"Yes, and you have a new husband who thinks *you* are the best gift he has ever received, and you should return to him," Elizabeth said lightly. "I will write you a letter and tell you everything, I promise." *Well, there might be a few details I shall leave out*, she thought with good humour, recalling the feeling of his arms around her and the exquisite sensation of his kiss.



ELIZABETH THOUGHT OVER HER meeting with Darcy quite frequently in the next days, trying to recall each word and intimation, often with pleasure, but sometimes with anxiety when she thought of how long it would be until she saw him again. It would be a full two months before the Bingleys returned to Netherfield, and a great deal could happen in that time—including a change of heart towards a woman who, on reflection, had given him far more pain than pleasure. To make matters worse, she had no way to know whether his feelings had changed, since there could be no contact between them. She even half-hoped that Miss Darcy might think to write, just for news of his existence, but she knew that their acquaintance was far too slight to warrant such correspondence; so she resigned herself as best as she could to waiting.

She had decided not to tell her family about Mr. Darcy's interest in her until she was certain he intended to return—which would, unfortunately, likely not be until she learned of his return to Netherfield, if it did indeed occur. She did not want to face the foolishness of disappointed hopes in public, and she knew without the shadow of a doubt that her mother could not possibly keep such news to herself.

Mr. Darcy had been quite clear she was not to expect him before the Bingleys' return to Netherfield, so it was with no little surprise that only two weeks later she heard Kitty announce the news that he was riding up the lane. She coloured; surely this must mean that his intentions were unchanged, but why would he be returning so early? More importantly, how was she to explain it to her family? She quickly turned her mind to the question of how to most quickly extricate him from the bosom of her family, but had only a moment before his knock at the door.

She waited anxiously for him to be announced, but as she watched the door, she saw Hill leading him past the sitting room. He glanced in for only a moment as he passed, just managing to catch Elizabeth's eye; his expression was serious, almost grave, as she had known it to be in the past. Her pulses fluttered as she realized where he must be going, and an even deeper flush stole up her cheeks at not only the idea of him speaking to her father, but how her father was likely to receive him.

“Lord, I wonder what *he* is doing here?” asked Lydia.

“No doubt he is passing through, and has a letter or some intelligence of Mrs. Bingley,” Mrs. Bennet replied. “Well, any friend of Mr. Bingley’s will always be welcome here; but else I must say that I hate the very sight of him. Why, he is too proud to even stop to pay his compliments to us!” Mrs. Bennet’s delight in pronouncing Jane’s new name was undiminished in two weeks of practice. Kitty and Lydia looked at one another and giggled.

This is a poor beginning indeed! thought Elizabeth.

“I believe he is here to see me,” she said evenly.

“What nonsense you talk, Lizzy! Why would he come to see *you*? We all know what he thinks of you!” cried Mrs. Bennet.

Elizabeth shrugged lightly, for all the world as if she did not know the explosion which was to follow her words. “Perhaps, but he did ask at Jane’s wedding for my permission to call on me; and I gave it.”

The effect of her words was most extraordinary; for on hearing them, Mrs. Bennet sat quite still, and unable to utter a syllable. She was not in general backward to credit what was for the advantage of her family, or that came in the shape of a lover to any of them, but it was many minutes while Elizabeth waited in agony for Darcy’s appearance until she could comprehend it.

Her sisters were not so slow. “Not Mr. Darcy!” cried Lydia. “Lizzy, you must be joking! Lord, he is *so* dull, and we all know of the infamous way he treated dear Mr. Wickham!”

“He is too proud to speak to the likes of us!” added Kitty, laughing at the very idea.

Elizabeth could only hope that their manners would be improved by the time Mr. Darcy was done with her father. She kept a closer eye on her mother, who was still fanning herself and gazing at Elizabeth in shock. She had certainly hoped to have more time than this to acquaint her family with the idea.

Finally the dam broke on Mrs. Bennet’s words. “Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! oh, Lizzy, why did you say *nothing*? Your hair, your gown...but it is too late, we can only hope—Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! I am so pleased—so happy.”

She clearly would have continued for some time in this vein, had not Elizabeth interrupted to say, “He asked only to *call*, no more; and he will no doubt be here any minute. Please, can we speak of something else?”

“Oh, Lord!” cried her mother, fidgeting about in her chair. “Of course he will be here. Mary, Kitty, Lydia—you must go upstairs—no, you must go to Meryton! Yes, Meryton will do—and my dear, dear Lizzy!” She came to Elizabeth and pinched her cheeks to bring colour to them, hardly a necessary task at the moment, and to smooth her hair. “Oh, it will have to do, but why did you not warn me, Lizzy? Such a charming man! So handsome, so tall!”

“There is no account for sending my sisters away,” objected Elizabeth, who could not help being amused as she recalled the same ploy being used on Jane.

“Oh, there most certainly is!” Mrs. Bennet waved her hands at the younger girls, urging them on to a hasty departure.

Elizabeth could only imagine with embarrassment what Mr. Darcy would make of this scene. She hoped desperately that her mother’s effusions would be over by the time he came, though she was also beginning to worry about what might be keeping Mr. Darcy so long with her father. And the implications of what it meant that he was talking to her father was not something she was ready to consider.

At that moment the two gentlemen appeared. Elizabeth’s eyes flew immediately to Darcy, and she was a little relieved by his smile. Not even her worries about her parents’ want of propriety could stop the burst of pleasure she felt on seeing him, and he seemed reassured by her appearance as well.

Her father sent her an amused look, and said dryly, “Well, Lizzy, it seems that Mr. Darcy has ridden all the way from London today to see you.” He clearly anticipated that this would come as quite a shock to her.

“I hope it was a pleasant ride, sir,” she said calmly. “Would you care to sit?”

Mr. Bennet, taken aback, quickly excused himself as Darcy paid his respects to Mrs. Bennet and then to Elizabeth.

It was an uncomfortable moment; Elizabeth had never considered what she might say in these circumstances. She asked after his sister, who he reassured her was in excellent health, and about his stay in town. To Elizabeth’s great relief, her mother luckily stood in such awe of their guest that she ventured not to speak to him, unless it was in her power to offer him any attention, or mark her deference for his opinion. This formal conversation continued for some time, with too much discomfort on the part of the main participants to do more than allow their eyes to meet on occasion, until Mrs. Bennet remembered that she was wanted elsewhere. Elizabeth rolled her eyes at the blatancy of this maneuver, but knew there was no use in protest.

Once they were alone, Darcy looked at her with great warmth. “Elizabeth,” he said, his voice replete with feeling. She coloured, and dropped her eyes in embarrassment, a pointless effort since he took advantage of the moment to take her hand in his and raise it to his lips. The sensation produced by his kiss seemed to race down her arm like electricity, leaving her momentarily speechless. He asked tentatively, “You have not changed your mind?”

She responded to him with an arch smile. “Not in the last weeks; although we both have reason to know, sir, that my opinions are not entirely unalterable, I do not intend to change them again. But *you* are before your time, Mr. Darcy.”

His smile slowly grew at her teasing. “Before I respond to that, let me ask you this: how long do we have before your

mother returns?" He had not relinquished her hand, a state of affairs which she was finding surprisingly distracting.

Elizabeth felt a lurch inside at his words. "We have all the time in the world—were it within my mother's power, I am sure she would post armed guards at the door to make sure we are not disturbed." She glanced at him quickly to see how he took this additional evidence of impropriety on her family's part, but he seemed not in the least displeased.

"You should, perhaps, not have told me that," he said, but his tone implied quite the opposite. "But I will take the time to answer your question then—I came early because I wanted to see you. I realized that the only reason to delay was so that I could court you without bringing it to public notice, and I decided to risk the possible embarrassment of having you refuse me publicly if it meant I did not need to wait out two very long months."

"And you decided to begin with my father?" she asked mischievously.

He looked slightly embarrassed. "I thought that if I was to be open about this, I might as well do it properly; so I asked his permission to call on you. He seemed...quite stunned."

She coloured at the implied question. "I thought it best not to mention the possibility, in case you were to change your mind."

"I, change my mind?" he said in a surprised voice. "I cannot imagine why you would think that."

She looked down. "What may occur in the heat of the moment may not always be what might be wished for in a moment of more sober reflection."

This comment was met by silence. Finally, in a carefully neutral voice, Darcy said, "What is it that you have wished for in your moments of sober reflection?"

She gave him a sidelong glance with a smile. "Surely, Mr. Darcy, you cannot expect me to answer that question!"

"You have not regretted it?"

With a teasing look, she said, "No, I have not; but I believe I have already told you that, sir."

His relief was so great that he acted without thought, catching her face in his hand and caressing her lips with his for a mere moment. "Then do not say such things!" He had clearly startled her with his behaviour, and he cursed himself and his lack of self-control.

Elizabeth was experiencing the shock of sensation that came with his touch. It had been all too brief, yet she knew she should not have allowed it in the first place. "What should I say, then?" she asked archly.

Darcy drew in a quick breath. Was she *flirting* with him? If so, he would need to be very careful indeed; he was by no means certain of his self-control when she looked at him like that. Choosing his words with care, he said, "While there are a great number of things I should *like* to hear you say, I think that we both know what you *should* say, and it involves reproaching me for my behaviour."

She smiled as if at some inner joke. "I cannot disagree, though I would have to admit that I am a few weeks late in saying it."

He was beginning to see that there were flaws in his earlier reasoning that a gradual wooing, giving her time to truly get to know him, was the best option. "Be careful, Elizabeth," he said softly. "You do not know how you tempt me."

Elizabeth had a strong impulse to ask him to tell her just how she did tempt him, but she checked herself, reminding herself of how her liveliness had led her astray with him in the past. She wished she knew what was in his mind; he evidently did not intend to propose to her yet, though he must know from her behaviour that she would not refuse—could not, after allowing him to kiss her, not just once, but several times without protest. Perhaps he was not as certain of his choice as he appeared. He had spoken of the possibility of his embarrassment if she refused him—but was there anything to stop him from changing his mind, leaving her to face the humiliation of being jilted? The very thought was painful enough; she resolved to be less forward, and to remember that he had by no means made a commitment.

Darcy saw her smile fade somewhat, and berated himself anew, realizing that once again he had gone too far. He reminded himself yet again that the behaviour she had permitted during a moment of distress was likely to be unacceptable in a calmer frame of mind. Unfortunately, his desperate desire to taste her lips again was such as to keep countering his rational mind, and that slight contact had not been enough to do more than to whet his need for her.

He was a man torn; he wanted a return of her teasing smiles and flirtatious looks, but he knew how very effectively they would undermine his restraint. "Eliz...Miss Bennet," he said, "I must throw myself on your mercy. I want... I would *like* to give you time to come to know me. My ability to be patient, however, is not what it ought to be where you are concerned; and most especially when you are...welcoming to me. You do not know the effect you have on me. Please understand if I need to keep a certain distance in order to maintain a standard of behaviour."

A sense of relief filled Elizabeth at his words. "I do not object," she said gently, "if you wish to call me by my name when we are alone."

He expelled his breath slowly. Any other woman he would have assumed to have misunderstood him, but this was Elizabeth—had she failed to take his meaning, or was she challenging him? "You are very kind."

Elizabeth looked at him sympathetically. She knew how difficult it would have been for her to restrain her happiness at seeing him, and he had waited longer for her and had more reason to be uncertain of his reception at her hands. He was once again reassuring her of his intentions, yet he had clearly decided not to take advantage of her earlier permissive behaviour to stake a claim to her, as he could have so easily—she could not have denied that she had allowed him to take liberties with her. "It seems rather too late," she

said carefully, "for me to be *Missish*, and I would prefer not to try." She could hardly be more obvious than that, and she waited anxiously to see his reaction.

It seemed an unconscionably long time before he took her words in, and even then he appeared not to quite credit them. "I do not want to rush you," he said uncertainly.

She considered telling him directly that he was not rushing her, but decided she could not be so impossibly forward, even given his obvious provocation. She limited herself to giving him an eloquent look in flagrant disregard of his request for distance.

His face remained unreadable for a moment, then she discovered a new light in his eyes, one which made her tremble. His hand reached up and caressed her cheek, then brushed across her neck to finally cradle her chin. "Elizabeth," he said, his voice slightly unsteady, "This would be a good time to tell me to stop."

She gave him a mischievous look. "I have taken your opinion into account, sir."

A trace of a smile crossed his face. He leaned toward her slowly until his lips caressed hers lightly. The experience was every bit as pleasurable as he recalled. "My sweetest, loveliest Elizabeth," he whispered before kissing her once again.

If Elizabeth had thought the experience of his kiss was powerful when she was despairing, it was nothing to the shivering tendrils of desire that it sent through her now, when their understanding was quite different. The feelings were new to her, and rather startling in their intensity; but she trusted Darcy, and would not let her own reaction frighten her.

Darcy, feeling his control beginning to slip, drew back slightly, gazing with great pleasure into her lovely eyes. Her kisses had been both very exciting and remarkably sweet, and had only increased his longing to ask even more of her, but he knew she had already been unreasonably generous with him. He did not think he could stop himself from kissing her again—no, the truth was that he felt absolutely no desire to stop himself, no matter how much he reminded himself of the dangers inherent in such behaviour. "Perhaps if you do not think it a good time to tell me to stop, you might consider it a good time to tell me that you will be my wife," he said.

His words astonished him; until he began to speak, he had no intention of proposing to her again so quickly, but it seemed his desire for her was to be expressed one way or another. He awaited her response with an anxious agony, ready to withdraw his words at her slightest evidence of discomfort.

Her eyes danced. "Very well, if you insist, sir," she said; then, quickly recognizing this was not a teasing matter for him, she added, "I should be quite happy to agree to *that* suggestion."

It was more than he could believe. How could it be so simple, after all this time and suffering?—that she should simply agree? Her look told him it was true, and a slow

smile began to grow on his face. "It seems, then, that I am destined to spend a great deal of my visit today speaking to your father," he said, his voice low, "so I had best make good use of the time I have with you."

To his delight, she met him halfway this time as he kissed her. He was intoxicated with the thought that she would be his, that she would be with him every day, and that there would come to be a time when he would not have to restrain his desire for her. He poured that exhilaration into his kiss, claiming an equal response from her. Knowing how easily he could lose himself in her, he forced himself to stop long before he was ready, but was rewarded by the entrancing sight of Elizabeth with her lovely eyes dark with passion for him.

"My beloved Elizabeth," he said, "how I wish I could take you away with me today!"

She gave him a look of mock demureness. "I do not imagine my father would be pleased with *that* idea!"

He smiled at her teasing, but his countenance turned quickly serious again. "And you? Would it please you?"

She regarded him for a moment, struck by his apparent need for reassurance as to her feelings for him. She felt a lurch of sadness at the thought of all the pain he had suffered on her account, that he should doubt her affection when she had made it so plain. *Well, in this matter, he can have all the reassurance he needs!* she thought with pleased determination. "My dearest," she said warmly, "I can think of nothing I would like more than to be with you." With great daring, she reached up to kiss him lightly, but what began as a simple gesture of affection quickly turned into more as they sought to express all that they felt in a manner which could not be misunderstood.



SOME WEEKS LATER, ELIZABETH joined Darcy and Georgiana at Netherfield as they awaited the return of the Bingleys from their tour. Elizabeth was anxious to see Jane; there was so much she wished to tell her, and to hear from her. She glanced at Darcy affectionately, and saw her smile provoked that smoldering look which told her that, but for the presence of his sister, he would be expressing himself in a manner more suited to a man violently in love. *It is astonishing,* she thought, not for the first time, *that a mere look from him is enough to set my heart racing!*

It had not always been an easy journey to this point. Mr. Bennet had expressed some strong reservations about a match made so suddenly, and with a man of whom he had heard so many ill reports; but with time, as he saw more of Darcy with Elizabeth and grew to know him better, he became convinced of the value of his future son-in-law. The two lovers also had their share of painful discussions as they worked to resolve their past misunderstandings and to grow

to a greater knowledge of one another. There had been far more times of happiness than of trouble, though, and the delight of Georgiana in their engagement was beyond her ability to express.

The carriage arrived, and a flurry of happy embraces and congratulations which could finally be made in person ensued. Elizabeth had never seen Jane happier, and the bond between her and Mr. Bingley was almost palpable. They talked about their tour and their visit to Mr. Bingley's relatives excitedly, and Elizabeth shared all the news from Longbourn and Meryton. Darcy was mostly quiet, but an occasional glance at him showed Elizabeth that it was a silence of contentment rather than of distress.

Georgiana, shy as ever, quickly excused herself from the scene of the reunion, and it was not long afterwards that Bingley announced that it was time for them to refresh themselves from the effects of a long day's travel. There was something in the way his eyes rested on Jane, however, that led Elizabeth, with her now greater knowledge of these matters, to believe that it might be some time before the couple made a reappearance. She smiled at the warm look in Jane's eyes as she blushed lightly before withdrawing, and watched after the disappearing couple with deep satisfaction over their apparent felicity.

She was not the only one with such thoughts, she discovered, as she felt a pair of warm arms slip around her from behind. She rested back against his beloved form, trembling at the rush of desire that ran through her as his lips delicately explored the sensitive skin of her neck. It was a familiar feeling now, that aching need that he could provoke in her so easily, especially as his proficiency in delighting her senses grew. She bore the subtle torture of his touch as long as she could, then turned to catch his mouth with hers, no longer afraid or ashamed to show him her desire. After sating herself with the pleasure of his lips, she leaned against him once more with a contented sigh.

"Soon, my dearest," he whispered in her ear. "Soon it will be our turn."

Finis