

The Theater *in May*



by Mariafaith

The Overture

Darcy had not wanted to come to the theater. He was in no humor to be in company, and having to navigate a large crowd of London's elite seemed intolerable. Nevertheless, here he was, and he realized he needed to make the best of it.

When Bingley had requested that they spend an evening together, Darcy's first impulse was to decline the invitation outright. He would rather spend the night in his study alone with a large bottle of brandy, nursing the wounds that Elizabeth had inflicted at Hunsford. It was how he had occupied most of his evenings since he left Kent. In the mornings, Darcy would vow to stop wasting his time pining over what could not be. But when darkness fell, he found himself unable to resist the temptation of forgetfulness that liquor often brought or the temporary respite he might be granted if he was lucky enough to drift into a dream where Elizabeth welcomed his advances.

When Bingley called, his subdued behavior awoke in Darcy a sense of guilt that trumped his desire to stay at home wallowing in self-pity and recrimination. He had advised Bingley to leave Hertfordshire to seek a more suitable future in London and the least he could do was assist him in the endeavor. Whether or not he had done the right thing by meddling in his friend's affairs, the deed was done, and he could not see a way to correct what Elizabeth claimed was a mistaken assumption on his part. He needed to help Bingley get on with his life, and if by doing so, it took his mind off Elizabeth's rejection, even briefly, then all the better.

Bingley suggested dining at his townhouse, but the idea of facing his friend's sisters was a prospect Darcy could not stomach. Instead, Darcy offered a meal at his own home, explaining that Georgiana had plans with their cousin until early evening, thereby giving them an opportunity to spend some uninterrupted time together. Darcy hoped that he was walking the fine line between making it clear that he would rather not include Bingley's sisters in the invitation and being overtly rude.

Bingley agreed without a hint of offense, but also suggested that they first attend the theater. Of late, Bingley had been concerned about his inability to shake the melancholy that had overtaken him since he had left Hertfordshire and he hoped that Darcy would have some private advice on the subject. Nevertheless, Bingley also sensed that spending the entire evening alone with Darcy, given Darcy's own recent sullen mood, would not be the diversion he needed.

Darcy quickly acceded to his friend's wishes. In his relief over having avoided a night with Caroline Bingley, Darcy failed to think through how difficult it might be to attend a crowded theater where he would be forced to watch happy

couples interact and attend a play where one of its major themes was the irony of finding love when it was least expected.

As Darcy stood at the theater door waiting for Bingley to catch up, he unconsciously began to compare each woman he saw to Elizabeth. They had not gone but a few steps before Bingley shook his head in apparent frustration. "Darcy, I forgot my gloves in the carriage. I will be but a moment."

"Certainly, Bingley, but if you do not mind, I would rather wait by my box where it is less crowded."

"That would be fine. I know the way."

As he waited, Darcy watched an unknown gentleman escorting a woman across the lobby. Her dark, curly hair reminded him of Elizabeth's and her image immediately came unbidden to his mind. Instinctively, Darcy began to calculate when Elizabeth had planned to leave Kent and noted that, if she had accepted his proposal, she might be here now in London attending this very play as his fiancée. He envisioned her on his arm smiling sweetly to him as he introduced her about the room to the various familiar faces he now saw and tried to avoid. She would enjoy the play, too. She had told him of her affinity for Shakespeare. He would love to see her in the muted illumination of his private box where he might be able to secretly take her hand into his and then silently watch her expressive eyes as she viewed the performance. He knew it would be far more interesting than actually following the play, no matter how good the production.

He had spent enough time in both Hertfordshire and Kent observing her to know that he found her mesmerizing. From these secret observations, he had built a catalogue of memories. His favorite was of her laughing unreservedly on a path outside Rosings among the vibrant colors of a spring morning. It was after one of those walks, where he had vowed to avoid her and then did everything in his power to ensure that their paths would cross, that he realized that it was futile to struggle against his attraction for her. At first, he told himself that he was only seeking her out to ensure she did not get lost in unfamiliar terrain. Then he argued that he was worried for her safety since she insisted on taking such long sojourns through sometimes-wild landscapes. When he admitted to himself that he was also doing it to thwart his cousin from having an opportunity to be alone with her, he knew that he had to ask her to marry him, because he could no longer imagine her as anything but his bride. He had thought as they walked alone together surrounded by the natural world in all its glory that she understood him—that their banter was the product of well-matched intellects and that their silences were comfortable ones born of mutual regard. He now knew differently, but he could not help but look back at those times longingly.

As he began to feel the familiar ache of disappointment, he cursed himself for his weakness. It was the uncontrollable ricocheting of his mind from mood to mood that Darcy found most disconcerting. Before he met Elizabeth, he had

taken particular pride in his ability to focus. He had often chided Bingley for his lack of control in that regard. But he had first experienced his inability to master his own mind when he left Hertfordshire secure in the thought that he would forget Elizabeth, only to be haunted by her image. When he encountered her in Kent, he could not resist seeking her out despite his resolutions to avoid her. After his humiliation at Hunsford, he vowed to disregard her memory completely and rejoice in his escape, but he could only stay angry with her for small stretches of time. This seemed particularly ironic since he had once named his implacable nature as a fault and warned her that his good opinion once lost was lost forever.

Now his emotions fluctuated like the breeze. When the pain of losing her was greatest, he would curse her for her lack of discernment as to both himself and Wickham and hope that she regretted her defense of such a scoundrel. But he would then soften and forgive her anything if only she would see his love for the sincerity and devotion it represented. He would rage against her for having been blind as to his intentions and then blame himself for failing to show her more clearly how he felt. He went from despising her for her unfair critique of his character to self-loathing and regret for his boorish behavior and foolish words. He would see the truth in her reproach of his behavior in Hertfordshire and try to change his manners accordingly, but he still resented her for being right and for having the courage to point it out to him. He would experience despair so overwhelming that its frustration would bring him to the brink of tears only to find himself the next moment in the throes of adorned lust for the comfort her body would have granted his battered soul. He wondered if in time he would settle on one view of her—if he would come to hate her for what she had cost him or forgive her any misstep for the sake of a love that he knew he would never abandon.

At the moment, he found himself remembering her with ardent devotion. He knew his longing was heightened by the overwhelming loneliness he always felt in social settings. He decided to give in to his emotions and envision her by his side reliving the quiet walks they had taken in Kent. It was a favorite diversion because it was one of the few activities where he had had her all to himself. Even back then, their walks always invoked a passionate response from him. Afterwards, his dreams of her invariably included a vision of him seducing her outdoors among the wild beauty of their surroundings. He wondered more than once at the turn of his mind, but thought that perhaps he had come to associate the freedom he had always felt when he was outdoors and away from the strictures of society with the more pleasurable activities he hoped to enjoy with her. As he began to picture it in his mind, he came to his senses and willed himself to stop. Not only was it unthinkably improper and physically frustrating, he knew that in the end it would bring him nothing but pain. No matter how pleasurable the

fantasy, the inevitable realization that it would never come to pass always cost him more than it was worth.

He attempted to distract himself by looking around. His eyes rested first on a woman at one end of the lobby, but she could not hold his interest as she bore no discernable resemblance to Elizabeth. He instead turned in the other direction to survey the crowd only to find himself again envisioning Elizabeth's presence there. The sight initially brought a broad smile to his lips, but it was soon replaced by a bewildered expression as he noticed the uncomfortable look on her face. He fleetingly wondered why a conjured image of Elizabeth would look so unhappy and felt a sudden stab of confusion as he unsuccessfully attempted to dismiss or alter her image. Disorientation followed as he came to realize that his fantasy was suddenly invading his reality, and he was powerless to tell the difference. As he looked more carefully, he was startled to understand that the real life Elizabeth was actually before him. She was here at the theater. And to his utter amazement, Bingley was escorting her across the lobby with Miss Bennet on his other arm.

Act I

Before Darcy could regain his composure Bingley was speaking. “Darcy, you will never believe who I was so fortunate to come across at the door. I knew you would want to pay your respects, so I convinced them to join us for a moment before the play begins.”

Darcy tried to keep his eyes on Bingley while he spoke, but the temptation was too great and he sought out Elizabeth. She looked down, but glanced up towards him only to look away quickly when their eyes met.

Darcy could feel how rapidly his heart was beating and that his hands had begun to sweat. He knew his cheeks must be deeply blushed. The situation would have caused him anxiety in any regard, but given that he had been fantasizing about her moments before, he felt particularly exposed. He wished his traitorous body would cooperate, but knew it futile. Gathering his wits, he bowed towards Jane and took her hand. “Miss Bennet, how good to see you again.” He then turned to Elizabeth, took her hand and bowed. As he looked up, he murmured, “Good evening,” and held her gaze. He felt a rush of emotion, but before he could say more, or even think how to react, Bingley was speaking again.

He saw rather than heard Jane’s response to Bingley’s question about where they were sitting. He was struck by Jane’s blushed cheeks and her flustered, discomposed expression. He could see the slight tremor of her hand as she fiddled with her handkerchief. She recovered quickly, but in that moment, Darcy recognized her discomfort. They had more in common than he would ever have previously guessed. She was as startled, mortified, excited, and nervous as he was. He was unsure if it was his new familiarity with the cause of such a mix of emotions or the effect of Elizabeth’s disclosure in Kent, but he now understood Jane’s true feelings and could not dismiss their depth. Like him, she had probably imagined a chance meeting with the source of her unrequited love a thousand times and then played out the possibilities with various endings. But such fantasies hardly prepared one for the reality of the actual encounter. A heightened sense of yearning and dread made conversation for either of them barely manageable. As he looked at the masked pain in Jane’s eyes, he suddenly understood the ramifications of what he had done by counseling Bingley to quit Hertfordshire so abruptly.

Despite this epiphany, Darcy knew that he had to attend to the conversation or risk looking even worse than he feared. Bingley was asking Elizabeth and her sister about their family’s health in Hertfordshire and Darcy cursed himself for forgetting to make the same civil inquiry. Before he could think of something to say, the herald announced

the final call to take their seats. Elizabeth explained that they should take their leave as the rest of their party would be wondering where they had gone. Despite the awkwardness of the situation, Darcy tried to catch Elizabeth’s eye. When their gaze met, he was unsure what he saw there. He nodded his adieu and she was gone.

Afterward both men stood deep in thought as they watched the women depart. A million questions flooded Darcy’s mind as he attempted to assess Elizabeth’s reaction to him. But one thought soon took precedent as a wave of irrational jealousy swept over him—who were the other members of her party? A sense of bitterness followed as he realized that he had no right to question who she spent her time with and never would. That depressing thought brought him back to the present. He looked to Bingley whose mind was contemplating a similar subject. After clearing his throat, Darcy said, “Charles I think we need to take our own seats.”



AFTER SETTLING IN THEIR row and explaining their absence to their Aunt and Uncle, and Maria Lucas, Elizabeth could not help but search out the area where she knew Bingley and Darcy’s box must be located. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she spotted them. They seemed deep in conversation. She wondered at Darcy’s reaction to seeing her, and for that matter, his reaction to Bingley seeing Jane. She had to admit that when Darcy first saw her, the look on his face moved her. In his surprise, he seemed genuinely happy to see her and she could not help but notice how becoming he looked when he smiled. But as recognition dawned, she could see his visible embarrassment.

Her heart went out to him, not because she regretted her refusal of his proposal, but because she knew she had treated him so unfairly. She was genuinely mortified by her behavior towards him regarding Mr. Wickham. When she thought of it, she flushed with shame. While she still could not forgive him for his role in separating Jane from Mr. Bingley, she knew how cruel her defense of Wickham must have sounded given the infamous sins he had committed against the Darcy family. Her disposition was such that she hated to cause anyone pain, but to do it with so little regard for the discernment of the truth or the feelings of her intended target made her understand her shortcomings in a manner she never had before.

She also understood how awkward this situation must be for him. She felt mortified herself, but at least she was not the rejected party. Her compassion, however, stemmed from more than just pity. With time, she had come to see the compliment of his attentions. Despite the demeaning manner in which he had proposed, her mind often dwelt on his declaration that he had formed, from almost their first

meeting, a passionate regard that had grown into an ardent admiration and love. To have declared himself in such a fashion and then to have been rejected must have been very difficult for a man of such reserve.

She was roused from her ruminations by a slight movement out of the corner of her eye. As she looked to their box, she could see that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were clearly in an animated discussion and neither looked happy. She watched as Mr. Bingley unexpectedly rose and exited the box. Darcy soon followed. She wondered briefly what their conduct could mean. It was highly irregular to leave while the play was in progress and it would not go unnoticed. Elizabeth's heart immediately sank. While she had been feeling remorse and regret over her treatment of Mr. Darcy, he was convincing Bingley to leave the theater before he had another opportunity to see Jane. Her old animosity for him boiled hot. She chastised herself for focusing on Mr. Darcy's reaction to her when the more material point was that Jane had been reunited with Mr. Bingley and what that meant for her sister. She wished that she had confided in Jane what had transpired in Kent, but Maria Lucas's presence on the trip had complicated matters and Elizabeth had thought it best to wait until they were in the privacy of their chambers at Longbourne. Now she would have to find a moment to tell her sister all that had happened between herself and Mr. Darcy and then what she saw in his box. Elizabeth spent the rest of the act preoccupied with how Jane would react to this development and how she might soften her sister's eventual disappointment.

At the intermission, Elizabeth could tell that Jane wished for an opportunity to walk about in the secret hope that they might run across a certain gentleman. While Elizabeth was anxious that such an endeavor might bring her sister disappointment, she nonetheless thought it a good idea. Jane needed to know, for better or worse, the power that Mr. Darcy wielded over Mr. Bingley. She thought the excursion might also provide a quiet opportunity for her to apprise Jane of what she had seen. Elizabeth quickly suggested to Mrs. Gardiner that they might all go for some refreshments. Before they reached the landing, she was startled to see Bingley anxiously awaiting Jane's arrival with Mr. Darcy standing slightly behind him.

"Miss Bennet," Bingley quietly inquired, "I was hoping that you would allow me to escort you to the refreshment table?"

After Jane discreetly looked to her Aunt for permission she demurely nodded her assent. As Jane took Bingley's offered arm and departed, Darcy stepped forward. He first made his acknowledgment to Maria Lucas and then turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet, please forgive me for not making proper inquiries as to your family's health when we met earlier. I am afraid I was...that because I was...surprised to see you, I did not greet you properly."

"No, Mr. Darcy, you were... My family is quite well, thank you."

"Oh, good. That is very good."

After a slightly awkward pause where both looked away in embarrassment, he asked, "I trust that your and Miss Lucas's trip from Kent went well."

She was tempted to reply that such was obviously the case since they were both standing here before him now, but thought better of adding impertinence to such an uncomfortable conversation. Instead, she simply replied that it had indeed been uneventful.

"And how long have you been in London?"

"Over a fortnight."

"Ah, yes..." After another pause he added, "Miss Bennet would you do me the honor of introducing me to your friends?"

Turning back to them, she said, "Mr. Darcy, this is my aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. Jane has been staying with them this winter in Cheapside and I now have been lucky enough to join them."

Elizabeth studied his reaction and was surprised to see that other than his slight blush upon the mention of Cheapside, he met them with every civility—inquiring after her uncle's interest in the play and discovering that her aunt hailed from Lambton. Elizabeth watched in wonder. She had never seen him so unaffected and it was gratifying that he should know that she had some relations for whom there was no need to blush. Before she could determine what his change of demeanor signified he was addressing her. "I believe Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet have gone for refreshments, perhaps we should all join them."

As he walked slightly behind her, Darcy could not help but be fascinated by the manner in which the single curl that dangled down her back bounced. He thought himself a fool for being distracted by such a sight, but knew that his time with her would soon be over. He could not resist the temptation of storing up as many memories as possible.

Being slightly taller than most, Darcy was able to spot Bingley at the far end of the hall long before their approach. He sighed at the sight of him. His emotions towards his friend were a jumble. After their unexpected reunion with Jane and Elizabeth, Darcy knew what he had to do. Without preamble, he confessed to Bingley that he had known that Miss Bennet was in London all winter and that she had called on his sisters. Bingley's confusion soon led to frustrated resentment and to Darcy's surprise a threatening silence. Rather than speak in anger, Bingley left the box. Darcy followed, and once in the vestibule, they were able to speak more openly. The change of venue had given Bingley time to digest what he had learned and his anger was blunted. After a moment of indecision, Bingley accepted Darcy's apology and the explanation he had given for his conduct, acknowledging that both were heartfelt. After again inquiring what Darcy knew of his sisters' reception of Jane, he wondered aloud whether Jane would accept his own apology so quickly. Having learned his lesson, Darcy refrained from offering an opinion on a topic about which

he now realized he knew so little and instead asked Bingley what he intended to do.

“The only thing one can do. Take advantage of this amazing stroke of luck. It is fate that I should find her here and I do not intend to waste the opportunity. I will seek her out at the intermission. I need to determine if she could still care for me. For all I know, she may already be engaged. I have not seen her for months. If she is not spoken for, then I need to show her that my affection have been far more steady than my behavior has demonstrated.”

“You intend to do all that during the intermission?”

“What option do I have. I have lived with regret for many months. It is not a very satisfying companion. I would rather be hasty and have my feelings known. Darcy, I understand that you were trying to protect me, but I would rather take my chances and risk any heartache that comes of it. I have tried the other alternative, and it has its own cost.”

Bingley’s words caught Darcy off guard. He had not lived with regret for quite as long as Bingley had, but he knew its bitter taste. Bingley was also right about their chance meeting. It did seem like fate that he should meet Elizabeth here, but unlike his friend, he could not set matters straight. In that regard, he was somewhat embarrassed to admit that his gratitude for the understanding and compassion that Bingley had demonstrated by forgiving him was slightly tinged with jealousy. While it might be difficult, Bingley still had a chance to win Miss Bennet’s regard and while he did not want to begrudge his friend any happiness, he envied it nonetheless. Unlike Bingley, there was nothing left for Darcy to say to Elizabeth. He had told her of his affections, and she had rejected them outright. It was true that some of the charges she had leveled against him were false or a misunderstanding of his intent; but, at its core, her rejection really centered on him as a man, and there was little he could do to change that.

As he thought back to all the reasons she had given for her rejection of his proposal, one stood out. “His selfish disdain for the feelings of others.” As to that, she had been accurate. He knew himself well enough to know that he did not choose to please unless he thought it necessary; and, in Hertfordshire, he had seldom thought it necessary. He wondered when he had become so condescending. He thought of his Aunt and hoped that he had not appeared in the same light as her, but he knew he must.

Deep in thought, he realized there was something he could do to show her that he understood her reproof. He vowed that when he saw her at the intermission he would do everything in his power to demonstrate to her that he could act as a gentleman should. He wondered why he should still care about her opinion of him, when he was sure that she was dreading their accidental reunion. He could not explain it, but he also could not lie to himself. He did still care what she thought and if nothing else, acting civilly would be better than the tongue-tied manner in which he had received her earlier. It might improve his

battered pride if he did not appear quite the lovesick puppy unable to join in a conversation. He would attempt to regain some dignity by rising above the awkwardness of the situation.

As the party joined Bingley and Jane, it was obvious from her heightened complexion that they had interrupted a private moment. Elizabeth wondered what Mr. Darcy’s reaction would be to such a scene and quickly looked to him. She was surprised to catch him in an unguarded moment. He had a wistful expression that Elizabeth found difficult to decipher.

As Jane introduced her Aunt and Uncle to Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth watched in amazement as Mr. Darcy willingly joined in the conversation, mentioning Mrs. Gardiner’s connection to Lambton to Mr. Bingley. After Bingley acknowledged his familiarity with the area, Darcy explained that he and Bingley had visited there several times last fall when Bingley was hunting at Pemberley.

To the surprise of most everyone in the party, Bingley then added, “Mrs. Gardiner, I believe our paths have also almost crossed in another regard. I only recently learned that you are acquainted with my sister, Caroline. I was unaware that Miss Bennet had called on her and my other sister, Mrs. Hurst, while we were in town or that Caroline returned the call at your home. Had I known, I would have insisted on paying my respects to you as well. I hope you will accept my apology for failing to do so and allow me to return the civility that you have extended to my family. Do you have plans to dine tonight after the theater?”

While Mrs. Gardiner answered that they did not, Bingley looked searchingly at Jane, who could not resist a demure smile before studying her shoes. Their exchange did not go unnoticed by any member of the group, save Maria Lucas. With an infectious smile, Bingley replied, “What good fortune for us then. Perhaps you could dine with us at my home. It is not far from here and I would consider it an honor. I believe both my sisters are at my townhouse; I could send word to them.” Adding with slightly too forced enthusiasm, “I am sure they will be quite pleased to see you again.”

Mrs. Gardiner expressed her pleasure at the invitation, but declined saying that it was far too short of notice to put Mr. Bingley’s sisters to such trouble. In the pause that followed, the disapproving face of Caroline Bingley came unbidden to more than one member of the party. While Jane’s disappointment was mostly masked, Bingley’s was evident and akin to that of a child who had just received a lump of coal on Christmas.

In the ensuing silence, Darcy spoke. “I am afraid that Mr. Bingley has forgotten that he has already made a commitment to dine with my sister and me this evening. Since she is already expecting us, and my housekeeper will already have arranged for a supper to be served after the performance, I insist that you do me the honor of joining us for dinner at my home. I know my sister would be quite disappointed if you were to decline.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled and said, "That is a very gracious offer, Mr. Darcy. But we could no more put your sister to the inconvenience than we could Mr. Bingley's."

"But, Madame, I assure that there would be no inconvenience. My sister is already expecting company and once you have the pleasure of meeting my housekeeper, Mrs. Larsen, you will understand that it would be no trouble at all. She will have already prepared enough food to serve twice our number and if she were ever to learn that someone rejected my invitation due to the fear that she might be unprepared for a slight change in plans, she would be gravely insulted, and I would never receive another moment's peace. I am sure Mr. Bingley can attest to Mrs. Larsen's proficiency and the danger I would be placed in if you were to decline the invitation for such a reason."

Awash in relief, Bingley happily seconded Mr. Darcy's description of Mrs. Larsen. Willing himself to appear calm, Darcy then turned to Elizabeth and said, "Miss Bennet, there is also a member of the group who claims an acquaintance with you. My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, is also to attend. I am sure he would be very disappointed to be deprived of your company."

Hardly able to comprehend all that had occurred and uncharacteristically unsure of what to say, Elizabeth replied, "Thank you. Yes, it would be very nice to see him again as well."

After a brief consultation with Mr. Gardiner, Mrs. Gardiner smiled broadly at Mr. Darcy and said, "Sir, you are a very persuasive man. We will accept your generous offer, with the caveat that you must allow us to return the favor."

Darcy bowed solemnly, as Mr. Gardiner added, "Then it is settled. But in the meantime, I think we should be returning to our seats."

Nodding his assent, Darcy said, "Yes, I think we must. Perhaps we could meet by the second door after the performance."

Offering an arm to Jane and then the other to Elizabeth, Bingley asked, "May I escort you both back to your seats?"

After seeing that Mr. Gardiner intended to take his wife's arm, Darcy mustered a smile and offered his services to Maria Lucas. He was unsure whether he was disappointed or relieved that he was foreclosed from offering the same courtesy to Elizabeth. During their brief conversation, it was tempting to pretend that his proposal had not occurred. It seemed that they had tacitly agreed to act as if nothing had happened, but he knew the danger of assuming that Elizabeth's feelings were as cordial as her manners. As he saw Elizabeth's retreating form slip into the crowd, he turned to his partner.

For her part, Maria Lucas's nervousness at being singled out by Mr. Darcy was more than evident. Darcy was tempted to walk in silence, but then remembered his vow to act civilly. "Miss Lucas, I hope your trip to Kent was pleasurable?"

Maria could not have been more relieved by his choice of subject. She thought her trip to Kent the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her. In her eyes, the condescension that Lady Catherine had shown them by repeatedly inviting them to Rosings was worthy of all the praise that her brother-in-law espoused. That she felt the compliment deeply was evidenced by the fact that her otherwise docile demeanor was driven to actually disagree with Elizabeth about the value of their time spent at Hunsford. Elizabeth had hinted to Maria, in the hope that she would think twice before following in her older sister's footsteps, that the cost of Charlotte's marriage to Charlotte's dignity was not worth the security it brought. Despite Elizabeth's hints, Maria saw Charlotte's situation as ideal, believing naïvely that the grandiose compliments that Mr. Collins periodically offered his wife a sufficient replacement for mutual understanding and suitability.

Instead of taking Elizabeth's meaning, Maria suspected that her mother was right in predicting that Lizzy would come to repent her refusal of Mr. Collins. She saw Lizzy's lack of enthusiasm for the time she spent in Mr. Collins's company as a natural byproduct of the regret and fledgling jealousy that her visit to Hunsford must inspire. While Maria had to admit to herself that Mr. Collins was not exactly the physical image of the ideal husband that she envisioned, his position and the entail adequately offset the downside. More than that, though, she knew Lizzy had to be wrong about Mr. Collins because her own favorable opinion of her brother-in-law coincided with Lady Catherine's. Whatever Mr. Collins lacked in appearance, it was clear from Lady Catherine's generous patronage that she approved of him, and to think otherwise was tantamount to questioning that Lady's judgment.

She worried that Mr. Darcy might think Lizzy's general dissatisfaction with Mr. Collins a reflection on the amount of esteem due his Aunt's opinions. Mr. Collins had been very clear that they all owed her Ladyship their utmost deference for the kindness that she had shown them, and she worried that Lizzy's attitude might demonstrate a certain insufficiency of spirit. Hoping to make it clear that she did not ascribe to Elizabeth's view, she replied emphatically, "Oh, yes, Mr. Darcy, I had the most wonderful time. I can only hope that I will be lucky enough to return again soon."

"With your sister settled there, such a prospect must be likely. Would you not, though, rather be in Hertfordshire where your acquaintance is more varied?"

"Oh no, I would much rather stay in Kent. Lizzy and I were just discussing it yesterday. I told her that I hoped we were invited back every Easter and I would enjoy going in the fall, too."

Unable to resist the temptation, he asked, "Did Miss Bennet indicate whether she would also want to return to Kent next Easter?"

Replying in a hurried, confused manner, Maria stammered, "No, she... I think... I think she would rather re-

main with her family.” Hastily adding, “But you should not think that she did not appreciate your aunt’s generosity. I mean, that is to say, that I could not imagine anyone not enjoying herself given our frequent trips to Rosings. I think it is more that... I think that Lizzy is uncomfortable, given what transpired... I think she is not comfortable being in company with... But I want you to know, though, that I do not share her view. I...” Seeing that her words had clearly upset him and afraid that she would make more of a muddle of what she intended to say, she looked about quickly seeking help in whatever form might be available. She was utterly relieved to see that they had arrived at her seat. Curtseying, she quickly replied, “Well, thank you; this is our row here.” A flustered Darcy bowed and took his leave without a backwards glance at Elizabeth.

Even though the play had resumed, Elizabeth could not resist asking Jane how she had come to tell Mr. Bingley about her visit to his house and Caroline’s call to Cheapside.

Whispering as quietly as she could, Jane replied, “But, Lizzy, I did not tell him. Mr. Bingley explained to me that Mr. Darcy only just told him about it after we met them in the foyer. Mr. Bingley said that his sisters never told him of my call and that he sincerely regretted not being informed.”

Unable to restrain herself, Elizabeth exclaimed in a vehement whisper, “It was Mr. Darcy who told Mr. Bingley about his sisters? Jane, are you sure?”

Mrs. Gardiner cast her nieces an affectionate look cautioning them to attend to the play. Dropping her voice even lower, Jane replied, “Oh, yes, Lizzy. Mr. Bingley said so specifically.” As Elizabeth attempted to understand Mr. Darcy’s motivation, Jane continued to whisper. “Lizzy, Mr. Bingley also apologized on his sisters’ behalf and told me that he hoped to make it up to me. He seemed so happy to see me, but I am not sure what it all means.”

Forcing herself to attend to the conversation and leave her musing about Mr. Darcy’s seemingly inexplicable behavior, she replied, “It means Jane that he is well on the way to being in love with you. His sisters obviously contrived to keep you apart, but fate has lent its hand. Without their interference, your relationship will be able to take its natural course. I am sure everything will be settled in no time.”

“Lizzy, I do not want to read too much into his behavior. He owes me nothing.”

“He may owe you nothing; but, from the look on his face, he would like a great deal from you.”

“Oh, Lizzy, please be serious,” adding in a more concerned tone, “I am glad, though, that we will not be seeing his sisters tonight. I do not know what to think of their behavior. I cannot imagine why they would have neglected to tell him that they had seen me twice this winter.” After a worried glance, she added, “Lizzy, I know it was very generous of Mr. Darcy to invite us to his home tonight, and I am grateful, but I have to admit that I am more anxious to meet his sister than to see Mr. Bingley’s. In her letter, Caroline seemed to imply that there was a general expectation that

Miss Darcy and Mr. Bingley were intended for each other. I am afraid that if it is true, I might not be able to hide my disappointment. I know I should only be happy for him.”

“Jane, you are too good. Only you would worry about giving offense to a person you have not yet met. I understand your concern, but I think that the one lesson we should both take from this evening is that we should not jump to conclusions. There was a time when I would have thought that Mr. Darcy had invited us over in order to set his sister up as a rival to you, but I am no longer sure of anything. We know that Caroline Bingley has been less than honest with her brother about you. I think it is likely that she has likewise exaggerated Miss Darcy’s attachment to Mr. Bingley. When I was in Kent, Mr. Darcy conveyed some information to me about his sister, and he never inferred that she was in any way spoken for. To the contrary, I was given the impression that she is very young and not yet out. I think you must proceed based on how Mr. Bingley has treated you this evening; and, if it is any indication, his heart belongs to you alone.”

Elizabeth approached the foyer with a sense of trepidation and anticipation. She had spent the rest of the play trying to comprehend Mr. Darcy. She knew that she had misjudged him. The only question that remained was by how much. That he had treated her and her family so civilly when she deserved no such consideration made her realize that she really did not know him. His invitation to dine was without question more than what was required. Her more suspicious side wondered what he hoped to gain by it but was unable to come to any sort of conclusion. She could think of an alternate explanation for each of his actions. In the end, she had to take her own advice and make no preconceived judgments as to what the evening might hold. Mr. Darcy was apparently trying to put the unpleasantness of Hunsford behind him; and, while she thought it a daunting task given the circumstances, there seemed little other choice.

As their parties assembled by the doors, Darcy was informed that his carriage had arrived. He indicated that he wished to go on ahead to ensure that everything was prepared. Mr. Bingley immediately spoke. “Darcy, I will stay behind and ride in the Gardiner’s’ carriage so that I can show them the way to your house.”

Darcy nodded his assent. He hardly thought it necessary as their driver would clearly be familiar with his address but understood Bingley’s motivation to keep Miss Bennet close.

With a cheerful smile Mr. Gardiner interrupted. “Mr. Bingley you give my carriage a great compliment, but I am afraid it cannot live up to the assumption underlying your plan. As it is, we barely fit. I am afraid it is too small to house another guest comfortably.”

“Oh. My mistake,” replied Bingley with chagrin. “I apologize for taking such a liberty.”

“Not at all,” smiled Mr. Gardiner. “I wish I could accommodate you. Unfortunately we are at our capacity.”

Seeing an opportunity that would not arise twice, Darcy spoke. "Charles, if I might. I think it would make the most sense for you to go along with Mr. Gardiner to show him the way to my street. Perhaps Miss Elizabeth could join me in my carriage. That way, everyone would fit and we would be assured of your safe arrival."

At the mention of her name, Elizabeth looked sharply up at Darcy. His demeanor was very different from the wistful expression he had donned during the intermission. His countenance had taken on the formal expression that he had often worn in Hertfordshire and he seemed to be silently challenging her not to decline his offer.

Rising to the challenge and seeing no polite alternative, Elizabeth nodded her assent and took his arm as they walked out into the night.

Act II

As they stood on the steps to the theater waiting for Darcy's groom and footmen to bring the carriage forward, Elizabeth tried to determine how to act. Since she could not have anticipated the turn of events that led her here, she was at a loss to predict what would come next. She looked to Darcy, but it was clear he did not intend to speak in this setting. As they waited in the awkward silence, Elizabeth noted that her presence on his arm had generated curiosity from a variety of parties awaiting their conveyances. She again looked to Darcy for his reaction, but he was staring off in the distance seemingly impervious to the attention. It struck her that due to his wealth and position, he was often the subject of scrutiny. Perhaps his detached demeanor was his way of avoiding unwanted attention. Given her present discomfort at being so on display, she could not begrudge him the refuge.

As the carriage steps were brought down, Mr. Darcy indicated that she should proceed in and then silently offered his hand to help her up. As she looked into his eyes and put her hand in his, she involuntarily felt something pass between them—a jolt of discomfort—or was it excitement? No matter how strained their interactions, she could not deny that he always elicited a strong response. She knew it was more than just the normal reaction that came from contact with the opposite sex. She had spent time with Darcy's cousin, but never felt anything but pleasant companionship. As she settled in across from him, the tension between them grew. Their unspoken history made each interaction more significant, and she wondered how they would get through the journey. Despite the distraction his presence caused, she could not help but admire the comfort of the carriage. She had never before experienced such luxury. She thought to comment on it, but thought that such a mundane statement would seem inappropriate. Instead, she rested her gaze upon him, hoping that he would make the next move. In any regard, his dark brooding good looks were hard to ignore. She had previously disregarded his striking features and pleasing build by dwelling on the fact that those attributes unfairly masked his cruel character. Knowing now that she had unjustly judged him, she saw his appearance in a different light. She knew that some of the attraction must stem from her own ego. She was honest enough to admit that the lure of someone finding you attractive made them more attractive in return.

But there was more to it than that. The thought that Mr. Darcy might still harbor tender feelings for her and had arranged to see her alone could not help but send the butterflies alight in her stomach. She did not want a repeat of Hunsford, but she also thought they had unfinished busi-

ness. She needed to apologize for much of what she had said, and she wondered what his actions towards her sister meant. But what did she hope he wanted?

The groom knocked on the widow, before sliding it down. “Good evening, Sir. I hoped you enjoyed the theater?”

Darcy responded in a quiet but steady voice. “Yes, thank you, Hanson. It was, in fact, quite a good production.”

“Sir, I was wondering if you were ready to depart or if we are waiting for Mr. Bingley?”

“No, I should have mentioned it to you before. Mr. Bingley will be coming along separately. We can leave when you are ready.”

“Very good, Sir.”

As the carriage lurched forward, Darcy looked out the window for several moments, apparently composing his thoughts. She knew he was nervous by the way that he absentmindedly twisted the ring on his finger. Apparently coming to a resolution, he folded his hands, turned to her, and began to speak in a formal tone. “Miss Bennet, I hope you will forgive my forwardness by inviting you to ride with me. But I thought that it might provide an opportunity for me to explain myself before we join the others.”

Unable to break his intense gaze, she nodded for him to continue. “Obviously, I understand that our interaction is unpleasant. I wanted you to know that at the theater I felt compelled to invite your party so that your sister and Mr. Bingley might have some time together. Despite my previous words to the contrary, I now do regret my actions in that regard. Your attestation as to your sister’s affections and my own observation of her earlier this evening made it clear to me that I was mistaken as to her true feelings. I know that this is a meager offering tendered far too late, but I wanted to give them an opportunity to reacquaint themselves without the presence of Mr. Bingley’s sisters who, I believe, would only serve to make matters more difficult. I understand, though, that my actions have put you in a most disagreeable position. Please forgive me, but I thought it the lesser of two evils. Nevertheless, I do not want to inconvenience you any longer than necessary. I thought that, after your party arrives, you could plead a headache. I will offer you the use of my carriage. My groom can return you to your Uncle’s home at your convenience. That way your party will not feel the need to leave early, and Mr. Bingley will have an opportunity to renew his acquaintance with your sister. After that, they can decide their own fate. But for tonight, I felt that it was the least I could do. Unfortunately, this has meant that you will be unable to avoid my company. I realize, better than anyone, how unpleasant this must be; but, as you once said, I hope it will be of short duration.”

Elizabeth sat in stunned silence. She was not sure what she had expected, but his distant and blunt words unsettled her. His last remark was clearly intended to wound. He obviously wanted nothing further to do with her, but why was she surprised? What man would feel comfortable in the company of a woman who had rejected him and then cata-

logged his supposed faults to his face? Nonetheless, her unexpectedly tumultuous reaction to her dismissal made her realize that she had unconsciously hoped for more. Because so much of what she had accused him had proven unfounded, she thought there might be a chance for them to transcend their earlier misunderstandings so they could at least interact civilly. His behavior in the theater showed he was more than capable of it, but it was apparent from what he had just said that he wanted to minimize the necessity of even attempting the pretense. She was relieved and gratified that he wished her sister and Mr. Bingley well, but the obvious resentment behind his words still stung. Without further thought, she asked, “But Mr. Darcy, would not that require me to engage in pretense? I thought you abhorred disguise of any kind.”

Her question seemed calculated to rile him. He attempted to formulate a reply which would explain his position and make her understand he was acting for her edification and not his own. But, he had had enough of contorting himself to please her when he knew it was futile. It was clear that his very presence was a punishment. He had already foolishly allowed himself to hope he could repair the damage between them, only to be savagely reminded of her distaste for him by Miss Lucas. He did not even want to contemplate what she knew of his proposal—what any of them knew. Tonight was apparently to serve as his penance for having separated Charles from Miss Bennet. He would suffer through whatever humiliation the evening brought, but after that, he needed to end this torture. With resolute bitterness, he replied, “Ah, Miss Bennet, you are right. You have caught me again. I do not usually condone artifice, but sometimes the alternative is far worse.”

As she stared at him with eyes flashing, he felt the carriage come to a halt. Before she could speak, he added, “I believe, Madame, we have arrived,” and then exited the carriage.

As he stood outside waiting for her to descend, she heard the groom bid his master good night. Knowing how disconcerted Mr. Darcy was, she winced knowing that his unsuspecting servant would either be completely ignored or treated badly for having the audacity to address him at such an inopportune moment. Instead, as Darcy helped her out of the carriage, he quietly said, “Thank you, Hanson, a good night to you as well. Give my regards to Mrs. Hanson.”

To her further surprise he did not release her arm as he escorted her up the front steps. Upon entering the imposing dwelling, they were immediately met by a kindly looking woman who bestowed a warm smile on Mr. Darcy. “Sir, I received your message. Everything is prepared.”

“As I knew it would be, Mrs. Larsen. Thank you.” As the older woman accepted his compliment with a slight bow of her head and blushed cheeks, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet, may I present my housekeep, Mrs. Larsen. Mrs. Larsen, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” After they exchanged curtsies, Mr. Darcy added, “The rest of Miss Bennet’s party will be arriving shortly.”

“Very well, Sir. Your sister is in the music room. Your cousin will be down shortly. The Colonel asked that I convey his apologies for the delay. He needs to send a dispatch. I have asked Mr. O’Toole to fetch a post rider for him.”

“Thank you. I am sure he will appreciate your efficiency.”

“Mr. Darcy, I have set out some wine and fruit on the sideboard. I can serve dinner whenever you wish. Is there anything else you require in the interim?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Larsen. As usual you have seen to everything.”

Darcy and Elizabeth both watched the housekeeper depart and then instinctively turned to each other. As Darcy looked at her, he knew he had everything to say and absolutely nothing to say. After a moment of indecision, he bowed his head and stared solemnly at the floor. To Elizabeth’s surprise, he then sighed heavily, tugged his waistcoat down, and looked up at her. “Miss Bennet, may I bring you some wine.” After walking to the table and inspecting the bottles, he suggested that she try a white wine that he recommended, explaining its origins and characteristics.

Elizabeth simply nodded her assent, glad for the diversion. Despite the unpleasantness in the carriage, she could see that he was working hard to regain his composure, no doubt so that their acquaintance would appear as normal as possible. His bitterness seemed to have been replaced by a forced resolve to act as politely as possible. She attempted to do the same, commenting on how much she liked the wine he had selected.

As she stood there, she could not help but admire his home—the warmth it exuded despite its elegance. She could hear that someone had begun to play the pianoforte in the next room with a great deal of skill. Noticing the music as well, Darcy asked. “Miss Bennet, may I introduce my sister to you?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Before they entered, Darcy stopped and turned to Elizabeth. “My sister is sometimes quite shy, especially about performing. Perhaps we could listen quietly for a moment before we disturb her.”

“I would enjoy that. Thank you.”

As they listened, Elizabeth studied Georgiana who was clearly lost in her music. She was younger than Elizabeth had imagined and the realization reminded her that Mr. Darcy’s role as guardian was more than just a formality. Elizabeth involuntarily looked to Darcy to see his reaction to his sister’s reverie. She watched him as the sad, contemplative music seemed to flow over him. He appeared to visibly relax in the respite the music provided from conversation. He closed his eyes; and, when he opened them, Elizabeth was taken aback by his expression. She had never before seen him look so open, his emotions discernible from his countenance. That he loved his sister and was proud of her talent was clear, but his face also showed a depth of emotion she had only glimpsed at Hunsford and had disregarded in the heat of their fight.

After Georgiana finished, Darcy stepped forward, and Elizabeth followed. “Georgie, that was simply beautiful.”

Startled and blushing red, she exclaimed, “William, I did not realize you had arrived. You should have made your presence known.”

With a contrite smile, he replied, “I am sorry. It is my fault. I thought we might interrupt you. Your playing was so lovely; we did want to intrude. Georgie, may I present Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Miss Bennet, this is my sister Miss Georgiana Darcy.”

A puzzled expression momentarily passed over Georgiana’s face and then she smiled broadly at her brother and then at Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to meet you. I feel as though I already know you. My brother wrote of having met you in Hertfordshire and then again in Kent. My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, has also spoken most highly of you.”

Smiling at the younger woman’s sincere nature, Elizabeth replied, “You are too kind. May I say that I have also heard a great deal about you? While both your cousin and your brother frequently praised your musical abilities, I still was unprepared for how beautifully you play. You are very talented.”

Clearly embarrassed, Georgiana stuttered, “Thank you Miss Bennet.” Regaining some equilibrium, she added, “My brother also told me of how well you play. I hope you will agree to perform for us tonight. He has said that he has hardly ever heard anything that has given him more pleasure.”

Elizabeth glanced nervously at Darcy whose face was blushed and looking down. “I certainly will if you wish it, but I would not expect too much. I play very ill indeed.”

As Georgiana looked to her brother and then Miss Bennet it was clear that she had embarrassed them both. Hoping to correct the mistake, she turned to Darcy and asked, “William, I am so glad you invited Miss Bennet. Mrs. Larsen said that you were also expecting more guests for dinner. Did Mr. Bingley’s sisters join you as well?”

“No, actually Georgiana, we met Miss Bennet and several members of her party quite by accident at the theater. Her sister, Miss Jane Bennet, and their aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, will be joining us shortly with Mr. Bingley. As will Miss Maria Lucas. She is the sister of Mrs. Collins from Hunsford parsonage.”

“Oh, yes, I met Mrs. Collins while visiting our aunt. Mrs. Collins is such a lovely woman.”

Mrs. Larsen entered and discreetly turned to Darcy. “Excuse me, Sir, but the other guests have arrived.”

“Oh, of course, Mrs. Larsen. Thank you. I will come to greet them directly.” Bowing to Elizabeth, Darcy added, “Ladies, if you will excuse me.”

After they were alone for a moment, Elizabeth said, “I hope our unexpected arrival has not been an inconvenience.”

“No, not at all,” exclaimed the younger woman. “You must not think such a thing. I was so glad to hear that William was going to the theater. Of late, he has not ven-

tured out much and I was glad he was...going out... It is always a pleasure to see Mr. Bingley, but it is even more so to finally meet you. I would not miss it."

"Do you see Mr. Bingley quite often then?" inquired Elizabeth.

"No, not often. I have not seen him since Christmas."

"Oh, I am surprised. I thought from something Caroline Bingley said that you were more often all in company."

"Miss Bingley, does call on me whenever my brother is also in residence, but I have not seen Mr. Bingley for quite some time. William spent a good deal of time with him before the New Year; but, as of late, my brother has been more often alone... Do you know Miss Bingley well?"

With a broad smile that put Georgiana at ease, Elizabeth replied, "No, I cannot claim that privilege. I know Miss Bingley from her stay in Hertfordshire. Her brother's estate is very near my home, and we were in company a few times together, but I would not presume to think that Miss Bingley would count me one of her close acquaintances."

Stifling a smile, Georgiana replied that the same might be said of herself. Georgiana then seemed to turn serious, weighing a thought in her mind. "Miss Bennet, I am sorry, though, not to have met you sooner. I had thought from my brother's correspondence that I might have seen you in Kent after Easter. My brother spoke of my joining him, but then his plans changed rather suddenly, and then you obviously left as well."

Elizabeth looked at Georgiana wondering what she knew and what she was implying. Unsure what to say, she tentatively replied, "Yes. I came to London a few weeks ago."

"My brother did not mention it. Did he know you were here?"

"I am not sure. I think it was discussed at Rosings at one point, but I do not recall whether he was in attendance. I am soon to return to Hertfordshire in any regard."

Elizabeth watched as a series of emotions crossed the younger woman's face. Before Elizabeth could say anything else, the rest of their party entered the music room.

As introductions were made, Elizabeth watched Mr. Bingley and Georgiana for any sign of an attachment between them. It was clear from both their behaviors that Jane had nothing to fear in that regard.

She then watched Mr. Darcy as he answered some questions the Gardiners had asked about his townhouse. He was initially reserved; but, apparently taking his role as host seriously, he forged ahead. After a time, Mrs. Gardiner turned to him and said, "Mr. Darcy, in the carriage Mr. Bingley mentioned that you saw Lizzy while she was in Kent. That is quite a coincidence."

With a hesitant look, he replied, "Yes, I was staying with my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, at the same time as Miss Bennet's visit with Mr. and Mrs. Collins. The parsonage is attached to the estate." He then glanced at Elizabeth and asked in a tentative voice, "Did Miss Bennet not mention seeing me there?"

Elizabeth answered for herself. "No, Sir, I did not. But I have only been reunited with my aunt and uncle for a short time since my return from that part of the country." She could see his questioning look and added, "In any regard, I am sure that they would not be interested in every detail of my goings-on there."

Holding her gaze, he nodded slightly and then asked, "Then, only Miss Lucas was aware of...my visit there?"

She stared at him for a moment with a puzzled look. "Well...yes, of course, Miss Lucas knew of your trip to Rosings."

His frown made her understand that he was expecting more, but she was at a loss for what else to say.

Mrs. Gardiner filled the void by asking Darcy about Derbyshire, which led to a long discussion of the area's merits. That exchange led an animated conversation of Darcy's travels in the Lakes District and the Gardiners' upcoming visit there. Elizabeth thought that despite his obvious discomfort at her presence, he seemed at ease in his surroundings. She knew he was hosting this evening for Jane's and Mr. Bingley's sakes, but was relieved to see that he was enjoying her aunt and uncle. Seeing them now in deep conversation, she thought it odd that he had once spoken of their potential connection as a degradation to his name. She wondered whether he had undergone a change of heart in that regard or whether he simply was adept at covering his disdain. She thought it unlikely that he would bother with the pretense, but also could not imagine how such a transformation could have occurred.

As the topic turned to the play, Elizabeth was surprised to hear how much Mr. Darcy's opinions mirrored her own.

Mr. Gardiner chuckled at something Mr. Darcy said and then replied, "Mr. Darcy, I am afraid I must disagree with you. But let us ask my niece, Elizabeth, for her view of the subject. She has been rather quiet this evening. She is usually quite insightful and typically unafraid to voice her opinions. More importantly, though, once she takes a position, she is quite difficult to get around. If she agrees with me, then I can let her convince you of the wisdom of my position, and I will be free to sit back and enjoy this excellent wine."

Turning to Elizabeth, Darcy caught her eye and replied in an unreadable manner, "Yes, I would be interested in her viewpoint. I know from our time in Kent together that she is a woman of decided opinions. My aunt often commented upon it during dinner. Miss Bennet, how did you enjoy the play?"

Elizabeth looked about the room. Jane and Bingley had found a quiet corner and seemed well on the way of renewing their friendship. Georgiana was showing Maria the pianoforte. While she was tempted to add her views to the stimulating flow of the debate, she could see that Darcy was more than able to entertain the Gardiners without her help and was probably wishing her to leave. She felt an odd pang of rejection. She had never considered his suit in Kent, but

seeing him here now, she wondered what it would be like to spend an evening in his company—without the animosity that she had previously nurtured standing between them. It did not matter though. He had suggested her early departure, and there was no reason to stay. “Actually, Mr. Darcy, I find that I have headache.”

She saw a flicker of emotion cross his face. Was it simple embarrassment or something else? He looked away, saying blandly, “I am sorry to hear it. Is there anything I could get you for your discomfort?”

“No, thank you. I think I simply need some rest.”

Darcy began to reply, “May I suggest...” but was interrupted by Georgiana who exclaimed, “Oh, Miss Bennet, I am very sorry to hear you are not feeling well. Why don’t you come with me to freshen up? Mrs. Larsen can bring you a powder to relieve your discomfort, and you could rest for a moment. It will give us a chance to talk and I think there is plenty of time before supper is served.”

Elizabeth immediately turned to Mr. Darcy waiting for him to speak. He looked to Georgina and then to Elizabeth and then back again. To her surprise, he then looked past them both and began to stare out of the window.

She looked again to Darcy, but he seemed engrossed with something far in the distance. Unsure what else to do, Elizabeth replied, “Thank you Miss Darcy. I would appreciate your help.”

Her uncle then asked, “Lizzy, are you truly unwell?”

“No, I should be fine. It is just a slight headache. Do not let me interrupt anyone else’s evening. I will take Miss Darcy’s advice. I am sure I just need to rest for a moment.” She looked one more time significantly at Mr. Darcy, but he only looked back with an unreadable countenance.

Act III

Elizabeth quietly rested on a chaise in a private sitting room. Georgiana had just excused herself to see to her other guests. Their visit had been both odd and revealing and had left Elizabeth deep in thought. The younger woman had so solicitously seen to her needs that Elizabeth felt guilty for not actually being ill. Given her confusion over Mr. Darcy’s conduct, Elizabeth wondered how she could not, in fact, have a headache. Elizabeth thought it peculiar that Mr. Darcy failed to offer her his carriage given that it had been his suggestion, but understood that Miss Darcy’s eagerness to help her may have inhibited him.

Once settled, Georgiana had talked pleasantly about her life with her brother and their shared enthusiasm for music and literature. Georgiana then attempted to inquire further about Elizabeth’s visit to Kent. She tactfully wondered how often Elizabeth had been in company with her brother and whether she knew if her brother planned to return to Hertfordshire. It was clear that Georgiana had some knowledge of her brother’s prior preference for her, and Elizabeth wondered how and when Mr. Darcy would make it clear to her that his feelings had changed. Eventually, Georgiana left with the promise that she would soon return to check her progress. Elizabeth heard her approach far quicker than she would have imagined.

As she looked up, Elizabeth was startled to see Mr. Darcy at the door. As their eyes met, she began to blush. Despite having initiated the encounter, he seemed paralyzed by the awkwardness of the situation and she saw his color rise as well. But rather than speak and resolve both of their discomfort, he stood mute. After a pause, Elizabeth attempted an explanation. “Sir, I am sorry to trouble you further. I thought you were to order the carriage for me. I am afraid I misunderstood how I was to request it. If it is not too much of a bother now, though, I am ready to go.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth for a moment with indecision written on his face. His countenance then became unreadable. After several minutes, he looked away as he began again to twist his ring.

As his silence continued, Elizabeth nervously added, “I do not mean to tax your patience any further by my presence. I know you must wish me away... As I said, I am ready to depart whenever it is convenient for you.”

Her words seemed to bring him back to the present. He looked up and then briskly nodded his assent. As he began to turn away, he abruptly stopped. With his back to Elizabeth, he momentarily bowed his head. After a long moment, he squared his shoulders, stood to his full height, and began to absentmindedly straighten his waistcoat. He turned with somber resolve to face her and said, “Miss

Bennet, you did not misunderstand me. When the time came to actually call the carriage, I hesitated... It seems that despite my knowing better...despite the fact that my sense of honor and my sense of pride—which we both know is not insubstantial—should forbid it, it seems that I cannot stop myself from letting you leave without first asking you a question.”

Startled by both his request and the direct manner he had made it, Elizabeth could only think to reply, “Sir?”

He looked at her intently. Despite the outward calm of his expression, Elizabeth could see the turmoil in his eyes. There was an uncomfortable self-consciousness in his entire demeanor. It seemed odd that, while this expression was not new to her, it was the first time she had understood it. In the past, she had taken his countenance as evidence of his disdain for his surroundings or for the company he was forced to keep. She now saw that his manner was far more formed from a self-imposed stiffness designed to mask his ill at ease. Within that sense of discomfort, there was a vulnerability she had never before discerned. It made her realize she had never taken the time before today to study him. Her own pride and Wickham’s words had long ago convinced her that she knew exactly what he was about, when in actuality, she had never truly attempted to look past her own quick judgment of his intentions. He now stood before her with such an anxious and uncomfortable look that it immediately reminded Elizabeth of his countenance before his proposal. She was amazed that this exquisitely uncomfortable situation suddenly seemed even more awkward.

She was relieved to hear him speak, but soon wondered if the silence between them was not better. “Madame, I am sure you would prefer to leave what has transpired between us in the past, and I can well understand such motivation, but I find myself dwelling on some of the things that were said... I cannot seem to... When I wrote you, I wanted to explain myself. I am not sure if I succeeded, but I resolved myself to the fact that my letter would serve to close our acquaintance... I wrote because I believed I needed to explain some of my behavior to you—that I owed you an explanation. But as time has passed, I have found that I have also been left with some unanswered questions. When I left Kent, I knew that I would never have the opportunity to inquire...to ask...” Unable to find the right words, he seemed to grow even more embarrassed. As he attempted to master himself, he looked past her out of the window. After a moment or two, he looked back at her. “Suffice it to say, it has been a source of regret for me. I find that, having come into your company so unexpectedly, I cannot resist the temptation of speaking with you. I am at odds with my own wishes. I know the mortification that this will cause us both; but I also know firsthand the frustration I will feel—having already experienced it for low these several weeks—if I let you leave without speaking frankly with you. I know it is an unpardonable imposition, but with your leave...?”

With her mouth dry, she stammered, “Certainly, Sir. I am...I am at your disposal.”

“Yes, thank you. I will endeavor not to make this any more uncomfortable than it already is. I know you are anxious to leave.”

Finding her voice, she replied, “No, Mr. Darcy, I am more than willing to stay for however long you deem appropriate. I know I owe you an explanation and an apology, but I am also mindful of the fact that you have been eagerly wishing my departure.”

He studied her for a moment before replying. “I would not say that is accurate. I would be lying if I did not admit that seeing you again tonight has been awkward, but I do not mean to make you feel unwelcome in my home.”

Unable to hold her tongue, she quickly retorted, “While I appreciate the sentiment, at this point I think there is nothing to be served by empty politeness. I understand why you want me gone—why you wanted me to invent a reason to leave early—and I cannot blame you for it. It would be extraordinary if you wished me to stay. As I said, though, I am at your disposal.”

“Madame, I was not engaging in empty civility. I offered you my carriage this evening for *your* comfort, not my own. Miss Lucas let something slip that made me understand how uncomfortable you are in my presence. I understand your objections to my proposal and your opinion of me. I accept that... I do not mean to try your patience in that regard or seek some sort of apology where none is required.”

“Mr. Darcy, I am quite unsure what Miss Lucas could possibly have said to you. You should know, though, that she is not my confidante. I have not discussed what transpired between us with her, or for that matter, with anyone else.”

As he stared at her trying to reconcile what she had just said with what he had assumed, Elizabeth felt the need to address what she thought was a more pressing matter. She had long ago come to regret the things that she had said to him. Her foolish faith in Wickham and the judgmental manner in which she had refused him had already caused several sleepless nights. She wanted him to know that she now lamented her defense of Wickham and truly appreciated what he had told her of his sister. She knew it must have given him pain to expose himself, and his family, in such a manner and felt the burden of knowing that it was her unfounded accusations that had forced him into such an untenable situation. “But, Sir, I do owe you an apology for the things I said about your dealings with Mr. Wickham. I know that I misjudged you. At the time, I was laboring under a misconception. I realize now that Mr. Wickham...”

He would have none of it. “Miss Bennet, you once told me that I was an exceedingly proud man, and I must admit that you were correct in that regard. Consequently, please allow me some dignity by believing that I am not attempting to illicit an apology or alter your opinion of me. I know the former would be futile, and I would rather not have

your pity. It was my fault that you believed Mr. Wickham. I knew his true character and never bothered to reveal it. That is not to say that I am not relieved, for a variety of reasons, that you believe me about Mr. Wickham.”

Elizabeth took a hasty step towards him and said, “But, Sir, I insist that you accept my apology for the unjustified accusations that I made against you based on Mr. Wickham’s vindictive lies. It is the least I can do.”

He nodded slightly, and took a step back, finding her presence too overwhelming. “Very well, if it will put the matter to rest.”

“I am not sure that is possible, but I want you to know how very sorry I feel for having believed Mr. Wickham over you. It was foolish and unpardonable.”

He nodded slightly and quietly thanked her. After an awkward silence, she bluntly asked, “What did Miss Lucas say to you?”

He frowned, began to speak, and then stopped. Trying to articulate what he believed suddenly seemed petty and the evidence upon which he had based his assumption meager. He held his head up and looked her in the eye as he explained, but his embarrassment was evident from how quickly he turned away from her once he finished. “I thought... She had mentioned your disinclination to return to Kent. I concluded from it that you had discussed with her what happened between us at Hunsford. I now see that my assumption was not well-based in fact...or rather that I did not have sufficient facts to reach such a conclusion.”

Before thinking the better of it, she archly replied, “An event that apparently occurs with some regularity within the confines of your imagination.” As he stared intently at her, she added, “Nonetheless, I am grateful, Sir, on my sister’s behalf that, no matter how entrenched your misconceptions become, you are not afraid to reassess your conclusions and make amends.”

While he knew he deserved the reproach, he could not resist replying in kind. “Yes, Miss Bennet, you are correct. But given your recent apology to me, it seems that it is a trait we apparently share. Nevertheless, I want you to know that I sincerely regret my previous interference in Mr. Bingley’s affairs. I hope you and your sister will accept my apologies.”

His retort had hit its mark and she flushed in shame for having forced him to account for what he had already tried to correct. How could she attempt to assume the moral high ground with him, even in jest, when she had so unfairly accused him of various sins without the barest proof? It seemed that he brought out the worst in her. She accepted his apology and then tried to make clear that his conduct that evening had done much to undo any error on his part, but she could see he did not believe either her words or the truth of the proposition. They then stood in what seemed an interminable silence, each unsure if there was anything else to be said that would not cause further pain or discomfort. Elizabeth finally spoke. “Mr. Darcy, you said that you wished to inquire as to something?”

Darcy colored. Part of him wanted to leave now with what was left of his dignity, but he could picture himself tonight in his library dinking his brandy and brooding. He needed to finish this. “Yes, you are right. I wanted to ask... I know this is unorthodox... I do not mean to... Miss Bennet, I understand your objections to my proposal and your opinion of me. I accept that. I do not mean to tax your patience in that regard... I know that this must seem a foolish distinction given that I am now seeking to remind you of the entire encounter, but my curiosity, which as of late has seemed all-consuming, tends more to how I could have been so mistaken in my impression of your feelings towards me. If nothing else, I think I simply need to know how I could have gone so very wrong.”

He waited for her acquiescence, which was granted by a nervous nod.

“When I... When we were at Hunsford, you said that you were unaware of my attentions toward you—that I had bestowed my affections most unwillingly. You inferred that my...that my proposal took you most unaware.”

She looked at him expecting him to continue, but he seemed to have finished. Unsure what to say, and on one level wishing the interview over, she replied more quickly than she would have liked. “Mr. Darcy, I am not sure what it is you wish to know.”

Frustrated for having placed himself, once again, in such an uncomfortable position, he quickly retorted. “Madame, I would think that my question would be obvious. But I will be explicit. I do not see how you could not have recognized my attentions towards you. I had thought it more likely that you were expecting my addresses. I can believe that you were not anticipating a proposal that specific evening, but I am at a loss as to how it could be that you did not know of my wishes.”

Elizabeth stared at him in disbelief. She could not fathom that this is what he wanted to discuss with her. Her only explanation was that he was attempting to assign blame on her for somehow leading him on in order to soothe his own wounded pride. She could understand the sentiment. She had just foolishly attempted to do the same by focusing on his treatment of Jane rather than her acceptance of Wickham’s tale, but while she was willing to admit the errors that she had made in imprudently evaluating his character, she would not be held responsible for his attentions. She had never had any clear indication of his attraction and she felt strongly that there was nothing in his behavior towards her, except perhaps asking her to dance once, that should have alerted her to his intentions. She solemnly replied, “Sir, you are mistaken. I had absolutely no suspicion that you would ever make such an offer. I think if you review our interactions, you will find that there was nothing in my countenance or my behavior towards you for which I should now be ashamed. You yourself said that you had struggled with your feelings. Clearly you never meant to make them explicit to anyone, even me, before that evening in Hunsford.”

Exasperated by her defensiveness and realizing the mistake he had made in trying even to discuss this, he curtly replied, "Yes, Madame, I did not mean to cast any aspersions on your conduct. Forgive me. Apparently, I totally misunderstood every interaction we have ever had with absolutely no basis for doing so. Forgive me for taking up your time."

While his expression was designed to communicate indifference, she could feel the sting of his words and see the frustration alight in his eyes. Despite her resentment at her abrupt dismissal, which seemed particularly unjust given that he had been the one who had entreated her to enter into this discussion in the first place, she could not help being struck by how expressive his eyes were. It made her wish that she had paid some attention to them before, because they now seemed an obvious key to understanding his true intentions. What he said and how he held himself could mislead, but his eyes seemed intent on forcibly conveying his emotions. She had noted it when she watched him with Georgiana earlier in the evening. She also had to admit that she had seen something similar in the manner in which he had looked at her when they met at the theater; but, in the awkwardness of the moment, she had dismissed it.

Perhaps these examples demonstrated that in the past he had in fact communicated some of his intentions to her through this subtle medium, but it was preposterous to think that she should be held accountable for not being aware of such an idiosyncratic characteristic in a man she had barely spoken with two dozen times. "Yes, well, Sir, I see my answer does not serve and that I shall be dismissed once again. Before I depart though, may I offer one thought by way of a defense, if not for my own sake, then on behalf of my sex in general? I think it unfair to hold a woman accountable for the underlying intentions of a gentleman simply because he asked her to dance once. If women were allowed to make such unfounded assumptions they would be held up to ridicule for their calculation and conceit and I believe, as a result, most balls would be far less attended."

She saw the flicker of anger at her jest. "Miss Bennet, I see your point but hardly think it apropos of the present situation. I do not think it would be fair to say that all that I ever did to gain your attention was to ask you to dance once. As to that example alone, I think you might recall I asked you to dance three times. I was only successful once."

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, you may be correct, but I think we both know that I would have been foolish to have seen your condescension in that regard as anything other than a desire to dance, as I was also aware since our introduction that I could never be considered tempting enough for you in the first place."

As her meaning registered, his surprise and then mortification were visible on his face. Coloring, he feebly added, "I did not think you heard me."

Unable to resist the temptation, she archly asked, "Really, Sir, did you not?"

Seeing that he was caught, he looked her in the eye and quietly confessed. "No, you are right. I did suspect you heard, but I suppose I later irrationally hoped that you did not." In response, Elizabeth simply watched him with an impassive expression. Her uncharacteristic reserve was unsettling. In the void, he began to explain himself in a rushed, nervous manner that evidenced his heart-felt contrition. "I spoke those words in haste. I never meant for you to overhear them. You must know that I did not mean them. I had not really even seen you. I simply did not feel like dancing. It was an excuse and I admit it was rude. I was uncomfortable, as I was not familiar with any of the people at the Assembly except for my own small party and I felt..."

"— that you could not recommend yourself to strangers. Yes, Mr. Darcy, you mentioned that to me once in Kent."

Her words caught him off guard and he stiffened at her rebuke, but he felt compelled to offer more of an explanation. "Yes, Miss Bennet I did. and in response you correctly pointed out that I was most likely uncomfortable making new acquaintances because I would not practice at it. I have since endeavored to take your advice on the subject. But, I see that my initial folly has cost me much. I am truly sorry for my rash words. I beg your pardon and hope that you can see fit to grant me absolution as you must admit that my punishment has surely outweighed my transgression."

"I am unsure of your point, but certainly, Sir, I accept your apology."

"Thank you for that. I simply mean that given my insult—however unintended—I can see why you then chose to reject my subsequent attempts to gain your regard."

"Sir, I do not mean to be contrary, but I think you misunderstand me. I was attempting to explain why I did not see your invitation to dance as anything more than what it was. While I have to admit that your behavior at the Assembly, when added to the falsehoods that Mr. Wickham told me, did incline me thereafter to pay you no special consideration, it would still be unfair to say that I made a conscious effort to disregard your attentions. I do not believe that, other than asking me to dance, you ever really bestowed any attentions upon me over which I would have the power to reject or accept."

"But putting aside my boorish behavior at our first meeting, I thereafter made every attempt to pay my respects to you. In fact, I often felt in danger of singling you out in an inappropriate fashion."

"But, Sir, that only proves my point. You would only be worried that such behavior was inappropriate if your intentions towards me were unclear. I think you must admit that during our acquaintance in Hertfordshire you were not decided towards me. Consequently, how could I be expected to know your feelings when you yourself were uncertain of them? And if I may be honest, the fact that you held most of my family in low esteem never escaped my attention. While I was surprised that you felt the need during your proposal to me to include your concerns in that regard,

I was not shocked to hear that you held such beliefs. Given my knowledge in Hertfordshire of your opinion of my family, I cannot see how anyone would think it likely that I would thereafter believe that you would voluntarily connect yourself to me and, by extension, my family.”

During her last statement his eyes flickered with regret. In a more subdued tone, he added, “I will not deny that I did not always approve of the behavior of some members of your family, but one might see my disregard of those misgivings as evidence of my attraction, not the reverse.”

“I will admit, Sir, that given my knowledge of your propensity to shun most social interactions, I perhaps should have noticed that I was not disregarded in quite the same fashion as everyone else. But compared to my other acquaintances in Hertfordshire, your attentions hardly seemed more intense than casual courtesy.”

He knew he should stop—this display was both undignified and unproductive, but he felt a deep need to have her at least understand him. Before he could think better of it, he hastily replied, “While there may be some truth to what you say, my visit to Netherfield was not the end of our interactions. Even if I was somewhat circumspect in Hertfordshire, you must admit that by the time I saw you again in Kent, my behavior towards you was very different.”

Seeing both his vulnerability and confusion, she added in a softer tone. “But by then, Sir, I thought that the attentions that you paid me in Kent were borne more from a scarcity of options than from an actual preference.” As they stared at each other, Elizabeth felt the anger that had been instinctually sparked by their heated exchange draining away. It was replaced by another emotion, harder to identify—something between sympathy and regret. She wanted to offer him something. Little did she realize, it was the last thing he wished to hear. “Mr. Darcy, I think that if you examine our interactions, you will see that such an explanation actually accounts for most of what transpired. I think you mistook your feelings of friendship towards me as something deeper because there was nothing else to distract you. Given the limited society available, you exaggerated the sense of companionship you felt for me into something it was not. I want you to know that I truly do regret having naïvely believed the accusations that Mr. Wickham falsely leveled against you and the harsh words that I so improperly applied to your character at Hunsford. Nonetheless, in hindsight, you must admit that on some level you are relieved that I was, in fact, laboring under those misconceptions, because they made me reject your offer out of hand before you, yourself, realized your mistake and came to regret having ever proposed.”

She saw his jaw tighten before he responded in a controlled voice. “Madame, do you truly think that likely? I accept that you do not believe that I sufficiently conveyed the existence, or the depth, of my attachment to you, that I let my initial indecision, or my concern over how our union would be received, sway me from making my intentions to-

wards you known. But at Hunsford, and again tonight, you have inferred that because you were unaware of my feelings, they were somehow not genuine or were a passing fancy easily overcome. Do you think I routinely ask women to marry me? That I would make such a request because I was bored by the limited variety of companionship in Kent? According to this reasoning, I suppose you think that I would have asked Miss Lucas to be my wife if you had not been at the parsonage that evening? I assure you that you are the only woman to whom I have ever made such a request and most likely the last.”

He quickly turned his face away from her, struggling to contain his emotions. He paced back and forth once before continuing. “Do you think me devoid of every proper feeling? I am not sure if I am more offended by your initial rejection of my proposal or by the pitifully low esteem in which you obviously now hold me. You imply that I do not know my own mind and that I acted in haste without concern for the consequences of my actions. By your description, I am a man whose convictions and emotions are dictated by uninformed whim.”

He stood before her, his gaze intense and his voice low and forceful. “Madame, my proposal was not a rash undertaking. It may comfort you to think it was, but it belittles the depth of my regret; and, given that it is all I have left, I am unwilling to concede the point. Given the poor initial impression I obviously made on you, it is understandable that you immediately dismissed me as unworthy of your notice, but the same was hardly true for me. I now realize the folly of such an approach, but I have silently studied you from almost the day we met. I will admit that at first it was practically an involuntary act borne of infatuation. I found you mesmerizing and could hardly look away whenever we were in the same room. I attempted to tell myself that my interest was an obsession unconnected to a more noble emotion given the speed and strength of my attachment. Nevertheless, my feelings did not diminish with time or distance and have been, in fact, my most constant companions. I spent an inordinate amount of time considering our differing personalities and the ways in which they are compatible—the manner in which we compliment each other. In turn, I also weighed the impact our marriage would have on both our connections and the reactions that we would receive from our respective families. I will admit that in doing so I unfairly sat in judgment of your family, not realizing that when you seek to share your life with someone you must take both the good and bad of their situations with the same gratitude and graciousness. But my preoccupation, however misplaced, cannot be confused with unthinking rashness or an uninformed desire.”

He took a step closer to her, his agitation evident. The turmoil of the moment and his unexpected anger had stripped him of all reserve. “You imply that I mistook friendship for a deeper emotion. I am not sure what is required for a person to say confidently that their regard is built on a true

understanding of the object of their affections, but I have no hesitation. I have listened to you discuss literature, poetry, art, music, and politics and have always been impressed with your wit, the depth of your understanding, and your honesty. I have witnessed your fierce loyalty, the strength of your character, the resolve of your principles, and the tender concern that you generously bestow on your loved ones. From our earliest interactions, I knew that your lively and engaging mind was capable of challenging me in a way that no other woman has ever done before, and that despite the discord that it sometimes produced, I was still all the while awed by your beauty and grace.

“I find it ironic that within a matter of weeks you believed with confident certainty that Mr. Bingley’s affections for your sister were sincere and deeply held, but you cannot imagine me having a similar reaction even though our own acquaintance has been much longer. I am sure that the distinction you draw stems more from a perceived deficiency in my character than from the difference in disposition that he and I share. But whatever your opinion of me, my proposal was not a passing fancy on my part or an impetuous act. I am guilty of so many missteps—and I will have to live with my mistakes; but, in return, you cannot ask me to minimize the depth of my affections in exchange for bland assertions as to the short duration of my disappointed expectations. If I were more generous, I suppose I should let you cling to the belief that I did not know my own mind when I asked you to be my wife so that you need not feel responsible for having disappointed my hopes, but I am afraid that my bitterness is too fresh for such an act of generosity.”

Seeing her stricken look, he realized that he had gone too far and had accomplished nothing other than embarrassing them both. He knew she must be either feeling contempt or pity for him. He felt a churning in his stomach and knew his hands were shaking slightly. Seeing the uselessness of this, he offered in a quieter tone, “Madame, I apologize. I have once again acted in an unpardonable manner. It was not my goal to upset you. I did not mean...”

“Mr. Darcy,” stammered Elizabeth, “I did not know...”

In defeat, he held up his hand. “Perhaps it is best if I order the carriage. I seem to have no control when it comes to you, and I fear that our further interaction will only do more damage. I will make your apologies to my sister and give your Aunt my assurances that you are being safely returned to your home.” He turned to leave but then stopped. “Miss Bennet, I am sorry for speaking so harshly and for saying more than was fair. My object was not to purposely upset you. I want you also to know that if Mr. Bingley and your sister do renew their acquaintance, I will show more restraint in the future. I will not force you to ever again revisit what should rightfully remain in the past. I do not want you to worry on that account. I also want you to know that I understand that as Miss Bennet’s sister you have a greater claim to be at Netherfield than do I. As such, I will

endeavor to ensure that our paths do not cross more often than absolutely necessary. You have my word.”

Elizabeth had much she wanted to say, but given the suddenness and intensity of what she had heard, all she could manage was a curt, “Thank you, Mr. Darcy.” She curtsied as he took his leave.



DARCY STOOD POURING HIMSELF a drink as he absentmindedly watched his sister talk to Mrs. Gardiner. He knew he had made a fool of himself and wanted nothing more than to retreat to his study and block out the world. But he had guests to attend and would not neglect his duty as a host. His attention to Elizabeth’s family would serve as his last act to close their doomed relationship. He had meant what he said. He would not inflict himself upon her again, and not just for her sake—it had cost him too much.

He was relieved that Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle had accepted his explanation regarding her departure without too much anxiety. He could feel his cousin and sister’s unasked questions, but they mercifully let him announce Elizabeth’s removal without interruption. Dinner would soon be served and eventually he would be left to his solitude, but for now he needed to mask his turmoil. No matter how shaken he felt, he needed to get through the evening intact. He had asked his sister to act as hostess, and it would be horribly unfair to desert her at this point no matter how justified his reasons for doing so.

He began to wonder about Elizabeth’s reaction to all he had said, but stopped himself. He had spent enough time replaying their conversations in his head. He had seen the devastated look on her face when he told her how he felt. It no longer seemed a worthwhile enterprise spending time determining whether the greater part of Elizabeth’s reaction was pity or contempt. Despite the depth of his embarrassment, though, when he thought it through, he did not regret what he said. He could not justify the inelegant words he had used during his proposal, but at least she might understand a little of the sentiment that lay behind them.

He took a sip of his drink. At least, the encounter was not completely unproductive. Elizabeth had answered his question. It was clear from her reaction that she had never even considered him as a suitor. He thought it ironic that almost every woman he met in London had sized him in that regard, and the one woman he wished had done so had never considered it. In the future, he would not take so much for granted. He would learn what was necessary to please a woman worthy of being pleased and would not ascribe emotions more appropriate to the likes of Miss Bingley to women in general. The idea of the future tasted bitter in his mouth. It seemed so bleak, but he nevertheless knew he needed to accept it and begin to devise a life for himself

without Elizabeth. He was startled from his thoughts by the sound of Jane Bennet's voice. To his shock, he heard her say, "Elizabeth, are you feeling better? I had thought you were gone home. I hope this means you have recovered somewhat. We were all worried."

As she entered the room, Darcy could not take his eyes off her. She smiled to her sister as she explained that she had suffered a slight headache, but with rest, it had abated. She then turned to Darcy. She spoke to the room in general but never took her eyes off him. "Mr. Darcy was gracious enough to offer the use of his carriage in case I wanted to retire; but, when the time came to go, I felt there was no need."

She watched as confusion graced his face. He took a step back from her, wary of her presence and attempting to fade from view. But she moved closer and addressed him directly. "Mr. Darcy, I am much better now. Thank you for your previous concern. I most likely had too much on my mind and let it get the better of me. Your sister was right. All I needed was an opportunity to rest. I found that once I gave myself sufficient time to sort through all that has recently preoccupied my mind, things could be seen in a much different light. Any thought of leaving suddenly seemed unnecessary—or folly on my part. I know I would come to regret having missed out on such a lovely evening."

"Oh, Lizzy, I am so glad," smiled Jane. "Are you sure, though, that you are feeling up to it?"

As Elizabeth nodded her assent, Mr. Gardiner warmly intoned, "Well, my dear, I am glad you are feeling better. We were concerned when we had heard you had left. You do look better though." After receiving her assurances as to her recovery, he resumed his conversation with Mr. Bingley, Jane, and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Georgiana turned to Elizabeth to second Mr. Gardiner's sentiment, but before she spoke, she noticed that her brother was rooted in the same spot, staring at Elizabeth in an uncomprehending manner. Georgiana could sense that something important had happened and turned to Miss Lucas to ask her a question in order to draw her into her conversation with Mrs. Gardiner. It seemed evident that her brother needed a moment of privacy.

Elizabeth took a step closer to Mr. Darcy who was looking very grave. "I hope, Sir, that you do not think me too presumptuous by deciding to stay when you advised otherwise. You should not think that I ignored all that you had to say. To the contrary, you gave me so much to think about, that I felt I wanted to stay." She tentatively smiled at him and she saw a flicker in his eyes. She then saw his brow frown and knew he was struggling for a reply.

She relieved him of the necessity. "Mr. Darcy, before I went upstairs, you asked me about my thoughts on tonight's performance at the theater. I never had the occasion to answer. Perhaps we could take the opportunity to talk about it now. I would very much like to know your opinion. I realized that, even though we have been acquainted

off and on for several months, I have never taken the time to ascertain your views about theater, art, music, or literature—and I think I should have. I think I might find the endeavor rewarding."

As he stared at her in an appraising manner, he slowly replied, "Do you?"

Elizabeth looked down for a moment to summon her courage and then about the room to see if anyone was listening to their conversation. She then looked up at him with a smile equal parts embarrassment and impertinence. "Yes, I do. I realize now that my failure to know you is my loss. When we first met, I formed an opinion of you clouded by misconceptions, but even after I knew better, I let my perception of you rest on preconceived notions. You have always seemed such an enigma. But I have found that most riddles can be solved with effort and perseverance; and that, in the end, the energy exerted is almost always worth the resolution. Do you not agree?"

He stared at her with an unreadable expression for more than a moment. "I would think that you of all people could no longer call me an enigma. I would think that I am more an open book."

With a beguiling smile, Elizabeth replied, "Perhaps that is what is so intriguing, Sir. You seem both at the same time."

Before he could reply, Georgiana announced that they should go into dinner. Darcy and Elizabeth stared at each other for a moment before he cleared his throat and looked away. She could see that he was trying to collect his thoughts and she watched in apprehension as he attempted to digest what she had said and what she hoped she had implied. She was awash in relief when his stern mien slowly dissolved into a shy, slight smile. He looked intently at her and asked in a low melodious voice, "You would like to know my opinion of the play?"

Without wavering, she held his gaze and replied, "Yes, very much."

His brow furrowed once again as he studied her, and then he asked, "Would you not find dinner in my presence an awkward ordeal—given our previous interactions?"

It was her turn to look thoughtful while she responded in a quiet voice, her gaze never wavering, "I thought we could start afresh. That is, if you could forgive my previous impertinence and my intentional and unintentional injuries. I understand I am asking quite a lot; but, if you are willing, I would welcome the opportunity."

He again looked briefly away and then attempted to contain a smile that revealed his dimples. He then offered her his arm and said, "Well then, Miss Bennet, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to dinner?"

She smiled at him in a manner that elicited from him a look of heart-felt delight. She took his arm and replied, "Thank you, Sir. It would be my pleasure."

Finale

Darcy stood on the steps of the Gardiner's townhouse. He knew it was too early to call. He had hardly slept. His dinner with Elizabeth had given him such hope and joy, but he now stood anxious and uncertain. Their dinner conversation had been uncomfortable at first. He was so aware of her presence at his side that he found himself a tongue-tied schoolboy. But she persevered, soliciting his opinions until their conversation hit a rhythm of comfortable banter. She asked him about his boyhood and his days at Cambridge. He found himself telling her stories that he had never shared and never thought he would. She, in turn, told him of her family and it helped him understand the relaxed chaos in which she was raised. He found the sound of her laughter exhilarating and marveled that she would bestow it upon him so freely.

At one point, the Colonel interrupted their tête-à-tête to ask Elizabeth her opinion of the performance she had just attended. Darcy felt a jealousy rise in his breast as Elizabeth turned to answer his inquiry; but, instead of continuing to look at the Colonel, Elizabeth returned her gaze to Darcy and said, "Actually, Colonel, I had asked your cousin the same question but he seems intent on leaving me in the dark. Could he have some ulterior motive or is he always so talkative that he jumps from subject to subject without concern for any sense of order?"

"Miss Bennet," chuckled Colonel Fitzwilliam, "are we speaking of the same man?"

Smiling broadly in return, Darcy replied, "I think, Cousin, she is teasing me. I have found that it is best to disregard half of what Miss Bennet professes. The trick is to know which half." As Elizabeth professed her mock outrage, the Colonel turned to speak to Miss Lucas, knowing that he was neither needed nor wanted.

When the Gardiners announced their intention to leave long past midnight; Darcy felt that hardly a few moments had passed since they were called to dinner. He walked Elizabeth to her carriage and held her hand for slightly longer than necessary as he helped her in. He then watched it depart until it was out of sight. Darcy returned to the sitting room where only the men had lingered to have his euphoria dashed as Bingley causally mentioned that both Miss Bennets were departing for Hertfordshire in the morning. Darcy abruptly interrupted Bingley's happy explanation of his intention to return to Netherfield by the close of the week.

"Bingley, they are to leave tomorrow. Are you sure?"

"Quite. What is there to be confused about? Miss Bennet confirmed it. The entire party is going on to Longbourne. I asked Miss Bennet if I could call on her there, and she agreed. I was concerned at first that I was being too forward, but she seemed quite pleased that I had asked."

"Did they say when they were to leave?" anxiously intoned Darcy.

"Not specifically, Darcy, but I assume they will attempt an early start. Is everything all right? Do you have concerns about my returning to Hertfordshire? Because if you do, you should know I am quite convinced..."

"No, no. Not at all, Bingley." Softening his tone, Dracy added, "I am glad everything worked out so well. I was just preoccupied. My mind was somewhere else."

"Yes, Darcy, that has been clear all evening," added Colonel Fitzwilliam, "and I believe I know her name. I must say I was happy to see you two get along so well."

Darcy simply glared at his cousin. While most men would be cowed by such a look, it only made that gentleman laugh as Darcy announced his intention to retire. Darcy then asked if Bingley intended on staying over. Bingley declined saying that he wanted to speak to his sisters before the evening was out.

Darcy had hardly entered his room before he called his valet. He gave him explicit instructions to have his horse ready at dawn.

As Darcy now stood on the Gardiners' front staircase, he wondered which was worse—calling too early or lingering about, looking suspicious. In either case, he would not desert his post and have them leave before he had an opportunity to see Elizabeth again. As he paced, the front door opened.

"Mr. Darcy."

"Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth could barely believe her eyes. She had gone to bed with her mind full of him. She felt as though she had been blinded towards him and that their private discussion in the sitting room had opened her eyes to him for the first time. That he could treat her with such civility when she deserved none made her understand the superiority of his character and the genuineness of his affection. During dinner, she was surprised at how comfortable she felt with him, and he slowly won her heart with his intelligence and sly wit. Once she had left, and she realized that she did not know whether she would ever see him again, she began to regret his absence more profoundly. She thought it her just desserts that she should come to appreciate him just when it might be too late. She hoped that his connection to Mr. Bingley might bring them together in the future, but it seemed a tenuous thread. That he was here now made her heart race with hope. As she stared at him in surprise, her mouth curled into a teasing smile. "Were you planning on knocking, Sir?"

Seeing the foolishness of being caught standing there, he smiled back and replied. "I had not yet decided."

She laughed and asked, "Did you not decide when you came here in your carriage?"

"No. By coming in the carriage, I decided on coming here. It is still rather early to call and I had not yet determined if I should knock. I am taking things in small steps."

“So I see.” As he returned her smile, she felt herself flush. “May I ask how long you do intend to wait? I could keep you company for the duration or I could ask you in. I am sure my Aunt is about by now.”

“Actually, Miss Bennet, I had come to speak with you, but if I am interrupting, I could wait or...”

“No, not at all,” she quickly replied. “I was just about to take a walk. Perhaps you could join me?”

Smiling his relief, he said, “I would like that a great deal.” After he took her arm and they started towards the park, he spoke. She could hear the nervousness in his voice. “I am sorry if I am calling too early; but, after you left, I learned that you were to return to Hertfordshire today.”

She looked away and quietly replied, “Yes, we are scheduled to depart before ten.”

“I see.” He then stopped in front of a bench and indicated she should sit. He cleared his throat, looked about the park, and then dropped his gaze intently upon her. “Last night when you left, I did not realize that your stay in London was coming to a close. I wanted to speak to you before you left because, to be frank, I have misunderstood you in the past, and I do not want to repeat my folly. I thought I would have another opportunity to call on you in London, but now time is so short and I did not want to misconstrue...” As he paused to compose himself, Elizabeth felt her heart pounding. She wondered how she could ever have been indifferent to this man. His presence now caused her the sweetest turmoil.

She watched him as a variety of emotions seemed to pass his countenance. He straightened his waistcoat and sat beside her. He then looked at her intently and said, “I thought last night when you did not take the carriage that it meant you had changed your mind about me, but I now realize I am not sure in what regard. I am glad you no longer hold me in contempt, but I also need to know...”

Seeing him struggle, she replied, “I have changed my opinion of you. You must know that.”

“I do and I am grateful for it, but I need to know... I want to be sure that when you asked if we could start afresh that you were not simply being...polite.”

She colored but smiled at him nonetheless. “While I do hope I was polite, no, Mr. Darcy, I was not simply being polite. I know I was being very forward then, but I wanted you to know that I hoped that we could be...friends.”

A slow smile graced his face as he thought about what she had said. “But that is the problem, Madame. You must know that I do not want to be friends. I want to be much more. I want to call on you in Hertfordshire. I want to court you there—or wherever you are. I know we have misunderstood each other in the past and I wanted to let you know my intentions before I arrived at your doorstep in order to spare you any embarrassment in case I have been, once again, too presumptuous.”

Elizabeth’s lips parted, suddenly unsure what to say. She nervously looked up at him, summoning her courage, but

returned her gaze to her hands as she spoke. “I would very much welcome your call, Sir. My feelings towards you are so different from what they once were. If you can forgive me my previous impertinence and my foolishness, I hope that we can...”

He interrupted her by gently placing his hand on the side of her face and directing her to look at him. He leaned closer and hoarsely whispered, “Elizabeth, there is nothing for me to forgive you for, but if you would consider me, you would make me the happiest of men.”

She stared intently in his eyes, inches from his face. She involuntarily gasped before whispering, “Then you have nothing to fear in coming to call. I will await you in every regard.”

She saw the flicker in his eyes and became aware of his quickening breath. He leaned ever closer until his cheek rested against hers. He closed his eyes as he breathed in the scent of her hair, letting his lips graze her earlobe. “Elizabeth, I know I should stop. I know I should just be grateful that you would give me a second chance and that we have found each other after all that has passed between us, but I have loved you for a very long time.”

She felt the dizzying effect of his words and could not resist the impulse to nuzzle into his neck in return. Slowly realizing the provocative position they were in on a public bench, she pulled away, but as she did she could not resist touching his face as she looked into his eyes. “I cannot claim to match your feelings for me in duration, but I can assure you that I have gradually come to feel something of the same intensity.”

“Elizabeth,” he whispered again. “I hardly know how I can let you leave this park, let alone leave London.”

Smiling broadly at him, she replied, “Then just promise me that you will come to Hertfordshire very soon.”

“On that, my dearest Elizabeth, you have my word.”

The End