



*Curiosity
and
Correspondence*

by Mariafaith

Chapter I

LETTERS

After wandering along the lane for two hours, giving way to every variety of thought; reconsidering events, determining probabilities, and reconciling herself as well as she could to a change so sudden and so important, fatigue, and a recollection of her long absence made her at length return home; and she entered the house with the wish of appearing cheerful as usual, and the resolution of repressing such reflections as must make her unfit for conversation.

She was immediately told the two gentlemen from Rosings had each called during her absence, Mr. Darcy only for a few minutes to take leave; but Colonel Fitzwilliam had been sitting with them at least an hour, hoping for her return and almost resolving to walk after her till she could be found. Elizabeth could but just *affect* concern in missing him; she really rejoiced at it. Colonel Fitzwilliam was no longer an object. She could think only of her letter.

Once Elizabeth finally reached the refuge of her room, she tried to comprehend the intentions of the callers she had missed. She thought that Mr. Darcy's visit must have been one of pure obligation for he could not have actually wanted to see her after all that had transpired between them. His object in coming certainly must have been to avoid the speculation that might have arisen had he left Kent without taking leave of the inhabitants of the parsonage. She wondered how they both would have borne the interview had she been home. The Colonel's visit she ascribed either to his natural amiability and his willingness to wait for her, or to the possibility that he held her in special regard. She then remembered their recent discussion in the grove concerning the limitations of a second son and thought better of it. Given her recent discovery of how limited her powers of perception could be, she vowed to examine the facts more thoroughly before determining their meaning.

As she turned back to Mr. Darcy's extraordinary letter, a connection between some of the sentiments in it and the Colonel's visit soon began to form. She reread the last passage of the letter.

For the truth of every thing here related, I can appeal more particularly to the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who from our near relationship and constant intimacy, and still more as one of the executors of my father's will, has been unavoidably acquainted with every particular of these transactions. If your abhorrence of me should make my assertions valueless, you

cannot be prevented by the same cause from confiding in my cousin; and that there may be the possibility of consulting him, I shall endeavour to find some opportunity of putting this letter in your hands in the course of the morning.

Could the Colonel's willingness to wait so long to speak to her be related to his cousin? Had Mr. Darcy, as his letter implied, informed the Colonel that she might wish to speak to him regarding Mr. Wickham and then asked that he make himself available to her to verify the events recounted in his letter? If he had, what explanation had Mr. Darcy given the Colonel for why she should be granted access to such intimate family details? She flushed hot with embarrassment at the prospect.

As she reread Mr. Darcy's words, they took on new meaning. It was evident that he believed her dislike of him was so intense that she might reject his explanation of his dealings with Mr. Wickham without corroboration. The thought brought her shame. That Mr. Darcy believed her capable of such willfulness after he had disclosed his sister's involvement made her realize how unfairly and forcefully she had accused him regarding Mr. Wickham. The fact that he felt it necessary to go to the extreme of revealing his sister's association with Mr. Wickham demonstrated how strongly he wanted her to believe him and his fear that she might not. It briefly crossed her mind that Mr. Darcy's motive might stem less from a desire to clear his name and more from the mistaken belief that Mr. Wickham held a power over her that he did not.

Elizabeth suddenly came to the startling realization that she was sorry to have missed Mr. Darcy's call. Despite the mortification it surely would have caused them both, she recognized that she owed him an apology and would never have the opportunity to offer it. At the very least, she wanted to let him know that she believed him and would no longer champion a man who deserved no sympathy. Her desire to provide an apology, however, did not make her regret her rejection of his offer or forgive him his treatment of Jane. She knew, also, that *his* sins did not negate her own. Given that Mr. Darcy had felt it within his power to lay bare all of his dealings for her scrutiny, she owed him, at the very least, an acknowledgement of his effort. However uncomfortable the visit might have been, the burden would have been worth the opportunity to let him know that, whether or not she accepted all of the reasons he offered for his actions, she believed the sincerity of his explanations.

As she pictured the reunion in her mind, she could not help but admit that the encounter would have been a torture for her. She rationalized that her reaction was understandable given that even Mr. Darcy had opted to avoid such a scene by taking the more risky measure of writing to her. He could have just as easily attempted to explain himself in person when he found her in the grove. Not for the first time, she lamented the differences between the sexes that allowed a man to take risks that a woman would be

foolish to consider. At that thought, a plan began to form in Elizabeth's mind.



ELIZABETH ARRIVED AT ROSINGS early the next morning. She watched carefully to be sure that none of the family was in evidence before stepping forward. She found the servants busily loading Mr. Darcy's carriage for the trip out of Kent. His groom, who was inspecting the bridle of one of the horses, noticed her first.

"Sir," Elizabeth inquired with a forced calm, "Excuse me, but are you in Mr. Darcy's employ?"

"Yes, Miss, I have the honor of being his groom. May I be of service?"

Smiling warmly, Elizabeth replied, "Yes, as a matter of fact you could. I borrowed a book from Mr. Darcy, and I wanted to return it before his departure. I only realized that I still had it yesterday after sunset. I usually take some early morning exercise and thought I would use the opportunity to return the book, but I do not want to disturb the household at such an early hour with a visit. If you would be so kind as to give him the volume when he comes out, I would be in your debt."

"Certainly, Miss. But it'd be no bother to fetch him. He has been up and out riding already. He is just inside seeing to some details. I'm sure he would wish to thank you himself."

"That is very kind of you and I would otherwise accept your offer, but I am afraid I would also interrupt Lady Catherine at her breakfast and I know she likes to maintain certain schedules." As Elizabeth mentioned Lady Catherine's name, she indulged in the faintest of smiles and the groom nodded knowingly.

"Ah, yes, Miss. I see what you mean. If you like, I will take the book and give it to the master when he comes out."

"That would be most helpful. Thank you."



DARCY SAT BACK AS the carriage began to move. He had been astonished when his groom told him that a lady had come to return a book. That emotion, however, was nothing compared to the shock he received when he opened the inside cover to read the bookplate: *Elizabeth Bennet, August 26, 1810*. His groom had handed him the book as he was entering the carriage with his cousin on his heels. To Colonel Fitzwilliam's surprise, once they were inside, his cousin turned and left. With his heart beating madly, Darcy scanned the horizon for a glimpse of her. If he saw Elizabeth, he would go to her, despite the suspicion it might cause. He had been fighting the desire to do just that all

morning and this seemed an omen of sorts. The anger and bitter disappointment that he had nursed the night before dissipated the moment he realized that she was initiating contact with him. It was replaced with a wild hope that she might have changed her mind and regretted the criticism she had leveled against him. When he failed to locate her, he immediately began questioning his groom as to all that had transpired. Understanding that she had come more than an hour ago and specifically opted not to have him informed of the visit, he stood in puzzlement until the Colonel called from the window. "Darcy, are we to leave or not? Despite the comfortable weather, it is infernally hot in here without the aid of movement. If you intend on delaying our departure, I would rather wait where I can breathe."

Darcy stood as conflicting emotions fought within him. His Aunt and cousin Anne were on the steps waiting to see them off. If he dallied any longer, his Aunt would undoubtedly want to know the reason why. Even if he could invent an excuse, he knew his cousin would see through any attempt at deception, since he had seen the book delivered and would connect the events. He had previously aroused the Colonel's curiosity regarding Miss Bennet by informing him that he had told her about Wickham and given her leave to corroborate his history with him. When the Colonel pressed him for further details, Darcy stiffly explained that he had confided in her because she had let slip that Wickham had been spreading his lies around Hertfordshire. He wanted Miss Bennet to know the truth so that Wickham could not importune her further. The Colonel was initially reluctant to accept this explanation at face value, but relented when Darcy entreated him to trust in his judgment that Miss Bennet needed to understand what Wickham was capable of.

Darcy knew that any more odd behavior on his part, such as leaving the carriage minutes before it was scheduled to depart in order to visit the parsonage, would require him to explain himself to his cousin. While Darcy knew he could trust the Colonel, his humiliation was still too raw to share. Before he could come to a decision, his Aunt began to demand a reason for the delay. "Darcy, is there a problem with the equipage? You must be sure that the horses have been properly hitched. You can never be too careful. I always insist that it be checked twice. My stable hands will assist you, if need be." When Darcy made no answer, she simply continued. "Darcy, is the Colonel unwell? Is the sudden warmth of the spring weather too much for him? There is always concern when it is too cold, but the heat can be just as dangerous. Most people are ignorant of its effects. I have always understood its dangers. I never travel when it is either too hot or too cold." As Darcy listened to her seemingly endless soliloquy, he came to a decision. Elizabeth had sent him this book in the hope that it would be accomplished without arousing anyone's interest and it was only right to ensure her goal, even if it meant leaving before he wished it. "No, Aunt Catherine, I simply needed to ask my groom

a question before we departed. It has now been addressed, and we will be on our way. Good day.”

The book made Darcy’s hands itch as he was seated in the carriage, but he knew his cousin was narrowly observing him. Fighting an overwhelming urge, Darcy put the volume in his coat pocket. He then relaxed his head into the corner of the cushions, stretched his legs, and tilted his hat over his eyes, hoping the Colonel would follow suit. After what seemed an interminable wait, Darcy was able to confirm that his cousin was drifting in and out of sleep. He immediately retrieved the book. He read the bookplate again, admiring her hand. He then looked over the table of contents for a clue to why she would have sent this particular volume and began to flip through the pages. He knew he audibly gasped when he saw the letter addressed to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy carefully affixed by the letter’s seal to the last page of the book. Before plucking it free, he reverently felt its thickness with trembling fingers to determine its length. It was not more than one sheet and the envelope.

Before he could progress further, his cousin stirred and sat up. After stretching, he asked, “So Darcy, are you as relieved to leave Rosings as I am? I must say, though, having the addition of the guests from the parsonage certainly made the time go more swiftly.” Darcy could only nod and then stare at him in an uncomprehending manner. He then turned to the front page of the book. After seeing that Darcy was obviously intent on reading, the Colonel accepted the fact that he would have to entertain himself by watching the countryside.

Darcy attempted to focus on the words of the book that were swimming before him. She had written to him. The possible reasons for her having done so assailed him. His desire to open the letter was almost overpowering, but he vowed to wait until they stopped to refresh the horses so that he could read it without his cousin’s detection. A part of him was glad to procrastinate. If it were good news, he would risk everything. He would tell the Colonel all that had transpired, pay for his passage on the next post coach to London, and turn the carriage around in order to return to the parsonage before the evening meal. If it were bad news, or if it contained a further attack on his character or a reprimand for having the presumption to write her in the first place or a renewed defense of Wickham, he would rather wait to know and keep the entire sorry affair from his cousin. Until he opened the letter, he had hope. Once he read it, it would be either heaven or hell. He decided to do the only thing he could. He would read her book. The fact that it had once been in her hands held some allure and knowing that her eyes had once scanned these same words gave him a comfort that allowed him to hope for the best.

An hour later, they stopped as they arrived at the outside border of Kent. Darcy quickly told the Colonel that he needed to stretch his legs and would join him later at the inn for refreshments. He then set off down the road and walked off the path to a fallen tree. He opened the letter and began to read.

Mr. Darcy,

Please excuse my presumption in writing to you. I hope that the delivery of this letter did not cause you either embarrassment or hardship. My excuse for resorting to the subterfuge necessary to place this letter in your hand must be my lack of opportunity to otherwise succeed undetected. Aside from the unorthodox manner of delivering this missive to you, you also must be wondering at its purpose. Simply put, the contents of your letter seemed to require a response and I knew the chance to do so was fleeting. Consequently, I have endeavored upon this course of action, when I fear more reasoned reflection might dictate a different result.

Having missed your and your cousin’s final visit to the parsonage, I was unable to find an opportunity to put to rest the apprehension you expressed in your letter that I might not believe your explanation as to your course of conduct towards Mr. Wickham. I assure you that I need no further testament than your word. I know that you would never have confided to me the abominable manner that Mr. Wickham betrayed your family for any other purpose than to convey the truth of the matter. I understand how difficult it must have been to share this information with me, and I appreciate the trust that you have placed in me by doing so. I want you to know that I am ashamed of the things that I accused you of regarding him, and to have done so on such flimsy evidence makes me understand my own shortcomings in a most painful manner. I owe you an apology and I did not want you to leave Kent, and therefore my acquaintance, without conveying such a sentiment. I am heartily ashamed to have acted in the manner that I usually abhor in others. I condemned you for crimes without bothering to ascertain your side of the story and I did so, I believe, because you did nothing more than fail to please my expectations of civility. I want you to know that from my error I have learned a lesson very dearly taught and I will make every effort to avoid such folly in the future. I realize that this will do nothing to subtract the slight that I have made to your character. As to that, I can only offer my most sincere apology and seek your forgiveness.

I am tempted to end this letter here and avoid other topics which you yourself recognized might only bring further pain to either of us. But I know that to do so would be less than forthright, given that the course of recent events must assuredly place those other subjects in the forefront of our thoughts. I appreciate that you felt it necessary to explain your behavior concerning Mr. Bingley and my sister to me. I realize from your narrative that you felt your actions were undertaken to protect your friend and that such altruistic motives could never be condemned. I agree that concern for a friend’s welfare is always a laudable endeavor, but I cannot help but note that the manner in which it is sometimes accomplished can be an evil in itself. Whether you believed yourself impartial to judge my sister’s regard for Mr. Bingley or not, your investigation into the subject left

much to be desired. I feel I am a fair judge of that, not only because I know the extent of the deep regard my sister felt for your friend, but also because your methods seem eminently familiar to me. It was the same sort of impetuous decision-making that led me to believe Mr. Wickham's torrid tale about you without ever trying to verify my opinions. Because no one can ever be sure of the heart of another without being privy to their confidence, I do not think that anyone can rightly judge the state of another's desires and affections. It is another lesson that I have dearly learnt and I would hope that you, of all people, would see the merit of that point as well. As to your concerns regarding my family and their behavior, I cannot help but admit that your descriptions were aptly put. I can offer no defense but to note that every family, no matter what its rank, has its share of the ridiculous and the sublime. I suppose the test of a family is which category is more prevalent. I avoid tallying the totals as to my family members for fear it will not reflect well on anyone. Nonetheless, I would be remiss in not thanking you for your kind words regarding my older sister's behavior and my own. Given the harsh words we exchanged, I do understand the significance of the compliment. I will close in the same manner that you employed in your letter, as the adieu showed a generosity of spirit that I hope we can both share.

*God bless you.
Elizabeth Bennet*

Darcy sat and reread the letter. He attempted to reconcile his conflicting emotions. Foremost, he was disappointed that she could still not love him, and he was stung by her continuing criticism of his conduct towards her sister and his opinion of her family. She wrote politely, but he did not miss the reference to his own aunt's often-ridiculous behavior or that his own incivility caused her initial dislike of him. She said she did not want to ignore unpleasant subjects, but the most important to him, his proposal of marriage, was never addressed. His heart sank into a painful ache as he realized that she had failed to discuss it because there was nothing to more to say. He stood wearily, knowing that his cousin would be waiting for him. He vowed to put her letter and the entire misadventure behind him, but even as he said it, he knew he would be unable to accomplish the task.

On the long carriage ride home, he discreetly reread her letter, which, by now, he had almost memorized. No matter how he viewed it, her words could not relieve his palpable sense of failure, regret, and disappointment; but, if he thought about it, he would have to admit that her letter at least had taken away his anger. Given her heartfelt apology, he could no longer blindly resent her. Instead, he was left trying to understand her, an endeavor, that for of all his previous obsession with her, he had never before attempted. Unbeknownst to him, it was this change of focus that would allow him to start the long process of self-evaluation and healing that was necessary for him to grow from the experience.

Chapter 2

JUDGING A BOOK'S COVER

As Elizabeth followed Jane into the entryway of Netherfield, she reflected, once again, on how much had changed since her return to Hertfordshire. Upon her arrival, she had confided to Jane the details of Mr. Darcy's proposal and his letter, leaving out any reference to his influence in keeping his friend in London. After the sisters spent two nights discussing the ramifications of all that had transpired in Kent, their lives resumed their previous course, with the exception that Elizabeth no longer permitted Mr. Wickham any opportunity to treat her as a favorite.

It was a few weeks thereafter that her Aunt Philips breathlessly announced that Netherfield was to be opened once again. Within a few days, Mr. Bingley called on Longbourn in general and then on Jane in particular. Their initial reunion was awkward, but was soon replaced with a comfortable ease that quickly grew to its former companionship.

Mr. Bingley's return to Hertfordshire could not help but remind Elizabeth of Mr. Darcy. She found herself speculating about Mr. Darcy's reaction to her letter and whether Mr. Bingley's unexpected arrival in the neighborhood was at his urging—given what she had told him of Jane's regard for his friend. In order to confirm her suspicions, on his first visit, Elizabeth pointedly asked after Mr. Darcy to Mr. Bingley. He indicated that Mr. Darcy was in good health when he had seen him immediately before traveling to Netherfield. Mr. Bingley's response was somewhat cryptic, but his shy smile seemed to convey that he knew something of Elizabeth's past with his friend. It made her color, and she was momentarily relieved when her mother's interruption made further inquiry impossible. When Jane eventually agreed to marry Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth frequently contemplated Mr. Darcy's part in its orchestration. As much as she regretted most of the events that had transpired in Kent, in the end, she felt that it had all been worth it if they had helped secure Jane's happiness. Her mind, however, continued to dwell on the events leading to it and the seemingly contradictory actions of the gentleman from Derbyshire.

Elizabeth had come to Netherfield today to help Jane review the house and decide upon any changes that she wanted made before the wedding. Given Miss Bingley's presence, Elizabeth found the task far harder than it needed to be. It was with some relief that they finally finished their tour and Mr. Bingley joined them in the library. After exchanging pleasantries, Mr. Bingley turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet, I am glad you are here. I was charged with a

task that I have repeatedly forgotten to perform. Now that you and the book are in the same room, I must carry out my duty before it once again slips my mind. When I saw Mr. Darcy before I came to Hertfordshire, he asked me to return a book that you lent him in Kent. I am sorry to have not done so before this. Let me get it for you now.”

Elizabeth hoped that her cheeks were not as red as they felt, but feared the worse.

The mention of Mr. Darcy’s name immediately engaged Miss Bingley’s attention and, in response, she turned to Elizabeth and asked in a voice more shrill than she intended, “You were in Kent with Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, when I was visiting Mrs. Collins and my cousin, he was staying at his aunt’s, Lady Catherine De Bourgh. The parsonage borders the estate.”

“Truly, I had heard nothing of it from either Charles or Mr. Darcy.”

“Caroline,” Mr. Bingley calmly replied, “that is most likely due to the fact that we only saw Mr. Darcy once since his return from his aunt’s and then only for a few minutes.”

“Yes, Charles, I suppose,” Caroline replied, clearly displeased. “How peculiar, though. Mr. Darcy has such a grand library at Pemberley, I cannot imagine him in want of a book.”

Before Miss Bingley could continue, Mr. Bingley cheerfully exclaimed, “Here it is. I had set it aside for you upon my return, but I never found the opportunity to give it to you. Please forgive the delay. I know it is unpardonable.” He then looked to Jane and added, “My only excuse is that I have been distracted with recent events.”

“Well, if that be the case,” Elizabeth smilingly replied, “then I could never condemn you for it.”

“For that I am ever grateful, but I am not sure that Mr. Darcy would agree.” Mr. Bingley smiled easily. “He specifically asked that I return it to you as soon as possible.”

Elizabeth took the book and then attempted to hide her confusion. Upon examination, she realized that the book was not the same volume that she had given to Mr. Darcy’s groom. How strange. Why would he return a different book? She checked the nameplate to see if Mr. Bingley had confused it with one of his own books. The nameplate was made of a fine thick paper, but was inscribed with only a date: June 2, 1812, and no name. She then impetuously leafed through the book to see if there might be a letter hidden within the pages in the same manner that she had employed to send him a letter. She was surprised by the level of her disappointment when she realized there was no concealed message. She wondered at her reaction. Did she actually want another letter from Mr. Darcy? What was possibly left for either of them to say about what had happened at Hunsford? Despite understanding the truth of that proposition, she still felt an odd melancholy.

She was also disappointed by the fact that Mr. Darcy had returned the wrong book. It troubled her to realize that their exchange of letters had not held enough significance

for Mr. Darcy to have correctly remembered the title of the book she had given him. But if he did not really recall which book she sent him, why had he bothered to go to the trouble of returning a book at all? Despite her preoccupation, she realized that she needed to begin to converse coherently or arouse suspicion as to her distraction. Given Caroline Bingley’s already contentious mood, she did not need to give her something further upon which to harp.

It was with some relief that Elizabeth eventually returned to Longbourn and the comfort of her room. As she sat on her bed, she once again examined the book. It was a collection of poems, like the volume she had given him, but featuring a different author. She checked to see if any particular entry was marked. None was, so she doubted that there was any specific reason that this book had been selected, if in fact it was a conscious replacement. She read the title again. At least the entire affair was not a total loss. The book was a collection that she had wanted to read, but would probably not have been able to until it was in wider circulation. She would at least enjoy exploring the text regardless of how she had acquired it. She looked again at the date on the bookplate. She could not be sure, but she thought it was written in Mr. Darcy’s hand. If that were true, it would at least eliminate the possibility that Mr. Bingley had given her the wrong book. She then wondered at the date. It was a week or two after she had left Kent, so the book was newly acquired if this was the original bookplate. That thought gave her an idea. Maybe this bookplate had been placed over the original to obscure its true owner in order to continue the ruse that the book was hers. She began to closely examine the thick paper and soon realized that there was indeed something under it. Before she could think better of it, she peeled back the paper to reveal not only an older bookplate containing the Darcy crest, but a letter addressed to her.

She could not help but look nervously around her empty room before continuing. She found a long letter addressed to her from Mr. Darcy written at the beginning of June. Her emotions on finding it were in turmoil. There was the natural curiosity that finding such a letter must engender, and the excitement that came with being part of something that society in general would frown upon. There was also apprehension as to what it could possibly contain. A love letter from a man she could not love would only bring them both pain, and a letter filled with his disapprobation would hurt her more than she cared to understand. Attempting to quiet her jittery nerves, she began to read.

Miss Bennet,

When you recently wrote to me, you said you were moved to do so because my letter to you seemed to require a reply. Despite the temptation, I cannot pretend that my motive in writing this is similarly justified. That is not to say that I do not think that I owe you an acknowledgment for your very generous apology. You had no need to offer one. Mr.

Wickham succeeds by preying on the sensibilities of women whose dispositions are such that suspecting his nefarious motives would not readily occur. Your trusting nature and sympathetic heart are attributes for which no one should apologize. To hold you or, for that matter, my sister accountable for accepting him at face value would unfairly shift the blame from where it actually belongs—on Mr. Wickham's shoulders, and, in your case, to a lesser degree, on my own. I am not so insensitive or ignorant of how I was received in Hertfordshire not to understand that you felt free to accept Mr. Wickham's account of my behavior because I had never given you the opportunity to see anything of my character that would contradict his assertions. While I believe your apology was unnecessary, I nonetheless wish to thank you for the sentiment behind it and to let you know how relieved I am to hear that Mr. Wickham will be unable to abuse your trust in the future.

I know that much has been said between us and much said that should never have been attempted. Having acknowledged your apology, I should accept your last letter as a gracious end to—as you termed it in your letter—our acquaintance, but I find that I cannot quit this missive so easily. One would surmise that I wish to further explain myself, or importune you as to some of your opinions that are at odds with my own. Your letter, however, seemed to make clear that the divisions that I created between us—both knowingly and inadvertently—cannot be explained away, and I will not embarrass either of us by seeking any more clarification of your sentiments when your opinions are so firmly held. I feel, nevertheless, oddly compelled to inquire as to a separate matter. I recognize that I should not take such a liberty, but I feel the opportunity will not present itself again, and my curiosity seems to have gotten the better of me. Perhaps knowing that you might never find this letter makes writing it easier and allows me to express myself in a manner that I would not normally undertake. Given the somewhat extraordinary events that precipitated our unusual correspondence, I hope that you can forgive my impertinence and overlook the impropriety.

I must confess that since receiving your letter, and coming to terms with its contents, I have often found myself thinking about the vessel in which the letter was delivered. I am not sure why, but I wonder at the selection of the volume of poetry that you sent. Why I should be fixated on such a triviality, given all that has transpired between us, I cannot explain. Perhaps I feel cheated out of a discussion of books since you would not allow it in the ballroom at Netherfield, and subsequently I never had the forethought to initiate such a conversation in your company. I hope that there can be no specific objection to such a discourse in the context of a letter. Some of my curiosity, I know, stems from my previous impression that you did not favor poetry, and yet the bookplate indicates that the collection of verse is your own copy. At first, I thought that the book must not be one that

you held in high regard; because, by giving it to my groom, you must have known that you were risking its return. I then thought the better of it. The date on the bookplate indicates that you acquired it before you came to Kent. Therefore, you must have liked it enough to bring it with you. Even without noting the date, I knew that it could not have been borrowed from Mr. Collins' library. If you will excuse me for saying so, it is far too interesting of a title. His acquisitions contain only those works approved by my Aunt and her collection narrowly encompasses only those books that could be considered a classic without giving offense to anyone and, therefore, can only be of interest to someone whose literary knowledge is either newly-acquired or pretense. You might wonder, in turn, at my familiarity with Mr. Collins' collection. I have found that one cannot spend as much time as I do walking about in an effort to avoid conversation without becoming intimately familiar with other people's libraries. Even if my natural reserve did not impel me to such employment, I have always taken an active interest in what works of literature other people esteem. A person's literary likes and dislikes are obviously a reflection of their disposition and it sometimes gives insight into the parts of one's character not held out for general scrutiny. Perhaps I am often drawn to the subject, because I am less comfortable initiating the sort of conversation that might otherwise reveal such intimacies.

Given this, I was somewhat surprised to find that you possessed this particular volume, not only because it was a work of poetry, but because it appears somewhat ill-suited to your temperament. I was familiar with the volume before you sent it to me and re-read it closely after receiving it. It has much to recommend itself, but its general melancholy tone seems at odds with what I have observed of your optimistic nature. The author's tone reminded me of Viscount Chateaubriand's novellas, "Atala" and "Rene," two long-time favorites of mine. But then again, as you said in your letter, no one can ever be sure of the heart of another without being privy to his or her confidence. As we both know, I would be a fool to think I have any real insight into your more private thoughts. After re-reading the book, however, I did see how you might be drawn to the trilogy of verse on the passage of the seasons. Its allusions to the intricacies of the interrelatedness of the natural world reminded me of something that you once said about the streams of Rosings' park taking effortless precedence over the fabricated walkways—that man's attempts to design natural splendor can never rival nature's seemingly random effect. I now wonder if that poem had been in your mind when you shared that thought with me. I was also impressed with the breadth of the author's word choice. His style reminded me of that of Samuel Johnson, another favorite of mine. I think the critics of both authors often miss the irony of their subject matter and the depth of their prose.

While I know that you sent me the book as a means to an end, I want to thank you for its selection. I enjoyed reacquainting

myself with its text. I am always amazed at the ability of literature to show its reader a different facet each time it is examined. It is that phenomenon that I imagine might have motivated you to bring this particular book with you to Kent. The bookplate indicates that you owned the book for more than a year before you visited Mrs. Collins; and, having observed your eager interest in literature in general, I assume that you brought the book to the parsonage because you wanted to re-read it. When I decided to write you, I thought that I would return the favor and send my letter in a book that I thought you might enjoy reading. Because I have never been privy to your father's library, I am not sure what books you have at your disposal. Consequently, I have tried to select a book that would be worthy of re-examination in case you are already familiar with it. The task of selecting such a work has made me realize that what is sometimes immediately appealing is not often worth deeper study. I have selected the enclosed book on that premise. There are parts of it that I find insightful, such as its analogy of time to water. I have found that particular imagery quite apropos as in hindsight, for me, the passage of the last year has seemed a voyage on an unexplored river with varying and sometimes uncontrollable currents. There are other parts of the book that I have not always appreciated, but it has always challenged me to continue. Perhaps that is its attraction—it has stayed in my mind far longer than even I would have wished it. While I hardly expect that my selection will become a favorite of yours, I hope that you will at least come to enjoy it over time. Perhaps that is all anything can aspire to. If you cannot have instant allure or likeability, perhaps the best that one can hope for is to inspire a slow grudging respect that might someday turn into admiration.

I will end this letter as you began yours; with an apology. I hope that Mr. Bingley's attempt to return "your" book has not caused any discomfort or embarrassment. I also hope that this letter has not taxed your patience too long, and I apologize in advance for my presumption.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Elizabeth finished the letter and sat in stunned silence. That Mr. Darcy would write to her was odd in itself, but to do so in this manner seemed inexplicable. She could understand him sending the first paragraph, but the subsequent discussion of literature, and obliquely their relationship, was more than surprising. Most men would hardly have acknowledged her after her unfounded accusations and her refusal of his offer, but Mr. Darcy seemed to have moved beyond it. What sort of man would ignore all that had transpired between them and write as if they were correspondents? But that was not accurate. In his letter, he somehow managed to acknowledge what had happened between them while still keeping a cordial tone and his own dignity. But to what end? He was truly an enigma. She reread the

letter several more times, before she finally put it away with his other missive. While his letter said quite a lot, it did not answer the more fundamental question of why he would continue to write to her. Instead, she turned to the only thing that she could do. She would read his book.

It was almost two weeks later when Elizabeth finished reading for the second time the book that Mr. Darcy had sent her. It was indeed a book worthy of study, and she had enjoyed herself as she devoted more and more time to its inspection. Even Jane had commented on her distraction. She often took it with her for long ambles in the surrounding lanes and its perusal could not help but bring its owner to her mind. It had compelled her to inquire of Mr. Bingley whether Mr. Darcy intended to visit. Mr. Bingley replied that, while they had written to each other several times and Mr. Darcy had sent his congratulations on his engagement, his friend had no immediate plan to return to the area. Elizabeth was not sure how this made her feel. Reading his letter and enjoying the book he had sent was one thing, but it was not the same as seeing him face to face. She knew that there were things that she wanted to say in reply to his letter and she often found herself wanting to tell him what she thought of his book. But she knew that, even after Jane married Mr. Bingley and he eventually visited, she could not imagine that they would ever be on the sort of footing that would make such a discourse either comfortable or appropriate.

As she read the last page of the book again, she noticed something she had not the first time through. The inside back cover of the book also contained a bookplate made of the same fine, thick paper. Nothing, however, was written upon it. The discovery made her heart race. She could not help but smile to herself as she realized its purpose and began to peel back the paper to see if it contained another concealed letter. Several competing emotions vied for control as she found an envelope under the bookplate. When she examined it, however, she found that the envelope was empty and not yet sealed. She furrowed her brow in confusion as she looked to the front of the envelope. Understanding slowly dawned. It was addressed to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy at an address that had to be his townhouse in London. The return address listed a "Mr. James Cunningham" as the sender and indicated an address nearby. A slow smile came to her lips. He had, in essence, thrown down a gauntlet. He wanted her to write him back and had given her a way to do so without detection. He had not, however, directly asked her to do so.

She briefly wondered if it was arrogance on his part to assume she would write, but she quickly realized that there was nothing in his letter that seemed to mirror his prior behavior and everything about his tone that bespoke humility, albeit with a slight flourish of irony. It was not that he was assuming she would write him. Far from it. He was leaving the decision to her, without comment or pressure. For better or worse, she would have to decide the next move herself.

Chapter 3

BOOKS AND LIBRARIES

Darcy was working in his study at his desk when the post arrived. Two weeks ago, anticipation would have made it impossible for him to remain seated, but weeks of disappointment had dulled his sense of hope. By his calculations, he knew it was highly unlikely that he would receive the letter that he sought. Too much time had passed. He cursed himself for setting into motion a plan that made him his own jailer. He had written to her because he needed to do so and he did not regret a word. If anything, he wished he had said more. It was not his letter that kept him awake for countless sleepless nights, it was his too clever idea of leaving her an envelope to write him back. At the time, it seemed the right balance between forwardness and reserve to gauge her reaction to his overture. If she wrote back, then he would know there was some slight hope and he would attempt to forge a relationship with her through cautious steps. If she decided not to write, then he would respect her decision and never bother her again. He would avoid Hertfordshire, even to the point of missing Bingley's wedding. After Bingley and Miss Bennet were married, he would see them only when they were in London, where he could be certain that his company would not be forced unwillingly upon Elizabeth. What he did not take into account was the uncertainty implicit in his plan. He was willing to accept Elizabeth's rejection as final, but only if he was certain that she had consciously decided not to write. But how could he actually know? He was unsure whether she had even found his letter, let alone the envelope addressed to him. Even if she had discovered both, he had never explicitly told her that he would welcome a continuing connection between them. Or maybe he had said too much. She might be apprehensive as to what it would signify if she wrote back. Consequently, her silence could mean any number of things, and he was left to puzzle it without any hope of coming to a conclusion.

As the days passed, he alternated between believing that the delay was because Elizabeth had not yet found the concealed communications to thinking the worse. If that were not bad enough, he could not see a way to end his uncertainty. Darcy had vowed not to approach her until he received some sort of encouragement and he could not abandon his resolve simply because the wait might stretch on forever. Perhaps if he had not included a means for her to contact him, he could initiate an accidental reunion, but if she had already found his envelope and was purposefully trying to avoid him, his appearance would seem, at best,

domineering and, at worse, pathetic. His pride may have caused his downfall, but he could not abandon his dignity completely. Even if he did arrange for their paths to cross, what would he do? Inquire if she had found his highly improper missive and then ask if she was avoiding any further interaction with him because, despite knowing the truth about Mr. Wickham, she still hated him, or was she simply not sufficiently curious to flout propriety and pen a reply? No, he would wait in London, afraid that if he left for Pemberley, her letter would arrive and needlessly prolong his purgatory while it was forwarded. Every night he asked himself how much longer he would wait. So far, he was always willing to remain at least one more day.

As he saw the letter with his name written upon it in his own hand, his heart began to beat faster. He discarded the other correspondence and brought her letter to his desk. Despite weeks of impatience, he delayed opening it for a minute. He felt the enormity of the moment and briefly tried to understand how he had gotten to a place where the contents of one letter could dictate his fate.

Mr. Darcy,

I was initially unsure if I should write. It is, of course, improper and, despite what I assume to be the significance of your having left your address for me to find, a small part of me cannot help but believe that the impulse that moved you to do so might later be regretted. I do not mean to imply that you did not draft your very gracious letter with sincere intent. It is more that there seemed a certain degree of ambivalence in the manner that you posted it, since by its very nature, it left a great deal to chance. I wondered if you might have hoped both that I would find it and that I would not. I mean no disrespect. It is just that I have never been in such a situation before and, despite having previously sent you an unrequested letter, I am somewhat anxious about initiating contact in case it is unwelcome. After some of the things that I said to you in Kent, it would seem more likely that you would never want to hear my name again, let alone receive a letter from me. But that does not quite explain the envelope, and I also realize that your method of delivery could just as likely be borne from the need for secrecy, although that necessity only emphasizes how ill-advised our behavior might be considered.

Whatever prompted you to write, I must also mention how surprised I am that you felt confident in assuming that I would, in fact, discover the letter or the envelope. You should know that it did not immediately occur to me to look at the bookplate. Was it your intention to point me in that direction by sending me a different book? Because it was my confusion over the book that motivated me to examine the entire volume more closely. Perhaps I am just being vain and loath to admit that that my behavior is easier to forecast than I would have previously thought, since your plan did in fact succeed in its particulars. Perhaps I am disinclined to accept the fact that

you could so accurately predict my behavior, because I know I never could have predicted yours. To have written in such a manner seems more than out of character, but perhaps that is the point. I do not truly know your character—although your previous two letters have given me more insight into it than our acquaintance of many months had achieved. In the end, I was persuaded to write by the thought that if you were curious enough to contact me, albeit indirectly, about such an unconnected matter as my reading habits, then you certainly would be actively wondering if your letter had been found and anticipating a reply. Because Mr. Bingley indicated that you had no specific plans to return to Hertfordshire, I felt I should respond to you through the medium that I assume you intended.

Having explained why I am writing, I suppose I should also clarify the timing of my letter. I did not receive your book until almost three weeks ago. Mr. Bingley, being otherwise occupied with events commanding his attention since his return to the neighborhood, did not deliver it until then. It then took me until after I had read it thoroughly to examine the back cover.

As I mentioned, the presence of your letter and the envelope more than surprised me, but no more than the letter's contents. Your supposition as to why I had that particular book with me at Hunsford was correct on all scores. Once again, you seem to have fathomed my actions better than I would have anticipated. I was indeed familiar with the book's verse when I took it to Kent and was seeking an opportunity to reread it. I felt that I had never given its contents sufficient attention and hoped to remedy the situation. I had just finished reading it again when I sent it to you. I am pleased that you enjoyed it as much as I did, although I must be honest. When I used it to deliver my letter, there was no intent in its selection. The plan to contact you occurred to me with little time to reflect on its repercussions in almost any regard let alone as to my choice of literature. My only concern was your reaction to my decision to contact you and what I wrote. As to that, I would be remiss in not specifically thanking you for the gracious tone of your letter in response. It would have been well within your right to have ignored me, despised me, or received me in a far less generous spirit, given our past disagreements and my intemperate words. I thank you for your civility.

I wonder if I should also extend my gratitude for your friend's recent return to Hertfordshire. I suspect I should, since you asked him to deliver your book to me. I believe, though, that you would prefer me not to dwell on the details of his return other than to rejoice in the happy conclusion of the affair and as to that, I assure you I am most pleased at my sister and Mr. Bingley's newfound contentment.

As to the book you sent, I found it quite compelling. Despite what I may have led you to believe, I do enjoy poetry. I simply

vehemently dislike bad poetry. While a novel can be poorly written and still superficially entertain, bad verse can have no redeeming qualifications. In any regard, in retrospect, I am surprised you took my assertion about the efficacy of poetry at face value. I thought you yourself had once observed that I take great joy in professing opinions that are not my own. Perhaps it is best to take all my sweeping observations with a grain of salt. It might lead to less mischief. The poetry you provided, however, was beyond reproach. I had heard of the author by reputation and had hoped to obtain the volume, but it is not the sort of work my father would actively acquire and I doubt I would have come across a copy in Meryton anytime soon. Consequently, I am in your debt for the opportunity. My father's library unsurprisingly reflects his tastes, which often run to satire. William Gillford, Bernard de Mandeville, Thomas Moore, and Voltaire are among his favorites, but above all else, my father loves the Greek classics. His books are his companions and he reads them as one would entertain an old and trusted friend. From his devotion, I have developed a deep respect for the works of the ancients, but my tastes run to more current works, although my access to such authors are at a distance more removed. My Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, with whom my sister Jane resided this last winter in Cheapside, are avid collectors, each with a diverse and distinct taste in literature that I have come to value and rely upon. They maintain an ever-expanding library that I am lucky enough to use whenever I visit. It is through their interest that I have developed an inclination towards poetry and the type of literature that approaches the world from a less satirical point of view than my father favors. The book you sent me is exactly the sort of poetry that I would hope to find in their collection, and I thank you for the thought that went into its selection. I think I once told you that we were unlikely to read the same books or to do so with the same feeling. I must add this to the list of misconceptions that I have unfairly held against you. Thank you for the opportunity to realize my mistake. I would not wish to have left our acquaintance in the state of acrimony we fostered in Kent. It would remain a difficult and troubling memory. For me, this odd but engaging correspondence has served to erase some of the more painful details of our interactions. I hope the same can be said for you.

*Sincerely,
Elizabeth Bennet*

Darcy finally set the letter aside only after he had read it several times. His initial elation was now slightly tinged with concern. In many respects, her letter was more encouraging than he could have hoped. An hour ago, he would have been satisfied with the fact that she had written at all, regardless of its contents. But it was not her letter that troubled him; he would cherish each kind word. It was the daunting task of determining what his response should be. He knew he would have to think carefully before he decided

on a course of action. His initial reaction was to mount his horse and seek her out, but he knew that his rashness had cost him, in part, his chance to win her in the first place. He would not commit that mistake twice. He read the letter again, attempting to put aside the euphoria he felt at any passage that contained even the slightest hint of a compliment to his character or a waning of her disapprobation. He would continue to reread it until he could do so without emotion, for only then would he be able to determine rationally what her letter actually implied about her present opinion of him. Once he accomplished that task, he would begin to consider his next move.



ELIZABETH ENTERED NETHERFIELD WITH the female members of her family, dreading the impropriety that her mother would surely soon exhibit. They were there to discuss wedding plans with Mr. Bingley and his sisters, but Elizabeth knew her mother had an additional agenda. Mrs. Bennet had spent the previous week and a half complaining about Jane's decision to make only the most minor alterations to Netherfield. To her mother's thinking, the fact that there were funds available to make widespread modifications was reason enough to undertake them. Mrs. Bennet planned to see for herself what needed to be done. If Jane was still unwilling to properly follow her mother's advice, then she would broach the subject directly with Mr. Bingley. In Mrs. Bennet's estimation, Jane simply did not comprehend what was due her and it was a mother's duty to see that it was provided.

As they began yet another expedition through the house, Elizabeth could not help but drift into memories of her last tour and the book Mr. Bingley had given her at its conclusion. Since she had written Mr. Darcy again, she could not quite get the subject out of her mind. She knew that their correspondence was at an end, but wondered how it would effect the manner in which they would greet each other when they eventually met because of Jane's marriage. Elizabeth questioned why such a thought should preoccupy her mind. There was no guarantee that she would ever see him again, so why fret over its occurrence—and was it concern she felt or something else?

She knew that some of her interest had to be attributable to the fact that all of their interactions had occurred in secret. If anyone in the room, other than Jane, actually knew that Mr. Darcy had proposed to her and then that they had engaged in a clandestine correspondence after she refused him, she could not predict the uproar it would ignite. But as much as that thought entertained, there was more to it than that. She felt she was privy to having seen a secret side of Mr. Darcy and did not know what to do with the image. Her previous opinion of him, as well as all of Meryton's, was now at odds with what she now knew of his charac-

ter and not just because of Mr. Wickham's lies. She could no longer brush aside his clumsy but fervent declaration that the intensity of his regard had moved him to seek her hand against his family's wishes or the thought that he was sufficiently preoccupied with her refusal to puzzle over the import of her sending him a particular volume of poetry. Nor could she dismiss his willingness to write her without rancor and the tone of his letters, which revealed him to be far more compassionate than she would have ever imagined. She wondered which version of Mr. Darcy demonstrated his real disposition, because no matter how engaging his last letter was, she could not completely forget his previous interactions in Hertfordshire. Instead, she needed to blend the two versions of him into a new estimation of his character. The result was a complicated blur in her mind. Despite this lack of clarity, her newfound intelligence seemed so startling and important, that it felt exceedingly peculiar that the realization should come too late to have any actual consequence.

When they entered the library, Elizabeth's thoughts were interrupted by her mother's loud voice. "Mr. Bingley, what a lovely room this is in layout and orientation. It is a pity, though, that the bookshelves take up so much space. It would otherwise make a rather nice music room. If you were to remove the shelves, there would be more space to entertain. Why you could even hold small dance parties in here! The ballroom is more than adequate for larger affairs, but I think you may find that you will also want to host smaller family parties with your circle of acquaintances. That sort of event would be most beneficial to Jane's sisters and this room would certainly make a charming space to dance. After all, you cannot have a party without some dancing. Do you not agree, Jane?"

Bowing her head demurely, Jane replied, "Mother, I think this room is lovely as it is. It is to serve as a library, and I assume that Mr. Bingley will want to keep it as it is."

Seeing his fiancée's discomfort, Bingley added in a jovial tone, "Yes, 'tis true. I think it is very important for an estate to have a library. Something that can be handed down to succeeding generations. I have been remiss in the past in the upkeep of my collection of books; but, given my upcoming nuptials, I think it should become something of a priority." Turning to Jane he added, "I was actually hoping to discuss this very subject with you later on, but seeing as it has come up now of its own accord, I should tell you that I received an engagement gift from Mr. Darcy. He sent several volumes for the library to move me along in the right direction. It is a very diverse group—mostly newer authors that he said he could personally recommend. I was wondering about your taste in literature. I want to be sure that our collection satisfies your needs as well." Indicating with his hand, he added, "This section of books were acquired by my father. This paltry showing encompasses my additions. These three shelves are the books that Mr. Darcy sent."

"I am sure that they will be more than adequate for my needs," Jane replied with another radiant smile. "It was very thoughtful of Mr. Darcy to send these books. You must express my gratitude to him."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Caroline, "It was most thoughtful of him to bother. Charles, you must send our compliments. He is such an authority on the subject. The library at Pemberley is beyond comparison."

"Books?" exclaimed Mrs. Bennet with a frown. "What an odd engagement gift. I am sure I have never heard of such a thing."

Elizabeth could not help but walk over to look at the titles Mr. Darcy had sent. "Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy mentioned that some of the titles might be of interest to you as well. He said that he thought you an avid reader. I hope you know that my library is always open to you. Come whenever you wish."

"That is very generous, Mr. Bingley. I truly appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Miss Elizabeth, I thought we had agreed you would call me Charles. I am to be your brother after all."

"Yes," smiled Elizabeth. "You are right. I will endeavor to do better to remember. In exchange, I may just test your brotherly generosity further and take you up on your offer to borrow a book or two."

"That would please me very much."

As Mrs. Bennet attempted to turn the conversation once more towards renovation, Elizabeth bent to examine Mr. Darcy's collection. She had the oddest feeling as she reviewed the titles. They were all impeccably chosen and each volume was either a favorite of hers or one that she had hoped to find at her Aunt and Uncle's home. Her heart started to race as she began to suspect that these books were sent more for her benefit than for Mr. Bingley's. Could Mr. Darcy really have remembered from her letter that she did not have easy access to newer titles and then gone to the trouble of making the more appealing volumes available to her. Was she vain to even think it? It otherwise seemed too much of a coincidence. For once, she had to agree with her mother. Books were not a typical engagement gift. She wanted nothing more than for everyone to leave so she could examine the bookplate of each book. Was Mr. Darcy attempting to contact her again? Did she want him to? She knew one thing for sure. She needed to find out.

Elizabeth awoke the next day with a single-mindedness of purpose. She could not bear the suspense any longer. She would go to Netherfield to check the books for a concealed letter. She no longer cared if it appeared forward or if Miss Bingley took note and ridiculed her presence. She could check the books while pretending to select one to read. If she found a concealed letter, she would borrow that book and remove it later.

Elizabeth had been at her avowed task with no success for twenty minutes when Mr. Bingley interrupted her progress. "Miss Elizabeth. Good day. How nice to see you. I was

out riding and just told of your arrival. I hope you are finding everything you need."

"Mr. Bingley—Charles, yes, thank you. I thought I would take you up on your kind offer and borrow a book. I hope you do not mind."

"No, not at all. It is my most sincere wish that you feel at home here. My entire library is at your disposal." With an eager expression, he added, "Did Jane come with you as well?"

"No, she did not. I wanted to walk out first thing this morning, and she had some tasks she needed to complete for our mother that unfortunately will occupy her entire morning. She asked, though, that I convey her regards. She hoped that she might see you later today."

"As do I. Tell her that I plan to come to call this afternoon. Although, perhaps I could go earlier, so that I could return you there in my carriage. I could leave whenever you are ready."

"Thank you, no. I do appreciate the offer, but Jane will not be available until after lunch and I would not want you to change your plans on my account. I am all but finished here and I had planned to walk back as well. I will enjoy the exercise. The weather has turned quite fine."

"Yes it has. But it would be no bother."

"No, that is very generous, but I truly would prefer to walk."

"If you are certain because I could also send the carriage with you now and then have it return later for my use." After seeing that she would not relent, he added, "I do hope that you have at least found something to read?"

"I have found so many things. It was difficult to choose just one. I must say, Mr. Darcy's gift was quite generous. Is he in the habit of sending you books? It is an odd choice, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose in one regard it is rather surprising, but his generosity is not. It is his nature. He has always been like that. Nothing spared for his friends and family. If you will keep a secret, it is actually not his only gift. He has always chided me for my failure to keep up my library. The books are more a gift for me. He said that he could not let me enter into the state of matrimony will so little to offer Jane by way of literary contribution. For our real wedding gift, he has commissioned an artist to paint Jane's and my portrait to mark the celebration of our wedding. He used his considerable influence to engage an artist whom I could not hope to commission without waiting several years for a sitting. I am really quite in his debt. I am anxious to tell Jane about it this evening when we have a moment alone." After a pause, he asked, "Am I right to think that she will like the gift?"

Elizabeth hardly knew how to respond to this new intelligence. The books were generous, but a portrait seemed a particularly thoughtful gift. As she thought on it, she knew it was something she would cherish as well. Jane was so beautiful and to capture her likeness in the bloom of her happiness would make the portrait a treasured object for

everyone who loved Jane and Charles. It was a very dear gift and one which clearly indicated Mr. Darcy was more than pleased with Charles' choice of a bride. Elizabeth reached for Charles' hand, gave it a small squeeze, and said, "Yes, I am sure Jane will be delighted. She might be a little self-conscious at first with the sittings, but I know she will adore the results. Mr. Darcy is very wise. I do not think Jane would feel comfortable sitting alone. To have your likenesses taken as a couple will make her very happy indeed." She paused for a moment, with her brow furrowed. "Charles, may I ask you a question that might seem slightly odd? Are these all the books that Mr. Darcy sent?"

"Yes, they are. It seems more than I will ever have time to read. Do you think more are required?"

"No, not at all," Elizabeth exclaimed blushing slightly. "I was just looking for a specific title and wondered. But thank you anyway, you are quite right, the volumes he sent will give hours upon hours of pleasure... Charles, thank you again. I should be going. I will just take this one book, if you do not mind."

"Of course," Charles smiled easily, "be my guest."

As Elizabeth walked slowly home, her mind was a swirl of emotions. If she was honest, disappointment was foremost. After inspecting the titles and discussing Mr. Darcy's gifts with Mr. Bingley, she believed that the books were meant to be a gift to her as well. It was otherwise too much of a coincidence and Mr. Darcy had specifically told Charles that she might enjoy some of the titles. While she was grateful for his thoughtfulness—for what could she enjoy more than having several dozen books she had been hoping to read available to her at such an easy distance—but she had expected more. As soon as she heard about the books, she had hoped to find a letter; and, while the possibility was alive, it had given her a sense of excitement that was difficult to name. Her dashed expectations made her emotions clear. On some level, she was hoping for further contact with him and regretted that it was now clear it would not come to pass.

Mixed in with her disappointment, she felt something that she had to name as respect. She had to admit that all of Mr. Darcy's actions since Hunsford had impressed her. He had bothered to write her to reveal Mr. Wickham's true character when any other man would have shunned her. He had earned her forgiveness concerning Jane by correcting his mistake. His gift of Jane and Charles' portrait exhibited exactly the sort of attention to other people's pleasure that she secretly wished her father would exhibit, but never did. It was not the cost entailed, although she knew it was a generous gift, but rather the insight its selection showed. Through his correspondence, she had found him to be well read, discerning, and thoughtful. His actions were bold, and yet always appropriate, and he demonstrated a sensitivity to the awkward situation in which they found themselves that she could not have imagined. He seemed to be able to read her with a clarity that she could not understand. And in

the end, he had concluded their interactions with grace by sending a very generous, but more importantly, thoughtful gift that he managed to deliver without compromising her in any manner.

She had clearly been wrong to dismiss him as dishonorable, but she had not realized until now that he was more than just respectable, he was admirable. She had to laugh at the irony of realizing such a fact so late. Instead of being relieved that their acquaintance had ended better than she could have predicted, her pride was wounded and she felt rejected. She knew she had no right to such an emotion, since she was the one who had initially rejected him, but the idea that their acquaintance was truly at an end engendered a sense of loss that startled her. She knew that she probably would eventually see him through Jane's connection with Mr. Bingley, but the vision of them engaged in stilted discourse, all the while being careful to act as indifferent strangers, gave little comfort.

As she came to the turnstile at the edge of Netherfield, she found that a stranger was also about to cross. Bowing, he said, "Miss, please, after you." He then offered his hand to steady her ascent.

"Thank you, Sir," she said as she smiled at him with a nod. Once he navigated it himself, he asked, "Miss, if I might trouble you. I am working for Mr. Bingley. I am a steward staying at Netherfield and I was told that the Longbourn estate is situated across this field. You would not happen to be Miss Bennet, would you?"

"Yes, I am Elizabeth Bennet. But you must be confusing me with my older sister, Mr. Bingley's fiancée, Miss Jane Bennet."

Executing another crisp bow, he replied, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bennet. I am indeed looking forward to meeting your sister as well. I have heard a great deal about her from Mr. Bingley."

Smiling, Elizabeth easily replied, "Yes, it is quite difficult to engage Mr. Bingley in many other topics."

"Yes, but it is always a pleasure to listen to a man who knows the source of his own felicity. Such a man is always an example to others, for the gratitude he expresses is a testament to his good fortune."

Smiling at his sincerity, Elizabeth asked, "You are new to the area, are you not? Did you recently take the position as steward?"

"The answer, Miss, is both yes and no. I am new to the area but I have been a steward my whole life, as was my father before me. I have worked for one family for many years now. I am presently working for Mr. Bingley, but I am not in his employ. I have actually come to Netherfield on a temporary basis at my Master's bidding to help train Mr. Bingley's permanent steward and help him organize some of the estate's business. Mr. Bingley's steward is a very capable man, but he has not served in such a capacity before. I am here to help show him the ropes. He is, in his own right, a very accomplished man and already possesses the

necessary attributes for such an occupation. He knows that a steward must do his Master's bidding without question and always with discretion. It is the role of the steward to aid his Master in whatever manner available and to do so as discreetly and unobtrusively as possible. A good steward must be trustworthy and loyal above all else."

He stopped to see if Elizabeth had taken in what he had said and then bowed. "May I introduce myself, Miss? James Cunningham, at your service. I was actually on my way to Netherfield to seek you out."

Elizabeth colored at the name and looked at him for a long moment, attempting to appraise his intent. He seemed forthright, and not overly familiar, despite having initiated this contact. When she studied him closer, looking for any sign of amusement at her expense, she found none. She finally spoke. "You said you have worked for one family for many years? Where is that?"

Cunningham looked her in the eye and said, "I spend most of my time on my Master's estate in Derbyshire. Before that I worked for my Master's uncle in Matlock."

"Derbyshire?" she asked in a shaken voice, "Do you work for Mr. Darcy then?"

"Yes, Miss, I do. He asked me to come to Hertfordshire for a while to help Mr. Bingley organize the estate before his wedding and to aid him in whatever other manner I could. Master Darcy suggested that while I am here I could also help Mr. Bingley expand his library. I brought several books with me towards that goal, but he encouraged me to be on the lookout for ways to continue to increase the collection. He actually suggested that I contact you in that regard, Miss Bennet. He thought that you might have some ideas on what books were lacking."

Elizabeth colored and attempted to summon the necessary affront for his presumption in seeking her out. The man was so earnest; it proved difficult. She knew he must know more than he was letting on. It was no coincidence that his name was on the return address on the envelope that Mr. Darcy had left her, but his demure manner disarmed her of any anger or embarrassment towards him. Elizabeth could only ask, "Did he?"

"Yes, Miss, he did." Taking a volume from his inside coat pocket, he continued. "Mr. Darcy also suggested that I give you this book for your review. When you are finished with it, I will see that it is returned directly to Mr. Darcy. Similarly, if there was any particular book that you might wish to read that is not available to you, I could procure it for you and then, if it pleased you, add it to Mr. Bingley's collection."

As he handed the book to Elizabeth, he ignored the book she already held which he must have recognized from Mr. Bingley's library. She nodded her assent and said, "Thank you, Mr. Cunningham."

"Thank you, Miss." Bowing, he added, "Until we meet again."

As he walked away, Elizabeth was glad for the support of the fence post behind her.

She waited until the privacy of her own room before she even looked at the title of the new book or its contents. Her emotions seemed to have gotten the better of her and she felt completely unsettled. The previous disappointment she had felt when she thought she had heard from Mr. Darcy for the last time was now replaced with a sense of relief and, if she were honest, bated anticipation. But those emotions were also tinged with foreboding. She was shaken by her encounter with Mr. Cunningham. Previously her correspondence with Mr. Darcy had seemed surreal and as a result, the total lack of propriety their continuing contact entailed seemed a distant concern. Now that someone else was involved, an actual living person, her concern had turned to burgeoning alarm. Mr. Cunningham himself was not the problem. He seemed as gentle and understanding as she could hope. It was what he represented. What had she gotten herself into and, more importantly, why? She reviewed the steps that had brought her here. She knew intuitively that each progression was natural and understandable when it was viewed in sequence, but the overall result—the fact that she was corresponding in secret with an unmarried man who was not her relation—did not.

Despite her concerns, she opened the book, looked at the date on the front bookplate, and peeled it back to find the letter she knew would be contained there.

Miss Bennet,

I hope you can forgive my method of contacting you. I assure you that my steward is a completely trustworthy individual in whom I have the utmost confidence. I have absolute faith in him. I have had occasion in the past to trust Mr. Cunningham with my own life, the future of Pemberley, and my sister's security. I hope you know that I value your reputation in a similar regard and that I would not undertake to write you without complete assurance as to its protection.

In reading your last letter, I was struck by the sentiment you expressed that I might have been ambivalent about whether you ultimately found my letter because I had left its discovery to chance, or that I might later regret having sent it. I assure you that nothing could be farther from the truth. I never hoped for anything other than that you would discover it. I cannot explain why when I sent it I felt so very certain that you would discover it. At the time, it seemed so in your nature to question why I would return a different book that I knew you would inquire further as to the volume's contents. You said that one of the things that motivated you to write back was the recognition of my natural curiosity. I believe it is a trait we share, and I suppose I depended upon yours taking precedent when I wrote to you in the manner I did. Nonetheless, your thoughts on the subject did make me see that there is a danger that someone else might inadvertently discover a future letter enclosed in a book if I

entrusted its delivery to anyone other than Mr. Cunningham. Consequently, I hope you will see that I have chosen to involve him out of caution, not in disregard of it.

You also said in your letter that you were unsure whether the envelope I provided signified an invitation to write back. I am very grateful that you understood that that was exactly its purpose. I was surprised to read that you wondered whether I would want to hear from you. Please be assured that I most certainly did. Any discomfort between us in the past was totally due to my own fault and folly. I hold you blameless, and I was grateful that you could put aside my failings sufficiently to do me the honor of replying to my letter. If the manner I requested it seemed less than resolute, please know that it was only because I did not want to presume that I deserved a reply. On that note, I wish to make clear to you, at the risk of being both presumptuous and inappropriate, that I would welcome any contact from you at any time; and, if you should wish it to be so, Mr. Cunningham will be at your service.

I was interested to hear that your father preferred the classics and satire. Those were my own father's preferences as well; and, while I too appreciate such works of literature, they are not what I seek most to read. I think that it was a disappointment to my father that I could not esteem his favorite books as my own. I believe the newness of satire coincided and inflamed that generation's discontent with the ways in which society and politics had begun to stagnate and as a result, those authors hold a more particular interest to them than to their children. The turmoil that the continent is now experiencing, and as a result English society, began with the criticism innate in those satirical works and as such, their import cannot be underestimated. However, I think maybe you share my desire for authors who can propose solutions to change as well as identify the problems that require them. Some would find such works too earnest; but, while I admire the wit entailed in satire, sometimes I seek an optimistic perspective to what man might achieve. Authors that illuminate the manner in which mankind fits within the natural world inspire my respect more. To that end, I have sent the somewhat controversial text of F. W. von Schelling's "System of Transcendental Idealism" for your perusal. I hope you do not think I am attempting to corrupt you. I know that ladies are not generally interested in political philosophy, but I thought in this regard, like in so many other ways, you might prove the exception to the rule. I am anxious to hear your thoughts. If, however, I have in fact misjudged your interest in this regard, I hope that some of the recent additions to Mr. Bingley's library might be a good substitute.

I have tried to interest my sister Georgiana in political works, particularly treatises on government and their formations, but I think she is too young to develop a real appreciation for such reading. She has expressed, though, an inclination towards

the accounts of military and naval battles, but I thought them too upsetting for her tender disposition. It is at times such as these that I feel particularly inept at my task as guardian. I find my instincts to protect her vying with my desire that she grow to understand fully the world she will soon inhabit as an adult. I cannot help but feel that our mother would know innately the best course in this regard. While I can obviously consult her governess or others in my employ, I am not as confident in their opinions or that they understand her in the same manner that a family member might. You have obviously been exposed to a wide variety of literature, at what I must assume was a young age. Were your interests directed to certain types of study or were you allowed generally to follow your inclination? Do you think one course better than the other? I would value your opinion on the subject.

As to my sister, I find that I have left her overlong at Pemberley without my company. I have also too long neglected some of the demands of my estate. As a result, I am preparing to return there within the fortnight. London holds many attractions, but I find the comfort of country life overshadows its allure. The Derbyshire countryside this time of year is at the peak of its beauty—although I would be hard pressed to find a season when I do not find it beautiful. You stated in your letter that you often visit your aunt and uncle in London. They seem a most admirable couple and their literary interests compelling. Do you intend to visit them in the near future or are your plans for the remainder of the summer not yet fixed? Whatever your plans, please accept my best wishes for your felicity.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Chapter 4

PROPRIETY AND DECISIONS

After receiving her latest letter from Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth could barely think of anything else. It was only Lydia's incessant pleas that she be granted permission to go to Brighton that finally interrupted her reverie. Once she heard her father capitulate to her sister's demand, Elizabeth knew she had to put her own concerns aside, and attempt to intervene, if commonsense was to play any role in the governance of their household.

Elizabeth closed the door to Mr. Bennet's study in utter frustration. She had spent the previous night and the better part of the morning attempting to convince her father that it was folly to allow Lydia to go to Brighton. He seemed determined to make light of the situation in order to avoid upsetting her mother. She hated to admit it, but when he acted like this, he disappointed her. It would be one thing if she could believe that her father thought her mother sensible or Lydia capable of behaving properly while away from home. Then she could ascribe his lack of interest to a belief that such matters fell more properly within her mother's sphere of influence, but his barbed comments regarding how he thought Lydia would acquit herself in Brighton and her mother's inability to grasp what was actually involved indicated otherwise. Despite knowing the potential for disaster, her father nonetheless seemed to believe that it was no more his responsibility to intervene than that of any of their neighbors. Why could he not see that if he had no confidence in her mother's ability to properly judge the situation, then it was his domain alone to correct her? What made matters worse was that Elizabeth knew that her father had within himself both the authority and ability to curb her mother's excesses. It would just require concern, consistency, and determination on his part—characteristics he seemed to neither esteem nor practice.

Despite Longbourn's turmoil, Elizabeth's thoughts involuntarily returned to Mr. Darcy and his latest letter. Her father's lack of willingness to involve himself in his sister's affairs contrasted sharply with Mr. Darcy's behavior. She knew from everything he had said and written about his guardianship of his sister that he took more interest in her welfare than her father took in his own daughters. Mr. Darcy had recently asked her advice on what his sister should read. Her father would never condescend to consider such a matter, even though he held the pursuit of reading closest to his heart and his involvement would have provided an outlet from which he could guide each of her sisters. Her father

never took the opportunity. He did allow Elizabeth to discuss books with him, but only because their minds were of a similar disposition. He had no real patience for opinions that were either ill-informed or required nurturing.

As she concluded that Mr. Darcy had yet another attribute to recommend himself, it reminded her that the issue of Brighton was troubling to her on a more personal level as well. As she argued with her father that Lydia needed closer supervision to ensure that she followed the proprieties required of a young lady of her station, she could not help but feel hypocritical knowing that she was flouting the same social conventions by her continuing correspondence with Mr. Darcy. She knew her situation was different because she trusted Mr. Darcy, but did that really make a difference? When other women ignored what was required of them, did they not do so because they trusted the other party involved? Did it make it any less wrong? The night before, in exasperation, Elizabeth had told her father that Lydia needed to behave more appropriately for a variety of reasons, but foremost because she owed it to her other sisters. Each of their reputations reflected on their siblings' reputations no less than it did on themselves. Her father's amused query as to whether Elizabeth had been disappointed in love because of such concerns ended the discussion, but the issue lingered on in Elizabeth's mind. How could she ignore her own words when they applied equally to her behavior?

Elizabeth sat with a blank piece of paper before her debating the best course of action with a sense of confusion difficult to reconcile. Her equivocation felt so foreign. Previously, she had always been so decided about how she should act, to the point of always believing she knew best how others should act as well. It was her nature to form opinions quickly, and once decided, she hardly ever felt the need to second-guess her decisions. That had all changed since meeting Mr. Darcy. She had misjudged Mr. Wickham with horrible result and now she saw that her lack of perception concerning Mr. Darcy had also cost her as dearly, but in a very different manner. Maybe it was the coincidence of her father's decision regarding Lydia, but whether she should write Mr. Darcy suddenly took on a significance that was hard to ignore. She knew for his sister's sake that she could not continue to write him indefinitely in the manner they had. It was conduct indefensible in a single woman and she would be embarrassed and ashamed if it became general knowledge. People would assume the worse. If she knew her behavior could not stand general scrutiny, then, by the same token, it was folly to engage in it. While it seemed unlikely that anyone would learn of their correspondence, she could not overlook the fact that they had already involved another person in the affair. While she trusted Mr. Cunningham because Mr. Darcy trusted him, his involvement simply made it more evident that they were engaged in prohibited behavior.

On the other hand, she knew that deep down she wanted to write back, but her certainty in this regard made her feel

all the more troubled. When she had thought that her correspondence with Mr. Darcy was at an end, she felt a sense of loss. When she met Mr. Cunningham and realized his purpose, her first reaction, after shock, was a flash of happiness that Mr. Darcy had gone to the trouble of continuing to write her. But it was the strength of that emotion that also made her realize the implications of what she was doing. Their correspondence had always been improper, but as she argued to her father that a woman's reputation was all she had, the impropriety of the conduct in which she was engaging became all the more apparent. It was one thing to write in order to rectify the misunderstandings that Wickham's lies had caused—and she could even convince herself that their subsequent letters were justified in order to erase some of the harsh words they had exchanged—but if she continued to write, it could only be in the hope of eliciting his approbation. It was that realization that gave her both pleasure and pain.

Despite all this, she knew she could not leave their correspondence without responding in some manner. Maybe she could just write one more letter and in it somehow make it clear to him that she had started to change her mind about him—that she would not mind seeing him again in the context of Jane's wedding. But when she attempted to put pen to paper, she could not accomplish it. She thought of herself as somewhat of a free spirit, but the rules of society that had been drilled into her since she was a girl were not so easy to ignore. How could she be candid, ladylike, proper, and still retain her dignity. It was simply not possible in the confines of a letter. She knew what she needed to do; she was simply reluctant to do it. She vowed to pen a reply before any more time had passed and she lost her nerve. She would return to Netherfield before sunset and put her letter in Mr. Cunningham's hand.

Mr. Darcy,

Thank you for your last letter. Once again, you have anticipated my reaction. I was, in fact, concerned about meeting Mr. Cunningham. I do appreciate your reassurance as to his trustworthiness, and I understand that you have put a great deal of effort into securing that our correspondence remains private. Nonetheless, while your assurances have convinced me that this is the best manner in which to undertake such an endeavor, it begs the question of whether we should be continuing to exchange letters at all. I believe we both began to write in order to correct the misconceptions that we both held against each other. That endeavor, however, now seems complete. For my part, I thereafter enjoyed getting to know you better. But I cannot continue to ignore the lack of propriety that our writing in this unchaperoned fashion entails. I appreciate the implicit compliment you have given me in seeking my opinion as to both your sister's education and the value of von Schelling's work. While I believe I would enjoy discussing politics with you, your question regarding your

sister brings me back to my original concern. I believe I have sufficiently acquainted myself with your character to know that you would not sanction such behavior from your sister. Consequently, I feel obligated to bow to the weight of propriety and familial responsibility and point out how improper our continuing correspondence would be considered. I do wish you God's grace, good health, and a safe journey to Derbyshire.

*Sincerely,
Elizabeth Bennett*

After delivering her letter, Elizabeth thought she would at least feel a sense of relief at having done her duty. But five days later, she still felt only regret. Despite having made the supreme, albeit private, sacrifice of ending her correspondence with Mr. Darcy, nothing had changed for the better. Lydia was still being allowed to go to Brighton and Jane's marriage would soon deprive Elizabeth of her most beloved sister. The prospect of being at Longbourn without the benefit of Jane's companionship left her feeling slightly desperate. While Elizabeth had known for some time that this was to happen, she had not really dwelt on it because she mainly had been engaged in trying to sketch Mr. Darcy's true character. She was startled to recognize how preoccupied she had been with thoughts of him since she had left Kent. Now without a continuing connection to him, the reality of her situation was clear, and she felt the loss. She wondered how she would occupy her mind. In such a state, even Mr. Darcy's books did not serve to divert her attention.

She knew that inevitably there would be new social occasions in Meryton to keep her busy; but, when she considered the guests who undoubtedly would be included, they held no real interest for her. She passed the time on several occasions by watching Jane and Mr. Bingley interact. Their happiness always brought a smile to her face, but it also reminded her of how fragile matters of the heart could be. A few months before, they were both heartbroken. Only a series of precipitous events had reunited them. It made her wonder how her own life would turn out. She often joked that she would be the governess of Jane's children, but suddenly that image was too painful to contemplate.

While entertaining such somber reflections, Hill came in with a communication from Netherfield for Jane. Jane explained that it was a note from Charles. He would be unable to call until the following morning, because he needed to spend the rest of the day with his steward attempting to set estate matters to right before their wedding. Jane had seen Mr. Bingley that morning at church and she recognized that his delay was likely, but Elizabeth knew that Jane would still be disappointed by the slight separation.

"I suppose, Jane, that it will just be the two of us then. I know I am a poor substitute, but I hope you will endure the deprivation."

"Lizzy, you know I like nothing better than spending time with you."

Laughing Elizabeth asked, "Even more than Mr. Bingley? I should think not."

Smiling, Jane replied, "Lizzy, I will always love you. My marriage will not change that. I think, though, that our mother will insist that I accompany her to Mrs. Long's. She had asked that I would, if Charles was not to call."

"Ah, I shall be alone again," Elizabeth laughed. "But tell me, how does Mr. Bingley get on in the management of his estate? Being something of a new endeavor for him, does he find it a challenge?"

"I think he does somewhat," Jane replied, "but I believe his steward and Mr. Darcy's steward have done much to smooth out any difficulties. He hopes that this will be the last day before the wedding that he will need to be so occupied. I must say that when I think about all of the details that are required to run an estate of that size, I find it daunting. I worry that I may not be up to the challenge of being mistress to such a large estate."

"Mr. Darcy's steward," Elizabeth stammered, "is he still at Netherfield? His name is Mr. Cunningham, is it not?—is he still helping Mr. Bingley? I thought he might have left for Derbyshire. I mean to say, I assumed that his master would have needed him at some point and that he would have left. But you say he is still at Netherfield?"

Jane looked at Elizabeth quizzically. She could fathom neither her interest nor her odd reaction. "Yes, I saw both Mr. Corbet and Mr. Cunningham yesterday at Netherfield. I am not sure when Mr. Darcy will summon Mr. Cunningham to Derbyshire, but he has only been in Hertfordshire for a short while. I did not think his departure was imminent."

"Yes, yes. You are quite right, Jane. I did not think of it that way. Jane, would you excuse me. I think I shall take a walk since you are to be off to Meryton soon. I will just go to my room to get my shawl."

Elizabeth walked into her room with a resolve she had not felt since before she had received Mr. Darcy's letter. In her mind, once she had given Mr. Cunningham her letter, her correspondence with Mr. Darcy was at an end. She thought that because Mr. Cunningham had come to Hertfordshire to serve as go between for her and Mr. Darcy, he would depart as soon as his services were no longer needed. But, of course, he had other responsibilities and, in any regard, it was probably too soon for him to have received any instruction from Mr. Darcy. That gentleman might not have even received her letter yet or taken note of it.

Elizabeth felt a giddy surge of excitement. She knew that despite her elation nothing had really changed. Yet, the fact that she still could convey a message to Mr. Darcy opened a world of possibility. Propriety still forbade her from continuing to write, but spending almost a week alone with her regret had also taught her that she did not want their correspondence to end as it had—leaving her with only the hope that she might someday see him in conjunction with a visit to Mr. Bingley. In hindsight, she had realized that while Mr. Darcy was flawed, he was also the most admirable man

she had ever met. Their relationship had been tumultuous and fraught with misunderstanding, yet it had also always been compelling. While other suitors she had known might have been more pleasing socially, Mr. Darcy, even when she disliked him, had been absorbing. Even when they had fought and had completely misunderstood each other, there was a depth of feeling there that she had never before experienced. His subsequent letters had shown her his more private self and she could not help but be impressed by his thoughtfulness, intelligence, and by the charity of spirit he had shown her. It was a connection she did not want to lose, and that realization made her wonder what would have developed between them had she been willing to understand his true character when he had wanted her to accept his suit. She also could not shake the thought of how well he seemed to know her. She had had other admirers but their interest in her always had been based on polite parlor talk and her appearance. That Mr. Darcy was still interested in her advice on his sister's upbringing after he had seen her at her worst, made her understand that their connection went deeper. Maybe she had read too much into his letters, but she would not let the opportunity pass without giving him at least some encouragement to initiate contact again. In the end, if their reunion did not turn out well, she might regret her behavior, but at least she would not regret her inaction and always wonder what might have been. Society did not often allow a woman to shape her own destiny; and, faced with the opportunity, she could not ignore it. She grabbed her shawl and a book from her father's library and walked to Netherfield.

As she approached the steps, she hoped that Mr. Bingley's sisters were not at home. On the walk, some of her resolve had dissipated. She wanted to find Mr. Cunningham, seek his cooperation, and leave. She did not feel up to the challenge of inventing an explanation for her actions to anyone else. She was not sure she completely understood herself. She only knew that she had to find a middle ground between what propriety required and what she felt drawn to do.

She was so unsettled that she did not remember exactly what she had told Mr. Bingley's butler when he answered the door. It must have been plausibly coherent because he took the book that Elizabeth said she had brought for Mr. Cunningham and asked her to wait while he determined if Mr. Cunningham was available. When the butler finally did reemerge, he asked her to follow him into a drawing room. She thought to protest. She did not really have anything more to say to the steward other than to ask him to return the book she had brought to his master, but she thought her recalcitrance would look more suspicious. As she looked into the room hoping to find Mr. Cunningham without Mr. Bingley, she gasped when she realized who actually occupied the parlor. He bowed and said in a low but somewhat breathless voice, "Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to see you again."

"Mr. Darcy!"

They stared at each other for more than was appropriate, until Elizabeth looked away in embarrassment. He gathered himself and said in a softer voice than she had heard before, "My steward said you had a book to return to me, and I thought I might take the liberty of seeing you myself. I see that you were not expecting me. I hope I have not startled you. I simply wanted to..." His voice trailed off as they both looked at each other again. He cleared his throat, looked briefly about the room, and then returned his gaze to her as he spoke again. "I hope you are well?"

Blushing, she replied, "Yes, very. Thank you."

"And, your family? I hope they are all well?"

"Yes, yes. They are all...well."

They stood in awkward silence again. Looking down at the book in his hand, he finally asked, "Mr. Cunningham said you wanted to return this book."

"Yes... I thought he would send it on to you. I did not realize... I thought you were in Derbyshire. Your last letter indicated... You had said you were removing to there."

"Yes, that was my intention, but I changed my mind and arrived here this morning. I had planned to come to Longbourn directly to...give my regards."

Unsuccessfully hiding her confusion, she stammered, "Oh... Yes, well. My sister will appreciate your thoughtfulness. She had hoped you would be here for their wedding. She knows how much your company will please Mr. Bingley."

With his brow furrowed, he looked away and then at her again. He slowly replied, "Yes, well, my congratulations are long overdue. Please tell your sister I hope to offer them in person soon." Darcy looked at her and then at the book in his hand. After an uncomfortable silence, he read the title aloud. "Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare." He looked at her and noticed her blushing. She quickly looked away. "Miss Bennet, while I appreciate your thoughtfulness in sending me this book. I have already read it, many times."

She lightly cleared her throat and replied, "Yes, I believe it is a favorite of many." She frowned at the banality of her comment.

He murmured his agreement and then looked again to the book. She waited for him to speak, but instead he simply stared at her. It reminded her of his demeanor when he had first come to Hertfordshire. In the awkwardness, she eventually spoke. "Mr. Darcy, I do not mean to interrupt your visit with Mr. Bingley, especially since you have just arrived. I should be returning and I am sure Mr. Bingley will be expecting you as well. I do hope you have a pleasant stay in Hertfordshire..."

Alarmed, he replied more forcefully that he meant, "Miss Bennet, please, I would wish to speak to you." Collecting himself he added, "Please excuse me, but may I have a moment or two more of your time?"

She bit her lip, nodded, and moved to the settee. He sat too and then impulsively stood. He paced a moment and

then abruptly stopped, absent-mindedly twisting his signet ring and stood before her. As she realized what this reminded her of, she felt her face turn scarlet. He seemed to realize his actions as well. He took a deep breath to calm himself, sat, and then slowly smiled. "When I envisioned this, it was very different."

Astonished, she simply nodded. He seemed to relax slightly and then spoke. "Miss Bennet, may I ask you a personal question?"

Unsure what he was about, she replied, "Yes, I suppose so."

"Do you think it is usually this difficult for a man to talk to a woman or is it just me, or more precisely, is it just me when I attempt to talk to you?"

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows in surprise and then replied in what she hoped was a calm tone, "Sir, I am not sure I understand you."

He smiled exposing his dimples. "Yes, I think that is for certain."

She had never seen him so engaging and the tension in the air seemed to diminish. She hardly knew what to respond, but decided to take a risk. "I was somewhat surprised to learn that you do not seem to have a similar problem when you write."

"No, you are correct, but that is because I have more time to clearly think out what I want to say and how to do it. Perhaps that is the problem, I am too slow for you, or perhaps you are too complicated."

She could not help but smile. "Too complicated? I do not think I have ever been called such a thing. I am not sure it is charitable."

"It is not meant that way, I assure you. You might be surprised to learn that some people actually think me quick-witted. It is just around you that I find myself in need of time for extra contemplation. I believe it is because your actions are not usually what one would typically expect; and, as such, I find that I must think on their ramifications before I act. As we know, I have misread you in the past and I am trying not to repeat that mistake. As a result, I hesitate more than most." He looked to her for some reassurance. He saw she was listening attentively and was perhaps a little nervous. He wished he could tell what she was thinking, but decided it would have to be enough. "For instance, since Mr. Cunningham gave me your book, I have been trying to understand what it means. Rest assured that in the minutes before you were announced, I searched diligently for a letter but was unable to locate one. I was not surprised that there was none, though. After having received your last letter, I knew you would not write again and thought that you would not contact me. That is why this last book seems so intriguing."

She interrupted him to ask, "You have already received my last letter then?"

"Yes, that is why I am here. I gave Mr. Cunningham strict instructions to send anything he received from you

to me by express. Unfortunately, I had already departed for Pemberley, so I did not receive it until after I was underway, but once I did, I changed my plans."

She could feel her heart beating faster as she replied, "And may I ask, Sir, why you felt the need to come."

His eyes took on a slightly mischievous look and he responded slowly, "Yes, you may, and in due time I will explain, but we were discussing your book, were we not? It seems too interesting a subject to drop without some resolution." He waited for a reaction, but she simply nodded her assent. "Yes, well, as I was saying, once I realized there was no letter, I tried to understand why you would want to send me this volume. That thought has been preoccupying my mind since you entered and why I think describing you as complicated is not inappropriate."

She could not help but smile back at him at this, but all she said was "I see."

"I could perhaps ask you what you meant by it, but I think I might do better to try to figure it out myself." Holding the book up to look at it, he said, "I cannot believe the selection of this title could have any specific underlying meaning or if there is one, I am at a loss. Unless, of course, you see an analogy between me and the failed Roman dictator, and I would rather think that you do not. But what does that leave?" He paused to search her face, but was rewarded with only a small, embarrassed smile. "I also imagine that you would have known that I have read the text before and that I would have my own volume as well. It is that which intrigues me the most. My volume is part of a complete set of the Bard's works, as I believe is this copy. As such, it would be missed if you gave it to me indefinitely. The set would be incomplete without it. Consequently, I think that what it may mean is that this volume, unlike the other books we have exchanged, is meant to be returned or at least I hope that is what it means."

He stared at her with such intensity she could not look away. It took her a moment to find her voice and then said, "That would be a fair estimation."

He held his breath and then said, "Then you would not have minded if I came back to Hertfordshire to return it?"

She wetted her lips before speaking and almost whispered her answer. "No, I would not."

He smiled at her for a long moment and said, "Then I am very glad I came now."

His intensity made her look away, but she could not let the opportunity pass. "Then may I ask again why you came?"

Enthralled with looking at her, he said, "Yes," and nothing more.

After staring back at her for a moment, she raised her brows in a questioning manner. He smiled and said, "Oh, yes. Why am I here. Well, it is simple enough, I suppose. When I received your last letter, I was disappointed that you thought we should not write each other further." He saw her slight frown and added. "I want you to know, though,

that I understood your reasons for doing so. They were quite correct. I never meant any disrespect by writing to you and I never meant to place you in an uncomfortable situation—and I apologize if I did." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "I... When I found your first letter and wrote back to you, I was mindful that we had parted with a great deal of acrimony between us. I did not want to assume that you would welcome any further contact... I thought sending you a letter in the manner I did would allow you to decide... When you were willing to write back, I was... immensely pleased. I thought the more we could communicate in this manner, the more you might be able to see that I had taken your reproofs to heart and that I could behave in a manner more befitting a gentleman. Your reply was more than I had hoped. You seemed to have forgiven my boorish conduct and even appeared somewhat willing to consider me a friend. I supposed as time went on, I did not want to jeopardize that by asking anything further—by seeking to see you. I was unsure of my reception and I did not want to force you into a situation you would not welcome. Continuing to write offered, I suppose, a safe alternative."

He could feel his heart beating as he watched her for a reaction. "But when I received your last letter, I knew you were correct. Our correspondence was improper and while I believed that my hesitancy in seeing you was also for your benefit, I knew it was more cowardice on my part than not." He looked at her intensely and then said, "It made me understand that I needed to face you, and perhaps further rejection, if I am ever to have any hope of finding my happiness. So, I have come to let you know, and anyone else who cares to know, that my wishes and feelings regarding you have not changed since last April. There was a time when the idea of publicly displaying my feelings would have been enough to give me pause, but now I know such a cost would be insignificant in exchange for gaining your approbation. So...I came to return a book to you."

As he looked to her for a reaction, she realized that she had been holding her breath. She suddenly understood his need for time to contemplate what had been said before speaking. She could barely organize her thoughts let alone express them. She wanted to say so much, but only managed to squeak out, "You have brought me a book?"

"Yes," he smiled at her, "quite a coincidence is it not." He felt compelled to rise and stand closer to her. "I have brought you back the original book of poetry you sent me. It has... come to mean something to me—to represent something to me. Hope, I suppose. But, I know the book does not really belong to me. The manner in which it was given does not match what it has come to symbolize. So, I wanted to return it and in exchange ask you if you would let me court you—properly. Not in secret, through written words where I can ascribe meanings that may not be meant. I would rather risk everything, including the hope that book represents, in exchange for the reality of your smile, even if it is not mine to have."

She knew that she had let her lips part in astonishment. He was staring at her with such intensity. She began to smile and then to lose herself in his eyes. As he smiled in return, and his eyes softened, she felt the connection between them become tangible. He held out his hand and she took it as she rose to meet him. He stared down at her hoping to see in her eyes his acceptance. She, in turn, searched his face, trying to understand all that he was. It brought a sweet smile to her face. "I think, Sir, I now see the description of 'complicated' in a much kinder light and would say that it also describes you."

His smile exposed his dimples and made his eyes sparkle. "Is that charitable?"

"Yes, I believe you know it is."

"But sometimes when you want to hear something so badly, you need it explained clearly before you can believe it."

It was in this heightened state that they heard Miss Bingley and Mr. Bingley approaching. Their presence seemed to change the very air in the room and they stepped apart in reluctance. Elizabeth lamented both the awkward situation in which they found themselves and that they had been interrupted before all that needed to be said could be said.

"Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley exclaimed. "My brother just told me of your return. This is such an unexpected pleasure. I am sorry that I was not notified of your arrival so that I could have greeted you properly. Welcome, Sir." She walked to him and held out her hand. He took it and bowed perfunctorily. For a moment, she basked in his attention and then turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet, I was not told of your presence at all. To what do we owe this honor?"

Darcy answered for her. "Miss Bennet and I have been discussing books. She was kind enough to lend me two volumes and I was just about to return them to her." As he held out Elizabeth's copy of Julius Caesar, he tried to convey his regret at the interruption and said, "Miss Bennet, thank you again. I enjoyed receiving this more than I can say. I will just need a few minutes to retrieve the other book from my belongings. If you would like to wait, I will see to it directly."

Elizabeth rose and took a step towards him to accept the book. While they both held it, she spoke. "Thank you, Sir. But, I think, though, that you are mistaken. I believe that if you consider it carefully, you will see that the volume of poetry you mentioned is indeed your own copy. You needn't have brought it all this way. It belongs to you, and as such should remain with you. I simply did not realize it before now." She gave him a dazzling smile. He bowed his acknowledgement without breaking her gaze. She hesitated for a moment, transfixed, and then turned to address the others. "Miss Bingley, Charles, it is a pleasure to see you again, but I fear I am missed at home."

Hiding her dismay at Elizabeth's presence, Miss Bingley dismissed her with a nod. She then attempted to move into Darcy's line of sight as he tried to watch Elizabeth. Hoping to gain his attention, Miss Bingley began a monologue. "Sir,

I am so glad you have arrived. It has been dreadfully too long. I had told Charles to insist that you come. I hope that he did and that he told you how much you were missed. He said you might not be able to come for the wedding, but I knew you would not desert us and now here you are."

As Elizabeth collected her shawl and waited to take her leave, Darcy spoke. "Thank you, Miss Bingley, Charles did, in fact, send your regards and I am sorry that I could not commit to a specific visit before now. I would be delighted to stay for the wedding as I have other business in the area as well."

Miss Bingley raised her eyebrow to convey her incredulity, "Really, Sir, I cannot imagine what could hold your interest in this neighborhood, but as it is to our benefit, I will be grateful for the fortuity of the coincidence."

Darcy, absently murmured his acknowledgement and then addressed Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet did you walk here? Could I not return you home in my carriage? Or if you prefer to walk, I could accompany you."

Elizabeth blushed. She would like nothing more than the privacy a walk would provide them. They still had so much they needed to say to one another, and she did not relish the fact that they would soon be surrounded by her family with little hope of privacy, but before she could formulate an answer, Miss Bingley spoke. "Mr. Darcy, I cannot believe you would wish to walk through our muddy fields. I know Eliza does not seem to mind, but I am sure it is because she likes the solitude. In any case, if she needs an escort, I am sure Charles is going to Longbourn. He can take her."

Looking oddly at Darcy, Bingley spoke up. "Actually, Caroline, Jane is not expecting me today. I am meeting with my steward, but if Miss Elizabeth needs an escort..."

"I have already offered her one," Darcy replied in a definitive tone. All eyes turned to him and then to Elizabeth. She suppressed a smile and then replied, "Thank you, Sir. I would welcome your company."

Panicking, Miss Bingley interrupted, "Mr. Darcy, if you feel obligated to go, so be it, but it looks very overcast, you should call the carriage. You would not want to be caught in the rain. I will hold lunch for you, as I am sure you must be famished; and, after having completed such a strenuous journey this morning, you will need your rest, Sir."

"Miss Bingley, thank you for your thoughtfulness, but that will not be necessary. I am quite content; and, if Mr. Bennet is at home to visitors, I would like to call on him. As such, I am not sure when I will return. But thank you for your consideration." He extended his arm to Elizabeth and escorted her out of the room, while both of the Bingley siblings looked on in astonishment.

As they waited on the steps for the carriage to be delivered, Darcy furtively glanced at Elizabeth. She seemed so quiet. He could not tell what she was thinking, and he worried that he had been too impulsive. He then asked, "Miss Bennet, I hope I was not too forward inside or that I embarrassed you by saying I wished to meet with your father. As

I said before, I would like to court you, and I do not care who knows of my intent, but I do not want to put you in an awkward situation nor do I want you to feel obligated. I realize that you hardly expected to see me today and that I have now forced my company upon you. If you need more time to think about...all I have said, you need only tell me. I will wait."

She looked down for a moment, smiling to herself. She then looked about to verify that no one could hear them. Gathering her courage, she turned to look at him. "No, that will not be necessary. Do not interpret my silence as either disapproval or uncertainty. I was actually just thinking about the weather." He furrowed his brow for a moment and she continued to speak. "As to what you have said, I find that I do not need any more time. I suspect that perhaps you have already been courting me for quite some time through your letters. It was actually that realization and the fact that I wanted it to continue that made me see that it was improper. It seems odd that I should feel that I know you when we have so often misunderstood one another, but I feel I do. You may speak to my father. I have no reservations."

As he took in her words, he stared down at her with all his intensity, and then whispered, "Elizabeth," as one would a caress. She gasped ever so slightly and returned his gaze with an equal strength of feeling. He then said, "You have made me so very happy."

After a moment, he whispered again. "I wish I could touch you. To hold even your hand, so that I could be sure that I am not dreaming."

She glanced around nervously, and leaned towards him. "You would think me wanton if you knew how much I would like the same." His reaction could only be seen in his face, as his eyes darkened and his lips parted. Before he could act on his desire, they heard the sounds of the carriage being readied. She stood a little straighter and attempted to take a deep breath. She knew their position was precarious and tried to regain her control. She said, in what she hoped was an unaffected tone, "At such a moment, I find it odd that Miss Bingley should be in my thoughts, but I must admit to it being so and that I feel both gratitude and scorn."

He smiled at her, amazed that she had so quickly brought them back from the impropriety he had almost committed and to have done so without any obvious disapprobation towards him. He thought her a jewel among women in every regard. His every impulse was to kiss her, to let her feel the passion he could barely contain, but to attempt such a thing on the steps of Netherfield with servants only a few feet away was beyond foolish, and he would not compromise her reputation in such a reckless manner. As his thoughts returned to the situation at hand, he contemplated what she had just said and asked, "I can generally understand scorn, but your gratitude seems harder to ascertain."

Elizabeth smiled mischievously. "My gratitude is because Miss Bingley's presence inside made me realize something,

I had begun to understand how much my feelings for you had changed when I decided to come today to give Mr. Cunningham that book, but it was only when she interrupted us and was attempting to monopolize your attention that I realized that I did not mind who else knew of your interest in me and my interest in you."

"Then I shall be forever grateful for Miss Bingley." They stared at each other with mutual warmth as the carriage arrived. He then spoke. "And may I inquire as to why you would feel scorn? You must know that I have never held her in special regard."

"Yes, that is probably the very first accurate insight I ever had into your character. My resentment stems from her own insightfulness. There is not a cloud in the sky, and I will never forgive her for insisting that you take me home in your carriage when we could have walked. I have never desired the solitude, as Miss Bingley calls it, that a walk would have afforded us as much as I do right now." He looked momentarily incredulous and then produced a languid smile that made her blush at her own forwardness. As he helped her into the carriage, he whispered, "I think dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, you might be surprised at the privacy a carriage can afford on even a trip of such short duration."

THE END