

Of Scoundrels and Suitors by Pamela St Vines A Pride and Prejudice Story

Of Scoundrels and Suitors

It is difficult to know at what moment love begins; it is less difficult to know it has begun. A thousand heralds proclaim it to the listening air, a thousand messengers betray it to the eye. Tone, act, attitude and look, the signals upon the countenance, the electric telegraph of touch, all these betray the yielding citadel before the word itself is uttered, which, like the key surrendered, opens every avenue and gate of entrance, and renders retreat impossible.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Part I

Elizabeth Bennet pounded her pillow in vexation. Were it not scandalously unladylike she might have screamed aloud in frustration. Elizabeth had been at Netherfield for three days nursing her sister Jane, and she had gotten very little sleep since her arrival. Now that Jane had begun to improve and was resting peacefully, slumber eluded Elizabeth—hence, her provocation.

Elizabeth could never resent dear Jane, and she was most willing to sacrifice the comforts of home and sleep to watch over her. However, in her fatigue and discontent, Elizabeth felt her temper rising with their mother. After all, it was Mama's silly scheming that had led to Jane's illness. Mama had deliberately sent Jane to Netherfield on horseback in the face of a brewing storm—Elizabeth stopped herself realizing that this train of thought would not do. A distraction was required if she were to sleep at all tonight.

"Perhaps a book," Elizabeth thought. Unfortunately the only books at hand were a most engrossing novel and a new volume of poetry. Neither would help Elizabeth fall asleep. Only something tedious was likely to accomplish that. Having combed through the Netherfield library several times in search of diversion, Elizabeth knew that it contained enough dull volumes for a host of insomniacs. She reached for her dressing gown, but then paused to consider the matter of her attire.

In light of the hour Elizabeth decided that she could safely venture downstairs in her nightclothes. It would be silly to bestir herself to dress when it seemed that the entire household had retired for the night, and even if she should encounter one of the servants downstairs, Elizabeth knew her attire was quite modest. Firmly resolved that there was nothing improper about her appearance under the circumstances, Elizabeth tightened the sash of her dressing gown and slipped into the hallway.

She reached the library without incident. Breathing a gentle sigh of relief, Elizabeth stepped inside the room and quietly closed the door behind her. The remains of a fire slowly dying in the grate dimly lit the room, but Elizabeth did not see the man sitting silently in the shadows. She assumed someone had recently quitted the room and was excessively grateful that she had not encountered anyone on the stairs. The soft sound of the door catching roused Fitzwilliam Darcy from his introspection. He had been sequestered here for several hours, grappling with himself over this very same young woman. In truth, Darcy had been able to think of little else these last few days. Although their acquaintance was brief, Darcy found Miss Elizabeth Bennet increasingly irresistible. He knew all the reasons he should not be attracted to her, and in an effort to disengage his affections, Darcy had continually reminded himself of her lack of fortune and connections, not to mention the serious want of propriety often exhibited by much of her family. It was all in vain. He was lost. Elizabeth's unexpected appearance brought that reality home with an unexpected force. Striving to regain his composure, Darcy rose and said, "Miss Bennet."

"Mr. Darcy," she stammered, "I do beg your pardon, sir. I assumed everyone else had retired long ago."

Elizabeth was retreating toward the door as she made her apology; however, courtesy demanded that she halt when Darcy spoke again.

"No, wait. Pray do not be alarmed or embarrassed, Miss Bennet. Your expectation of finding the library deserted is quite understandable. I have taken great pains to hide the fact that I have not been sleeping well lately. Now that you have stumbled upon my secret, I must confess that I often find myself here late at night."

Darcy reached for the coat he had removed earlier as he continued, "I assume your purpose in coming was to procure a book. Please do so. After such a start you are undoubtedly fully awake."

Perceiving no censure in him, Elizabeth rewarded the gentleman with a slight smile. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy," she said, "but you need not don your coat on my account. Your being a little less formally attired makes me slightly less uncomfortable regarding my own wardrobe."

"As you wish," he agreed pleasantly.

"Since we have agreed to dispense with a certain degree of formality," Elizabeth replied, "please resume your seat, sir, and your late night meditations. I will just select a very dull book and return to my room."

Darcy was pleased to have secured her company for a few minutes more. He nodded and resumed his seat with a smile.

"Pray do not feel you must hurry on my account, Miss Bennet," he said kindly. "Your company is not at all unwelcome. Please take all the time you need."

Elizabeth was surprised at the change in Darcy's manner. She had thought of him as forbidding and disdainful. Yet, the man before her seemed to be quite amiable. She could not resist teasing him to see which Darcy responded.

"Very well, sir," Elizabeth said with a mischievous smile, "I will stay if you are certain that my remaining long enough to select a book will not cost me your good opinion for I know that *your* good opinion once lost is lost for ever."

Darcy's response astonished her. He actually laughed—a sound Elizabeth had not heard before. She had expected the proud Mr. Darcy to despise her impertinence. She had, after all, made a jest of something he had said quite seriously, but he was not offended. In truth, Mr. Darcy seemed to be delighted.

Now Elizabeth was intrigued and embarrassed. She took pride in her ability to rapidly discern the character of others, but this reaction from Mr. Darcy was not at all consistent with the personality she had attributed to him. Elizabeth quickly turned to the nearest shelf of books to hide her discomfiture.

Darcy *was* delighted as he particularly admired Elizabeth's playfulness and her wit. He had found himself eagerly anticipating her arch observations whenever he was in her company, and to have her tease him thusly was most gratifying. In truth, Elizabeth Bennet was everything he desired in a woman—beautiful, lively, intelligent, and devoted to those whom she loved—that trait having been clearly demonstrated in her care of Jane. In a flash of insight Darcy realized just how foolish he had been to waste time resisting his attraction to her when Elizabeth suited him so exactly.

No sooner had he reached this conclusion, than Darcy felt the torment of new uncertainties. He had been so preoccupied with his feelings for Elizabeth that Darcy had not previously considered what her opinion might be of him. Darcy knew he did not appear to best advantage in unfamiliar environs. He had never completely overcome his boyhood shyness and so tended to behave awkwardly among strangers. Bingley often accused him of stalling about stupidly in social situations to avoid having to converse with his companions.

In more fashionable circles Darcy was considered eminently eligible because of his fortune and lineage. Thus he was quite adept at fending off unwanted advances, but he had never considered how he would go about securing a woman's good opinion and affections. Darcy had never indulged in flirtation as a pastime and he certainly did not want to risk Elizabeth's favor by attempting something so totally foreign to him. Therefore, Darcy quickly determined that his only prayer of succeeding with Elizabeth was in being direct—direct and persistent. He must abandon all pretense and allow Elizabeth to know how much he admired her. This was a unique opportunity for such frankness as they were alone. Darcy was also grateful for the semi-darkness of the library. Perhaps that would make it easier to speak unguardedly.

Darcy smiled at the thought that there was also little chance of Caroline Bingley interrupting them in the library at this time of night. Caroline was, of course, the sister of his friend and host Charles Bingley. While Darcy highly esteemed Bingley, the sister's determined pursuit of Darcy irritated him exceedingly. With Caroline chasing after him like a hungry hawk after its prey, Darcy knew that a chance like this one might not come again.

While Darcy was occupied with determining his strategy to pursue Elizabeth Bennet, the lady herself was slowly studying the volumes nearest the door. It mattered little what book she chose, but Elizabeth found herself strangely reluctant to make a selection. Sighing deeply, she finally grasped a tome by a French philosopher whom she had always found to be quite tedious and turned back to Mr. Darcy.

"I bid you goodnight, sir," Elizabeth said with a small curtsy. "I believe this book will suit my purpose admirably. I hope that you rest well."

"Please wait, Miss Bennet," Darcy said. "May I impose upon you to stay for a few minutes more? I realize the lateness of the hour, but I would very much like to speak with you and opportunities for private conversation are rare in this house."

Mr. Darcy's raised eyebrow left no doubt he was referring to their hostess and Elizabeth could not help laughing as she replied, "Yes, it does sometimes seem as if Miss Bingley is everywhere at once."

Encouraged by her friendly response, Darcy smiled and said, "I realize my request is irregular and might be considered improper, but I mean you no disrespect, Miss Bennet." He gestured toward the chair opposite his in front of the fire, "Please?"

Having accomplished her purpose, Elizabeth knew she should not linger, but she could not resist his invitation. Her curiosity was simply too great. Remembering a time when her company had not been so appealing to Darcy, she also could not resist teasing him again.

"Very well, sir," Elizabeth said playfully as she took the offered seat, "since you asked so nicely I suppose it would be *tolerable* to stay a few minutes longer. Yes, I do believe you asked *handsomely enough to tempt me*."

Elizabeth immediately regretted her words as a stricken expression replaced Darcy's smile. She had merely hoped to elicit another laugh from the gentleman by reminding him of the Meryton assembly and his refusal to dance with her that night. However, before Elizabeth could express her regret for the ill-considered jest, the gentleman made an apology of his own.

"Please forgive me, Miss Bennet. I am deeply ashamed of those foolish remarks. In fact, I have wanted to apologize for my rudeness many times since then, but was uncertain of how to approach you. I was in a most foul mood that evening. I was tired and anxious, and I said those stupid things

so that Bingley would leave me alone. The truth of the matter is that I *had* asked you to dance."

Elizabeth was unaware of just how much Darcy's criticism had injured her vanity until she felt the balm of his apology ease the wound. She had made a big joke of it with her family and friends at the time, but now she realized that it had bothered her considerably. Darcy was almost holding his breath, so great was his anxiety for her response.

Eager to reassure him, Elizabeth smiled and said, "Well, I am not certain that I should forgive you *entirely* just yet, Mr. Darcy. However, I will *consider* it." Darcy was immensely relieved and he returned her smile. "Thank you for *considering* it, Miss Bennet. You are too kind and I am grateful for your clemency. In truth, I fear you have not seen me at my best, as I am never at my best among strangers. My sister and I are both rather reticent and somewhat awkward with new acquaintances. I am not certain if that is an inborn trait or if it is the result of how we grew up."

Elizabeth understood that this was a side of himself Darcy revealed to few people and she was touched that he would trust her. She nodded sympathetically, and her silent solicitude gave Darcy the courage to continue.

"People are often surprised by my close friendship with Bingley, because we are near opposites in that regard. Bingley rarely meets a stranger and is delighted by every opportunity to expand his social circle. Whereas, I abhor large gatherings and usually find it difficult to converse with someone I do not know well."

Elizabeth sighed and said, "It is now my turn to apologize to you, Mr. Darcy. I must confess that I have completely misunderstood your silence. I thought-- I thought that you did not wish to become acquainted with--Meryton society."

The look Darcy gave her was such that Elizabeth felt her cheeks begin to flush. With his gaze firmly fixed upon her Darcy said, "Nothing could be farther from the truth, I assure you, Miss Bennet. Before we lay the unfortunate incident to rest, please allow me to explain. I was quite distracted the night of the assembly. Something unfortunate occurred last summer to threaten my sister's happiness, and it was much on my mind that particular evening. Had that not been the case, your loveliness would have emboldened me to dance with you."

Pleased and flattered, Elizabeth hastened to offer her reassurances.

"I am sorry for your troubles, Mr. Darcy," she said. "Please do not give the inauspicious beginning of our acquaintance another thought."

"Thank you, Miss Bennet. I do not deserve your forgiveness," Darcy replied, "but I am most grateful to have it."

Darcy desperately wanted Elizabeth to understand him, but found it difficult to overcome his habitual reticence. In hopes of composing himself before continuing, Darcy rose with murmurs of not wanting her to become chilled and added another log to the fire. Sensing there was more he wished to say, Elizabeth waited patiently until Darcy had resumed his seat. When his silence continued, she gently said, "I hope your sister is well, Mr. Darcy."

"Yes, she is in excellent health," Darcy replied. "Thank you for your inquiry, Miss Bennet. I believe Georgiana is still somewhat unhappy, but her spirits seem to be improving. One day I may request your leave to tell you more of that history, but right now there is something else I would discuss with you."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said. "I am sorry if I misspoke. I did not mean to pry."

Her care for his feelings elicited another smile from Darcy, and his tone was gentle as he said, "Pray do not trouble yourself. I only understood you to be concerned for my sister's welfare and that is most gratifying. I am uncertain how to continue, Miss Bennet, but I must. In my anxiety I am afraid that I might misspeak and I have no desire to ever again give you offense. Please indulge me if I wander."

"I cannot imagine what is on your mind, sir," Elizabeth replied, "but you may continue. I give you leave to speak to me as a friend and I will try to listen as one."

"You are very generous, Miss Bennet," Darcy said as he rose and began to pace before the fire. "As I have already confessed I am rather reserved. Therefore, I fear you know very little of my character. I, on the other hand, believe that I know a great deal about you."

He paused and stood staring into the fire for a moment. Then taking a deep breath Darcy turned to face Elizabeth before continuing.

"From the earliest hours of our acquaintance I have found myself drawn to you, Miss Bennet. Although I could not gather the courage to speak to you as I would have wished, I have observed you closely."

Darcy watched Elizabeth in silence hoping his confession had not offended her. Elizabeth, for her part, was stunned to stillness. She had most definitely been aware of Mr. Darcy watching her, but she had never understood why he did so. After a moment's reflection, Elizabeth took a deep breath and then offered him a small smile.

"I must confess, Mr. Darcy, that I have noticed--your attention upon me at various times, but until now I did not understand your purpose."

"I would imagine not since I have been foolishly attempting to hide my interest in you," Darcy replied. "I must confess that I respect and admire you more than any other woman of my acquaintance."

He paused to assess Elizabeth's response to this declaration. She appeared to be surprised, but not dismayed.

Taking that as sufficient encouragement for the present, Darcy continued, "It is my wish for you to better understand my character. Miss Bennet, would you--I hope I do not ask too much, but--would you consent to my calling upon you when you return to Longbourn?"

Elizabeth was astonished. A pointed request for permission to call upon her was tantamount to making a declaration. Mr. Darcy in love with her--it

seemed impossible, but there was no other reason for a man like Darcy to pursue her. That the proud Mr. Darcy should be humbly seeking her favor was gratifying, and Elizabeth realized that he was correct. She did not really know him at all. Elizabeth's compassion was stirred as she realized that Darcy was anxiously awaiting her reply and that he had risked much in making his request. Elizabeth decided that she would be safe in granting Mr. Darcy permission to call upon her, as that alone would not signify an acceptance of his suit, but rather permission for him to make his suit.

Lifting her eyes to meet Darcy's expectant gaze, she said, "I must confess that you have indeed taken me by surprise, sir. I find myself thinking that perhaps I do not know you at all, but I would welcome the opportunity to further our acquaintance. You are certainly welcome to call on me, sir. Beyond that I cannot go at this time. I hope my answer is to your satisfaction."

His relief was evident as Darcy whispered, "Yes, thank you, Miss Bennet. I am most grateful for your indulgence."

"You are most welcome, Mr. Darcy. Now I had best bid you goodnight."

"I look forward to calling upon you at Longbourn," Darcy said, "but having abandoned concealment, I am eager to spend time in your company. If the weather and your sister's health permit, would you, perhaps, consent to join me for a walk tomorrow morning?"

"I would enjoy that very much," Elizabeth answered with a smile, "providing of course that dear Jane continues to improve. The fresh air and exercise would restore my spirits, and Jane did seem much better this evening. I would also enjoy your company, sir."

Elizabeth's eyes shone with mirth as she added, "But however will you manage such a thing, Mr. Darcy?"

Her impish smile caused Darcy's heart to race. He knew she was thinking once more of the very determined Miss Bingley.

Giving Elizabeth a conspiratorial smile Darcy replied, "I must meditate upon a plan of action, but rest assured, I shall manage. I may be forced to subterfuge, or perhaps I will slip out before the rest of the house is up and lie in wait for you like a highwayman."

Delighted by his enthusiasm, Elizabeth laughed as she said, "Well, Mr. Darcy, I shall look forward to seeing how you make your escape. Now, I must retire. It is late and although our conduct has been quite polite and proper, it would be unseemly for us to be discovered alone at this late hour. I do hope you rest well, sir."

Darcy stood and took her hand. His voice was soft and low as he said, "Good night, Miss Elizabeth." He whispered her name as if it were an endearment. "Thank you for indulging me. I believe I shall be able to sleep after all."

Darcy softly kissed Elizabeth's hand and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

Pleased but disconcerted, she curtseyed and said, "Goodnight, sir."

As Elizabeth quitted the room Darcy resumed his seat, far more contented than he had been a short hour before. He lingered only long enough to allow Elizabeth sufficient time to be safely ensconced in her room. Then Darcy followed up the stairs, hopeful that he would be able to sleep at last.

Part II

It was a very cheerful Darcy who entered the breakfast room the next morning. For all his teasing about subterfuge and highwaymen, Darcy had characteristically decided that he would not attempt any further concealment of his intentions. If he were to woo Elizabeth properly, she must see that he was fixed in his opinions and Darcy was resolved to no longer hide his attachment for her in any way.

Bingley raised an eyebrow at Darcy's ebullient greeting. Conspicuous emotion of any kind was unusual for Darcy who hated display, but he was now clearly brimming with happiness. Bingley was far too polite to embarrass Darcy by commenting on the change in his demeanor. He did, however, allow himself some silent speculation on the source of his friend's smile. It was not terribly difficult to divine, as Bingley had noticed Darcy's attention firmly fixed upon Elizabeth Bennet whenever he was in her presence. The lady herself soon joined them, giving Bingley the opportunity to test his supposition.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," Bingley happily greeted his guest. "How fares your sister today?"

"She is greatly improved, Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth replied, "and I thank you for inquiring of her. Jane slept soundly through the night, a certain sign that she has begun to recover."

Bingley beamed as he prodded his friend, "That is excellent news, is it not, Darcy?"

"Yes, of course, Bingley," Darcy answered, his eyes firmly fixed on Elizabeth's face. "I am very glad that Miss Bennet is better, but I never doubted she would do well with such tender care."

It was not so much Mr. Darcy's words, as it was the intensity of his gaze, which caused Elizabeth to blush. She quickly turned to the sideboard to hide her confusion. Espying her blush, Darcy was encouraged to continue.

"And what of you, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked. "I hope your sister's improvement allowed you to rest well last night also."

She could not help but blush again at the very particular way he said her name. Striving for composure, Elizabeth focused attentively on buttering

her muffin as she answered, "Yes, thank you, Mr. Darcy. I must admit that I was up rather late reading, but then I slept very well, indeed."

"I am quite pleased to hear it, Miss Elizabeth. As your sister is feeling better, might I beg your company for a walk in the garden after breakfast?"

Elizabeth was astonished. Even after their conversation in the library she had expected that the private and circumspect Mr. Darcy would not be so pointed in his attentions.

Her thoughts were awl as Elizabeth smiled at him and said, "That sounds delightful, Mr. Darcy. A walk would be most refreshing and I would appreciate your company and your protection." With a mischievous smile she continued, "It is my opinion that one cannot be too careful when walking out, sir. Why there might be a highwayman hiding in the lane."

Darcy almost laughed aloud but managed to simply smirk as he answered, "You are wise, indeed, Miss Elizabeth. One cannot be too careful. I promise to protect you from any passing highwaymen in exchange for the pleasure of your company."

Bingley followed this unusual exchange with great delight. The reference to highwaymen was obviously a private joke between his companions, but Bingley was not affronted. In fact, he was quite satisfied by this evidence of growing intimacy. While he had suspected Darcy's preference for the lady, Bingley was most surprised to see his friend acting upon it and showing such particular attentions to her. For Darcy to be so direct—and after all his years of caution regarding possible matrimonial entanglements—it was no less than astonishing.

While he was not privy to their joke, Bingley also found a source of private amusement in this unusual turn of events. "How the mighty have fallen," he silently gloated to himself. Even as he inwardly chuckled at Darcy's surrender to Miss Elizabeth's charms, the ever good-natured Bingley resolved to aid Darcy by intervening with Caroline.

When she had finished her breakfast, Elizabeth left the gentlemen to see how Jane fared and collect her shawl. A very pleased Darcy remained at the table, planning to enjoy another cup of tea with Bingley as he awaited her return. Unfortunately Caroline swept in shortly after Elizabeth had quitted the room, and the convivial atmosphere evaporated quickly. The remains of Elizabeth's breakfast on the table attested to her earlier presence, as Caroline's sister Louisa and her husband Mr. Hurst were not early risers. Caroline also preferred to sleep in until a more fashionable hour. However, Darcy was an early riser, and she would not willingly forego any opportunity to be in his company. Suspecting Darcy's interest in Elizabeth Bennet, Caroline resented her greatly and could not resist an opportunity to disparage her.

"Well, I see Miss Eliza has come and gone," she said with a sneer. "No doubt she is out combing the countryside, being such an excellent walker."

Determined that Caroline Bingley of all people should realize the depth of his regard for Elizabeth, Darcy said, "No, Miss Elizabeth has gone upstairs to see her sister and to fetch her wrap. She has graciously agreed to accompany me on a walk this morning."

"But, Mr. Darcy," Caroline cried in alarm, "Miss Eliza should stay with her sister. I can accompany you myself."

"I thank you for the offer, Miss Bingley," Darcy said firmly, "but I *must* decline. I was delighted when Miss Elizabeth accepted my invitation. I have been wanting to speak with her regarding my sister for some time, and a stroll through the gardens will provide me that opportunity while also allowing Miss Elizabeth the fresh air and exercise she has denied herself recently in concern for *her* sister."

In an effort to change the subject Darcy then added, "It will please you, no doubt, to hear that Miss Bennet is somewhat improved today."

"Yes, that is wonderful news, is it not, Caroline?" Bingley chimed in. He was absolutely delighted to see Darcy stand up to Caroline on behalf of Elizabeth Bennet, and although Darcy was still polite, he was less so than was his usual manner. Knowing Darcy as he did, Bingley could only conclude that Darcy was firmly resolved to have the second Bennet daughter for his wife. Bingley stifled a laugh as he recalled how often Darcy had chided him for *his* impulsiveness.

Then remembering his resolve to help smooth the way for his friend, Bingley said, "I think this morning would be an excellent opportunity for us to discuss some household matters, Caroline. When you have finished your breakfast, perhaps you will accompany me to my study."

Almost choking in her anger, Caroline protested, "But Charles, I feel the need of some air myself and any household concerns can surely wait."

"No, Caroline," Bingley said with surprising firmness. "I think not. Therefore, I must insist upon your presence immediately after breakfast."

Darcy realized what Bingley was about. It would not be beneath Caroline Bingley to insinuate herself into his walk with Elizabeth even after he had pointedly refused her company, and Bingley—bless him—was trying to prevent it. Darcy gave his friend a small nod of gratitude when Caroline was not looking, and the exuberant Bingley actually winked back. Before the irate Caroline could devise a new stratagem, Elizabeth reappeared in the doorway.

"Good morning, Miss Bingley," she said pleasantly.

"Miss Eliza," was Caroline's curt reply.

Ignoring Caroline's glare, Darcy walked to Elizabeth's side as he said, "If you are ready for our walk, Miss Elizabeth, then so am I. Please allow me to assist you."

He reached for her shawl and carefully settled it around Elizabeth's shoulders before offering her his arm. "Shall we?"

The remaining occupants of the breakfast room were of very different frames of mind on viewing their departure. Bingley was admiring his friend's resolve and daring. Although he thought very highly of Jane Bennet, Bingley was certainly not ready to think seriously of marriage—yet. Caroline, on the other hand, was so vexed that she could only think of how much she hated Elizabeth Bennet.

It was a lovely autumn morning--perfect for walking out--but an awkward silence settled upon them when Darcy and Elizabeth left the house. Dispensing with the usual constraints of polite conversation had seemed quite natural in their *tete-a-tete* the night before. However, Darcy found himself uncertain of how to continue in the clear light of day, and Elizabeth, for her part, was momentarily lost in thought. Had Darcy been privy to the workings of her mind, he would have felt considerably more at ease.

Mr. Darcy's attentions to her in front of the Bingleys had pleased Elizabeth very much. They had exceeded her expectations and Elizabeth was flattered. In truth, she was more than flattered. She found herself stirred by Mr. Darcy's presence beside her and Elizabeth blushed as she recalled the way he had looked at her across the table. Feeling that such efforts on his part deserved some reward and sensing the return of Mr. Darcy's shyness, Elizabeth resolved to ease his discomfort as best she could. Smiling up at him, she began the conversation to Darcy's great relief.

"Well, Mr. Darcy," she said playfully, "shall we begin your journey of self-disclosure by discussing the weather? Or perhaps, we should debate the relative merits of Meryton and London?"

Darcy's anxiety was assuaged considerably by her teasing. Smiling down at her warmly he said, "I believe the fine morning speaks for itself, Miss Elizabeth and if I am not mistaken, the town versus country theme has already been covered in a recent discussion with your mother."

Elizabeth greatly appreciated his speaking of her mother's ill behavior with such apparent good will, and her smile grew as she said, "Yes, Mr. Darcy, I believe you are right. I must admit that sometimes proper conversation can be down right dull."

"After your indulgence last evening, I had hoped that we might dispense with certain formalities when in private conversation, Miss Elizabeth. That is, if it would be agreeable to you?" Darcy gazed down at her fondly and hopefully.

Hearing again the gentle caress in the way he said her name, Elizabeth almost sighed aloud. Although she had always considered Mr. Darcy to be quite handsome, Elizabeth had never seen him without his mask of reserve carefully in place--at least not until their chance meeting in the library. Now the light in his eyes and his gentle manner of address were almost irresistible. Pausing and turning towards him, Elizabeth exerted herself to speak with more composure than she felt.

"I think that might be agreeable, Mr. Darcy. You may consider yourself free to speak of any number of subjects when we are in private conversation. I feel I can allow you that liberty. Be advised though that this will also free me to speak my mind, and if I disapprove your choice of topic I will not hesitate to reproach you."

The saucy smile that played about her lips almost undid Darcy completely. He placed his hand over the smaller one resting lightly on his arm.

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth," he said. "You are very generous. Based on my recent behavior I may not deserve your good opinion, but I am most determined to earn it."

As he spoke, Darcy gently squeezed her fingers and then left his hand resting lightly atop hers. Elizabeth felt herself blush as her heart began to race. Two days ago this would have been inconceivable, but now she felt herself being drawn to him.

"Mr. Darcy, I find your most recent behavior very pleasing," Elizabeth said, resorting to wit as a distraction from her own roiling emotions. "Now as for two days ago, well let us say that you have *begun* to redeem yourself in my eyes, sir."

Laughing with delight Darcy answered, "I believe that could be a life long endeavor, madam, and one which I would gladly undertake."

The last phrase was almost a whisper, but the deepening blush across Elizabeth's cheeks confirmed that she had heard him. She understood him, but did not chide him--this greatly encouraged Darcy. Not wishing to press her, Darcy exerted himself to continue in a lighter tone.

"Well, Miss Elizabeth, I am yours to command," he said with a smile. "Shall we confine our walk to the formal gardens or shall we venture off on one of your notorious rambles through the countryside?"

"I am quite content either way, Mr. Darcy," she assured him. "I do often wander far, but the gardens will do well enough."

"If you leave the decision to me," Darcy replied, "then I will opt for the countryside. New scenery is always refreshing and--" Darcy paused and leaned towards Elizabeth's ear to whisper, "Walking abroad might ensure that we will be able to continue our private conversation in private."

This elicited a bright smile from Elizabeth as she answered, "Well, then sir, let us away before we are delayed by an over attentive hostess."

By the time Caroline Bingley escaped from her brother's study, Darcy and Elizabeth were no longer in sight of the house. She was, therefore, forced to take consolation in abusing the staff and thinking of her own superiority over the likes of Eliza Bennet.

Meanwhile Darcy and Elizabeth had a delightful morning. One slight misunderstanding almost marred the day, but was quickly set to rights. It occurred when Darcy suggested they speak of their families. Still embarrassed over her mother's indecorous remarks and overt hostility towards Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth misunderstood his meaning and grew defensive.

"I am sorry, sir," she said somewhat stiffly. "While my family may leave something to be desired in your eyes, they *are* my family. Such a discussion would not be suitable."

Darcy was momentarily confused. When he realized that Elizabeth thought he was referring to her family--perhaps, her mother's visit to Netherfield the previous morning--Darcy hastened to explain.

"Please do not think I meant anything derogatory towards your family," he assured her. "I was thinking that you might allow me to tell you of my relations. I currently have the advantage over you in that I am at least acquainted with your family, while you know almost nothing of mine."

Darcy spoke with patent sincerity, and Elizabeth was embarrassed by her quickness to think ill of him. The hand she placed once more upon Darcy's arm was trembling as she said, "I beg your pardon, sir. I misunderstood you entirely. I must confess that I sometimes have trouble understanding my family myself. Therefore, I wrongly assumed that you were thinking ill of them."

"Pray do not trouble yourself, Miss Bennet," Darcy reassured her. "I must admit that I do not admire your family as I do you. However, they *are* your family and, therefore, due my respect and gratitude."

"Your gratitude, sir?" Elizabeth asked in confusion.

"Yes, my gratitude," Darcy repeated with a slight smile. "Without your family, you would not be the woman I so admire."

The deepest of blushes spread across Elizabeth's face, as she understood Mr. Darcy's meaning. "Thank you, sir. Perhaps, it is safest if we talk of your family for now. Please tell me about your sister," a now smiling Elizabeth requested, "for I am certain that Miss Bingley has not done her justice."

"No, she has not," Darcy happily agreed. He was relieved by the return of easiness between them and delighted by Elizabeth's interest in his nearest relation.

"For all her praise of Georgiana's accomplishments, Miss Bingley does not know my sister all that well and I am certain she does not understand her," Darcy continued. "Of course, as her elder brother and guardian, I find Georgiana puzzling at times myself. I suppose it is not surprising that a lonely bachelor would not understand the emotions of his fifteen-year-old sister. Yet, in spite of my occasional bafflement, Georgiana is very dear to me."

Elizabeth was moved by the tender way in which Darcy spoke of his sister. It was plain that he cared for her deeply.

"You see, Miss Bennet," Darcy continued, "in terms of immediate family Georgiana is all I have. Our mother died when Georgiana was just a little thing. Our father survived some years without her, but he was not the same man after my mother's death. He tried to be strong for us, but I was on my own in many ways long before he died. It fell to me to look after my younger sister, as well. When my father died he left Georgiana to my care. My cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam and I share her guardianship."

"I am sorry, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth began. "I did not realize you--well, to lose both parents and then to have such responsibility thrust upon you--it must have been a very trying time for you. I cannot imagine what it would be like to suddenly find myself responsible for everything at Longbourn, much less to have the onus for raising my younger sisters--"

"Thank you, Miss Bennet," he whispered, inordinately pleased by her response. In true Darcy fashion he had only told the facts of the matter, but Elizabeth had grasped how he felt. Eager to see her smile again Darcy dared to playfully reply, "Of course, your younger sisters might be more of a challenge than mine."

No sooner had the words escaped his lips, than Darcy feared he might have offended her--so great was the expression of surprise on Elizabeth's lovely face. His anxiety was short-lived, however, for once she grasped that the somber Mr. Darcy had actually made a joke, Elizabeth dissolved into laughter.

Their conversation rambled on much like their walk, flowing easily in divers directions. They not only talked of Darcy's family, but also of their respective histories and a shared love of literature. Darcy could not say how he began the subject, but he found himself confiding in Elizabeth what he had previously told no one save his nearest relations. He talked to her of Wickham.

As the son of the late Mr. Darcy's steward, Mr. Wickham was intimately connected with the Darcy family. He had grown up at Pemberley and had been the protege of Darcy's father. Sadly, Wickham was as selfish and immoral as he was charming, and he had abused the Darcy family's trust on more than one occasion, culminating the previous summer in an attempted elopement with Darcy's sister. This was the painful circumstance that had preyed upon his mind the night of the assembly.

"--I honestly cannot say if Wickham was intent upon marrying Georgiana for her fortune or--something even more sinister. I believe him capable of almost anything, and his resentment towards me due to the difference in our stations is great. Whatever Wickham's design, her life would have been destroyed. Being young and naive--she was barely fifteen--Georgiana easily believed that he loved her. Fortunately I arrived unexpectedly for a visit and Georgiana confessed their plan before it was too late."

The two of them were seated side by side upon a stile and Elizabeth instinctively took his hand in hers as Darcy haltingly told this harrowing tale. Seeing his drawn expression she knew that he was still tormented by grief and anguish over the episode.

"Pray, sir, do not distress yourself so," she attempted to encourage him. "That will be of no help to your poor sister. Miss Darcy must see that you have recovered so that she will not grieve over your misery as well as her own."

"Grieve over my misery--" Darcy paused, as this was an entirely new thought for him.

"My misery," he repeated at last. "I think you may be right, Miss Elizabeth. Georgiana has always been so anxious to please me, and I have been so engrossed in despising myself for not protecting her that I did not comprehend I might be multiplying her unhappiness. Why did I not see it before? To think that I may have caused her more pain."

"Please--you must not blame yourself, sir," Elizabeth said. "You are a kind brother, and I am confident you have done all that is within your power to secure your sister's happiness. Sometimes there are things we simply cannot control. Storms come and we must weather them as best we can. I am certain that your sister must have a strength of character similar to your own and she will be able to emerge from this cloud."

Elizabeth was suddenly cognizant that she was holding Mr. Darcy's hand. She gently loosed it to withdraw her own. Darcy, however, prevented this by grasping Elizabeth's hand quite firmly. He gazed at her intently until Elizabeth raised her eyes to meet him. Only then did he speak.

"Thank you, Eliza--Miss Elizabeth. Although you have never met Georgiana I fear you may understand my sister better than I do. I think my aunt, Colonel Fitzwilliam's mother, was trying to tell me something like this when she insisted that I 'take myself off' and leave Georgiana with her for a prolonged visit. However, I did not take her meaning then."

Eager to lighten his mood, Elizabeth adopted a playful tone as she said, "I must conclude that your aunt is a very wise woman, Mr. Darcy, as we are in agreement."

This tack drew a small smile from him, making Elizabeth feel inordinately pleased. However, the bounds of propriety had been stretched far enough for one morning. Realizing this, Elizabeth reluctantly rose and said, "I am certain I should enjoy making your aunt's acquaintance someday, as well as your sister's. However, my sister is probably missing me right now. As much as I have enjoyed our morning ramble, Mr. Darcy, I think we had best return to the house."

Darcy nodded his agreement, and the pair walked back towards Netherfield in a companionable silence, each well content with their time together. As they neared the house, Darcy halted.

Turning to face her, he hopefully asked, "Do I still have your permission to call upon you when you return to Longbourn, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Yes, sir," Elizabeth replied with an impish smile. "That would please me very much--provided, of course, that you continue to be suitably charming and attentive."

Darcy's heart leapt at the arch manner of her reply. To be the chosen object of Elizabeth's playfulness fortified his hopes of securing her affections. Darcy felt an almost irresistible urge to take her in his arms, but duty demanded that he be content with bestowing the gentlest of kisses upon her hand--for now. Darcy had thought himself totally captivated by Elizabeth before their meeting in the library. Yet, those emotions signified nothing when compared with what he felt for her at this moment. Everything Darcy learned of Elizabeth increased his ardor. He could help but wonder what would it be like after years of loving her. Seeing her still gazing up at him expectantly, Darcy smiled. He kissed her hand again and stood silently for a moment staring fondly down at her.

Finally he said, "I do not wish to impose upon you, Miss Elizabeth, but I fear I asked the wrong question last night."

To Elizabeth, it seemed as if her heart had stopped and Darcy's momentary pause felt like an eternity of waiting. She was vastly relieved and found that she could breathe again when Darcy resumed speaking.

With his eyes firmly fixed upon hers, Darcy said, "May I request your father's permission to court you, Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth's heart beat faster as she returned his gaze, and it was only by considerable effort that she managed a coherent reply.

"We have not been acquainted long, sir," she said. "Are you certain that you wish to make your private actions quite so public?"

"I know that you have not accepted me yet," Darcy assured her, "but my affections and wishes are firmly fixed. It is my desire to show you every possible honor, and thus I would like to make my intentions known."

Darcy's tone softened considerably as he continued, "If it is *your* preference that I not declare myself, I will wait until you are ready. Be assured, however, that I know my own mind in this. The real question is what do you desire, dearest Elizabeth?"

She could not help herself. Elizabeth trembled to hear him address her so intimately. She was amazed at how quickly her feelings for this man had undergone such a material change. Darcy, who was anxiously awaiting her reply, misinterpreted Elizabeth's delay in answering him.

"Please forgive me, Miss Bennet," he said with great civility. "You are chilled and I am keeping you out here selfishly. I did not mean to press you."

Instinctively Elizabeth placed her right hand on his lapel, and Darcy immediately fell silent as his hopes began to rise anew.

"You misunderstand me, sir," she whispered. "I am not cold."

Elizabeth was deeply touched by Darcy's request to formally court her. Yet, she was concerned that he did not fully understand all that would ensue if she agreed.

The small hand resting lightly on Darcy's chest reassured him that Elizabeth was not resolved against him. Hoping that she would either accede to his request or explain the cause of her hesitancy, Darcy asked again very gently, "Then have I your permission to speak with your father?"

Unable to face him Elizabeth finally ventured to say in a small voice, "It is not my *father* I am thinking of, sir."

Darcy's was immensely relieved as he grasped her meaning. Not her father--Elizabeth was fearful of her mother's behavior once Mrs. Bennet learned of his intentions. Eager to set her mind at rest, Darcy covered Elizabeth's hand with his own.

"I hope that your mother's opinion of me will improve upon closer acquaintance," he said. "Pray, do not worry, dearest. I have managed to withstand the raptures and machinations of many determined mothers, whose daughters did not interest me in the least. In the present instance, I hope to not only be allowed the pleasure of your company, but I also hope for your mother's assistance in persuading you of my charms." Elizabeth smiled, thinking that he was undoubtedly an excellent judge of character. A knowledge of Darcy's preference for one of her daughters--even her least favorite--would surely erase Mrs. Bennet's ill will. In fact, Elizabeth realized her mother would immediately become his champion and ally. Impressed anew by Darcy quickness and determination, she agreed to his request.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, you may ask my father's permission to court me." Then giving him a radiant smile, Elizabeth added, "I must confess that your bravery is commendable, sir."

"Thank you," Darcy said, his relief and joy apparent on his countenance. "Then I shall call upon your father before I call on you. Be advised, my love, that I am rather impatient. I shall restrain myself until the day after you return home, but I will not wait any longer."

"I am warned, but I am not afraid of you, sir," she teased him. "However, I had best warn you in return, Mr. Darcy. I am rather impatient myself which sometimes leads me to be impulsive. Whether that is a fault or a virtue I am not certain. It seems to depend upon the circumstances."

Darcy gently squeezed her fingers as he said, "As long as you will have me in the end, I am not afraid of you, dearest."

Elizabeth knew not how to properly answer such a statement, so she did not attempt it. Instead, she merely smiled up at him. If Darcy had found her charming before when she treated him with cold politeness, he found her utterly and completely adorable now.

Elizabeth felt exultant and yet disquieted, too. Although she was not anxious to part from Darcy, Elizabeth decided she must withdraw for a time to collect herself.

"Thank you for the walk, sir," she said, "but I had best go in to my sister."

"By all means," Darcy said agreeably. "Please allow me to see you to her door."

And he did. Neither of them spoke again as they made their way inside. Upon reaching the door to Jane's room, Darcy again kissed her hand with a tenderness that made Elizabeth feel faint. He then pressed her hand to his chest as he leaned in to whisper, "Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. You have made me very happy."

Elizabeth smiled up at him with shining eyes, and somehow managed a curtsey before slipping into her sister's room. Jane was feeling much better and happily asked if she had enjoyed her walk. Elizabeth did her best to reply in her normal manner, but Jane was enough improved to realize her sister was quite preoccupied. She smiled patiently, certain that Elizabeth would confide in her when she was ready.

At present Elizabeth was in no mood for conversation. She wanted to think about all that had happened since last night. She felt the need to review every detail of her conversations with Mr. Darcy so that she might adjust to the change in her own feelings before speaking of it. To mask her distraction, Elizabeth began bustling about, plumping the pillows and smoothing the covers. In short, she latched onto any activity that might contribute to Jane's comfort and cover her own introspection. All too aware of her sister's abstraction, Jane was far too considerate to accept Elizabeth's offer to read to her.

"No," she said, "I think I would just like to move to the chair and enjoy the sunshine streaming in through the window, Lizzy."

Elizabeth was eager to please her dearest sister and soon had Jane comfortably settled by the window. She then positioned herself on the settee and pretended to sew. Elizabeth was so preoccupied that she did not realize her face was alive with expression as she relived her recent encounters with Mr. Darcy, first in the library, and then on their morning walk. Jane watched her sister surreptitiously even as she pretended to be absorbed in the outdoor scenery. She could not help it. Elizabeth's constantly changing countenance was fascinating.

It was quite some time before Elizabeth became conscious of her sister's engrossed surveillance. When she became aware of Jane's scrutiny, a deep blush began to rise across Elizabeth cheeks, and seeing the blush, Jane actually giggled.

"You must be feeling better, Jane," Elizabeth said dryly, "and I am glad to be the source of such amusement."

"Oh, Lizzy, please forgive me," Jane quickly apologized. "I did not mean to offend you, but I have not been able to help myself. Your mind's activity has been reflected in your rapidly changing facial expressions. It was as if you were playing all the parts in a play yourself. It was truly mesmerizing, but I am very sorry to have encroached upon your solitary musings. Please do not feel that you must confide in me--" Jane's voice dropped to a whisper as she added, "Although I would dearly love to know what has you so absorbed."

Elizabeth sighed. She could never conceal anything from Jane for long. They were far too close for that, and of all the family Jane was most sensitive to Elizabeth's feelings.

"Please do not trouble yourself, Jane," Elizabeth reassured her. "I would eventually tell you all anyway. I have just been trying to puzzle it out. My emotions have suddenly undergone such a material change that I find my thoughts are unable to keep up."

Seeing Elizabeth's hesitancy to continue, Jane softly prompted, "Does this have anything to do with Mr. Darcy, Lizzy?"

"How did you know?" Elizabeth asked with a start.

It was now Jane's turn to blush. She shifted uncomfortably before answering, but her eyes were merry as she said, "Sometime after you left for your walk this morning, one of the maids came in to take my breakfast tray. She left the door slightly ajar and I could not help but overhear Miss Bingley. From the sounds of it, she and Mrs. Hurst were walking towards the stairs, and I decidedly heard Miss Bingley saying something like 'That country upstart would certainly not win *her* Mr. Darcy.' Since Miss Bingley would never risk Mr. Darcy overhearing such a remark, I ventured to guess that the two of you were walking together. Were you, Lizzy?"

"Yes," Elizabeth replied. Her voice was even but she flushed furiously as she said, "I was out walking with Mr. Darcy this morning. I have so much to tell you, Jane, but first you must let me take a moment to delight in how clever you were to figure it out."

"If it helps, Lizzy, my first impression of Mr. Darcy was quite different from yours," Jane said gently. "I thought he might be so withdrawn simply

because he is shy. I also know that Mr. Bingley thinks very highly of Mr. Darcy which is to his credit."

"Oh, Jane," Elizabeth said with a sigh, "you were right all along. I let that silly slight at the assembly color my judgment, and I have been very unfair to Mr. Darcy in my suppositions. It is humiliating to realize that I, who pride myself on my ability to readily comprehend another's nature, have been so wrong."

"So then I would hazard a guess that Mr. Darcy's ill chanced remark that you were 'not handsome enough to tempt him,' does not reflect his true opinion of you, Lizzy."

"No," Elizabeth said quietly. "Mr. Darcy's opinion of me is, in fact, quite the opposite. He has assured me of his admiration and his intentions." Her voice was barely audible as she spoke the last word.

"Intentions," Jane gasped. "Oh, Lizzy, this is too much. What did he say? How did you respond?"

"I have not accepted him if that is what you mean," Elizabeth replied, "but I have agreed that I would welcome the opportunity for us to become better acquainted. I have given Mr. Darcy permission to call upon me. In fact, being the man of honor that he is, Mr. Darcy is insistent upon asking our father's formal permission to court me."

Jane was delighted at the possibility of a union between her dearest sister and Mr. Bingley's dearest friend. Yet, she was torn by a concern for her sister's happiness.

"Lizzy, you would not consider marriage to a man you did not love, would you?" Jane asked. "Please, let me not have that concern for you."

"No, Jane, I remain steadfastly determined that I will marry only for love," Elizabeth reassured her. "I have not made any promises to Mr. Darcy. Yet, he is willing to risk public scrutiny and humiliation in the hope of winning my hand. I must admit that it is both sobering and flattering to have such a man so determined to win my favor. Although we have been acquainted some weeks, I do not think I knew Mr. Darcy at all until last night when he asked me to walk with him."

Jane beamed at her sister. For anyone to admire Elizabeth seemed only natural to Jane's affectionate heart, but the knowledge that Mr. Darcy was so determinedly in love with her dearest sister greatly increased Jane's admiration and respect for the gentleman.

"Now, Jane, are you enough improved that we might return home?" Elizabeth inquired. "As Mr. Darcy has made his intentions quite obvious to our hosts, I feel we had best return to Longbourn as soon as possible. I do not think Miss Bingley will be able to countenance my presence for much longer."

"I think I am much better," Jane replied. "Perhaps even well enough to venture downstairs this evening after dinner. If all goes well, perhaps we could send to Longbourn for the carriage tomorrow morning."

Elizabeth's expressed delight was all for Jane's improvement, but she was equally joyful at the prospect of their returning home soon. Spending the rest of the day above stairs with Jane, Elizabeth had no further opportunities to be in Darcy's company until the evening. Caroline Bingley, of course, made certain Elizabeth and Darcy were seated far apart at dinner, making any conversation between them impossible. However, Elizabeth was not insensible of Mr. Darcy's attentive manner when he insisted upon escorting her to the table. Neither could she ignore how often his gaze was fixed upon her during the meal. If Miss Bingley were not so haughty and ill bred in her behavior, Elizabeth would have been tempted to feel sorry for her. The lady was determined in her attempts to charm Darcy and he, though always polite, was equally determined in offering her no encouragement.

When the ladies withdrew after dinner, Elizabeth slipped upstairs to assist Jane, and by the time the Bennet sisters entered the drawing room, the gentlemen were already in attendance. Elizabeth helped Jane settle in comfortably by the fire and was soon easy leaving her to Mr. Bingley's exuberant attentions. Elizabeth selected a seat on a nearby sofa and was joined by Darcy almost immediately.

"Miss Elizabeth, I have observed that you seem to have quite a diverse taste in books," he began. "Perhaps, we might discuss one that we have both read. Do you care for French philosophers?"

Although Darcy's expression was placid, Elizabeth could not miss the glint in his eye and she nearly laughed aloud. "That is an interesting place to begin a discussion of literature, Mr. Darcy," she said with a smile. "Are the French philosophers perhaps a passion of yours?"

"No," he happily replied. "I actually find them most useful when I need assistance in sleeping."

"Are you often troubled by lack of sleep, Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth inquired.

"No, not usually," Darcy said. "However, I must confess that since coming into Hertfordshire I have had some difficulty in that area. My fascination with certain charms of the countryside has proven a detriment to my rest."

Amazed at his boldness, Elizabeth could not help blushing. Seated where they were, it was impossible for Miss Bingley to join their conversation. Therefore, she was desperate for a way to disengage Darcy's attentions from her rival and draw them to herself. When she was nearly beside herself with jealousy, Caroline requested that Elizabeth indulge them with a song.

Elizabeth readily agreed, as politeness demanded she must. Giving Darcy a conspiratorial smile she rose and said, "Please excuse me, Mr. Darcy. I must oblige our hostess."

To Elizabeth's surprise and Caroline's chagrin, Darcy also rose and escorted Elizabeth to the pianoforte.

"I am certain your performance will delight us all," Darcy said. "Please allow me to turn the pages for you."

Caroline was stunned, as she had never known Darcy to turn pages for anyone. What was he about, displaying such marked attentions to Eliza Bennet of all people?

After perusing the available sheet music Elizabeth turned to her companion and said, "Well, sir, since you have volunteered your assistance, I will allow you to choose." Holding out two scores she asked, "Would you prefer the Mozart or the Handel?"

Darcy spoke decidedly, "The Mozart, it is a personal favorite."

He enjoyed Elizabeth's performance immensely. It was not only the delightful way in which she sang, but also the thrill of sitting beside her. Darcy was so distracted by her nearness that he was late turning the page several times. Fortunately Elizabeth knew the aria well, so she and Darcy were the only ones aware of the gentleman's inattention to his duty.

At the conclusion of her song, Elizabeth politely requested that Miss Bingley oblige them by performing next. Considering this a perfect opportunity to demonstrate her superiority over the likes of Elizabeth Bennet, Caroline assented and even dared to ask Darcy if he would remain and turn the pages for her.

Darcy politely declined saying that unfortunately he needed to finish a letter to his sister, but he would enjoy hearing her play as he attended that task. Elizabeth gladly offered herself in his stead, but was assured that Miss Bingley had no need of assistance after all.

In consideration of Miss Bingley's feelings, Darcy escorted Elizabeth back to her seat and then situated himself at the nearby desk to begin a letter to his sister. After the morning's conversation with Elizabeth, Darcy was determined to set Georgiana at ease about his own frame of mind. The thought that his own regrets might actually be adding to his sister's unhappiness was most distressing, and Darcy hoped to lift any such burden from her. Of course, Darcy's genuine concern for his sister was quickly overcome by the pleasant distraction of Elizabeth's presence. Darcy found the letter difficult to complete, for his mind frequently wandered from the task at hand and he was quickly reduced to watching Elizabeth. The lady herself was reading a book she had selected from the nearby table, but she quickly felt Darcy's gaze upon her. Looking up to meet his eyes, Elizabeth warmly returned his fond smile.

Although delighted by Mr. Bingley's attentions, Jane was not so wholly diverted as to remain unaware of the change in Mr. Darcy's behavior towards her sister. She was gratified to observe the ready evidence of his affection and to see her sister's pleased acceptance of his attentions. Jane had already believed Mr. Darcy to a man of great intelligence and integrity. She now believed that he was also capable of deep feeling. Having long worried that their limited social sphere would prevent Elizabeth's meeting a man who could fully appreciate her quick wit and warm heart, Jane delighted in the thought that Mr. Darcy might be just such a man.

Caroline Bingley chose an extremely difficult sonata to showcase her superior technique on the pianoforte. However, Darcy seemed unimpressed. Still determined to command his attention, Caroline abandoned the instrument and tried a new stratagem. She asked Elizabeth to join her for a turn about the room. This succeeded in that Mr. Darcy's attention was immediately arrested. However, Miss Bingley derived no pleasure from this fact as his gaze was fixed upon her companion. Although Darcy made several flirtatious remarks, they were most decidedly not directed at Caroline. In fact, she found herself entirely left out of his verbal exchange with Elizabeth, for Caroline's wit was not quick enough to keep pace with them. While Caroline was steadily growing more vexed, Darcy and Elizabeth both seemed to be quite invigorated by their spirited conversation.

Soon after the ladies resumed their respective seats, Darcy completed his letter and returned to Elizabeth's side. He spoke to her quietly so that no one else would be able to distinguish his meaning.

"I have tried to allay my sister's concern for me and assured her that I am resolved to think on *that* situation no more," Darcy said. Then staring intently into Elizabeth's eyes he added, "I have also written to her of my own present happiness, in hopes that a knowledge of my contentment will improve Georgiana's spirits. Thank you for helping me to understand what she might be feeling."

Elizabeth colored with pleasure and she smiled up at him in such a way that Darcy thought he would not be able to bear it.

"I pray your letter achieves your purpose, sir," she said sweetly. "Will you not invite Miss Darcy into Hertfordshire? Perhaps a change of scene would help improve her spirits."

Barely able to restrain himself from taking her hand, Darcy replied, "That is an excellent suggestion, Miss Elizabeth. I know that coming into Hertfordshire has done much to improve my own spirits."

Unable to abide watching the two of them any longer, Caroline loudly remarked that Jane looked tired and suggested she consider retiring. No one present believed that Caroline was seriously concerned for Jane's health. However, the hour was growing late, so Elizabeth readily acquiesced to their hostess's suggestion. Murmuring a quiet, "Goodnight, dear sir," to Darcy, Elizabeth then bid the company goodnight and escorted Jane back to her room.

When Jane had changed into her nightclothes and was comfortably settled into bed, Elizabeth sat down beside her and took her hand. Although they had not shared a room for many years, it was still the sisters' custom to have a private chat before retiring to their separate chambers for the night.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Elizabeth asked solicitously.

"No, I am content, Lizzy," Jane reassured her. "I am only a little tired. May I say that the change in your Mr. Darcy is quite remarkable? I have never seen him smile so."

Despite her best efforts Elizabeth felt her color begin to rise as she protested, "Now, Jane, he is not *my* Mr. Darcy."

"Oh, I think he is," Jane gently insisted. "Every one of his smiles tonight was for you, and the smile of Mr. Darcy's countenance when he smiles is quite remarkable. I am very pleased for you."

Eager to change the subject, Elizabeth could not help teasing Jane in return. "Tell me, dear Jane, how did you enjoy Mr. Bingley's company this evening? He seemed quite attentive."

It was Jane's turn to blush now as she said, "Oh, Lizzy, Mr. Bingley is the most amiable young man of my acquaintance. I do enjoy his company."

The sisters' conversation turned to their plan of returning to Longbourn the following day, which led to happy speculation regarding what they might have missed at home during their stay at Netherfield. When Jane began to nod off, Elizabeth rose to leave. After smoothing Jane's covers and kissing her brow, Elizabeth whispered goodnight and quitted the room. Without considering what she did, Elizabeth began walking toward the library. "This is silly," she thought when she reached the stairs. "Mr. Darcy will not be there waiting for me." Still her disobedient feet continued on their way.

Elizabeth consoled herself with the knowledge that at least she was still fully dressed tonight and there would be nothing improper in her going downstairs for a book before retiring. To her great pleasure the library was indeed occupied. Mr. Darcy was there as she had hoped he would be, staring into the fire.

"Mr. Darcy," she greeted him happily. "I must confess that I am not wholly surprised to see you here, sir, but I am very sorry if you are still experiencing difficulty sleeping."

"I am actually quite well, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy assured her. "I quitted the drawing room shortly after you left, but I have been lingering here--hoping for the opportunity to wish you a more private goodnight and to possibly engage you for another morning constitutional."

Elizabeth could not help being pleased and she readily accepted his invitation. "I would be pleased to walk with you, Mr. Darcy, the weather and my sister's health permitting, of course. I would enjoy it very much, sir."

Darcy's smile revealed his pleasure at her acceptance. Taking a step towards her, he said, "Thank you again for your excellent insight concerning my sister, Miss Elizabeth. I trust that the letter I wrote tonight will improve her spirits."

"I hope so, too," she said. "Although the fire is inviting, I fear I should take a book and retire to my room now. It would not do for someone to misunderstand our chance meeting here this evening."

"No, of course, not, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy agreed. Although he spoke quite formally, Darcy took her hand and kissed it tenderly, first the back and then the palm. "I eagerly await the morning, dearest."

His last words were spoken so softly that Elizabeth could barely hear them. Gratified by the obvious affection in his manner, Elizabeth found it quite difficult to take leave of him. Darcy continued to hold her hand even as his eyes held her own. Finally, he kissed her hand again and released it.

"Goodnight, Miss Elizabeth."

"Good night, sir," she whispered. "I wish you a good night with all my heart." With her heart pounding, Elizabeth grabbed the first volume to catch her eye, curtsied and left the room.

Darcy lingered before the library fire for some time. He found himself meditating upon how much more pleasurable it was to surrender to Elizabeth's charms than it had been to resist them. In fact, he had experienced some of the greatest pleasures of his life in her company today. Darcy was also vastly contented with his progress thus far in securing Elizabeth's affections. Her manner towards him was much warmer and more encouraging than it had been, and it was plain that Elizabeth was not unaffected by his attentions. Although the outcome was not yet certain, Darcy's hopes were buoyed by the knowledge that he was now making every effort to win Elizabeth's heart. Such thoughts were not conducive to sleep, but they were very pleasant nonetheless.

Darcy would have been extremely gratified to know that while his mind was so agreeably engaged, Elizabeth was also thinking of him. Trailing a finger lightly across the palm of her hand, Elizabeth now lay awake remembering the sensation of Mr. Darcy's lips softly touching that very spot. Just the memory sent a shiver of delight coursing through her, and Elizabeth smiled in anticipation of another morning walk with Mr. Darcy.

She had excited the admiration of gentlemen before but none had elicited such a response from her--none save Darcy. It was as if a secret wellspring of feeling had been uncovered within her, and those heretofore restrained emotions were now rushing forth in response to Darcy's unguarded affection. Elizabeth thought it exceeding strange that she should take such delight in the attentions of a man she had been determined to detest, and she now shuddered with abhorrence at the recollection of her own misjudgment of him. However, being of a cheerful disposition, Elizabeth's thoughts soon retreated from the unpleasantness of her own folly and returned to the happier prospect of being wooed by such a man. When Elizabeth finally drifted off to sleep, the book she had chosen from the library still lay unopened beside her pillow.

Part III

Elizabeth was somewhat surprised to find Mr. Darcy absent when she entered the breakfast room the next morning. Now determined to think well of him, she exerted herself to hide her disappointment and greeted Mr. Bingley cheerfully. Remembering Mr. Darcy's confession of difficulty sleeping, Elizabeth consoled herself with the thought that perhaps had had spent an uneasy night and was still abed. Determined not to entertain any dire speculations, Elizabeth turned her full attention to her host and immediately noticed a mischievous gleam in Mr. Bingley's eyes.

"You, sir, look as if you have a wonderful secret this morning," she said. "Is this the result of a happy dream?"

"No, Miss Bennet," Bingley replied. "I am merely amused by my friend Darcy's unusual behavior. Surely you have observed that he is the one who is ever sensible, while I am somewhat impulsive by nature. How delightful it is to find myself the sensible one for a change."

Afraid of exposing Darcy and herself to the servants' gossip, Elizabeth tried to restrain her keen curiosity and respond normally. "I do not take your meaning, sir, as I find Mr. Darcy to be a very sensible and practical man."

Bingley's smile broadened as he said, "I would agree, Miss Bennet, had he not asked me to relay a most unusual message this morning--almost nonsensical it was."

Elizabeth busied herself with her muffin and did not raise her eyes.

Bingley was initially disappointed by Elizabeth's refusal to exhibit her curiosity, but then he realized she was correct to be circumspect in front of the servants. In fact, Bingley decided with some satisfaction that her discrete response was very like what he might expect of Darcy in a similar situation. Eager to continue the conversation, Bingley hastily manufactured excuses to send both servants from the room.

When they were alone, he continued good naturedly, "As I was saying, Darcy charged me with passing along a message that I find very odd indeed. I trust it will mean something to you, Miss Bennet, as you are the intended recipient."

Elizabeth looked at him with interest, but did not trust herself to speak. Realizing she would not rise to the bait, Bingley sighed and said, "Yes, my friend Darcy asked me to tell you that he was going riding this morning."

"I cannot say why Mr. Darcy would ask you to inform me in particular of his plans," Elizabeth responded with a smile. "However, the activity itself does not seem unusual. I understand that Mr. Darcy is quite the accomplished horseman and takes great pleasure in riding."

"Of course, you are right on that point," Bingley agreed pleasantly. "It is Darcy's custom to ride almost every day when in the country. The unusual part of the message is--"

Bingley could not resist one more attempt provoke a telling response from her. He paused as if trying to remember. Elizabeth, however, merely waited him out. With a wry smile, Bingley finally relented and relayed the rest of the message.

"I apologize for my slowness," he said in a tone that was anything but apologetic. "However, it is rare that my friend asks anything of me, so I want to relay his message faithfully. I believe I have the exact wording now, Miss Bennet. Darcy charged me to tell you that he was going riding, but that he thought you would be safe walking out alone as there are no highwaymen in the area."

Bingley had, of course, instantly divined the purpose behind the message. Darcy was clearly contriving to arrange another walk with Miss Elizabeth all to himself--not an easy feat with Caroline on the prowl. Having no doubt of Darcy's honorable intentions, Bingley was most happy to aid his friend. He also delighted in the opportunity it gave him to observe the lady's response. To Bingley's considerable amusement, Elizabeth blushed and struggled not to choke on her tea.

When she had recovered her composure sufficiently to speak, Elizabeth replied, "That is an unusual message, Mr. Bingley. However, I think it is very kind of Mr. Darcy to exhibit such concern for my welfare, as it is my frequent habit to ramble across the countryside on my own."

Eager to see Darcy, Elizabeth did not linger, and Bingley happily accepted her murmured excuses. He was very fond of Darcy and it pleased him to see that the lady was not at all indifferent to his attentions. A smiling Elizabeth returned upstairs to check on Jane and retrieve her wrap. Jane had passed another restful night so the sisters dispatched a message to Longbourn asking that the carriage be sent to fetch them in the afternoon. Then Elizabeth hurried down the stairs certain that Darcy would join her shortly after she left the house.

Caroline entered the breakfast room just after Elizabeth had quitted it. Seeing no Mr. Darcy and no Eliza Bennet she was quite alarmed. Striving to project a semblance of calm Caroline asked her brother of their guests' whereabouts.

Knowing his sister as he did, Bingley had no qualms in telling her the truth in such a way as would totally mislead her. "Oh, you know Darcy, Caroline. He set off on a long ride earlier this morning and Miss Bennet has just returned upstairs to her sister."

Caroline was disappointed to have missed Darcy, but took great satisfaction in the knowledge that at least *they* were not together. If she could not have Darcy's attention fixed upon herself, then Caroline decided that keeping him from the likes of Eliza Bennet would certainly do--for now.

When she had reached the outdoors Elizabeth paused to consider which way she should go. Taking a clue from Mr. Darcy's message that he had gone riding, she decided to set out in the general direction of the Netherfield stables. She soon happened upon Darcy who was waiting for her rather impatiently. Having satisfied his scruples by riding a bit as he waited, Darcy now gave charge of his horse to one of the grooms and joined Elizabeth on foot. It was another beautiful autumn morning and Elizabeth found herself more relaxed in his company today. Darcy for his part was ebullient. Having opened his heart to her, Darcy now felt a freedom with Elizabeth that he had never experienced with anyone outside his family. They walked briskly until they were well away from the house, and then continued their walk at more leisurely pace. While they traversed the countryside, Darcy and Elizabeth talked.

They talked more of their families, of Pemberley and of London, of books and plays. It seemed that there was no end to their common interests. Where their tastes diverged, both found their debate invigorating. Elizabeth had never enjoyed anyone's conversation so much. Mr. Darcy was obviously an intelligent man. That alone was a rarity, but he also showed great respect for her opinions and insights, even if they were not uniformly in agreement with his own. This made Elizabeth feel as if she could speak to him of anything, and Darcy was pleased to sense her easiness and delight in his company.

All too quickly it was time to return to the house. Neither wanted their private interlude to end, but duty demanded it. Darcy insisted upon delivering Elizabeth to her sister's door. When they must part, he again took Elizabeth's hand and kissed it tenderly.

His eyes were fixed upon hers as Darcy whispered, "Thank you for a wonderful morning, Miss Elizabeth."

"I, too, enjoyed our conversation," Elizabeth said smiling up at him. "Thank you for the lovely walk, Mr. Darcy."

To Darcy's delight Elizabeth had said his name in a very particular whisper. She even dared to gently squeeze his hand and then with a quick curtsy, she was gone.

Jane was eagerly awaiting Elizabeth's return, but seeing her sister's dreamy smile, Jane wisely refrained from asking any questions. Elizabeth was too distracted to appreciate Jane's sensitivity at that moment. She simply stood there leaning back against the door to the hallway and wondering what Mr. Darcy would be doing with the rest of his morning. Finally, Jane could no longer repress her delight in Elizabeth's abstraction.

"Well, Lizzy," she said with a smile, "did you have a nice walk this morning?"

"Oh, yes, Jane," Elizabeth replied softly as she stepped away from the door. "Mr. Darcy is unlike any man I have ever known. My first impression of him was so unfair. You were the wise one. You guessed that he was merely shy, while I misjudged him so badly."

Jane patted Elizabeth's hand as she said, "You obviously have Mr. Darcy's full pardon for that lapse, Lizzy. You must forgive yourself as well. Mr. Darcy would not want you to fret over past misunderstandings that are clearly no longer important. Now tell me more about him please, as I want to understand him better. What is it that makes Mr. Darcy so unique among our acquaintance?" "This may sound silly," Elizabeth said with a sigh of happiness, "but Mr. Darcy listens to me. He talks to me freely—like Papa does—and Mr. Darcy is not at all shocked when I speak my mind. You know how Mama is always telling me that I will never marry unless I learn to curb my tongue and hide my strong opinions. Yet, Mr. Darcy encourages me to express my viewpoint as if he enjoys it. The very liveliness and impertinence that Mama declares will be the death of her seems to please him."

Elizabeth fell silent, lost in her own reflections. When she did continue her voice was little more than a whisper.

"It is so strange, Jane," she said. "Although I barely know Mr. Darcy, I feel like I could talk to him about anything."

"That easiness between you confirms that Mr. Darcy may be exactly suited to you, and I am quite pleased for you," Jane said with a smile. "You are so clever yourself, Lizzy, that you simply must marry a man who values your fine mind. It seems that Mr. Darcy is intelligent enough to value your abilities. I could not be more delighted for you."

The only cloud on the Bennet sister's happiness was a note from their mother, saying that she would not consider sending the carriage for them today as it was too soon to think of moving Jane. Neither sister was deceived. They knew their mother was fixated on Jane securing Mr. Bingley and hoped to somehow play Jane's illness to their advantage. With Elizabeth's encouragement Jane asked Mr. Bingley for the use of his carriage. He was, of course, glad to oblige them, but entreated the sisters to stay at least one more day. Jane had not the heart to deny the gentleman, so it was quickly agreed that the Bennets would remain at Netherfield until the following day. They would all attend services together and then Mr. Bingley's carriage would take Jane and Elizabeth home to Longbourn. Jane felt well enough to venture downstairs for dinner and the evening passed agreeably for everyone—except Caroline, of course.

Darcy continued in his pointed attentions to Elizabeth much to Caroline's dismay. He had politely refused all of her attempts to deter him in any way, and Caroline was quite literally beside herself. It was one thing to have Mr. Darcy practically ignore her, but it was quite another to see him bestowing the attentions she so desired on another woman. The Bennets could not leave soon enough to suit her.

Part IV

When the Netherfield party arrived at the church the next morning, Mr. Bingley helped Jane from the carriage. The Hursts were next to emerge and then Darcy, who politely offered an arm to each of the remaining ladies. Caroline's triumph was sadly lessened by sharing the honor of his escort with the likes of Eliza Bennet. When they joined the rest of their party, Caroline entered the pew ahead of Darcy and Elizabeth and deliberately spread her skirts as she sat, leaving just enough room for one more in the pew. Darcy merely gave Caroline an amused look and guided Elizabeth into the row behind the others where he proceeded to join her.

Elizabeth had to stifle a small giggle when Darcy lifted an eyebrow at Caroline's ill-conceived strategy. In truth Darcy was delighted with the result of Caroline's machinations. Now he had Elizabeth all to himself. He could share his prayer book with her and hopefully touch her hand in the process. In truth Darcy had never enjoyed a service more. Caroline on the other hand was fuming. Not only was she now deprived of Darcy's company, but she also could not observe Darcy and Elizabeth.

Caroline was not the only one to notice Darcy's attentions to Elizabeth. Although Mrs. Bennet was far too obsessed with Jane and Mr. Bingley to give her second daughter a thought, Mr. Bennet saw his Lizzy enter the church on Mr. Darcy's arm. He also noted that when their party divided, Mr. Darcy looked entirely pleased to be seated with Elizabeth. However, what struck Mr. Bennet as surpassing strange was the warm smile he saw on his daughter's face as she looked up at the tall man beside her. Anxious to know what that was about, Mr. Bennet decided it was well that the girls were coming home today.

Mr. Bennet was delighted to have his eldest and most sensible daughters return home, as he had not heard two words of sense spoken together since their departure. After greeting them, he left the conversation over dinner to the girls and their mother, so that he might watch Elizabeth closely.

Mr. Bennet was eager to understand the change in her attitude towards Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth did not seem at all unhappy, but he thought she was quieter than usual and seemed rather preoccupied. After observing several significant looks pass between Jane and Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet resolved not to make any direct inquiries. Elizabeth had always been fiercely independent, but she would confide in him when she was ready. In the meantime, it appeared certain that Elizabeth had opened her heart to Jane. Observing Jane's looks of happy encouragement, Mr. Bennet felt there could be no cause for alarm.

Mr. Bennet's determination that he would not leap to any conclusions was sorely tried the following morning, when the housekeeper announced that Mr. Darcy was asking to see him. Knowing that Jane and Elizabeth were somewhere about, Mr. Bennet found it unsettling that Mr. Darcy would seek his company. Surely Elizabeth had not accepted a man—any man—upon such a slight acquaintance. His trepidation increased as Mr. Bennet suddenly recalled that Elizabeth had been most adamant in refusing to walk into Meryton with her sisters this morning. Jane had resolutely remained behind as well. In fact, no amount of cajoling by their younger sisters—and there had been considerable wheedling and whining as well—had been able to convince his eldest daughters to venture out with them.

Mr. Bennet sighed, realizing there was nothing for it but to hear the man out. Hopefully his daughter had not taken leave of the good sense he so valued in her. Mr. Bennet squared his shoulders with a sigh, as he anxiously awaited the gentleman's entrance. One glimpse of Darcy's ashen countenance fully convinced Mr. Bennet that this discussion was to be of something far more distressing than Elizabeth.

The ever-proper Mr. Darcy bowed appropriately as he said, "Good day, Mr. Bennet. Thank you for seeing me."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy. Please sit down," Mr. Bennet said pleasantly. The younger man's distress had awakened the elder's compassion, and Mr. Bennet was now genuinely anxious to put Darcy at ease. With a wry smile, he continued, "As the sole man living in a house full of females, I always find the conversation of a sensible gentleman a welcome change."

Darcy managed a small smile in return as Mr. Bennet continued, "But you seem troubled, sir. Is there some matter in which I may be of assistance?"

"Thank you for your generous offer," Darcy replied. "I left Netherfield with the intention of calling upon you. However, something occurred on the ride over that makes me feel I must approach you on an entirely different matter, sir, in the hope that I may be of assistance to you."

"I must admit I am most curious, sir," Mr. Bennet replied, "but would you care for tea or perhaps a glass of wine to steady yourself before you begin?"

"Your concern is most welcome," Darcy assured him, "but I need nothing at the moment except your indulgence."

"Then you have my full attention, Mr. Darcy."

"As I was rode through the village this morning," Darcy began, "I passed your two youngest daughters in the street. They were engaged in conversation with a certain gentleman of my acquaintance and several of the officers whom I do not know. George Wickham is that gentleman's name, sir, and I have known him practically all my life. Therefore, I feel it is my painful duty to warn you. To allow any degree of acquaintance between Mr. Wickham and your daughters is to endanger their welfare and happiness.

"I hope this does not offend you, Mr. Bennet," Darcy continued. "I know that you are the experienced parent here, but sadly, I am the one who has experience with Wickham. As guardian to my younger sister, I know the torment I would feel if someone were to deliberately harm her when I might have prevented it."

Here Darcy's voice trailed off and Mr. Bennet easily perceived the depth of his misery. Clearly there was far more to this sad tale, than a mere knowledge of Wickham's evil. He must have injured Darcy grievously.

"I am not at all offended by your concern, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet kindly reassured him, "but may I ask for more information as to the nature of Mr. Wickham's transgressions?"

"Certainly, sir," Darcy replied. "I wish you to understand exactly what type of man he is. From Mr. Wickham's seeming familiarity with the officers and the fact that he has no connections in Hertfordshire, I surmise that he is here to join the militia. Seeing him with your daughters made me feel that the matter requires immediate action."

Darcy went on to lay Wickham's history with his family before Mr. Bennet. He told him everything save Wickham's attempt on his sister. Yet, even that must be alluded to in some way for Mr. Bennet to fully understand his daughters' peril.

"I have described Mr. Wickham's behavior to myself as dishonorable, Mr. Bennet, but this is not just a personal matter between the two of us. He is an unremitting debtor. Because of his charm people are inclined to trust Mr. Wickham more than they usually would a slight acquaintance, and he gladly takes advantage of that trust. When Mr. Wickham finally quitted Derbyshire for good, he was severely indebted to every tradesman in Lambton. Many of those merchants probably believed him to be reliable, because of Mr. Wickham's long-standing relationship with my family. Therefore, I paid off those debts, but I refused to pay his gaming debts, which were by all reports quite extreme.

"The worst, however," Darcy added, "is that this man will trifle with *any* woman simply for his own amusement. I know of numerous instances of his seducing young women of *all* ranks, Mr. Bennet. I am sorry if I shock you, sir, but the mere fact that they are a gentleman's daughters will not protect your girls from Wickham."

Darcy sighed with relief. He had not exposed Georgiana, but Darcy felt confident that Elizabeth's father now understood just how serious a danger Wickham was to the community.

Mr. Bennet was truly shocked by this report, but he had no doubt of Darcy's sincerity. It was obvious the man was genuinely worried. Knowing the

silliness of his younger daughters and the naivete of most of his neighbors, Mr. Bennet felt that Darcy had truly done him--and all of Meryton--a great kindness this day.

"Please be assured that I believe you, Mr. Darcy," he said soberly, "and that I will see to my girls."

"Thank you, sir," Darcy replied. "I am vastly relieved to hear it and grateful for your trust upon such a short acquaintance. As soon as we have concluded our discussion, I plan to visit Colonel Forester. I feel that I must somehow warn him, as the behavior of his men may be deemed a reflection upon his own honor. However, I would ask your advice in one other matter concerning Mr. Wickham."

"My advice, Mr. Darcy?"

"Yes, sir. Hertfordshire is your home," Darcy explained. "You know the good people of the area. I am concerned for the general populace as long as Wickham is in residence. Yet, I am a stranger here. I cannot very well go door to door warning your neighbors. Do you have any thoughts how it might be accomplished?"

"Leave that to me," Mr. Bennet said with a smile. "I will not name you as the source of the information, but I can almost guarantee that by nightfall all Meryton will know of Mr. Wickham's perfidy."

Mr. Darcy was surprised both by Mr. Bennet's smile and by his confidence that this delicate piece of business could be accomplished so easily.

"Truly?" he asked. "I am most grateful for your assistance, but I must confess that I am curious as to how you will accomplish it, sir."

"That will be the easiest thing in the world, Mr. Darcy," the older man said with a laugh. "I shall simply drop a few hints to my wife."

Darcy could hardly stop himself from laughing out loud. He managed to cover his mouth with his fist as if stopping a cough, but Mr. Bennet was not fooled. In fact, Mr. Bennet was very pleased to see that this solemn young man had a sense of humor after all.

Remembering Darcy's attentions to his daughter, Mr. Bennet said, "Now, Mr. Darcy, you mentioned earlier that you were on your way to Longbourn, when you happened upon Mr. Wickham in the village. Were you just making a social call or is there some way in which I may assist you?"

Darcy smiled briefly to himself as if recollecting the happiest of memories but his expression grew serious again as he said, "Yes, sir. I did set out this morning to see you regarding an entirely different matter--one that I hope will meet with your approval. I most respectfully ask your permission to court Miss Elizabeth."

Mr. Bennet was amazed. He had not known of anyone engaging in a formal courtship-- Well, he could not remember how long it had been. Of course, young men still paid court to their chosen ladies, but it was generally done more informally. This avoided a public disclosure of the young man's intentions until all was settled between the couple and sanctioned by the girl's father. This was a most unexpected turn of events, particularly as Mr. Bennet had judged Darcy to be very reserved and circumspect regarding his private affairs.

Uncertain of how he should answer the young man's request, Mr. Bennet simply asked, "You want my permission to court Elizabeth?"

"Yes, sir."

Unable to resist teasing the serious young man, whom he found more pleasing with each passing minute, Mr. Bennet exclaimed, "But this is so surprising, sir. I was told that my Lizzy was not handsome enough to tempt you."

"Oh, if you only knew how much I regret ever making such a stupid remark," Darcy said with a groan, "especially since I did not mean it. I had not the least idea--"

Taking pity on Darcy, Mr. Bennet interrupted him. "Please accept *my* apologies, Mr. Darcy. It really is not fair of me to tease you about that. I am certain my Lizzy has already made you pay considerably for that infraction."

Relieved to see that Mr. Bennet was not truly angry, Darcy replied with a smile, "Yes you know your daughter well, sir. I have been thoroughly chastened and told that I may yet be forgiven for that insult one day."

Mr. Bennet laughed aloud. How like Lizzy that sounded.

"Before we discuss *my* permission, what does Lizzy have to say on the subject?" Mr. Bennet inquired. "Has she already accepted you, young man?"

"Oh, no, sir," Darcy assured him. "Miss Elizabeth has expressed a desire to know me better, so that she might make up her mind as to my suitability. She has allowed that I may call upon her and even court her with your permission. Yet, it has been made very clear to me that I have no right to any further expectations at this time. In other words, I may hope, but I may not expect."

Realizing that this young man was going to be tortured quite enough by his favorite daughter, Mr. Bennet decided to dispense with any further teasing for now. Giving Darcy a sympathetic smile, he said, "I would very earnestly like to know why you are interested in my daughter, Mr. Darcy."

Mr. Bennet was very pleased by the way Darcy's eyes lit up as he formed his answer.

"It is difficult to discuss emotions rationally," Darcy began, "but I shall try to give you an honest answer that is not nonsensical, sir. The truth is that my feelings for your daughter are very strong and I have spent considerable time trying to understand them myself."

Darcy rose and began to pace as he continued, "While Miss Elizabeth is very lovely, the truth is that I have met many beautiful women. Similarly,

there are many other intelligent women in England, but your daughter, sir, is more than intelligent. She possesses a quickness of thought and feeling that I have never experienced in anyone, man or woman. In fact, Mr. Bennet, I do not believe there is another woman on earth to compare with your daughter. It is the sum of all that she is. I know that it will be a challenge to stay abreast of her and that I may never be able to deserve her. However, I do not think I could be satisfied with anyone else. That is why I am seeking your permission to court Miss Elizabeth."

"I must confess that I am impressed," Mr. Bennet replied as Darcy resumed his seat. "You, sir, seem to prize my daughter for the treasure that she is. Elizabeth is a rarity for certain, and there are few men, in my opinion, capable of appreciating her as you seem to. Thank you for that. I also appreciate your approaching me directly regarding your interest in my daughter, and I am most willing to grant you permission to call on Lizzy."

"But, sir," Darcy said, "I asked for your permission to court Miss Elizabeth."

"I did understand your request," Elizabeth's father replied, "but I wonder if an officially sanctioned courtship is necessary, sir? Please understand my concern in this is for you, Mr. Darcy. Such an open acknowledgment of your intentions towards Elizabeth would expose your actions to a great deal of public curiosity and comment. It could also make things far more embarrassing for you, should you be unsuccessful in securing my daughter's affections."

"I am well aware of those facts, sir," Darcy replied. "However, I am committed to this course of action. I wish it to be widely known that I have secured your permission to pay formal court to your daughter in the hope of winning her hand."

"I understand your determination to woo Lizzy," Mr. Bennet said, "but why the need to do it so openly? To deliberately expose your private actions to such public scrutiny would seem to contradict what I know of your character, sir."

"You are correct in that I normally conduct my affairs in such a way as to avoid undue interest from anyone not connected to me. However, my concern for your daughter must take precedence over my own wish for privacy," Darcy explained. "I sincerely hope to be successful in my suit. If that hope is realized, then my very public and proper pursuit of your daughter may well protect her from gossip and impertinent remarks in the future."

Mr. Bennet raised an eyebrow at the mention of impertinent remarks and Darcy felt he must risk a more direct explanation. Hoping he would not offend his host, Darcy took a deep breath and attempted to elucidate.

"In my estimation," he said, "the only disparity in our conditions which matters is that my feelings are far stronger than Miss Elizabeth's at this time. It is my sincere hope to change that. However, the world looks at things more materially and where there is discrepancy of fortune certain assumptions are usually made as to the motivations and manipulations behind a match. I would hope to make it universally understood that I am pursuing your daughter, because I consider her worthy to be my bride. If I should fail in the attempt, then the humiliation will be mine alone and that is what I would wish. If I should succeed, then my very public pursuit of her may spare Miss Elizabeth from much unflattering gossip at that time."

"I quite comprehend and appreciate your reasoning now," Mr. Bennet said with a nod of satisfaction, "and I must confess that your concern for Lizzy's reputation and happiness inclines me to hope that you will succeed, Mr. Darcy. Am I correct in assuming that you would like your courtship of Elizabeth to be as universally known as the repudiation of Wickham?"

"Yes, Mr. Bennet," Darcy said with a smile. "That is my wish."

"Then I shall use the same means to spread that news as well," Mr. Bennet said wryly. "I believe that my wife's nerves and stamina are up to disseminating two such splendid pieces of gossip--I mean news--at the same time. I hereby give you permission to court Lizzy, Mr. Darcy. Do not think this means little to me. She is my dearest treasure."

"A sentiment I can well appreciate," Darcy said. "Please rest assured that if I am so fortunate as to secure Miss Elizabeth's affections, I will devote myself to her happiness."

"I believe you," Mr. Bennet said softly. Then adopting a more normal tone, he inquired, "Would you like to see Elizabeth now?"

Darcy's expression grew grave as his thoughts returned to Wickham. "Nothing would please me more," he allowed. "However, I am torn, sir. Duty and honor compel me to speak with Colonel Forester as soon as possible, and I fear that once I am in Miss Elizabeth's presence, I will find it difficult to leave."

"I do understand your dilemma," Mr. Bennet assured him. "Perhaps then you might join us for dinner this evening. In the meantime I will apprise our family of the situation and the uproar should subside somewhat before you begin your suit in earnest this evening."

Darcy was greatly relieved to not only have Mr. Bennet's consent, but to also have his support. "Mr. Bennet, I do not want to ask too much--"

Seeing Darcy's glance at his pen, Mr. Bennet spoke frankly, "I think it is far too early for notes, sir. However, be assured that I will explain to Lizzy the urgency of your business."

"Yes, of course, you are right," Darcy hastily agreed. "That would be best. I would be most grateful if you would explain my departure to your daughter, Mr. Bennet. I would not want Miss Elizabeth to misunderstand me again."

"Neither would I, Mr. Darcy," the older gentleman assured him. "You may trust me to explain your rapid departure to Lizzy's satisfaction. While any correspondence between you would be too great a familiarity, I will allow you to present Lizzy with an offering of flowers or some other small evidence of your esteem this evening in token of your position as my daughter's suitor."

"Thank you, sir," Darcy said. "I realize that I have not made the best of impressions upon the neighborhood, and I would like to thank you for your generosity. You have been far more gracious to me this morning than my past behavior would merit. It is my hope that as we further our acquaintance--our friendship, if you will--that you will find your generosity has not been unmerited."

Well pleased with the morning's interview and with the strong young man before him, Mr. Bennet smiled and waved Darcy off with his hand. "I look forward to knowing you better, Mr. Darcy. Now you have a scoundrel to deal with and I am left to face my family. We shall expect you this evening, sir."

Darcy bowed and quitted the room. He was sorely tempted to stop and seek out Elizabeth, but knew that time was of the essence if he were to prevent Wickham's harming the community. Darcy squared his shoulders and left the house. He would put his unpleasant duty in regards to Wickham behind him and then he could spend the entire evening with Elizabeth. As Darcy rode away from Longbourn, his spirits were considerably lighter than they had been on his approach.

Part V

Shortly after Darcy's departure, Mr. Bennet's musings were interrupted by a knock at his door. He was not at all surprised, and, in fact, he was rather pleased that it was Elizabeth. No doubt she was come to discover the result of his meeting with Darcy.

"Come in, my dear," he greeted her pleasantly. "Come in and please shut the door, for your silly sisters may be back from Meryton at any minute."

Elizabeth was puzzled by her father's good humor, as Jane had happened to spy Darcy riding away from Longbourn. Knowing the import of his visit, Jane had immediately informed Elizabeth of this development. Jane had spoken gently and tactfully, alluding to her confidence that there must be simple explanation for Darcy's leaving. However, it was obvious to Elizabeth that Jane shared her worry over what this strange occurrence might mean for Elizabeth's future happiness.

Elizabeth was extremely disappointed that Mr. Darcy had left without seeing her. In fact, she was quite surprised by the strength of her own agitation. Facing the possibility that all was ended before it had even begun, Elizabeth realized that Mr. Darcy had already made great inroads into her heart with his gentle, yet pointed attentions. She could not bear the uncertainty. Had her father refused Darcy's request to court her and dismissed him? Or worse, had something unfortunate occurred during the interview with Mr. Bennet--something that caused Mr. Darcy to falter in his purpose? Unable to bear not knowing, Elizabeth resolved to confront her father.

Elizabeth endeavored to appear as if there were no particular reason for her visit, but Mr. Bennet knew his daughter well. The gentle worry line between her eyes and a particular set to her mouth would have escaped the notice of her mother, but to Elizabeth's father they easily betrayed her apprehension. Having been quite impressed by Darcy, Mr. Bennet was encouraged by this evidence that Elizabeth was not indifferent to the man; and he correctly assumed that Elizabeth had either seen Mr. Darcy leaving or was, perhaps, anxious that he had not come at all. Rather than speaking at once to alleviate her anxiety, Elizabeth's father decided to wait her out. This was not out of cruelty. Mr. Bennet's purpose in delay was to determine the extent of his daughter's regard for Darcy. He also hoped that the inquietude of uncertainty might reveal to Elizabeth herself the true nature of her feelings for the man. Mr. Bennet knew from his own experience that anxiety often accelerated personal revelation in such instances. Although he had agreed to a public courtship, Mr. Bennet had no intention of taking the irrevocable step of informing his wife of the event unless he were reasonably certain Darcy would be successful in his suit.

Now witnessing his daughter's agitation, Mr. Bennet concluded that Elizabeth already had considerable feelings for Darcy, a fact that pleased him greatly. Although he was not at all anxious to lose Elizabeth, her father found himself thinking with satisfaction of Darcy's character and the strength of the man's devotion to his favorite daughter. In truth, Mr. Bennet thought that Darcy might well be the only young man of his acquaintance capable of making Elizabeth truly happiness. Meanwhile his favorite stood before him twisting her hands anxiously as she tried to speak normally.

"I hope I am not interrupting anything important, Papa--"

Her father took some pity upon her and introduced the topic he knew to be uppermost on Elizabeth's mind.

"Certainly not, my dear, I am quite at leisure," he said with a smile. "I was engaged for some time with Mr. Darcy, but he left a few minutes ago."

"Oh, Papa, please tell me you have not turned him away," Elizabeth cried, forgetting her previous intention of hiding her distress.

"No, I have not sent Mr. Darcy away, Lizzy," her father soothed her as he crossed to Elizabeth's side and ushered her to the settee. "How could I do that when Mr. Darcy may be the first young man of my acquaintance who is intelligent enough to truly appreciate you?"

Seeing his daughter blush, Mr. Bennet could not resist trying the strength of her regard a little further. Patting Elizabeth's hand, he said, "No, I have not turned him away. In fact, I have given Mr. Darcy permission to call upon you."

"Your permission to call--," Elizabeth's voice trailed off in disappointment, but she quickly rallied. "Thank you, Papa. I shall look forward to his visits as they will give us all the opportunity to know Mr. Darcy better."

"Yes," Mr. Bennet agreed, "I believe we shall all enjoy becoming better acquainted with Mr. Darcy. I was most impressed this morning by his depth of feeling and his determination. It seemed to me that it would be most prudent to allow your relationship to grow in an informal manner. Yet, Mr. Darcy was most insistent upon a formal courtship."

Elizabeth's eyes glowed with pleasure when he spoke of Darcy's insistence. Yes, Mr. Bennet thought, Darcy already understands her very well, which is highly favorable towards their future happiness.

Turning to Elizabeth her father spoke aloud, "Yes, Mr. Darcy was most insistent that he wishes for his high opinion of you to be universally known. He also wants it to be widely known that it is his hope to win your affections and acceptance. He spoke most convincingly and as he gave me to

understand that this was acceptable to you, I felt I could not deny him."

Elizabeth was beaming by now, and seeing her joy warmed her father's heart. He patted her hand again as he explained, "Mr. Darcy had planned to visit with you this morning after our conference, but he had to leave straight away on a matter of some urgency. He feared it would be difficult to tear himself away from your company which is why Mr. Darcy left without seeing you at all."

Seeing his daughter's blush, Mr. Bennet smothered a laugh of pleasure and continued, "Yes, for a man who seems to have little to say, your Mr. Darcy is actually quite talkative once you get him started. It warmed your old papa's heart to hear the manner in which he spoke of you. I assured Mr. Darcy that I would make his apologies, and I hope that I have not done him injustice. It would not do for your father to cause a quarrel between you when I am actually learning to enjoy the man's company."

"Do not worry, Papa," Elizabeth said. "I do wish Mr. Darcy had been able to stay this morning, but I understand. I know that he carries many responsibilities and that he takes each of them very seriously."

"Yes, he does, Child," Mr. Bennet agreed. "Today he is set upon a most disagreeable piece of business. It seems a villainous, disreputable man who is known quite well by Mr. Darcy is now in Meryton."

Somewhat taken aback by the look of recognition on Elizabeth's face, her father inquired, "Am I to understand that Mr. Darcy has already told you something of George Wickham?"

At a nod from Elizabeth, he continued, "On his way to Longbourn this morning, Mr. Darcy saw this Wickham in Meryton. He is very concerned about the havoc Mr. Wickham could wreak among our neighbors and is taking action to insure that his stay here will be brief. I have agreed to be of some small assistance to him in this endeavor. You may aid me in that Elizabeth by not disclosing your previous knowledge of Wickham to the rest of the family."

Elizabeth was puzzled as she could not conceive of what assistance her father might possibly offer in this circumstance. However, she was determined not to risk disrupting their plans by yielding to her own idle curiosity.

"Of course," she said with a slight nod of her head. "I will feign ignorance if you wish it."

"Thank you, my dear," her father said, "and now on a happier note, I have invited Mr. Darcy to return for dinner this evening. I hope this pleases you."

"Yes, Papa, it pleases me very much, but what of the party at our Aunt Phillips' this evening?"

"We will not be attending that event," Mr. Bennet said firmly. "Do not distress yourself, Lizzy. I will handle it and again I count on your discretion."

"Certainly, Papa," she murmured struggling not to ask any of the questions forming in her mind.

Assured of Elizabeth's cooperation, Mr. Bennet rose and extended a hand to her. In an unusual display of affection he gently kissed her brow before saying, "Well, Lizzy, let us go and see if your sisters have returned from Meryton. I am anxious to take several matters in hand."

Mr. Bennet did not have to wait long for his two youngest daughters to return from Meryton. Kitty and Lydia soon bubbled and giggled their way into the house. Their father sat quietly in a corner of the sitting room, seemingly engrossed in a book, awaiting his opportunity. He was hoping for one of them to introduce the subject of Wickham, and Mr. Bennet did not have to wait long.

Lydia was describing a bonnet she had espied in town when she suddenly interrupted herself, "--oh, but I forgot to tell you, Mama, we met the most dashing young man in town today--so handsome and charming, too."

Mrs. Bennet almost giggled herself as she inquired, "And is he in uniform, my dear?"

"Not yet," Kitty quickly responded eager for her share of the conversation.

"But he soon will be," Lydia spoke over her not willing to yield any share of their mother's attention.

For once Mr. Bennet found himself appreciating his wife's encouragement of their youngest daughters' silliness, for she helpfully prompted them to continue.

"Well, tell me all," Mrs. Bennet demanded. "How did you meet him, my dears?"

"Denny," both girls answered at once, but a glare from Lydia squelched Kitty who lapsed into an unhappy silence.

"Yes," Lydia went on excitedly. "We were almost to our Aunt Phillips' when we ran into Denny and Carter and their friend Mr. Wickham."

"Perfect," Mr. Bennet thought to himself even as he spoke aloud, "Wickham! George Wickham?"

Lydia was far too surprised to perceive the outrage in her father's voice, as Mr. Bennet had never expressed the slightest interest in such news. Turning to him, she answered, "Yes, Papa, that was his name--Mr. George Wickham."

Hearing the sigh in her voice as she spoke Wickham's name, Mr. Bennet was excessively grateful for Mr. Darcy's warning. Clearly his daughter was already in danger.

"You are to have nothing further to do with that man," he said firmly. "In fact I refuse to allow *any* of you to associate with that scoundrel in any way."

But we cannot avoid the acquaintance now, Papa," Lydia haphazardly persisted. "He will be at Aunt Philips' this evening. She has already invited him."

"Well, then it is settled," Mr. Bennet replied sternly. "None of you will be going to your aunt's this evening. I will brook no argument on the matter."

He gave Mrs. Bennet such a pointed look that she bit back the protest that leapt to her tongue. Upon a moment's reflection she remembered that Mr. Bennet never imposed such strictures upon his family. It was very odd that he would do so now and over a small evening party.

"But, my dear, Mr. Bennet," she began in placating tones, "it would be most awkward for us not to attend this evening's party. How shall I explain it to my sister? Why do you object so strongly to such an agreeable young man?"

"We will discuss this no further in front of the girls, Mrs. Bennet," he said firmly, his look implying that it would not be fit conversation for their daughters to hear.

This increased Mrs. Bennet's curiosity and she mouthed a silent, "Oh," as she began to suspect the nature of the objections to Mr. Wickham.

Before Lydia could begin to whine, Mr. Bennet changed the subject. "It is just as well. I have issued a dinner invitation of some importance for this evening and think it only proper that our entire family should be in attendance."

Having it firmly fixed in her head that Jane would marry Bingley, Mrs. Bennet happily rushed to the false assumption that Mr. Bingley was to be their guest. "Oh, have you been to call at Netherfield? How good of you, my dear Mr. Bennet. You are such a kind father."

"No, Mrs. Bennet," he replied. "I have been home all morning and have had no congress with Mr. Bingley. However, his friend Mr. Darcy very kindly called on me this morning."

"Mr. Darcy!" his wife exclaimed. "What on earth could that proud--" "Yes, Mr. Darcy called on me," Mr. Bennet interrupted her firmly, determined to curb her habit of belittling Darcy. "I must say I was very impressed with the gentleman and I think we may have all misjudged him. Mr. Darcy is really very agreeable and quite intelligent."

Mr. Bennet rarely spoke well of people so Mrs. Bennet was impressed; however, Mr. Darcy had rejected one of her daughters—even if it was *only* Lizzy. Therefore, she felt that she must be offended with him as a matter of principle.

"Now, Mr. Bennet," she began, "I am glad you had a nice visit with Mr. Darcy, but have you forgotten that he flatly refused to stand up with Lizzy. How can you explain that away?"

"I need not speculate upon his reasons," Mr. Bennet replied smugly, "for Mr. Darcy explained the incident to my full satisfaction this morning." Mr. Bennet knew he had the full attention of all his family now, and he was delight to assuage their curiosity on the subject.

"Yes," he continued, "the purpose of his call was to speak with me about Lizzy. I think that for all his affluence and elegance, Mr. Darcy is actually rather shy. It was just an idle remark that he never intended for Lizzy to overhear. Mr. Darcy deeply regrets that he ever said such a silly thing, and his opinion of our Lizzy is, in fact, quite the opposite. The purpose of Mr. Darcy's visit this morning was to ask my permission to court Elizabeth."

Mrs. Bennet nearly fainted with astonishment, but she recovered enough to say, "Mr. Darcy wants to court Lizzy? Mr. Darcy and our Lizzy, who would have thought it?"

Deciding it was best to simply ignore his wife for the moment, Mr. Bennet continued on, "It seems that he is quite determined to win her affections and has already had some success in raising her opinion of him while she was staying at Netherfield. Is that right, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth was blushing deeply by this point, but she was also quite pleased. She spoke hesitatingly, "Yes, Papa, it seems that my first impression of Mr. Darcy was very wrong. He is-- Well, as you said, Papa, Mr. Darcy is by nature very reticent. He finds it much easier to meet new acquaintances in smaller more intimate settings. He has apologized to me most handsomely for speaking so ill of my charms."

Mrs. Bennet was now sufficiently recovered from her shock to speak. "Ooh, Mr. Darcy," she gushed. "He is so very rich and very handsome, too. This is wonderful for all our girls! Now, Lizzy, you must not offend Mr. Darcy. I insist that you behave like a proper young lady. No carrying on about nonsense and spouting off foolish notions as you are wont to do. I am sure that Mr. Darcy wants a proper, obedient wife."

"I am sorry to contradict you in front of the girls," Mr. Bennet said, "but in this instance you are entirely in the wrong, my dear. Mr. Darcy spoke quite eloquently of his admiration for Lizzy's intelligence and independence. I fear that if you force her to behave in opposition to her character, he may change his mind altogether."

Unsure of how to respond to this startling and incomprehensible revelation, Mrs. Bennet ignored it and immediately began to fret over what must be done.

"Where is Hill?" she began. "Everything must be spotless and I must speak to cook about dinner. Oh, and then I must go into Meryton to see my sister and explain about tonight. A note just will not do. Mr. Bennet, please have the carriage readied for me. That would be such a help."

"Of course, I will have the carriage prepared for you," Mr. Bennet said, "but we must speak privately on that other matter before you go. I will not detain you long." He gestured towards his library with a slight nod of his head.

Remembering that she had yet to learn the exact nature of Mr. Wickham's infamy, Mrs. Bennet readily agreed. It was, after all, her duty to fully warn her sister about Mr. Wickham. Since Mrs. Phillips lived in the village she was generally the one to bring news to Longbourn, and Mrs. Bennet could not resist a sigh of satisfaction at the prospect of imparting such information to her sister.

Only Elizabeth detected the slight smugness in her father's countenance as her parents quitted the room. She was delighted in his success. With

the two sisters' propensity for gossip, all Meryton would abhor Mr. Wickham before the evening party had even begun. Elizabeth was also gratified by the knowledge that all Meryton would also be apprised of Mr. Darcy's determination to win her hand. Remembering her own unhappiness earlier in the day when she thought her father had refused his permission, Elizabeth was confident of Mr. Darcy's ultimate success.

There was, however, no opportunity for further personal reflection at present. While Jane simply reached over to gently pat her hand, Elizabeth's younger sisters descended upon her immediately. All three were quite impressed and spoke over one another in their excitement. The Bennet sisters were in complete agreement that Mr. Darcy must be quite the romantic gentleman to seek permission for a formal courtship of their sister.

"Mr. Darcy must be madly in love with you, Lizzy, to go to all this trouble," said Lydia with a giggle.

"I had no idea he was so romantic," added Kitty with a sigh.

"Well, I am happy for you that he seems to be a truly honorable man," said Mary.

Elizabeth endured their raptures and good naturedly deflected most of their questions. This did not offend her sisters since each was too wrapped up in her own thoughts to fully listen to Elizabeth's responses anyway. Mrs. Bennet came back into the room before leaving for Meryton.

"Now, Lizzy, I will brook no argument. I want you to rest this afternoon so that you will be at your best this evening. We must redress your hair before dinner and I want you to wear your second best gown this evening. We must have you appear as fine as any other young woman of Mr. Darcy's acquaintance. After all he is used to a wider society and must be very particular."

Without waiting for Elizabeth's nod of acquiescence, Mrs. Bennet was gone. She had important news that must be shared right away. Although Elizabeth gave her sisters a wry grin, she was actually quite grateful for her mother's orders. "Resting" would allow her the time she needed to reflect and compose herself. Elizabeth was very happy with all that had taken place, but she wanted time to enjoy her happiness without her sisters' scrutiny.

Elizabeth was so lost in thought that she did not even hear Jane's knock on her door a short while later. Receiving no response, Jane quietly opened the door to see her sister curled up in the window seat, staring out abstractedly. Jane slipped into the room and softly closed the door.

"I trust I am not disturbing you, Lizzy."

"No, Jane. Your dear presence is always most soothing."

"You are not unhappy, dear Lizzy?"

"Oh, no, quite the opposite," Elizabeth replied. "Yet, I find myself disconcerted by my own happiness. I thought I understood Mr. Darcy so well when I was entirely mistaken about him. Now I am discovering I did not know myself very well either."

Seeing Jane's questioning look, Elizabeth blushed, but she continued her confession. "Truthfully, I think I have been drawn to Mr. Darcy since I first laid eyes on him. Otherwise, why would I have carried on so foolishly about one silly remark? Perhaps I was attempting to guard my heart against him so that I would not be disappointed. It is all so strange."

"Strange it may be, dear Lizzy," Jane agreed, "but is it not wonderful as well? Here, since it has been decreed that your hair is to be redone entirely, let me take it down and brush it for you. You will rest better with it down."

Elizabeth found Jane's ministrations soothing. In fact, she was actually quite at peace by the time Jane squeezed her shoulder and left the room. She would rest and then she would prepare to receive Mr. Darcy and offer him every encouragement permitted by propriety. After all, she thought with considerable pleasure, first impressions need not be lasting.

Copyright 2007 Pamela St Vines