

Such Differing Reports

A Short Pride & Prejudice Variation

Abigail Reynolds

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Such Differing Reports

“**W**HAT CAN BE THE meaning of this!” said Charlotte, as soon as Mr. Darcy left the Hunsford parsonage. “My dear Eliza, he must be in love with you, or he would never have called on us in this familiar way.”

“I can hardly think so, Charlotte,” Elizabeth reassured her with a laugh. “You were not here; we could hardly keep a conversation going! Each time I raised a subject, he would exhaust it in a few words, and then lapse into silence. In love with me? Impossible!”

“I suppose it is not very likely, then,” agreed her friend, “yet he does appear to have an interest in you. Have you never noticed how he watches you? And you were the only lady apart from Bingley’s sisters he danced with at the Netherfield ball.”

Elizabeth put a hand affectionately on Charlotte’s shoulder. “He looks at me only to criticize, dearest Charlotte! Do you not recall that he found me tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt him?” She imitated his voice as she repeated his words with a smile.

Charlotte continued to look dubious. “We shall see, I suppose. But Eliza, just think – if you were to have made such a conquest!”

Elizabeth laughed at the idea, but afterwards she could not put the conversation out of her mind. It seemed a completely ridiculous notion, that Mr. Darcy might admire her, yet Charlotte’s judgment and observation in

these matters had often proved better than her own. She could not believe it was true, but she could not completely discount it. What would she do if it was true? Even if she disliked him, Elizabeth did not desire to occasion any pain to Mr. Darcy or any other gentleman. She would have to do her best to put a stop to any ideas he might have.

Therefore she was prepared the following day when once again she met him on her walk through the grove. He again said little, but at one point seemed to suggest that on her future visits to Kent she would be staying at Rosings.

Charlotte was right. And this was more serious than she had thought.

She chose her words with care. "Mr. Darcy," she said slowly, "I wonder if I might ask your opinion on something."

He placed his hand over her gloved one. "Certainly. I would be happy to be of use to you."

She could feel the warmth of his hand through her glove. This was not proceeding as she had planned. "Suppose, sir, you had a sister whom you loved dearly."

He looked at her in surprise. "That is not at all difficult to imagine, since I do have a such a sister."

Emboldened, Elizabeth continued. "Suppose, then, that she met a gentleman who engaged her affections, and who appeared to return them. But then he disappeared without word, leaving everyone to suppose his friends had interfered with the match. Would you be inclined to think kindly toward those friends?"

His brow darkened, and Elizabeth feared she had gone too far in her accusation. But she would not allow his anger to intimidate her, so she stood her ground.

He spoke finally through clenched teeth, saying each word distinctly. "What did he tell you?"

Elizabeth shook her head in confusion. "He? The gentleman, or his friend?"

"You know perfectly well of whom I speak. I repeat, what did he tell you?"

"Indeed, sir, neither of them told me anything. It was merely an observation...."

"I must know. What did Wickham tell you?"

Elizabeth blinked. "Mr. Wickham? What has he to do with this?"

"Everything, as you well know! What did he say about my sister?"

She was beginning to feel frightened by his anger, and took a step away. "Your sister, sir? Why, nothing to speak of."

He seemed to be trying to calm himself. "Miss Bennet, I must insist you tell me. It is a matter of the utmost urgency."

For a moment she almost took pity on his clear distress, but the illogical nature of the conversation stopped those natural feelings. "He spoke very little of her, only to say she was handsome and highly accomplished."

"But what of his connection to her?"

"Why, nothing, except that she had been fond of him when she was a child, before she became proud like...." She realized just in time the danger of what she was about to say.

His mouth curled. "As a child, indeed. Why, then, did you raise this question to me, if he said nothing more to you?"

"This question? What question?"

"About my sister!"

Finally, comprehension dawned, though the matter of Mr. Wickham's connection remained a mystery. "I was speaking of my own sister, Mr. Darcy, not yours."

"Your sister?"

"Yes, my dear Jane, who is now not only heart-broken but also exposed to the world's derision for disappointed hopes!" The thought of Jane's distress renewed Elizabeth's anger toward Mr. Darcy. "And if I am not mistaken, you were pleased by the outcome!"

His countenance changed as if she had slapped him. "I cannot deny it."

His proud words removed the last vestiges of control from her temper. "I believe I have heard quite enough. Good day, Mr. Darcy." She turned her back on him in what she hoped was an unmistakable manner, then walked off without a backwards look. The nerve of the man, to admit straight

out that he had opposed a match between Mr. Bingley and Jane! At least he could no longer be in doubt as to her own feelings toward him. She doubted he would trouble her again.



Darcy could not take his eyes from Elizabeth's light figure until she vanished into the trees, but the disturbance of his mind took away his usual pleasure at the sight. How had their conversation gone awry so quickly? One moment he had been warmed with pleasure at the idea that she was seeking his advice, then a moment later He did not even wish to think of it.

Wickham. The cur had a malevolent talent for ruining happy moments in Darcy's life. He half-wished he had not stopped Colonel Fitzwilliam from going after Wickham with a pistol at Ramsgate. What spiteful fate had set Wickham to cross paths with his Elizabeth?

Mention of Wickham always sent clouds of fury through Darcy's mind, making it difficult to think clearly, but not to the degree that he had failed to notice Elizabeth's anger at him. Painstakingly he tried to reconstruct the conversation in his head, hoping to understand why her attitude had changed so much. What had she said about her sister, that she was heart-broken? He dismissed that idea. Miss Bennet had been disappointed by the loss of a fine marital prospect like Bingley, no doubt, but her heart had not been touched. She had never shown signs of a particular regard for him.

But while Elizabeth might profess an opinion not her own, she was not the sort to lie. She must believe that her sister cared for Bingley, perhaps out of her own romantic notions. His anger softened a little at the thought, soon procuring forgiveness for her. But no wonder she was distressed, if she felt torn between her growing affection toward him and her loyalty to her sister.

He nodded slowly. That would explain a great deal.

Elizabeth put down her embroidery with a sigh and rose to her feet. What ill-luck was it that caused Mr. Darcy to come to call on her whenever she was alone? In any case, should he not be at Rosings for tea, along with Mr. and Mrs. Collins? Elizabeth had pleaded a headache and stayed home, primarily to avoid the gentleman now standing before her.

He did not sit down, but instead paced back and forth across the floor. "I am sorry to hear you have been in ill-health," he said. "May I hope that your headache is better now?"

"Tolerably so, thank you." Perhaps she should have said it was much worse, and then he might go away.

But he seemed to have something else on his mind. He did not appear to be in good spirits; in fact, if anything, she would have said he looked worried.

"Miss Bennet. I wish to apologize for my behaviour yesterday." He spoke hurriedly, as if he wished to get the words out as quickly as possible.

The great Mr. Darcy lowering himself to apologize? Hardly likely. Elizabeth wondered what he was hoping to accomplish. Certainly he could no longer be maintaining any romantic intentions toward her.

"There is no need for apologies. It was a misunderstanding, nothing more." She hoped he would go now.

He did not seem happy with her response. "I would also like to ask you to keep what I said about my sister in strictest confidence. I am sure you understand the importance of this."

So he did want something from her. As if she would be likely to reveal something to the discredit of a young girl she did not even know! "You may count on me to reveal nothing, because that is precisely what you told me."

"But about Mr. Wickham..."

"Mr. Darcy, I understand that you and Mr. Wickham have your disagreements, and that one of them apparently involved your sister, but I would prefer to remain outside them."

"*Disagreements?* Is that what he called them?"

Elizabeth was quite exasperated by Darcy's refusal to change the subject. "Difficult as it may be to believe, I do not recall every single word he ever spoke to me, either about your sister or about you, nor do I see any reason why I should tell you if I did."

He fell silent, but the whiteness of his face spoke of his anger. His boots seemed to strike the worn rug with unnecessary force. She could see his struggle to keep control, but sympathized with him not at all. If he insisted on forcing the topic of Mr. Wickham on her, she was well within her rights to say what she did. It was just more proof of his pride and ill-temper.

Finally he burst out, "I cannot believe that you place your trust in such a man."

"I have seen no reason not to."

"He is a scoundrel. He has wasted his education, squandered his inheritance, left debts behind him, and attempted to take advantage of innocent young women. Is that enough reason for you?"

"Squandered his inheritance? He says you denied him his inheritance." Anger had taken over from wisdom in choosing her words.

"That is nonsense. His inheritance was a living which he chose not to accept, and I paid him three thousand pounds in lieu of the preferment. Which he squandered, then had the audacity to apply to me for the living when it became vacant. You cannot blame me, I hope, for refusing."

Elizabeth was taken aback. Their stories coincided, except for the portion regarding the payment. But which man to believe? Mr. Darcy had never seemed a dishonest man, despite his ill-temper, and what would it profit him to make up such a tale? But if he was telling the truth about that, should he also be believed about Mr. Wickham's other supposed sins? She could not imagine that amiable gentleman behaving in the manner Mr. Darcy described, although it was true that he seemed rather free with his money, and had been all too ready to denounce Mr. Darcy on their first acquaintance.

"I cannot believe him so bad," she said, more to herself than to Mr. Darcy.

Darcy's mouth twisted. "I had hoped you would trust my word, but since you cannot, I urge you to appeal to Colonel Fitzwilliam for information, since he has the misfortune to know Wickham well and can confirm all the particulars. Good day, Miss Bennet." He slapped his hat on his head and strode toward the door, turning only once for a last, long look.



Elizabeth was still shaken when Charlotte returned. When asked what was the matter, she said, "I believe you were right about Mr. Darcy's interest in me."

Charlotte beamed. "What wonderful news! A brilliant match, indeed."

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I fear not. I have thoroughly discouraged him. We have quarrelled twice now. He will not be back."

"*Discouraged* him? Eliza, are you out of your mind? Think of the advantages of such a marriage!"

Elizabeth took Charlotte's basket from her and set it on the table. "Dearest Charlotte, you know I have always wished to marry for affection. All the advantages in the world mean nothing to me next to his abominable pride and manners. I could never love such a man."

Charlotte sank down in a chair and closed her eyes. "Sometimes I forget how young you are, Eliza. How can you look at Jane and still believe love is a good thing? Certainly, it can be wonderful for a brief moment, but more often it causes nothing but pain." The bitterness in her voice could not be missed.

"Just because Mr. Bingley did not prove to be the gentleman we believed him to be...."

Charlotte shook her head. "Wait until you fall in love. You will learn there is nothing that can hurt you more. I would never wish to be in love again."

Charlotte in love? "Again? Have you been keeping secrets from me?"

"I should not have mentioned it. You were still a child when it happened."

"But what happened?"

"There is nothing to tell. I fell in love with a gentleman, a young acquaintance of my father who was always kind to me, but I discovered he cared for someone else. That is the whole of my experience with love, but it was enough to show me the dangers. You cannot imagine the pain of being rejected by someone you love. Have you ever seen Jane in such low spirits?"

"No, I have not." Elizabeth suddenly recollected the look on Mr. Darcy's face, just before he left her. Did he feel the kind of distress Charlotte had, or Jane? Quarrelling with him had seemed such an excellent solution, but she had never considered how he might feel. She had accused him of ignoring her sister's sensibilities, yet she herself ignored his. If Mr. Bingley had treated Jane so, her sister would have been devastated. Oh, why had she not been gentler in her attempts to dissuade Mr. Darcy from pursuing his suit? She was no better than he in that regard.

Charlotte stood and rubbed her hands together. "But it is all no matter. Love comes to nothing in the end, and life goes on." She left the room quickly, before Elizabeth could respond.

But Charlotte's words continued to echo through Elizabeth's mind. After walking herself into exhaustion on the muddy footpaths of Rosings Park, she perched on the wobbly footstool outside the parsonage's kitchen door to shake off the worst of the dirt from her petticoats and half-boots. She began to scrape the soles of her boots along the bristle-brush left there for that purpose.

A woman's low laughter came from kitchen. Elizabeth recognized the voice of Mary, the maidservant. In her broad Kentish accent she said, "He may be a fine gentleman indeed, but I would not choose to serve such a stern master, no, indeed, I should not!"

"That is all for show," a man's voice replied. "In private he is quite different. If I must be in service, I can think of no better master than Mr. Darcy. He treats us with kindness and generosity, and never makes

unreasonable demands. My last master, now, if the mood took him, he would rage at me and blame me for everything, but not Mr. Darcy. If aught troubles him, he just keeps to himself. Almost never does he have a cross word for anyone.”

Elizabeth could hardly believe her ears. Of all her beliefs about Mr. Darcy, the most certain was that he was an ill-tempered man. She strained her ears to hear more.

“He was in a temper when he left here yesternoon, and that is a fact,” Mary said. “Practically grabbed his gloves from my hand and didn’t even wait for me to open the door, he was that glad to be gone.”

“Aye, he has been in an odd mood of late.” The man lowered his voice a little, and Elizabeth could not hear his next words for several minutes, until he spoke up again. “And he burns ‘em. Stays up half the night writing letters, pages and pages, and then he burns ‘em. I’ve never seen the like.”

“Letters? Who are they to?” Mary sounded fascinated by the prospect of gossip.

“I’ve no clue. Like I said, he doesn’t trouble me when he’s in a mood. I just see the ashes in the fireplace in the morning, and I can tell he tosses and turns all the night away. But I didn’t come here to talk about Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth heard Mary’s low laugh, then nothing but silence. Cheeks burning, she tiptoed away. Once she was safely out of earshot, she sank down onto a stone bench. Was Mr. Darcy’s suffering because of her? The idea of him, sitting late into the night and thinking of her, made her feel oddly warm.

She wondered what the burnt letters had held, and whether they had been addressed to her. She had never received a love letter, but she could not imagine what Mr. Darcy might say in one. Did he save all the words he kept back in conversation for his nightly letters? Was it words of love that he burned each night? A shiver went through her at the thought.

When Jane’s next letter arrived, Elizabeth retreated to her room to read it. Although Jane made an effort to be cheerful, it was clear that her spirits were still not recovered. Elizabeth felt a familiar flash of anger with Mr.

Bingley for leading Jane on, but could not stop her thoughts from moving to the man she suspected of being the architect of the plan, Mr. Darcy. Perhaps if he was suffering now at her hands, it was only his just due for what he had done to Jane. But even as she thought it, she knew the falsehood of it. Mr. Darcy's pain would not ease Jane's, and whatever his motives, she doubted that he would have deliberately hurt Jane. He seemed so very protective of his own sister.

That was another mystery. Although she told herself she should respect Miss Darcy's privacy and not think on it, she could not help but wonder from time to time what Mr. Darcy's great secret about his sister was, and how Mr. Wickham played into it. Clearly he felt Wickham had injured his sister somehow.... But no, the discussion had started with the idea of a sister being disappointed in love. Although she had accepted that Wickham was not the man she believed him to be, she could not picture him doing anything too bad. Then again, he had been quick to blacken Mr. Darcy's name. Yet Mr. Darcy's concern seemed to be for *her*, that somehow she would be misled by Mr. Wickham. A sudden suspicion crossed her mind. Mr. Wickham and Miss Darcy? But no, it could not be. Wickham had not spoken of Miss Darcy with any particular affection.

She needed some fresh air to clear her mind. Putting Jane's letter aside, she took her sunbonnet and quietly made her way out the door. She was not yet ready to face Charlotte again.

Usually she walked toward Rosings Park, but today that held too many memories, so she set off down the lane toward the village, stepping carefully to avoid stones and ruts in the road. Hunsford was much smaller than Meryton, only a handful of small houses clustered together. As she reached the first cottage, she heard a small child calling desperately, "No! No! Come back!" A quick glance was all it took to assess the situation, as a boy of perhaps six scrambled into the road in pursuit of a dozen chickens. Clearly they had escaped the coop and were now making the most of their freedom. The boy's chasing was only driving them further away.

With a smile at their antics, Elizabeth hurried nearer, shaking her skirts at the chickens to drive them back. She clucked at them, running back and

forth as she herded them toward a gate in the fence. The boy, following her lead, pulled the latch to shut the gate behind them, blurting out his thanks, but Elizabeth felt she should be the one to thank him. The adventure had lifted her spirits.

A deep voice spoke behind her. "You seem to have missed one."

She whirled to see Mr. Darcy, impeccably attired as always, holding a struggling white chicken at arm's length. She could not help but laugh at the incongruity of the picture.

With an attempt at solemnity, she said, "As a rule, chickens prefer not to be held."

Mr. Darcy bent over the stone fence and deposited his charge in the yard. "So I have discovered, but unfortunately, she seemed disinclined to listen to me when I told her to go back."

The image of the proper Mr. Darcy, giving orders to a recalcitrant chicken as if it were a dog, provoked a peal of laughter from her. She clapped her hand over her mouth, recalling her resolve to be kinder with him. "It was good of you to assist."

"It was my pleasure." He seemed occupied with picking stray bits of down off his black coat. When it was cleaned to his satisfaction, he looked up at her, his expression unreadable.

It was hard to be anything but amused when he stood there so seriously while a white tail feather dangled from the collar of his coat, despite his meticulous efforts. She stepped closer and took his lapel between her fingers, removing the offending item and offering it to him. "It appears you missed one as well."

His lips curved slowly into a smile. She had never stood so near to him when he smiled. It was peculiarly consuming, as if his smile somehow possessed the power to draw her in. She had never noticed the light that could dance in his eyes, either.

His fingers closed over hers for a fraction of a second as he took the feather, but it felt longer as warmth penetrated her thin gloves. Suddenly Elizabeth could think of nothing but how astonishing it was that such a man should feel affection for her, of all people.

Instead of letting the feather drift off in the wind, he tucked it into his pocket. "I thank you."

She bobbed a slight curtsy, not knowing what to make of the strange feelings coursing through her. Quickly she reverted to humour to regain control of the situation. "So, Mr. Darcy, now that we have resolved the pressing problem of the chickens, what shall we quarrel about today? I am feeling generous, so I will allow you to choose the subject."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why should we quarrel?"

She stepped back, feeling somehow more secure with a little distance between them. "Why, it seems to be our daily habit. We have exhausted the subject of our various sisters, so I thought we should have a new bone of contention. Perhaps my cousin, Mr. Collins? No, perhaps not, it might be difficult to find two different opinions on him."

Mr. Darcy threw back his head and laughed. "I should be very surprised if our opinions of him differed. I am still amazed that he managed to convince a sensible woman like Mrs. Collins to become his wife. Can you imagine him proposing on bended knee?"

Elizabeth pressed her fingers hard against her lips until she could trust her voice not to express her mirth. "I am sure I could not say."

His smile disappeared. "Pardon me. I did not mean to trespass on any confidence."

"No, it is not that." But she could perceive he was offended, and wanted to see his smile again. "I should not say, but will you promise never to tell a soul?"

"You may rely on my discretion."

She leaned toward him and said in a whisper, "I cannot tell you how he proposed to his wife, but he proposed to *me* only three days earlier. On bended knee."

"To *you*? That man proposed to *you*?" He sounded horrified.

"Yes, and was extraordinarily reluctant to accept no for an answer! Fortunately, he found consolation quickly." She could not believe she was sharing this story with Mr. Darcy, of all people.

He seemed to recover enough to see the humor in the situation. “Extraordinarily quickly, I should say.”

Elizabeth wished she had known this side of Mr. Darcy months ago. Perhaps if she had, she might have welcomed his interest in her, instead of putting him off. Had it been there all along, in some of his teasing at Netherfield? She had been so blinded by his remark at the assembly that she never saw it.

She would have been flattered had Mr. Darcy shown interest in her at their first meeting. Were it not for his pride, there would have been nothing to offend her, and she would never have spoken so warmly of her dislike of him to Mr. Wickham. Instead, how quick she had been to believe Mr. Wickham’s stories about him, assuming him to be ill-tempered and missing all of his attractive aspects! She rarely had the opportunity to encounter a gentleman with Mr. Darcy’s education and knowledge of the world. She glanced up at him, only to discover him regarding her warmly. It was difficult to pull her eyes away, and her pulses began to flutter.

They had almost reached the parsonage when Mr. Darcy stopped and turned to her, a serious look on his face. “There is something I must ask you while we are still in private.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. There was only one question which gentlemen sought to ask ladies in private, but she had not expected this after their quarrels. She did not even know what she would answer. She was still too confused about his character, and it was only in the last few days she had been willing to admit he had any redeeming features at all. How could she consider a proposal of marriage?

He appeared not to notice the heat in her cheeks. “It concerns your sister. I observed her closely at the Netherfield ball, but I saw no signs of particular regard for Mr. Bingley. She appeared to enjoy his company, but no more nor less than that of any other gentleman in attendance. I was certain her heart was not touched.”

If Elizabeth had been embarrassed before, it was nothing compared to what she felt now, after misappraising his intentions yet again, especially when she realized she was oddly disappointed to have been wrong. She

took a deep breath, attempting to restore her composure, and reminded herself that Mr. Darcy, however much he might admire her, was unlikely to ever act upon such feelings, especially given his objections to a match between Mr. Bingley and Jane. Her sister's last letter had been full of sadness which Jane had struggled unsuccessfully to hide. And Mr. Darcy had as much as admitted to his part in her unhappiness. How had Elizabeth allowed herself to ever conceive that such a man might be attractive to her, or to forget his abominable pride?

She spoke carefully. "Jane's feelings, though deep, are little expressed. She is very private in matters of the heart."

"Is it your belief, then, that she cared for my friend?"

Elizabeth suddenly wished for nothing more than to be out of his company. She folded her hands behind her back and began to walk again. She heard him fall into step beside her, but she kept her eyes on the path. "I will not violate my sister's confidence, but I assure you I am aware of her heart, and she is not mercenary."

He paused. "I did not mean to suggest she was. Your sister herself is beyond criticism. But a dutiful daughter of ambitious parents might accept a man for whom she had no particular affection. Your mother's wishes in the matter were quite clear to anyone who met her. The behaviour of your mother and younger sisters, combined with your family's low connections, made such an association unfavourable for a man of Mr. Bingley's standing. If she truly cared for him, such obstacles might be overlooked, though even then it would be difficult. But I saw no evidence that was the case, and I told my friend as much."

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. How dare he say such things to her, and not even have the grace to look ashamed of himself? His calm countenance suggested he expected her to agree with his assessment of her family, her low connections. Such pride was beyond any she had ever attributed to him in the past. Ill-mannered man! To think she had begun to warm to him!

"I wonder at your troubling to take the time to speak to me at all, Mr. Darcy," she said tartly, "given the many failings of my family and your

obvious doubt of my own honesty and knowledge of my sister. Surely you can find someone more *appropriate* to pass the time with. If you will excuse me, sir.” She swept past him as quickly as she could, but was halted by his hand on her arm. Enraged, she turned to face him.

“I meant no insult to you, but merely was sharing my honest reservations. Perhaps you might have preferred flattery to the truth, but disguise of every sort is my abhorrence.”

“There is a difference, sir, between flattery and gentleman-like behavior. If you wish a polite response from me, look first to your own manners, sir, not those of my family. Mr. Wickham was correct about your abominable pride.” She knew those words would hurt him, but in her anger no longer cared. “I hope no one ever injures *your* sister as you have injured mine. Good day, sir.” She shook his hand off and hurried through the parsonage gate, away from his disturbing presence.



Darcy did not move as the door to the parsonage slammed shut behind Elizabeth. It was as if all the air had been stolen from his lungs and he would never breathe again. He knew not what infuriated him the most, her criticism of his manners – the nerve of suggesting he did not behave like a gentleman! – her agreement with Mr. Wickham, or her departure without allowing him to respond. Wickham! How could she still believe that cad after what he had told her?

But she had saved the worst for last, without even knowing how hard her arrow would hit its target. That he had hurt her sister, albeit unintentionally, he could no longer deny. But Georgiana had also been deceived by a man she believed she loved, who left her without a backwards glance except for his regret over losing her dowry, and Darcy was still worried about her loss of spirits. His lively younger sister had turned into a shadow of her old self, and it was all Wickham’s fault.

And Elizabeth saw him as doing the same to her sister.

It did not matter that he had believed he was acting for the best, that his actions, unlike Wickham's, had no malicious or selfish intent. Or not much selfish intent, he immediately amended his thought, since his hopes for a match between Bingley and Georgiana could not have helped but to make him more opposed to Bingley's interest in Miss Bennet. To Elizabeth, he was the man who hurt her sister, regardless of the reason, and she could no more forgive him than he could forgive Wickham for what he had done to Georgiana.

He fingered the feather in his pocket, remembering the moment when Elizabeth had touched him to remove it, her face alit as much from her inner spirit as from the sun. He had never stood so close to her before, and he had wanted nothing so much as to taste her lips. He had thought she might have felt the same, but he had been fooling himself.

He turned his feet away from the parsonage and began to walk slowly back to Rosings. There was only one thing for him to do.



The following day, Mr. Collins reported that they were summoned to dine at Rosings again that evening. Elizabeth found herself taking unusual care with her preparations, then laughed at herself for her efforts. What, after all, did she hope to accomplish? Mr. Darcy might notice, but he was unlikely to ever act upon it. And she could not make it through an entire conversation with the gentleman without becoming losing her temper.

But when they arrived, the sitting room was empty except for Lady Catherine and her daughter. Elizabeth waited for some mention of the missing parties, and was grateful when Charlotte asked after the two gentlemen.

"They have returned to London," pronounced Lady Catherine. "I assure you, I feel it exceedingly. I believe nobody feels the loss of friends so much as I do. But I am particularly attached to these young men; and know

them to be so much attached to me! They were excessively sorry to go! But so they always are.”

Elizabeth folded her hands in her lap and lowered her eyes. So Mr. Darcy had left, without even mentioning it to her. Had he thought it of no importance to her? Or was leaving her of no importance to *him*? Perhaps he was just as glad to leave after their quarrels. Any admiration he had for her certainly would not have survived the knowledge of her prejudices and her anger. If only she had guarded her tongue better!

Mr. Collins said, “I am sure they are already missing the delightful company of their dear cousin, Miss de Bourgh.”

Elizabeth was sure they were missing nothing of the sort, so Lady Catherine’s next words came as a shock. “It is true, and although it is not yet official, I would not be surprised to see an announcement in the newspapers soon.”

Mr. Collins hastened to make obsequious congratulations to Miss De Bourgh, who looked as if she did not feel the matter deserved celebration. Elizabeth, folding her hands so tightly that her knuckles ached, was glad to have everyone’s attention focused on the other young lady, for she was sure no one could miss the heat rising in her cheeks.

It was too late to think about what she might have wished for. She would have to make the best of it, and there was no point in dwelling on such an unpleasant subject. She would think no more of him. With new determination, she looked up and rejoined the conversation.



Elizabeth had never realized how much energy one could expend to avoid thinking about one particular thing, especially when that thing seemed to want to be at the forefront of her mind. After a night of restless sleep and a morning where everything seemed to remind her of Mr. Darcy, she was heartily sick of it. Soon, she told herself, she would be unable to breathe

the air, because it would be a reminder of Mr. Darcy, since he also breathed that same air!

Finally she decided that if she could not avoid thinking of him, she would attempt the opposite, and deliberately think of him until she was bored with the entire subject. What, after all, was Mr. Darcy to her? He had admired her, and while she could not help but feel the compliment to herself, there was no reason for that to change *her* opinion of *him*. He was not as ill-tempered or unfair a man as she had thought, but it did not therefore follow that he was a paragon of virtue. He was proud, uncaring of the effect of his behaviour on others, and altogether too concerned with himself. Her feelings were hurt not because she had lost an admirer whose good opinion she desired, but because her injured vanity had wanted more appeasement from him. What better cure for having been named as tolerable, but not tempting, than to receive a proposal of marriage from that same gentleman? But she was not a child who needed someone to tend to her ills. Clearly Mr. Darcy had indeed decided that she was tempting, but that was all. If he had truly loved her, he would not have left her side and the same day become engaged to his cousin. No, his affection, if she could term it such, was a shallow thing, if it could be so quickly forgotten! He, like Mr. Collins, had not regretted her for longer than it took to propose marriage to another woman. She would not regret such a fickle admirer, either.

Having settled the matter to her own satisfaction, and having determined that renewing her dislike of Mr. Darcy was much more satisfying than dwelling on her loss, Elizabeth embarked upon a journey of annoyance with the gentleman. By the end of the third day, Charlotte declared herself heartily sorry she had ever heard of Mr. Darcy or his many faults. Elizabeth, chagrined, began to keep her thoughts to herself once more, which proved to be fortunate, since the following day the gentleman himself, accompanied by Colonel Fitzwilliam, once more called at the Parsonage.

Once her initial shock had worn off, she noticed that Mr. Darcy had returned to his old silent habits. Perhaps he had not wished to make this

call, but felt somehow obligated. With a hint of tartness, she said, "We had understood from Lady Catherine that you did not intend to return to Rosings this season."

Colonel Fitzwilliam said, "I do not know why, for we told her we would be but a few days." He winked at Elizabeth. "Sometimes one needs a change of scenery even from a place as charming as Rosings Park."

Mr. Darcy seemed to bestir himself long enough to ask, "Miss Bennet, have you heard from your sister of late? Is she still in London?"

"She is, although she has not written recently." Elizabeth wondered at his interest, after their last conversation. It was no doubt an attempt at civility, but it could be nothing more. Whether he admired her or not, he was engaged to Miss De Bourgh, and that was an end to it.

Elizabeth pointedly turned her attention back to Colonel Fitzwilliam, conversing gaily with him for the remainder of their call, but through it all, she remained aware of the dark eyes fixed on her from across the room.

She was determined to remain annoyed with Mr. Darcy, so the following day, she was pleased to receive a letter from Jane, which would no doubt provide more ammunition for her pointed dislike of Mr. Darcy, the source of her sister's pain. As soon as she had the opportunity, she collected her bonnet and gloves and went for a long walk where she could take her time in perusing her sister's missive.

What a blow, then, to discover that Jane not only sounded like her old self, with none of the sadness of her recent letters, but almost ebullient. The surprising cause for the change became readily apparent, and Elizabeth read her sister's news with increasing delight, any thoughts of Mr. Darcy quite forgotten in her celebration. She finished the letter and put it away, but it would not do; in half a minute the letter was unfolded again to allow her to bask once again in her sister's happiness. It was at that moment that she heard a familiar voice call her name, and she looked up to see the subject of her earlier ill-humour.

Even Mr. Darcy could not dampen her spirits at that point, so she folded the letter and put it once more away before greeting him with all civility.

He took his place walking beside her and said, "You seem happy today, Miss Bennet."

"I am indeed. I received a letter from my sister Jane, who is in excellent spirits."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Apparently Mr. Bingley came to call at my uncle's house, and she was able to report that he was in good health." Elizabeth stole a sly look at him, to see how he bore it, but he seemed unperturbed.

"Yes, he had mentioned he might do so when I saw him last."

Elizabeth turned to stare at him in surprise. He looked uncomfortable, and shrugged his shoulders at her questioning look. "Did you see him in London, then?" she asked.

"Yes, I did." He seemed disinclined to say anything more.

Her cheeks flushed, Elizabeth fixed her eyes on the path ahead of them. Had Mr. Darcy told Mr. Bingley of Jane's presence in London? It seemed the most likely explanation. But what had he meant by it?

She remembered that she had confirmed Jane's affection for Bingley just before Mr. Darcy's surprising departure for London. And then, on his return, the first question he had asked her was whether she had heard from Jane.

He must have done it. She felt warmth all over at the idea, certain he must see how embarrassed she was. She wished she could thank him, but how could she when he had not admitted to the action? Not to mention that he was engaged to another woman.

It was dangerous to let herself feel warmth toward him. Tightening her bonnet strings, she said, "I understand there is reason to congratulate you, as well."

He gave her a puzzled look. "I do not understand."

He had said he abhorred disguise, but that was another falsehood. "Lady Catherine told us of your forthcoming engagement to Miss De Bourgh."

"That nonsense again?" he exclaimed irritably. "I have no intention of marrying my cousin, now or ever."

"But she said..." Elizabeth reviewed the conversation at Rosings in her mind, and realized that Lady Catherine had neatly avoided stating directly that the two were engaged. A feeling of relief suffused her.

Mr. Darcy's annoyance had not yet faded. "How could *you*, of all people, believe such a thing?"

"I am not in the habit of disbelieving what I am told," she said in confusion, perceiving that he was affronted. In an effort to reduce the tension, she changed back to the previous subject, rashly saying what she had only minutes ago decided not to say. "I cannot help but thank you for speaking to Mr. Bingley. His visit made Jane very happy."

"Do not thank me. I did nothing more than a friend's duty of confessing my error."

"Still, it was generous of you."

His mouth twisted. "I would not wish Miss Bennet unhappy, nor to stand in the way of my friend's joy. The experience of having a sister in pain is not unknown to me."

She stole a glance at him. "I am sorry to hear it."

"When my sister was but fifteen, George Wickham took advantage of her innocence to persuade her that he loved her. His object, of course, was her dowry. It was pure chance that led to their elopement being foiled."

"You need not tell me this, sir," she said uncomfortably.

"I would not wish you to be misled by Wickham's charming manner." There was a bite in Mr. Darcy's voice.

"I do not doubt your word." At least not any longer. The words hung unspoken in the air.

"I am glad to hear it, for I do not wish you to be under a misapprehension. Especially regarding me, when it is clear your opinion of me is not high."

"Mr. Darcy, in truth I find it hard to hold *any* opinion about you for more than a day at a time, since you persist in surprising me, and I hear such differing reports of your character as to confuse me completely."

"Differing reports? From Mr. Wickham?"

She shook her head, then with a sudden urge to tease, said, "I have many sources of information, sir. For example, after hearing Miss Bingley praise the neatness and deliberateness of your letter-writing, I now hear that you are prone to write half the night and then burn the results."

He stiffened, and a flush rose in his cheeks. "There is some writing best consigned to the flames."

"Such as?" She was playing with fire, but for some reason, she had no desire to stop.

"Such as words of ardent admiration directed toward someone who would have no desire to hear them." His voice was oddly flat, and his eyes seemed fixed on the horizon.

She had not expected so direct an answer, and it left her confused, embarrassed, and unable to find words for an answer. But something about the set of his jaw told her of his pain, and she could not bear to be the cause of it. "Unless, perhaps, the lady is in possession of *differing opinions* owing to the many differing reports she hears." She blushed furiously at her forwardness.

He froze and stared at her, his mouth opening as if to say something, but nothing emerged. Elizabeth could not quite hide a self-satisfied smile, but did not meet his gaze. After a moment, he appeared to recollect himself and began to walk again. Elizabeth was beginning to think she had misjudged his words and truly embarrassed herself when he finally said in a somewhat strangled voice, "Indeed."

She could not decide how to interpret that, especially since he seemed to have developed a sudden interest in the line of trees on the horizon. He did not show the pleasure she had hoped he might, leaving her to consider the worst possibilities. Perhaps she had done nothing but convince him she was, like so many others, a fortune-hunter of the worst sort. The thought was intolerable, so with great energy she began to discuss the recent improvements Mr. Collins had made to the parsonage at Lady Catherine's behest. It was the dullest and least flirtatious subject she could devise.

Mr. Darcy made little response, but there was nothing unusual about that.

Elizabeth's words continued to haunt her, bringing flushes of embarrassment to her cheeks whenever she thought of their interchange. She held many a conversation in her imagination with Mr. Darcy where she attempted to turn her forwardness into a light-hearted joke, but found that even thinking of him tended to put her wits into disarray. She was tempted to avoid the grove completely the following morning; but her courage, which always rose with each attempt to intimidate her, would not allow such cowardice.

And so it was that she found her way to the grove before the morning mists had been dissipated by the sun, dew staining the edge of her petticoats. Mr. Darcy was already waiting there, and his countenance warmed at her approach. His appearance relieved her greatest anxiety; had she indeed offended him, all he need do was avoid the grove, but instead he had come to meet her. After a brief murmured greeting, he offered her his arm and they began to walk.

They were but a short distance from the Parsonage when Mr. Darcy said, "Miss Bennet, are you indeed a lady of differing opinions?"

Elizabeth's heart began to race. "I pride myself on never maintaining the same opinion for more than an hour at a stretch," she said with mock solemnity.

He inclined his head. "Then I will have to hope that I am choosing the correct hour to give you this, rather than allowing it to join its fellows as kindling for the fire." He took a letter from his pocket and held it out to her.

Her hand trembling slightly, she took it between her fingers, aware how close to his body it had been lying. She was too embarrassed to meet his eyes, knowing this was an impropriety that could not be ignored.

"I will leave you now," he said quietly, and when Elizabeth automatically held out her hand to him, he took it in a firm grip. "And now, in the eventuality that I may never have the opportunity to do this again..." He raised her hand to his lips and applied a kiss that was more a caress than

a formality. Then he held the back of her hand to his cheek, his dark eyes capturing hers, and Elizabeth forgot to breathe for a long moment.

Darcy released her hand after brushing it once more with his lips. "I wish you good day, Miss Bennet." And then, with a slight bow, he turned again into the park and was soon out of sight.

"Good day, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said to his retreating back. As he walked away, she instinctively pressed the letter to her chest, a smile beginning to curve her lips.

She found her way into a private part of the garden where she could not be seen from the parsonage. With the strongest curiosity, she opened the letter, and, to her increasing wonder, perceived an envelope containing two sheets of letter paper, written quite through, in a very close hand. The envelope itself was likewise full. Sitting on a small marble bench, she then began it. It was dated from Rosings, at five o'clock in the morning, and was as follows:

If this letter is not to be consigned to the flames, I must consider where to begin. I have told you so often in my dreams and in these letters of my ardent admiration of your person, the extraordinary pleasure I derive simply from being in the same room with you, how the sound of your laughter brings warmth into a cold world, how your eyes sparkle when you tease me, that it is easy to forget that I have used nothing more than glances to communicate those sentiments to you in reality. But start somewhere I must, so I will begin at the night of the ball at Netherfield. I was determined to dance with you that night, to have the privilege of your attention for an entire half hour, a prospect as intoxicating as fine wine. For weeks I had remained on the periphery, listening to your conversations, noting at whom you smiled and whose attentions you preferred to receive, what made you laugh, and how you would step in when you felt someone was in danger of being offended. I wanted to understand your magic, what enchantment you used to keep me in thrall, what secret element you possessed that would not allow me to look away; I, who have looked on the greatest beauties of the ton and remained unmoved.

I first came to Netherfield shortly after settling my sister's household in London, after the dreadful affair of which you are aware. I have never been much inclined to social events, preferring a quiet night with a few friends to a ball at Almack's, but at that point my disinclination for society was at its greatest. The man who, although we had grown apart, was my oldest friend, had betrayed me in the worst way possible. I was in no mood to make new acquaintances, and anything that smacked of fortune-hunters enraged me. I cared nothing for what anyone thought of me, and felt little pleasure in anything. Then, one day, someone at a party asked my opinion of something. I responded tersely, no doubt rudely, and you turned your fine eyes on me and said, "And at last Mr. Darcy has dazzled the room with his knowledge! We must all be duly grateful." Your laughing voice seemed to make the candles burn brighter, and I became your captive. But every time I attempted to approach you, you seemed to fly away. You refused to dance with me at Lucas Lodge and later at Netherfield during your sister's illness. Thereafter my only delight was to look on you, to hear you speak, to think of you, to dream of you each night.

My dearest Elizabeth – and I must hope you will forgive my forwardness in addressing you thus; but since I have written you so many letters that were never to be read, and it is of little matter to the fire how forward the words it burns might be, I have taken that liberty too often to surrender it now, because the sound of your name, the appearance of it coming from my pen, is an addictive delight – you cannot imagine the torment I felt at leaving Hertfordshire, knowing I was unlikely ever to see you again. I doubt I could have found the resolve to do so for my own sake; it was only out of a sense of duty to Bingley that I could force myself to leave the web of bewitchment you had cast upon me. I wish I could say that I forgot you quickly, but it would be a lie; you were my first thought in the morning and my last at night, and you danced through my dreams like a siren I could not hope to escape, nor did I wish to. For a time I thought it would drive me to madness, and I had only just regained some sense of myself when I left London for Rosings, only to find the siren herself at the end of my journey. Even a brief time in your company was enough to place me once again in the gravest of danger, perhaps

even more than I had been in Hertfordshire, because now I had the certainty that I could not escape the memory of you. I tried with all my might to stay away, but a teasing Cupid kept throwing you in my path – at church, where I could not attend to a word of the sermon, as all my prayers were of you; when you dined at Rosings, and I knew that all the family expectations in the world could not compensate for the joy I received whenever a smile would touch your lips. I was lost before I began.

I would tell you of my longing for you, but those words are not suited for a maiden's eyes; that letter must be fed to the hungry fire, which does not burn as fiercely as my love for you. I could write to you of the depth of my hopeless admiration of you and how it overcame all my scruples, but words of that sort are likely to be as unforgivable as they are unforgettable. I can only tell you of the lessons I have learned from you, my dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth; lessons of the heart, of the error of my ways and my intolerable selfishness in not considering the sensibilities of those I care for, lessons which have made me a better man. They have also made me into a man who will never forget the sparkle of your fine eyes, the delightful turn of your countenance when you spy a victim for your teasing, the extraordinary light you bring into the darkest room; and I will always feel the lack of your presence when I am away from you, even though years and decades may pass. You are a woman in a million, as much for your honesty and sweetness as for your beauty and wit, and it has been my privilege to be a worshipper at your feet. Those are memories I would not surrender for anything, even if they are the only ones I ever have of you.

Now you see what only the flames have seen until now. I will understand completely if you treat me as if this letter had never existed; indeed, I deserve no more, and you need not worry that I will importune you further. Your love is a prize I dare not dream of gaining, one too precious for a mere mortal such as myself, but if you find any small part of yourself that is willing to consider my suit, nay, even to tolerate my occasional presence, I pray you will find some way to take pity on me and show me your forgiveness for these words. I will be in the grove each morning, my thoughts filled with you.

I will only add, God bless you.

*Yours, more than my own,
Fitzwilliam Darcy*

Elizabeth's feelings on reading this letter were scarcely to be defined. Her cheeks wore a warm blush provoked by Mr. Darcy's unexpectedly passionate eloquence. His attachment incited gratitude; his ardour, a sense of near-disbelief. How badly she had misread his behaviour even in Meryton, taking such a pronounced dislike to a gentleman who clearly saw himself as in her power! Her inclination before reading it was already in his favour, and it was impossible not to be touched by the depth and enduring nature of his attachment, and being touched by it, to feel some of the same warmth toward the writer. She read the letter over and over again, until she was in a fair way of knowing it by heart. Finally, with a dreamy smile, she hid the precious letter in her reticule and returned to the parsonage.

An agitated Charlotte awaited her. "Lizzy, wherever have you been? We have been invited to tea at Rosings, and are expected in less than an hour. Mr. Collins has been frantic over your absence."

Indeed, it had grown later in the day that Elizabeth had realized, but the unexpected invitation threw her into a turmoil of spirits. She had thought she had until the next morning to decide on a response to Mr. Darcy, and now she would be face to face with him in a short time – and in front of his family and the Collinses. How could she meet with him in public with the words of his letter ringing in her mind?

She hurried upstairs to change and to bring her hair into some sort of order. She wished she had more time so that she could look her best, but then she laughed at herself. Given what Mr. Darcy had written in his letter, she doubted it would matter to him if she appeared before him in rags. He had forgiven her so many other faults that a hurried toilette could hardly be expected to affect him!

In a short time, she joined Mr. and Mrs. Collins. The walk to Rosings, which might have given her time to calm herself, instead seemed devoted to flutterings of her pulse. Her distraction was such that Mr. Collins bestirred himself to ask if she were quite well, and to caution her on the dangers of bringing contagious illness into the presence of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Elizabeth could not help thinking that Lady Catherine would likely prefer a grave illness to the knowledge that she harboured a competitor for Mr. Darcy's affections!

Elizabeth barely knew where to look when they were ushered into Lady Catherine's presence. She dared not glance at Mr. Darcy for fear that her embarrassment would be all too easy for that gentleman to read. Fortunately, visits with that lady did not require thought about conversation, since Lady Catherine invariably directed the discussion in whatever direction interested her. On this day her mind turned to the subject of punctuality, owing to her displeasure with the arrival of the visitors several minutes after the hour specified.

Mr. Collins naturally could not apologize to her ladyship enough for this grave sin, though he sprinkled his expression of contrition with many compliments to both Lady Catherine and Miss De Bourgh. "We can all learn from your most excellent example, Lady Catherine, especially my dear cousin Elizabeth, as our deplorable tardiness was the result of one of her exceedingly long rambles. Your ladyship has condescended to warn her of the dangers of this behaviour in the past. Today she left at mid-morning and did not return until an hour ago!"

"Miss Bennet, is this true?" Lady Catherine demanded.

"I am sorry to say it is true, Lady Catherine. I was preoccupied with my thoughts and lost track of the time, and it was most inconsiderate of me. I hope you will find it in your heart to exonerate Mr. and Mrs. Collins for this fault, which was solely my own."

Mr. Darcy's deep voice came from behind her. "The fault is mine. I encountered Miss Bennet on her walk and engaged her in conversation for some time, which caused the delay in her return."

Startled, Elizabeth looked over at him, and her eyes met his dark, penetrating gaze. His expression was sober, but she thought she could perceive some signs of concern in the manner in which he held his hands, as if he was uncertain what to do with them. Feeling the more than uncommon awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, she said with a smile, "Mr. Darcy is most gracious, as our conversation was not of such great length that I

could not have returned in good time, but the subject of his discourse gave me a great deal to ponder.”

Lady Catherine frowned. “What could my nephew possibly have found to converse about with you at such length?”

Elizabeth, realizing that private conversation with Mr. Darcy was a worse sin in her ladyship’s eyes than mere tardiness, thought quickly and said, “Oh! It was a matter pertaining to his visit to Hertfordshire last autumn. The people there are unused to contact with a gentleman as discerning and knowledgeable as Mr. Darcy, and could not always perceive his generous motives in offering them his advice regarding the... management of their estates. I assure your ladyship that I now have a much better understanding of the value of Mr. Darcy’s opinion on matters of husbandry –” at that moment her voice faltered briefly as she realized the interpretation he might put upon her words, “And I intend, on my return to Hertfordshire, to make certain that his most excellent advice is attended to by all concerned.”

Lady Catherine appeared mollified by this. “I am glad, Miss Bennet, to see that you can recognize your betters and learn from them. I am sure my nephew is far more knowledgeable in these matters than the persons with whom you are accustomed to consorting.”

“I cannot argue with your ladyship,” Elizabeth said, giving Mr. Darcy a teasing look. “His eloquence is enough to convince even those of differing opinions.” She was rewarded by the sight of his eyes opening slightly wider in surprise.

To Elizabeth’s mingled relief and disappointment, there was no opportunity for direct discourse with Mr. Darcy during the visit, as Lady Catherine decreed that her nephew should remain by the side of Miss De Bourgh. Elizabeth did not know what she would have said to him had the opportunity presented itself, but she could not deny that she wished it would. Her frustration was eased only when the time came to depart, when, while Lady Catherine was giving endless household advice to Charlotte, Mr. Darcy caught her gaze and his lips shaped the word, “Tomorrow.”



Elizabeth anticipated another restless night, but that did not prove to be the case. Once she was abed, she read Mr. Darcy's letter one more time, then folded it and put it under her pillow, and almost immediately she drifted off into a deep sleep.

When her eyes opened the next morning, the sun was already well up in the sky. The previous day's events came back to her, and she realized that Mr. Darcy would have been in the grove for some time already. How could she have overslept, on this of all days? He must think she wanted nothing to do with him. The very thought caused her a sharp pain.

She threw back the bedcovers and began to dress herself as quickly as she could, without even a thought as to what dress she chose. She brushed her hair out from her braid and twisted it into a knot. She wrapped a few tendrils around her finger to give them a touch of curl, and decided that would have to be enough. What would she do if she reached the grove and Mr. Darcy had already left?

She knew Charlotte would be in the sitting room. Not wishing to waste any precious minutes in conversation, Elizabeth crept down the back stairs and out through the kitchen. She headed for the grove at an unladylike pace.

When she arrived, she did not immediately see Mr. Darcy, and her heart sank. Would she have to wait until the following morning? Would he even return the next day after she had failed to meet him today? Then she noticed a dark shape leaning against the trunk of the twisted oak. It was him; his eyes closed and a pained expression on his face.

She spoke his name, and his eyes flew open, a becoming expression of heartfelt delight diffusing over his face. Elizabeth smiled – she could not have done anything else, as her lips seemed to have taken on a life of their own.

Darcy closed the distance between them with a few long strides. “Elizabeth?” he whispered. “I was afraid you were not coming, that I had misunderstood yesterday.”

Her mouth suddenly dry, Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I was merely...delayed.”

“Thank God,” he said, his voice rough. Before she could realize what he was about, he took her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

She had not known that a man’s lips could be so warm and tender, and a surprising heat suffused through her. Her entire being seemed to be concentrated in her lips and on the fortunate spot on her back where his hands pressed against her. Her head swam in a sudden delight.

When he finally released her, his breathing ragged, she could do nothing but stare into his eyes. Despite the novels she had read, she had never realized a kiss could make the entire world a different place.

Her stunned silence apparently worried him, as he took her hands in his and said with concern, “Elizabeth? Are you well?”

A smile bloomed on her face. “Quite well. Very well indeed.”

His expression relaxed, and he looked younger and happier. “Elizabeth, tell me you will relieve me from my misery and agree to be my wife.” When she did not answer immediately, he added with a smile, “Or must I kiss you again until you agree?”

Elizabeth touched her finger to her lips. “You say that if I refuse you, you will kiss me again, so I must assume that if I accept, it would then follow that you would *not* kiss me. You are an unusual gentleman indeed, sir! This presents me with quite a dilemma.” She tilted her head as if in deep thought. “Well, I am afraid you leave me no choice but to refuse, since I would be very sorry if you did not kiss me again.”

A multitude of expressions passed over his face, first disbelief, then understanding, then a look of deepest happiness. “In that case, Miss Bennet, I look forward very much to convincing you to change your mind.”

With a smile, she closed her eyes and tipped up her face. She did not wait long before Mr. Darcy began to practice his skills at persuasion.

Also by Abigail Reynolds

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A Pemberley Medley

Mr. Darcy's Letter

The Darcy Brothers (co-author)

Mr. Darcy and the Enchanted Library (co-author)

About the author

ABIGAIL REYNOLDS MAY BE a nationally bestselling author and a physician, but she can't follow a straight line with a ruler. Originally from upstate New York, she studied Russian and theater at Bryn Mawr College and marine biology at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole. After a stint in performing arts administration, she decided to attend medical school, and took up writing as a hobby during her years as a physician in private practice.

A life-long lover of Jane Austen's novels, Abigail began writing variations on *Pride & Prejudice* in 2001, then expanded her repertoire to include a series of novels set on her beloved Cape Cod. Her books have won multiple awards and several have been national bestsellers. Her most recent releases are *Under the Netherfield Mistletoe*, *The Magic of Pemberley*, and *The Price of Pride*. You can find her other books listed on her Author Page at Amazon. Her books have been translated into seven languages. She lives on Cape Cod with her family and a menagerie of animals. Her hobbies do not include sleeping or cleaning her house.

Visit Abigail's website at [Pemberley Variations](#)