



A Stranger at Longbourn

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Category: Historical

Description: A tall, dark, and handsome stranger with no memory captures Elizabeth's heart—but what if his forgotten past destroys everything?

Mr. Darcy, confident in his judgment, advises Mr. Bingley to part from Miss Bennet, which causes Bingley great distress. Troubled by this, Darcy decides to visit Longbourn to reassess his counsel. However, fate intervenes....

Elizabeth Bennet—already disapproving of Darcy for his role in separating her sister from Bingley—finds an unconscious, bloodied man near her home.

The man, with no memory and only a coat labeled Property of George Wickham, is taken in by the Bennets and named Georgie. As Georgie recovers, his wit and kindness win Elizabeth's heart, and they fall in love, planning to marry despite the mystery of his past.

But their happiness is shattered when a letter reveals that George Wickham is a notorious rogue who nearly ruined Darcy's sister. Shattered, Georgie leaves to uncover the truth about his identity, leaving Elizabeth heartbroken.

Weeks later, as her hope wanes, Georgie returns with a startling revelation, forcing Elizabeth to decide whether to risk her heart once more, or close it off forever?

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Page 1

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Darcy

20 th November 1811

Grosvenor House, London

“A nd the youngest sister, Lydia, I have never met a young lady so uncouth,” Caroline Bingley said, before raising her cup and taking a sip of tea. She glanced at Darcy over the rim of the cup and curled her lips into what Darcy assumed was her version of a charming smile. He shifted uncomfortably and focused on her sister who’d slipped to the edge of her seat, eager to continue the conversation.

“Indeed,” Louisa said, picking up the conversation. “The entire family is unsuitable. The younger sisters are loud and lack any decorum. You know we hosted a ball at Netherfield, of course?”

“Of course he knows, nothing escapes Mr Darcy’s attention,” Caroline said, continuing to smile at Darcy.

“Charles told me about the ball in one of his letters,” Darcy agreed, motioning for Louisa to continue.

“Well, the middle sister, Mary, played the pianoforte rather dreadfully and did not know when to stop. And the mother—”

“Oh, the mother,” Caroline exclaimed dramatically. “It is clear where the younger sisters get their behaviour from, for Mrs Bennet is entirely impossible. She too is

loud, and she announced at the dinner table that she feels a marriage between Jane Bennet and Charles would help her other daughters as well, due to his wealth.”

“She thought Charles would open doors for them, in fact,” Louisa added.

“What do you say to that, Mr Darcy?” Caroline asked, her head dipped to the side as she eagerly awaited his opinion.

Darcy ran one hand along his black pantaloons and drummed his fingers against his knee. Indeed, what did he have to say to that? He’d hardly been at the Hursts’ home for an hour, and already he’d heard all manner of dreadful tales about the woman Charles Bingley wanted to marry. Or rather, about her family, for even Caroline and Louisa seemed to carry a level of fondness for their brother’s intended. The family, however, sounded utterly outrageous. Still, wanting to be fair, he reserved his judgement.

“What of the father? And the other sister? In his letter, Mr Hurst mentioned there was another older sister.”

Caroline shrugged. “Elizabeth Bennet, yes. She appears a little less silly in comparison, but her judgement is lacking. Miss Bennet became unwell at Netherfield during one of her visits, and Miss Elizabeth deemed it proper to walk through the mud and rain, arriving entirely dishevelled.”

“It was quite a disgrace,” Louisa added. Darcy could see how they might have reached such a verdict. A part of him admired this Elizabeth Bennet’s tenacity to reach a sister who’d evidently fallen quite ill. Still, one had to wonder why she would not have hired a carriage. However, that brought him to another matter.

“I see. Well, that is unfortunate but hardly reason to oppose the marriage. However, their finances...” he started. Mr Hurst, who had slumped in the armchair in such a

manner Darcy hadn't been sure if he was awake or asleep, cleared his throat.

"Not in good order, I'll say," Hurst said and got up with a groan. He retrieved a ledger from the table by the window and handed it to Darcy. He flipped through the pages and took a deep breath, feeling his chest rise under his waistcoat.

"The estate is entailed away from the family?"

"Indeed. Since there are no sons, the estate will go to a relative of theirs in Kent," Hurst confirmed. Darcy's eyes examined the words and he let out a scoff.

"William Collins is the heir?"

"You know him?" Caroline asked, and Darcy nodded.

"He is the vicar at my aunt, Lady Catherine's estate. Dreadful man, he thinks himself rather more important than he is, or so I have heard," he declared, running a hand through his hair.

What was Bingley thinking? He'd heard everything about Jane Bennet, the young woman who had enchanted him, and by all accounts she sounded like a respectable woman. Even Caroline and Louisa acknowledged her refinement and poise.

But the family? They hardly had a sixpence to scratch together and their circumstances were less than ideal. Mr Bennet, an inept landowner if his finances were anything to go by, had five daughters to find husbands for, and an estate entailed away from the family. Given their precarious finances, there was no way to break the entailment—not unless...

Darcy sat up straight, "What is it you said Mrs Bennet declared at the ball? That this would be beneficial for her daughters?"

“Yes, it is quite clear that she intends to use Charles to find rich husbands for her other daughters,” Caroline said, twisting her mouth as if she’d bitten into a lemon.

“Pray, when you have seen Miss Bennet with your brother, does she appear enamoured of him?” he asked, feeling uneasy to even pose such a question. Indeed, the entire conversation he was currently involved in was not proper, and he would not usually engage in such a debate if not for his genuine concern for his friend.

He’d been happy for Bingley when his friend had first written to him about the woman he’d met in Hertfordshire. He was renting an estate there with the view to making a purchase. He’d described a gracious, gentlewoman who appeared on the surface much like Bingley himself—kind, amiable, and perhaps a little naïve. Alas, since then he’d received word from Thomas Hurst who’d written to relay the concerns of his wife and sister-in-law regarding the marriage.

Instantly, Darcy regretted not accompanying Bingley to Hertfordshire as he’d requested, in favour of spending the summer at Matlock with his cousin and uncle. If he’d been there, he could have judged for himself if this woman was indeed good for his often-gullible friend.

Had he gone to Netherfield with Bingley, he would have been able to assess the situation better and perhaps dissuaded Bingley from pursuing this young woman and ending this entanglement before it commenced.

“Mr Darcy,” Caroline said, “I fear he’s going to make an offer when we return to Netherfield next week.”

Darcy scratched his temple. “I shall speak to him. It truly does sound like a very poor match.”

“You know how he is,” Mrs Hurst chimed in. “He has always been a man who has

his head in the clouds when it comes to romance. How a man who has such a mind for business is so easily swayed by a pretty face, I do not know.”

The floorboards creaked behind him, and Darcy turned to see his friend standing in the doorway, pale faced. His blond hair had fallen into his eyes, and he pushed a lock back with his right hand while looking around the room.

“Darcy? I did not expect you. You were not due in Town until next month.”

Darcy rose and shook his friend’s hand. “I had not planned to be here, but an urgent letter reached me from Mr Hurst.”

“From Mr Hurst?” Bingley asked, the confusion evident in his face. He eyed his brother-in-law, who nodded sheepishly and then looked away. “But why?” However, his shoulders dropped, and Darcy could see that he already knew what this was about.

“Please take a seat,” he said gently, and Bingley walked to the empty armchair between Caroline and Mr Hurst. He sat down and looked from one to the other.

“Have you come to talk about Jane?” The pleading undertone in his voice almost broke Darcy’s heart as he knew this would hurt his friend.

“Indeed. We had to summon Mr Darcy because you will not listen to any of us,” Caroline said with an accusatory tone.

“But I do not understand,” Bingley replied. “What is it you have against her?”

“We have nothing against her,” Mrs Hurst repeated. “And we have already told you this. It is her family whom we dislike. You must see it, Charles. They are nothing but villagers looking to marry up. Mrs Bennet said as much at the ball.”

Bingley looked around the room as though he were a fox being pursued by the hounds.

“I understand your circumspection, however, they are not lowly villagers,” he said. “Indeed, they outrank us. Darcy, surely you understand.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “Your brother is correct. Technically, the Bennets do outrank you. They are landed gentry, and Mr Bennet is a gentleman. Socially, they are on the same level as myself and other landowners.”

His friend smiled with gratitude, but Darcy knew this would not last long. “On the other hand, from what I have heard, their behaviour is hardly that of genteel people. Miss Bennet might be an exception, but the rest of the family, from what I have been told, are not. Or do you deny your sisters’ and brother-in-law’s observations?”

He wanted to give Miss Bennet and her family the benefit of the doubt because he knew that Caroline especially could be very judgemental. At times she seemed to forget that she too was from humble beginnings. She might not remember the days when she was a tradesman’s daughter who was just coming up in the world, but Darcy did.

The late Mr Bingley had changed the family’s fortunes with wise investments and a sharp sense for trade, which he’d passed on to his only son who’d increased the family’s wealth since taking over.

Bingley wasn’t the sort to forget where he came from, but the same could not be said for his sisters, Caroline especially. At times when Darcy spoke to her, he had a feeling she already fancied herself a gentleman’s sister, and the push for Bingley to purchase land had come from her. She’d become insistent after Bingley acquired Netherfield on lease. In the end, Darcy knew, this was because she too hoped to elevate herself in society and marry well. Indeed, her attitude to Darcy himself was a

constant reminder of her ambitions. A gentleman such as himself would be a more than suitable match in her eyes.

“I do not deny their observations, and I appreciate their candour though I do not agree,” Bingley replied reluctantly. “Indeed, Mrs Bennet has a tendency towards effusions and can be rather boisterous, but then again, Darcy, have you not heard that Lady Catherine de Bourgh can also be rather loud and overbearing?”

“Point taken,” Darcy said with a faint smile. “Lady Catherine does have an imperious attitude at times, indeed. But she does know how to conduct herself in public.”

“Whereas Mrs Bennet does not,” Caroline said pointedly. “And what of her sisters, Charles? Are you not concerned that you would have to spend your life in their company as well?”

“Indeed,” Darcy chimed in. “What would become of Miss Bennet’s sisters should you marry her? I assume you have thought about this?”

He was met with silence. He gave Bingley a moment, hoping his friend had indeed given this some thought.

“Honestly, I have not thought about this,” he said quietly. “I did not think it my place to decide what happens to her sisters. That would be up to her father.”

“Would it?” Darcy asked. “The estate is entailed to William Collins, a man who will hardly take care of five young women. You know how it is for young women in society. Her sisters would look to you and your wife for support.”

“I am sure they would make their own matches,” Bingley said, but Darcy shook his head.

“How? You are a businessman, my friend. You must understand that as long as they are left without a fortune, it is unlikely they shall ever make a good match. Consider how much it would take for them to live comfortably. Even if you and Miss Bennet were able to assist her family, the expectations that would be put on you would be immense.”

“Do you really wish to spend your life taking care of five young women who have no fortune and no connections? A gentleman like Mr Darcy can afford such a burden, but you cannot. The dowries for one, let alone five sisters would be exorbitant,” Mr Hurst said.

It was a point well made, and Darcy nodded. Even he, with his immense wealth, would struggle with such a situation. Georgiana was only a year younger than Lydia Bennet, and if he found himself in Bingley’s situation, he would be forced to sell one of his estates, perhaps even Pemberley, to care for the sisters.

“Charles,” Darcy said, “I do not say this to hurt you. I do it out of love and friendship. Please, consider what will happen if you proceed with this match.”

His friend sat quietly, his shoulders slumped. Darcy’s heart ached for him, but he had to ensure that his friend’s future was secured.

Finally, Bingley spoke. “I must think on this.”

“Please do, Charles,” Caroline said. “We want only what’s best for you.”

Darcy sat back and sighed. He knew his docile friend well enough to know that he’d been swayed. Now, he only had to hope that Miss Bennet had not captured his heart too deeply for his advice to be in vain.

As he made his way back to Darcy House, he found himself thinking of Elizabeth

Bennet, the sister who'd walked through mud to care for her sister. He could not help but admire her tenacity, but he hoped to never make her acquaintance. He could do without being caught up in this entanglement of emotions and social standing. The Bennets, he'd come to understand, were the kind of family a man such as him did well to stay away from.

Page 2

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Elizabeth

30 th November 1811

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The staircase creaked as Elizabeth climbed up to her chamber. The entire house was infused with the aroma of the stew that the cook was preparing in the kitchen, and usually, the smell of her favourite meal would have made Elizabeth's stomach rumble and her mouth water with anticipation. However, these last few days she hadn't had much of an appetite. Her poor sister, Jane, had been so deeply in the clutches of melancholy that Elizabeth hadn't found it in herself to be happy about anything, while Jane was so miserable.

She cursed Mr Bingley, cursed his sisters, and whoever else was involved in her sister's fate.

A few short weeks ago, it had seemed certain that Mr Charles Bingley would make an offer of marriage to her beloved sister. It had been clear to all of Meryton that the two were moon-eyed over one another. That was until he had been called away on business to London. Still, he'd assured Jane he would return—only for that promise to be undone by a very curt letter penned by his sister Caroline, informing Jane that they would remain in London for the rest of the year and would likely not return to Netherfield in the near future, if at all.

Heartbroken and confused, Jane had retreated into a world of her own. Elizabeth had been quite certain from the beginning that Mr Bingley's sisters—who outwardly

acted kindly towards Jane—harboured a dislike of the family.

Indeed, she was certain that they would not have been in favour of the match because they made it quite clear they thought themselves somehow above the Bennets. Just how they had arrived at that conclusion Elizabeth didn't understand because, as gentlemen's daughters, she and Jane outranked the Bingley sisters, there was no question about it.

That they would have interfered in the courtship resulting in the separation of Jane and Mr Bingley, had shocked her. But what surprised her even more was that Mr Bingley had so readily taken their counsel. Surely if they had disapproved of the match they would have spoken up earlier. If their words had fallen on deaf ears while they had remained at Netherfield, what had changed in London?

She stopped in front of her sister's door and knocked before pushing down the handle and peering inside. The door creaked, drawing Jane's attention. Her sister was seated upon the wide windowsill, a letter in hand, and when she turned her face to look at Elizabeth, Elizabeth's heart sank. Jane had been crying.

"Jane," she said, hurrying across the room to her sister's side. "Pray, what has happened? What has upset you so?"

Jane had been dispirited for weeks now, but she hadn't cried—not since the first week after they had watched Netherfield being shut up by Mr Morris, the owner who had rented it to the Bingleys. Since then, Jane had composed herself enough to face the world, although she had withdrawn into herself, sharing her innermost thoughts only with Elizabeth and only when nobody else could hear them. To see her crying now, greatly alarmed her.

Jane looked at her out of her wide blue eyes as she held up the letter. "This is from Charlotte Lucas. I mean, Mrs Charlotte Collins," she said, and Elizabeth frowned

immediately. Charlotte Lucas had been her best friend since childhood, although their friendship had suffered some strain after Charlotte, eager to be married lest she end up an old maid, had married Elizabeth's insufferable cousin William Collins in the spring. They had somewhat mended their rift, but the friendship was not what it had once been.

In fact, she had not received a letter from Charlotte in several weeks, so to hear that she was writing to Jane, who had never been more than an acquaintance to Charlotte, was puzzling. And why such a letter should have reduced Jane to tears was even more unusual.

"From Charlotte? Pray, why?"

Jane took a deep breath. "Charlotte became privy to some information she felt I needed to know. She had heard from her sister about Mr Bingley's sudden departure, and her sister must have shared how distraught I was and how surprising all of this was to me."

Elizabeth nodded. Of course, all of Meryton had talked about nothing but the Bingleys' sudden departure and what that meant for the future. "Do not keep me in suspense. What did she write?"

Jane took a shaky breath. "Charlotte and Mr Collins were invited to dine with his patroness, Lady Catherine. During dinner, which was also attended by Lady Catherine's nephew, one Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, they spoke of another cousin of his, a Mr Darcy. You might remember, Charles—that is, Mr Bingley—mentioning him."

Elizabeth had heard Mr Bingley and his sister discuss a friend of his from Derbyshire who was meant to come and stay for a few weeks but had changed his mind. This gentleman's absence had vexed Mr Bingley who'd spoken of him in the manner one

might speak of an older brother or revered friend. But how was this friend connected to this saga and to their cousin?

Her sister continued, “Lady Catherine enquired as to what Mr Darcy was doing these days, and in that conversation, it came up that he is in London. Colonel Fitzwilliam told a riveting tale about how Mr Darcy had saved one of his dearest friends from the most unfortunate match. He said Mr Darcy rushed to his friend’s side upon hearing that his friend was about to make a horrible match with a young woman from a family that was far beneath his own. The Colonel spoke in tones of admiration about his cousin’s actions and how he had saved his friend from ruining his future by tying himself to this most unfortunate woman.” Elizabeth’s stomach dropped because even though Jane hadn’t said it, she already understood what her sister meant.

“Mr Bingley was that friend?” she asked, and Jane nodded as thick tears rolled from her eyes. She blinked, her eyelashes wet and heavy.

“Yes, Charlotte enquired further to make sure, and Colonel Fitzwilliam confirmed it. Apparently, Mr Darcy, as well as Mr Bingley’s sisters, thought that our family was an embarrassment and would hinder their chances of rising in the eyes of society, and thus convinced him to give up his plans to return. How could someone judge me? What have I done wrong?” A wracking sob escaped from her, and her shoulders shook. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her sister, hugging her tightly.

“Nothing, Jane, you have done nothing wrong. You do not deserve this. You are goodness itself.”

“I do not understand. He met my family, and he never said a word about disliking any of you. I know Mother can be difficult, and I know Lydia and Kitty are exceedingly silly, but this endangered our courtship? I do not understand. He never mentioned any dislike or discomfort to me, and we spoke about so much. How could this happen?”

Indeed, Elizabeth thought to herself. She had known that Caroline Bingley would try to influence her brother and try and turn him away from Jane, but she had had no doubt that he could withstand their assaults. But this Mr Darcy? She had never known the man, but she had heard Mr Bingley speak of him often enough to understand that this man wielded great influence over him. Indeed, had Mr Bingley not said that he could not commit to purchasing Netherfield outright without his friend's good counsel? Now that she thought about it, that is exactly what he had said.

So it was this man who'd undone her sister's happiness? And for what reason? Because he'd heard tales about their family, a family he'd never even met.

"I cannot believe this, Jane. How dare he? Without ever meeting you?"

Jane dabbed the handkerchief against her eyes and let out a sob. "I wish I could tell you, but I cannot. I suppose I was wrong about Mr Bingley's feelings for me for he'd never have rejected me so quickly if he'd truly loved me."

Elizabeth wanted to defend the young man's love for Jane because she'd seen how he looked at her, always throwing admiring glances her way when he thought nobody could see, but she stopped herself.

Perhaps it was better that Jane believed Mr Bingley never truly loved her. For wasn't it better to have lost your heart to a man who was harsh and callous, rather than to someone who truly loved you but didn't have the spine to stand up to detractors?

Elizabeth rubbed her sister's back. "My dear Jane, you did not deserve this. You deserve someone who loves you, all of you, unconditionally. And you will find that someone."

"I cannot imagine loving another," she said and looked out of the window.

“You will, one day very soon Mr Bingley will be naught but a distant memory,” Elizabeth assured her. Though in her stomach the anger and disappointment at Mr Bingley’s actions only simmered. And the rage for this tiresome Mr Darcy right alongside it.

Page 3

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Darcy

6th January 1812

London

“... And then my uncle told me no matter what,

he shall see Edward wed this year. He is eager for him to have a son, so the line will continue. You know his biggest fear is for the Matlock title to return to the Crown,” Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam said, and then patted Darcy’s back. “So it seems you will be going to a wedding.”

“What did Edward have to say about that?” he enquired and took a sip of cognac. The strong liquor stung his throat and left a pleasant tingle once it had gone down.

“I do not think he knows it yet. Father will likely select a lady and present her to him. He will make it look as though it is Edward’s own choice, but we all know what my father is like. I am sometimes grateful to be only a second son, so I do not have to worry about things such as producing an heir and carrying on the line.” He took a swallow before fixing his gaze on Darcy. “But what of you? When will you marry our dear cousin Anne? I will tell you, Aunt Catherine mentioned the matter more than once when I was at Rosings in November and then again at Christmas. She had hoped to announce a date.”

Darcy narrowed his eyes at his cousin. He knew he was speaking in jest, for the entire family, besides his Aunt Catherine, knew that there was no chance Darcy and Miss

Anne would ever get married. They liked one another well enough as friends and cousins, but neither was inclined to marry the other. Still, his aunt insisted on a supposed promise made between Darcy's mother, Lady Anne, and Aunt Catherine which would see their eldest children married.

Darcy had hoped with time, his aunt might forget the matter, but thus far he'd not been fortunate enough for that to come to pass. That was also why he'd declined, when his aunt invited him to Rosings for Christmastide. He preferred spending Christmas with Georgiana at Darcy House in London, away from the chaos a family celebration brought with it. Besides, the last thing Georgiana needed was to be subjected to her aunt's questioning regarding the unfortunate events that had taken place at Ramsgate some months ago.

"I shall rather make my own selection when it comes to a wife," Darcy said. "But you know this."

"Indeed, I do," Richard said and leaned back, smacking his lips after taking another drink. Then, his eyes focused on the third occupant of their table and Darcy felt his jaw clench with tension. Bingley, his dear friend, sat across from him with a countenance that betrayed his misery. It bordered on a miracle his friend had even agreed to come with them as he had been averse to social interaction for weeks now. However, he and Richard had known one another for years and thus he'd agreed to come to Brooks with Darcy to see Richard during one of his rare visits to London.

"Pray, Bingley, what of you? Have you anything to report?" Richard asked.

Bingley looked up. "Report?" he asked, making it clear he had not paid much attention at all.

"Regarding a young lady. I know you had that entanglement in Hertfordshire a few months ago, but I'd assumed by now you might have met someone, perhaps at one of

the many masquerade balls? I always adored those,” Richard said as Darcy’s eyes grew wide. Bingley looked at them, thus far he had spent most of the afternoon silently staring into his drink without joining much in the conversation.

“I have not partaken in any balls. As far as my entanglement in Hertfordshire, it was far more than that. I- I...”

He shook his head, took his glass and gulped the rest of the cognac down with haste before banging the glass on the table and standing up. “If you will excuse me, I have a megrim coming on. I shall see you tonight.”

Then he pushed his chair back with such force it almost tumbled over and rushed out of the club.

“Goodness gracious, what in the world has happened to him? Is he still upset about that woman?” Richard asked and turned his perplexed visage to Darcy who let out a prolonged sigh.

“He is. He has been misery itself since he made the decision not to return to Hertfordshire. As you might remember, Caroline Bingley wrote to Miss Bennet to inform her the family would not return, thus letting her know informally that the courtship was at an end. Bingley hasn’t been himself since. I thought he would have recovered by now, but he is as gloomy and withdrawn as on the day the letter was sent,” Darcy explained.

Richard’s eyebrows rose. “He is? I’ll say, this does not sound like the Charles Bingley I know at all. He usually loses his heart rather quickly, doesn’t he?”

Darcy shrugged. “He has always been the sort to become infatuated with one pretty lady or another, only for the feelings to evaporate the moment they parted ways. So, I thought this would happen again now. But it seems it is different this time. I

misjudged his attachment to Miss Bennet. I simply hadn't realised quite how fond he was of her. He has been miserable ever since the courtship ended, and I do not know what to do to help him recover."

"To hear he hasn't attended a single masquerade ball shocks me. He was always at the heart of any celebration. And he was so eager to immerse himself in the world of the gentry, seeing how he was going to be a landed gentleman himself soon." Richard shook his head as he stared at the door that had closed behind Bingley some time ago.

"He has little interest in anything. He does not want to go to the theatre. He does not want to go to dinners. It was only because you were here that he agreed to come out today. I feel that I made a terrible mistake, Richard," Darcy confessed while staring at his glass. Such declarations passed his lips rarely but it couldn't be denied any more.

"You?" Richard sat upright. "I never thought I would hear Fitzwilliam Darcy utter such words."

"Do not mock me, Richard. I feel bad enough as it is. I was certain he would have recovered by now. I was sure I did what was best for him."

"You assured me it was a terrible match," Richard said. "You no longer believe this to be so?"

"I did and I do. Still, I feel I ought to have been more circumspect. I have looked over the papers compiled by Mr Hurst again and again. There is no doubt about it. Financially and socially, this is a bad match. However, I feel I have overlooked one thing."

"The woman in question," Richard said.

"Indeed, the woman in question. I can't help but wonder if Mr Hurst and his sisters

were wrong about her. What if she did truly love him? What if I was imprudent and ruined what could have been a happy match? I should have gone to at least investigate the situation for myself. I should have met the woman.” Darcy had wrestled with these thoughts for many weeks now but never said them out loud. Doing so now only impressed upon him further what he should have done.

“It is not too late to do so now,” Richard said while tracing his index finger along the tablecloth. “What is stopping you?”

“Stopping me?” Darcy asked. “What is stopping me is that the courtship is over. They are separated.”

“Fitzwilliam,” Richard said and rolled his eyes before chuckling. “You sometimes do amaze me with how little you understand of the world of romance. If one loves another, if one is truly moon-eyed, there is no such thing as a permanent separation.”

Darcy pondered this. If Bingley suffered so much with this separation, it stood to reason that a tender-hearted woman would feel the same if not more—if her feelings were similarly deep to begin with. The idea that there was a young woman out there struggling as much as Bingley bothered Darcy terribly. Could it be that Richard was correct and it wasn’t too late to set things right?

But going to Hertfordshire just to see this woman? It was a little odd, wasn’t it? He voiced this concern to his cousin who shrugged.

“Did Bingley not say that he has to meet with this Mr Morris to cancel the lease on Netherfield? Perhaps you could offer to go in his stead. It would be a reason to go there and stay for a few days. You could close up Netherfield for good, and manage whatever Bingley has left untended to? Make certain you meet this young lady while you are there. You need not even tell him why you’d like to go. You can simply do so as a favour.”

Darcy leaned back and pondered this proposition. Certainly, going to Hertfordshire to see this family for himself would be helpful to appease his guilty conscience—or to correct his error if need be. If he went, he might find the family as terrible as described and he would be able to live with himself. And if perchance, he found this Jane Bennet to be as enchanting as Bingley described her, and as infatuated with him, then... well. Then he'd have to do his best to undo his actions.

But that was a worry for another day. Now he had to decide what to do. Involve himself further? Or walk away, hoping time would heal his friend's broken heart. As he sat there and considered his options he understood at once that in his heart he already knew what he had to do. Really, there was but one path forward if he ever hoped to live with himself again. He'd have to go to Hertfordshire himself.

Darcy stood at the entrance of Darcy House, his hand resting on the polished brass handle of the hired carriage door. Darcy had told Bingley that he had some personal matters to deal with in Northamptonshire and had offered to pay a visit to Longbourn on his return to London. Bingley had been grateful for Darcy's suggestion—his friend had admitted that he had been dreading returning to settle his affairs, as he felt that his heart couldn't take seeing Miss Bennet again. So a week later, Darcy was all set for the trip to Hertfordshire. He'd decided to hire a carriage to travel to Netherfield and return in the phaeton Bingley had left behind.

The horses snorted and pawed at the cobblestones impatiently, their breath visible in the crisp morning air. He had arranged with Bingley to wrap up the latter's affairs at Netherfield, but in reality, he had another, more personal mission—to meet the Bennet family and determine if he had indeed made a grave mistake in advising Bingley against a match with Jane Bennet.

In a few hours, he would arrive at Netherfield. He would settle in for perhaps a week,

and as Bingley's representative, he would execute the cancellation of the agreement between Bingley and Mr Morris, the owner. During his time there, he would venture into Meryton and do his best to find out what he could about the family.

Then, he would return and consider his next steps. He took a breath and was about to step into the carriage, when a familiar voice called his name.

“Darcy!”

He turned, and his expression hardened as he saw George Wickham striding towards him. Wickham, with his easy smile and confident demeanour, looked as if he were merely greeting an old friend, but Darcy knew better.

“What do you want, Wickham?” Darcy asked.

Wickham's smile widened as he approached. “What sort of greeting is this for an old family friend?” He stopped and took in the carriage. “Headed out of town? Back to Pemberley? Marvellous, Darcy, Marvellous indeed. It is always good to return home to Pemberley.”

Darcy's eyes narrowed. “My plans are of no concern to you.”

“A master at polite conversation as always. I knew you had no skill when it comes to civil discourse, Darcy, but this is—”

“Wickham, I haven't the time or desire to converse with you. If you have something to say, do it quickly, although I cannot imagine what there is left to say.”

Wickham leaned forward and peered inside the carriage. “Is Miss Darcy not with you?”

Darcy's jaw tightened, but he felt relieved to know Georgiana was at Pemberley, a safe distance from this man. "I would advise you not to even utter her name, Wickham."

Wickham stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Very well. But I must speak to you. Perhaps we should continue this conversation inside. It's rather urgent."

Darcy shook his head, his expression firm. "I have somewhere to be, Wickham. This conversation is over."

"Where are you going with such urgency, Darcy?" Wickham pressed. "Surely you can spare a moment."

"It is none of your concern," Darcy replied icily.

Wickham's eyes glittered with frustration. "Darcy, this is important. Perhaps I could ride with you and we can talk on the way. I'll find my own way back."

"No," Darcy said dismissively, stepping into the carriage. "Good day, Wickham."

With a final glare, Darcy signalled to the driver. The carriage rolled away from Darcy House, leaving Wickham standing alone on the cobblestones.

As the carriage picked up speed, Darcy couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that Wickham's presence boded ill. He had made it clear to him that Georgiana and the rest of his family were out of bounds. Wickham was not to speak to them, harass them, or even look at them in any way, or Darcy would have to deal with him once and for all. He knew all about Wickham's petty crimes and gambling debts and, if he wished, he could cause the rascal great harm. The reason he hadn't, was because his father had been fond of the man, for whatever reason. But if he continued to act as he had, Darcy would be left with no choice.

For the time being, he pushed the unpleasant encounter to the back of his mind. What Wickham wanted was not important right now. What mattered was only the task at hand. He would deal with Wickham when he returned from Hertfordshire—if need be.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:08 am

Elizabeth

15 th January 1812

Outside Meryton, Hertfordshire

The January air was crisp and cold, a light frost clinging to the barren trees lining the road to Longbourn. Elizabeth Bennet sat beside her father in the old cart, the horse's hooves skittering on the frozen ground. The winter landscape stretched before them, a patchwork of white and grey beneath a pale, overcast sky.

Mr Bennet broke the silence. "I think it will be good for Jane to go to London for a few weeks with your aunt and uncle. She's been so downcast lately."

Elizabeth nodded, her breath visible in the cold air. "I agree, Papa. Jane needs a change of scenery, and Aunt and Uncle Gardiner are always such good company. I'm glad they invited her."

Her father sighed, his brow furrowed with worry. "I've been quite concerned about her. It's not like your sister to be so despondent."

"Jane will recover," Elizabeth said reassuringly, although she didn't feel quite so sure. Ever since Jane had discovered the truth about Mr Bingley's abandonment, she had not been herself. The letter from Caroline Bingley, informing her that they would not be returning to Netherfield, had only made things worse. Caroline's kind words had reeked of falseness and even Jane hadn't been able to deny it. Still, for her father's sake, she had to remain positive, even if it was as false as Caroline's words.

“She always does. She just needs time.”

Mr Bennet turned to her, a twinkle of curiosity in his eyes. “I suppose you are correct. I am glad you have been invited too, I know you would otherwise miss Jane greatly—though your mother tells me that the Collinses have invited you to visit their home in Hunsford. Will you travel to Kent, as well?”

Elizabeth hesitated, her gaze fixed on the road ahead. “I’m not sure I want to go, Papa. You know Lady Catherine is Mr Darcy’s aunt. He might call on her, Charlotte said he was due for a visit. The idea of seeing Mr Darcy bothers me. He brought so much misery onto poor Jane.”

Mr Bennet chuckled softly. “You’ve made this Darcy the villain in the story, just like your mother has, Lizzy. But let’s not forget it was Mr Bingley who decided to vanish without a direct word to Jane. To me that is the action of a coward.”

Elizabeth considered this. “Perhaps it is easier to blame Mr Darcy because I don’t know him. But I’m just so sad for Jane.”

Her father patted her hand gently. “All will be well, Lizzy. Jane will recover. Being away from home will do her good.”

Just then, he abruptly pulled the cart to a halt. “Perdition!”

Elizabeth, startled, looked at him with wide eyes. “Papa, what is it?”

He pointed to the side of the road. “Look there, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth followed his gaze and gasped. Lying face down in the middle of the road was a man, motionless and half-covered in frost.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she stared at the figure, dread and urgency mingling within her. The cold, still air seemed to thicken around them as they realised the gravity of what they had found. Elizabeth and her father exchanged a quick, horrified glance before they jumped down from the cart and ran towards the figure. As they drew closer, Elizabeth's heart pounded even harder.

"Stay back, Lizzy," her father instructed, his voice steady despite the urgency of the situation.

Elizabeth stopped a few paces away, watching with bated breath as her father carefully rolled the man over. She noted his greatcoat laying on top of him as though someone had placed it there on purpose and she shuddered. Someone had attacked this man on this quiet road. She looked back and forth, wondering which way they might have gone. Were they in danger? She hadn't heard of highway robbers in these parts, but the threat had spread from the larger towns where such activity was more prevalent. However, she pushed that worry aside, for right now only one thing mattered, and that was the person before them. She was terrified they had come across a corpse, and the thought made her stomach churn.

"Papa, is he alive?" she asked.

Mr Bennet bent down and checked for a pulse, his face tense with concentration. After a moment that seemed to stretch on forever, he looked up and nodded. "Yes, he's alive."

Elizabeth let out a shaky breath and stepped closer, her curiosity and concern overcoming her fear. She examined the man's face. He had fine, handsome features, with a broad forehead, a proud nose, and a well-formed mouth. His hair, dark and slightly dishevelled, clung to his skin, held there by what looked like dried blood. She glanced at the road and sucked in a lungful of air. The ground was stained red where his head had rested.

“He’s injured,” she whispered.

Her father’s brow furrowed in concern as he took in the sight of the man. “What on earth is he doing here in the middle of the road all alone? Meryton is ten minutes away by carriage at least.”

Elizabeth looked around when a thought came to her. “Netherfield is just five minutes away on foot. Perhaps he was looking to be let in? Would Mr Morris know?”

“Perhaps, but he could also have been travelling on the Royal Mail carriage. They come through here and sometimes let people off if they’re heading to Greaton.” He gestured in the direction of Greaton Village, located to the east of Netherfield.

“But, Papa, the man has no luggage with him. Surely, if he’d arrived by coach then he’d have a travelling bag of some sort?” Elizabeth said, as she once more looked around nervously.

A grunt came from the man on the ground then, and his eyelids fluttered open, revealing deep, dark eyes that looked around in confusion.

“Sir?” her father said, but the man closed his eyes again and appeared to drift away.

“He had a blow to the head,” her father said. “We must get him back to Longbourn and call for the surgeon.”

“We can send Kitty into town to get Mr Wexler and if he is not available, perhaps the physician, Mr Barnes?” Elizabeth never felt comfortable with Mr Wexler, the town surgeon, as she felt he lacked skill, but her mother hardly ever conceded to calling Mr Barnes, the physician who had treated Jane at Netherfield when she caught cold, due to his higher fee.

“We will send her directly. Now, come. Let’s get him into the cart.”

Together, they carefully lifted the man and carried him to the cart, laying him gently across the seat. Elizabeth’s mind raced with questions as they made their way back to Longbourn. Who was this man? How had he come to be injured?

She realised they would have to alert the constable as well just as soon as he awoke so they might learn what had brought him to their road in such a state. The journey back to Longbourn felt like an eternity. Elizabeth’s mind was a whirl of worry and confusion, her eyes never leaving the man’s pale, unconscious face. When they finally arrived, the commotion began almost instantly.

“Mrs Bennet!” Elizabeth’s father called for his wife as they turned into the driveway outside the house.

“What is it, Mr Bennet? Must you shout in so undignified a manner?” she replied from the window while Elizabeth rushed to the back of the cart again to ready the man for their egress.

“We have an injured man in the cart,” her father replied as he joined her. “Send Kitty to fetch Mr Wexler.”

She heard her mother gasp, and moments later, the front door flew open. Her mother’s footsteps crunched across the yard until she came to a stop just as they unloaded the man.

“Good heavens! What has happened? Who is this man?”

“We found him like this on the road,” Elizabeth gasped as she strained under the man’s weight.

“Miss, allow me,” John, one of her father’s farmhands, called as he rushed to take her place.

“John, we need to get him inside,” Mr Bennet said firmly. “He’s injured.”

Mrs Bennet gasped, her hands fluttering to her cheeks. “Oh, the poor man! Quickly, bring him in! Take him to Elizabeth’s chamber—it’s the nearest and the most convenient.”

Mr Bennet and John carried the man upstairs while Mrs Bennet instructed Kitty to fetch the town surgeon. Elizabeth followed them upstairs. They laid him gently on the bed, Elizabeth’s heart was pounding as she observed his still, pale form.

“We must summon the surgeon at once,” her father said, turning to one of the servants.

“Mother has done so,” she informed him.

“Kitty is on her way,” Mrs Bennet said then as she entered the room while John left to tend to his duties. “I’ve instructed Hill to bring some hot water and cloths for his wounds.” She looked at the man who lay still on Elizabeth’s bed, wringing her hands and fussing over every detail. “Oh, what a dreadful thing! To find a man in such a state! Who could he be?”

“We’ll have to wait until he wakes to find out, dear,” her father said while Elizabeth took off her jacket and placed it over a chair. She pushed up her sleeves after removing her gloves and stood beside the man. The wound on his head had stopped bleeding, it seemed, but now that she took a closer look, she saw he bore bruises on his right knuckles and his eye was beginning to turn purple.

“I think he was in a fight,” she said, causing her parents to grow quiet and join her

side.

“A fight? Oh, Mr Bennet, have you brought a bandit into the home?” her mother said in a high-pitched tone that made her pull her shoulders forward as if to shield against the sound.

“I dare say if he was in a fight, it was with whomever attacked him,” her father reasoned. “See if there is anything in his coat, perhaps there might be an indication of who he is.”

Just then, Hill entered with a porcelain basin and steaming water in a carafe. She stared at the man as she came closer, but swiftly Mr Bennet took the supplies from her and directed her out.

“I know this man’s name!” Mrs Bennet called. “Look here, inside his jacket!”

She held up a dark, finely tailored jacket that had been found near the stranger and pointed to a patch of material inside. On the inside of the jacket was an embroidered label. The jacket was in a bad state with the material ripped and torn in part, but some letters were still readable.

“Propter... eorge Wickham,” Elizabeth read. “Property of George Wickham. I do not know anyone by that name. Do you?”

“No,” her mother said and her father shook his head.

She exchanged a startled look with her father, but then both their attention was diverted, for the man on the bed finally stirred, and all eyes were on him at once. Perhaps he would be able to tell them what had brought him here and how he had come to lay injured in the road all alone.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:08 am

Darcy

His eyes blinked open and he found himself in a dimly lit room. Immediately, a sharp, pounding pain on the right side of his head claimed all his attention, and a groan filled the air. Was that his voice?

“Sir?” A soft, tender voice called out, and he turned his head slightly to the left to see a woman hovering over him, her dark eyes filled with concern. “Are you in pain?” she asked.

“My head,” he mumbled.

“Well, we should put a cool cloth on his head,” another female voice, this one shrill, said, accompanied by the sound of splashing water.

“I need to get up,” he said, attempting to push himself up, but the young woman with the soft voice placed a hand on his shoulder, pushing him back while a man did the same on his other side. He moved his head, although every inch of movement brought more pain. The man was older, with grey hair. His eyebrows were bushy and white, and his face was lined and weathered. However, he was dressed well, indicating that he was a gentleman.

“Lizzy,” the other woman said from somewhere closer to him now. “Here, take this cloth and put it on his head.”

He did his best to take in his surroundings, trying to see who had spoken, trying to understand who these people were. The thrill of a wet cloth being placed on his

forehead drew all his attention because it felt wonderful.

“Thank you,” he muttered as he closed his eyes. Where in the world was he? Who were these people? How had he got himself into this situation?

“Mr Wickham, you should know I am Mr Thomas Bennet. This is my daughter Elizabeth and my wife, Mrs Bennet. We found you lying injured on the road and brought you in. We have sent for the surgeon, and he will be here soon,” the man said.

He looked around the room to see who else Mr Bennet had just spoken to, for he knew it could not be him. However, there was nobody else here but the three people he’d already taken in. He closed his eyes again, confused.

“Did you hear me, Mr Wickham?” the man asked.

The voice was still coming from directly beside him. How odd. He opened his eyes, and sure enough, the older man looked right down at him.

“Wickham?” he asked. This time he looked at the young woman.

“That was the name stitched in your greatcoat. George Wickham. Is that not your name?” The young woman, Elizabeth, said, now with a hint of confusion in her voice.

“No...” he said. “My name is...” He felt the air passing between his lips as he lay there with his mouth agape, a washcloth on his head, and a young woman who smelled like a lavender field beside him—and there was nothing where his name should’ve been. It was a void, blank. What was his name?

Surely he had to know his own name. “My name is...” he started again, hoping that somehow those words would catapult out the information he was looking for, but

again he came up with nothing. "I am..."

Who was he? He had been found on the road, what road? And where was he? Panic gripped him and he sat up in the bed, the wet cloth falling into his lap where it soaked the blanket they had covered him with.

"I have to go," he said.

"Go? You cannot go anywhere, Mr Wickham," the sharp-voiced woman, Mrs Bennet, said while he wildly looked around and attempted to get out of bed.

"Mr Wickham," she repeated.

"That is not my name," he said. "That is not..." The strong arms of Mr Bennet pushed him back onto the bed and pinned him down. For an older man, he was certainly very strong. Then it occurred to him. Was he an older man? He had no idea how old he was. He had no idea who he was.

He looked at his hands and saw that they were strong and without age spots. They were the hands of a young man. He was a young man. How young? His heart pounded, and the urge to get away increased. He had to find out who he was. He had to get away from these people who seemed intent on keeping him in their care. Without a clue as to who they were, he had to assume they were up to no good. Maybe they had poisoned him. Maybe they had done something to make him not remember?

His mind raced with the pain he had felt earlier when suddenly a cool, smooth hand appeared on his forehead and the young woman's dark eyes and heart-shaped face materialised before him again. She pushed him back into the pillow but not with the force used by her father, rather with a smooth, tender movement.

“Mr Wickham, please be calm. We only want to help you, as my father said, we found you injured and brought you home. We have summoned the surgeon. We mean you no harm, you are safe here. Please stay sir, at least until Mr Wexler can assess your wounds.”

He knew that on a rational level these words should not have necessarily soothed him. Because if these people were up to no good, of course, they would say this. Yet he couldn't help himself. The woman's voice was so sweet, so compassionate, and so full of sincerity that he felt his heart slow to a regular pace and his breathing grow even again.

“I don't know who I am,” he said, noting the flicker of surprise on her face. She caught her father's gaze and then her mother's, and then Mrs Bennet exited the room in haste. “I don't know who I am,” he whispered again and suddenly his eyes stung, and he felt a tear rolling down his cheek.

He was terrified. Absolutely terrified.

“All will be well,” the woman said. “I promise you. The surgeon will come and take a look at you. You've had a blow to the head. Perhaps that is why you cannot remember? Once you heal, you will remember. And then we will take you home. Do not fret.”

“I think it would be best if you try to rest,” Mr Bennet said, releasing his grip on his arms. He looked up at the man. “Thank you for helping me. I... I don't know who I am,” he repeated.

“I gather that,” Mr Bennet said, “but as my daughter said, we will figure it out. For the time being, I would advise you to rest and garner your strength. We will leave you to it. Come now, Elizabeth.”

He turned to leave, but the young woman, though she removed her hand from his forehead, did not leave his side.

“Perhaps it would be better if I stayed. What if he falls asleep and wakes and he’s frightened again?”

He wasn’t sure why, but the idea that she thought him frightened, bothered him. Why he should be concerned with something like this, at a time where he lay in a home he didn’t know with people who could be just about anyone—a stranger even to himself—wasn’t quite clear. And yet, there it was.

“Well, I’m not sure that’s proper,” Mr Bennet said.

“Please,” Elizabeth said. “I will sit and wait here until Mr Wexler arrives. I would want someone with me if I were in his position.”

Elizabeth looked at her father, who hesitated, and then nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “But do call us if you need anything. And I am leaving the door open.” With that, he left the room, leaving the young woman behind to watch over the stranger who didn’t know his own name.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:09 am

Elizabeth

Elizabeth pulled a chair up beside the man and sat down. He looked at her, and she wasn't sure what to make of the situation. He didn't know who he was and seemed terrified, yet she had to wonder, how did one end up in such a condition?

"Miss... Elizabeth?" he said and looked at her. "That is your name?"

She nodded while dipping the cloth in water once more and wringing it out. "Do you remember what my father said about who we are?" she asked gently.

"Yes," he replied, his voice uncertain. "The Bennets..." He trailed off, confusion evident in his eyes. "But... where am I?"

Elizabeth placed the cloth on his forehead again. The tension in his shoulders eased and he closed his eyes, as if savouring the sensation.

"You have remembered our name, that is good. We live in a small village called Longbourn, near Meryton in Hertfordshire. We found you lying in the middle of the road, clearly injured. We brought you here and sent for the town surgeon."

He watched her intently as she spoke, his eyes following every movement of her lips. Elizabeth noticed how handsome and attentive he was, despite his situation. She felt terrible for him but couldn't help but wonder where he might have come from.

"Where exactly did you find me?" he asked again. "And why do you think my name is..." He paused, his brow furrowing. "What do you think my name is?"

She took a deep breath. “George Wickham. It was sewn into your jacket. You were lying in the middle of the road about ten minutes from here, near a property called Netherfield. Are you familiar with it?”

She saw his lips and eyes narrow in concentration but then he shook his head.

“No I am not. So I had nothing with me other than the coat? No money? Nothing?”

“Nothing. The coat was thrown over you, as if someone meant to cover you up with it.”

“I see, so... that might not be my name,” he said. “It doesn’t feel like my name.”

Elizabeth felt a pang of sympathy. He truly seemed lost, not just in memory but in identity. She could see the fear in his eyes.

“I understand this is difficult,” she said softly. “But we will do everything we can to help you remember. Maybe all you need is more rest. But... If I may, the coat was with you and nothing else was, so it stands to reason that it is your name.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if trying to will his memory back. “I don’t feel like a George Wickham,” he grumbled. “But I suppose it might be my name. I shall have to be called something until I remember, so it might as well be that.”

Elizabeth reached out and gently placed her hand on his arm. “We will find out who you are. For now, rest and try to heal. The more you worry, the harder it will be for your mind to recover.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her, gratitude mingling with the fear. “Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I don’t know what I would do without your kindness.”

She smiled, hoping to reassure him. “You are welcome. We shall take care of you, Mr Wickham, or whoever you turn out to be.”

As she sat beside him, watching over him, Elizabeth couldn’t help but feel a connection forming. Whoever he was, she wanted to help him find his way back to himself.

The sound of heavy footsteps approaching interrupted the quiet of the room. Elizabeth glanced at the man in her bed one last time before rising. She smoothed her dress and walked towards the door, her heart still heavy with concern for the stranger who did not know his own name. Her father was hurrying down the hall, alongside the surgeon, a tall, thin man with spectacles, carrying a leather bag.

“Mr Wexler, thank you for coming so quickly,” Elizabeth said, stepping aside to let the surgeon enter.

“Miss Bennet,” he replied with a nod as he entered with Elizabeth’s father following behind. “This is our patient? And how is he?”

“He is awake, but still quite confused,” Elizabeth explained. “He does not remember who he is.”

“Or where he came from,” her father added. “We found his name stitched into the lining of his coat. It’s Wickham, George Wickham.”

“But he doesn’t think that is his name,” Elizabeth said quickly.

“Right, right, well, I’ll talk to him and see what we can do for him,” Mr Wexler said as his brow furrowed and he made his way to the bedside, his keen eyes already assessing the man. “Mr Wickham, are you awake?”

The stranger grunted, and Mr Bennet and Elizabeth quietly left the room, her fingers lingering on the door handle for a moment. She saw the surgeon open his bag while Mr Wickham sat up and swung his legs out of the bed for the examination. He looked up, his brown eyes meeting hers for a brief moment. She gasped, not sure why, and closed the door.

“Let us sit in the parlour,” her father said, “Give them some privacy.”

She followed her father down the creaking stairs and headed to the parlour, where her mother was sitting. Elizabeth breathed deeply, trying to shake off the tension that had settled in her shoulders.

“How is he, Lizzy?” Mrs Bennet asked as soon as Elizabeth entered the room.

She repeated what she had said to the physician, and her mother nodded.

“Well, I hope Mr Wexler can tell us more about him. Oh, Mr Bennet, I do hope you haven’t brought a criminal into our home,” she said, giving him a chastising look.

“Now, why would your first thought be that I would bring a criminal into the house? He might be a wealthy man, Mrs Bennet,” her father replied and winked at Elizabeth, who smiled while her mother clamped her lips shut, considering this.

Before Mrs Bennet could respond, the sound of hurried footsteps approached. Elizabeth’s younger sisters, Lydia and Kitty, burst into the room. Lydia’s eyes were wide with curiosity, and Kitty followed close behind, looking equally intrigued.

“Lizzy, what’s going on?” Lydia asked breathlessly. “Is it true there’s a strange man in the house? Kitty said she had to fetch the surgeon!”

“Yes, there is,” Elizabeth said, trying to keep her tone even. Lydia had been in

Meryton most of the day, alongside her friends to view—and no doubt flirt with—the militia who had come to Meryton a few weeks ago. The idea of setting her cap on an officer had been Lydia's primary focus, and of late a young man named Mr Denny was the object of her obsession. However, it appeared the stranger at Longbourn now took precedence.

"Is he handsome?" Lydia asked with a mischievous grin. "That's the most important question, isn't it?"

Elizabeth frowned, feeling a surge of irritation. "Lydia, this is not a matter for jest. The man is injured and has no memory of who he is. Show some compassion."

"No memory? How intriguing," Kitty chimed in. "Maybe he's a prince from a faraway land."

"Or a Scottish laird," Lydia mused. "Oh, how very exciting. Can I go and say hello?"

Obviously, Lydia's imagination was running away with her again. Elizabeth looked at her parents, hoping they might rein her in, but as usual, they simply said nothing.

"He is with Mr Wexler, and you need to leave him be. The last thing he needs is you bursting in and fawning and giggling all over him," Elizabeth said sternly.

Lydia's smile faltered for a moment before she recovered with a giggle. "Oh, Lizzy, always so serious. Perhaps you've already claimed him for yourself? Is that why you're so defensive?"

Kitty snickered beside her, and Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush with anger. Before she could respond, Mr Bennet intervened at last.

"Girls, that is enough," he said sternly. "This is not a subject for your amusement."

Show some respect.”

Lydia and Kitty exchanged a look, their amusement fading under their father’s rebuke. They fell silent, though Lydia’s eyes still sparkled with curiosity.

Elizabeth sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Mr Wexler will do his best to help him recover. We should focus on making him comfortable and ensuring he has the rest he needs.”

Mrs Bennet nodded, her worry still evident. “Of course, Lizzy. You are correct. Let us hope Mr Wexler can help him regain his memory. I do not know what we’ll do if he can’t remember. I should not like to have another mouth to feed in this house for too long.”

“Is that what the vicar teaches you about compassion, Mrs Bennet?” Mr Bennet said coldly. Mrs Bennet snapped her lips shut and for once looked mortified. Elizabeth was torn between feeling badly for her mother for having been admonished by her husband in front of her daughters, and glad her father had spoken up.

She wished Jane were here so she might tell her everything that had happened, but she and Mary had gone to church to help prepare food for the needy and would not return until the evening.

They sat in silence for a moment, Elizabeth’s thoughts still with the stranger lying in her bedchamber. She couldn’t shake the feeling that his presence would bring more than just a mystery to their doorstep.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:09 am

Darcy

The surgeon, who had introduced himself as Mr Wexler, stood beside the bed, peering intently at him. “Now, Mr Wickham,” he began, holding a small lantern close to examine the bruising around his eye, “can you recall anything at all before you woke up in this bed?”

The man, whom they were calling Mr Wickham, though he didn’t think that was his name, shook his head slowly. “Nothing,” he murmured. “It’s as if everything before my accident is missing. I don’t know how I got here or who I am.”

Mr Wexler nodded thoughtfully, making a few notes in his ledger. “I see. It’s not uncommon for a concussion to cause temporary amnesia. Judging by your accent, I’d say you hail from the north. Does that sound familiar to you?”

The man blinked in surprise. He hadn’t thus far considered where he might be from. “A northern accent? I hadn’t noticed. But no, it doesn’t spark any memories.” Then something came to him. “I know Hertfordshire is in the south of England.”

“Interesting. Who is the King right now?” He dipped his head sideways and waited, the floorboard creaking as he stepped from one foot to the other. A crackle from the fireplace across the room filled the silence as he pondered the question.

“King George the Third, but he is unwell. His son is Prince Regent,” he said, certain this was so.

“Indeed, so it appears it is your personal memories that have been affected. That is

good. That means you know some things at least.” The surgeon continued his examination, gently probing the bruises and the swollen area around the black eye. “You have a rather nasty black eye and some significant bruising, indicating you were in a fight. Any recollection of that?”

“No,” he replied, frustration edging his voice. “I remember nothing about any fight. I wonder who I might have been fighting with on the roadside. Do I look like a man who might be a brawler?”

Mr Wexler looked at him sympathetically. “One can never tell, though your nose is quite straight and I would expect a man who fights regularly to have sustained past breaks. In any case, you’re suffering from a concussion, Mr Wickham. You need to rest. The Bennets will certainly allow you to stay here for a while. I will alert the constable, and perhaps he can find out who you are. For now, focus on recovery.”

The man nodded, though the name ‘Mr Wickham’ still didn’t sit right with him. There was something unsettling about it, something that didn’t quite fit. But he had no better alternative.

Mr Wexler finished his examination and packed up his bag. “I’ll be back to check on you tomorrow.”

He slipped back into bed once the surgeon had left. As he lay down and glanced around the room, he realised he hadn’t paid much attention to his surroundings before. It was a simple chamber, clearly belonging to a young lady, as there was a dressing table with a hairbrush near the window, along with patch boxes and small containers that reminded him of—he sat bolt upright.

What did it remind him of? He’d had it for a second, a clear image of a dressing table just like this with all manner of containers and patch boxes. Neatly arranged, unlike this cluttered table before him. Who had it belonged to? He closed his eyes, willing

the image to return but it did not. Frustrated, he clasped the soft blanket between his fists and squeezed when the door opened. He turned so fast a sharp, hot pain seared up his neck, and he grabbed it with one hand, willing the muscles to relax.

“Mr Wickham, are you quite all right?” Mr Bennet asked.

“Yes, just a pain, it is nothing.” He massaged the spot while Mr Bennet, his wife, and Elizabeth entered. She smiled at him, but it was the kind of smile one reserved for a person most unfortunate, someone one pitied.

“Mr Wexler said you will need rest. You are welcome to stay here for as long as you need,” Mr Bennet said while glancing at his wife, which brought up a worry that perhaps not everyone in the household was pleased to have him there.

“The constable will come by to get a description of where we found you, and of you,” Elizabeth explained. He couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief at her presence. There was something calming about her that eased his anxiety. As he looked towards the door, he noticed two young girls peering in, their eyes wide with curiosity and excitement.

Mrs Bennet hurried towards the door in a resolute manner that prompted the girls to retreat back.

“That’s Lydia and Kitty,” Elizabeth said with a slight smile, noticing his gaze. “They’re my younger sisters.”

“Silly girls, you’ll excuse them,” Mr Bennet added.

“Lydia, Kitty, please allow Mr Wickham some peace,” Mrs Bennet chided gently. “He needs rest, not your endless questions, if we have any hope of him recovering his strength and memory.”

“Yes, Mama,” they chorused, though it was clear they were eager to learn more about the mysterious man in their house.

Mr Bennet gave them a stern look. “Girls, go and help your mother with dinner preparations. Leave Mr Wickham to rest.”

Reluctantly, Lydia and Kitty left the doorway, though not without a final glance back at the bed. Elizabeth moved closer, adjusting the blanket around his shoulders. “If there’s anything you need, please let us know,” she said softly.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” he replied, with gratitude. “I appreciate your thoughtfulness more than I can say.”

She smiled at him. As the Bennets left the room, Elizabeth lingering a moment longer to offer one last reassuring look, he settled back into the pillows. Despite the turmoil of his missing memories and the confusion of his situation, there was a small comfort in knowing he was in the care of such kind people.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:09 am

Elizabeth

“How is Mr Wickham this morning?” Jane asked as Elizabeth stepped into the drawing room. Mary looked up from her spot by the pianoforte as Elizabeth shrugged.

“I have not seen him yet. Mr Wexler is with him again, and Father and Mother,” Elizabeth replied.

Three days had passed since Mr Wickham arrived at Longbourn, and during this time, Elizabeth had been attending to him. Her father had deemed her mother too prone to interrogation to trust her with the stranger, and Elizabeth had volunteered herself rather than create more work for Hill, their already overworked housekeeper. She wasn't sure why, but she had a keen desire to help the poor man remember. The fear and panic he had clearly felt upon waking and realising he did not know who he was, had struck her deeply. Besides, she had been the one to find him along with her father, so she assumed that played into her protectiveness.

He had recovered his strength over the last two days, and the previous day she had found him sitting by the window, reading one of the books her father had brought up. Mr Wexler recommended that he read when and if his aching head allowed, for it might jog his memory. So far, all efforts to help him remember had failed. They had deduced that he was a northerner based on his accent. His clothing had been fine once it was washed and pressed, the material one might usually see on a gentleman, but his greatcoat had been worn and torn in parts.

“Lizzy?” Jane said and poked her with her elbow.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, gathering her thoughts. “I was just thinking about Mr Wickham. It is all so peculiar, don’t you think?”

“I certainly do. I wish we had any idea who he was—or is,” Jane replied.

“Mother thinks he’s an impostor,” Mary said, standing up from the instrument.

“An impostor of whom?” Elizabeth asked, a little peeved by her mother’s insistence to think the worst of everyone, lest they came from money.

“She did not say. Or rather, she did not settle on one point. At first, she thought he was pretending to be a rich man, trying to worm himself into a favourable position. Then she said, perhaps he was a rich man escaping an unfavourable marriage. Then she thought perhaps he was a member of the militia on the run.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Oh, Mama. I would say she reads too many novels. Her imagination runs wild, but I think it runs wild without even the use of a single book.”

“It is peculiar, however, you are correct,” Mary continued. “He can’t remember anything and there is no indication of where he might have come from. I thought he might have been a homeless man, wandering the streets...”

“No, for if you look at his face it was clean-shaven, without hint of a stubble. And his hands? He does not look as though he has operated a plough or served in the military,” Elizabeth replied, for she’d given this matter a great deal of thought.

Jane let out a suppressed chuckle and glanced up from her embroidery.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked, but Jane shook her head and turned her attention back to the work in her lap.

“Nothing. It is only that you have paid a lot of mind to his hands, his face, and his accent,” she said in a teasing tone.

“I have not,” Elizabeth said. “That is what Mr Foxworthy said.”

The constable, Mr Foxworthy, had come to pay them a visit the previous day, speaking to each and every one of them, even though most of the family hadn’t known Mr Wickham was even there, until after he had woken up in bed. He spent two hours with Mr Wickham and emerged confused. Nonetheless, he had posters drawn up and distributed in the surrounding areas in the hope that somebody might recognise him, but thus far, nobody had.

“It is quite alright to think him handsome, Lizzy,” Jane said in a soothing tone usually reserved for stray animals.

“Kitty and Lydia will talk of nothing but how handsome Mr Wickham is. I can hear them through the wall in my chamber. ‘Mr Wickham’s beautiful brown eyes, Mr Wickham’s broad shoulders,’” Mary said, rolling her eyes.

“They have hardly even seen him,” Lizzy commented. “But of course, that never stops them. They have inherited their wild imaginations from Mama, I declare.”

The three sisters chuckled when their father entered.

“Our guest is feeling better,” he said to Elizabeth. “And Mr Wexler is gone. He thinks it would be beneficial for him to get outside and draw in the fresh air. I haven’t had the time to tend to him, I must go into town. And your mother is due to visit her sister. Would you mind?”

Lizzy got up at once. “Of course not. I will take him for a walk in the garden. Has there been any news? Has Dr Wexler had any other thoughts regarding his recovery?”

Her father sighed and shook his head. “Nothing as yet, but it is early days and we cannot give up hope.”

Knowing there was nothing else that could be done for the time being, Elizabeth went upstairs and knocked lightly on Mr Wickham’s door—or rather, her own door—before entering. She found him already dressed, just about to button up a waistcoat when he caught her eye and smiled.

“I recognise that waistcoat,” she remarked with a smile.

“Your father was generous enough to lend it to me,” he replied, still working on the buttons. “I was told to dress and take the air. Mr Wexler was quite insistent.”

“That is why I am here. I am to accompany you. And the waistcoat suits you. It’s his church-going waistcoat,” Elizabeth said.

Mr Wickham looked puzzled. “Perhaps I should not wear it, then.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Oh, don’t worry. My father avoids church at all costs, so such a fine waistcoat ought to see the light of day sometime.”

He returned her smile, the initial concern melting away. “Thank you, Miss Bennet. Your family has been exceedingly kind to me.”

Elizabeth nodded, her expression softening. “We are happy to help. Now, are you ready for a walk? The fresh air might do you some good.”

He agreed, and together they headed out into the garden.

Mr Wickham looked around, taking in the scenery with a sense of appreciation. It was still too early in the year for the crocuses and daffodils to make an appearance,

but in a few weeks the garden would be a riot of early spring colour. Elizabeth began to give him a little information regarding the area as they walked.

“So, as you might have gathered, my family live in Longbourn which is a very small village,” she began, then gestured to the house behind them. “Longbourn House is my family’s ancestral home, Bennets have lived here for generations. Over there, beyond the fields, is the town of Meryton. If you stand on the wall you can just see Lucas Lodge, where our friends, the Lucases, reside. Sir William is the highest-ranking man in Meryton, given he is a knight. His wife, Lady Lucas, is lovely. I shall introduce you one day.”

“I think I heard your mother speak of her,” he said a little wearily.

“Ah, yes. The two have a long running rivalry, though it is mostly my mother who keeps it up,” she said and he chuckled.

Mr Wickham followed her gaze. “So, Meryton is the main town?”

“Yes, depending on the state of the roads we are but four hours from London,” Elizabeth confirmed. “Meryton is where we do most of our shopping and socialising, Longbourn village only has a church. You can find Mr Phillips’ office there—he’s my uncle and the town’s only solicitor. Also, Meryton is where the militia are currently stationed, which has been quite an excitement for my younger sisters.”

Mr Wickham smiled at that. “I imagine it has been.” She looked at him intently, hoping something she said might trigger a memory but nothing had thus far. She turned around and pointed towards the fields at the back of the house, “Further along, if you go through the fields, you’ll come to Netherfield Park, which is currently vacant.” She felt the dismay creep into her voice and did her best to suppress it, not wanting to alert Mr Wickham of the events that had so shaken her family.

“Netherfield Park,” Mr Wickham repeated thoughtfully. “Netherfield.” He said the words slowly as though he were trying them out for size.

“Is the name familiar to you?” Elizabeth asked. “By foot one can reach it through the fields, but my father and I found you on the road that leads there.”

“I cannot be certain,” he said. “I want to say yes, but then I fear it is more wishing it to be true than it being so, if you understand what I mean.”

“I do. Do not force yourself to remember. Mr Wexler said your memories would come back to you naturally with time.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and nodded, then pointed his chin in the direction of a hill up ahead. “What is that spot called?”

“Oakham Mount, it offers the most splendid views of the countryside. Once you feel better, we can climb it if you like. I often do with my sister, Jane.”

“It all sounds quite charming,” Mr Wickham said, taking a deep breath of the fresh air. “And I am grateful to be here, Miss Bennet. Your hospitality has been most generous.”

“We are happy to have you, Mr Wickham,” Elizabeth replied warmly. “Now, let us enjoy this walk. Perhaps the fresh air will jog some of your memories. If you wish, we can walk beyond the garden and stroll on the road.”

“I would like that. It feels good to stretch my legs after so long.”

With that, they continued their stroll, Elizabeth pointing out various landmarks and sharing stories, hoping that something, anything, might help Mr Wickham remember who he was or why he had come to this part of the world.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:09 am

Darcy

He looked around the countryside, still a little barren since spring was weeks away. Yet, it was rather lovely anyhow. The empty fields for as far as the eye could see filled him with a sense of hope. There was much to explore, and somewhere around here lay the answers to his many questions regarding his identity.

It was a pleasurable way to spend a little time, walking in the cold winter's air with Elizabeth Bennet, who told him all about the neighbourhood, its inhabitants, and whatever else she could think of that might help him remember who he was and where he came from.

As they walked back, a half hour into their walk, he found himself a little out of breath as they reached Longbourn House, which struck him as rather odd, seeing how he was a young man. He had looked at himself in the mirror, hoping to find out who he was, but it had been a stranger looking back.

“Oh Mr Wickham!”

He looked up to see the two younger Bennet sisters, Kitty and Lydia, peeking out from an open window. Their giggles filled the air when he dipped his head in acknowledgment, eliciting even more laughter. A strange sense of familiarity tugged at him upon seeing them, though he couldn't quite place why.

Elizabeth sighed softly. “I must apologise for my sisters, Mr Wickham. Their curiosity is getting the better of them. They are eager to learn more about our mysterious guest.”

He smiled, a warm, genuine expression that reached his eyes. “No need to apologise, Miss Bennet. I can’t blame them. I’m just as curious to find out more about myself.”

They shared a smile, a moment of connection that neither could entirely explain. He cleared his throat and gestured around them. “Would you mind if we sit in the garden for a spell? I am afraid I cannot walk any further today, but I am not ready to return to my... your chamber. I must apologise anyhow for taking your room.”

“It is quite alright, Jane and I do not mind sharing,” she said quickly, and he nodded, grateful once more. The Bennets had been nothing if not hospitable, and he hoped to one day repay their consideration. He wasn’t sure when or how, but he would.

“Tell me about your family, Miss Bennet. If I can’t know more about my own for the time being, I’d like to know about yours.” It was true, he still knew little about her family, and she hadn’t said much about them, focusing instead on the area around them in case it would give a hint of where he was from, or who he was.

Elizabeth appeared thoughtful. “Very well. I am the second oldest of five daughters. My elder sister, Jane, is the beauty of the family. She is as kind and good-natured as she is lovely, as I am sure you know by now. Then there is Mary, who is very studious and serious. She was the one who brought your breakfast yesterday. Kitty and Lydia, as you have seen, are the youngest. They are quite spirited and full of energy.”

Mr Wickham listened intently, intrigued not just by her words but by the way her eyes lit up when she spoke of her family. He found himself captivated by her voice, the sincerity behind her words. He wondered what his own family was like. Did he have siblings? Did he sound as amused when he spoke of them as she did? Were his parents still alive? These questions swirled in his mind, but he pushed them aside, focusing on Elizabeth.

“And your parents?” he asked, eager to keep her talking.

Elizabeth’s smile wavered slightly. “My father, Mr Bennet, is a quiet, scholarly man. He prefers his books and his study to the bustle of everyday life. My mother, on the other hand, is quite the opposite. She is very keen on seeing us all well married and is always full of plans and schemes to that end. She has a brother in town and a sister here...”

“Mrs Phillips,” he said. “The solicitor’s wife.”

She smiled at him. “You remember.”

“I appear to be a keen listener with a good memory. There’s something we’ve discovered about me,” he replied with a bright smile.

“We shall accept any little victory. I hope my family is not too boisterous for you.”

Mr Wickham chuckled softly. “Not at all. Your family is wonderfully lively. I can hear your conversations through the door sometimes when you congregate outside my room. Or rather your room.”

Her lips parted, and he knew instinctively that she was thinking about the things she and her sisters might have said about him. He smiled to ease her worries.

“I’ve not overheard anything untoward, just a lot of chatter about gentlemen from your younger sisters and assorted fretting from your mother.”

She threw her head back, and a laugh escaped. “That sounds right.”

“It makes me wonder if I have a family also. I hope I do,” he said, wondering what his family might be like. Did he have living parents? Siblings? Children? A wife? He

stopped and blinked.

“Are you unwell?” she asked quickly, but he shook his head.

“No, it just occurred to me that I do not know anything about my personal life. I wonder if I have children. And...” he looked at his fingers. There was no ring, there should be a ring.

“A wife?” she asked, and the air shifted between them.

“I wondered about it, but I feel I do not have a wife. I am missing a ring though, I feel certain that I wear a signet ring, a gold ring with a ruby and—” he stopped abruptly.

“And what?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

“The memory has gone, for a moment I could almost see it, but it was fleeting,” he said sadly.

“It must be a good sign though, that you have snatches of memory however brief,” Elizabeth smiled at him.

“Perhaps.”

“So you feel that you do not have a wife?” she asked, and he couldn’t help but notice the delicate pink flush in her cheeks as she spoke.

“A feeling, but a distinct one,” he said and dropped his hand.

“Well, then perhaps you are as yet unwed, Mr Wickham,” she said and indicated for them to press on. Yet the sound of the name from her lips somehow caused him to stand still. There was a distaste to it he couldn’t place. It bothered him to be called

this name by anyone, but her most of all. He cringed and took a deep breath, expelling it with some force.

“This will not do,” she declared with determination and faced him.

He looked at her, confused. “What do you mean, Miss Bennet?”

“You clearly don’t like the name Wickham for whatever reason,” she said firmly. “So, we need to come up with something else. Do you prefer George?”

A smile tugged at his lips but he shook his head. “I do not love it either, no.”

Elizabeth tilted her head, thinking. “We shall have to find you something else. It cannot be Thomas for that is my father’s name, nor Phillip as it is my uncles.”

“Phillip Phillips?” he quipped and she let out a little laugh behind her hand.

“Indeed, his parents were very humorous. Now, as for you, how about... John?”

He laughed. “John? That sounds far too common, don’t you think? I would not want to be in the market and have to turn every few minutes upon hearing that name.”

“True,” she admitted, grinning. “Alright, how about Edwin?”

He smirked. “Edwin?” He pursed his lips and rubbed his chin. “I do not mind it. Do you think I look like an Edwin?” He noted they had skipped from formal last names to Christian names but she did not mind it. She scrutinized him with care before waving a hand.

“No. You look more like ... Melchior?” she proposed.

“As in the bible? The bringer of myrrh?”

“Gold, I believe. Another thing we have learned about you. You do not know the scripture well,” she said and he wagged his head as a laugh escaped both of them.

“It seems that way. But no. None of these will work,” he said and grew silent when a thought came to him. “Truly I do not like George but I quite like the name Georgie. I’m not sure why, but it feels... right.”

Elizabeth’s expression softened. “Georgie? Yes, I like it too. It suits you.”

He smiled, a sense of relief washing over him. “Georgie it is, then.”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Very well, Georgie. I shall tell my family this is your preferred name. Georgie Wickham. But we shall not use the Wickham.”

He bowed slightly, a playful glint in his eye. “I thank you, Miss Bennet.”

As they walked on, the mood lightened, and they continued to exchange stories and jokes. The name Georgie seemed to fit perfectly, and with each passing moment, the bond between them grew stronger, filled with humour, and a hint of something deeper.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:09 am

Darcy

23rd January 1812

A week had passed, and Georgie had recovered physically, but his memory remained elusive. The Bennet family had been more than benevolent to him. He had taken meals with them on the first day after his initial recovery but had since requested to dine on his own, feeling uncomfortable eating with them in case it was not proper.

He knew the society he was a part of had strict rules. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he did. If he were a servant or, worse, a pauper, and word spread that the family had dined with one such as he, it would reflect badly on the Bennets. Of course, he also could not dine with the servants because, if he outranked them, there might be talk about him in the future.

This concern had not been his own, but rather Mrs Bennet's who seemed the most concerned about his status. "What if you are a Duke? What would it look like if word spread that the Duke of Dingers took dinner with servants? And what would it say of us? The Bennets made the Duke of Dingers eat with their housekeeper? I think not."

Given the woman's demeanour, it was clear that she would brook no argument.

Thus, a compromise had been made, which saw him eating in his chamber. Indeed, he had a chamber now designated for him in the attic. He had not wanted to use Miss Elizabeth Bennet's chamber longer than he had to and was much more comfortable in his own room—even if it was darker and smaller than the comfortable chamber of his host's daughter.

Still, despite having his own room, and even though his eating arrangements had been sorted, he felt uncomfortable. He was costing the family money. Not just for food and beverages but also firewood and clothing, which Mr Bennet had purchased for him in town.

The longer he stayed, the more he would cost them. From conversations he'd overheard, and from what he'd gathered on his daily walks, the Bennets may have been landed gentry, but they were not wealthy. No, Georgie was certain, he had to repay the Bennets for their kindness and generosity somehow. To that end, he approached Mr Bennet, who was in the stable, tending to the horses.

"Mr Bennet," he began, his breath visible in the chill air, "I need to speak with you."

Mr Bennet looked up from his work, a brow raised in curiosity. "What is it, Georgie?"

Georgie, as he had begun to think of himself, took a deep breath. "I cannot continue to live off the family's good Christian hospitality. It is not right."

Mr Bennet straightened, dusting off his hands. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I intend to earn my keep. I have nowhere else to go, so I cannot leave unless you wish it, but I cannot simply rely on your compassion without contributing. I want to work on the lands." He motioned to the fields where farmhands were toiling under the guidance of a burly, bearded man whom Georgie had heard called Mr Cook.

Mr Bennet's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Georgie, how do we know what you can do? Do you think you've worked a farm before?"

Georgie hesitated, the uncertainty of his past gnawing at him. "I have no idea. But I

think I'd be quite good at sowing the fields or bringing in the harvest."

Mr Bennet chuckled. "It's not harvesting season, I'm afraid. We do grow cabbage and Brussels sprouts in the winter, but right now, we're just turning the land ready for sowing in the spring. But I do need someone who can chop wood. Can you do that?"

"I can," Georgie said confidently, though the confidence was mostly for show. He had no idea if he could chop wood. Although he'd seen it done a few days earlier when John, one of the farmhands, had prepared a basketful and it looked simple enough. Because there wasn't much work to be done on the lands over winter, John had gone to visit his family in Devon for a fortnight, so Georgie was happy to volunteer for the task in his absence, if it would go some way to repaying the Bennets generosity.

Mr Bennet nodded and led him to the chopping block around the corner. The stack of seasoned logs stood tall, a daunting task for anyone, let alone someone who wasn't sure if he had ever chopped wood before. Georgie stared at the block, feeling a pang of uncertainty.

"Here's the axe," Mr Bennet said, handing him the tool. "I'll come back later and, in the meanwhile, I'll speak to Mr Cook, the steward, to see what else you could do around the place."

Georgie watched Mr Bennet walk away, leaving him alone with the task. He gripped the axe tightly, feeling the smooth wooden handle against his palm. He placed a log on the chopping block and raised the axe high above his head, aiming for a clean split. So far, so good.

He swung down with all his might, but the axe struck the log awkwardly, barely making a dent. The vibration from the impact jarred his arms, and he grimaced. Well. This was not promising. But then again, he'd had an accident. Or he'd been attacked.

One or the other. In any case, he'd been unwell, so surely it was understandable he'd need some time to get back into this task. Determined, he tried again, adjusting his grip and stance. This time, the axe glanced off the side of the log, sending splinters flying but leaving the wood mostly intact.

"Perdition!" he grumbled, standing with the axe to one side. He paused, feeling the frustration rise. Then, he tried his hand again. And again. And again.

Yet, despite his best efforts, the logs seemed to mock him, remaining stubbornly whole as he kept missing and carving ridges into the chopping block instead. He wiped the sweat from his brow and took a deep breath, reminding himself that he had to keep trying. He was about to raise the axe for another swing when he heard a giggle.

Turning, he saw Lydia and Kitty watching him from a distance, their faces alight with amusement. Lydia called out, "Are you sure you know what you're doing, Georgie?"

Kitty chimed in, "You look like you're battling a dragon, not chopping wood!"

Georgie managed to smile, though he felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment. Before he could respond, Jane appeared, her calm presence a relief.

"Lydia, Kitty, leave him be," Jane said gently but firmly. "He's doing his best."

The younger sisters pouted but obeyed, skipping off to find another source of entertainment. Jane turned to Georgie with a kind smile.

"Thank you, Miss Bennet," he said, feeling grateful for her intervention. "Your sisters are quite spirited."

Jane laughed softly. "Indeed, they are. Don't mind them. They mean well."

Georgie found himself struck by Jane's serene beauty and gentle nature. "You're very thoughtful, Miss Bennet."

Jane blushed lightly. "Thank you, Georgie. If you need any help, just ask."

"I will, Miss Bennet. Your generosity is much appreciated. I only hope I can be of some use around here."

Jane regarded him thoughtfully. "You're already more helpful than you realise. Your determination is admirable."

He watched her leave, feeling a lightening in his chest. The Bennet sisters were indeed unique, each one with her own charm. Even the quietest sister, Mary, had a silent charm to her—it was just more difficult to see.

But it was Elizabeth who captivated him the most. He thought of her lively eyes and her lovely lips, a smile playing on his face at the memory of their exchanges. Maybe it was because she'd cared for him when he was ill, that he thought highly of her but he wasn't sure. There was more to it. Wasn't there?

"Georgie?"

"Eli... Miss... Miss Bennet," he said, grappling with the correct title. Of course, she had to show up just as he was thinking of her.

"What were you smiling about, Georgie?" she asked, her tone teasing.

Georgie tried to hide his surprise. "Just thinking about how poorly I'm doing with this wood."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, glancing at the pile of badly chopped logs. "Is that

something to smile about?" she asked with a wink, but then surveyed the rather calamitous scene in front of her. "Yes, it does look like you could use some help. Why don't you show me how you've been doing it so I can help?"

He sighed, knowing his lack of skill would be evident. He picked up the axe and attempted to chop another log, but it was a clumsy effort. Elizabeth laughed, a delightful sound that made him forget his embarrassment.

"Let me show you," she said, taking the axe from him. With a practised motion, she split the log cleanly in two. "See? It's all about technique."

Georgie watched her, impressed. "You make it look easy."

Elizabeth handed the axe back to him. "Now you try."

He followed her instructions, focusing on his technique rather than brute strength. This time, the axe split the log more effectively. He grinned at Elizabeth, who clapped her hands in approval.

"Well done, Georgie! You're getting the hang of it," she said. "A few more times and you'll have it." She paused then and pressed a finger against her lips. "Do not tell my mother that I know how to chop wood. It isn't one of the accomplishments she feels behoves a young lady to know."

He chuckled and pressed his finger on his lips, mirroring her posture. "Your secret is safe with me. But pray, who taught you?"

"My father," she said. "Whenever Mother goes to town to visit her sister, he teaches me whatever I want to learn, like hunting and fishing."

"I love fishing," he said, though instantly snapped his mouth shut. Did he?

“You remembered something,” she said, her words tumbling out one over the other. “That is wonderful.”

“It- it is... but I am unsure how I know that I like fishing. Earlier I was convinced I knew how to chop wood and I was mistaken.”

She tapped her finger against her chin. “We should try it out. Mother is travelling to London next week with Jane, perhaps we can fish if you are still here then. My father will take us and we can see if you can indeed fish.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” he said, feeling a rush of heat. “I appreciate your help. And I look forward to it.”

She smiled, a hint of mischief in her eyes. “As do I. I will speak to Papa this afternoon. In the meantime,” she pressed her finger in front of her lips again and then walked away as he looked after her, his heart skipping a beat.

Once she’d disappeared inside, he set out to work on his firewood again, and once he’d managed to apply what she’d taught him, he found his thoughts drifting.

The same questions that had bothered him for days, all piled one on top of the other. Where was he from? What had he done before this? Why had nobody come looking for him? The questions nagged at him, creating an unsettling void where his past should have been. The thought that perhaps no one was searching for him, weighed heavily on his heart.

Was he truly alone in the world? Maybe he had no family to look for him. The idea was disconcerting, even more so because of how much he liked the Bennet family. The laughter of the younger Bennet sisters, the gentle sympathy of Jane, the teasing but supportive nature of Elizabeth—it all provided a stark contrast to the cold, uncertain reality of his memory loss.

Mr Bennet returned a short while later, eyeing the pile of chopped wood with approval. “Well done, Georgie. You’ve done a fine job.”

“Thank you, Mr Bennet,” Georgie replied.

Mr Bennet clapped him on the shoulder. “You’ve earned your keep for today. Come inside and warm up. Hill will have something for you to eat.”

Georgie nodded, feeling a heat spread through him that had nothing to do with the physical exertion. As they walked back to the house, he looked around at Longbourn, feeling a deep appreciation for the place and the people within it.

Elizabeth

Later that day, Elizabeth sat in the drawing room, enjoying a quiet cup of tea. The heat from the hearth enveloped her, creating a comforting cocoon against the chill outside. She'd watched as Georgie continued to chop wood, a task he had been at for at least two hours, and now, he'd disappeared to stack it in the various rooms. He had quite clearly never held an axe before in his life, at least not to chop wood, but he was trying to earn his keep, and that impressed her.

A sniffle came to her ear then, and she turned just in time to see Jane entering, her eyes red. This alarmed her because her sister had not shed a tear in some weeks now.

Elizabeth rushed to her sister and placed a hand on her back. "Jane, what's wrong?"

Jane looked at her with tear-brightened eyes. "It is silly, I know, but I just realised... it's Mr Bingley's birthday today. We had plans for this day. He was going to hike up to Oak Mount with me, and we were going to eat there and watch the sunset. I hadn't thought about it until just now, and it made me feel so terribly sad."

Elizabeth's heart ached for her sister. She could see the pain etched on Jane's face, the sorrow in her eyes. She had hoped time would heal her sister's heart quickly but to no avail. Mr Bingley and his brethren had hurt her sister so deeply, Elizabeth feared she would never fully recover. "Oh, Jane," she said softly, squeezing her sister's hand. "I'm so sorry. I would tell you to think of something else, but I know it is not as simple as that."

Jane shook her head, her eyes welling up with tears. "I wish I could think of anything

else, but I can't stop thinking about him, wondering if he's happy or if he misses me too."

Elizabeth realised with a sinking heart that Jane was still deeply in love with Mr Bingley and might never stop loving him. She reached out to console her, wrapping her arms around her sister. "It's all right to feel this way, Jane. It's natural to miss him."

Her sister pulled away from her and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I- I didn't mean to burden you, Lizzy. I was on my way out, and... I should go." She spun and made for the door.

Just then, a grunt emitted from the door. Georgie walked past them, his arms laden with firewood. He started at Jane's sudden appearance and jumped out of her way, dropping the firewood with a loud clatter in the hall.

"I beg your pardon," Jane called, startled, and then hurried past him, her head bowed, leaving Elizabeth, who had run to the door, and Georgie standing amidst the scattered logs.

Georgie's eyes widened in concern as he looked from the fallen firewood to Elizabeth. "I'm sorry, Miss Bennet. I didn't mean to frighten her."

Elizabeth shook her head as she squatted to help him collect the firewood. "It's not your fault, Georgie. Jane is just... she's having an upsetting day."

Georgie bent down to gather the firewood, his movements quick and efficient. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked gently, sensing the weight of the moment.

Elizabeth offered him a grateful smile. "No, it is something Jane needs to come to terms with on her own."

“What has upset her so?” he asked but then shook his head. “I beg your pardon, I should not have asked. It has nothing to do with me.”

Elizabeth sighed, feeling the weight of her sister’s sorrow and the sudden urge to talk. “It is not a what, rather a who. A gentleman broke her heart, I am afraid.”

Georgie’s expression hardened with unexpected resolve. “If you need, I will speak to whoever upset her and set them straight.”

Elizabeth was touched by his earnest offer. A part of her wished she could ask Georgie to set Mr Bingley and his friend Mr Darcy right. They deserved someone to plant a facer on them, in her estimation. Alas, it was futile. “The man who upset her is not here, he is far away otherwise I would have delivered a severe censure already. In a way, it wasn’t even his fault.”

Georgie looked puzzled. “How can it not be his fault if he caused her so much pain?”

Elizabeth sighed, trying to organise her thoughts. “Do you remember Netherfield Park?”

He nodded. “The large estate we saw on our walk, yes.”

“Well, a gentleman by the name of Mr Bingley, rented it. He was new to the area, a wealthy, amiable man, a man of trade. Jane and Mr Bingley met at a local dance, and it was clear from the beginning that they were taken with each other. They spent a great deal of time together, and it became evident that Mr Bingley had serious intentions towards Jane.”

Georgie listened intently, his brow furrowed in concentration. “But something went wrong?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Yes. Mr Bingley’s sisters thought us beneath their touch, you see? We outrank them, but they are far wealthier, and they believed us to be after Mr Bingley’s money. My family can be... Well, you know my sisters and my mother can be uncouth, but there were no ill intentions.”

“Of course not,” he said, his chest rising. “Your family is honourable and kind, and I’d challenge anyone who says otherwise.”

She smiled again. He was a good man, this Georgie Wickham. If only Mr Bingley or Mr Darcy were half as decent. She took a breath and told him the rest of the tale, how the Bingley party had disappeared, how Mr Darcy had shown up and inserted himself in the equation and sown trouble, and how they had found out the truth from Charlotte Collins.

“So you see, this Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley’s sisters twisted his mind and poisoned him against my sister.”

Georgie frowned, trying to understand. “But this fellow Bingley made the decision to leave, didn’t he?”

“That is what Jane says,” Elizabeth admitted. “But regardless, Mr Darcy is horrible for poisoning his friend’s mind against Jane without even meeting her. He thinks he’s better than all of us, and Mr Bingley’s sisters are just as bad. They think themselves superior, but we outrank the Bingleys, as I said, and yet it wasn’t enough for this Mr Darcy.”

Georgie was taken aback and frowned deeply. “Wait, this Darcy never met Jane? I had thought him a part of the Bingley party that resided here. It sounds as though he would have had to have witnessed the entire courtship to pass judgement.”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes bright with indignation. “You would think so. Alas, no, he

never even met her! Can you imagine? Passing judgement without ever having met the person you judge?"

Georgie shook his head, his expression one of disbelief. "That is inconceivably irrational and horrible. Nobody should pass judgement without at least meeting the person."

Elizabeth felt a rush of relief at his agreement. "Exactly! How can he be so cruel and arrogant?"

Georgie placed the last of the logs in the pile, then stood up and faced Elizabeth. "It's clear you care for your sister a great deal. She's fortunate to have you by her side."

Elizabeth felt her heart soften at his words. "Thank you, Georgie. We all look out for each other. It's what families do."

"If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know," Georgie said, sounding quite determined.

She smiled, touched by his sincerity. "Your care is already a great help. I am glad I am not alone in my assessment of the situation. Jane thinks me too harsh on Mr Darcy and the sisters."

"You can trust that at least this one humble fellow is on your side when it comes to this matter, Miss Bennet," he said.

"I thank you. Say, would you call me Elizabeth at least when we are alone? Miss Bennet or Miss Elizabeth seems awfully formal, given the circumstances."

He paused and scratched his chin thoughtfully before he nodded. "Very well, Elizabeth. I shall. And now I ought to stack the other fireplaces."

As Georgie took his leave, Elizabeth couldn't help but think of how much had changed since he had come into their lives. He had brought with him a sense of mystery, but also a quiet steadiness that she had come to rely on. She watched him go, feeling a deep sense of gratitude for this man who, despite his own uncertainties and struggles, had become a source of comfort and strength.

Darcy

1 st February 1812

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

“Come on, just a little more,” Georgie muttered under his breath as he tried his best to get his freezing fingers to bend so he could tackle his task for the day—milking a cow. He’d managed a few squirts of milk but hoped to fill the bucket to prove to Mr Bennet that he wasn’t entirely useless when it came to farm work. Thus far, he’d managed to bungle every task he’d been given other than feeding the animals.

He’d persevered with each task but not without difficulty. Clearing out the stables took him much longer than any of the other workers, as the pitchfork would not co-operate when he attempted to clear out the muck. Pumping water from the well, tired his arms in an embarrassingly short period of time, and he would rather not think back to his misadventures with sowing the last of the winter crops. Whatever he had been in his former life, a farm worker was not it.

“Come now, Maisie,” he pleaded with the animal and blew onto his hands to warm them a little. However, Maisie the cow had other plans. She sidestepped suddenly, knocking over the bucket where Georgie had managed to collect a small amount of milk. The liquid splashed onto floor, soaking into the straw almost immediately.

“By Jove!” Georgie let out an exasperated sigh, running a hand through his hair. His attempts to acclimate to farm life had been met with one failure after another, and now milking the cow seemed like an insurmountable task. He felt completely inept.

Just then, Mary Bennet appeared at the barn door, a book clutched in her hands.

“Georgie,” she called out. He turned to face her. Quickly, he glanced around to see if either of her sisters were there, so he’d know how to properly address her. Etiquette, for some reason, was a topic he appeared to know much about. Perhaps a hint at his former life? Had he been a footman at a rich man’s home perhaps? A butler, even?

“Miss Bennet,” he acknowledged after verifying her older sisters were not there and thus awarding her the title of Miss Bennet for the time being and straightening up. “Do you know anything about milking cows, perhaps?”

“Not from experience,” she admitted while surveying the chaos at his feet, “but I have watched the cows being milked before. It didn’t seem very difficult.”

Georgie scoffed. It truly hadn’t looked difficult when he watched Mr Cook, demonstrate it, but doing it himself, was quite another matter.

Georgie hesitated for a moment but then said, “Anything would help at this point.”

Mary stepped closer. “Well, whoever does it usually speaks quietly to the cows. Also, they do it slowly. I think the cows know when you don’t know what you are doing. Also, they do not like cold hands.”

Georgie nodded, taking in her words. He’d already thawed his hands earlier, but it was cold out with a stiff breeze that had left the air frigid. He rubbed his hands together, trying to warm them up again, and approached the cow once more. He positioned the bucket and reached for the udder, attempting to follow Mary’s advice.

Mary watched intently, as if she were reading a most fascinating book.

“Alright, Maisie old girl. Why don’t you help me?” Georgie tried talking to the cow

in soothing tones, but despite his best efforts, the milk was still not flowing as it should. The cow seemed more annoyed than calmed, shifting her weight and swishing her tail irritably. Determined not to give up, he bent forward and gave the teat another tug—only to find his face splashed with a stream of warm milk.

“Oh, perdition!” he bellowed and leaped up, and staggered backwards while Mary broke into giggles.

“It’s no use,” he muttered, wiping the milk off his face while the cow merrily sauntered away.

Mary bit her lips, but her cheeks twitched with amusement, although it seemed she’d seen quite enough as she took a few steps out of the barn. “It does take time, Georgie. Perhaps you just need more practice. Don’t be too hard on yourself. I’ll leave you to it.”

It was pointless. Georgie sat down on the hay, his back against the wooden wall and watched Mary as she left. She kicked a pebble along the path, swinging her arms in a carefree manner. As he observed her, an image flickered in his mind.

A young woman, blonde-haired and taller than Mary, appeared before him, mirroring Mary’s actions. She wore a vivid sky-blue dress with a bow in the back. A soft, melodic giggle filled the air, and a wave of familiarity washed over him.

“Who is this?” he whispered to himself, his heart pounding. Was this a flash from his former life?

Compelled by a sudden urgency, Georgie leapt up to go after the apparition. In his haste, his foot kicked the bucket, and the clattering sound startled the cow, causing her to moo loudly. The noise jolted him back to reality, and the image of the blonde-haired woman faded as quickly as it had appeared.

This had been his window to his past, a hint about who he was. And now it was gone! Was this woman the same one who owned the tidy dressing table he'd seen in his mind the day he first awoke? Was she his ... wife? Sister? Georgie didn't know. His stomach churned, and a wave of nausea overcame him. Stumbling out of the barn, he barely made it a few steps before doubling over and heaving. He staggered a few more feet and sank to the ground, leaning against the barn wall, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

"Why can't I remember?" he muttered, tinged with desperation. The brief glimpse of the past had only deepened his frustration. His lack of memory was a constant, gnawing void that overshadowed every moment of his existence.

His limited skills and poor outlook on life added to his sense of inadequacy. Every task on the farm seemed beyond his capability, and he felt like a burden rather than a help. The days stretched out before him, bleak and unchanging, with no promise of improvement or enlightenment.

He buried his face in his hands, the weight of his situation pressing down on him. He felt utterly lost, a man without a past, struggling to find his place in a world that made no sense. The image of the blonde-haired woman lingered at the edge of his mind, a haunting reminder of all he had lost.

For now, all he could do was sit there, shaken and frustrated, trying to piece together the fragments of a life he couldn't remember.

As he stared at the ground, he heard footsteps approaching. He looked up to see Elizabeth walking back to the house. Elizabeth noticed him and veered in his direction, her brow furrowing with concern.

"Are you ill?" she asked, worry painting each word.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I’m turning out to be an abject failure as a farmhand,” he admitted, not wanting to tell her about his strange experience moments ago. He didn’t know what it meant, who it was he’d seen—and somehow, he felt he needed to hold on to that image for himself.

Elizabeth chuckled softly. “Yes, my father implied as much. But you don’t need to work, Georgie. You are our guest. In fact, Mother has already said it is unseemly to have a guest work.”

Georgie shook his head, though grateful for the interruption. “I overheard Mrs Bennet complaining that having an extra mouth to feed is a hardship. I cannot simply sit idly by and be a burden on your family.”

Elizabeth’s expression softened, and she waved a hand dismissively. “You are not a burden, Georgie. My mother has a flair for dramatics, and while she may complain, she also enjoys the notoriety hosting the man without a memory brings.”

He looked into her eyes. “Is that what I am called in town?”

“Indeed. Or ‘the man without a past’, depending on whom you speak to. In any case, Mother has never been talked to or about as much as she is now. That alone is a gift. And I enjoy having you here. It is nice to have someone who likes to read as much as I, and not just romance novels like Mary. And now that Jane has gone to London to stay with our aunt and uncle, I shall have to come to you for riveting conversation.”

Georgie smiled weakly, feeling a flicker of hope that this meant seeing more of her. Jane Bennet had gone into London three days prior with Mrs Bennet, who had since returned. Jane was to spend time with Mrs Bennet’s brother and his family. “Thank you, Elizabeth. Your words mean a great deal to me.”

She smiled back, her eyes warm and encouraging. “Come, let’s go inside. It’s too

cold out here and Maisie has already been milked this morning.”

His eyes grew wide. “She has?”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Yes, I overheard Father and Mr Cook talking about it and how they were going to play a little joke on you. I didn’t agree with it, but...”

To his surprise, he let out a burst of laughter. “So I am not entirely useless at milking. Poor Maisie was just perturbed.”

“Yes, that is all. Come now,” she said and nodded her head towards the house.

As they stood up and walked towards the house together, Georgie felt a small measure of comfort. Elizabeth’s words had reassured him, but he still felt a deep desire to prove his worth and find his place. Somehow.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth glanced at the young man from the corner of her eye, unsure why she felt so compelled to reassure him. It had been clear that something was on his mind, for he had sat by the barn looking utterly miserable. She had not approved of her father's plan to cheer him up by having him struggle with the milking task, but she also knew this was not the cause of his downcast state.

Not knowing his true identity upset him deeply—she knew this much. Yet, she felt helpless to do anything for him, she couldn't imagine what it would be like to wake one day and not know who she was. The best she could do was offer him tea and companionship, which, to be truthful, she welcomed, especially now that her sister was gone.

"Would you like a cup of chamomile tea?" she asked as they entered the house, but he shook his head.

"I think it would make me too sleepy, and I had hoped to trouble you for another book to read," he said, hanging his hat up on the hook by the door.

Elizabeth's smile softened. "I've noticed you seem to enjoy reading very much. Every book I bring you is devoured in a day."

He brightened at this. "Yes, I do enjoy reading immensely. I wondered if perhaps I was a book merchant." He winked, and she knew he was jesting.

"Perhaps you ran a circulating library," she replied.

“Let us hope not, lest my loyal customers think I’ve abandoned them,” he said with a chuckle, and she found herself admiring his ability to laugh about his predicament. It took strength to live as he did, she was certain.

“Why don’t you select something from my father’s library instead of me bringing you books?” Elizabeth suggested. “We have a substantial collection, and I am sure you will find something to your liking.”

Georgie agreed eagerly, and they walked to the library together, abandoning her plan to cheer him with tea and biscuits. It was the right decision, as she knew the moment they entered. Georgie’s eyes widened, taking in the shelves upon shelves of books. The room had a cosy, inviting atmosphere, with a large window admitting the soft winter light.

“Goodness, so many books!” he exclaimed and began to peruse the shelves, his fingers trailing over the spines. He pulled out a volume and opened it, his eyes quickly scanning the pages.

“Ah, this is in French,” he murmured.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “You can read French?”

“Yes,” he replied, looking somewhat surprised himself. “Apparently, I can.”

“Let us see,” Elizabeth said, stepping closer. “What does this say?” She read over his shoulder as he recited a passage from the book effortlessly.

“Les plus grandes choses sont accomplies par la persévérance,” he read aloud, then repeated the words in English, “The greatest things are accomplished through perseverance.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Impressive. Your knowledge of languages suggests you might have had a very different upbringing than what you initially assumed.”

Georgie closed the book thoughtfully. “It does seem that way. I certainly wasn’t a farmhand, that’s been established.”

Elizabeth placed a reassuring hand on his arm. “Whatever your past, you are welcome here. Take your time, explore the library, and perhaps more memories will come to you. I think there is a Russian novel somewhere here, maybe you can read that too. If so, you might be a diplomat of some sort.”

“Let us hope not, otherwise the world could hang in the balance due to my absence,” he said, and Elizabeth let out a chuckle that was more heartfelt than any in a long while.

“Let us hope not, then,” she said and made her way to her father’s desk. She sat in his chair, planning to let Georgie select a few books while she wrote to Jane, when her eyes fell upon a letter lying on the desk. She picked it up and let out an unladylike grunt.

Georgie turned at once. “What is wrong?”

Elizabeth sighed, trying to shake off her irritation. “Nothing, I just saw an old letter from my cousin, Mr Collins. He came to visit some months ago, and he is, to put it mildly, a rather pompous individual. This letter was sent prior to his visit and invoked, shall we say, unpleasant memories.”

Georgie raised an eyebrow, curious. “How so?” He placed the book he had been holding back on the shelf and focused on her instead.

Elizabeth could not help but let out a dry laugh. “Allow me to share a sample,” she

said, picking up the letter and reading a passage aloud, “My reasons for marrying are, firstly, I think that every clergyman in easy circumstances such as myself, should set an example to his parish, it is the proper thing to do. Secondly, I am convinced it will add greatly to my happiness, and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier—this is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling my patroness .”

Georgie raised his eyebrow.

Elizabeth added, “The patroness he speaks of, is the star in his sky. He does all that she demands of him and more. He thinks rather highly of himself because she pays him attention, though from what he says, she thinks herself the queen of the ton, and her daughter a diamond of the first water.”

Georgie chuckled. “He does sound quite the character, as does his patroness.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, remembering Mr Collins’s tedious visit. “He is indeed. I was to call on him a week ago, or rather on my friend Charlotte, who is his wife, but I did not truly wish to go.”

“And I see you did not,” he said. “May I ask why?”

She smiled, her cheeks colouring up. “Because of you. I thought it more important that I stay here and help, since we did not know what condition you’d be in. So, after you first arrived and we understood you’d be with us a while, I cancelled the trip to Kent.”

“I am sorry you will not be able to see your friend on my account,” he said, sounding genuinely regretful.

“Our friendship has been strained somewhat, and I truly do not want to be in Mr

Collins' company anyhow, even if marriage might have somewhat tempered his character. He is rather vexing. And to make matters worse, he is the heir to Longbourn."

Georgie looked puzzled. "Heir? Does that mean there is an entailment on the estate?"

Elizabeth sighed, "Yes, there is. You know about entailments?"

He paused and then nodded, as if surprised that he did. "I seem to know a great deal about it," Georgie admitted and rattled off the legal details of the entailment law which had Elizabeth stumped. She had been jesting when she suggested he was a diplomat, but now she had to wonder—was he someone of higher rank? A barrister perhaps?

"You certainly know more about entailments than I do," she said finally.

He slipped into the seat across from her. "I cannot tell you how I know all of this."

Elizabeth looked at him with newfound interest. "You know, it is curious that you have this knowledge. Perhaps you were a gentleman before the accident?"

Georgie shook his head thoughtfully. "I do not think so. I do not feel very gentlemanly, I must confess. Maybe I was a steward or had some other role related to managing properties."

Elizabeth pondered this, her mind racing with possibilities. Georgie's knowledge of entailments and his familiarity with the intricacies of estate management suggested a background far removed from manual labour. What kind of life had he led before his accident?

"... can naturally be broken if both parties agree," he said, and she looked up,

realising she had not been paying attention.

“Broken?” she asked, and he nodded.

“The entailment, it can be broken,” he repeated.

She sighed, her thoughts returning to their earlier conversation. “Breaking the entailment requires money, which we do not have. Mr Bingley could have helped us, and would have, but this is one of the reasons his friend Mr Darcy warned him off Jane. He thought Jane would use him for his money. We found this out some time later by way of a friend who spoke to someone with knowledge of the situation.”

Georgie was aghast. “How did this Mr Darcy come to such a conclusion without ever meeting your sister? Besides, family ought to help one another. If I were a rich man, I would help my wife’s family without question.”

Elizabeth felt a tenderness spread through her at his words. He was so earnest, so genuine. “You are a better man than both Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley, it seems.”

At that moment, they were interrupted by her father, who entered the library. He glanced between Elizabeth and Georgie.

“Ah, there you are, Georgie. How did the milking go? Did Maisie cooperate?” he asked with a hint of jest in his voice.

“I told him you tricked him,” Elizabeth said, and Mr Bennet shrugged.

“Ah, Elizabeth. Must you ruin my little bit of fun?” He grew serious then and turned to Georgie. “I do beg your pardon if you were upset. I meant to lighten the mood.”

“It is quite alright,” Georgie replied. “I hope you do not mind, your daughter was

kind enough to let me look at your books.”

“Of course not. I hope you are finding our library to your satisfaction, Georgie.”

Georgie smiled politely. “Indeed, Mr Bennet. It is a wonderful collection.”

“We have discovered Georgie can read French and he is quite knowledgeable when it comes to estate law and entailments,” Elizabeth informed her father.

Mr Bennet’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he eyed Georgie with renewed interest.

“Is that so?” Mr Bennet said, turning to Georgie.

“It seems so, yes,” he replied, although a little uncertain.

“Well, let us see how much you know,” Mr Bennet said and leaned against his desk, arms crossed. “Can you tell me, what are the requirements for breaking an entailment?”

Georgie nodded. “Indeed, Mr Bennet. For an entailment to be broken, both the tenant in tail and the remainderman must agree. This can be done through a common recovery, which involves a series of legal fictions. Essentially, it allows the tenant in tail to ‘suffer a recovery,’ thereby converting his limited estate into a fee simple.”

Mr Bennet looked impressed. “And what if the remainderman is a minor?”

“In that case,” Georgie replied, “a guardian would need to act on behalf of the minor, but it would require the approval of the Court of Chancery. Additionally, the estate’s income would be taken into consideration to ensure that the minor’s interests are protected.”

“You see, Papa?” Elizabeth said, “Georgie has a keen mind for estate matters.”

Georgie coloured up but smiled back at her. “I suppose I might have been involved in the law or in running an estate.”

Mr Bennet tapped his chin thoughtfully, still appearing quite puzzled. “You certainly have a wealth of knowledge. Tell me, what would be the proper way to handle a dispute over tithes?”

Georgie answered without hesitation. “Disputes over tithes would typically be brought before the ecclesiastical courts. However, if the dispute involves a matter of law or statutory interpretation, it could be escalated to the Court of King’s Bench. Mediation by a neutral third party could also be sought to resolve the issue amicably.”

Mr Bennet’s eyes widened in surprise. “You certainly know your estate law, Georgie. I think you are correct. You may well have been a steward or held a similar position. I now see why my attempts at turning you into a farmer have failed.”

Georgie offered a modest smile, and Elizabeth felt pride for him. “Thank you, sir.”

Mr Bennet nodded, seemingly unaware of the growing connection between Elizabeth and Georgie. “Georgie, would you mind staying and looking at the estate ledger with me? I’m afraid I’ve made a bit of a mess of it, and I’d appreciate your help. Perhaps we can ascertain if you have other skills in this area.”

“I’d be happy to, Mr Bennet,” Georgie replied.

“I will leave you to it,” Elizabeth said quickly, clutching a book to her chest. She slipped out from behind her father’s desk and walked sideways to pass between the two men in the narrow space. As she passed Georgie, their arms briefly touched. She

felt a pleasant shudder go through her, and her cheeks heated. Georgie glanced at her, his eyes softening, and they exchanged a fleeting but telling smile.

Elizabeth left the room, her heart fluttering as she walked down the hallway. For the first time in a long while, she felt a sense of excitement and anticipation.

Elizabeth

10 th February 1812

Elizabeth lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Unfortunately, this was nothing new. For the past fortnight, she had found herself sleepless quite often, her thoughts consumed by Georgie.

The two of them had grown closer these past few days, closer than perhaps they ought. Her father had taken them fishing as she'd promised Georgie—and as expected, he'd turned out to be an excellent fisherman. In addition, he'd shown himself a capable hunter and knowledgeable when it came to the various trees and around the estate. She'd established this on one of their many walks. Indeed, she had found reasons to spend time with him, primarily by offering to help her father as they attempted to tidy Longbourn's ledgers. Thus, she had found herself spending hours poring over receipts, letters from tenants, and bills to match them to the ledger.

It was not that her father was a bad landowner, but since his previous steward had retired, he had taken care of the ledger himself—and to say he did not have a system in place was an understatement. Mr Cook, his new steward was tackling the more recent transactions, but her father had felt it was his duty to sort out his own mess, rather than give the man extra work. Georgie had proven himself capable of sorting through the ledger, though much of the time they spent working together was taken up by conversation unrelated to the task at hand.

Georgie had a wonderful sense of humour and they shared a similar taste in literature. Likewise, they bonded over their shared love of sweet foods and just yesterday they

had compiled a list of the perfect puddings. She smiled as she thought of it now. Georgie was a delightful man, and she found him entering her thoughts many times throughout the day. Yet it was not merely their commonalities that occupied her, there was another question that bothered her.

Who was he really? The question had been gnawing at her since his arrival, but more and more, she found herself worrying about what would happen if he recovered his memory and left. Or if he never remembered anything at all. His life would have to go on one way or another and soon it would lead him away from Longbourn, that she knew—and dreaded.

Chiding herself, Elizabeth rolled over and sighed. No good could come from these thoughts. It was foolish to dwell on someone whose past was a mystery, someone who would disappear from her life as quickly as he had arrived.

She pulled the blanket up to her chin, shivering. The room was cold, the February chill seeping through the walls. Elizabeth groaned, aware she would not get any rest. She would need to stoke the fire in her room if she had any hope of getting warm.

Thus, she swung her feet out of bed, wincing as the icy floor bit at her toes. Wrapping a shawl around her shoulders, she walked towards the fireplace, glancing out of the window as she passed. The glass was frosted over, delicate patterns of ice making it difficult to see outside. She rubbed a small circle clear and peered through.

To her surprise, she saw Georgie sitting on a bench in the garden, bathed in the cold, silvery light of the moon. He was hunched over. What was he doing out there at this hour?

Curiosity and concern propelled her into action. She quickly donned her thickest redingote, picked up her woollen shawl, and slipped on her boots.

As she made her way through the silent house and out into the garden, the cold air stole her breath, and she pulled her shawl tighter around her. Outside, her breath became visible at once as she pressed on into the garden. Something had to be wrong if he was sitting alone here in the cold.

When she approached him, he was seated with his legs pulled up on the bench, his arms crossed on his knees, and his head pointed skyward. She cleared her throat to announce herself, so as not to startle him.

He looked up at once and rose to his feet. “Elizabeth, is something the matter?”

“No, nothing. I could not sleep. I happened to look out of the window and saw you, so I thought I would ask if something was the matter with you.”

He smiled, and inside, her heart leaped. “It seems we are both sleepless tonight. What kept you up?”

She took a deep breath. “Well, it started with my missing my sister, as per usual. Jane and I have always been so close, and now that she is in London for a few weeks, I miss her terribly. Then it occurred to me that it is Mary’s birthday next week, and I have not got her a present yet. And then my thoughts simply wandered to the past family celebrations...” She shrugged, leaving out the part where she had spent a long while thinking about nothing but him. “You?”

“I do wish that I could be kept awake by thoughts of my past. Although, in a way, I am. I am kept awake imagining what my past might have been like.”

“I beg your pardon, it was insensitive of me to talk about my past when you...” She waved her hand.

“Please, you need not apologise. My lack of memories does not constitute a need for

you to suppress yours. Anyhow, I have found that not knowing who I am allows my imagination to run rather wild. For instance, I just imagined myself a member of the royal family, staring at the starry sky at Whitehall, thinking that all of this could be mine one day.” He chuckled, and she found herself giggling as well.

“I suppose there is something to be said about being able to make up one’s past. Although I do not think I should like to be a member of the royal family. There is too much scrutiny attached to it. Besides, if you look at our not too long-ago history, women do not always fare well.”

“Indeed, I think that could be said about the current royal family and its women,” he said and scoffed. “You see? I know things about our royal family, but nothing about my own.” He pressed his lips together, and she noticed a subtle change in his demeanour.

“You seem troubled, Georgie. Are you certain there is nothing else keeping you awake?” she asked, knowing that she should not pry into his personal matters, but unable to help herself.

“There is. I have flashes of memories. I cannot explain it. Perhaps they are not even memories, for they do not tell me anything about who I was. For instance, when I first woke up, I looked at your dressing table, and suddenly recalled seeing a similar table, but neat and tidy, with carefully arranged pots and brushes all in rows...”

A giggle escaped her. “So not mine at all. Mine is always rather in disarray.”

“I noticed,” he replied with a warm smile. “It was not yours, but I do not know whose it was. Then another day, I saw the image of a young woman with blonde hair, skipping away from me.”

She straightened at this, pulling her shoulders back and holding her head high. Why

was she alarmed at the mention of his remembering a woman? Surely, there were all manner of women in his past—mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and yes, perhaps someone more romantic as well. It should not bother her, yet it did.

“Do you know who she was?” she asked.

He shrugged and buried his hands in his pockets. “No. I had thought perhaps a sister, but I cannot know. I wish I did.”

Elizabeth shivered as a gust of wind whipped through the garden. Instantly, he took a step towards her.

“You are not dressed for being out of doors,” he said, and offered his coat, placing it carefully around her shoulders. His nearness sent a warm shiver through her, and she looked up at him. Momentarily, their eyes met, and she felt his breath rush across her cheeks.

“Now you will be cold,” she said breathlessly.

“I do not mind. Now that you are more comfortable, will you sit with me?”

“Perhaps we ought to sit over yonder, near the stable, it may offer us some shelter,” she said although she had to admit his warm coat had already improved her condition, though she worried now about his. He gave a nod and together, they made their way to the stable and took their seats on a bench where the grooms usually took their lunches. Once settled, he turned to her.

“Pray, if you could be anything or anyone, what would you be?” he asked and took a step away from her.

Elizabeth was aware how irregular it was to be sitting outside alone with him, but she

could not bring herself to care. There was nowhere she would rather be in this moment.

“If I could be anything, I imagine I would be a sailor. I would like to see the world. When we visit London, I love visiting the shops with spices and teas and herbs I have never seen before, languages that I cannot read, people who have the most wondrous stories to tell about life in faraway lands. I would love to see those lands. If I could, I would visit them all.”

“That sounds enticing. I imagine I have never been to any of those faraway lands either. Even if I was a member of the royal family, it seems unlikely I would have travelled that far. There is some appeal to it, these faraway lands. It does not matter that I do not remember who I was. I could be anyone. We both could.” He tapped her arm with his elbow in a conspiratorial manner. “We could visit one of these faraway lands together. We could go right now. We could run away to the seaside, board a ship and see where it takes us.” He said this with a glint of longing in his eyes.

“Ah, but then who would strain to milk already milked cows to provide amusement for my father?” she said and he let out a burst of laughter.

“That is true,” he said before growing serious again. “If you could visit any country in the world, where would you go first?”

Elizabeth thought for a moment, then smiled. “I think I would visit Italy. My friend Charlotte, the one who is now married to my cousin, once travelled there and told the most wonderful stories about it. She described the beauty of the countryside, the history that seemed to linger in every corner, and the friendliness of the people.”

Georgie nodded enthusiastically. “Italy sounds splendid. One of the books I found in your father’s library is set in Rome. The descriptions were so vivid, I almost felt as if I were walking through the ancient streets myself. I wish I could see Rome. Perhaps I

did at some point...”

Elizabeth hesitated, watching him carefully. His gaze was far away, lost in the possibility of memories just out of reach. She took a deep breath and asked a question that had been gnawing at her. “Georgie, do you think you might be married?” They’d briefly spoken about this topic once before but never in detail, and never with as much tension in the air between them.

He was taken aback, and so was she for having asked it. The silence that followed seemed to thicken the air around them. Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I am sorry, I should not have asked that.”

Georgie shook his head, his expression thoughtful. “No, you were right to ask. I do wonder about it myself, but... I do not think so. Because...” He paused, shaking his head as if trying to dislodge a stubborn thought.

Elizabeth leaned in slightly, her curiosity piqued. “What is it you want to say?”

He hesitated again, then looked into her eyes, his gaze intense. “I hope I do not have a wife because I have grown rather fond of another young lady, and it would make things rather awkward.”

Elizabeth felt a rush of heat despite the cold night air. She wondered if she was the young lady that he spoke of, and the way he looked at her made her believe it might be so. Though perhaps she was mistaken. She felt suddenly awkward and giggled nervously. “Yes, it would indeed make things a bit strange.”

Georgie nodded, taking a step back as if sensing her discomfort. “I should not have said that. It is not fair. I am not even sure why I said it.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the tension between them palpable. Finally,

Elizabeth stood up, shrugged off his coat and instantly shivered again.

“It is cold, and I need to go inside,” she said, handing him back his coat.

He rose at once, taking his coat though as he did, their hands touched, she gasped at the spark she felt, and he jerked his hand away, clearly feeling the same.

In that moment, it became clear to her that he had been talking about her. She had suspected it of course; it had been almost too clear but she had not been certain. Now she was. And she did not know how to react or what to say. Thus, she rushed back to the house, more confused than ever, her heart pounding so hard she felt it in her blood.

Darcy

Georgie watched Elizabeth retreat to the house, the lingering sensation of her touch on his hand slowly dissipating in the cold night air. He chided himself for making her uncomfortable, uncertain why he had spoken so openly. It was true—he felt an immense sense of comfort around her. It was always a delight to be near her, and she was undoubtedly very beautiful. His thoughts often wandered to her throughout the day, and he found himself instinctively searching for her when he entered the house, feeling a sense of relief and happiness when he saw her.

But he hadn't allowed himself to truly examine these feelings before. There was no denying it now—he cared for her deeply. However, he knew he couldn't let his heart lead him astray. She was correct, he might be married. The blonde woman in his fleeting memories could easily be a wife rather than a sister.

“No,” he told himself firmly. “I must forget these silly feelings.”

Yet, as he slipped his coat back on, the lingering scent of Elizabeth enveloped him. It was a delicate blend of lavender and something sweet, like fresh honeysuckle. The scent was intoxicating, and it stirred a deep yearning within him. He couldn't help but wish he could hold her, feel her warmth against him, and breathe in her scent more fully. The conflict within him grew sharper as he tried to push aside his feelings, but the sweet, familiar fragrance kept pulling him back to thoughts of her.

The next day, Georgie found himself in the study with Mr Bennet. They were deep in

discussion about a matter involving the allocation of funds for the autumn harvest, whilst it was not even early spring, these matters had to be taken into consideration even before the crops were sown—Mr Bennet was concerned about the costs of hiring additional workers versus the potential increase in yield—when Georgie spotted Elizabeth walking past the window. Immediately, his lips curled into a smile which she returned. He let out a sigh of relief because the truth was, he had worried that their intimate conversation the previous night might have caused strain between them. However, his fears appeared to have been unfounded.

For a moment, Georgie was lost in thought, wondering what Elizabeth was doing and if he might find a reason to speak with her later. Perhaps he could suggest another walk, they had enjoyed several pleasant strolls together recently. The idea filled him with a quiet anticipation.

“Mr Cook suggested we might divert some of the funds from the livestock budget to cover the extra labour costs,” Mr Bennet said, pulling Georgie back to the present.

“Yes, that could work,” Georgie replied, forcing his focus back on the ledger. “We could offset the decrease in the livestock budget by selling off some of the older cattle. They aren’t as productive, and this would help balance the books.”

“Excellent suggestion,” Mr Bennet said, nodding approvingly. “You’ve a keen eye for these matters, Georgie.”

Georgie tried to suppress the swell of pride he felt. “Thank you, sir.”

Yet, as Mr Bennet continued talking about crop rotation and soil fertility, Georgie’s mind drifted back to Elizabeth. He reminded himself firmly that he needed to stop thinking of her like this. His feelings were misplaced, given his uncertain past and the potential ramifications of any relationship between them. The memory of last night’s conversation and the lingering memory of their brief touch haunted him, but he

steeled himself to concentrate on the task at hand.

He managed to focus for the rest of the morning, though found himself in Elizabeth's presence sooner than expected when he stepped outside to enjoy a cup of tea on the bench outside the house. The weather was milder than it had been, and he wished to enjoy the warmth of the sun while he could.

Fate, it appeared, had other plans. Georgie stepped outside to find Elizabeth standing with a letter in her hand. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she read, and he kept his distance so as not to startle her, though he didn't need to wait too long before she sensed his presence and looked up.

"Oh, I did not see you. I was engrossed in my letter from Jane."

"Is she well?" he asked. He'd missed the older Miss Bennet's presence. She had a calming air about her, and Elizabeth appeared much more relaxed when her older sister was nearby.

Elizabeth sighed. "Yes, she is. But something is troubling her."

He tilted his head in concern. "What is it?"

She looked towards the house before walking closer to him and dropping her voice. "Jane has found out that Mr Bingley is still in London," she said.

Georgie frowned. "I thought he would have gone back to Sheffield by now."

Elizabeth paused, her eyes narrowing slightly. "How did you know Mr Bingley was from Sheffield? Or that he was going there?"

Georgie hesitated, a flicker of panic crossing his mind. How did he know that? He

didn't know this Bingley, nor that he was from Sheffield. So how? Determined not to let her see his confusion, he shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant despite these unsettling thoughts. "You must have mentioned it."

"I must have. The truth is, I also thought he would have returned north by now." Elizabeth seemed to accept this explanation and continued. "In any case, this news has greatly upset Jane. She wishes to leave London, but at the same time does not want to return here yet. I have a mind to join her in Town to make her more comfortable."

Georgie was taken aback, his heart sinking at the thought of Elizabeth leaving. "Oh, no!"

Elizabeth smiled at him, a knowing look in her eyes as a brief silence stretched between them.

Realising how his words could be interpreted, he quickly corrected himself. "I meant, it's sad that Jane is so upset."

Elizabeth chuckled softly. "For a moment, I thought you were upset that I might be going to London."

He smiled, aware of the truth behind her jest. "I won't deny that I enjoy your company and would feel deprived without it."

Internally, Georgie felt a pang of guilt. He had grown so fond of Elizabeth, perhaps more than he should have allowed himself. Every moment spent with her felt like a gift, and the mere thought of her absence was intolerable. But he knew he couldn't let his feelings show. Not with the uncertainty of his own past.

"Well, I have not yet decided. I cannot leave anytime soon because my father also

received a letter—from Mr Collins. You may remember him.”

“Your cousin, the heir to Longbourn,” he said, recalling a mention of this man.

“Indeed, he and his wife Charlotte are coming to Longbourn in a fortnight. I was due to call on them but since I did not, they’ve decided to come here instead. Not just to see me, of course, but to visit her family, the Lucases. Though I suspect he wishes to keep an eye on the estate to see how well it is doing, seeing how it will be in his grip one day.” He heard the bitterness in her tone and felt dreadful for her. It had to be awful to know that one’s home would be taken away one day.

“Mr Wickham? Mr George Wickham?” somebody called and it took him a moment to remember they were looking for him. He spun and raised a hand.

“I am he,” he said, though it sounded just as wrong as it had when he’d first been referred to as such.

“Mr Wickham,” he said, nodding politely. “Mr Foxworthy, the constable, sent me. Would you come with me to the constabulary? There’s a woman there who says she might know you.”

Georgie saw Elizabeth pale beside him, her hand instinctively gripping the letter tighter. The ground appeared to shift beneath him as he gulped down air.

“Who is she?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

The man replied, “She thinks she’s your wife.”

Georgie’s stomach dropped. His heart pounded, and his thoughts immediately went to Elizabeth. She smiled, but she was pale and her eyes looked glassy, as if she might cry.

As for him, the idea of having a wife out there, someone who might claim him, was unsettling, even though he knew he should be happy that somebody recognised him.

“How wonderful,” Elizabeth said, but the thickness in her tone betrayed her true feelings. “You should go. I hope everything turns out well for you, Georgie.” She turned and made for the house.

“Elizabeth, wait—” he called after her, but she was already near the front door, her back turned to him.

Georgie watched her retreating figure, feeling a knot of confusion and sorrow tighten in his chest. He didn’t want to follow the man to the constabulary, didn’t want to face the potential truth waiting for him. But he had no choice. Taking a deep breath, he nodded to the man and followed, his mind a whirlwind.

He was married.

The thought was like a dagger to his heart. That in turn, made him feel rotten inside. This woman, this wife, had to have worried for weeks now over his wellbeing. He’d been with the Bennets for three weeks now, three weeks this woman had fretted over him. And here he was, upset that she had come for him. What if he had children? They’d have been missing their father. How awful a human was he to begrudge this poor woman coming for him, when she was where he belonged.

By Jove, he had to have loved her if he’d married her, surely!

Although, how could he, when he felt such romantic affections for another? It was as if the moment he opened his eyes and saw Elizabeth, he had begun the inevitable process of falling for her. Had he betrayed a beloved wife with these feelings? It was sickening. All of it. Sickening.

The constabulary was a few miles away, and the journey felt both too short and unbearably long. The previous clear weather had gone as if echoing his mood, and now the skies were leaden grey, the landscape was bleak, the bare trees standing like silent sentinels along the road. His thoughts churned as he neared the small brick building of the constabulary.

He stopped right outside the door, taking a deep breath while the messenger headed in to announce his arrival. Through the window, he saw flickers from the candles and the fireplace. A figure moved—the constable? Or his wife?

For a moment, he considered turning back. But he knew he couldn't. He had to face whatever awaited him inside. Steeling himself, he stepped forward and knocked to announce his entry.

“Hello? Foxworthy?”

The interior of the constabulary was warm and smelled of wood and tallow candles. A large desk dominated the room, with a few chairs scattered about for visitors. The messenger pushed past Georgie on his way out, while Mr Foxworthy headed his way.

“Ah, Mr Wickham—or so we've called you thus far,” the constable said, standing up. “Thank you for coming so swiftly. We've had a woman come from Barnet. She saw the notice in the Hertfordshire Mercury about a man found near Meryton and thought you might be her husband.”

Georgie's heart pounded in his chest. “Her husband? Right. I see.” The words stuck in his throat like gruel that hadn't gone down right.

“Yes,” Foxworthy replied. “The woman is quite desperate. Her husband went missing

about two months ago after a night of drinking at a tavern.”

Drinking in a tavern. He wondered if that was something he’d be doing. He hadn’t a taste for spirits other than the occasional brandy he shared with Mr Bennet after a long day.

Georgie swallowed hard, his mouth dry. “What was the man’s name? It’s not Wickham, I take it,” he asked, bracing himself. He expected that once he knew his real name, memories would flood back. The name Wickham had never felt right to him.

The constable chuckled. “Nah, it wasn’t Wickham. It seems your name is Brandon, Alexander Brandon.”

“Alexander Brandon,” he said, trying out the name. It felt as foreign as Wickham, although it didn’t have the same bitter aftertaste as his current moniker did.

“Sound familiar?” Foxworthy asked expectantly but Georgie shook his head.

“No, not at all.” Indeed, there was no recognition, no flicker of memory. “And the woman?” he asked.

“Her name is Annabelle,” Foxworthy said. “Still nothing?”

Georgie shook his head. “No, nothing.”

Constable Foxworthy’s expression was one of disappointment, but he led Georgie further inside, confident that seeing the woman might trigger his memory. The narrow hallway was dimly lit, the smell of the pigsty outside seeping through the walls, mingling with the scent of musty paper and tallow.

As they approached a small room at the back, Georgie's steps grew heavier. The door was slightly ajar, and through the crack, he saw a woman sitting inside. She was facing away from him, her posture tense and anxious.

Constable Foxworthy pushed the door open and announced, "Mrs Brandon, I've brought you your husband, or so I hope."

The woman stood up and turned to face them. Georgie's breath caught in his throat. She was blonde, just like the woman in his fragmented memory, though not as tall he thought. Not as slender. But then he noticed her rounded belly. She was pregnant.

The room spun, and Georgie felt as if the floor might give way beneath him. This woman, who might be his wife, was carrying a child. His child. His heart raced, and a wave of nausea washed over him as he struggled to make sense of the emotions and confusion swirling within him.

The woman's eyes filled with tears as she looked at Georgie, but he felt nothing but a deep, unsettling void. Georgie stood frozen, his heart pounding in his chest as the blonde woman's eyes filled with tears. Constable Foxworthy spoke first, his tone gentle but firm.

"Mrs Brandon, your husband's memory is entirely wiped out, but perhaps if you—"

The woman shook her head, her tears spilling over. "No," she said. "This isn't my husband."

Constable Foxworthy was taken aback. "Please, look again. Maybe he looks different. He might have lost weight—"

"No," she interrupted, despite the tears. "My husband is much shorter and rounder. His hair is lighter. I know what my husband looks like, Constable." Her voice broke,

and she sobbed, “I hoped so much he was the one, because... because I’ve been told my husband ran away with another woman. He left me, our four children, and I have another on the way. I’d rather believe he’d lost his memory than face the truth that he abandoned us. It seems now I must.”

Georgie felt a deep pang of guilt and sorrow. “I- I wish I could help, madam,” he stammered, his words feeling hollow.

The woman shook her head, tears streaming down her face. “No, I knew it might not be him. I just... I hoped...” She couldn’t finish her sentence, turning and leaving the room in tears.

Georgie was shaken to his core as he faced Mr Foxworthy. “Thank you for trying.”

Constable Foxworthy nodded, his expression sympathetic. “We’ll keep looking. I’ll do what I can. We have notices in the Hertfordshire newspapers, I’ve been in touch with the constabularies of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, but thus far, no one has reported a missing person who matches your description.”

Georgie left the constabulary, the weight of the encounter pressing heavily on his shoulders. As he walked back to Longbourn, he saw Mrs Brandon board a carriage and drive away, her face buried in her hands. He was deeply sorry for the woman and her plight, but he couldn’t deny the surge of relief that coursed through him. He wasn’t married. At least not to this woman. Perhaps to no woman. Even if he was, he might never be found. With each passing day, it seemed that he was doomed to be a man without a past.

Although the longer he lived in this void, the more he had begun to consider it a blessing. Maybe he could start over. He could be the man he wanted to be, make himself into the man he wished to be—with the woman he adored at his side. He wasn’t sure how a courtship could work between them—given he did not know his

status, he could be a prince or a pauper. However, Elizabeth's father was a good man, one who seemed disinclined to care little of what society thought of him, so perhaps Mr Bennet would allow him to court his daughter.

Determination welled up within him as he neared Longbourn. He knew now what he had to do. He had to tell Elizabeth how he really felt. The uncertainty of his past and future no longer mattered. Living through these last few minutes with the thought of having what he had with Elizabeth snatched away had woken him up from his uncertainty. It didn't matter who he had been. What mattered was the present, and in the present, he had fallen in love with Elizabeth Bennet.

Page 16

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Elizabeth

Elizabeth paced the halls of Longbourn, her heart heavy with uncertainty. Was Georgie in the arms of his wife at this very moment? Had he already forgotten about her?

As she turned another corner, she nearly collided with her father.

“Elizabeth, what has you in such a state?” Mr Bennet asked, his brows furrowed with concern.

“It’s Georgie,” she began. “A woman came to the constabulary claiming he was her husband.”

Mr Bennet’s eyes widened slightly. “Well, that is wonderful if he is identified,” he said. “Why are you so solemn? You’ve been so close to him, I thought you’d want Georgie to find out who he is.”

Mrs Bennet joined them, her curiosity piqued by the conversation. “What’s this about Georgie?” she asked.

Mr Bennet explained, and Mrs Bennet’s expression shifted from surprise to a mix of relief and disappointment. “Oh, it would be a shame to lose him when he’s been so helpful with the estate,” she lamented.

Mr Bennet chuckled, shaking his head. “You were the one against having him here in the first place, thinking he was some sort of runaway up to no good.”

“Well, how was I to know he’d turn out to be so useful?” Mrs Bennet retorted. “But imagine the scandal if he turned out to be some ne’er-do-well!”

“Mrs Bennet, you are bound to give me a stiff neck with this constant back and forth. One second you are sad he is leaving, then you think he was a ne’er-do-well after all. Which is it?”

Elizabeth listened to their banter, feeling a dreadful weight in her chest. The thought of Georgie having a wife filled her with despair. She could feel the tears prickling, and she turned away, hoping to hide her distress.

Mr Bennet noticed her sudden silence. “Elizabeth, what is the matter? Mrs Bennet, our daughter seems rather upset at the prospect of finding out who our Georgie is.”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I am pleased, that is all. I am so happy for him,” she forced the words out, though feared they might choke her. Wishing to avoid further debate, she rushed away, unable to bear the conversation any longer.

As she left she heard her mother chastising her father, “Really, Mr Bennet, how can you be so blind? It is clear how much Elizabeth cares for the man.”

“Perhaps,” Mr Bennet mused, “but we cannot have one of our daughters mooning over a man without memory. It is for the best, I suppose that he has been found.”

Elizabeth dashed outside, the cold air hitting her face like a splash of water. Tears welled up in her eyes as she wandered into the garden, the weight of her unspoken feelings pressing heavily on her. How silly had she been to allow herself to lose her heart to a man with a wife, with a life she did not know about, a life that might have already been full of love and affection. What a fool she was.

“Elizabeth!” Georgie’s voice suddenly broke through her contemplation and she

looked up. “Elizabeth!” he shouted, now running her way.

Elizabeth spun around and fell into a dash as she made her way towards him. Why was he here again, and alone? Hope flickered inside her, though she knew it was foolish to allow this. “Georgie, I—”

“It was not her,” he interrupted, his breath coming in quick puffs from his run. “The woman did not know me, and I did not know her.”

A wave of immense relief washed over Elizabeth, and she could not help but feel a smile tug at her lips. Her heart felt as if it might burst from her chest. “Oh, Georgie,” she said, then quickly added, “I am sorry for feeling relieved. You must be so upset now.”

He shook his head, stepping closer. “I am not upset. In fact, I felt relieved when I realised the woman did not know me. Because while my mind cannot remember a thing about my past life, my heart knows one thing with certainty—I admire you, Elizabeth.”

Her breath caught, and she looked up at him with wide eyes. His admission sent a shiver down her spine, and she felt an overwhelming mix of emotions—joy, fear, hope.

“I feel the same way,” she admitted. “But it’s foolish and silly. We have only known each other for a few weeks. And this woman... she might not have been your wife, but another might be. What if you are married already?”

He took her hands in his, his touch reassuring. “I might be. Or I might not. What if I am a pauper? Or rich?” he replied, his eyes locked onto hers. The intensity of his gaze made her knees weak, and she had to steady herself by gripping his hands tighter.

Elizabeth's heart wanted nothing more than to agree with him, but her mind raced with the potential complications. What if he had a family? What if he turned out to be someone entirely different from the man she had grown to care for?

She clung to him, her heart pounding. "It's all so uncertain," she whispered. The thought of losing him now, after realising her feelings, was unbearable.

Georgie tightened his grip on her hands, his presence a balm to her frayed nerves. "Yes, it is. But right now, what I feel for you is the only thing that feels certain."

Elizabeth felt the tears of relief and happiness streaming down her cheeks. "Then let us hold on to that certainty, no matter what the future holds. But my parents will not agree to us..." she looked down and raised her eyes gingerly, "courting."

"I know it. But perhaps we can enjoy one another's company as we have until now, in private. We need not tell them anything just yet. If something else is uncovered."

She nodded, dreading the idea of sneaking around but also worried what her parents might say if she told them she wished to be with Georgie, her father's words still ringing in her mind.

"Let us take time to get to know one another, away from prying eyes," she said. "And we will see where time takes us."

"I wholeheartedly agree, Elizabeth," he said, holding her hand tighter.

They stood there, holding on to each other, caught between delirious happiness and the terrifying uncertainty of what lay ahead. Elizabeth felt a warmth spread through her as she leaned into him, drawing strength from his solid presence. She knew that whatever challenges lay ahead, they would face them together. And for now, that was enough.

Elizabeth

25 th February 1812

Elizabeth stood in her chamber, glancing out of the window as the late afternoon sun cast a warm, golden glow through the lace curtains. Her eyes fell on the garden below, where Georgie stood in conversation with Mary. A soft smile tugged at her lips as she watched him, her heart swelling with a blend of joy and longing.

A fortnight had passed since she and Georgie had confessed their love for one another. Nobody knew of their secret, though she understood her parents suspected as much, based on what she had overheard that dreadful day she thought she had lost Georgie forever.

They had kept their romance quite secret, carrying on as they always had. During the day, they worked together in her father's study. Sometimes, Georgie went on errands in town for her father, and she would find a reason to accompany him. At night, they found one another in the garden or in the drawing room when everyone else was asleep. It gave her a thrill, yet she worried still. Georgie continued to see flashes now and then of people from his past, but he did not know their names nor could he figure out who they were to him.

After a few moments, Elizabeth turned from the window, crossing the room to her polished wooden writing desk. The faint scent of lavender filled the air, a scent that always reminded her of her sister. Oh Jane, how she missed her. Her older sister was the only person she'd entrusted with her secret romance, and she'd supported her decision not to tell their parents in her reply. Elizabeth had been tardy in crafting her

response, too caught up had she been in the bliss of her romance. How, however, she had to sit down and reply, lest too much time pass. Besides, she had much to share with her sister, wishing only she could do it in person rather than by letter.

She took a deep breath, seated herself, and dipped her quill into the inkwell, her thoughts focused on the letter she was about to write.

My dearest Jane,

It has been a fortnight since my last letter, and I am so pleased to have received yours in reply. I wish you were here with me so I could share with you what is in my heart and on my mind, for my heart is anything but calm. As you know, Georgie and I have been meeting in secret, stealing precious moments together, which I must conceal from our family. I find solace in pouring out my thoughts to you, dearest Jane, for you have always been my confidante, my pillar of strength.

As I write these words, my hand trembles slightly with the weight of the decisions I am making. I confessed my love for Georgie, and yet, I am tormented by the uncertainties that loom over us. What will become of us if his memory never returns? Will we be condemned to live a clandestine existence forever?

Despite these doubts, I cannot deny the joy he brings into my life. We converse endlessly about literature, about the mysteries of the universe unveiled in the stars above us. Did I tell you in my last letter we've discovered a new pastime? Georgie came across a book about the stars in father's study and it has become a passion for us both. During the day, we talk about the faraway lands on father's globes and at night we nights we study the stars. The evenings spend together, poring over maps of the heavens, learning the names of constellations, feel so perfect and wonderful I cannot imagine how it would feel if I had to part from him and...

A knock sounded, taking her attention away from the letter.

“They are here,” Kitty called through a crack in the door.

Elizabeth slipped the letter into the drawer, making sure not to smudge the still-wet ink and rose, smoothing down her dress.

“I’ll come down with you, Kitty,” she said and followed her sister down the stairs where she was greeted by the smiling faces of her cousin, Mr Collins, and her dear friend Charlotte Lucas, now Mrs Collins.

“Charlotte, it has been far too long,” Elizabeth said as she hugged her friend.

“Indeed, it has, Lizzy,” Charlotte replied with a gentle smile. “I have missed our conversations.”

“Ah, Cousin Elizabeth, we must have you visit Hunsford soon,” Mr Collins said, though the idea of visiting them did not sit well with Elizabeth. She’d been relieved when she’d managed to postpone the visit due to Georgie’s arrival, and she couldn’t imagine going now. She wanted to see Charlotte more, of course, but the threat of meeting Mr Darcy at his aunt’s home was too real a possibility to engage in the wish.

“One day,” she said diplomatically and smiled at her father, who ushered the guests into the drawing room.

“Well,” he said, “You are here for now, we will make the best of that.”

“My dear Mr Bennet, it is an absolute pleasure to be here at Longbourn once again. And Mrs Bennet, I must commend you on the hospitality of your charming household.”

“Thank you, Mr Collins,” Mr Bennet replied dryly, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “We are always delighted to have you.”

“Hill!” Mrs Bennet bellowed at the housekeeper who bustled in with a tray of tea, in due haste. “Please, everyone, make yourselves comfortable. Let me pour everyone a cup of tea.” Elizabeth watched her mother with great care. She carried herself with poise, which surprised Elizabeth, for these past few days she had been rather upset and fallen victim to her ever-vexing nerves at the prospect of seeing Mr Collins, who stood to put them all out of Longbourn when he inherited. One would never know it now, of course, as she was the image of the perfect hostess.

Charlotte settled into a chair, and as Mrs Bennet poured the tea, she asked, “When might we meet the handsome stranger I’ve heard so much about?” She cast a knowing glance at Elizabeth, who immediately felt a flush rise to her cheeks. She had told Charlotte about Georgie and his striking looks but had refrained from mentioning their burgeoning romance.

“Indeed, I had hoped to have a moment with him so I could counsel him,” Mr Collins said. “My congregants always find my words of advice enlightening.”

“Do you think a sermon might restore his memory?” Lydia said with a chuckle that made Mr Collins colour up with mortification.

“One can never underestimate the Lord’s words, Cousin Lydia,” he replied stiffly.

Mrs Bennet interjected swiftly, “Oh, a family tea is hardly the time to introduce a stranger. Besides, he’s gone into Meryton with Mr Cook for some business. Quite unfortunate timing, but necessary, you see.”

Elizabeth knew well enough that her mother had likely orchestrated this trip to avoid any interactions between Georgie and Mr Collins. Mrs Bennet had made no secret of her disapproval of Elizabeth’s discreet relationship with Georgie, considering it unseemly and fraught with uncertainty.

Charlotte gave Elizabeth a knowing look, her curiosity clearly piqued but she was respectful enough not to press further. “I look forward to it,” she said warmly. “I’ve heard so much about him.”

The family had gathered for tea, and Elizabeth took her seat across from her father. It was a rather advantageous position because, with Mr Collins facing in the opposite direction, she could see her father rolling his eyes whenever Mr Collins made one of his ridiculous comments.

“Yes, dear cousin,” Mr Collins said, addressing a question posed by Mary, “I intend to make these visits more frequent. As my patroness says, as the future owner of Longbourn, I must ensure that the estate is in the best shape possible so that once I take ownership—” He paused then and bent towards Elizabeth’s father. “—which I hope will not happen until I myself am a very old man, naturally,” he said with a chuckle. “But anyhow, I must make sure it is in the best state possible.”

Beside her, Elizabeth’s mother grumbled under her breath. “It might’ve been prevented altogether if not for Mr Darcy and the dreadful sisters...”

She, like Elizabeth, had made Mr Darcy, this unknown entity, into the real villain of the story. Of course, Mr Bingley did not come far behind, for her mother disliked him almost in equal measure, since he had dashed her hopes of Jane marrying well and saving them from falling into the hands of Mr Collins. However, it was always easier to hate somebody whom one had never met.

“What’s this?” Mr Collins looked up with a smile. “Did you mention Mr Darcy? I did not know that you were familiar with the gentleman.”

“William,” Charlotte interjected, “do you not recall, Mr Darcy is intimately familiar with Mr Bingley? His cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, spoke of it when—”

“Ah, that is correct,” Mr Collins interrupted sharply. “Most unfortunate situation. If only I had known that our dear Jane was looking to be betrothed, I might have interceded. While I have yet to meet the man, from what I gather, Mr Darcy has a sharp mind and a keen sense of observation, so if he thought that dear Jane and Mr Bingley were an ill fit, I must trust his judgement. The entire family is, of course, known for their astute reflections. Nothing escapes Lady Catherine’s scrutiny, for instance.”

“I do not see how Mr Darcy could observe or assess any situation, given he was never present to do so,” Elizabeth said, sharper than intended. Any other man might have been offended by her tone, but her hopeless cousin was entirely unaware of the upset he had caused.

“Well, someone truly accomplished and intelligent can put the pieces together without necessarily having to observe them. My patroness, for example, can solve intricate troubles arising on her estate without ever having to meet the people involved. That is greatness, Cousin Elizabeth, that is true greatness.”

Then he sighed, and just as Mr Bennet was about to steer the conversation in another direction, Mr Collins continued, “It is most unfortunate that Mr Darcy seems to have so little regard for my dear patroness of late, as he has not replied to her letters. It is quite unlike him.”

“I imagine a gentleman such as himself is very busy,” Mary said and Elizabeth glanced at her sister. She was not usually one to insert herself into any type of conversation, but Elizabeth suspected that a part of her poor sister still held onto the affection she had inexplicably held for Mr Collins during his last visit. Indeed, Elizabeth was certain that after she had rejected Mr Collins’ proposal, Mary had hoped to make herself Mrs Collins. What a poor match it would have been, though she imagined it would have saved Charlotte a great deal of trouble and likely made her a bit happier.

“The last I heard,” Charlotte said. “Mr Darcy was traveling to Town and then back north on business,” she added, glancing at Elizabeth again.

“My dear wife is quite correct,” he replied. “I am certain he will soon grace us with a visit. For the time being Lady Catherine is most concerned with the well-being of her estate. Such dedication is truly admirable.”

Elizabeth caught her father’s eye and rolled her eyes subtly, eliciting a small, amused smile from him. The rest of the conversation continued in a similar vein, with Mr Collins extolling the virtues of Lady Catherine and occasionally dropping hints about the future of Longbourn. Elizabeth endured it with practiced patience, her mind wandering to thoughts of Georgie.

Finally, the long visit drew to a close, and as the guests departed, Elizabeth felt a mixture of relief and anticipation. She returned to her room to finish her letter to Jane, pouring her heart into every word, finding solace in the act of writing. She knew that whatever the future held, she would face it with courage, buoyed by the love she had found in Georgie and the support of her beloved sister Jane.

When Elizabeth finished her letter, she felt a renewed sense of determination. She sealed it with a steady hand, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead. The path before her might be uncertain, but with Georgie by her side and Jane’s unwavering support, she knew she could navigate it with grace and strength.

Elizabeth

“And then he brought up Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said with a prolonged sigh later that evening as she and Georgie walked the quiet road leading to Oak Mount.

“That Mr Darcy,” Georgie said. “The one who separated your sister from Mr Bingley?”

“The very one. You see, he is the nephew of Lady Catherine.”

“Ah, yes,” he said and snapped his fingers. “I do recall you telling me that.”

“It seems he has now abandoned his fiancée-to-be, according to Mr Collins. Lady Catherine’s daughter. She is to marry him.”

“He is to marry his cousin?” Georgie said, and Elizabeth nodded.

“I suppose nobody else will have him. Although it seems he does not want to have her either, since he appears to have avoided coming to visit the family. But he shall have to visit soon,” she said, turning on the path as Mr Collins’s voice echoed in her mind once more. As dreadful as the afternoon had been, at least she had been able to use her cousin’s endless ramblings to entertain Georgie by imitating her cousin for the better part of their walk.

“They are to be graced by the arrival of Miss Georgiana Darcy, Darcy’s sister, who is apparently the epitome of refinement. One can only hope that the poor dear does not have as poor a personality as Mr Darcy does,” she said and chuckled. However,

Georgie did not respond with a chuckle as he had earlier. In fact, he looked at her with narrowed eyes.

“Georgiana Darcy?” he said, and his tone gave her pause.

“Does that name mean something to you?”

“No, it does not. For a moment, I thought perhaps it would, but it must simply be because Georgiana and Georgie are similar. But no. No images have appeared or anything of the sort.”

“Well, in time,” Elizabeth started, but Georgie shook his head.

“But what if I never remember? We cannot continue to assume that one day my memory might suddenly return. We cannot live in limbo either. Elizabeth,” he said, and took her hands in his. “These last two weeks with you have been wonderful. But I hate having to sneak away for time with you. Besides, your parents must know. I see the way your mother looks at me. She knows.”

Elizabeth could not deny this. It was easy to dismiss Mrs Bennet as overbearing, self-involved and an awful gabster. These assessments were not kind, though they were true. On the other hand, she was also a very perceptive and protective mother. Elizabeth had noted the way her mother looked at them as well, one eyebrow seemingly always raised.

“I understand. Perhaps we should speak to them, what do you think? I do not like hiding either. It gave me a thrill at first but I do always worry that someone will see us together and deduce that we are more than friends now,” she said, admitting it at last.

He wetted his lips. “Elizabeth, I do wish to speak to your parents. I wish to tell them

what I have told you—that I admire you and that I wish to court you officially. And I wish...” He paused and suddenly Elizabeth stood ramrod straight. Her entire body tensed and her stomach contracted. Was he going to propose?

But he couldn't.

They had not known one another long enough. Although then again, Charlotte had agreed to marry Mr Collins within a week of meeting him. And Jane and Mr Bingley's entire romance had stretched less than two months from their initial meeting in October to Bingley's departure at the end of November.

“Elizabeth,” he called, drawing her back to reality.

“Yes, I... I...”

“Elizabeth, from the moment I opened my eyes, you have been there. Literally. You were the first face I saw when I woke up in this new world of mine where I know nobody, and nobody knows me. You've been with me from the beginning. You have nursed me back to health. You have helped me with my tasks. You have helped me find out what I am actually good at. You have done so much for me. And I know that I am not worthy and I cannot provide you with any kind of security for the future. Indeed, I do not know what our future might look like, but I know that, whatever my future is, I want to share it with you. Elizabeth Bennet, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

He had done it. He proposed. Before Elizabeth could spend another moment considering, her lips readily declared her answer. “Yes, I do. I want to be your wife.”

He pressed his lips upon hers and for a moment Elizabeth heard nothing but the chirping of the birds in the distant trees and felt nothing but the sound of her heart thumping in her chest against his.

It was madness, all of this, but she could imagine no better life than at his side. She knew what she wanted, with all her heart, mind, and soul. She, Elizabeth Bennet, would become Mrs George Wickham and nobody would stop her.

“Absolutely not!” Mrs Bennet said that evening when Elizabeth and Georgie had settled down in the drawing room with her parents and made their confession. Her father had taken it as he took everything in life—in his stride. He noted that the mystery of Georgie’s true identity may pose a problem to the couple getting wed, and that they would probably have to discuss the matter with the vicar and also seek legal advice from Mr Phillips, his brother-in-law. However, on the matter of the marriage itself, her father had no objections. Her mother, however, had declared that she had known all along but then immediately fell into a fit.

“Mr Bennet, you cannot seriously consider this. It is dreadful for Elizabeth,” she declared and crossed her arms like a petulant child.

“Why should it be dreadful for me, Mother? I adore him and he adores me. What more could you want for your child?”

“Elizabeth dear, you have never been a romantic dreamer like Jane or silly like Lydia and Kitty,” she said, acknowledging for the first time what the whole family already knew—that her younger sisters were silly indeed. “So I do not understand where this sudden flight of fancy comes from.”

“It is no flight of fancy. I love him and he loves me,” she said, smiling at him despite the tension in the room. It was odd, even though her mother glared at her, Elizabeth did not care for in Georgie’s eyes she found the comfort she needed to withstand her mother’s protests. In the end of the day, she knew, it wasn’t Mrs Bennet’s opinion that mattered anyhow. It was her father’s.

“Love,” Mrs Bennet said, and clicked her tongue, flicking one hand as if she had said the most ridiculous thing in the world. “Love does not put food on the table or pay for a house. It does not give you security. And Georgie, how can you even consider marrying Elizabeth? With all due respect, you have nothing. You have no skills, you do not even have a name. Do you intend on living off our charity forever?”

“I had not considered asking for—” Georgie said quickly.

“Elizabeth,” her mother said. “I hope you do not expect your dowry to sustain you for heavens knows it is not much.”

“No, I did not,” she replied. “I do understand that this is highly irregular,” Elizabeth said, “but it is what it is. One of the reasons I declined Mr Collins’s offer was because I did not care for him. I care for Georgie. I want to marry Georgie.”

Her father let out a deep sigh. “Mrs Bennet, surely you can see that these two care deeply about one another. Elizabeth is correct. Georgie is a hard worker. Maybe not out in the field, but he has helped me make sense of the books. He has helped me run the estate more efficiently in only a few weeks. There is much more work to be done, and I have come to rely on him. I would like to rely on him more in the future.” He cleared his throat and raised a hand to silence his wife who was about to break into another speech.

“Outside of this home, there are others who can benefit from his skills. I am sure that Mr Morris, who has been looking for a caretaker for Netherfield since Mr Bingley decided he does not wish to purchase it, will give our Georgie the position if he wishes it.”

Her mother sat back and drummed her fingers on the table but said nothing in reply. Caretaker of an estate like Netherfield would come with use of a house on the grounds. A house Elizabeth and Georgie could make their own. And if he did well,

whoever bought Netherfield eventually would most certainly keep him on in the future.

“And then there is always your brother, Mr Gardiner. He is a businessman and we cannot deny that Georgie has a mind for numbers. Certainly, he would be able to find a place for him in his company. Let us not forget I am a gentleman. I am well-respected. A recommendation from me would go a long way. If you could see yourself inspired to ask your brother-in-law, Mr Phillips, to also write one, I am certain employment would not be a problem. Besides, we might find out our dear Georgie is a rich fellow after all,” he said with a chuckle.

Elizabeth felt nothing but tenderness for her father in this moment. She knew she should appreciate her mother’s concern as well; indeed if she were her mother, she might have the same concerns. It was Georgie who spoke up and finally managed to put her worries at ease.

“Mrs Bennet, despite what you said in a moment of frustration, you have come to see me as a hard worker these past few weeks. I have heard you say it yourself. I do know that my circumstances do not make me an ideal match for Elizabeth, but I can promise you that I will always love her, and I will always look after her. If I must take a position mucking out the stables, I will do so. I do not think it will come to that since I am rather accomplished with numbers as we have come to find out. Besides, I believe you have come to know me as a man of character. Someone’s financial standing does not always speak of the kind of person they are, as we have learned by the example set by Mr Bingley. We have heard so much about his family members and friends, all of whom are rich and accomplished, but who are not of the best character.”

Georgie, Elizabeth decided, was a genius. For her mother had so come to despise Mr Bingley’s sisters and his friend Mr Darcy, that anyone who could speak against them eloquently was sure to have her attention and regard.

“Hang that Mr Bingley and his friend Mr Darcy right along with him,” she bellowed, “really was a dreadful disappointment. Poor Jane. Oh, our poor Jane. And that Mr Bingley, so gullible, so easily influenced by his wretched sisters and friend. I do not care how highly Mr Collins speaks of his patroness, her nephew surely is a terrible individual to say nothing of Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley.”

Georgie chuckled. “Well, that is something you will never have to worry about with me. I have neither family nor friends aside from this, so there shall never be anybody to influence me.”

Her father quickly placed a handkerchief in front of his mouth to disguise his amusement. Mrs Bennet seemed to have entirely forgotten her reservations as she sat there, unfolded her arms, and nodded. “Well, Georgie,” she said, “you are correct about that.”

Under the table, Georgie’s hand wrapped around Elizabeth’s and squeezed, and when she looked at him, she knew that for the two of them the future might be unclear, but it didn’t matter—they would bring light to it together.

Darcy

3rd March 1812

Georgie walked from Meryton to Longbourn, lost in thought. It had been a week since his courtship and subsequent engagement to Elizabeth had been revealed. The reaction had been pleasant, he had to admit. Her sisters had been delighted, and the townspeople had been given something to gossip about which in turn appeared to please them.

Mrs Bennet had slowly but surely found herself at peace with the prospect of a new son-in-law, especially as she was beginning to see the benefits of having another man in the house who wanted to make himself useful.

The most unpleasant thing had been getting to know Mr Collins. Upon hearing the happy news, he had prolonged his stay at Lucas Lodge by several days in order to get to know Georgie. As if that wasn't bad enough, he'd also decided to pay them another visit after his errands were completed. Thus, he had another dinner with Mr Collins—who had just returned from Town—to look forward to tonight. It was a pity, for any length of time spent in Mr Collins' company was, by his estimation, too much.

Collins was insufferable, even more so than Georgie had expected. Unfortunately, he would have to see him again at least once more because he had been invited to the wedding, which was set to take place in three months' time. They had spoken at length with Elizabeth's Uncle Phillips regarding any legal ramifications, and also with the vicar of Meryton, who had obtained advice from one of his more senior

colleagues. The consensus of opinion amongst the clergy was, that in addition to the usual reading of the banns in their local parish church, a notice of intent should be read out at all of Hertfordshire's churches on four consecutive Sundays. This, combined with a sworn affidavit from Georgie stating that to the best of his knowledge he was not wed, nor of unconscionable character, should suffice.

As he wandered along the familiar path, his thoughts drifted from the tediousness of Mr Collins to the happiness he felt when he was with Elizabeth. He pondered their future together, the challenges they might face, and the joy he hoped they would share. The sun was beginning to set, casting a golden glow over the hills in the distance, and the tranquillity of the evening only added to his introspective mood.

He was torn from his thoughts when he heard a voice calling after him. "Georgie! Georgie, wait!"

He turned to see Mary hurrying towards him, her bonnet slightly askew and her cheeks flushed from the brisk walk.

"Mary," he greeted, "what brings you out here?"

"I was on my way back from visiting a friend in Meryton and saw you ahead," she explained, slightly out of breath. "I thought I might walk with you."

"Of course," Georgie replied, offering her his arm. "I would be glad of the company."

As they continued their walk together, Mary glanced at him with a curious expression. "You seemed deep in thought. Is something troubling you?"

Georgie chuckled softly. "Just contemplating the future, I suppose. There is much to consider."

Mary looked thoughtful, but then said, “It is a time of change for all of us. But I believe that you and Elizabeth will be very happy together.”

Her words brought a smile to Georgie’s face. “Thank you, Mary. That means a great deal to me.”

“Where were you coming from, Georgie?”

“I was meeting with Mr Morris about the position of caretaker for Netherfield Park,” he replied with a satisfied smile. “And I got it. I will soon be the official caretaker of Netherfield and be responsible for the grounds and the house. I’ll have to get it ready should anyone wish to rent it and if someone buys it, I might be made steward.”

Mary’s eyes lit up with delight. “That’s wonderful news! Will you and Elizabeth live there?”

“We will live in a cottage near the main house,” Georgie said. “I saw it today, and it’s quite grand, and more than what we need.”

Mary jested, “It must be much larger than the little room you have now.”

Georgie chuckled. “It is. In any case, it will be lovely. It will be my first real home.”

Mary arched an eyebrow. “Well, not really. You had a home at some point, surely. Maybe even a grand one.”

Georgie nodded thoughtfully. “True, but since I can’t remember any other home, this will be my first real one. I shall henceforth always think of it as my first home, aside from Longbourn, of course. Although it was more a respite than a home.”

Mary’s expression softened as she asked, “Do you not wish you could remember

everything now? Your home, your family?"

Georgie sighed. He'd been more at ease with his circumstances since he and Elizabeth had confessed their feelings for one another.

"I used to and I also used to get flashes of my past, but I haven't in a long time. I know I must have a family out there but nobody has come looking for me so that either means there is nobody left, or that they do not care to find me. Either way, it will not do me any good to dwell on it. Now, I think of the Bennets as my family."

As they approached Longbourn, the familiar sight of the house brought a smile to Georgie's face. However, as they drew closer, he noticed something different. The windows were closed and he saw Mrs Bennet rushing into the house and shutting the door after looking left and right. Mr Collins' carriage was parked around the side of the house as well. He usually stayed at the Lucas' when visiting but came to call on the Bennets—though never this early.

"Mr Collins so early? I'm sure Hill hasn't even started dinner yet. What do you suppose is happening?" Mary whispered, her earlier cheerfulness giving way to concern.

Georgie shook his head, his senses alert. "I'm not sure, but we should find out."

They quickened their pace, the feeling of unease growing stronger with each step. Georgie couldn't shake the sense that something significant awaited them inside, something that would change everything once again.

Georgie and Mary entered Longbourn with a growing sense of foreboding. The house, usually filled with light-hearted bustle, now seemed to echo with tension. They followed the sound of raised voices to the drawing-room, where they found Mr Collins, Elizabeth, Mr Bennet, and Mrs Bennet in a heated discussion.

Mr Collins was in the midst of a fervent declaration. “Elizabeth must not marry Mr Wickham!”

His stomach clenched. Mr Wickham was still a name he felt no connection to but it was his name now—but why would Mr Collins suddenly object to the marriage?

Georgie stepped forward, revealing himself. “What is going on here?”

Mr Collins turned to face him, his expression a mix of disdain and triumph. “Ah, the charlatan himself appears. Mr Wickham, you are exposed. I wrote to my patroness to share the happy—if peculiar—news about your circumstances and your intention to marry my cousin, and she quickly replied, by messenger no less! She spared no expense to ensure I could stop this travesty from happening.”

“Mr Collins, why would you say such things?” Elizabeth demanded.

Georgie frowned, his confusion evident. “Yes, what are you talking about? What did your patroness say? Does she know me?”

Instantly the worry that there might be a wife and children looking for him resurfaced and he glanced at Elizabeth, certain she too felt this concern rise to the surface. The possibility had been small, at least in their minds. After all, nobody had come looking in the weeks he’d been here. However, that might be about to change.

Mr Collins puffed up his chest, clearly relishing the drama of the moment.

“Lady Catherine knows exactly who George Wickham is and you, sir, have no reason to be proud, for you are a scoundrel of the worst sort.”

Georgie groaned internally, for this was his second greatest fear, aside from being married, he’d been concerned about having some sordid past. He didn’t feel

particularly sordid, indeed, he'd found himself compelled to stop a theft at the local market once and had broken up a fight between two drunkards another time. He'd thought himself quite a good person, in fact—but perhaps he had been mistaken.

“Mr Collins, do not keep us in suspense,” Mr Bennet demanded. “Tell us what she believes Georgie has done, and how she knows who he is.”

“Well, naturally I described him in detail. Tall, dark-haired, shifty eyes... And the accent, of course. In any case, she is well familiar with Mr Wickham as he is the son of her late sister's steward.”

“She knows my father?” Georgie asked, hopeful at once despite the unfortunate news, that he might be a ne'er-do-well after all.

“She knew him,” Mr Collins replied, clicking his tongue. “But he died some years ago. My patroness' sister and husband were for reasons unknown to her rather fond of you. Do you truly pretend not to know?”

“Pretend? He has no memory,” Elizabeth spoke up now and he felt warm inside knowing she'd defend him, even now.

“So he says,” Mrs Bennet said and Georgie realised just how quickly the woman changed her allegiance.

“I assure you, I am a good man.”

“If you have no memory, how would you know?” Collins challenged. “Lady Catherine told me you have always been a burden on her poor nephew, asking for money any chance you had, and even turned down a living that was left to you. Foolish,” he said and shook his head with disgust marking his features.

“Her nephew?” Elizabeth spoke up. “The Colonel?” she asked, sounding hopeful but her cousin shook his head.

“No, the esteemed Mr Darcy, of course. He was always kind to you, Mr Wickham and you repaid him by attempting to scandalise his sister, Lady Catherine’s niece. Miss Georgiana Darcy! You attempted to elope with her purely for her fortune. If not for her brother, you would have ruined her happiness forever.”

“Faith,” Mrs Bennet proclaimed and fanned herself with a handkerchief even though it wasn’t warm in the room.

“On top of that, you have amassed debts all over the country, gambling away any money you could get your hands on. You have seduced innocent women, leaving them and their families in disgrace. You are a liar, a cheat, and a scoundrel of the highest order! Indeed, Lady Catherine tells me you likely faked your injury to escape and ingratiate yourself with a good family.”

“I told you, Mr Bennet. I told you!” Mrs Bennet screeched and fell into her seat, hands covering her face.

“This cannot be,” Elizabeth shouted. “Georgie is a good man. He has done nothing wrong.”

“I assure you, he has. Lady Catherine advised me to counsel you against any match between your fine daughter and this man, Cousin,” he said ignoring her and focusing on her father instead.

“Goodness, goodness. I told you Mr Bennet! I told you he would be up to no good! Oh, my nerves. Mary, fetch my smelling salts,” she called and dropped backward again.

Elizabeth, standing in the doorway, seemed torn between disbelief and dawning horror.

“I trust you have evidence of this?” Mr Bennet said, though Georgie noted how shaken he sounded.

“Of course I do, she has sent along a list of people who know Mr Wickham any of whom will confirm that he is a despicable scoundrel. In addition, Mr Wickham is a blackmailer. Mr Darcy, that is the late Mr Darcy, regarded you so highly he took you under his wing when your father died—even left you a living as I said, but you demanded money instead, always coming back for more when you needed it! And when Mr Darcy finally said no, you attempted to charm his sister!”

Georgie’s lips parted, he was utterly confused. A living? And... Darcy? That name again. He felt as if the ground had been ripped out from under him. “This- this cannot be true,” he stammered. “I have no memory of any of this.”

Mr Collins sneered. “Convenient, is it not? To claim amnesia and insert yourself into the lives of decent people, to worm your way into their good graces. You are a fraud, sir. My dear cousin,” he said turning to Elizabeth’s father now. “I am afraid your wife was correct. This man is trying to ingratiate himself with your family. He will take you for all you are worth if you let this marriage go ahead.”

A fraud? A monster? A rake? He was a rake? No, this could not be true. Georgie’s head thumped. This was so much worse than anything he had imagined when thinking about his past.

Elizabeth stepped forward. “I do not believe it. Georgie has been nothing but kind and honourable. He cannot be the man you describe.”

Mr Collins turned to her, his tone condescending. “Elizabeth, my dear cousin, you are

blinded by your affections. The facts are clear. Lady Catherine herself confirmed his identity and his misdeeds. This man is not to be trusted.”

Georgie looked at Elizabeth, his eyes filled with anguish. “Elizabeth, I swear, I do not remember any of this. I cannot reconcile what he says with who I feel I am.”

Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears. “I believe you, Georgie. But what are we to do? How can we prove your innocence if you cannot remember?”

Mr Bennet, who had been silent until now, spoke gravely, “We must seek the truth. If there is even a chance that Mr Collins’s accusations are true, we owe it to ourselves and to Elizabeth to investigate further. Georgie, you say you do not remember your past, but perhaps there are people or places that might trigger some memories.”

Mrs Bennet, still reeling from the revelation, added, “We cannot have a scandal ruin us. We must be certain of who this man is. In the meantime he cannot stay here in our home, with our daughters. You will need to leave, Georgie.”

“No, Mother!” Elizabeth replied sharply. “No, you cannot make him leave. Father!”

Before her father could say anything, Georgie nodded, feeling the weight of the family’s concern. “No, Elizabeth your mother is correct. I cannot risk scandalising this family. I understand. I will do whatever it takes to find out the truth. I do not want to bring any harm to your family. I must find out if this is true.”

“We ought to go to Rosings Park,” Elizabeth explained.

“I think not,” Mr Collins said resolutely. “Lady Catherine does not wish to see Mr Wickham anywhere near her estate. Especially not when her niece is there. The poor, gullible girl has been through enough as it is. Now, I have made my case, the rest is up to you. I shall return to Lucas Lodge for the time being. You may call on me if

you need.”

He turned to leave, but not before casting a final disdainful glance at Georgie. “Remember, Mr Wickham, that the truth will always come to light. You cannot hide from your past. It has already found you out once, do not presume to try this trick again.”

The front door clicked shut and silence settled upon the house while Mrs Bennet made swift use of the smelling salts Mary had brought her. Mr Bennet stood, shaking his head while beside Georgie, Elizabeth looked as if her entire world had come crashing down. And in a way, it had. For the bright future they’d had ahead of them had darkened and was perhaps, entirely ruined.

Elizabeth

Later that evening, Elizabeth stepped outside into the chill evening air. The sun was setting in the distance, painting the sky in hues of crimson and purple, like a masterpiece in a gallery. It afforded her a moment's respite, though she knew it would be fleeting. Her world had been shattered. Georgie, her Georgie, a rake and a scoundrel? It could not be true.

Her heart told her it must be lies or misunderstandings. She knew him. Didn't she? Elizabeth had always prided herself on her discernment, and it seemed impossible for her to have been so mistaken about the one person who mattered most. But then again, had she not also misjudged Mr Bingley? And look how that had turned out.

"Elizabeth," Georgie's voice came from behind her, soft and uncertain. She turned and instinctively flew into his arms. It was a reflex more than anything else. They stood arm in arm for what felt like an eternity, but still ended all too soon when he stepped back.

When she looked at him, she found an expression of utter devastation reflected back at her.

"I am not that man," Georgie repeated. "I didn't do those things to Miss Georgiana Darcy. I don't know any Darcys. It can't be true! It simply cannot."

Elizabeth placed a comforting hand on his arm, though her own heart was in turmoil. "Georgie, please, I know. I believe you. We must remain calm. And you must not let my mother send you away."

He turned to her, his eyes wide with anguish. “How can I be calm? They say I am this George Wickham, a man of despicable character. But I don’t remember any of it! It feels like a nightmare. I cannot remain here and put you and your family at risk. I- I must discover who I am.”

Elizabeth’s mind raced. Her cousin had sounded so certain, and the letter from Lady Catherine, which he had left in her father’s care for them to read, had been so authoritative. How could all of this be true? She was shaken to her core, yet her love for Georgie remained steadfast. She couldn’t believe he was capable of such deceit and malice.

“Georgie, I know this is overwhelming,” she said. “But we must think clearly. Did you not say that the name Wickham didn’t sound familiar to you at all?”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, that’s correct. The name meant nothing to me. It still doesn’t. In fact, it invokes a kind of distaste.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “Then perhaps it means you are indeed not him.”

“Or it means I am, but I have grown to despise myself. Perhaps I do not want to remember,” he said, suddenly changing his opinion as he paced.

“You just said you know you are not that man,” she reminded him, feeling as though she were caught in a storm or on a boat cast adrift on the rough seas. He raised his hands towards the heavens.

“I know, but how can I be sure? I feel as though it is wrong, as if all of it is wrong, but then I doubt myself. I do not know who I am or what I’ve done. And the woman? The blonde woman I saw in that flash of memory? Perhaps she was Miss Darcy?” he said in a tone so desperate it almost broke Elizabeth’s heart.

“No, I am sure it was not. I know what we will do. We will go to Rosings Park. Just as we said to Mr Collins. Then we must prove that Lady Catherine was wrong. She did not even see you. She was told you were George Wickham without ever seeing your face. Mr Collins told her your name when he wrote to her, remember? So she was bound to be sure it was you.”

“He described me as well, did he not?” Georgie replied miserably.

“Yes... but...”

“And my coat said George Wickham,” he added.

“Still, it proves nothing. We should travel to Rosings and present ourselves to Lady Catherine. We can confront her directly and confirm whether or not you are this George Wickham. I am certain you are not.” Elizabeth looked at him with a small smile, convinced this would resolve everything.

“I am not wanted at Rosings Park. Your cousin said as much,” he reminded her, but she shrugged.

“George Wickham is not wanted there, but if you are not him, then it does not apply to you. If we go there and you are allowed an audience with Lady Catherine without challenge, then it will prove that they do not recognize you as George Wickham, and neither will she,” she surmised. “We will go there and then we will get married and—”

Georgie looked at her, his despair deepening. “Elizabeth, we cannot get married like this. Not with such accusations hanging over me.”

“An accusation we will have resolved by then,” she pleaded.

“No, I was foolish to think we could marry under these circumstances. Even if I am not George Wickham, what if I am worse than that? What if I am already married? We have spoken of this many times, I know, and I let my love for you blind me. But now that I am confronted with what could be, I cannot allow myself to be delusional any longer,” he said. “I want to postpone our wedding until I know who I am.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank. “No, Georgie, please. I still want to marry you. You are a good man. And it will be as we said, anything that comes our way we will resolve together and if you are married then...”

“Then you are ruined. I was so selfish, Elizabeth. I should not have let it come to this. I cannot let you marry me under this cloud. I need some time alone to find out who I am. I have saved some money, I shall go to Rosings, but first I will travel to London. From what Collins said, Wickham is the sort of scoundrel who is likely to have some notoriety. Perhaps even in London? And even if I am not him, then someone might know me in Town still. I will hang posters, present myself to the Bow Street Runners for examination.”

“But, Georgie, what if you find nothing? What if no one recognizes you?”

“As I said, then I will go to Rosings, even though Mr Collins warned me not to. I need to know the truth, Elizabeth. I owe it to you, to us,” he said “And if I am who they say, I must find out how much of what I supposedly did is true and which parts are Banbury tales. Most of all, if I am indeed George Wickham, I must find out what happened between me and Miss Darcy. I cannot believe I would act as described, I must know for certain.”

“And if you did all the things they said you did?” she asked.

“Then I cannot marry you, of course. You deserve better than that,” he said, the words coming out rapidly, as if he hadn’t wanted to say them at all.

Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears. "I cannot bear the thought of losing you. I am not sure what is worse, finding out that you were an awful person or losing you to this quest."

Georgie took her hands in his, his expression pained. "Elizabeth, if I was that man I might become that man again if my memory returns, and you do not deserve that. I must prove who I am so I know what sort of man I might be in the future. Please understand. I will return regardless of what I find out, that I vow."

She nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I understand. Just promise me you will come back and that we will make these decisions together."

"I promise," he whispered, pulling her into a tight embrace.

As Georgie walked away, Elizabeth felt her heart shatter. She stood there, watching him until he disappeared from view, her mind a tumult of fear and hope. She wasn't sure what the future held, but she knew one thing—she loved Georgie, no matter who he had been. And she prayed that love would be enough to bring him back to her.

Elizabeth blotted the ink and sighed as she read through her letter telling Jane exactly what she had come to learn. As she had put the words down on paper and described the man Lady Catherine claimed to know, she could hardly believe it. This could not be her Georgie. It had to be a mistake or perhaps another man of the same name, from the same area, with the same northern accent, who had done these things. Not Georgie.

My dearest Jane,

How I wish you were here, how much I need you now. The worst has happened. We

may have discovered who Georgie truly is, and it is quite dreadful. Although I cannot believe it is true. No, I know it isn't true. I can barely compose myself.

Mr Collins received a letter from his patroness upon hearing that I was to be married, and she claims to know Georgie, or rather, she claims to know Mr George Wickham, and he is a dreadful man. A truly dreadful person.

She dropped her head into her hands. Who was she fooling? Everything Lady Catherine had said made sense. Georgie had no family. His parents had died, and he had no siblings. She was not aware of any family ever being in the picture other than the Darcys, therefore, no family would have missed him. Particularly if he was from the north. If he was from the north and had friends there, they might not even have noticed he was missing if he travelled or did not see them with any regularity.

The only people who would have possibly noted George Wickham's absence were the Darcys.

"Hang that Mr Darcy," she cursed under her breath. Of course, he was somehow involved in all of this. This man, whom she had never even met, had wrought so much chaos in her life and that of her family.

No, that wasn't fair. He had nothing to do with this affair other than by way of his sister.

A gasp escaped her, but she picked up her quill again.

Jane, I just had an awful thought regarding the possibility of Georgie actually being this rotten man. You know I told you he had a flash of memory involving a blonde woman. If we assume it was Georgiana Darcy then I fear I know that it might mean. If he only used her as Lady Catherine claimed, it seems unlikely that he would be thinking of her so deeply to have her appear before him... Could there be more?

Could it be that he is George Wickham but there was a misunderstanding? Could it be that Lady Catherine is misinformed and Mr Wickham did not attempt to seduce Georgiana Darcy out of harm, but out of true love? What if he loves her and that dreadful Mr Darcy made up this entire story to force them apart? It would not be the first time. He has done it to you.

Elizabeth longed to have her sister with her because she could almost hear Jane's tender, measured voice telling her that she did not know anything for certain and that all of these were speculations based on the word of one woman, and the rest were products of Elizabeth's active imagination. They knew nothing. Not yet. To find out what really happened and if Lady Catherine was indeed correct about Georgie's identity, they would have to write to her or visit her. One or the other...

Elizabeth rose and paced her room. Why had Georgie not agreed to travel to Rosings? Why go into London first? Yes, someone might know him there and it was on the way to Kent, but why not first prove he wasn't George Wickham? Was it because he suspected he was?

He stood accused of being a philanderer and a cheat. Wouldn't he want to clear his name? He had decided to leave for London in the hope of finding out who he was. But could it be that, in reality, he already knew that all of this was true, that he really was this awful man, and he wanted to escape?

Worst of all, could it all have been lies? Could he have known who he was all this time and...

"No!" Elizabeth cried and slammed the quill down on the paper, splashing ink all over the letter to Jane. "Perdition, perdition," she called out and snatched the letter, which only made things worse. The ink ran into the carefully crafted words, making a mess she knew she would not be able to fix. She dropped the letter into the wastebasket and collapsed on her bed. Tears spilled out of her eyes as she hugged her

pillow close, remembering that just a few weeks ago Georgie had lain in this bed. She remembered that day when he had opened his eyes and looked at her, the confusion had been evident. The fear, the uncertainty. No, none of this had been lies. None of it. And yet, why hadn't he wanted to come to Rosings with her? Why hadn't he wanted to clear his name? It was all impossibly tangled, and Elizabeth lay there, her pillow becoming stained with tears, unable to distinguish right from left, as the future before her grew murkier than ever.

Darcy

Georgie stood by the stable, his hands trembling as he tightened the saddle on his horse. Mr Bennet had loaned him the use of his best horse, the man had insisted that Georgie take his carriage, but Georgie did not want to cause the family any more inconvenience than he already had. He would leave the horse in the care of Mr Bennet's brother-in-law in Town, and the beast could return to Longbourn when Elizabeth's sister journeyed back. His mind was a storm of confusion and despair. The accusations laid upon him by Mr Collins, the letter from Lady Catherine, the horrified looks from the Bennet family—these images replayed in his mind, making it difficult to think clearly.

Mounting the horse, he took a deep breath, trying to ready himself for the task ahead. The horse's steady breathing was the only calming presence around him. He urged the horse forward, beginning his ride into Town, it was twenty-four miles to London and Georgie hoped that he would arrive before sunset.

“Georgiana Darcy,” he muttered under his breath. The name resonated with him in a way that felt both foreign and familiar. He recalled the first time he had heard it. There had been a flicker of something—recognition, perhaps, but nothing more. Certainly not romance. Yet, the name had stirred something deep within him. Could it have been guilt?

He tried to remember the blonde woman who had appeared in his fragmented memories. Was she Georgiana Darcy? The image was so vague, so indistinct. He remembered her as a figure from a dream, someone who had evoked a sense of... what? Not love, not longing, but perhaps remorse?

Georgie shook his head, frustration bubbling up. “Am I truly this Mr Wickham?” he asked aloud, his voice barely audible over the sound of the horse’s hooves. The thought gnawed at him. If he was George Wickham, did that mean he was capable of such deceit and cruelty? Had he really sought to ruin an innocent girl? The idea repulsed him, but the lack of any solid memories left him adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

He had heard of Wickham’s misdeeds from Collins’ dramatic retelling—of gambling debts, of seducing young women, of living a life marked by deceit. The details had painted a picture of a man completely at odds with the person he believed himself to be. Yet, the absence of his past made it impossible for him to refute these claims.

“Georgie,” Mr Bennet called, and Georgie urged his horse to a halt. Mr Bennet was on his cart, riding back to Longbourn with supplies as he came to a stop beside him. “You’re really leaving? I hoped perhaps that you would reconsider, this is all rather hasty.”

“I am, I am on my way to London now, the sooner this matter is resolved the better,” Georgie confirmed.

“Georgie, are you certain this is the best course of action? Have you considered writing to Lady Catherine or calling on her to confirm your identity? Why not do that first? It seems easier,” he said, repeating what Elizabeth had already suggested.

Georgie tightened his grip on the reins and shook his head. “I don’t want to do that, Mr Bennet. I can’t stomach the idea of seeing Elizabeth’s face when I find out I am this awful man. I can’t believe I am Wickham—I just can’t.”

Mr Bennet sighed deeply. “As far as I know, you are a good man, Georgie. I find it hard to believe you are a terrible person. But we must know the truth. As it stands, I can’t let you marry Elizabeth until we know. The truth is, I was not certain marriage

was right for the two of you in the first place because I feared something like this might happen,” he admitted, though it did not take Georgie by surprise.

Georgie understood the gravity of the situation. “That is also why I am seeking out my true identity. I need to know who I am. I hope that if I go into town and ask there, someone might recognise me and tell me who I truly am, if not George Wickham. It would be preferable than to go to Rosings and find out the truth from there.”

“Better to cling to hope than have it all dashed, I suppose. But you understand you are merely procrastinating, young man, don’t you?” Mr Bennet said in a fatherly tone that comforted Georgie somewhat.

“I do. And there is more. I must think about what I will do if I find out I am indeed George Wickham. How will I move forward in life? If I am he, then I must find out more about him to see why he did what he did, perhaps I can redeem myself. Or him... Or us both, I suppose. And if not, I must find another way, for my memory may never return,” he said miserably.

“It is a difficult load, Georgie but one I know you can carry, one way or the other. Also do keep in mind Mr Collins tends to be dramatic, and his patroness, while I’ve never met her, sounds much the same. Mrs Bennet has these traits as well. Sometimes people sound worse than they are, and perhaps that is the case with him.”

“I will find out, Mr Bennet, one way or the other. Will you speak to Mr Morris for me? Let him know I cannot take the position just yet?” Georgie asked and the man nodded.

“I will do that.” Mr Bennet placed a reassuring hand on Georgie’s shoulder then. “Then go, Georgie. Find out who you are. I wish you luck, and remember, you have people here who care about you, regardless of your past.”

“Thank you, Mr Bennet. I will return, and I will find the truth,” Georgie replied.

As he urged his horse forward again, ready to ride away, he glanced back at Longbourn which had faded into the distance. He could almost see Elizabeth at her window. Was she looking after him? He hoped so. He hoped that he would find a way to return to her somehow, a man complete with his memories intact and his reputation unsullied.

The countryside blurred as he rode on, his mind racing faster than the horse. “Am I a bad man?” he whispered, the weight of the question pressing heavily on him. He had no clear answer. All he had were the past few weeks—weeks in which he had felt kindness, compassion, and a sense of belonging with the Bennets. But was that enough to define who he was?

One thing he knew for certain, he loved Elizabeth Bennet. The thought of losing her, of not being able to marry her, was a pain he could hardly bear. Yet, he also knew he could not bind her to a man with such dark accusations hanging over him. He owed it to her, to himself, to find out the truth.

If he found no answers in Town, he resolved he would go to Rosings, despite Collins’ warnings. He would face Lady Catherine and confront the past head-on.

Georgie arrived in London just as the sun dipped low in the sky, casting the city in a golden glow. The streets buzzed with activity, carriages rattled over cobblestones, street vendors called out their wares, and pedestrians hurried about their business. London was a maze of elegant townhouses, narrow alleyways, and bustling markets. He realised that he knew these streets quite well, Mr Bennet had given him his brother-in-law’s address, and the address of a couple of boarding inns—however once he had reached Barnet, it was as if he knew the terrain like the back of his hand.

Clearly, whoever he was, he had spent much time in London. That notion gave him a sense of purpose, for surely here, he would find his answers.

For some odd reason he felt as if he should stay in Mayfair, but he had to live within his means. Thus he found a modest inn near Grosvenor Square, a place that seemed both welcoming and discreet. After securing a room and handing his horse to the stableboy, he set out to walk the streets, hoping to stir some recollection of his past. As he wandered through the familiar yet unfamiliar streets, snippets of memories began to surface—faces, sounds, fleeting images that he couldn't quite grasp.

Georgie marvelled at the sudden rush of recollections. It had been so long since he'd remembered anything concrete about his past. He wondered if his happiness with Elizabeth had kept his mind from dwelling on these forgotten fragments. The more he walked, the more the area around Grosvenor Square felt familiar, like a half-remembered dream.

He recalled Lady Catherine's letter, describing Wickham as a drunkard who frequently used the Darcy name to gain access to taverns and gentlemen's clubs. The memory made him shudder. Was that really him?

Georgie stopped outside a tavern, its sign swinging gently in the evening breeze. As he stood there, pondering whether to go inside, the door burst open and a man rushed out, colliding with him. They both tumbled to the ground, Georgie's hat flying off and landing a few feet away.

"Watch where you're going!" the man snapped as he scrambled to his feet. But then he froze, his eyes widening in recognition. "You! At long last, where the devil have you been?"

Georgie grabbed the man by the arm, his heart pounding. "You know me? Who am I?"

The man looked bewildered, glancing back towards the tavern. “Have you been on the spirits?” he slurred, his breath betraying the beverages he’d consumed. Before Georgie could press him further, another man emerged and lunged at the first man. The two struggled briefly before the second man broke free and dashed down the street.

“Wait!” Georgie shouted, chasing after them. The narrow streets and alleyways were a blur as he ran, but soon he lost sight of both men. Panting, he stopped, frustration mingling with a strange sense of hope.

Someone knew him. Someone had recognised him, even if just for a moment. It was a small victory, but it was enough to rekindle his determination. He couldn’t find the man now, but the encounter had given him a crucial piece of information—he was not a complete mystery to everyone.

Feeling more encouraged than he had in days, Georgie resolved to keep searching. The truth about his past was out there, and he was one step closer to finding it.

Elizabeth

11th March 1812

A week had passed since Georgie had left for London, and his departure had left Elizabeth's emotions entirely torn. With each passing day, she grew more and more uncertain about their future. Would he do as he had promised and return to her side once he proved himself entirely innocent of the accusations laid against him? Or would he vanish, proving her mother right, that he had known he was George Wickham all along and had concealed his true character?

No, this couldn't be true. Not her Georgie. She knew him, didn't she? She leaned back against the bench as Lydia and Kitty approached. Kitty's visage carried a certain sympathy, and she had been exceedingly kind to Elizabeth. Lydia, on the other hand, had always enjoyed drama, and there was nothing more dramatic than her elder sister's situation.

"Lizzy, are you still pining for Georgie? You must understand that he is not coming back. Surely," Lydia said with all the empathy of a dead fish.

Elizabeth looked up. She wanted to be angry at her sister for her unkind words, but she no longer had the strength to conjure up feelings today. She was numb, exhausted from the endless torrent of emotions tearing through her. She had battled her mother for days now, for Mrs Bennet was certain they had escaped a great tragedy. Even her father had indicated that it might be best to not dwell on things for too long. This had hurt her more than anything because she knew her father had liked Georgie.

“Lydia, must you be so unkind? Can’t you see that Elizabeth is upset?” Kitty asked in an unusually sharp rebuke.

“Lizzy hardly knew the man,” Lydia said, rolling her eyes. “Do not be so silly. The both of you are, in fact, exceedingly silly. In a few days, you will have forgotten all about him and you’ll find yourself another young gentleman. And Kitty, do not indulge her. She does not need us to pity her. She needs us to shake her back into reality. I cannot be burdened by two sisters who mope around the house and feel sorry for themselves. It was bad enough with Jane crying over Mr Bingley for weeks on end, but at least Jane is gone, so I do not have to see her miserable face. But you, Lizzy...”

“You are horrid,” Kitty said. “I do not know why I spend so much time with you. Must you be like this?”

“Must I be like what? Realistic? It seems I am the only one in the family. Jane and Elizabeth have their heads in the clouds, Mary can never lift hers out of a book, and you... you do nothing but cling to my skirts.”

“Lydia!” Elizabeth said, suddenly jolted out of her melancholy. “What is wrong with you?”

“I can tell you what is wrong with her. Mr Denny told her he does not want to see her anymore,” Kitty said, hissing the words more than saying them.

“Kitty, I made you promise!” Lydia said, curling her hands into fists and stomping one foot into the ground, sending dust into the air. “I asked you not to tell anybody,” Lydia complained, but Kitty shrugged, indignant now.

“I asked you not to talk to me in such a rude and condescending manner. If you cannot be nice, why should I?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “What in the world has happened? Lydia? I thought you and Mr Denny got along so well.”

“Mr Denny has met a young lady while away on leave, and he is engaged. Can you believe it? Engaged to somebody other than me!” Lydia said indignantly. “I hear she is as ugly as sin and he only wants her for her father’s money. Oh, why can Papa not be rich?”

“I heard she is rather lovely,” Kitty said and crossed her arms. “And her father is only a merchant, not a gentleman like Papa, perhaps he simply likes her better,” Kitty said and shrugged while Elizabeth shook her head. She had not paid much attention to her sisters and their exploits and doubted that there was anything serious between Lydia and Mr Denny. At least on his end.

“You are terrible, terrible!” Lydia cried and rushed away, while Elizabeth let out a deep sigh. The last thing she needed right now was her sister bringing more mayhem into the house. What she craved was quiet, but she knew she was not likely to get it if Lydia was determined to have all the attention on her instead.

“Do not mind her,” Kitty said while Lydia stormed inside and slammed the door. “She is in a dreadful mood. She should take her own advice because, in a few days, she will have forgotten all about Mr Denny and will find another gentleman.”

“You are correct. But perhaps this could be a lesson to you, Kitty. She is right—you attach yourself to her too often. You are a kind young woman in your own right, and you do not need Lydia to pull you down.”

“You are quite right. The older I get, the more I realise this. But what of you, Lizzy? How are you? I hate to see you so sad and despondent. Has there been no news from Mr Wickham?”

“No. And I truly hope that he isn’t Mr Wickham. I trust that there has been some kind of mistake...”

Then the front door opened again, and Lizzy braced herself for another round of her sister’s complaints. However, it was her mother who appeared instead.

“Lizzy! There you are,” she said and waved her arm.

Lizzy rushed towards her mother immediately. A letter. Perhaps at last, word from Georgie.

“Is it from Town?” she asked, assuming that he would still be in London at. Her mother shook her head.

“No. It is from Rosings Park.”

“Rosings Park?” Lizzy frowned. Why would there be a letter from Rosings Park? Could it be that Lady Catherine had concluded that she had been wrong?

Was she writing to confess that she had made Mr Wickham sound more villainous than he actually was? She took the letter from her mother immediately and tore off the seal, expecting it to be from Lady Catherine. However, this time, the handwriting was not that of the older Lady Catherine de Bourgh. This handwriting was more youthful.

She realised her mother and Kitty were talking because she heard their voices, but the words did not penetrate her mind. She left the two of them standing where they were and made her way towards the garden, needing quiet to focus though her mind was already racing.

Dear Miss Bennet,

I hope this letter finds you as well as can be expected under the circumstances. You do not know me, and I know you have no reason to believe my words, for they are nothing more than the words of a stranger, but I felt compelled to write to you. I heard that you have fallen prey to the same man I did.

Her stomach clenched at once, and she glanced at the signature, Georgiana Darcy. This letter was from the woman Georgie supposedly attempted to trick into marriage. She did not want to read on and wanted to burn the letter immediately, but she knew she couldn't. With one hand clutching her necklace, she read on.

George Wickham was one of my dearest friends when I was growing up. My home in Derbyshire, called Pemberley, is one of the grandest in the north, and Mr Wickham's father was largely responsible for its success. He was our steward and lived on the grounds, and myself and my brother Fitzwilliam, grew up with Mr Wickham. I used to call him Georgie, which is funny because that is also what my brother calls me.

Elizabeth's feet swayed under her. Georgie. Was this why her Georgie liked the name so much? Because it was, in fact, his name and the name of the woman he was connected to?

Mr Wickham and I were good friends, though he and my brother never got along. They were the same age and went to the same school. They were never friends. It was peculiar, everyone always thought that Fitzwilliam was a little strange when it came to Mr Wickham. He always spoke of him and accused him of having bad intentions when everybody often just saw him as a good young boy with a touch of mischief. It changed when he grew older, and people around me began to see that perhaps my brother was not wrong in his assessment. As for me, I was too foolish to see it, and I hate to admit it, but I was too blinded by what I thought was love.

You see, after his father died, Georgie relied on me.

She had crossed out Georgie and written Mr Wickham next to it, which was oddly like another punch in Elizabeth's gut. This woman had called her Georgie, 'Georgie', and he had hurt her so much she could not refer to him as such anymore.

Mr Wickham relied on me a lot afterwards. I was still very young then, of course, but I had regarded him as my friend for so long I wanted to be there for him in his darkest hour. You see, he had no other family since his mother died when he was born and there were no relatives left alive.

My father paid for his schooling and intended to mentor him but unfortunately, we lost both my father and mother within a few years of each other. My brother became my guardian alongside our cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam—

Elizabeth immediately recalled the name. This was the cousin who had exposed Mr Darcy's scheme to Charlotte in the first place. She narrowed her eyes and wondered how old Miss Darcy was now. She could not be more than eighteen or so. To lose both one's parents so young was tragic indeed, and then to be left with just a horrid brother and an aunt who was by no means kindly was sad for Georgiana Darcy thus far sounded like a decent person.

My father left him a living. I was very excited because I thought it meant he would be near us more and I would still be able to see him, but he declined the living, saying that the church was not for him.

Instead, he wanted to go into the law, so my brother Fitzwilliam gave him a monetary sum.

Elizabeth paused again. The law. Mr Wickham had expressed an interest in the law. Just like her George. George wasn't necessarily knowledgeable in all manners of law, but he knew estate law. They had never had occasion to explore how deep his knowledge of the law went in other areas, but this was just another clue in the puzzle.

Elizabeth continued reading, her heart heavy with every word.

After a while, Mr Wickham returned to Pemberley to ask for more money, but my brother would not give it to him. A few weeks later, he showed up in Ramsgate, where I was with my companion, Mrs Younge. Mr Wickham charmed me, and I fell deeply in love with him. I was so naive, and he knew exactly what to say to make me trust him completely. We planned to run away together. I believed we were to be married and that he loved me as much as I loved him. My brother arrived just in time to stop everything.

At first, I was furious with my brother. I could not understand why he would ruin my happiness. Fitzwilliam let me listen from another room while he confronted Mr Wickham. I heard everything. Mr Wickham admitted he only used me for my money. He was going to marry me solely for that reason. He did not love me. He had never loved me. I was nothing but a means to an end for him.

I was distraught, as you can imagine. My brother was my only comfort, but even he could not mend my broken heart. I do not write this to distress you further, but to warn you. If this man is indeed George Wickham, you must not marry him. He will only bring you sorrow. And as for his having forgotten his memory – I know my aunt must have told you already in her letter but it is known George Wickham owes large sums of money to many people, most of whom are dreadful and capable of all sorts. It would be in character for him to pretend not to know who he is in order to start over again.

The man described to me by Mr Collins' letters and my aunt makes me believe he is indeed who I think he is. Especially his coat. Yes, indeed. It hurt me deeply when my aunt told me that Mr Wickham still wore the coat I had given him. I had it embroidered with 'My dearest love, George Wickham.' It was a token of my affection, a symbol of my blind trust. To hear he still wears it, and that it was how you were able to discern his name felt so strange, I can hardly explain.

Elizabeth put the letter down, her hands trembling. She remembered a tear in Georgie's coat above the name George Wickham, as if it had been snagged on something. Had he cut out the part that said, 'My dearest love'? What a horrible thing to do. The man Georgiana described sounded like a most dreadful man. How could he possibly be the same man she'd grown to love?

She turned the letter over, forcing herself to read the rest.

I wish my brother were near so I might tell him what I have learned and draw comfort from him, but he has left Town and I have not been able to reach him. I know if he were here, he would come to Longbourn at once to confront him because he would never allow Mr Wickham to harm another young lady.

Elizabeth sank into her seat, feeling as though her entire world had been ripped from under her. Her Georgie, a horrible man—and Mr Darcy, the man she'd despised for so long, was a good person? How could that be? Of course, the letter was written from a loving sister's perspective. If only she could speak to Mr Darcy, but she did not know where to find him.

Georgiana's words had a ring of truth to them that Elizabeth could not ignore. It was clear Georgiana had no reason to lie to her, and her account of Mr Wickham's actions was too detailed, too specific to be anything but genuine.

Elizabeth felt tears well up in her eyes. She had been so sure of Georgie, so ready to believe in his goodness despite everything. Now, she felt like a fool. The pain of betrayal cut deep, and she wondered if she would ever trust anyone so completely again.

As she sat in the garden, clutching the letter, the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the ground. Elizabeth knew she had to make a decision. She could not ignore the evidence before her. If George Wickham was truly the man Georgiana

described, then she could not let herself be drawn further into his web of deceit.

With a heavy heart, she resolved to confront him if he ever returned. She would demand the truth, no matter how painful it might be. She owed it to herself and to Georgiana to uncover the real man behind the charming facade.

For now, though, all she could do was wait and hope that the days to come would bring her the strength to face whatever truths lay ahead.

Darcy

Georgie stood before the imposing facade of what he had thought was a mere tavern the previous day, when he'd been all but run over by a man who appeared to know him. Now, in the early afternoon's bright sunlight, the building was grander than he remembered, with polished brass fixtures gleaming and elegant, frosted glass windows hinting at an interior of luxury. The words 'The Westchester Club' were displayed in brass letters above the door. No, this was no mere tavern. This was a gentleman's club. Was he a member here?

His initial sense of unease grew as he stepped through the ornately carved wooden doors and into the opulent lobby. Inside, the club was richly decorated with deep mahogany woodwork, plush burgundy velvet furnishings, and intricate gold trim. The scent of leather, tobacco, and expensive cologne filled the air, mingling with the faint sound of a pianoforte playing softly in the background.

Georgie approached the front desk, where a man with neatly combed hair and a well-tailored coat greeted him. The man's demeanour was initially polite, but there was a certain coldness in his eyes.

"Good afternoon, sir. My name is Mr Henry Smith and I am the concierge here, may I assist you?"

Georgie hesitated for a moment, then said, "Yes, I'm looking for someone. Actually, I am looking for someone who might know me, strange as that may sound."

The man's right eye twitched, and he took a step back, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Someone who knows you?”

“Yes, you see, yesterday a man came running out of this establishment and ran into me—”

“We are not responsible for what our members do, sir,” the man said quickly, raising a hand.

“I do not hold you responsible for anything, good sir. It is just that I do not recall the gentleman’s name, but he appeared to know me, and I was wondering if perhaps you might be able to help me figure out who he was.” Or who I am, he added to himself. He wasn’t quite sure what he was hoping to accomplish here, but he had no other leads.

“What is your name? And are you a member here?” the man asked.

Georgie wetted his lips. Was he a member here? Good question. Should he tell him yes and hope it was true? Or simply not answer? He went with that, put on his brightest smile, and stated the name he hoped was not his own.

“My name is George Wickham.”

The man looked down at a leather-bound book, flicking the pages when his expression changed instantly. The politeness vanished, replaced by a look of disdain. “George Wickham, you say?” He glanced down at a list on the desk, his lips pressing into a thin line. “One moment, please.”

The man stepped away to confer with another gentleman standing nearby. This second man, shorter and with a rounded stomach and robust frame, glanced at Georgie in such a manner that he sweated under his collar.

After a moment, the second man and Henry spoke in hushed tones, casting occasional glances back at Georgie. Then, Henry returned, his face now set in a grim expression.

“I’m afraid I must ask you to leave our establishment, Mr Wickham.”

Georgie blinked in surprise. This wasn’t what he’d expected at all. “What? Why? I demand to know the reason.”

The other man stepped forward, his voice smooth yet authoritative. “I am Mr Martin, the owner of this establishment, Mr Wickham, you must know that your reputation precedes you. We have been warned that you’d make your way to our establishment sooner or later, as you have been barred from almost every gentlemen’s club in London. Please be aware that your presence here is not welcome.”

Georgie’s heart pounded in his chest. What in the world had he done now? “But... I don’t understand. I can’t remember anything. Please, you must tell me what I have done.”

Henry and Mr Martin exchanged a look. Mr Martin’s eyes narrowed as he studied Georgie. “You don’t remember? That’s a scheme I haven’t heard before. I did not wish to get involved in your earlier troubles and had planned to merely send you on your way, should you show up, but since you insist on trying to pull the wool over our eyes, I shall have to do something about it,” he turned to Henry, “Watch him while I call for the constable.”

Georgie’s mind raced. He was both horrified and excited. These men did not seem to recognise his face, but apparently, his name rang many bells. They certainly could help him find out who he was if he could only convince them of his predicament.

“Please,” he pleaded, “Mr Martin, listen. If you could just tell me what happened. There was a man who rushed out of here yesterday, chased by another, can you tell

me who he was? Or at least who told you of my so-called reputation? I truly do not remember who I am.”

Mr Martin smirked. “Do you take me for a fool, Mr Wickham? I have heard you are quite the trickster. But your tricks won’t work here.” He walked away, leaving Henry to guard Georgie.

Henry grabbed Georgie by the arm, his grip firm and unyielding. “Come with me. We’ll wait in the back.”

Panic surged through Georgie as he was escorted towards a dimly lit hallway. His mind spun with confusion and fear. What had he done to warrant such treatment? The more he tried to remember, the more elusive his memories became. The plush rugs muffled their footsteps, but the distant murmur of conversation and clinking glasses reminded him of the genteel surroundings from which he was being forcibly removed. It occurred to him that the man Lady Catherine had described in her letter would be just the sort to receive such treatment in a fine establishment.

It also occurred to him that if he was indeed so terrible a man, he might have done something that would warrant punishment. If he was taken in by the law, he might find out who he was. However, if he had committed some sort of crime, he might see himself carted away and incarcerated, or worse. He’d never find out who he truly was then.

He’d find out what sort of misdeeds he’d committed, to be sure, but nothing beyond that. He wouldn’t find out how he came to be here, and why. And if he was this bad a man, there had to be a reason. And what if he wasn’t George Wickham and was mistakenly arrested? He could not prove he wasn’t this man. And if he was taken in and put on trial only for it to come out he wasn’t who they thought he was? It would be too late. Elizabeth would have given up on him.

Yet, another thought was clearer than any of these—he was terrified of being taken in. If he was George Wickham, a trickster and a fraud, then he deserved to be jailed. He deserved to lose everything. But he, the person he was and had been for the past few weeks, had done nothing wrong. What if he had changed his ways? What if this amnesia had given him a chance, a new life? No, he could not let himself be arrested.

The idea of him rotting away in a jail cell threatened to cut off his air supply. He had to get out of here. He had to. As they reached a door at the end of the narrow hallway, it suddenly swung open, and a patron appeared, blocking their path. The thick smell of pipe smoke drifted out, and he realised this was the smoking room.

In the moment of distraction, Georgie saw his chance. He pulled his arm free from Henry's grasp and bolted, his heart thumping wildly in his chest. He sprinted down the hallway from where they'd come and burst through the front door and into the bustling street, the cold air hitting his face like a slap. He didn't stop but ran and ran, the sounds of carriages, street vendors, and passers-by creating a chaotic symphony around him. He ran until his lungs burned, finally ducking into an alleyway to catch his breath. He leaned against the brick wall, his mind a whirlwind of terror and bewilderment.

"What have I done?" he whispered to himself. The thrill of recognition mingled with the dread of his past. Georgie wondered what heinous crimes he had committed to warrant such a reputation, if he was indeed responsible. Had he skipped out on expensive meals, leaving his friends to foot the bill? Gambled and left without paying? Worse? And who were the people who'd alerted the owners of the Westchester Club? And the man from yesterday?

His memory was a blank slate, save for the recent weeks spent with the Bennets, where he had felt kindness and love, especially from Elizabeth.

Georgie closed his eyes, willing himself to remember. But the past remained

shrouded in darkness, with only fleeting, disjointed images surfacing—flashes of faces, a hand reaching out, laughter mixed with anger. He felt as though he were on the brink of a revelation, yet it slipped through his fingers every time he tried to grasp it.

A wave of despair washed over him. The weight of uncertainty pressed down on him, making it hard to breathe. If he was indeed George Wickham, then what did that mean for his future with Elizabeth? How could he ever hope to marry her with such a tainted past?

But amidst the fear and confusion, a spark of determination ignited within him. He needed to find out the truth, no matter how painful it might be. He owed it to Elizabeth, to the Bennets, and to himself. He could not live in this limbo any longer.

Gathering his resolve, Georgie decided he would seek out more answers. He would find the men from the club, confront them, and piece together his past. Only then could he face Elizabeth with the truth, whatever it might be.

Georgie wandered through the streets, aimless and disoriented, until he found himself back in Grosvenor Square. The park, with its lush greenery and serene atmosphere, was a stark contrast to the turmoil raging within him. He dropped onto a bench, burying his face in his hands.

Thoughts of Elizabeth flooded his mind. Her gentle smile, the way her eyes sparkled when she laughed, her presence—these memories were a balm to his troubled soul. Yet, they also deepened his anguish. How could he return when he didn't have answers? Or if the answers were not those they both longed to find?

As he sat there, lost in his misery, snippets of a conversation drifted over from

nearby. Two women, elegantly dressed, were walking along the path, their voices carrying over to him.

“Louisa, my dear, I simply cannot believe the audacity of that man,” her companion was saying, her tone sharp with disdain. “Spending money like water, it’s a wonder he hasn’t been thrown into debtor’s prison,” said the taller woman. She had dark hair, pinned back in a bun of sorts with an assortment of gems affixed to it. The shorter woman beside her, with ashen hair that was styled similarly with a bandeau instead of gems, nodded vigorously, her face pinched with disapproval.

“Indeed, Caroline. It’s absolutely disgraceful. I heard he is on the run anyhow from some men he owes a tidy sum to. And yet, he takes little care to disguise himself if all these stories we are hearing are true.”

The dark-haired woman’s voice grew even more indignant. “And to think, he had all the possibilities before him. A living was offered to him, did you know? Mr Darcy told me so himself.”

“I know. And Mr Wickham turned it down. The nerve of him! I’ve heard on dit that he preyed on young Miss Darcy, such an innocent girl, and then to carry on as he has been. It’s beyond reprehensible.”

Georgie looked up in surprise. Wickham? Were they talking about him? And Darcy? Was this the same Darcy of whom Elizabeth spoke so often? The woman had come to a stop after they’d passed him and he sat upright to look after them. There were elegantly dressed and had now paused before the pond nearby. He could still hear them but they could not see him. Should he alert them to his presence? They might be able to help him.

But no, they had just spoken of him in quite the negative fashion.

“By Jove,” he muttered. They’d just said Wickham was spending money and acting a fool. As in right now. How could they know this? He’d been with the Bennets for weeks now. Or had they been speaking about the not distant past? He had to learn more. He rose and pulled his collar up to conceal his face, before stepping a little closer to them. He dug his hand into his pocket and pretended to pull out crumbs for the birds, tossing them at the confused animals who were eagerly awaiting dried bread but received nothing but air. From his new position, he could hear the women quite well.

Louisa sighed, “I heard he is in Scotland now. Word has come down from Sheffield that he was thrown out of a tavern there for getting into a fight. It’s a wonder any respectable establishment would let him through their doors.”

He hesitated, torn between his desperate need for information and the fear of further rejection.

“Did you hear about his latest escapade?” Louisa continued. “I heard he swindled a gentleman in Edinburgh out of a considerable sum and then disappeared before the man could call for the constabulary.”

Caroline snorted. “Typical of the man. Always on the move, always looking for his next victim. I don’t know how anyone can stand to be in the same room with him. I wish Mr Darcy would come out of his seclusion so we could tell him all of this. It would amuse him greatly.”

“Alarm him, more like,” her sister replied. “He has been very peculiar of late, our Mr Darcy. It is not like him to stay out of touch for so long. Poor Charles is lost without him. I hope Mr Wickham does not call on Pemberley on his way back from Scotland.”

Georgie’s heart leapt. Wickham was in Scotland, according to this. So he could not

be this man. Even better, these women seemed to know him. Could they have answers to his questions? Yet, a wave of anxiety washed over him. What if they recoiled in horror, just as the men at the club had? Even if he wasn't Wickham, he was somehow connected to him. He had his coat, after all. No, he could not procrastinate any further. He had to approach the woman.

Steeling himself, Georgie rose from the bench and move towards the pair. As he drew nearer, he could see their expressions shift from casual disdain to outright shock. The one named Caroline's eyes widened, and the other, Louisa, took a step back, her hand flying to her mouth.

"Excuse me, ladies," Georgie began. "Might I have a word?"

"Mr Darcy?" Caroline exclaimed and stepped forward. "You are here in Town?"

"When did you arrive? No one has heard from you in weeks." Louisa said but then she looked him up and down, an example her sister swiftly followed. "What on earth has happened to you?"

"Have you traded places with your stable hand?" Caroline asked and chuckled, but Georgie could not move. Darcy? Had they just called him Darcy?

"You- you think I'm Mr Darcy?" Georgie stammered.

The women looked at one another, confused.

"Are you unwell? Have you had a drink already?" Louisa asked and came closer. She wasn't afraid of him, that much was sure.

"Mr Darcy, you do not seem yourself," Caroline added.

“Darcy?” he muttered as he rubbed the side of his head. Why were they calling him Darcy.

Louisa exchanged another glance with the other woman, her expression softened slightly with concern. “Perhaps we should take him to Charles. He might know what to do.”

“Charles?” Georgie echoed, his head spinning. “Who is Charles? And why are you calling me Mr Darcy?”

Caroline took a hesitant step closer. “Mr Darcy, that is your name. Did you bump your head? Were you mugged? Is that why you look so... curious?”

Georgie shook his head in disbelief, unable to reconcile the image of himself as this Mr Darcy. “But I... I was told I am Wickham. That I was involved in a scandal involving Miss Darcy.”

Caroline nodded solemnly. “He has been involved in scandals, to say the least. But you, sir... you are not Wickham, you are Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, of the Pemberley Darcys. A fine, esteemed gentleman.”

He wanted to protest, to argue that he couldn’t be this wealthy, esteemed man they described. The same man his beloved Elizabeth hated so much. There had to be a misunderstanding. But deep down, a part of him feared the truth.

“Please,” Georgie implored. “Take me to this Charles. Maybe he can help me understand. But first, who are you? Do I know you?” He looked from one to the other.

Caroline and Louisa exchanged another uncertain glance before nodding in unison. “I am Mrs Louisa Hurst, this is my sister, Miss Caroline Bingley. Charles is our brother

and your dearest friend,” she said, speaking slowly as if he were a wee boy, not yet old enough to understand the world. But he understood. He understood just fine. Bingley. Charles Bingley. The man who had broken Jane Bennet’s heart—aided by none other than this horrid Mr Darcy.

“Charles Bingley...” he whispered, shaking his head.

“Indeed. Very well,” Caroline said finally. “Come with us.”

Georgie followed the sisters through the bustling streets of London, his mind a whirlwind of doubt and confusion. Mr Darcy, a man so different from George Wickham, yet seemingly equally burdened with disgrace and disapproval. He struggled to grasp the reality of his situation, each step towards meeting this Charles Bingley filling him with apprehension. He’d heard about this man but he did not know what to expect. Elizabeth had painted a picture of a rather feeble minded, gullible man incapable of making his own decisions and easily led by others.

And this was meant to be his dearest friend?

Darcy

They stopped at a grand townhouse, Caroline rapped on the lion's head door knocker, and as the butler escorted the party in, she said, "Charles should be in the drawing room."

As Georgie followed, the butler looked at him with bright eyes. "Mr Darcy, it is good to have you back at Grosvenor House," he said cheerily and took his coat, though the moment he did, he rumped his nose as if smelling something rather distasteful. "Have you been riding, sir?"

"Yes," he said, wondering why he'd ask such a question. Was he not a man in the habit of riding? No, that wasn't it. It was the smell of horse emitting from the coat that had caught his attention. Indeed, Georgie was not dressed as a man of high esteem in his simple trousers, waistcoat, and shirt. He wasn't even wearing a cravat.

He hesitated briefly before taking in the house, the air was heavy with the scent of polished wood and lavender. Caroline led him through the foyer and into a lavishly decorated room where a man stood by the window, staring out into the street.

"Charles," Louisa called softly.

"This is Mr Bingley's home?" he asked but Louisa—no, he ought not call her that. He ought to call her and think of her as Mrs Hurst, as was proper—shook her head.

"This is my husband's home. He is out right now, but he will be back later." She paused and frowned, a line appearing on her otherwise smooth forehead. "You really

do not know?”

“No. Have I been here before?” he asked, for the place lacked any familiarity. He had no chance to get an answer because the young man standing by the window turned. He had a pleasant countenance and his face brightened into a warm smile as he saw his sisters. “Caroline, Louisa! I thought you were not returning until this evening, has London tired—” He abruptly stopped speaking as his gaze fell upon Georgie. “Darcy? What on earth! Where have you been, old chap? No one has seen hide nor hair of you since New Year!”

Caroline stepped forward. “Charles, this gentleman insists he is not Fitzwilliam Darcy but rather George Wickham.”

Georgie shifted uncomfortably under Charles’s gaze, the weight of his confusion and fear almost palpable in the silence that followed.

“Wickham?” Charles repeated, brows furrowing. “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Darcy? What is this you are playing at?”

Georgie wanted to respond but found himself cut off once more when Mrs Hurst spoke up. “He seems to have lost his memory, Charles. Thinks he’s someone he’s not. I thought he had been at the spirits but he is quite sober. Perhaps he had an accident?”

Charles’s expression softened with concern as he approached Georgie. “I see. So this is not you jesting? You really do not know who you are?”

Georgie nodded slowly, his throat tight with emotion. “Yes, that is correct. I can’t remember anything. Not who I am, not... anything. Some weeks ago I was found by a family in Hertfordshire and they let me stay with them for some while, in the hopes I might recover my memory but I did not. I was in possession of a greatcoat with the

name George Wickham embroidered inside, and then it was confirmed to me that I am indeed this man. Although now it seems I am not?"

"Confirmed? By whom?" Charles asked as he stepped closer.

"A Lady Catherine de Bourgh," Georgie said, growing more and more uneasy by the moment.

"Lady... You mean your aunt? She saw you, and she said this?" Bingley said, then ran a hand through his hair as if truly mystified.

His aunt. It sounded so strange. Lady Catherine was his aunt? How could this be? "It was a letter, sent to Miss..." his voice trailed off, suddenly he felt quite overwhelmed. "May I have a cup of tea or... I must sit," he said and staggered alarmingly, Bingley quickly took his arm to support him and guided him to a chair.

Caroline stepped in. "Charles, what should we do?"

Charles appeared to regard him thoughtfully for a long moment before turning to his sisters. "Let's get him settled in the drawing room for now. I'll send for a physician. Perhaps they can shed some light on this."

Georgie felt relief and apprehension in equal measure as he followed Charles along the hallway to a grand drawing room. The Bingleys' kindness touched him deeply, but he couldn't shake the haunting question that lingered in his mind.

"Am I really Mr Darcy?" Georgie asked quietly as Charles closed the door behind them.

Charles hesitated, his expression pensive. "You are, my friend. But we'll figure this out together."

Once settled on the chaise in the drawing room, Georgie couldn't help but feel a pang of longing for the simplicity of being Georgie, the stranger without a memory. It was strange but he'd been more comfortable as this man, than he was now.

Even when he'd thought he was Mr Wickham, he'd at least had an idea of who this man might have been. But now he wasn't this man at all, but Darcy? The villain in Miss Jane Bennet's story?

Now, faced with the possibility of being someone he hardly recognised—a man named Darcy—he feared the unknown more than ever.

The uncertainty gnawed at him—a stranger in an unfamiliar world, grappling with a name that didn't seem to fit.

Bingley and his sisters had departed after settling him here, no doubt to converse about what to do with him. He'd been left alone with his thoughts, his head more in an uproar than ever.

A knock on the door drew him from his contemplations and moments later, a physician arrived—a middle-aged man with a kind face and gentle demeanour. “Mr Darcy,” he said. “I'm Mr Thompson, Mr Bingley's physician.”

He introduced and immediately set about examining him, asking questions about his health, recent experiences, and any memories he could recall. This man was more thorough than the country surgeon he'd seen at the Bennet's home, but he wasn't sure there would be a different outcome.

Georgie answered as best he could, feeling increasingly distressed as the physician probed deeper into his past. Each question, always addressed to Mr Darcy, his new

incarnation, confused him more than the last. The sensations he'd been experiencing since he'd arrived in London, where things had seemed familiar and yet not, grew ever stronger.

After what felt like an eternity of questions and examinations, Dr Thompson finally withdrew, his expression thoughtful. Another knock sounded and Bingley poked his head inside.

"May we enter?" he asked and when Georgie nodded, he re-entered the room along with his sisters who looked even more worried than before.

"Well?" Charles prompted anxiously. "What do you make of it?"

Dr Thompson sighed softly, his gaze sympathetic. "Mr Bingley, Miss Bingley, Mrs Hurst... it appears that this gentleman is suffering from amnesia. His memory loss seems extensive, covering a significant portion of his past. Everything, really, aside from the last few weeks which he seems to have spent under the alias of Mr Wickham. You are certain he is who you say he is?"

"Of course, I am. We went to school together, he is like a brother to me," Bingley said sharper than he'd heard him speak before. A brother. They were like brothers. All this time he'd wondered about a family and now here he was, with a man who claimed to be like a brother to him. And yet, he felt nothing more than a faint sense of familiarity. He wasn't sure what had brought it on. It wasn't recognition, that he knew. But he felt comfortable around Charles Bingley, the way he had felt with the Bennets.

Caroline gasped softly, a hand flying to her mouth in shock. "Amnesia? Is there any hope of recovery?"

Dr Thompson shook his head slightly. "It's difficult to say at this stage. He reported

an accident, although he could not recall what exactly happened. He suffered a head injury at the time which certainly can be the cause. Memory loss can be unpredictable. Sometimes, memories return gradually over time, while in other cases, they may never fully recover.”

Georgie’s heart sank at the doctor’s words. The knowledge that he had finally found out who he was, didn’t bring him the hoped-for relief, even though he wasn’t the dreadful Mr Wickham. He didn’t want to be Darcy. And what good did it do him anyway to know his name, if it brought no memories with it? How could he return to Elizabeth like this? Cleared of the accusation of being a rakish scoundrel who harmed everyone in his path but proven to be the one man Elizabeth detested more than any other.

Charles placed a reassuring hand on Georgie’s shoulder, offering a small, comforting smile. “Thank you, Doctor. We’ll do everything we can to help him.”

Dr Thompson turned to give Georgie one last glance before he departed, his expression sympathetic. “Of course. If there’s anything further I can do, please don’t hesitate to send for me.”

“We will see you out,” the two women said almost at once.

With a final nod, the physician took his leave, leaving Georgie and Charles Bingley in a heavy silence punctuated only by the ticking of a nearby clock.

Charles turned to Georgie. “Perhaps tea might help settle your nerves. I took the liberty of asking the maid to fetch us some while the doctor was examining you. I find no matter what life may throw at one, tea helps one see things more clearly.”

Georgie nodded silently, as a maid brought in the tea tray. Bingley made himself comfortable in an armchair by the window, and Georgie followed suit. The weight of

his new reality settled heavily on his shoulders as he sank into the seat.

As Charles poured them both a cup of tea, he spoke softly. “We’ll figure this out, Darcy. Together. You have us, and we won’t abandon you.”

Though Georgie appreciated Charles’s words, the name ‘Darcy’ still felt foreign on his tongue.

The road ahead seemed uncertain and daunting, but at least he wasn’t alone in facing it. He had Charles, Caroline, and Louisa—people who knew him even if he couldn’t remember them.

With a heavy heart, Georgie resolved to find a way to piece together the fragments of his shattered past and discover who he truly was beneath the name and the face that everyone insisted was his own.

His eyes fell to his cup, his mind drifting back to Elizabeth Bennet and the life he had left behind in Hertfordshire. Would she accept him now, as Darcy, despite the revelations about his true identity? He could only hope and pray that the truth, once uncovered, would bring them closer rather than drive them further apart.

Darcy

Georgie and Charles Bingley sat in the elegantly appointed drawing room, some hours later, the quiet hum of the city beyond the windows serving as a backdrop to their conversation. Bingley leaned forward in his chair, his brow was furrowed and he wore a look of deep concern.

“Do you remember nothing at all about Grosvenor Street, the house, the family?” Bingley asked, hand wrapped around a glass of whiskey.

Georgie shook his head. “No, I don’t. All I can recall is being found by a family in Hertfordshire several weeks ago. They took care of me when I had no recollection of who I was. I stayed with them, hoping someone would come looking for me, but no one did.”

Bingley frowned. “And how did you come to believe your name is Wickham again?”

Georgie took a deep breath. He’d told the physician about this and had given a shorter report to Bingley earlier, but he understood the young man needed to hear it again to wrap his mind around it. “The coat I was wearing had the name George Wickham stitched into it. It was the only clue I had. But what about Darcy? Can you tell me about him? Me?”

Bingley nodded slowly, “No one has heard from you for a month and a half. You were heading north on business, then supposed to go to Netherfield Park, which is the estate that I had rented in Hertfordshire, to conclude some business on my behalf, but you never arrived. I wrote letters to Rosings and Pemberley but I was informed that

you were not at either place. You had been in a rather odd state of mind before you left, so I just assumed that for whatever reason, you wished to be alone. Either that, or the business you had to attend to, was personal.”

“I recall Netherfield Park, it was near the family’s home where I stayed,” he said, not sure why he had not named the family yet. He had a feeling that once he revealed the family’s connection to Jane Bennet, the conversation would lead elsewhere, and he needed to try and gather as much knowledge about himself as he could.

“A grand place. I was a fool to leave it,” Bingley said with a certain sorrow in his voice.

Eager to change the subject back to himself, Georgie cleared his throat. “What’s Pemberley? Your sister referred to me as Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley or some such thing,” Georgie asked, confusion evident.

Bingley’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Pemberley is your home, Darcy. It’s the estate you inherited from your father. It is located near Lambton in Derbyshire. I am from Sheffield myself, which is very near there.”

“I understand the geography of the realm, Bingley,” Georgie said and waved a hand, but then paused. He’d noted the changed tone in his voice when he spoke, and the way Bingley looked at him, told him that he had noticed it too.

“You sounded like yourself just now,” he said. “That slightly condescending tone you fall into sometimes.”

Condescending. That was not good.

“I did not mean to offend,” he said.

“You did not. I never take it the wrong way, you do not mean to sound that way. It is just your way. You get a little testy when you feel your intelligence is in question,” Bingley said with a smile.

Georgie raised an eyebrow. It was true. He hadn’t liked being given tasks that made him feel stupid. Perhaps that part of him had always been there.

“Anyhow, you live there. At Pemberley. You have a house here in Town also, in Mayfair. It is called Darcy House,” Bingley continued.

A house in Derbyshire and one in London. Just how rich was he? Georgie struggled to grasp the concept. “I don’t remember anything about it. Houses, lands. It means nothing. But pray... is there a blonde woman with whom I am connected in some way?”

Bingley smiled, a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. “You must mean Georgiana, your sister.”

“Sister,” Georgie repeated, feeling a wave of relief. “I was worried she might be my wife.”

Bingley laughed softly. “No, no wife. You are not yet married, nor courting anyone. You have been far too busy with Pemberley’s affairs since your parents died.”

His parents were dead. This information was like a punch in the stomach to him and he lurched forwards.

“Darcy,” Bingley said and stood to place a hand on his back. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. It is just that I didn’t know my parents had died. I didn’t know if I had parents but I’d hoped. It was silly, really,” he said and shook his head before gulping down

some of his whisky. “Can you tell me about them? The Darcys.” He asked and looked up before correcting himself. “About my parents.”

“Of course. You’re the son of Lady Anne and Mr George Darcy. Your sister was named after your father. Your mother was a lady, born to an earl. Her sister is Lady Catherine, whom you have heard of. Your uncle, the Earl of Matlock, is her brother. Your father had sisters, but no brothers. I can tell you about them as well, if you like” Bingley sat for a while and told him stories about his parents, whom he had got to know quite well over the years. They were lovely stories that spoke of a genuinely kind mother, and an intelligent yet compassionate father. How had such lovely people produced a son like him who’d think nothing of ruining his best friend’s happiness? And why was Bingley so kind to him now?

“You are to be married to your cousin, Miss Anne—at least according to your aunt,” Bingley said with a chuckle. Highly alarmed, Darcy spun around.

“Excuse me?”

“Do not fret,” he said and laughed. “It is not anything that will come to pass. Your cousin, Miss Anne, is in love with your other cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, your uncle’s second son. He is moon-eyed over her as well.”

“How do you know this?” he asked.

“You told me last time you were here. You were going to help arrange a clandestine meeting for them at Pemberley in the winter, so they could get away from the prying eyes of their parents and plot their future,” he said. “You are quite the Eros.”

Eros? The god of love? Hardly. Had Bingley forgotten what he’d done to him?

Georgie’s eyes narrowed at the mention of Lady Catherine. “You spoke of Lady

Catherine, she is the one who confirmed I was Wickham. Do you know why she would have done so?”

Bingley looked even more perplexed. “That makes no sense. Lady Catherine should know you well. And she knows him. I do not know how she could lay eyes on you and say you are Wickham. It is ludicrous.”

“She did not. She was told of my presence at the family home by a man connected to the family. Her vicar. A Mr Collins. He wrote to her and she wrote back, telling him that I had to be exposed as the horrid man I am so that I would not ruin Elizabeth and the Bennet family’s lives and—”

“Elizabeth? Elizabeth Bennet?” Bingley exclaimed and stood ramrod straight. “The family you stayed with in Hertfordshire—they were called Bennet?”

Georgie gulped and nodded. “Yes. And I... I should have told you immediately but I wanted to find out who I was first. Forgive me. It was indeed the Bennet family I resided with. Miss Elizabeth and I grew very close. So close in fact I wished to marry her and—”

“Marry Jane’s sister? You? I... I do not know what to say. Does this mean you met Jane? How is she? Is she well?”

Georgie hesitated, recalling everything he had been told about Jane and his own supposed actions. “I met Jane Bennet. She is a lovely woman, very kind and gentle. You should know that I was told of your connection to her—of course I did not know who you were. I still hardly know who you are.”

“What were you told,” he asked and sat in his chair, his elbows propped on his knees. “What did she say? Does she hate me? Is she engaged? Or married?” he asked, his tone betraying his true feelings. He was worried he might have lost her.

“She is not engaged to anyone. In fact, she pines over you.”

Bingley’s face lit up with hope and a smile spread across his features. “She pines over me?”

“Yes,” Georgie said, growing serious. “She cares for you deeply. But, Bingley, there’s something I need to understand. What have I done to her? And to you? Elizabeth told me that I split you and Jane up in a vicious manner. That I bestowed cruelty on you both. Why would I ever have spoken so badly about her?” He looked at Bingley, his face a mask of confusion and regret. “Did I really play a part in separating you and Jane? Elizabeth hates me for it. Or I should say, she hates Darcy. She blames Darcy for everything.”

Bingley frowned, his confusion deepening. “Elizabeth Bennet? But she never met you, at least not when you were yourself, Darcy.”

Georgie sighed. “I know, but Elizabeth feels that it was Mr Darcy’s influence that tore you and Jane apart. She learned about it from this cousin you mentioned—the colonel. He was at Rosings Park and spoke of the actions Darcy undertook to part you and Miss Jane Bennet.”

“You’re talking about yourself in the third person, Darcy. You are Darcy, but you speak of him as though he were a stranger.”

Georgie looked down. He’d made an effort to think of himself as Darcy and speak as such, but he’d slipped back into being Georgie the moment he found himself getting upset. It felt safer being Georgie, the man Elizabeth loved rather than the one she despised. “I feel like a stranger. I always knew the name Wickham didn’t sit right with me, but I don’t feel like Darcy either. From what I’ve been told, Darcy is a terrible man.”

Bingley moved to sit beside him, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “You are not a terrible man, Darcy. I have known you for years, and I can vouch for your character. You are a man of great integrity and loyalty. Last year you helped the tenants on your estate during the harsh winter, ensuring they had enough firewood and food. You also funded the schooling of several underprivileged children in the area. You have always been generous and charitable.”

As Georgie listened to the words his friend had to say, his heart felt heavy with doubt. “But what about Elizabeth and Jane? I caused them so much pain. And you. You did not answer my question yet.”

Bingley shook his head. “Yes, it’s true you influenced me, but in the end, the responsibility is mine. I should have been stronger and trusted my own feelings for Jane. I allowed myself to be swayed by you, my sisters, and my brother-in-law. That was my weakness, not your wrongdoing.”

He felt a flicker of hope at Bingley’s words. “You really think I’m not a bad person?”

Bingley smiled. “I know you’re not. You did what you did because you cared about me. You were wrong, everyone who judged Jane was wrong, but it was my responsibility in the end. You’ve lost your way, but that doesn’t change the man you are at your core. We’ll figure this out together. We’ll make things right with Jane and Elizabeth. And perhaps, in doing so, you’ll start to remember who you truly are.”

Georgie let out a sigh of relief, a sense of resolve beginning to form. “Thank you, Bingley. I don’t know what I’d do without your friendship.”

“You’re not alone, Darcy,” Bingley said as he squeezed his shoulder. “We’ll get through this, one step at a time. But pray, do tell me, are you certain Jane misses me? Do you think she’d want me back if I presented myself to her?”

Georgie nodded slowly. “Yes, Jane clearly loved you. And I take it you still love her?”

Bingley sighed. “I did love her then and I love her more now that I have been without her. Perhaps I should go to Longbourn and speak to her?”

Georgie shook his head. “She’s not in Longbourn; she’s in London. She is visiting her aunt and uncle. I am to take the horse I borrowed from Mr Bennet to them.”

Bingley’s eyes lit up with excitement. “The Gardiners! I must go at once! Will you come with me? Perhaps if you’re with me, Jane will agree to speak to me—since she likes you now.”

Georgie hesitated. “I can’t. The Bennets think the worst of me. They thought I was Wickham, a horrible man who lied and deceived them.”

“But you’re not Wickham, you’re Darcy—a good man,” Bingley protested, appearing puzzled.

Georgie looked away. “Not in Elizabeth’s eyes. She hates me. I can never face her again.”

“You must show her she is wrong to think badly of you. I will speak to her myself. I will vouch for you. Darcy, you are my dearest friend. You say you love her, do you mean it?”

Georgie nodded. “I do. I asked her to marry me.”

“And then you left because of what Lady Catherine said?”

“When a letter came from Rosings with news that Mr Wickham was a horrible man,

that he mistreated Darcy's, I mean my sister. She could not marry me under those circumstances, and so I set out to prove that I wasn't Wickham, or at least that I wasn't as bad as people said. But now, I might have proved I'm not Wickham—but instead I'm the man Elizabeth abhors and blames for her sister's unhappiness.”

Bingley shook his head, his expression one of determination. “We need to untangle this. If Jane is in London, I must see her. And if you care for Elizabeth, you must try to make amends. We can't let misunderstandings and mistaken identities ruin everything.”

Georgie looked at Bingley, hope flickering in his eyes. “You really think we can fix this?”

Bingley smiled encouragingly. “I believe we can. Let's go to Gracechurch Street in the morning. If I can win back Jane, I know she will help you win Elizabeth.”

“Very well,” Georgie said. “But let us not go right away. Let me have a few days to come to terms with who I am. Perhaps by hearing stories, and being with you and your sisters I might recall who I am.”

Bingley wetted his lips and shifted, his haste clear in the way his foot bounced up and down. “I suppose a couple more days won't make any difference. Let us wait until after the weekend and on Monday, we shall go. I will make enquiries with my contacts in Cheapside to ensure Jane is still there, and then we will go.”

With that decided, the two friends settled in—and Georgie allowed Bingley to take him on a journey into their shared past.

Page 26

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Elizabeth

17th March 1812

Cheapside, London

Elizabeth exited the carriage in front of her aunt and uncle's London home and bade farewell to her Uncle Phillips, who'd escorted her to Town on his way to a business engagement.

"Pass on my regards to the Gardiners, Elizabeth, I shall visit once I have completed my business," he called as the carriage drove away.

Elizabeth waved after her uncle and then climbed the steps to the modest home on Gracechurch Street. In the distance, children played and laughter sounded though her mind remained hazy.

She was eager to see Jane, who had been staying with their aunt and uncle for the past few weeks, but even more eager to escape her life for a little while.

She rapped on the ornate brass knocker and was momentarily let inside by a maid.

As Elizabeth stepped into the cosy, well-appointed house, she was greeted by the familiar scent of freshly baked bread and the comforting hum of family life as her cousins played somewhere within, the bark of a dog mingling with their voices.

Aunt Gardiner hurried out of the drawing room when Elizabeth was announced and

embraced her warmly. “Lizzy, my dear! It’s so good to see you. How was your journey?”

Elizabeth smiled, her travel-worn face lighting up. “It was uneventful, Aunt Gardiner. I’m just happy to be here.” She glanced around, her eyes searching for her sister. “Where’s Jane?”

Her aunt’s expression softened. “She’s in the drawing room. She’s been looking forward to seeing you. Why don’t I make sure your trunks are brought to your chamber while you say hello to Jane? You can greet your cousins later.”

Elizabeth was grateful to her aunt for understanding and hurried towards the drawing room, her heart pounding with excitement and concern. It had been so long since she’d seen her sister and so much had happened it felt as though years had passed by.

She found Jane seated by the window, gazing out at the bustling street below with a piece of embroidery untouched on her lap. When Jane turned and saw Elizabeth, her face broke into a radiant smile.

“Lizzy!” Jane exclaimed, rising to embrace her sister. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Elizabeth hugged Jane tightly, but then Jane pulled back, her face crumpling with emotion. “Oh, Lizzy I am so sorry I was not there for you these past few weeks. More than once did I consider returning but then you wrote you were coming here and I think that is better for us both.”

“I think so too. Oh, Jane. It has been dreadful, I cannot deny it. My Georgie, I cannot believe that I fell for a man like him. And at the same time, I still long for him. Isn’t that strange?”

Elizabeth had of course told her sister all about her beloved Georgie and the things

she'd learned from Georgiana Darcy, but sometimes it still did not seem real.

"It is not strange. You loved him. I still long for Mr Bingley at times, even though I know he did not care enough for me to fight for me."

"It is different for I do believe he loved you, with Georgie—I mean Mr Wickham—I must wonder if he did not play me for a fool all along."

Jane narrowed her eyes. "You think he knew who he was all along and sought a way to escape? But his confusion seemed so real. I cannot imagine he would have made it up. And did you not say he wanted to prove who he really is?"

Elizabeth nodded. "He did, but now I am beginning to believe that he lied about that also. I think perhaps he knew who he was all along, and I shall never see him again. Truthfully, I do not know what I might have said to him had he still been at Longbourn when I received Miss Darcy's letter."

Her sister rubbed her back and Elizabeth felt badly for imposing upon her when Jane had only recently begun to recover from her own heartache.

"What do you plan to do? Did you not say that he came to Town? What if it is true and he is here?"

Elizabeth shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. She'd considered this. Coming to London might not have been the wisest thing to do, but she hadn't had another option.

"I don't know, Jane. I couldn't stay at Longbourn anymore, waiting for news, or waiting for it to become clear he'd never return so I came here. If I see him... I don't know. Part of me wants to confront him, demand answers. But another part of me is terrified. What if he really is as terrible as everyone says?"

Jane pulled Elizabeth into a comforting embrace. “We’ll face it together.”

Elizabeth clung to her sister, drawing strength from her presence. “Thank you, Jane. I just wish I knew what to do. Everything feels so uncertain.”

Aunt Gardiner, who had been standing quietly by the door, stepped forward. “Lizzy, Jane, I do beg your pardon for listening in but I could not help it. I worry about the both of you. Rest assured, whatever happens, you have family here to support you. We shall figure this out together.”

Elizabeth smiled, grateful for the unwavering support of her family. “Thank you, Aunt. I don’t know what I would do without you all.”

“Well, I have done nothing yet. But I plan to. Pray, would you care to go for a picnic this weekend? We could go to Hyde Park.”

Elizabeth looked at Jane who nodded encouragingly and then, with a smile, she agreed. The time for grief and sorrow had to be over and she had to learn to move forward, even if that was without Georgie.

20 thd March 1812

The sky over London was a brilliant expanse of blue, unmarred by even a hint of cloud. The spring sunshine shone brightly, casting a golden hue over the lush greenery of Hyde Park. Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, accompanied by their Aunt Gardiner, had decided to take full advantage of the beautiful weather by spending the day outdoors just like their aunt had suggested. They had chosen a spot near the Serpentine, where the gentle lapping of the water against the shore provided a soothing backdrop to their picnic.

The last few days had passed like a whirlwind. Between Jane and her cousins, Elizabeth felt as though she were busy all the time and she'd found that distracted her from thinking of Georgie too much. At night, she was often too tired to consider her fate and sleep took her away quickly, much to her relief.

The picnic blanket was spread out beneath the shelter of a large oak tree, its leaves rustling softly in the light breeze. The blanket was a cheerful checkered pattern of red and white, and atop it was a hamper of treats Uncle Gardiner had ordered from Fortnum & Mason.

Elizabeth reclined on the blanket, feeling the soft grass beneath her fingers. Jane sat beside her, her expression serene, though her eyes betrayed a flicker of concern. Her older sister had seemingly abandoned the melancholy that had gripped her and replaced it with anxiety over Elizabeth. Aunt Gardiner, always the picture of grace, set out the plates and cutlery with a deft hand.

"Such a perfect day," Elizabeth remarked, stretching out and letting the sun warm her face. She was determined to recover from her own bout of melancholy and would not let her aunt and sister worry about her anymore. "It feels like an age since we've had weather like this."

Jane smiled gently, her gaze drifting to the sparkling water. "Indeed, Lizzy. It's so peaceful here. Just what we needed."

Aunt Gardiner nodded in agreement as she settled herself comfortably on the blanket. "It's wonderful to have you both here. A little respite from the usual hustle and bustle is always welcome. I am glad we left your cousins behind. I do adore them all, but sometimes it is nice to be among us ladies, is it not?"

Elizabeth glanced at Jane, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Indeed, I agree. Although I must say, you have not shared much news from home," she challenged.

“Oh Jane, you wouldn’t believe the latest dramas at Longbourn.” Elizabeth said with a laugh.

Jane raised an eyebrow, a curious smile playing on her lips. “Oh? Do tell.”

“Well,” Elizabeth began, her voice laced with amusement, “it seems Kitty has taken quite a fancy to Mr Faraday, the greengrocer. They’ve been seen walking together on several occasions, and Mama is positively delighted because while he isn’t titled, he is quite well-to-do, what with three shops in three towns as Mama likes to say.”

Jane’s eyes widened in surprise. “Mr Faraday? I hadn’t realised Kitty was so interested in him.”

Elizabeth chuckled, “Oh yes, ever since she and Lydia had their falling out she has been more independent and Mama is already imagining wedding bells. She’s even taken to discussing dowries and bridal gowns. And as you can imagine, Lydia is green with envy.”

Aunt Gardiner poured herself a glass of elderflower cordial and looked up with a smile. “Your mother does have a penchant for getting ahead of herself, doesn’t she?”

“Indeed she does,” Elizabeth replied, her tone affectionate. “Although at present she is a little distracted on account of something she believes Lady Lucas did to spite her.”

Jane leaned in, her curiosity clearly piqued. “What did Lady Lucas do?”

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Apparently, Lady Lucas made an offhand remark about Mama’s new bonnet, suggesting that it was perhaps a little too flamboyant for her age. Mama thinks it is part of a campaign to shame her and that Lady Lucas is quite envious of her.”

Jane stifled a laugh, her hand covering her mouth. “Oh dear. I can only imagine Mama’s nerves are troubling her.”

Elizabeth grinned. “She was utterly scandalised and called for her smelling salts. She declared that Lady Lucas had no taste.”

Aunt Gardiner chuckled softly. “Your mother does have a flair for the dramatic, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth sighed, her laughter subsiding. “Yes, she does. But despite all the drama, there’s a certain charm to it. It wouldn’t be home without it.”

Jane reached out and squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “I miss it all, even the chaos. But it’s wonderful to be here with you, Lizzy. And with you, Aunt.”

Aunt Gardiner smiled. “It’s a joy to have you both here. And, while Town is wonderful, of course, I’ve been thinking. Perhaps we could extend this little respite. How would you both feel about a tour of the north?”

Elizabeth’s eyes lit up with excitement. “A tour of the north? That sounds splendid, Aunt!”

Jane’s smile widened. “Oh, that would be wonderful! I’ve always wanted to see more of the countryside.”

Aunt Gardiner looked thoughtful. “I was thinking we could visit the Peak District. The scenery is quite breathtaking, and there’s so much to see and do. And, of course, we could include a visit to Derbyshire. You know of course that is where I am from. Your uncle has suggested the trip for all of us to take together.”

At the mention of Derbyshire, Jane’s eyes brightened with curiosity. “Derbyshire? Do

you happen to know the Darcy family?”

Elizabeth gasped at the sound of the name but looked eagerly at her aunt. She wasn't sure what, if anything, her aunt knew about the Darcy's involvement in Jane's and her current predicament but she was curious to hear her opinion.

Aunt Gardiner smiled. “It is curious you should ask. Is it because your Mr Bingley was friendly with them?”

Jane nodded but didn't look at Elizabeth. “Yes, I've heard much about them from others but I thought perhaps if you knew them...”

“I've met the Darcys on a few occasions. Mr Darcy's estate, Pemberley, is one of the finest in the country,” Aunt Gardiner said as she reached for one of the scones. “Though I don't know them very well, I've always heard very good things about Mr Darcy. He's known to be a very respectable gentleman, and his sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, is quite charming.”

Elizabeth's expression grew thoughtful, “You speak so highly of him, Aunt. But from all I know of him, he is high in the instep. It is he who helped convince Mr Bingley to abandon poor Jane.”

Jane, always the voice of reason, gently interjected. “Lizzy, I told you, I do not bear him a grudge at all. It was Mr Bingley's decision.”

“Well, if he is anything like his aunt, Lady Catherine, then I am sure it is true and he is as I suspected,” she declared though Georgiana Darcy's kind words about her brother still rang in her head. Why was she so affixed on being angry at Mr Darcy? Was it because it was easier than dealing with her disappointment and anger at Georgie and their situation? Was the elusive northerner nothing more than a scapegoat to pin her confusing feelings on?

Aunt Gardiner, perhaps sensing the gravity of the conversation, leaned in. “You need to tell me everything that has happened, my dears. But I can tell these are troubling times for you both. Maybe a tour of the north would do you both a world of good.”

Silence fell over their small group while Jane squeezed Elizabeth’s hand.

“Our aunt is correct. We shall go on this trip and forget all about the Wickhams, Darcys, and Bingleys of the world for a while.”

Elizabeth glanced at Jane, her heart full of gratitude for her sister’s unwavering support. “Thank you, Jane. For always being here for me.”

Jane smiled softly. “And thank you, Lizzy. For always being so strong. We’ll get through this together.”

As the afternoon wore on, they continued to enjoy their picnic, sharing stories and memories. Elizabeth found herself relaxing, the warmth of the sun and the company of her loved ones easing her troubled mind. As the day turned into late afternoon, they packed up their belongings and returned home, with Elizabeth feeling a little lighter for the first time in weeks.

Elizabeth

23 rdh March 1812

“I would like to avoid Sheffield,” Jane said as they planned the trip ahead. “I’d rather not see all the buildings and streets Charles spoke of. It would only remind me of him.”

Elizabeth nodded and crossed Sheffield off the list of places they wished to visit. After a pleasant weekend they had decided to plan for the trip in earnest.

“Madam,” the butler’s clipped voice broke through the excited chatter, “you have a caller. Shall I show them in?”

Aunt Gardiner rose to her feet, “Thank you Algernon. Them, you say? That is rather curious, we weren’t expecting visitors. Do excuse me girls, I shall see who it is,” she said as she followed Algernon to the entrance hall.

A few moments later her aunt returned. “Jane, Elizabeth, we do indeed have callers,” she announced. Her wary visage and the way she bit her lip betraying the obvious tension. “Mr Bingley and a friend.”

Elizabeth glanced at Jane. Her sister’s face was drained of colour, her eyes wide with shock. “Mr Bingley?” Jane whispered. “Why would he call on me? Why now?”

Elizabeth reached out and squeezed her sister’s hand. “Perhaps he has heard you are in Town and has come to make things right.” She said, hoping this was true. Weeks

ago, she would have told Mr Bingley to leave her sister be, but now she had to admit, she wished for her sister to have at least a sense of finality. Knowing she might never get such a resolution with Georgie had shown her just how important it was for her sister to have the possibility.

“This is your chance, Jane. Go and speak with him. You deserve to know his intentions. And at the very least, you can tell him how upset you were with him. Do you wish me to join you?”

Jane nodded, her fingers trembling slightly as she placed her teacup on the table.

“Yes, please,” she mumbled. Then, together, they rose and stepped into the hall, Elizabeth’s heart pounding with.

They entered the drawing room and Elizabeth spotted Mr Bingley pacing before the fireplace. He looked as handsome and charming as ever, though genuinely troubled as he walked grooves into the floor.

“Mr Bingley,” Jane said softly and he stopped. The moment he spotted Jane, his face lit up as did hers, and Elizabeth knew at once that the two of them still held affection for one another. Perhaps she had been wrong to judge Mr Bingley and perhaps her sister might still find her happy ending with this man. Yes, indeed perhaps—

“Elizabeth,” a familiar voice interrupted her musings and she looked up at the man who’d stepped out from the corner where he’d been looking out of the window.

“Ge...Georgie?” the name hardly crossed her lips as she backed a step.

Her mind raced, trying to process the sight before her. It could not be. Why was he here? And with Bingley? “What are you doing here?”

Georgie's eyes met hers, a mix of relief and determination in his gaze. "I've found out who I am, Elizabeth," he said.

Who he was? Was he not Mr Wickham after all? She felt as though the entire world was spinning around her and she wasn't sure if she should be happy, upset, scared, or elated.

Elizabeth blinked, her heart leaping with a flicker of hope. "You aren't Mr Wickham?" she asked. Could this be true? Could they have been wrong?

He shook his head. "No, I am not. I came upon two young ladies, sisters to Bingley here, and they knew me. I've been wrong to think I might be Wickham. We all were. It's been a few days since I found out, but it is the truth."

Elizabeth clasped her hand around Jane's, a smile breaking out on her face. She had been wrong to fear the worst. Oh, how terrible a person she had been to think her Georgie could be a rake, a horrid blackguard.

"Oh, Lizzy," Jane said beside her, squeezing her hand. "How wonderful. And Mr Bingley, we must thank you for this, I imagine."

However, as Elizabeth's eyes flickered to Mr Bingley, she noted the tension in his shoulders, reflected in Georgie's own. Why hadn't he rushed to her to hug her yet? Was it because of the company? Or was there more? Then, it came to her.

He wasn't Mr Wickham, but he hadn't told her who he was. Bracing herself, she took a breath. "If you are not Mr Wickham, then, who, pray tell, are you?"

Georgie looked at his shoes and it was only then she noted the difference in his attire. He wore a fine suit with a striped silk waistcoat. A golden pocket watch peeped out of his pocket and he held a top hat in his hand. His attire spoke of wealth. Immense

wealth.

“I am Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

The words hit Elizabeth like a physical blow, and she felt as if the ground had shifted beneath her feet.

“Oh, oh...” she stammered and swayed slightly.

Jane, sensing her sister’s distress, stepped closer, her concern evident. “Lizzy, are you all right?”

Elizabeth nodded weakly, struggling to regain her composure. “Yes, yes, I’m fine. It’s just... You are Mr Darcy.” How could this be? This was worse! Mr Darcy was a horrible man who inserted his nose into things that did not concern him. A man who had judged her sister harshly without meeting her. But then, her thoughts went back to Miss Darcy’s letter and the praise bestowed upon him.

Mr Bingley stepped forward, his gaze earnest as it rested on Jane. “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, I know this is a lot to take in but it is true. Darcy here has been missing for weeks and my sisters met him quite by chance. It was serendipitous, indeed. I hope you can forgive my sudden appearance but when he told me he had been staying with your family and that Jane was here —” he turned his gaze to her. “I had to see you. There is so much I need to say.”

Jane blushed. “Mr Bingley, I- I thought you would have known by now I was in Town and chose not to see me.”

Mr Bingley smiled, his eyes filled with affection. “I did not know you were here. I only heard a few days ago and I couldn’t stay away any longer. I thought surely Darcy’s appearance was a sign that I had to come here. Please, Jane, will you give me

a moment of your time so we might speak in private? I know there are things Darcy wishes to tell your sister in private also.”

Elizabeth stared at her sister and wanted to beg her to stay, for she did not want to stay alone with Georgie. Or Mr Darcy. Whoever he was. However, she knew she could not impose upon her sister now, in what might be one of the most important moments of her life. Thus, she let go of her hand.

“It is quite alright,” she said and watched as Jane led Mr Bingley into the adjacent music room, their aunt following as a chaperone, positioning herself between the door so she could serve as such for both of her nieces.

Elizabeth’s attention shifted back to the man she now knew as Mr Darcy, her mind racing with questions. “Georgie,” she began, her voice shaking, “I can hardly believe it. I do not know what to say.” She realised she’d called him by the wrong name and wanted to correct herself but calling him Mr Darcy made her stomach clench.

“I do not know what to say, Elizabeth. I did not know, truly. I did not. I still do not know who I am. I mean I have been told and I have been to my home, it seems I have a home in Town with a lot of fine clothing, and books and...” he shrugged. “It is quite extraordinary. I am told it is all mine but I can’t believe it. I feel like a fraud wearing this suit, though I found it in a closet in my chamber. I have a footman and an estate in Derbyshire, if you can believe it. I seem to be rather rich indeed, I could take us on any trip we want and I have a family...” The smile on his face touched her heart because it belonged not to Mr Darcy but to Georgie, the man she’d come to love. And the way he spoke about his newfound wealth was so unaffected, as if he could not believe it. He sounded so much like her beloved Georgie.

And yet, he was Mr Darcy. And she knew what sort of man he was.

“You have a family,” she said and crossed her arms, feeling the walls rise up around

her heart.

Mr Darcy nodded. “Yes, Elizabeth. The blonde woman I saw in my flashes was my sister, Georgiana. I cannot remember her but I saw paintings of her and I know it is she. She has written to me already from our aunt’s home—can you believe that Lady Catherine, who had me believe I am Wickham, is my aunt? I shall have to talk to her about that when I see her. In any case, I know who I am, though I cannot remember. But perhaps once I see my home I will.”

She looked up, her tongue running over her teeth as she thought of something to say. “You are returning home?”

He met her gaze, “I am. My aunt and sister will set off for London tomorrow and then we will all travel to Pemberley—which is my home—and we will go there to see if they can help me remember. The physician thinks now that I know who I am, seeing my surroundings will help me.”

She swallowed hard, trying to wrap her head around what had just been revealed. He was Mr Darcy. Her sweet Georgie. How could this be? And why wasn’t she angrier?

“I see. But how did you come to be wearing Mr Wickham’s coat? And how did you come to be where we found you?”

He shook his head slowly. “I do not know the answer to your first question. For the second, Bingley tells me I offered to come to Netherfield to meet with Mr Morris to finalise the closing of the estate. It is ironic that I came to meet with him after all, but not as myself.”

“I suppose we might never know,” she said quietly, her thoughts racing. “So, you are leaving tomorrow?”

“I am, but Elizabeth—one of the reasons I am here is not just because I wanted to tell you in person. Indeed, I just found out you were here. When I first told Bingley that Jane was in Town, he wanted to come here at once. He made enquiries to find out how long she was staying as he did not want to miss her and found that you were here also. Thus, we decided to come together—however, I wanted to first figure out what I could do about everything.” His words came tumbling out and he raised a hand to stop himself. “I meant I wanted to first arrange everything. There has been so much uncertainty between us and I cannot make you go through more, so I wanted to have everything in place before I came here.”

“Have things in place?” she asked, utterly confused now.

“I know that you think you hate me and knowing that I was the reason for your sister and Bingley to part makes me hate myself. And certainly, my actions against your sister are unforgivable. But still, I feel strongly that I am not as bad as we thought. I have been assured by my sister, and Bingley, and others that I am not a terrible man at all and I think you will see I am simply Georgie, just richer and more elevated.” He smiled but she saw something in his eyes that gave her pause. He was scared. Scared of whatever he wanted to say next.

“Elizabeth, I have been worried about seeing you for days because I fear you might hate me still but I feel that we can find a way. I can show you that I am the man you think I am. I am not a bad man, truly. And I want to marry you still. I want to be with you and thus I’ve instructed my aunt to make arrangements at Pemberley for you, for us. That is, if you would still have me?”

Elizabeth’s lips parted. He wanted her to come to Pemberley with him? Her mind whirled with confusion. Mr Darcy—her Georgie—was asking her to come to Pemberley with him. To leave everything behind and plunge into a future fraught with uncertainties. She could hardly believe it.

“I hardly know who you are,” she argued. “How can you expect me to come to Pemberley with you?”

“I am still the same man, Elizabeth,” he insisted gently. “I am Georgie. I am the man you love, just with another name.”

“But I have hated Mr Darcy for so long. There is enough of evidence to suggest that he was a haughty, arrogant man.”

He nodded, his expression sombre. “I have examined my actions, and they were foolish. But I am sure I have learned from my mistakes.”

“How can you be so sure?” she challenged, her eyes flashing. “What if you regain your memories and decide you were right to part Jane and Mr Bingley?”

“I would never,” he vowed. “Besides, Bingley wants to marry Jane—he is proposing to her right now!”

Elizabeth’s heart swelled with joy at the news, but it was quickly overshadowed by the chaos of the past few weeks. “I am glad to hear it, but I find this hard to reconcile, there has been so much uncertainty.”

“There was disagreement, certainly, but you still agreed to marry me,” he reminded her softly.

“I was wrong,” she whispered. “When I thought you were a rake named Mr Wickham, it all came crashing down. What if it happens again?”

“This time it is different. I know who I am, and others know who I am.”

She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. “I cannot allow myself to risk it. What

if you regain your memories and are aghast about marrying someone like me? If you thought my dear sister was an unsuitable match for your friend, then where does that leave me?"

He stepped closer, his eyes pleading. "Elizabeth, please reconsider. Come to Pemberley with me. See that I have changed."

She was torn. She loved Georgie, but she couldn't forget the pain of the last few weeks when she thought he was a terrible man and she had made a mistake loving him. How could she be sure she wasn't wrong now? How could she risk her heart again? And how could he?

The idea that he could one day wake up and remember who he was and revert back to the man who thought her beloved Jane not good enough for Mr Bingley grew in her mind. "I cannot, I will not come to Pemberley with you. I loved you, and I was happy with you... with Georgie," she said. "But I cannot risk my heart again for an uncertain future."

"Elizabeth, please," he begged.

But she turned and fled, tears streaming down her face as she rushed to her chamber. She could hear him calling after her, but she couldn't stop. The pain in her chest was unbearable, the weight of her decision crushing her. She had loved him with all her heart, but she couldn't endure the torment of uncertainty again. She collapsed on her bed, sobbing, the ache of her broken heart echoing in the silence of the room.

Darcy

4th May 1812

Pemberley House, Derbyshire

Darcy sat in the drawing room of Pemberley, the grandeur and elegance of his surroundings offering little comfort. He had been back at his home for six weeks now, surrounded by his sister and cousin, Richard. Their aunt, Catherine, and her daughter, Anne, had stayed with them for a while but had since moved on to Matlock, where Darcy's uncle resided. He had met his uncle as well, during a recent visit, though it had not jogged his memory.

Indeed, his memories were slow to return, though fragments of a past life were coming together piece by piece. Georgiana, his beloved sister, had been instrumental in this process. Her gentle recounting of their shared history helped bridge the gap between the man he remembered being and the man he was now trying to rediscover.

The fire crackled in the hearth, casting a glow over the room. Darcy stared into the flames, his thoughts consumed by Elizabeth Bennet. Her image was imprinted on his mind—her sharp wit, her sparkling eyes, her fierce independence. He missed her terribly and found himself wishing more and more that she would give him a chance to prove himself, to show her the man he truly was. Not a day had passed without her image haunting him or his heart longing for hers. He'd received news about her by way of Bingley, who'd settled once more at Netherfield in preparation for his wedding.

He had told him how Elizabeth fared—and how she too longed for Darcy, at least in his friend's estimation.

Georgiana entered the room, her presence a soothing balm to his troubled thoughts. "Fitzwilliam," she began, "how are you feeling today?"

Darcy turned to her, offering a small smile. "Better, I think. I had a memory earlier of a woman with a silver cross around her neck reading me a story. She smelled of peppermint."

"Your governess, Mrs Maple," Georgiana said, slipping into a seat beside him.

"Mrs Maple, yes. The name feels familiar. It's strange, Georgiana. I feel like I'm rediscovering myself. I was scared back when I thought I was George Wickham. I feared what I might discover and the same was true when I found out who I really am, but now I find it is not quite as awful."

Georgiana smiled, her eyes filled with tenderness. "I'm glad to hear that. You have always been a good man, Fitzwilliam. It's just taking time for you to remember." She paused and bit her lip before placing her hand on his arm. "You were thinking of her again, weren't you?"

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I miss her, Georgiana. I miss Elizabeth terribly. I wish I could see her again, explain everything to her."

Georgiana moved to sit beside him, placing a comforting hand on his arm. "Perhaps you will have the chance, Fitzwilliam. Mr Bingley has invited us to Netherfield for his wedding to Jane. Elizabeth will be there."

Darcy's heart leapt at the prospect. "Do you think she would be willing to speak with me?"

“I think she cares for you, Fitzwilliam,” Georgiana said softly. “She may be angry and confused, but those emotions come from a place of deep feeling. She would not be so affected if she did not care. Mr Bingley said as much in his last letter. Oh Fitz, I do feel dreadful for writing to her back when I thought she was being misled by Mr Wickham. Do you think my second letter might have helped?”

Georgiana, after discovering all that had happened, had decided to write another letter to Elizabeth, apologising for her mistake. Darcy was certain she had also sung his praises again, something for which he was grateful though he didn’t think it helped anything, as Elizabeth had never returned an answer.

Darcy nodded, taking solace in his sister’s words. “Do not fret. I think the moment she found out I was Darcy, nothing related to Wickham mattered anymore. I do hope you are correct, and I might see her again one day. I long to. Though I am uncertain if I ought to attend the wedding, what if I am not welcome in Longbourn?”

Indeed, he’d fretted for some weeks now over the prospect. He wanted to go to the wedding, quite badly too but he wasn’t sure if it was the correct thing to do. He didn’t want to ruin the day by appearing there. He knew Bingley would understand this, but Darcy still hadn’t been able to make a decision.

“Fitzwilliam? Georgie?” Richard called then, and Darcy flinched for a moment at the sound of the name Elizabeth had called him for so long. That it was Georgiana’s pet name had explained why he’d felt such a connection.

“Here,” he called, and his cousin soon entered the room. His presence was always a welcome one, his humour and straightforward nature providing a counterbalance to Darcy’s more serious demeanour.

“There you are,” Richard greeted, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “What are you two conspiring about now?”

Georgiana laughed, a light, musical sound. “We were just discussing Fitzwilliam’s memories and his thoughts about Elizabeth Bennet. And if he wishes to attend the wedding.”

Richard raised an eyebrow, his expression turning serious. “Elizabeth Bennet, eh? You’ve spoken of her often, Darcy. She seems to have made quite an impression on you. I think you ought to go to Hertfordshire and win her back. I’ll come along and vouch for you. Georgie will as well, I am sure.”

Darcy nodded, his gaze thoughtful. “She has captured my heart, Richard. More than I ever thought possible. I find myself longing to see her again, to explain everything. Yet, I know it won’t make a difference. The moment I came between her sister and Bingley, her opinion of me was lost forever.”

Richard took a seat opposite them, his demeanour turning more contemplative. “It seems rather pig-headed, if you ask me. A man can make mistakes. Besides, you did all you could to put her sister and Bingley back together. You almost lost your life doing it.”

Darcy sighed, leaning back in his chair. “What do you mean?”

Richard frowned. “Your journey to Netherfield. Surely you know you only went to meet Miss Jane Bennet to see if you made a mistake?”

“No,” Darcy said, slipping to the edge of his seat. “I thought I went to close up Netherfield for Bingley.”

“You did, but you wanted to take the opportunity to see Jane Bennet to make sure that you did not make a mistake when you advised Bingley to leave her. You were quite distraught. I thought you had been told this by now,” Richard said but then slapped a hand in front of his head. “Of course not. Nobody could have told you but

me. I do not know what I was thinking.”

“Pray, what is this you speak of?” Darcy asked and slipped forward in his seat. “I went to Netherfield to meet Jane Bennet?”

“Yes,” Richard explained. “You were so upset with yourself for advising Charles to leave Jane because he was so melancholy you wanted to meet her in person to make sure. That is why you left. Telling Bingley you wanted to see to Netherfield was a mere ruse to go there. Somehow I thought that was why you ended with the Bennets to begin with. I should have said something sooner.”

Darcy shook his head. Richard had come as soon as he’d received word about Darcy’s condition and stayed with him at Pemberley for a week. However, he had to return to his regiment soon thereafter and had only been back another week. During his first visit, things had been so chaotic they hadn’t spoken much in detail, and during this visit Darcy had been better so the circumstances of his journey hadn’t come up.

Darcy sighed, leaning back in his chair. “So I felt badly about what I did. I had regrets.”

“You were in high dudgeon, my friend,” Richard said.

Darcy could hardly believe what he was hearing. So he had been remorseful even before he met Jane.

“I wish I had remembered this when I spoke to Elizabeth. Her worry was that I’d recover my memory and once again think the Bennets beneath Bingley’s touch and certainly my own. It might have served to convince her that would not be the case.”

Richard leaned forward, his expression earnest. “Darcy, you’re a good man. You

have been a little high in the instep in the past and you've made mistakes, but who hasn't? The important thing is that you recognise them and seek to make amends. If Elizabeth Bennet is as intelligent and perceptive as you say she is, she will see that too."

Georgiana nodded in agreement. "Richard is right, Fitzwilliam. You must not give up hope. This was a terrible shock to her. She loved you when you were a man without a past, then she told you were a horrible rake, and then you turned out to be the man she'd told herself to despise. It is a lot to take in. But she's had time now. Go there. The wedding is in two weeks but there's nothing stopping you from going earlier. You have always been a man of integrity and honour. Show her that."

Darcy felt a surge of determination. "You are both correct. I must try. For her, and for myself."

Darcy sat in the carriage, the rhythmic clatter of the horses' hooves providing a soothing backdrop to his thoughts. He gazed out the window, watching as the familiar countryside of Hertfordshire unfolded before him. The rolling hills, the patchwork fields, and the quaint villages all stirred a sense of nostalgia within him.

Georgiana sat opposite, her eyes fixed on him, "Fitzwilliam," she began softly, "how are you feeling?"

Darcy turned to her, a small smile playing at his lips. "It's strange, Georgiana. As we draw closer to Netherfield, to Longbourn, I find myself feeling at home. These roads, these fields—they feel familiar, comforting even."

Georgiana smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. It must be strange having firm memories of this place, but still so few of your own past. Though you do remember more each

day, I must say.”

He nodded, his gaze turning inward. “Yes, I am. Bits and pieces, fragments but enough so that I feel I can piece together things. Nothing is as clear as the memories I made here, I am sad to say.”

Georgiana reached out and took his hand, her grip firm and reassuring. “In time all will come back. You’ve come so far, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy took a deep breath, his thoughts turning to Elizabeth. “Enough to know that Elizabeth was not entirely wrong in her estimation of who I am. I was a fool. I was arrogant. I deserved to be taken down a little. And I remember the mistakes I made—how my pride and my assumptions blinded me to the truth. I was a fool, Georgiana. A fool for coming between Bingley and Jane and a fool not fighting harder for Elizabeth.”

Georgiana’s eyes filled with compassion. “You’ve learned from those mistakes. All is well between Charles and Jane. They’re to be wed this week! And you haven’t missed your chance yet. You have the opportunity to show Elizabeth who you truly are.”

Darcy looked at his sister, his heart swelling with gratitude. “Thank you, Georgiana. Your faith in me means more than you know.” Though he still lacked concrete memories of their life together, he knew Georgiana. The feelings he had for her were real and he knew this was enough for now.

She squeezed his hand, her eyes shining with determination. “You deserve happiness, Fitzwilliam. And I believe that Elizabeth is a part of that happiness.”

Darcy gave his sister a warm smile, he was pleased that he was not making this journey alone.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Darcy nodded, his resolve firm. “Yes, I am.”

As the carriage drew closer to Netherfield Park, Darcy couldn’t help but feel a sense of hope. The familiar surroundings, the memories of the past, and the promise of the future all combined to fill him with a renewed sense of purpose.

Georgiana linked her arm with his, her presence a comforting anchor. “Remember, Fitzwilliam, you haven’t missed your chance. Show Elizabeth the man you truly are.”

Darcy smiled, his heart filled with determination. “I will, Georgiana. I promise.” The closer they had got to Netherfield and Longbourn, the more he had longed to see her... and the more uncertain he became that the one thing he wanted more than anything—to win her back—could be accomplished.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth sat in the drawing room at Longbourn, her sisters Jane and Mary by her side. Jane had spent much of the last few days at Netherfield, planning her wedding to Charles Bingley. His sisters had not accompanied him to Netherfield, since they both remained opposed to the wedding. Mr Bingley, however, appeared to have learned from his mistakes and had stood strong. He would marry Jane, no matter what.

And while Jane struggled with her soon to be sisters-in-laws' misgivings, she was determined to win them over one day. While her oldest sister was at last contented, the same could not be said for Elizabeth.

"Lizzy, you have been so quiet since we returned from London weeks ago. Is it Mr Darcy? I know it must be," Jane said, her voice laced with concern.

Elizabeth sighed, her gaze distant. "I can't deny that I miss him, Jane. I miss Mr Darcy. I find myself thinking about him all the time."

Mary, who had been quietly reading a book, looked up, her expression thoughtful. "Do you regret not going with him to Pemberley then, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth shook her head slowly. "It would have been a mistake at the time but a part of me wishes I had gone. I wish ... I wish he hadn't turned out to be who he was in the end."

Jane reached out, taking Elizabeth's hand in hers. "Mr Bingley speaks so highly of

Mr Darcy, Lizzy. You must see that he is a good man. You might have disliked him, but you didn't even know him. And from what Charles says, Georgie is much like Mr Darcy—minus some of the haughtiness. Charles adores Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth looked at her sister, her eyes filled with uncertainty. “I admit that I have been wrong about Mr Darcy. I've known this for some while now. Not only has Charles praised him at every opportunity, but his sister wrote to me again as you know. I did not reply for I did not know what to say, but it was clear that she adores her brother greatly. I regret the things I have thought about him. I know it wasn't rational to do so especially after you forgave him. But still, I feel that it was correct not to go. What if—”

Mary interrupted her. “Lizzy, you cannot live your life by ‘what ifs’. Do you love Mr Darcy or not? For at the end of the day, he is your Georgie. And you have moped and been Friday-faced for quite long enough. You must finally face reality.”

Elizabeth looked at Mary, surprised by the outburst and yet grateful because it was what she'd needed. “I do love him, Mary. Seeing Jane and Mr Bingley together, and even Kitty with her greengrocer, has made me long for that happiness even more. But he's so far away and it would not be proper for me to write to him. Besides, time has passed, what if he—”

“No what ifs!” Mary bellowed now and slammed the book down. “Jane, tell her before I need Mama's smelling salts.

“Tell me what?” Elizabeth asked at once.

Jane smiled then, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Let me just say that it is a good thing you said that, Lizzy, because I happen to know that Mr Darcy is on his way here.”

Elizabeth's eyes widened in shock. "What? Mr Darcy is coming here?"

"Yes!" Jane said with a broad smile. "Charles asked him to come to the wedding, but we didn't know if he would. But then he suddenly agreed. A letter came just a week ago. In fact, he should have arrived this morning and is at Netherfield right now."

Elizabeth's heart raced at the news. "Mr Darcy is here? At Netherfield?"

Jane nodded, her expression filled with excitement. "Yes, Lizzy. Let's go to Netherfield and see him."

"I do not know if—" Elizabeth started.

"None of that," Mary replied, joined by Jane.

"Indeed, you told me to speak to Charles and I did and now we are to be wed. Now I am the one to tell you to speak to Mr Darcy."

Elizabeth took a deep breath and rose, taking both her sisters' hands into her own and then, the three of them made their way to Netherfield to find out if Elizabeth might yet find her happily ever after—or if Mr Darcy had ultimately decided that her rejection of him had been too harsh to forgive.

Darcy

Darcy stepped out of the carriage and turned to assist Georgiana. The elegant sight of Netherfield's facade greeted them, surrounded by lush lawns and vibrant flower beds. It stood in stark contrast to the last time Darcy had been here. Had it really only been a few weeks? Georgiana looked around with wide eyes, her expression a mix of awe and curiosity.

"This place is charming," she said.

Darcy smiled at her. "Indeed, it has its own charm. Bingley chose well."

"I believe you advised him on the suitability of the estate," Georgiana said with a smile.

"Did I? Well, perhaps I should congratulate myself too," he laughed. "The last time I was here, I met with the owner about the possibility of taking a position as the caretaker of the estate."

Georgiana laughed softly. "I can't imagine you as a caretaker, brother. It seems so out of character."

Darcy chuckled. "It does, doesn't it? But back then, I didn't know who I was. I had wondered why I was so skilled when it came to estate management, but never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd turn out to be a gentleman with an estate of my own. Still, a part of me wished that dream could have been true. Living a simple life with Elizabeth felt like the grandest of dreams."

He thought back to a conversation with Elizabeth, where they had jested about his true identity, wondering if he was a prince, a pauper, or something in between. His heart ached with the memory—and longing.

As they approached the entrance, the door opened, and Bingley stepped out, his face breaking into a broad smile. “Darcy! Georgiana! Welcome to Netherfield.”

Darcy returned the smile and shook Bingley’s hand. “It is good to see you, Bingley. Thank you for having us.”

Bingley laughed, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “I was thrilled to receive your letter. I’d feared you’d miss my wedding entirely. Now, pray, do you remember me yet?”

“I remember bits and pieces,” Darcy said, for it was true. His memory was returning in small snippets but there were enough of them now to paint a picture.

“I remember, for instance, the time at Eton when you attempted to scale a tree and got stuck. You were going after apples, if I remember correctly.”

Bingley chuckled, shaking his head. “I remember that all too well. And I also remember you laughing at my predicament.”

“That I do not recall,” Darcy said and winked, for he did remember very well indeed. It was a joy to recover these memories, even if they were fleeting.

Georgiana greeted Bingley. “It is lovely to finally see Netherfield, Mr Bingley.”

Bingley bowed slightly. “And it is lovely to see you here, Miss Darcy. I hope the journey was not too tiring.”

Georgiana nodded. “Not at all, thank you.”

Bingley turned back to Darcy, his expression growing more serious. “Elizabeth should be here soon. I sent word to Longbourn that you were arriving this morning.”

Darcy’s heart sank at the thought and at the same time, he could not wait. Yet the old worry remained and he found himself doubting once more.

“Do you think she—”

“Georgie!”

Darcy’s heart skipped a beat at the sound of the familiar voice.

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth didn't know when she had started running, but before she knew it, her legs were carrying her across the driveway of Netherfield Park and towards Mr Darcy. He looked as she remembered him, and yet different. He had the same kind face, the same large eyes, but he was dressed like a gentleman, as he had been when he'd come to call on her in Cheapside.

All her worries flashed through her mind. Did he know who he was? Did he even want to see her? What if he had changed his mind? Yet at the same time, the thoughts and feelings that told her he was still her beloved Georgie grew stronger by the moment.

The closer she got to him, the more she felt that her feelings were right. He was her Georgie. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did.

"Elizabeth," he called. "Lizzy!" He called again and ran down the stairs. Behind him, she saw a blonde-haired young woman dressed in a pretty white dress, with a serene smile on her lips that made her look almost angelic. That had to be Georgiana, his sister.

Beside her Mr Bingley flashed a wide grin as well.

"Lizzy!" he called again and then came to a stop. She ran three more steps and then she was in his arms. She felt herself being lifted off the ground and whirled through the air by him, and suddenly it was all clear.

Why had she doubted him? Of course, she had her reasons, and her reasons had been valid. But still, in this moment, as she was in his arms and inhaled his scent and felt his breath against her ear, it all seemed foolish. In her heart, she had always known her Georgie, even when—

He set her down then and stepped back, though only a fraction. He wrapped his hands around hers, and she realised that she had not been wearing gloves, even though they were going to visit polite company.

Still, she didn't care.

“Elizabeth, I was afraid that you would not want to see me. Our last meeting was so fraught with difficulty.”

She shook her head. “I did not know how to react. I had grown so comfortable in my dislike of Mr Darcy, I...” She stopped and looked up at him. “You. I told myself for so long that you were a villain, never wanting to see that perhaps I had been wrong, that there was more to you.”

“There was,” he said, smiling. “My cousin informed me only a few days ago that the reason I came to Netherfield in the first place was not just to handle affairs for Bingley. It was to meet your sister, your family.”

She stepped back, totally shocked by this. “Truly?”

“Yes, I did not remember it, and he did not think to tell me until just recently. He said while I was staying in London, I was quite distraught by what had happened. Bingley was so very upset—and that I do remember now—over the loss of his connection to Jane that I began to doubt my actions. I was driven to come to Longbourn to meet Jane, to see if I had made a mistake.”

He had looked to right a wrong he had created, Elizabeth realised, when he was Mr Darcy, before he had been with them. Before everything. He had had a conscience, he had had a desire to make sure his friend was happy. He hadn't been a villain. Misguided, perhaps, but even before he lost his memory, he had understood the mistakes he made and had tried to rectify them.

“Oh, Mr... I do not know what to call you.”

“It seems people call me Fitz, William, or plain Darcy. But honestly, I miss being called Georgie. If you like, you can continue to call me that in the future. I mean, if we have a future, I very much hope we do.”

“You do?” she said. “I had thought too much time had passed and that perhaps you had found another or remembered another.” She tipped her head to one side. “Do you remember the past now or if there was a lady?”

“I remember some of my past. Not everything. But I know there was no woman. Those close to me confirmed it. I seem to have been quite the confirmed bachelor. I certainly remember that I was a man who was very high in the instep, although I also know that I was always a man who was interested in justice above all else. I imagine I will be changed now, because I have been Georgie. I have lived as someone who is not privileged, which is an insight many people in my station do not ever get. Elizabeth, I am sorry for everything I have done. I should never have separated Bingley and Jane. It was a grievous mistake. I should have fought harder for us.”

“And I should not have been so quick to dismiss your idea of coming to Pemberley with you. But I was so scared. Scared that you would remember who you were and look down on me. That you wouldn't want me.”

“There is a time when perhaps I might have thought that way, but that is in the past. I will never make such a mistake again. Elizabeth, I love you. I have missed you every

single day. I have thought of you so often. Indeed, I think my sister Georgiana and my cousin Richard feel as though they already know you because I have talked about you so much.”

She chuckled. “Have you indeed? I am glad to hear it. And I owe your sister an apology, she wrote me the loveliest letter. I shall have to apologise to her for not replying, I did not know how.” She glanced back at the blonde woman and realised she had been babbling. “I must beg your pardon, I have turned into a gabster your absence.”

He chuckled. “You have not. If you think you were a chatterbox, you have not met my aunt, who is exactly as we had thought she was, by the way.”

“Do you remember how you ended up here?” she asked.

“A little, I have been able to trace my steps. I hired a coach to take me here because I had planned on taking Bingley’s coach back to Town. The coachman let me off at an inn, and for reasons I cannot quite fathom, I decided to walk the distance to Netherfield, which was three miles.”

“I see,” she said. “So you were dropped at the posting inn three miles from here but you do not know how you came to be injured?”

He shook his head. “No, I do not. I have a feeling Wickham was involved somehow. My footman said that he was at Darcy House the night before I set out, and we had some sort of argument. I’ve discovered that he has been spending a lot of money in gambling halls. I suspect that this is in part funded by whatever money I had with me—which from what I gather from my bank, was quite a considerable sum. I had taken sufficient funds to ensure that I could settle any of Bingley’s outstanding accounts.”

“It seems our fantasies were not quite so wrong. You are a rich man.”

“Indeed, I am,” he said. He bent forward and lowered his voice. “Bingley tells me I am worth ten thousand pounds a year. Can you believe it?”

Elizabeth’s eyes grew wide and she gasped. “Goodness gracious!”

“Indeed. So, do you think your mother will accept me as a son-in-law then? Even though I almost separated her daughter from a gentleman worth five thousand pounds a year?”

They both chuckled, although it had not escaped her that he’d alluded to marriage. “You will be her favourite son-in-law. Pray, what about Mr Wickham? Do you think he will be found and perhaps be able to shed light on what has happened?”

“I should hope so. For the time being, I must assume that perhaps he followed me. Our argument appears to have been about money, which I am told is not unusual for Wickham. It is possible that because I said no, he followed me here and we had some sort of altercation.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Perhaps he left his coat to distract people? To make people think you were him and he could escape?”

He shrugged. “That is what I thought as well. Or perhaps he thought I was dead or as good as and believed his coat would delay my identification. But let us not speak of him anymore. Elizabeth, too much time has passed. I have missed you dreadfully. Now, I cannot wait another moment.”

Elizabeth watched him, unsure of what he was going to say next, but then he took her hand, “I know that I already proposed to you once, but that was when I didn’t know who I was. I didn’t know what future I might be able to give you. But now that I

know who I am, I want to propose to you again as myself. Elizabeth Bennet, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around him as he held her close. "Of course. Of course, I will be your wife. I cannot wait." He pulled her close, and then his lips found hers and Elizabeth felt as though she had taken flight. A hot tingle flooded her body, and she heard nothing but the sound of their breathing and felt nothing but his kiss.

When they parted, she saw Jane walking past with a beaming smile on her lips as she linked arms with Mr Bingley, who had come down the stairs with Georgiana. The two whispered to one another and then Charles clapped his hands.

"Well, if that doesn't call for a celebration, I don't know what does! Indeed, I think we should have a double wedding."

Mr Darcy let go of Elizabeth and helped her get up as the two of them faced Charles, Jane, and Georgiana.

"What a wonderful idea!" Jane said. "I could think of nothing better than to get married on the same day as my beloved sister. What do you think?"

Elizabeth beamed at Mr Darcy, who nodded. "I think it's a grand idea."

And so, it was decided. Jane and Mr Bingley, and Elizabeth and Mr Darcy would have a joint ceremony in front of their family and friends, right here where their journey had begun, and where the future was just taking shape.

One Year Later

Pemberley House, Derbyshire

“Lizzy, I am here!” Mrs Bennet’s voice echoed through Pemberley’s grand entrance hall.

“I take it your mother has arrived,” Fitz said with a chuckle.

Elizabeth glanced at him. “Do you think so?” she asked, bursting into laughter as they made their way towards the front door. The windows were open to let in the breeze and thus Mrs Bennet’s arrival had been announced to all within earshot.

“I dare say yes,” called Charles as he emerged from the drawing room alongside Jane, who had a distinct glow about her.

“Wonderful,” said Elizabeth, and the foursome made their way to the front door together. The two couples had been anticipating Mrs Bennet’s arrival for the past few days. Determined to attend the birth of Jane’s first child, due in a few weeks, she had announced her intention to travel north and spend the last month before the birth with the Bingleys, who had purchased an estate very close to Pemberley.

She planned to stay for several weeks afterwards. Initially, the sons-in-law had not been certain this was a good idea, but both Jane and Elizabeth were pleased to know their mother would be with Jane.

While Mrs Bennet could be vexing, her nerves had made an almost miraculous

recovery now that her two eldest daughters were married to wealthy gentlemen. Though the entailment over Longbourn still loomed like a dark cloud over the family, Fitz—after some consideration, Elizabeth had felt she should call her husband by his true name, though she fondly reminisced over her days with Georgie—was in talks with his aunt to convince her to persuade Mr Collins to break the entailment in favour of the Bennet family. Given that Mr Collins was still mortified over the actions he had taken regarding her husband, Elizabeth felt fairly confident that her cousin would agree sooner or later.

“Not this trunk, this trunk goes to Farnsworth House,” Mrs Bennet’s voice drew her out of her contemplation. “I am just stopping here to see my daughters. Ah, Jane, I should have known you would be here also!” Mrs Bennet said as she rushed over to them. She hugged Jane and Elizabeth, and then curtsied to Charles and Fitz, which was a habit she had not been able to break. Her eyes went to Jane, “Goodness gracious, you should not be travelling in your condition.”

Jane placed a hand on her stomach. “Mama, it is a ten-minute carriage ride from Farnsworth House to Pemberley. I would hardly call that travel.”

“Well, I’ll have no more of this,” she said. “Elizabeth, Mr Darcy, you shall have to come and collect Jane and Mr Bingley from now on.”

“Very well, Mrs Bennet,” Fitz said with a smile.

“You are such good sons-in-law. Both of you are. Much better than that greengrocer,” she said and rolled her eyes. “Can you believe that he will not give me a family discount? Who has ever heard of such a thing?” She shook her head and made her way inside while the foursome smiled at one another. Their sister Kitty had been married all of four months, but already Elizabeth had heard much about the newest Bennet son-in-law. To say that her mother was displeased with Kitty’s match was an understatement. She had been spoiled, of course, by the addition of Charles and Fitz to the family, and Elizabeth was sure that in her mind she had already imagined that

her remaining three daughters would also marry high-ranking gentlemen. A greengrocer was not what she had in mind. At least Mary was involved in a courtship with a solicitor, and if all went well, she would be wed by year's end.

"How is Papa?" Jane asked.

"Mr Bennet is very well. The new gamekeeper Mr Darcy recommended is working out fabulously," she said, giving Fitz a grateful smile. "Lydia keeps distracting him from his work. I wish she would not do so."

"Do not fret," Elizabeth said. "The military will be back soon, and Lydia will be thoroughly busy."

"I hope so," Mrs Bennet said. Then she turned around to the group. "Did you hear the latest about Mr Wickham? He has been arrested in Dover."

Elizabeth gasped while Fitz's eyebrows rose. They all exchanged looks. Elizabeth was the one to speak, "Arrested? For what?"

Mrs Bennet shrugged. "Something to do with him impersonating some high-ranking person or other. But he had a lot of charges against him as it stood, so we shall not have to worry about him anymore. I suppose you could call on him in prison and see if he could shed some light on how you came to be in the condition you were in, Mr Darcy."

"I will not have any need for that," he said. "I remember now."

"You do? Well, the mind is a wonderful thing, isn't it? I never thought you would ever recover any of your memories considering the horrible state you were in."

Indeed, it had been quite miraculous the way Fitz's memory had recovered. Over the last year, it seemed day by day, memories returned. He had almost a full grasp of his

life before, and it was something that had been delightful to discover alongside him. Every time he recovered a memory, he would share it with Elizabeth, it was as if both of them were experiencing it together.

Georgiana, who was currently staying with their uncle, Lord Matlock, had been a big help in uncovering these memories, as had Fitz's cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam. At first, Elizabeth had suffered with a lingering fear that perhaps he might remember some things that would change things between them, but that hadn't been the case. In fact, they were closer now than ever.

The previous week, Fitz had finally remembered exactly what had occurred the day he ended up injured by the roadside. It had been as he suspected. He had decided to walk the distance from the inn to Netherfield as a way to help his stiff legs after a lengthy carriage ride. Mr Wickham had followed his carriage from London on horseback and saw an opportunity to speak to Fitz to once again beg him for money. It seemed Mr Wickham saw his life in danger, due to having borrowed considerable amounts of money from some unsavoury characters, leading him to take drastic action. When Fitz had refused, a fight had broken out, which ended with Fitz receiving a blow to the head. They would likely never know why Mr Wickham had decided to leave his coat draped over Fitz—but that was just a minor detail and did not affect their life at all.

“Well, where is this tea then?” Mrs Bennet asked, interrupting their thoughts.

“This way,” Jane said, and led their mother into Elizabeth's drawing room where tea had been served. Fitz was right behind them when Elizabeth called softly, “Georgie.”

He turned, a smile on his lips. She still called him Georgie on occasion, when it was just the two of them together.

“Yes, my love,” he said.

“I want to tell you something,” she said. “I wanted to wait, but my mother has a way of detecting these things, even though it’s early days.”

“Early days?” he said, puzzled.

“I am with child,” she said quietly. His eyes widened, and his lips parted. “I have suspected it for a few weeks, but I am certain now.”

“Lizzy,” he said and hugged her tight. “I did not think that I could be any happier than I already was, but you have made it so. My darling, darling Elizabeth. How blessed I am to have you.” He caressed her cheeks and then pressed his lips upon hers.

They had kissed many times between their first kiss and now, and every time she felt his soft lips on hers, Elizabeth’s stomach fluttered, and her very spirit soared.

She took his hands and they stood for a moment in tranquillity and quiet, knowing that the next chapter of their life was about to unfold before them.

THE END

Thank you for reading!