



Every Savage Can Dance

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Category: Historical

Description: Every Savage Can Dance is a romantic story of Elizabeth and Darcy, recommended for readers of all ages. It contains moderate angst, fast pacing, many unexpected turns of events, and some changes in several characters. It will reveal Elizabeth and Darcy slowly falling in love with each other and taking care of each other in a shared endeavour to solve difficult problems. Twists that appear along the road will induce them to act in ways a little bit out of character and out of decorum — which hopefully will please readers and put a smile on their faces.

The story begins in line with canon, with Mr Wickham's arrival in Meryton. Unlike canon, though, Mr Wickham's new employment in the regiment proves to be part of an elaborate plot that involves other characters and causes significant consequences.

Darcy decides to warn Mr Bennet and Colonel Forster about his nemesis's true nature, but he is only partly believed. His life is put in danger, and he is found injured by Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet and taken to Longbourn. Fear for his health also brings Miss Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam to Hertfordshire, allowing the two families opportunities to mingle.

Darcy's road to recovery is sprinkled with sweet interactions with Elizabeth, as well as with struggles to solve an enigma and thwart a conspiracy.

The Netherfield ball plays an important role in the story, though not in the way we are accustomed to.

And Mr Darcy will admit not only that he is deeply in love with Elizabeth and that she is his perfect match, but also that he adores dancing with her, on any occasion, even though he once called her tolerable and claimed every savage can dance.

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Hertfordshire had turned out to be the worst place in the whole of England, Darcy mused as he spurred on his stallion. Wherever he turned, every single day, something unpleasant happened. He had come to support Bingley in settling into the property he had let, but he had soon come to regret his decision.

Darcy had been in Hertfordshire for only a few weeks, yet his life had become a disaster. He had lost his self-control, his self-confidence, and his patience as well as his enjoyment of little things like reading in peace or riding in the morning.

He could not stay indoors as Bingley's sisters had become insupportable in their rudeness, stupidity, and ridiculous attempts to draw his attention towards the younger of the pair, Miss Caroline Bingley. Out of doors, he was painfully aware of Miss Elizabeth Bennet's presence only three miles away; he could not stop thinking about her, regardless of the distance, but being close to her was exceptionally disturbing. Even at the present time, having escaped Netherfield for a ride, his horse seemed to be taking him closer to her home of Longbourn, as if led by Darcy's secret desires. Desires that he had refused to acknowledge for weeks, then he had admitted them but had given them no serious thought until he was forced to accept he had fallen in love with a young woman whom he had not found tolerable enough to dance with on their first meeting.

Perhaps fate had a strange sense of humour and was trying to punish him for his rudeness at that fateful assembly — which he should not have agreed to attend in any case. Truly, Bingley could be so persistent and annoying at times that Darcy would say and do anything just to be left alone. That was why he had reluctantly accompanied his friend to the dance and then had refused to stand up with anyone he was not acquainted with. That had been mostly Bingley's fault. However, how he had

become intrigued, then enchanted, and finally attracted to Miss Elizabeth Bennet was still puzzling, but he had nobody to blame for it except himself — his infatuation had been fed by his weakness.

Yes, Miss Elizabeth Bennet was charming, witty, pretty in a most delightful way — especially her lively eyes! — candid, and clever. She was worthy of admiration, but to be caught in that sort of infatuation, to be incapable of taking his mind off her, was certainly proof of a weakness in his character. It was a flaw he had never suspected yet was now forced to admit. He had spent several days in her company at Netherfield; it had been a sweet torture having her so close, and his enjoyment of her presence had been ruined by his mortifying dreams, which he was too ashamed to remember. A gentleman should not entertain such idle fancies about another gentleman's daughter. Therefore, when the eldest Miss Bennet's health improved and the sisters returned to Longbourn, Darcy's relief was stronger than any other feeling. But the distance proved to be no match for his infatuation, as he continued thinking about and dreaming of her.

As if those circumstances had not been tormenting enough, the disaster had worsened with the shocking presence of George Wickham — the abominable scoundrel Darcy had hoped he would never see again. Encountering him in the middle of Meryton, chatting animatedly with the Bennet sisters — especially Elizabeth — had made his blood boil and his resentment threaten to overcome his self-control. Luckily, he had turned and left immediately, but two days had passed since then, and his turmoil was just as great.

The Netherfield ball would be held in five days' time, and afterwards, regardless of Bingley's plans, Darcy would then leave Hertfordshire. The county was ruinous to his peace, and the farther he distanced himself from it, the better.

That morning, Bingley had ridden to Meryton to deliver invitations to Colonel Forster and the rest of the officers, but Darcy had declined to accompany him in order to

avoid an encounter with Wickham. Instead, he had chosen to take a long ride across the lands around the market town, hoping the exercise would lessen his anxiety. After a while, he allowed his stallion to rest; he dismounted and sat on a stump, his back against an old oak, observing the scenery. It was by no means unpleasant; however, the late November weather was not ideal for activities out of doors, and sitting still exposed him to the cold rather quickly.

Darcy was about to jump back into the saddle when his attention was caught by voices and laughter. He looked behind him; there were two men and two women, walking and chatting. A moment was enough for him to recognise Wickham and his fellow officer Denny. With them were the youngest — and no doubt the silliest and most irritating — Bennet sisters, Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty. Darcy had only met them a few times, but that was more than enough to observe their poor manners and lack of education.

“Mr Wickham, I hope you and all the officers will come to the ball. Every lady in Meryton wants to dance with you!”

“We certainly do not want to disappoint the ladies of Meryton, especially you and your sisters, Miss Lydia,” Wickham replied, and the girls giggled.

“We all know Lizzy is your favourite, but you cannot dance more than one set with her,” the girl continued.

“I do consider Miss Elizabeth a dear friend, but I assure you it would give me equal pleasure to dance with you.”

Darcy felt chills of anger as he heard the scoundrel’s insinuating voice. His mere mention of Elizabeth’s name made him shudder.

“How fortunate we met!” Miss Catherine added. “We were about to return home after

visiting Maria Lucas and did not expect to have such a delightful escort.”

“The pleasure is ours, Miss Kitty,” Wickham said, and Denny agreed.

Darcy’s intention was to remain hidden and hope the group would pass by without noticing him.

Then, a peculiar and disturbing feeling changed his mind as he observed the two girls holding the men’s arms and realised they were walking on a rather secluded path. The scene would have been acceptable if one of those men had not been George Wickham — someone who could hardly be called a gentleman and an officer.

The Bennet sisters must have been no more than sixteen and already smitten with the officers. They were carelessly flirting, ignorant of the danger they exposed themselves to. Neither of them was likely to possess a large enough dowry to tempt Wickham to marry them; but, as unfortunate as a marriage to such a man would be, George Wickham could easily ruin a young girl’s life and future in many other ways.

As little as Darcy cared about them or their insolent mother, he could not disregard a threat to any woman or do nothing about it. So, pulling his horse behind him, he stepped out onto the path.

“Good morning,” he said.

The group turned, and he saw Wickham’s disconcerted face.

“Mr Darcy!” Denny greeted him first. The two girls curtsied with apparent displeasure.

Wickham mumbled in a low voice, “Good day.”

“Miss Catherine, Miss Lydia, are you alone?” Darcy enquired.

“No...I mean yes,” Miss Lydia answered. “We are returning home now, and Mr Wickham and Mr Denny offered to keep us company.”

“I see. Well, I happen to be going in the same direction. I hope you do not mind if I join you.”

Wickham’s face changed again, but Darcy remained calm.

“We would be delighted,” Denny said. “It is quite a coincidence we met.”

“Not really. This is the most direct route between Meryton and Netherfield. I enjoy riding this way, so the chances of such a meeting are not slight.”

“We often ride here too,” Denny continued. “Which is how we happened upon Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty.”

“I do not know why Mr Darcy wants to walk with us,” Miss Lydia interjected. “He does not like us — or anyone else, for that matter.”

Darcy frowned. “I assure you that is not true, Miss Lydia. My desire is to be sure you arrive home safely.”

“Why would we not be safe? We already have two gentlemen to escort us. And we walk to Meryton several times a week, so we know this path very well.”

“I am sure that is true, but I wish to speak to your father, nevertheless,” Darcy replied, steady to his purpose despite the obvious disapproval of his companions.

The group of four walked together, whispering to each other, while Darcy followed

them. Wickham glanced back at him several times.

When they were close to Longbourn, the officers excused themselves and left. The two young sisters ran inside, while Darcy took a moment to contemplate his next move and decide whether he should enter or not. Very likely his presence had been noted, as he spotted a face at a window. While his heart raced, he pondered that perhaps he would be better to leave. However, he had little choice when the door opened and Mr Bennet appeared.

“Mr Darcy, I assume? I am Thomas Bennet. I have not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance yet.”

“Yes, sir. I am Fitzwilliam Darcy. Please forgive my unexpected visit. I would have waited for Bingley and called on you properly, if not for certain circumstances.”

“Do not worry, sir. I am pleased to meet you, regardless. Please come in. I was told you wished to speak to me.”

“Yes, please.”

“Then let us go to the library to avoid any distractions.”

Feeling rather uncomfortable, Darcy followed Mr Bennet, glancing about discreetly. The house was appropriate for the small estate of a country gentleman — not exactly fashionable but comfortable enough. He found himself wondering whether Elizabeth was at home and hoping to see her even for a moment.

Mr Bennet opened the library door for him, saying, “I imagine you are accustomed to larger and more impressive libraries, but at least we shall have peace and quiet here.”

The room was indeed small, with not much furniture except a sofa, two chairs, and a

desk. The view from the window was of the garden behind the house, and the fire was burning steadily. Darcy immediately noticed a few remarkable volumes.

“In my opinion, the value of a library should be measured not by its physical dimensions but by what is inside it and how often it is used.”

“I could not agree more. Please sit down. May I offer you a drink?”

“Yes, thank you,” Darcy replied after a brief hesitation. In truth, he would rather not stay long, but since he had already intruded, saying a few words and leaving abruptly would be even worse.

His host handed him a glass, then resumed his seat with obvious curiosity.

“Mr Bennet, the reason for my visit might be deemed presumptuous. However, I feel it is my duty to express my concern.”

“That sounds quite serious, sir. Please speak plainly.”

“It is serious. During my ride this morning, I happened upon your youngest daughters, walking on a rather secluded path with two officers. I escorted them back to Longbourn to be sure they arrived safely.”

Mr Bennet frowned. “Did you see anything that induced your concern about my daughters’ safety? Did you notice anything improper?”

“No...but I am better acquainted than I would wish to be with one of the officers, and I know George Wickham is not to be trusted around young, innocent women.”

Darcy gulped from his glass while Mr Bennet looked at him with apparent stupefaction.

“That is quite a statement, sir.”

“I am well aware of that.”

“I do not wish to be impolite, Mr Darcy, but I heard some rumours that you and Mr Wickham are not the best of friends. I requested no details as I usually prefer to remain ignorant of other people’s business. However, I cannot but wonder whether perhaps your past affairs have influenced your harsh judgment.”

“I understand you find my opinion biased and have no reason to trust me. I simply consider it my duty to inform a father about the potential danger to his young daughters. What you choose to do next is entirely your decision.”

“Please know your concern is greatly appreciated, Mr Darcy, and I shall treat the matter with increased caution. In truth, my silly, naive fifteen-year-old daughter should not be alone with officers, even if they are the most honourable men. She should not even be out at balls, but I have been too indulgent to forbid it. And Kitty is not much better, even though she is two years older.”

Darcy did not reply. He had fulfilled his responsibility, and expressing his thoughts in regard to Lydia Bennet’s education would be rude and pointless.

“May I offer you another drink? Or perhaps you are in a hurry to return to more pleasant company?”

“I am in no hurry,” Darcy replied. Indeed, he was not. Bingley could not have returned to Netherfield yet, and he felt more comfortable in the library of a stranger than with the Bingley sisters and Mr Hurst.

“I assume Miss Elizabeth inherited her passion for reading from you,” he said, then immediately felt disquieted by the mere mention of her name. “Do any of your other

daughters share the preference?”

“Perhaps my middle child, Mary. In truth, Mary does study a lot, but I am not sure whether she is passionate about reading itself. Lizzy, however, puts passion into everything she does. Perhaps too much and too keenly at times.”

Darcy smiled to himself at Mr Bennet’s accurate description.

“My sister, Georgiana, loves to read too. It was a pleasure I began to share with her when she was young, and I am proud to see her progress.”

“You seem very fond of your sister, Mr Darcy. Your voice and countenance changed when you mentioned her.”

“I certainly am. Fond and exceedingly proud of her many accomplishments, as well as of her kind and generous heart.”

“That is admirable. I love my daughters dearly, but in truth, if I put them all together, they have few accomplishments between them.”

Darcy was uncertain whether Mr Bennet was serious or merely jesting.

“I am not well acquainted with your daughters, but during the time I spent with Miss Elizabeth and Miss Bennet at Netherfield, I saw nothing wanting in either of them. Miss Elizabeth has a lively determination in expressing her opinion, which is rarely seen in ladies her age.”

Mr Bennet laughed. “Is that a compliment...or the opposite? Regardless, please do not repeat it in front of Mrs Bennet — she already despairs of how obstinate Lizzy is.”

“It was certainly a compliment, I assure you,” Darcy uttered.

Mr Bennet’s eyebrow arched. “That is pleasant to hear and slightly surprising, Mr Darcy. From what I have been told, when you met, your first impressions of each other were not favourable.”

Darcy almost choked on his drink and was desperately preparing an excuse when he heard a knock. The door opened, and a man appeared. Behind him stood Elizabeth and Jane Bennet. Darcy became uncomfortable the moment he laid eyes on Elizabeth. The man stepped forwards and bowed, and he remembered having seen him on the day he encountered Wickham in Meryton.

“Mr Darcy, I beg your forgiveness, but I have made the most extraordinary discovery. I have reason to believe that you are the nephew of my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park.”

“Yes, Lady Catherine is my aunt. And you are...?”

“I am William Collins, sir! I have been the clergyman of Hunsford parish for the last ten months, by the grace of God and Lady Catherine.”

“I see. Congratulations, Mr Collins.”

“I am in a position to inform you that Lady Catherine was in perfect health five days ago.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

Darcy was amused, curious, and irritated by the man, but his attention was mostly on Elizabeth.

“Mr Collins is my cousin, Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet interjected. “He will inherit Longbourn when I am gone,” his host continued in a jesting tone.

“That is precisely the purpose of my visit,” Mr Collins said. “To become better acquainted with the family and hopefully to find the companion of my future life amongst my fair cousins.” The man had a large grin on his face. He then looked at Elizabeth, which puzzled and vexed Darcy. Surely the ridiculous rector would not dare pursue her. Such an assumption would be beyond absurd to anyone with a little wit.

“Mr Darcy, making your acquaintance is certainly one of the happiest moments of my life,” Mr Collins declared.

“I sincerely hope that is not the case, Mr Collins. Making a mere acquaintance should not be anyone’s happiest moment. Mr Bennet, it is time for me to leave.”

“As you wish, Mr Darcy. I hope to see you again. Speaking to you was exceedingly pleasant.”

“Likewise, Mr Bennet,” Darcy answered. He bowed to Elizabeth and her elder sister, his eyes locking with Elizabeth’s for an instant, then he left the house.

He imagined Mr Collins would run immediately to his room to put the happy news of their meeting into a letter for Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

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“I cannot understand what he was doing there!” Lydia uttered. “Kitty and I were having a pleasant walk with Wickham and Denny, and I am sure they would have come into the house for refreshments. Then suddenly Mr Darcy appeared and ruined everything! We tried to get rid of him, but he insisted on coming to Longbourn!”

“What did he have to say to you, my dear?” Mrs Bennet enquired of her husband.

“Some gentlemen’s affairs. But Lydia, did I understand correctly? You and Kitty were walking with two officers, one of whom you only met a few days ago?”

“Yes, Papa. We were coming from Lucas Lodge, and we met them, and they offered to escort us. They are both exceedingly amiable and funny, and Mr Wickham is the most handsome man I have ever met.”

“How lovely! I am sorry I did not have the chance to meet them,” Mrs Bennet said. “Perhaps next time they will come in.”

“I feel like we are speaking different languages,” Mr Bennet declared. “There will be no next time, Mrs Bennet! And I forbid Lydia and Kitty from going to Meryton without one of their elder sisters or parents. A girl of fifteen should not be alone in secluded places, far from home, with officers! Have you all lost your minds?”

Mr Bennet’s outburst — so rarely, if ever, seen before — left the ladies speechless and dumbfounded.

“I shall be in my library with no more interruptions, I hope,” he concluded before anyone recovered enough to reply.

“What on earth has come over your father?” Mrs Bennet enquired a few minutes later.

“I am sure Mr Darcy said something to infuriate him. This is so unfair and unreasonable!” Lydia said.

“Lydia, it was you who told Papa about your walk with the officers,” Jane interjected gently. “And I do not think he is being unreasonable. He is only trying to protect you from danger.”

“That is true!” Kitty added. “It was you who told him, Lydia! But Mama, you must force Papa to change his mind. What danger can there be when we are with the officers?”

Elizabeth was intrigued about Mr Darcy’s unexpected visit, and her family’s conversation made her uncomfortable.

Mr Darcy was not acquainted with her father, and his arrogance would never allow him to introduce himself to someone so below him. So what had been his business at Longbourn?

The previous evening, Mr Wickham had kindly revealed to her the painful and shocking story of his past dealings with Mr Darcy. Why would a man who had not hesitated to disregard his father’s wishes and had condemned his childhood friend to poverty come to Longbourn unexpectedly — and at the same time as Mr Wickham? It was puzzling and made no sense at all — just like her father’s behaviour.

Lydia and Kitty were accustomed to walking into Meryton alone and had been doing so for two years. The distance was short, and the road and paths that led there were good — there had never been a concern for their safety. And, while she agreed Lydia was too young to be out at parties, she could not see a danger in her sisters being

escorted by two honourable officers. Mr Bennet was rarely inclined to address a situation with more effort than was warranted, so she was perplexed by his actions.

While her mother and sisters continued to chat, Jane leant towards her and whispered, “Lizzy, what do you think Mr Darcy talked to Papa about? Could it be regarding Mr Bingley?”

“Oh, I doubt that. I mean, Papa had not even been introduced to Mr Darcy before, while he and Mr Bingley have spoken on several occasions. I cannot imagine Mr Bingley not speaking for himself and sending his friend instead.”

“True... It was too unexpected and too improper a visit to have been requested by Mr Bingley,” Jane admitted.

“I shall wait a little longer, until Papa composes himself, then try to speak to him,” Elizabeth said.

Her plan was hastened by the return of Mr Collins, who was still in awe after his meeting with Mr Darcy. There was nothing more annoying, so she excused herself from the room.

As she had never done before, Elizabeth stopped in the hall, hesitant to enter the library. She knocked and, as she heard no answer, tapped again.

“Papa?” she called softly.

“Yes, Lizzy, come in. Did they send you to ask me to change my mind?”

“No, Papa. It is not for me to change your decision. I am just worried, and I wanted to know how you are feeling.” She paused, bearing her father’s scrutiny. “And yes, I admit I am curious about Mr Darcy’s visit. To my knowledge, you two were not even

acquainted. Am I too bold to ask what he wanted?"

"Yes, we were not acquainted until earlier today. And yes, you are bold to ask, but I expected no less from you. I shall satisfy your curiosity as soon as you clarify something for me."

"Of course, Papa."

"I heard you girls mention something at breakfast about Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham being enemies. I cared little about such rumours before now. May I ask how you acquired that piece of information?"

Mr Bennet was speaking in his usual dry tone, which Elizabeth recognised too well, so she smiled.

"Mr Wickham told me himself. We were in Meryton when we first met him. While we were speaking, Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley appeared, and it was obvious by their coldness towards each other that Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham were not friends. Furthermore, Mr Darcy left, leaving Mr Bingley there."

"Did he?"

"Yes. Then last evening, at Aunt Phillips's card party, I spoke to Mr Wickham, and he told me how unfairly Mr Darcy had treated him. In truth, the injustice Mr Wickham suffered was so terrible that it deserves to be publicly exposed."

Elizabeth became more animated as she spoke and supported the cause of her favourite. Mr Bennet's expression revealed his curiosity.

"So, Mr Wickham just told you about his life's misfortunes?"

“Yes.”

“At Mrs Phillips’s party?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Elizabeth repeated. “What do you mean, Papa?”

“Why would a stranger who had just met a woman about whom he knew nothing tell her of his private affairs?”

“I believe he trusted me, Papa.”

“Trusted you? Why?” Mr Bennet insisted. “He knew nothing about you — he could not know you were trustworthy. To him, you were just one of many women he had met in Meryton, and to you, he was just one of the many officers in the regiment.”

Elizabeth needed a moment to consider her father’s words and to form an answer. The more she thought about it, the more it muddled her understanding.

“Are you delighted to hear my cousin Mr Collins talking about Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

“Not at all!”

“But you did enjoy listening to a stranger, with no connection to your family, talking about the private events of his past.”

Again, Elizabeth’s puzzlement increased, together with her discomfort.

“What do you mean, Papa? What do you imply?”

“I imply nothing, as I know too little of the truth. But I cannot remember a single situation in my life where I shared my misfortunes with a new acquaintance — either man or woman.”

“So...you are suggesting Mr Wickham lied to me, Papa? Why would he do that?”

“I can hardly guess, since I do not know what he told you.”

“He told me his father had been the steward of the late Mr Darcy. That same Mr Darcy had been his godfather and had loved him very much, even supporting him at school. Before he died, he requested that a good living in Derbyshire be given to Mr Wickham when it fell vacant, as well as one thousand pounds.”

“And?”

“When the time came, the young Mr Darcy refused to honour the request, exposing Mr Wickham to a relative state of poverty, as he still suffers today. I do not believe any excuse can justify the intentional dismissal of someone’s dying wishes.”

“This is quite a story, Lizzy. One that is a little too convoluted for me to understand. So, Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy are long-standing acquaintances.”

“Yes.”

“If Mr Wickham knew about his godfather’s wish, it means it was publicly expressed. Was it in a will?”

“No. Apparently, it was clear enough but left to the discretion of the present master, who chose not to honour it, probably out of envy and revenge.”

“But did Mr Wickham receive the sum of one thousand pounds?”

“He said he did.”

“And why would Mr Darcy give him the money but not the living?”

“I...I do not know, Papa. I have not thought of that before.”

“Mr Darcy could also have refused to give him the money if he wished to. However, he did not. It was only later, when the living became vacant, he refused to grant it. It is quite obvious that something happened during that time. And it is obvious that the late Mr Darcy trusted his son to decide either way.”

“Papa, you seem to mistrust Mr Wickham, and I wonder why.”

“You, Lizzy, seem to trust Mr Wickham completely, and I wonder why.”

“I am afraid we cannot agree on this matter. Will you not tell me what the purpose of Mr Darcy’s visit was?”

“I shall. He was apparently worried about seeing your sisters alone with the officers. He came to speak to me, regardless of how improper his visit was, in order to warn me. He specifically said Mr Wickham is not to be trusted around young girls.”

Elizabeth stared at her father, stunned, struggling with the gravity of his words.

“He said what? How dare he make such an accusation! Such audacity! And you believed him?”

“I was as surprised as you are, Lizzy. I even implied to Mr Darcy that he might be biased about Mr Wickham, due to their history. Strangely, Mr Darcy did not try to

convince me, nor did he try to tell me anything about the story you just related to me. He simply stated it was his duty to express his concern.”

“Oh...this is... Why would he even take the trouble to come here and speak to you? Why would he care?”

“Exactly, Lizzy. That is what I have been wondering since he left. He took a lot of trouble with this visit, and he has nothing to gain from it. There could not have been another reason for his call other than his genuine concern.”

“I cannot believe his opinion is fair, Papa!”

“And yet, he does not seem the kind of man to speak without proof. In fact, he does not seem to be the sort of man you described, Lizzy.”

“I was told he is capable of making a good impression, when and if he pleases.”

“His opinion of you appears good, which was another surprise.”

“That cannot be true. Just as his assertions about Mr Wickham cannot be true either.”

“We shall see. For now, I am unwilling to take any risk. As I said, your sisters will not leave the house by themselves. And I expect prudence from you too, Lizzy.”

“You give Mr Darcy too much credit, Papa. I hope he is worthy of it.”

“Just as you give Mr Wickham too much credit, Lizzy. One of us will certainly be disappointed, and I wonder who.”

The conversation ended without resolution, leaving Elizabeth distressed. She had no reason to doubt Mr Wickham, but her father’s concerns could not be overlooked.

Her common sense forced her to question things she had simply accepted as being true.

Apparently, both Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy required much more attention and consideration to make a proper sketch of their characters. She had not enough information for a thorough examination, and any detail would be helpful. The Netherfield ball was to take place in five days' time, and she wondered whether she would have the chance to see either of the gentlemen before then.

Mr Collins's presence, his annoying attentions towards her, and his irritating voice were not helpful and only increased her vexation, especially when he began praising Mr Darcy again.

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“I cannot believe you called at Longbourn without me, Darcy!” Bingley said. “You should have waited so we could go together.”

“It was not a call but an impromptu visit. Perhaps I should have waited for you, but it is done now.”

“Was the family well?”

“I believe so. I spoke mostly to Mr Bennet and barely saw the ladies.”

“Oh... Would you like to go back with me tomorrow?”

“Absolutely not. There is an annoying, insupportable man there whom I do not wish to see if I can help it.”

“Ah, you mean Mr Collins. We met him in Meryton a few days ago, remember?”

“Apparently he is under the patronage of my aunt Lady Catherine. He obviously worships her and — by association — he also worships me.”

Bingley laughed heartily. “There are very few people, I suppose, who dislike so much to be liked by other people.”

“Fortunately, most of our common acquaintances like you more than they like me,” Darcy replied in earnest, and Bingley laughed louder.

“I have no complaints about that. I enjoy being liked, especially by certain people. I

am amazed how different we are, yet still you consider me a friend.”

“You are easy to like, Bingley. Besides, you are one of the most honourable and genuine people of my acquaintance. You only lack self-confidence in some matters and possess excessive self-confidence in others.”

“What do you mean? Do tell me — I really wish to know.”

Darcy hesitated briefly.

“I believe you should rely more on your own judgment and less on my advice — and that of your sisters.”

“And...?”

“And...perhaps you should not be so confident when you admire someone or even fall in love.”

“Ah... Your meaning is clear now and perhaps justified. However, if I am to follow your earlier piece of advice, I should rely on my own judgment and tell you that this time things are different.”

Darcy chose not to reply. He knew too well that Bingley spoke of Miss Jane Bennet, and he could not approve. Firstly because he did not trust Bingley’s feelings were more than his usual infatuation. The eldest Miss Bennet was exceptionally beautiful, and most men would need nothing more to be charmed by her. Furthermore, Darcy distrusted Miss Bennet’s feelings too. From the little he had been in her company, she seemed to be reserved and well-mannered, but her heart was probably not easy to touch. If Bingley’s infatuation increased and he had the imprudence to propose, she might accept him for convenience, and they would end up in an unhappy marriage.

The thought of Bingley marrying Jane Bennet was rather disturbing for Darcy for more than one reason. If such an event took place, Elizabeth would become Bingley's sister too, and Darcy would find himself in her company rather often. Such a notion was as exhilarating as it was distressing and would likely alter his friendship with Bingley. The proximity of the woman he desired but could not allow himself to pursue was a torture to which he refused to be exposed.

“Darcy? What is wrong? You seem distracted.”

“I am... There is something I am considering and cannot decide.”

“May I help?”

“I do not believe so. I am pondering whether to speak to Colonel Forster about Wickham. The man could be a threat to any honourable person. It is only a matter of time before he builds up debts at cards with the other officers or betrays their trust in some other way.”

“Wickham? He is the object of your concern? I know he treated you terribly, but I thought you had chosen to disregard him.”

“I planned to. However, the more I think on it, the more I realise I cannot turn my back on the consequences of his actions.”

“I have no opinion as I am not even aware of what he has done. But since you called him outrageous, I am sure he is.”

“Will Colonel Forster attend the ball? Perhaps I shall speak to him then.”

“He will, but I suspect he would rather dance and enjoy himself than talk about such serious matters on that particular night.”

“Yes, I see your point. In that case, I might speak to him tomorrow — if I decide to speak at all.”

“By the way, I hope you remember we are invited to dine with Sir William at Lucas Lodge tomorrow night. Caroline and Louisa have declined, but I am going.”

“I did forget. I am afraid I must decline too. There will be too many people I wish to avoid, including Wickham and that Mr Collins. Please tell Sir William I have a prior engagement and convey to him my apologies.”

“As you wish, Darcy.”

With that, the conversation ended. During dinner, the Bingley sisters chatted with hardly a pause, but Darcy was barely listening to them.

He considered for a moment going to the dinner at Lucas Lodge the following evening, simply to catch a glimpse of Elizabeth. But he quickly dismissed it as silly, pointless, and painful. He would probably be forced to watch Wickham talking to her in a friendly manner, and that, he could not bear.

He was deeply distracted, his mind warring between what he believed to be his duty — protecting strangers from Wickham — and his real duty of protecting his sister. Any attempt to expose Wickham carried the danger of the attempted elopement being exposed and Georgiana’s reputation being ruined. Was he prepared to take such a risk? Was it truly his duty, or was he just trying to keep Wickham away from Elizabeth?

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By the next day, Darcy was still unsure about what further actions were required.

However, he called on Colonel Forster and requested a private meeting. As expected, it did not last long, and he regretted it almost immediately. He could not reveal much about his past dealings with the scoundrel, only mentioning their long acquaintance and Wickham's inclination towards debts, gambling, and seduction. At that, the colonel laughed while offering him a drink.

“Mr Darcy, I thank you for your concern, but honestly, your description fits most of my officers. Including myself. I confess I used to drink too much and allow myself to be easily enchanted by charming, pretty ladies. That is precisely how I met my lovely wife, and I do not regret it at all.”

Darcy was lost as to how to reply or contradict such a statement. He could not do it without offering more details, which he was not ready to do, so he abandoned the attempt entirely.

“Mr Darcy, I understand that to an educated and honourable gentleman like you, accustomed to always following the rules of decorum, the behaviours you mentioned might be appalling and condemnable. That must be the reason for your past misunderstandings with Wickham, which he has already mentioned to me. However, for us army men, it is nothing unusual. I am sure your cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam would agree.”

Darcy chose not to respond; he only nodded and bade the man farewell, riding back to Bingley's estate in a poor mood. Vexed and restless, he wondered whether Mr Bennet had discussed Wickham with his family and what had been Elizabeth's response. She was probably on Wickham's side as much as Colonel Forster. Darcy's word did not count for much when compared with Wickham's charming manners — as had happened for many years.

Once he returned to Netherfield, Darcy's disposition turned from bad to worse; Bingley had left for Lucas Lodge, and he was forced to bear an evening with three

people he liked too little to enjoy their company. As usual, Hurst hardly spoke at all, while Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst chatted incessantly. As soon as dinner was over, he excused himself and withdrew to his room despite the ladies' insistence that he remain longer.

He had received a letter from Georgiana earlier and indulged himself with its contents. His sister wrote about the Matlocks, about their older cousin, the viscount, whose wife was expecting their first child, and about the colonel still being away from London. She sounded comfortable with her new companion, Mrs Annesley, which brought Darcy much relief. He still blamed himself for trusting Mrs Younge and wondered how the woman could have betrayed him — and even more so, how she could have betrayed Georgiana after being her companion for ten years. She had been generously paid — more than was usual for such a service — and her every request had been granted. Yet still, Mrs Younge had chosen to plot with Wickham at Ramsgate to deceive his sister.

How it was possible, Darcy could not understand. Did Wickham possess such powers of persuasion that he was able to convince even a woman of a certain age and experience to abandon her comfort, her honour, and her loyalty? Or perhaps Mrs Younge had never possessed such qualities, and he, Darcy, had been as blind to her faults as his father.

From Wickham, his musings moved to Elizabeth, pondering what the scoundrel had told her; most certainly his usual lies, meant to make him appear a victim and convince people to trust and pity him. It was a scheme he had been using for many years now, and many people had been taken in by it, until Wickham used his power to gain advantage over them in one way or another. Was Elizabeth one of those easily fooled?

He recollected some observations of her while she stayed at Netherfield. Her witty remarks, the wry twist of her lips, the sparkle in her eyes... An evening spent with

her alone would be a delight. Perhaps with Georgiana joining them. But no, such imaginings must be immediately banished.

As perfectly suited as he believed Elizabeth was to him, her situation in life — her family's situation — made any connection between them impossible, even though Mr Bennet was an intelligent man, more educated than many others he had met among the ton . The gentleman had expressed his hope of them meeting again, and Darcy would not be opposed to it, if not for his tormenting sentiments for Elizabeth. What use could there be in befriending Mr Bennet since he already struggled to stay away from Elizabeth?

Two glasses of brandy later, he finally fell asleep, confusing thoughts still spinning in his head and turning his rest into restlessness.

Therefore, his state of mind did not improve overnight, and the following morning found him irritated, in no disposition for conversation.

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Chapter 4

At breakfast, Bingley spoke about his enjoyable time at Lucas Lodge.

“It was unexpectedly delightful, truly. Around thirty people — not too crowded. There was good food, a little bit of music so we could dance, pleasant company.”

“The entire Bennet family, I assume.” Miss Bingley rolled her eyes.

“Yes. Even Mr Bennet was there. He enquired about you, Darcy.”

“How kind of him. Was Mr Collins there too?”

“Yes...sadly. He is truly annoying. And, upon my word, I think he is trying to court Miss Elizabeth. I hope I am wrong — for her sake.”

Darcy felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

“Is he?” Mrs Hurst interjected. “Well, a clergyman who will inherit Longbourn sounds like a perfect match for Eliza Bennet. Better than she could have hoped for.”

“I could not agree more,” Miss Bingley added.

“Surely you are joking!” Bingley cried. “I find it absurd. I am sure Miss Elizabeth would not agree to marry such an annoying man.”

“And why not?” Miss Bingley continued. “With no dowry, their estate entailed, and

relatives who live near Cheapside, what better can she hope for? Would you not agree, Mr Darcy?"

"I do not know Miss Elizabeth well enough to anticipate her thoughts and actions. I know there are women who would do anything and accept any sort of man for a comfortable marriage. Others would place their self-worth above their comfort."

His answer was evidently not what the ladies expected, and it silenced them for a while.

"Darcy, what are your plans today?" Bingley enquired later on, when the party was gathered in the drawing room. "I am going to Meryton and then perhaps will call at Longbourn."

"Call at Longbourn again?" Miss Bingley asked, her expression filled with disapproval.

"Caroline, I am of an age where I can lease an estate. I would surely hope I am allowed to decide who I wish to visit and when."

"Caroline has a good point, Charles," Mrs Hurst interjected. "Your actions will certainly arouse some unreasonable expectations."

"I should feel offended by your assumption that I am unaware of my actions. Regardless, my plans are decided. Whoever wishes to join me is most welcome," Bingley answered with calm determination.

"I shall go for a ride," Darcy said. "I have a slight headache, and I believe some exercise would be helpful."

"I am sorry you feel unwell, Darcy. May I help in any way?"

“No, thank you. Please do not alter your plans.”

“If you have a headache, perhaps you should stay at home, Mr Darcy,” Miss Bingley offered. “A herbal tea and some rest would surely help you more.”

The notion of Miss Bingley bringing him tea caused Darcy a sudden real headache.

“Some exercise and fresh air always helps,” he insisted.

“I am afraid you have contaminated yourself with Eliza Bennet’s bad habits,” Miss Bingley said bitterly.

Darcy’s irritation increased, but he remained silent.

“I was not aware Miss Elizabeth was fond of riding too,” Bingley replied.

“She is not. Quite the opposite,” Darcy said. “Miss Bingley seems to see similarities where they do not exist. Forgive me, I must go and prepare myself,” he concluded.

Half an hour later, Darcy was at the stables, ready for a ride, when a servant boy ran in, breathless.

“Mr Darcy, it’s good I caught you before you left. There’s a note for you, sir. It just arrived. The master said it might be urgent.”

“A note? Do you know who brought it?”

“Tom Green. He works at the inn. He’s waiting for your reply, sir.”

Intrigued, Darcy took the letter. From the opening word he recognised the handwriting, and his first instinct was to throw it away.

We should talk. There are issues of mutual interest we must clarify in order to avoid further unfortunate occurrences.

You were the last man I expected to encounter in Meryton when I joined the regiment. Still, I trust there is enough space here for both of us to mind our own business without bothering each other.

A brief conversation is needed, so I shall wait for you today and tomorrow at three o'clock in the place we saw each other four days ago. That is unless you write back and suggest another location and time to meet.

That was all — no name, no signature. Not that one was needed.

The boy was still waiting, watching him.

“Please pass on the following message. ‘Absolutely not, for as long as I can avoid it.’”

The boy looked stunned and confused.

“That’s all, Mr Darcy?”

“Yes.” The boy hurried away, and Darcy mounted and began his ride at a gentle pace, which increased to a gallop, the cold wind blowing in his face.

The audacity of the scoundrel! He had requested a meeting, but he had also introduced a subtle threat between the lines. He was probably hoping to convince Darcy not to reveal the truth. He must be desperate to keep his character hidden and present an appearance of decency. Wickham might have found out about Darcy’s attempts to warn people about him and was now trying to retaliate. Such actions revealed that the reprobate’s character had not improved in the slightest; nor did he

appear to have any remorse.

The horse continued steadily, with Darcy too distracted by his own thoughts to notice where he was. Eventually, he realised he had taken the path towards Meryton and Longbourn. He knew he had to distance himself from Elizabeth, and yet, whatever he did, it always brought him closer to her. Not even the risk of seeing Wickham made him stay away. He needed to leave Hertfordshire soon — it was surely not good for his sanity.

Time passed, and Darcy lost track of it until he noticed it was getting darker. His pocket watch showed it was only two o'clock, but heavy clouds were covering the sky, obscuring the daylight. He made the quick decision to ride to Meryton, hoping he might see Bingley and they could return to Netherfield together.

When he entered the town, he noticed a group of officers, and, without stopping to see who they were, he turned back. He wondered whether Wickham had received his message of rejection or whether he was expecting him. Either way, he had no desire to see the miscreant.

He rode towards Longbourn but did not go so close as to be observed from the house. Could Bingley be there? He pondered that perhaps he should go and enquire, but he quickly dismissed such an idea.

He resumed his ride, increasing the horse's speed to a gallop, then stopped for a moment believing he had heard another horse's steps. The wind prevented him from hearing anything further, so he continued on. It was cold, and very likely the rain would begin soon, so he hastened towards Netherfield, until his plans were forcibly altered.

Lost in his confusing and distressing thoughts, with the wind blowing in his face, Darcy was unprepared for the horse's abrupt halt, the loud neigh that followed, and

its sudden, frantic rearing onto its hind legs.

He dropped the reins and tried to grab the horse's mane as the stallion reared again, but a sharp blow struck his head. The last thing he remembered was falling, then a pain in his foot, cold, then dark and silence, broken by the sound of a voice asking something. He tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids were too heavy, and his hand would not move to his face, as if it was imprisoned. Some time passed, and the voice returned, and this time he thought he recognised it and even heard some words.

Moments later, the voice faded, the silence turned into noise, other voices called to him, and he felt himself lifted up, then falling again, until finally he felt the ground under his body — and he felt very cold.

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“Mama, I am so tired of walking! It is cold and muddy and will rain soon. We are the only ones who do not have a carriage,” Lydia moaned as they walked from Meryton back to Longbourn facing the icy wind. Elizabeth and Kitty also accompanied their youngest sister and mother. They were returning home after a short visit to the Phillipses' and were all tired and cold.

“We do have a carriage, Lydia, but Papa needs it. It is not a toy that you may use whenever you want.”

“That is not fair! We should buy another carriage just for us.”

“Another carriage?” Mrs Bennet rolled her eyes. “We can barely keep two servants to help your father with his duties. How could we afford another vehicle?”

“Mama, this is so upsetting! If only we were not so very poor and could afford another carriage — even a small one!”

“We are not very poor, child, but we are not rich either,” Mrs Bennet replied. “Your father’s income is small, and we have five daughters and no son. You must try hard to marry well, or else we might be homeless once your father dies and Mr Collins inherits Longbourn. You should pray Mr Collins will offer to marry one of you!” she concluded with a meaningful glare at Elizabeth.

“I hate Mr Collins. He is so irritating that I cannot stand him! I would never marry him,” Lydia continued. “I am so glad he decided to have dinner with Sir William. At least we shall not be forced to listen to him while we eat tonight.”

“Well, he certainly does not want to marry you either, Lydia. You are too young and too silly to understand how hard life is. Hopefully, Lizzy is older and wiser.”

Elizabeth chose not to answer and pretended not to understand her mother’s meaning.

“If only Jane would marry Mr Bingley sooner. I could not wish for anything more! I would not even care about Mr Collins inheriting Longbourn. Jane’s marriage would place you girls in the path of other rich men, and I am sure you would find good husbands in no time.”

“That plan is not sensible, Mama,” Elizabeth said. “I only hope Jane will find happiness in a marriage of affection. If Mr Bingley is the one she finds it with, even better.”

“I am worried that she did not come with us. She said she had a headache. I hope she will not catch a cold before the ball!”

Elizabeth knew there was no such danger. Jane was just tired after an eventful evening and needed to rest. She had even whispered to Elizabeth that Mr Bingley had mentioned he might call — a good enough reason for the honest, sweet Jane to use an excuse and remain at home.

Unlike her sisters, Elizabeth was in no particular disposition for entertainment —and had not been since Mr Darcy had called on her father. The reasons for the gentleman's involvement, his assertions about Mr Wickham, her own response to both men, and her father's harsh scrutiny were all strong inducements for a thorough examination of her actions and feelings.

She had trusted Mr Wickham's story the moment she had heard it, just as she had doubted Mr Darcy's accusations against the officer. However, she had to admit that her judgment had been based on nothing more substantial than her resentment of Mr Darcy's pride and arrogance and her instant preference for Mr Wickham's amiable manners.

Just like her father, she wondered why Mr Darcy had gone to the trouble of warning them if there was no danger. It was an embarrassing situation, to which she was certain he would not have exposed himself if he had not deemed it absolutely necessary.

The notion Mr Darcy could be right was disturbing; therefore, Elizabeth had taken the opportunity provided by the Lucases' party the previous evening for keen observation and a careful search for any evidence to prove either side.

Mr Wickham had been there, together with his fellow officers as well as Colonel Forster and his wife; Mr Darcy — as expected — had been missing. Mr Bingley had attended by himself, which had allowed him the liberty to spend most of the evening with Jane and even to dance with her. It had been the best part of the party, Elizabeth reflected.

As for her, Mr Collins's attention had been horribly annoying, and watching Mr Wickham had not been as rewarding as she had hoped.

The officer had been nothing but amiable towards everyone. He had been introduced

to Mr and Mrs Bennet — who had liked him instantly, as her mother had loudly declared. While Mr Bennet had exchanged a few words with the officer, Mrs Bennet and her youngest daughter had spent quite some time talking to him.

Mr Wickham had also sought out Elizabeth's company, engaged her in conversation, and asked her to dance. In short, the officer had been the heart of the party, his behaviour beyond reproach. Still, the more she had observed him talking to the men and then the women — from Lydia and Kitty to Maria Lucas, Mary King, Mrs Forster, Charlotte Lucas, and even the elderly ladies — the more troubled she had become by something she could not define. It was a feeling so strong that it threatened to overcome her objective observations. She had tried but failed to dismiss it and was not even certain whether it was real or induced by Mr Darcy's allegations. Everything around her seemed to be related to Mr Darcy.

“It is raining!” Lydia cried. “I am cold and hungry, and now I shall be wet and maybe catch a cold before the ball. I shall never go to Meryton without the carriage again!”

“Then I assume you will not go often,” Elizabeth answered calmly. “It is only a few drops of rain,” she added. “Do not worry. We shall take the shorter path and be home in a few minutes.”

They continued to walk, taking careful steps, until they noticed the silhouette of a man standing some distance away.

“Look, it is Mr Wickham!” Kitty exclaimed.

“Keep your voice down,” Elizabeth said, screwing up her eyes for a better view. “I cannot see him clearly.”

“It is definitely Mr Wickham. I would recognise him anywhere,” Lydia confirmed. “Mr Wickham! Mr Wickham!” she shouted.

After a few more steps, Elizabeth recognised the man too, though she did not see his face directly. They were all walking towards him, Lydia still calling out.

The man seemed to hear them; he turned his head, mounted in a hurry, and rode away.

“What was that?” Lydia asked. “Why did he leave? Did he not hear us?”

“That was very strange,” Mrs Bennet admitted. “Last night he was so friendly, and now he has run away. Men are peculiar indeed.”

“I wonder what he was doing there,” Lydia continued with obvious disappointment.

Elizabeth was curious too, intrigued by the man’s actions. She walked towards the spot where he had stood, Lydia and Kitty following her. Moments later, all three let out a cry of horror. There was Mr Darcy, hanging from his horse with one foot caught in the stirrup. The horse neighed and moved restlessly, and Elizabeth frowned momentarily, then hesitantly stretched out her hand to free his imprisoned appendage.

“Mr Darcy,” she called a few times, but she received no answer.

Mrs Bennet approached too and cried, “Oh, dear Lord!”

Then, to Elizabeth’s disbelief, her mother stepped in front of the horse, took hold of his bridle, and patted his neck, attempting to calm him down.

“Release his foot, Lizzy! Quickly!”

Elizabeth hurried to obey her mother, and her sisters tried to help — as clumsy as they were. Finally, the man was freed and laid on the ground. He was still unconscious, and Elizabeth crouched next to him, holding his head. As soon as Mrs

Bennet released her hold on the horse, it shook its head and bolted.

“Dear Lord! What on earth has happened to Mr Darcy? Is he dead?”

“No, Mama. He is breathing but unconscious. I see a wound on his temple — there is a little blood.”

Mrs Bennet bent down and touched his face and head.

“It is just a scratch. It does not look serious. But he is freezing. We must get help.”

“I shall go, Mama,” Elizabeth offered. “Can you stay here with him? We cannot leave him all alone.”

She had disliked the man from the day they met, but seeing him lying there, at the edge between life and death, was heart-wrenching.

“I cannot wait! I want to go home! I am so cold, and look — it really is raining now!” Lydia whined.

“Me too!” Kitty repeated.

“Lizzy, hurry to Longbourn and fetch help,” Mrs Bennet requested. “Take your sisters with you. I shall wait here with Mr Darcy. Bring John with the carriage.”

“Yes, Mama. And I shall send for Mr Jones too.”

“Go now!”

With her last glance, Elizabeth saw her mother seat herself on the cold, wet ground, holding Mr Darcy’s head in her lap. The image was immensely distressing

considering Mr Darcy had always treated Mrs Bennet with superior disdain, and she had always resented him in return.

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Kitty and Lydia continued to chatter about what they had witnessed, but Elizabeth disregarded them. She ran towards the house, gasping for breath.

“Where is Papa? Is he in the library? I need him right now!” she shouted the moment she entered, frightening Jane and Mary, who hurried after her. Mr Bennet startled at her appearance, standing up so quickly that he dropped his glasses and book.

“Lizzy, what has happened to you? Where are your mother and sisters? Are you hurt?”

“No, Papa, but Mr Darcy is injured and frozen. He might even die. I have come to fetch help. Mama is with him, and Lydia and Kitty should arrive soon.”

Her words sounded barely coherent, causing Jane and Mary to gasp in panic. Fortunately, after a moment of stupefaction, Mr Bennet composed himself and took control of the situation. He requested that John prepare the carriage and sent Hill for the apothecary. Their footman, Tom, went with them too, for additional help.

Less than half an hour passed between Elizabeth leaving the injured gentleman and her mother and returning in the carriage. However, in that time, the rain had intensified, and the cold could be felt in one's bones.

Mrs Bennet was soaking wet and shivering, her lips blue. Mr Darcy was moving his head, moaning something, whispering something, a streak of blood on his cheek.

With much effort, the two manservants and Mr Bennet managed to lift the injured gentleman into the carriage. Mrs Bennet and Elizabeth entered too, and only then

could Elizabeth breathe a little more freely.

Mr Darcy continued to moan, and his lips moved. She knelt next to him, calling his name.

“Mr Darcy, can you hear me, sir? You have been injured. We are taking you to Longbourn now.”

She was surprised to hear him mumbling her name, and then he reached out his hand towards her. His fingers grabbed hers, and he whispered her name again. The gentleman’s gestures, whilst clearly unconscious, were disturbing for Elizabeth, but she felt relief to at least observe a sign of his recovery, however weak.

“Should we not take him to Netherfield?” Mrs Bennet suggested.

“Netherfield is too far,” Mr Bennet said. “The road is in poor condition, and the weather is terrible. His clothes are all wet and dirty — he must be freezing. Let us go to Longbourn for now and see what Mr Jones says. I shall send word to Mr Bingley.”

“Yes, I think that is best,” Mrs Bennet replied. “I am frozen already, and he must have been out in the cold much longer.”

“I shall ask Mr Jones to examine you too. You look very ill,” Mr Bennet said. “And you too, Lizzy.”

“I am well, Papa. I wonder what could have happened to Mr Darcy. What if we had not walked by?”

“I am shocked to see him in such a state. Mr Bingley called on us earlier, and he mentioned Mr Darcy had gone out for a short ride but expected him to already be back at Netherfield.”

“Mr Bingley called?” Mrs Bennet asked enthusiastically. “Did he speak to Jane?”

“Yes and yes. He stayed about half an hour.”

“Oh, how kind of him! I am so glad to hear that. The poor man will suffer so much to see his friend injured. Dear Lord, I hope Mr Darcy will not die before the ball. That would be disastrous for Mr Bingley.”

“It would surely be more disastrous for Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet uttered. “But let us pray that will not be the case.”

“We do not even know the nature of his injuries,” Elizabeth said. “Papa, where should we put Mr Darcy? In which room?”

“In my room,” Mr Bennet responded after a brief hesitation. “It is close to the library and a door to the garden so will be easy to access. We shall decide further after Mr Jones examines him.”

The carriage stopped in front of Longbourn, and all the Bennet sisters appeared, as well as Hill. Mr Darcy was lifted out, still not properly conscious.

Jane took Mrs Bennet inside to help her change and warm up; Elizabeth withdrew to her chamber to do the same.

As she took off her dirty clothes and brushed her hair, Elizabeth’s mind was a tumult of sentiments and questions. Mr Darcy had seemingly suffered a riding accident. But if so, what had Mr Wickham been doing near him? And whatever the reason for his presence, why had he departed when they approached? The officer had left without a word or indication that there was a wounded man who needed help.

She — as well as her sisters and mother — had clearly observed Mr Wickham’s

position; he must have been very close to Mr Darcy. It would have been impossible not to see him or his horse. And again, the same question returned: Why had Mr Wickham hurried away from them when the previous evening at Lucas Lodge he had been all warmth and friendliness towards them? The only logical, though disturbing, answer was that Mr Wickham had deliberately abandoned Mr Darcy there — injured, in danger of dying either from his wounds or the cold. Such a notion caused Elizabeth disgust, resentment, and rage. No human should be allowed to display such cruelty towards other living beings.

A knock on the door surprised her, and Mary entered carrying a small tray.

“Hill has prepared some soup and herbal tea for you and Mama.”

“Thank you. How is Mama? And Mr Darcy?”

“Jane is taking care of Mama. All I know of Mr Darcy is that Papa and John are with him. What a tragedy, Lizzy! I wonder what happened.”

“I wonder too, my dear. I shall take a few sips, then let us go downstairs. I wonder why Mr Jones is taking so long. Did Papa inform Mr Bingley?”

“I am not sure, Lizzy...”

Her questions were answered a few minutes later when she and Mary went downstairs, encountering the apothecary in the hall, who passed by her with a brief nod. Mr Jones looked exceedingly troubled, which increased Elizabeth’s own agitation. She waited for her father to appear, but he did not, so she and Mary went to the drawing room, where Lydia and Kitty soon joined them.

“I have never seen a dying man before,” Lydia whispered.

“Let us hope he is not dying,” Elizabeth replied.

“He did not look proud and arrogant any longer. I felt sorry for him,” Kitty added.

“Of course you did, my dear. We all feel sorry for him. Even though we do not always appreciate his manners, Mr Darcy is a gentleman with many qualities, and he deserves our concern and prayers. In truth, anyone would deserve concern and prayers under similar circumstances.”

In the middle of their conversation, Mr Bingley arrived, pale, alarmed, his hair and neckcloth in disorder, breathing erratically. With him was another man, silent but equally troubled.

“Where is Darcy? What happened? How is he?”

“He is with my father and Mr Jones the apothecary,” Elizabeth answered gently.

“Please take a seat. We should have news soon.”

“No, thank you. I cannot sit. This is Stevens, Darcy’s valet. He has come to take care of him. I could not make him wait at Netherfield.”

“I must be with Mr Darcy. Can you take me to him immediately?” Stevens asked.

While John showed him the way, Mr Bingley continued his enquiries.

“But what happened? Your servant told me he had an accident. What accident? There is no better rider than Darcy! And he fell? I have fallen from a horse a hundred times with barely a scratch!”

“Mr Bingley, please calm yourself. We know nothing more except that we found him unconscious, his foot caught in a stirrup. We do not know the nature or the

seriousness of the accident.”

“Why...why not call me sooner? Why did you not take him to Netherfield?”

“There was no time. We sent you word as soon as we could. We were walking home from Meryton when we found him. Mama remained with him while I ran to get help. Longbourn was the closest place to shelter him. He was already cold, and it was raining, and—”

“Yes, of course... You did well. Forgive me. I am lost, shocked—”

“Mr Bingley! You are here!” Jane’s voice interrupted the gentleman. He turned to her, and his expression immediately softened. Jane approached him and stretched out her hands, which he took. The simple, genuine gesture seemed to provide him instant comfort, so he finally took a seat, with Jane by his side.

Against her will, Elizabeth recollected Mr Darcy whispering her name and holding her hand when he was barely conscious, and a strange warmth enveloped her. She had previously held men’s hands while dancing, but she did not remember feeling anything so intense before.

Mrs Bennet joined the group a few moments later, and the discussion resumed, then ended abruptly when the apothecary appeared, his countenance still disquieted. Behind him was Mr Bennet, looking equally anxious.

Mr Bingley jumped to his feet.

“How is he?”

“I am not sure,” Mr Jones replied. “He has regained consciousness and even recognised us.”

“He has? Thank God! This is wonderful!” Mr Bingley exclaimed.

Elizabeth breathed deeply with a profound sense of relief.

“I hope it is a good sign, but there are plenty of reasons for concern,” the apothecary added. He paused to take the drink offered by Mr Bennet.

“What reasons? What concerns?” Mr Bingley insisted.

“Mr Darcy has some pain in his foot, but it does not seem broken, which is good. Also, a few of his ribs are sore, and I expect to see many bruises by tomorrow.”

He paused again for a sip of brandy.

“There is a strange injury on his temple. It is as if he was struck with a small rock, perhaps. There is also another wound on the top his head. It was likely hit quite hard by a branch. He must have been riding at a gallop and failed to see it. I believe the impact made him dizzy and caused him to fall.”

“It sounds worrisome, but it is not so tragic, is it?” Mr Bingley asked.

“My knowledge is limited. I cannot know for sure. I cannot estimate the seriousness of his head injury, and he was out in the cold for some time. He might develop a fever. I do not know...”

“So, what should we do?” Mrs Bennet asked, sounding like she was losing her patience.

“I shall give him some medicine and stay with him through the night. We should not move him until we know for sure. Perhaps some tea or a little soup if he is awake.”

“Of course. We shall do as you say,” Mrs Bennet replied.

“Mr Bingley,” the apothecary continued, “I imagine Mr Darcy has a doctor in London. A true physician. I recommend you send for him. I cannot make a decision alone about Mr Darcy’s health.”

“Yes, of course! He does have a doctor, but I am not acquainted with him. I shall write to Miss Darcy immediately. I shall send an express. With luck, by tomorrow night, the doctor can be here.”

“Please do so,” the apothecary uttered.

Mr Bingley was highly agitated, and he glanced about, seemingly confused.

“Mr Bingley, I may provide you with paper and pen,” Mr Bennet offered. “Or you would prefer to return to Netherfield, perhaps?”

“No...I would rather stay if it is acceptable to you. I shall write to Miss Darcy and dispatch a note to my sisters to let them know Darcy is well enough. Can you send someone with it?”

“Of course. It seems there are only a few things we can do for Mr Darcy, so let us do them properly,” Mr Bennet concluded. “Mrs Bennet, is dinner ready? We shall all have a restless night, and some food might be helpful. And we must adjust our living arrangements for these peculiar circumstances.”

“We shall take care of everything, Papa,” Elizabeth replied. “Mama needs to rest, but we shall help Hill.”

She preferred to have something to engage her time and her mind to avoid any thorough consideration of the facts — and Mr Wickham’s involvement or lack of it in

the accident. If they had not arrived at that very moment, would Mr Wickham have sought help or left Mr Darcy to die there? And if he had wished to offer help, why not do it even after they approached the scene?

Was it possible that she was judging the officer too harshly? Could he truly have not seen them and was hurrying to seek help? What if he had returned but Mr Darcy had not been there any longer and he had heard they had already saved him? Could there be any excuse for what seemed like cowardice and cruelty? She hoped there was; otherwise she would be a ridiculous simpleton who had trusted a deceitful man for no other reason than his handsome face and pleasant manners.

She remembered how readily she had believed Mr Darcy guilty of cruelty and wickedness and had accused him — at least in her mind — of being a disloyal son and a dishonourable man. If she was proved wrong, she would be forever ashamed of her unfair judgment.

If only Mr Darcy would recover — that was the most important thing. But his situation seemed truly grave.

Elizabeth had known Mr Jones since she was a child and had never seen him so disconcerted. It could be because the wounds were life-threatening or simply because he had never treated someone so important before. Either way, he seemed confused about the injuries and unsure about the treatment — and that could not have been worse for Mr Darcy. The arrival of his own doctor would be his salvation.

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Mr Jones joined the rest of the family for dinner while Mr Darcy was resting.

Mr Bingley — sitting next to Jane — kept talking about his friend's accomplishments and wondering about the strange accident. His concern ruined his appetite and revealed his genuine affection for Mr Darcy. The letter for Miss Darcy and the note for his sisters had been sent, but Mr Bingley was still restless, asking what more he could do.

“There is nothing else to do but wait. Mr Darcy's wounds need rest to heal, and if he has caught a cold, we should know by morning,” Mr Jones said. “I shall watch him overnight.”

“Mr Jones, could you please give Mama some herbal tea and some medicine, just to protect her?” Elizabeth enquired.

“I need no medicine, Lizzy, I am well. Perhaps a glass of port will help me sleep after all this agitation.”

“Mama, you stayed out in the rain with Mr Darcy for a long while. You may have caught a cold too. Let us be prudent.”

“Then you and Lydia and Kitty should also have some medicine,” Mrs Bennet argued. “I hope you will not fall ill now, three days before the ball.”

“I shall certainly take medicine if it will prevent anything that could keep me away from the ball,” Lydia said.

“Oh, the ball...” Mr Bingley interjected, becoming even more distressed. “I do not know what to do...” he whispered, glancing at Jane.

“I dare say it depends on Mr Darcy’s progress,” Jane answered. “We all understand that.” They shared a timid, comforting smile, which Elizabeth noted with delight. As for the ball, cancelling it, given the present circumstances, seemed a prudent step.

“Mr Bingley, what do you mean? You cannot cancel the ball, please!” Lydia cried.

“Lydia, try to use your mind more than your mouth,” Mr Bennet censured her. “Mr Bingley’s friend is fighting for his life, and you expect him to entertain you?”

Lydia was silenced by the severe reprimand and looked to her mother for support.

Mr Bingley continued. “As Miss Bennet said, it depends on Darcy’s improvement. We should know by tomorrow and decide accordingly.”

“I hope Mr Darcy will recover soon,” Mrs Bennet interjected. “In the meantime, please know you are always welcome here, Mr Bingley. You may come and stay all day with your friend.”

Elizabeth easily guessed her mother’s scheme of keeping Jane and Mr Bingley together even in that dire situation. She would smile if things were not so sad.

“Thank you, Mrs Bennet. I truly appreciate all your efforts on behalf of my friend.”

“In truth, Mama was most helpful in attending Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said. “And very brave. She grabbed the reins of his frightened horse and managed to calm him. Quite impressive, Mama.”

“Your mother was an excellent horsewoman in her youth. Did you not know that,

Lizzy?" Mr Bennet asked.

"No, I did not." Elizabeth smiled at her mother affectionately. "I regret I did not inherit the skill from her."

"Apparently, only Jane inherited your mother's enjoyment of riding, as well as most of your mother's beauty," Mr Bennet offered in an unexpected compliment to his wife.

"Oh, what a silly thing to say, Mr Bennet! I am sure you only wish to tease me," the lady said.

"Not at all, madam. I am being as honest as I can be," the gentleman assured her.

Mrs Bennet's cheeks coloured with obvious pleasure, and Jane blushed too, glancing at Mr Bingley, who responded with an enchanted little smile.

"I am sure Darcy will be as grateful as I am and will thank you in person as soon as his health allows it," Mr Bingley uttered.

"Mr Darcy's full recovery would be enough expression of gratitude," Mrs Bennet replied with a wisdom that stunned Elizabeth even further. Her mother had surely not been her usual self over the last few hours, which was a delightful change.

"I do not wish to sound presumptuous," Mr Bingley continued, "but will you manage to accommodate your family, considering Mr Bennet's room is being used by Darcy? And your cousin is here too, occupying an extra room. Perhaps I could take Mr Collins to Netherfield, so you can use his chamber?"

"That is very kind of you, Mr Bingley, but we shall manage for tonight. I am sure Mrs Bennet will not mind hosting me for a few nights, even if I snore and disturb her

rest. Let us see what happens tomorrow.”

“Very well, sir. We shall move Darcy to Netherfield as soon as we are allowed.”

“Such a decision should only be made after Mr Darcy’s physician has examined him,” Mr Jones said. “I strongly advise we let him rest here for now.”

“Of course. As I said, we shall manage for tonight,” Mr Bennet concluded.

After dinner, the apothecary returned to Mr Darcy’s chamber, and Mr Bingley soon joined him. He stayed at Longbourn for another hour, then left with the intention of calling again the next morning.

During the meal, neither her mother nor her sisters had mentioned the fact they had espied Mr Wickham near the injured Mr Darcy, but Elizabeth became more and more concerned about it. She intended to discuss it with her father, but Mr Bennet was too tired for any further conversation. As Mr Jones said, the best thing to do was to wait and pray the night would pass favourably for the wounded gentleman.

The family was about to retire to their rooms when Mr Collins arrived. He had been dining at Lucas Lodge, and apparently the news of Mr Darcy’s accident had already reached Meryton. Mr Collins looked so desperate it was as if he was the one wounded. He would not stop talking about the tragedy that had struck one of the most remarkable young men in all of England and what a loss his death would be.

Lydia, Kitty, and Mary escaped to their rooms, as did Mrs Bennet. Mr Bennet, Elizabeth, and Jane tolerated their cousin’s whining for a while, until it became too much.

“Mr Collins, let us hope Mr Darcy will recover and live a long life, for the benefit of the entire country,” Mr Bennet said with an irony that the clergyman missed. “We

should be quiet so he can rest — as can we all. Our apothecary will watch over the patient tonight, and hopefully, his own doctor from London will arrive tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes! I must inform Lady Catherine de Bourgh immediately!”

“I strongly suggest you do not do that until tomorrow,” Mr Bennet replied harshly. “You know too little, and any presumption would only disturb her ladyship. I am sure she would not appreciate that.”

“Yes, but—”

“Mr Collins, as far as I know, patience is an essential virtue for a man of the church. You cannot just act on your first impulse. Even Lady Catherine would agree with that. Let us go to bed now. Hopefully, we shall have a clearer mind after some sleep.”

With that, Mr Collins was dismissed, and the evening came to an end.

In their room, Elizabeth and Jane continued to discuss the day’s events. Jane seemed more concerned with Mr Bingley’s distress than with Mr Darcy’s injuries — for which Elizabeth could not blame her. Eventually, Jane fell asleep, but Elizabeth was too restless. She wondered about Mr Darcy’s health, whether he had regained full consciousness, whether he had a fever... Her curiosity was endless and impossible to satisfy.

Silence and solitude offered Elizabeth little comfort and much torment; distressing thoughts about Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham returned to burden her mind. So many questions without answers, so much self-reproachment without knowing the truth.

The night progressed, along with Elizabeth’s anxiety. She put on her robe and went to the kitchen to make herself tea but, to her surprise, she found Hill there.

“Mrs Hill, why are you still awake?”

“Mr Jones asked me to prepare some medicine for Mr Darcy and to warm him some soup. I am happy to help if I can.”

“Let me take him the tray. I am too tired to sleep, and I am curious to enquire about Mr Darcy’s health.”

“Very well, miss.”

“And go to sleep, Mrs Hill. It is very late, and you will have to rise again soon.”

Holding the tray, Elizabeth took careful steps, a sense of apprehension making her knees tremble. Entering the room where Mr Darcy rested was bold, improper, and uncalled for. They were more enemies than friends, and seeing him so informally dressed would be uncomfortable for both. Even if he was not awake, he might be upset when he found out later.

Still, curiosity prevailed, and she knocked on the door. It creaked a little as it opened, and in the doorway, Stevens, Mr Darcy’s valet, eyed her with confusion. A lady should not enter a gentleman’s room in her nightgown, even if he was hurt. She knew, yet she dismissed such proper and wise reflections.

“Miss Elizabeth? Is something wrong?”

“No...Hill made some hot soup and medicine. I brought it.”

They were both whispering, and she assumed Mr Darcy was asleep.

“Thank you. I am sorry for the trouble. I could have come and fetched it myself.”

“No trouble at all.”

The valet tried to take the tray, but Elizabeth would not release it.

“How is Mr Darcy? Is there any news? Is he any better?”

“We hope so. The master seems to be in some pain, and he has a fever. But he is very much aware of his situation.”

“Oh, is he? How wonderful! We pray that he will be even better by morning.”

“Miss Lizzy?” Mr Jones called to her.

“Yes, sir,” she replied, taking the opportunity to step into the room. “I brought the medicine you requested.”

“Good. Hopefully Mr Darcy will take a few sips. He is just like any other man — a very disobedient patient who refuses any medicine.”

“I agree with that. Papa is the same. So is Mr Darcy better?”

“Better than I feared, but the danger lingers.”

They were still talking in low tones until a loud, clear voice startled them.

“Miss Elizabeth?”

“Mr Darcy!”

She finally handed Stevens the tray, then she stepped farther into the room, disregarding the rules of propriety entirely. She stopped, and her heart raced when

she saw him lying under the sheets, looking pale and vulnerable.

“Sir, I am so glad to see you awake. Forgive me for disturbing you. I shall leave immediately.”

“I am glad to see you too. Please, stay a moment,” he pleaded. The softness in his voice gave Elizabeth shivers. She looked to Mr Jones, asking permission, and he nodded.

“Miss Elizabeth, I cannot go any longer without thanking you and your mother for saving my life. I hope to have the chance to express my gratitude to Mrs Bennet very soon.”

“Mr Darcy, please do not take the trouble of speaking of gratitude. You need all your strength to recover. You gave us all a fright, including poor Mr Bingley.”

“I am truly sorry. I still cannot understand how it was possible for my horse to throw me. I have been riding him for years.”

“But, sir, do you remember what happened?”

“Partially. I was out riding when suddenly my horse stopped abruptly and reared in fear. I hit my head on something, and I fell. I was fortunate you found me. You truly saved my life.”

“I agree,” Mr Jones interjected. “Being out there in the cold and rain was the most dangerous part. Luckily, you were close to Longbourn, and Miss Elizabeth fetched help remarkably quickly.”

“Miss Elizabeth is a great walker,” Mr Darcy replied, surprising Elizabeth. She gazed at him and noticed a trace of a smile in his eyes and in the corner of his lips. Was he

teasing her? If so, he was surely in no danger of dying.

“I am indeed both a great walker and a great reader, I have been told,” she replied and noticed his smile grew a little bit. “And if you are truly grateful to me, Mr Darcy, I expect you to express it by taking all the medicine Mr Jones gives you. Every last drop. I shall accept nothing less.”

“I would by no means wish to be ungrateful, Miss Elizabeth, so I shall do as you request.”

“I am glad to hear that.” She smiled at him. “I shall leave you now, and I hope for a favourable report in the morning.”

“Good night, Miss Bennet,” he said. Elizabeth walked towards the door, then, despite the loud cry of her own reason demanding she leave, she stopped and asked, “Mr Darcy, forgive my boldness, sir. There is something that troubles me. Do you remember anything between the moment of your fall and the time we found you?”

She immediately noticed the change in his expression. He hesitated, their gazes locked, and he seemed reluctant to reply. Finally, he answered, “I have some vague memories. I was not aware you knew of something occurring between those two events. Did you see anything?”

“I did — as did my mother and sisters. We have little doubt about what we saw. The only question is why.”

Elizabeth felt as if she was speaking against her will, against her common sense. She should put an end to the conversation; it should not have even begun. The subject was so delicate she should not have even dared mention it, especially not to an injured man and not in the presence of Mr Jones and the valet.

“Such a question would be better answered at another time and in another place,” Mr Darcy said. His voice was calm, even gentle, but his dismissal was clear.

“Of course. I am sorry for bothering you at such an improper moment.”

“Please do not apologise, Miss Elizabeth. The moment is not proper, but your presence was most welcome.”

“Good night, Mr Darcy. Please take your medicine,” she concluded, then left in a hurry. Outside the door, she halted for a moment to compose herself.

Mr Darcy clearly remembered what had happened, including Mr Wickham’s presence. He had not said as much, but surely the circumstances between the two men were complicated. And something else was clear: she had foolishly granted her trust and friendship to a man who had left his childhood companion to die in the cold and the rain.

She returned to her room, heavy-hearted, and on the way to her bed, she realised she had stood in front of Mr Darcy and spoken to him dressed in only her night gown and robe, with her hair loose and her bare feet in slippers.

A sudden wave of heat enveloped her entire body as if she had a high fever; yet there was no medicine that might cool it.

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Darcy tried to open his eyes, but his head hurt as if it was being squeezed in an iron trap. He raised his hand to it and gasped; there must have been an impact. His right temple hurt too — almost like a small and painful burn. Strangely, the pain had increased overnight instead of diminishing, and the suffocating warmth could only mean he had a fever. So he had likely caught a cold too.

Or perhaps, he mused with his eyes still closed, the fever was from the image of Elizabeth standing beside his bed, dressed only in a night gown and robe, which had fallen freely around her alluring figure, her long hair loose over her shoulders, her worried countenance, her sweet teasing and enchanting smile. She had come to bring him soup and medicine. He had eaten it all — for her. She had seemed concerned for him. She had seemed to actually care.

Since he had no intention of pursuing a relationship with Elizabeth, he had never pondered thoroughly what her feelings for him were. She must have been upset by his offensive remark at the assembly. Since then, he had been in her company often enough to be completely enchanted by her but insufficiently enough to know her feelings. Her manners were natural and charming, her wit sparkled as much as her pretty eyes, and she enjoyed teasing — probably another trait inherited from her father.

When he had spoken to Mr Bennet, the man had assumed Darcy disliked Elizabeth as much as she disliked him. Till that moment, Darcy had never considered Elizabeth's opinion of him might be unfavourable. Her dislike made him feel uncomfortable, but in the end, it served his purpose; he did not want to leave her behind feeling hurt and disappointed.

Since she had left Netherfield after staying a few days, they had not spoken again except for polite greetings. He had purposely avoided her because he was frightened by the attraction that made him lose control. He wished for her more than he had ever wished for anything, yet he had denied himself the chance to even consider another outcome but separation from her. And now he was bound to her by gratitude. He refused to consider living his life with her — as wonderful as such a dream might sound — but he would have not lived at all if she had not happened upon him.

He had also blamed Elizabeth for her family, including for her mother's situation in life and her outrageous manners. As if in revenge for his vanity, fate had given Mrs Bennet a critical part in his rescue. He had not been fully conscious, but he had recognised that the matron had sat with him, on the cold ground, in the rain, and held his head in her lap until help arrived. She had probably done it because he was a friend of Bingley's — whom she hoped to entrap as her son-in-law. But regardless, he owed her his gratitude.

What perturbed him the most was Wickham's presence after the accident. Darcy was unaware how long after his fall Wickham had appeared, but he remembered his words.

“So, you are here, after all, Darcy. You refused to talk to me, and yet you can do nothing to avoid me. There is no greater pleasure than seeing you lying at my feet.”

Those words, that laugh, were enough proof for Darcy to assume the worst. How Wickham had come to be there was a mystery, but undoubtedly the scoundrel had no intention of helping him. In truth, Darcy's death would be the perfect revenge for Wickham, and a fatal accident was probably what the man prayed for.

Darcy's presence had become a threat to Wickham's latest schemes within the regiment, and the exposure of his true character would have ended his new career before it had begun. Obviously, the scoundrel had no intention of changing his

behaviour and making amends for his past errors; he only wished to conceal the past so he could continue his dishonourable conduct in the present and future.

Darcy shivered, imagining that Wickham could have actually done something to push him towards such an ending.

Fortunately, Darcy had been blessed by the appearance of the Bennet ladies. Pure luck, a twist of fate, or whatever it was, had saved his life. And apparently, from what she had implied the previous night, Elizabeth and her mother and sisters — who were all on friendly terms with Wickham — had seen the officer. Had they spoken to him? Had he said anything? Had he just walked away? But how would he justify such actions? The situation was disturbingly complicated, and there were many elements missing for a thorough understanding. And the terrible headache was certainly not helpful.

“Mr Darcy?”

He finally opened his eyes to see the apothecary leaning over him.

“Are you in pain, sir? May I examine you? You certainly have a fever. I have asked for some tea and more medicine.”

“My head hurts a little, but it is nothing to worry about. As for the fever, I am sure it is nothing but a trifling cold.”

“I would suggest more prudence, Mr Darcy, as it is a serious matter. As I feared, many bruises have appeared on your chest and on your right leg, which might indicate deeper injuries. And the fever might increase and affect your lungs. What worries me the most is the swelling on the top of your head. Most likely you hit a branch.”

“If you intended to frighten me, Mr Jones, you have surely succeeded,” Darcy replied. “I promise to follow your advice. I do not wish to worsen my condition with disobedience.”

A knock on the door interrupted them, and Bingley entered. Behind him, Darcy was surprised and thrilled to see Elizabeth with another tray.

“Good morning, Darcy! You look better than I expected. How are you feeling?”

“I feel like I was thrown from my horse,” he replied, and Bingley laughed. “Good morning, Miss Bennet,” he added.

“Good morning, sir. I only came to bring your medicine and tea, as Hill is a little busy this morning.”

“Thank you. That is very kind of you. But you should not have inconvenienced yourself — Stevens could have fetched it.” He paused as he noticed a trace of discomfort on her face. Could she have taken his words as disapproval of her actions?

“Please know that I am grateful for your care and your presence, Miss Elizabeth. I just do not wish to burden you even more.”

“I am glad to help, sir,” Elizabeth replied while Stevens took the tray from her.

“You should know that I took all the medicine you brought last night — as promised,” Darcy continued, and the smile returned to Elizabeth’s eyes.

“There is nothing more pleasant than a gentleman keeping his promises,” she said in a teasing tone.

“So, Mr Jones, can we move Darcy to Netherfield today?” Bingley enquired. “The

house is much larger, the servants more numerous, and it would be more comfortable for everyone.”

“I cannot approve such a movement, Mr Bingley. I would recommend waiting for Mr Darcy’s doctor to make any further decisions in regard to his health.”

“My doctor?” Darcy asked, dumbfounded. “Whom do you mean?”

“I asked for your doctor to come, Darcy,” Bingley explained. “Your injuries seemed severe yesterday, and we feared for your life. Mr Jones suggested that his own knowledge was limited and that you needed someone with more experience. Did I not mention it last night? I thought I did.”

“You did not mention it, Bingley. Nobody did. You wrote to Dr Bates?”

“No...I did not know his address, so I wrote to Miss Darcy that you had suffered an accident and required your physician.”

A sharp claw gripped Darcy’s head and chest, and he struggled to breathe.

“You wrote to Georgiana? Have you lost your mind? How dare you?” The sudden movement of his body as he tried to sit up increased the pain so much that he moaned, and rage rushed through him.

“Yes...of course...I do not understand... What else could I have done?”

Bingley’s stupefied expression and the apothecary’s stunned countenance were not enough for him to control his outburst, but Elizabeth’s eyes, widened in disbelief, her frown of amazement, and her suddenly pale cheeks were. He took a deep breath, while Bingley seemed unable to find his words.

“Mr Darcy, if our decision was incorrect, I take full responsibility,” Mr Jones interjected. “I insisted the doctor be called. Your health was in danger, and I truly believe it still is, despite your being awake and alert. A wound to the head or the ribs can always be life-threatening. I am a simple country apothecary with limited knowledge and a few medicines.”

“All of us who feared for your life agreed with the decision, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth interjected, her voice trembling slightly.

“I am very sorry...truly sorry...” he said, addressing Bingley and Mr Jones, then locking his gaze with Elizabeth’s for a moment. “Your concern is greatly appreciated, and I know your actions were for my benefit. It is just that...my sister has not been well this summer. Her state is delicate, and she is still rather weak. She has a kind, sensitive heart, and the news of my accident would surely have been distressing for her. She is alone with her companion. I can only imagine her shock, her sorrow, her fear... Bingley, please bring me a piece of paper. I must write to her this instant. Stevens — you will take the letter and deliver it yourself. Please assure her that I am well and shall return to London soon.”

“I shall fetch you some paper, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth replied and left in a hurry. Darcy had to face the stunned and confused gazes of his friend and the apothecary, while he still could not settle his heart.

Poor Georgiana. Who knew what words Bingley had used and how much panic and fright it had caused her. She had surely sent Dr Bates immediately, but her suffering while waiting for news must be torture.

Moments later, Elizabeth returned with a small tray with paper, pen, and ink. He tried to raise himself up against the pillows, but the pain was sharp, and he could not conceal another groan.

“Mr Darcy, you should not move!” Mr Jones interjected, hurrying to him to adjust his position.

“Mr Darcy, would you mind if I wrote the letter to Miss Darcy? You may dictate it, and I shall write it down, so we can send it immediately.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. That would be perfect. Please forgive my response. My brain must be addled by the accident.”

“Do not apologise, sir. I understand your concern for your sister. Please tell me what you want to write,” Elizabeth said. Then she sat on a chair at the small table close to the bed and waited. He struggled to gather his thoughts, while her closeness made him even dizzier.

Dearest Georgiana,

I am not writing this letter myself; the handwriting belongs to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who kindly offered to assist me. Please know I am well, and you have no reason to worry.

I am sorry you received such disturbing news, which I am sure hurt you more than it should. I did suffer an accident due to my lack of attention, and I have a few injuries that I am sure will heal soon.

Bingley asked for Dr Bates because he was worried for my wellbeing, which is much appreciated. If Dr Bates arrives, he might be helpful, but today I feel better already.

I shall write to you again in a few days, either myself or with help, with more news, which you must expect to be all good.

Hopefully, we shall see each other before long, as I plan to return to London as soon

as possible.

Your beloved brother.

He dictated, Elizabeth wrote and sealed it, and a few minutes later, Stevens was prepared for the trip to London.

Elizabeth excused herself and left, but Bingley and Mr Jones remained, both obviously affected by his response to their actions. He tried to apologise to them, and then, after Bingley left too, Darcy felt suddenly sleepy. He tried to rest when a sudden realisation struck him harder and more painfully than his other wounds.

Georgiana would surely not stay at home and wait for news, knowing he was hurt. She was very likely on her way to Hertfordshire already, and there was nothing he could do to stop her. Furthermore, he would not be able to protect her from Wickham if she happened to meet that scoundrel.

Georgiana did not even know Wickham was in the area, so meeting him would cause her another shock. He would have to ask Bingley to protect his sister, but such a request would cause more questions to arise than Darcy could answer. Not to mention that Bingley's sisters were another reason for distress for Georgiana.

Mr Jones poured him another cup of medicine, and he was about to refuse when he remembered Elizabeth's bright little smile when she had made him promise to obey the doctor. He took a few sips of the bitter beverage, hoping it would help him to heal soon.

Of course, healing would mean he could return to Netherfield and then London, leaving Elizabeth behind, which increased his pain even more.

???

The night of the accident, Elizabeth had slept little and agitatedly, and when she finally arose in the morning, she was still disquieted by her bold intrusion upon Mr Darcy.

She recollected the details of their previous conversations, from the first evening at the assembly to the previous night, when he had smiled and teased her, despite his pain. She remembered small details like the locks of hair on his forehead, his neck revealed by the open shirt, the form of his jaw, and the particular expression in his eyes. In the relative darkness of the room, lit only by a few candles and the fire, Elizabeth had seen Mr Darcy in a new light.

In the morning, Hill was busy making arrangements for breakfast for so many people. Therefore, when the medicine for Mr Darcy was mentioned, Elizabeth offered to take it; and Mr Bingley's sudden appearance at that early hour offered her a companion to enter Mr Darcy's chamber with.

She had hoped to find the gentleman awake and alert and to hear a favourable report from Mr Jones. Her expectations were partially met as he received them in good spirits and even jested about keeping his promise to her. She teased him back — perhaps a little too boldly, considering the state of his health.

What she did not expect was his strong — almost wild — response to the news that Mr Bingley had called for his doctor. It was a natural and logical action, meant to protect him, which even Mr Darcy admitted eventually once he managed to control his anger. Mr Darcy offered an explanation about his sister's distress, which could be a real concern. However, Mr Bingley was not to be blamed; he had done what anyone would do for a friend in a dire situation.

Mr Darcy did seem to be an affectionate and protective brother, though. Since their parents had died when Miss Darcy must have been very young, he had probably been both a brother and a father to her. It was no wonder brother and sister cared about

each other so deeply. All in all, Mr Darcy was, without doubt, a man difficult to understand and to truly know for anyone outside his close circle of family and friends.

At breakfast, with Mr Bingley, Mr Jones, and Mr Collins in attendance, they spoke of little else but Mr Darcy's accident.

"Darcy's horse arrived back at Netherfield's stables," Mr Bingley said. "The stallion is injured too — he has a strange wound on his back right leg, which is probably what scared him and caused him to throw Darcy."

"Mr Darcy has a peculiar scratch too," Mr Jones interjected. "As though something sharp hit his right temple. It is not deep, nor does it look dangerous, and it is unlikely to be the reason for his fall. Still, it is intriguing."

"Perhaps we could take a look at the specific spot where you found Darcy," Mr Bingley suggested. "We might find some clues about how the accident occurred."

"That is an excellent idea," Elizabeth admitted. "I shall gladly join you, sir. And I am sure Jane will come too."

"Yes, yes, it is a good idea for Jane to go with you," Mrs Bennet uttered. "But I hope you will wait till the rain stops."

"Of course, madam," Mr Bingley answered. "I would not want to put Miss Bennet or Miss Elizabeth in any danger. Until then, I shall wait here with you, if you do not mind."

"Nothing would give us more pleasure, Mr Bingley," Mrs Bennet said with much enthusiasm, while Jane only smiled and blushed.

“I shall ask Mr Darcy whether he approves of me writing to Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” Mr Collins said.

“You may ask, but I strongly suggest you not write a word until he agrees,” Mr Bingley said. “He was quite upset that I wrote to his doctor without asking permission.”

Mr Collins appeared disappointed but did not reply.

“So...is Mr Darcy any better?” Mrs Bennet enquired.

“He is not as bad as I feared,” Mr Jones answered. “I expect his doctor to arrive with medicine that will be more effective than mine.”

“So, Mr Bingley, I hope you will still host the ball,” Lydia said.

“We shall know for sure later today after Darcy’s physician examines him.”

“Papa, may we go to Meryton? I wish to visit Maria Lucas.”

“You may not. You only went to Meryton yesterday. You should try to stay at home and spend at least half an hour doing something to improve your mind,” her father responded.

Lydia tried to protest, but with strangers at the table and Mr Bennet’s severe countenance, she abandoned the attempt.

“Sir William invited me to Lucas Lodge to continue a discussion we began last night but was interrupted by the news of Mr Darcy’s accident,” Mr Collins said. “I am tempted to go but feel I should stay here and wait for news about Mr Darcy. I cannot enjoy myself when I know he is fighting for his life.”

“Mr Collins, I advise you to go to Lucas Lodge and continue your conversation,” Mr Bennet said. “None of us can be of any use to Mr Darcy at present. If there is significant news, I promise to inform you immediately.”

“Thank you, Mr Bennet. You are exceedingly kind and considerate.”

“Mr Collins, you have spent quite a lot of time at Lucas Lodge lately,” Mrs Bennet interjected.

“Indeed,” Mr Collins replied. “I very much enjoy Sir William’s company, and I always feel welcome and well attended to at Lucas Lodge.”

At that, Mrs Bennet threw a glare at Elizabeth, who chose to disregard it. She could easily believe that Mr Collins and Sir William were well suited, and she pitied her friend Charlotte for being forced to bear their dull conversation.

As for herself, she could not be happier about Mr Collins’s absence.

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The rain lasted until around noon. Mr Bennet visited Mr Darcy for a few minutes, then he withdrew to the library, while the patient fell asleep.

As Jane was engaged in conversation with Mr Bingley, Elizabeth took the opportunity to speak to her father on the subject that troubled her.

“Papa, I must ask your opinion on something very delicate.”

“There is more? I hoped we had already exhausted all delicate subjects for a while.”

“You have no such luck, Papa,” Elizabeth replied in the same tone. “In fact, it is delicate and very serious. Yesterday, when we were walking home, we saw Mr Wickham. He was standing holding his horse. We called to him, but he did not turn. Nor did he acknowledge our presence. He departed in a hurry, and we were curious to know what he was doing there. That was when we found Mr Darcy.”

Mr Bennet put his book down and took off his glasses.

“What are you saying, Lizzy?”

“I do not know, Papa. I have related to you exactly what happened.”

“Are you sure it was Mr Wickham?”

“I am. So is Mama and Lydia and Kitty, who are well acquainted with him. There is no room for confusion.”

“So, he just stood there?”

“That is what we saw. Mr Darcy indicated to me that he remembered too but did not provide me with any further details.”

“When did you talk to Mr Darcy?”

“Last night. Hill was busy, and I took him some tea and his medicine. Mr Jones and Stevens were there, and Mr Darcy was awake, so we talked for a few moments.”

“I see... Could Mr Wickham have gone for help?”

“I considered that possibility. But would he not have said something if he had returned and Mr Darcy was not there? Mr Collins heard the news about the accident last night. Surely the reports must have reached the officers too. He must know Mr Darcy is at Longbourn.”

“True. So, what do you suspect, Lizzy?”

“I am afraid to express my thoughts, Papa. If they are true, I would be disgusted by Mr Wickham’s actions.”

“You suspect he caused the accident in some way?”

“Oh no, Heaven forbid! I would not dare accuse Mr Wickham of such an atrocity. But the evidence suggests that he did see Mr Darcy lying there injured, and he did not care enough to fetch help. Papa, I am horrified to imagine that if Mr Wickham had left and we had not arrived, Mr Darcy would have died — if not from his injuries then from the cold. Mr Wickham must have known the consequences of his actions. Is it not horrible?”

“Very much so, Lizzy. Do you intend to do something?”

“It is not for me to do anything. Mr Darcy must decide if and what he wishes to do.”

“I agree... This is an abhorrence, though. Mr Wickham, whom you all adored, could be revealed to be a low-life human who deceived you all shamelessly.”

“I never adored Mr Wickham, Papa, but I did like and trust him. And that makes me a foolish simpleton. If he is shameless, I should be ashamed of myself.”

“My dear, sadly, you are right,” Mr Bennet concluded in his usual ironic tone. “Now, if we have finished this conversation, I shall go and see how Mr Darcy fares.”

Elizabeth was tempted to ask permission to accompany her father, but visiting Mr Darcy’s room for the third time in two days would be too much.

“Papa, come quickly!” Lydia shouted before they had time to separate. “Look, there is a large carriage in front of the house!”

“A carriage? Did Sir William tire of Mr Collins so quickly that he lent him his carriage to convey him home?”

“No, no, my dear. Apparently, we have visitors!” Mrs Bennet declared as they all gathered by the window. “It seems to be someone more important than Mr Collins.”

“Could Mr Darcy’s doctor have arrived?” Elizabeth enquired.

The answer came when a lady stepped out of the carriage followed by a gentleman who looked to be around Mr Bennet’s age. When the third person appeared, Mr Bingley exclaimed with much enthusiasm, “It is Miss Darcy! And yes, that must be the doctor. I shall go and greet her.”

The gentleman hurried out as if forgetting he was not the host.

Elizabeth glanced at Jane, who looked suddenly pale and disconcerted, then she gazed at the new arrivals. Mr Bingley bowed to them, there was a brief exchange, then he offered Miss Darcy his arm and showed them all inside. Only then did Elizabeth notice Stevens, Mr Darcy's valet, following them.

The Bennets all stood up, waiting. Elizabeth felt a twinge of anxiety, and she noticed Jane looked quite distressed. The group entered, and there was a moment of mutual scrutiny from both parties.

“Mr Bennet, Mrs Bennet, please allow me to introduce Miss Georgiana Darcy,” Mr Bingley said. “This is her companion, Mrs Annesley, and this is Dr Bates.”

He then presented the entire Bennet family, one by one.

“I beg your forgiveness for this improper and unexpected visit,” Miss Darcy said in a low voice that matched her obviously perturbed state of mind. “I am very sorry to bother you, but I could not wait another moment without seeing my brother. How is he?”

“He is reasonably well, our apothecary says,” Mr Bennet replied. “Dr Bates's arrival was eagerly expected.”

“Then please show me to his room, and we shall continue with the pleasantries later,” the doctor uttered in a rather demanding tone.

“Of course. Let me show you there now,” Mr Bennet replied.

“I can take Dr Bates to the master if you do not mind, sir,” Stevens offered.

“Of course,” Mr Bennet agreed.

“May I see my brother?” Miss Darcy pleaded.

“I would rather examine him first, so I can answer your questions,” the doctor responded decidedly.

Those who remained in the room were all still standing, looking at each other with curiosity and apparent discomfort.

Elizabeth spoke first. “Miss Darcy, Mrs Annesley, please take a seat.”

“Thank you,” Miss Darcy whispered. She sat on a sofa, with Mrs Annesley next to her.

“We would be delighted to welcome you to our home if not for the unhappy circumstances that brought you here,” Mr Bennet said.

“Thank you, sir, you are very kind. When I received Mr Bingley’s note...I could not believe it... My brother is the best rider. He has never suffered any accident. Is he badly injured? Is he in danger...?”

On the verge of tears, Miss Darcy looked so young, her suffering so visible on her face that Elizabeth’s heart ached.

“Miss Darcy, I have spoken to Mr Darcy twice — last evening and this morning. He is injured, but I am sure he will recover soon.”

“You are Miss Elizabeth? You helped my brother write me the letter?” Miss Darcy enquired, her eyes tearful.

“Yes,” Elizabeth answered, somehow uneasy.

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Please, there is no reason to thank me. Your brother was worried you might be frightened by the news, and he wished to assure you he was well.”

“I should have been more careful when I wrote the letter last night,” Mr Bingley interjected. “I thought of little else except how to summon the doctor as quickly as possible. I should have known you would be frightened, Miss Darcy.”

“I understand, Mr Bingley. You were worried for my brother, and I thank you for that.”

The fact that the two of them seemed to know each other so well and be comfortable in each other’s company increased the pallor of Jane’s distressed countenance, and Elizabeth gently squeezed her hand in comfort.

“But I do not understand. How did you arrive here so quickly?” Mr Bingley asked.

“The messenger arrived last night, at midnight, and I sent word to Dr Bates immediately. He replied that he would travel to Hertfordshire at dawn, and I insisted on coming too. I could not stay in London while my brother... On our way here we encountered Stevens. He gave me the letter and returned with us. My brother does not know I have come.”

“Oh dear... I am sure Mr Darcy will be happy to see you...but you must be very tired and certainly very hungry,” Elizabeth said.

“Indeed! What terrible hosts we are!” Mrs Bennet finally interjected. “We shall order some refreshments immediately.”

“Mama, I shall go to the kitchen to help,” Elizabeth offered.

“I shall come with you,” Jane quickly said, and they left the room before anyone could argue.

“What an unexpected turn of events!” Elizabeth whispered to her sister. “Poor Hill must be exhausted with so many people in the house. We must prepare a tray for our guests.”

“Miss Darcy is exceedingly pretty,” Jane said, her voice trembling slightly. “Miss Bingley told me she is very accomplished and exceedingly talented on the pianoforte.”

“I am sure she is. And indeed, she is very pretty.”

“Have you noticed that she and Mr Bingley seem very comfortable with each other?”

“Of course they are. He and her brother are close friends.”

“But Lizzy, Mr Darcy is not so comfortable with either of Mr Bingley’s sisters.”

“Well, it might be because Mr Darcy is too proud and vain for such familiarity. Or because Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst are so annoying.”

“Lizzy!” Jane reproached her. “Please be serious! I cannot laugh at that.”

“At what, Jane? At Mr Bingley and Miss Darcy being comfortable in each other’s company? Surely you are not jealous!”

“I am not,” Jane answered after a brief hesitation. “I just wish to know... He seems to admire her and was happy to see her.”

“Dearest Jane, now you are being silly. I am sure Mr Bingley admires Miss Darcy and they were happy to see each other. That is friendship. If there was something more, Mr Bingley would surely not spend so much time in our home, by your side, and would not be so much at ease to introduce you to her.”

“I do not know, Lizzy...”

“Please try to see reason, my dear. Mr Bingley’s admiration for you is no secret from anyone. Do you suspect he is a dishonourable scoundrel who is trifling with you while having a romantic attachment to his friend’s sister?”

“Of course not!”

“There, you have your answer. Now let us prepare the tray. Poor Miss Darcy must be starved and exhausted and desperately worried for her brother. I cannot imagine how she felt fearing that she might lose him given she has already lost both her parents.”

“You are right, Lizzy. Oh dear, I have been so selfish and careless, thinking only of my wishes... Poor Miss Darcy.”

“My dear, nobody is less selfish and careless than you. Come, let us hurry. It just crossed my mind that Mr Collins might return and smother Miss Darcy with his attention. The poor girl should at least be fed by then!”

“Lizzy, dearest! You are just incorrigible!”

???

By the time they returned, their mother was engaged in conversation with Mrs Annesley and Mr Bingley. Mr Bennet only listened and nodded, and Miss Darcy was still silent, glancing about with discomfort, while the youngest Bennet sisters

scrutinised her with curiosity.

Elizabeth placed the tray on the table, and Jane prepared the tea. Mr Bingley hurried to help her.

“Is there any news from Dr Bates yet?” Elizabeth enquired.

“No. Hopefully he will return soon. I look forward to speaking to my brother,” Miss Darcy said.

“You should eat a little and have some tea while we wait,” Elizabeth insisted. “I am sure your brother would wish you to.”

The girl took the proffered cup and sipped from it.

“You should take a little meat and bread too, Miss Darcy,” Mrs Bennet said. “You are very pretty but too thin.”

“Mama!” Elizabeth interrupted her.

“What? Am I not right, Mrs Annesley?”

The lady offered a polite smile. “Who could contradict a mother of five beautiful daughters? I agree Miss Darcy should eat — she has barely eaten anything at all since yesterday.”

“Well then, please do me this favour, Miss Darcy. My daughter Lydia must be close to you in age, and she is always hungry.”

Miss Darcy forced an awkward smile and took a plate, while Lydia and Kitty whispered to each other.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Miss Darcy addressed her, “Mr Bingley told us how you found my brother, how Mrs Bennet stayed with him in the rain, and how you ran for help. You saved his life, and we shall be forever grateful to you all. And now, the way you are all looking after him and offering him the best care — such kindness is overwhelming. How can we ever repay you?”

The girl’s eyes were heavy with tears, and she seemed unable to control her emotions.

“Miss Darcy, you have been here for only a short while and have already thanked us more than is necessary,” Elizabeth said with a smile she hoped would comfort the girl. “We have done nothing more than what any decent person would do. The only payment we need is to see Mr Darcy fully recovered.”

“We have done all we could,” Mrs Bennet interjected. “Thank God I have not caught a cold — but I do not regret remaining with Mr Darcy. He is not the most talkative or amiable gentleman, but he is Mr Bingley’s friend, and Mr Bingley is dear to our family.”

“Thank you for saying so, Mrs Bennet,” Mr Bingley said, obviously pleased, glancing at Jane.

“Mr Bingley is truly a good friend to us,” Miss Darcy interjected. “For the last three years, he has been like another brother to me. And my own brother is kind and generous, even if he does not always say much. Everybody who knows him praises his character.”

The censure behind the girl’s reply was clear, despite the sweet, gentle voice. Miss Darcy would not allow any disparaging words about her brother, not even from the person who had saved his life. Such loyalty caused Elizabeth to smile again, though she assumed the girl’s affection must bias her judgment.

“Miss Darcy, your statement honours me just as much as having Darcy’s friendship,” Mr Bingley said, and Elizabeth saw Jane looking disconcerted. “Darcy is truly the best man I know. The best master, the best landlord, always helping anyone who requests his assistance. He has guided me like a brother and father.”

“I have met Mr Darcy only once, and we spoke for merely an hour, so I cannot boast of a close acquaintance,” Mr Bennet said. “However, I found his company to be exceedingly pleasant, despite the fact I rarely enjoy meeting new people. And one cannot judge a gentleman by how much he speaks.”

“I agree, sir,” Miss Darcy replied, and a little smile finally appeared on her face. “Again, I thank you so much, Mrs Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, and the entire family.”

“Let this be the last thanks we hear from you, Miss Darcy,” Elizabeth said. She kept her smile, but the girl looked uneasy at even a gentle jest.

“I apologise. I know I am being silly...”

“Oh no, not at all, Miss Darcy! I must warn you that I have a tendency to tease, which not everybody approves of,” Elizabeth said.

“Elizabeth inherited the trait from me,” Mr Bennet said. “Even Mr Darcy mentioned the resemblance when we spoke.”

“Mr Darcy is certainly one of those who disapproves of my teasing,” Elizabeth said with a little laugh.

“That is not entirely true, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Bingley declared. “I have heard Darcy praise your wit many times. I do not remember another woman ever arguing with him so often. In truth, I am not always sure when you are arguing and when you are teasing.”

The gentleman looked so sincere that Elizabeth's smile broadened.

“Mr Darcy is usually my severest critic, and I cannot blame him for that.”

“Mr Darcy seems to enjoy teasing, from what he told me,” Mr Bennet uttered. “And I see no reason for him to deceive me.”

“My brother always speaks the truth. Disguise of any sort is his abhorrence,” Miss Darcy said emphatically. “I am sure he does not disapprove of you, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Well, he refused to dance with Lizzy at the assembly... But perhaps I should not have mentioned that,” Mrs Bennet said, and Miss Darcy turned pale.

“Perhaps you should not have, madam,” Mr Bennet interjected. “Besides, a man should be at liberty to dance or not, and with whom he pleases, without anyone holding a grudge against him.”

“Darcy rarely dances, even in the most illustrious places,” Mr Bingley confirmed. “It is one of the many differences between us.”

Elizabeth smiled again. She knew that to be true; she had heard Mr Darcy telling Sir William that ‘every savage can dance’. Strangely, only moments later, Mr Darcy had asked her to dance. Of course, she had refused, but what could have been his meaning? Did he intend to mock her? Surely he would not wish to expose himself to ridicule by acting like a savage — according to his own description.

Mr Darcy might be an excellent man, as his sister and friend had stated, but he was certainly one who was difficult to understand.

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Dr Bates's entrance took Darcy by surprise and confirmed his worst fears. Georgiana had come too, after travelling since dawn. She was now waiting in the Bennets' drawing room, where her timidity and restrained nature would have to endure a room full of strangers and where the youngest sisters might mention Wickham's name at any time.

"Mr Darcy! I have known you since you were an infant, and I can hardly remember another instance when I have seen you lying in bed," Dr Bates said after the introduction to the apothecary.

"Dr Bates. Thank you so much for coming. Your effort is greatly appreciated. And I do hope this will be the last time you see me a bed, for many years at least. I feel terrible not moving for so long."

"Well, I am glad Mr Jones managed to keep you still because you do look quite terrible. Let me see what the damage is."

Darcy bore Dr Bates's thorough and painful examination impatiently. At times, he let out a few moans and observed the doctor shaking his head in displeasure.

"So? Can I move to Netherfield? I have already burdened the Bennets enough, and now there are even more people invading their home and disturbing their peace."

"You were right to send for me, Mr Jones," Dr Bates finally said. "Your conclusions were also correct. There are several bruised ribs, which need time and rest to heal. Thankfully, nothing seems broken. He has caught a cold, and the fever might still increase. The protuberance on the top of the head is the most worrisome, but I have

brought something for it, and I shall watch it closely for a few days.”

“Will you not return to London?” Darcy enquired. “I assumed you would return tomorrow, and I was about to ask you to take my sister with you.”

“Not at all. I shall stay for a few days — possibly even a week. I have already discussed it with Miss Darcy. You may be more ill than you feel you are, sir.”

“What about your business in London? Your other patients?”

“Do not worry — everything is well taken care of. I have the feeling you are trying to send me away, Mr Darcy. Does my presence here displease you?”

“Of course not! Quite the contrary — I am deeply grateful to you. I just feel uncomfortable that I have caused so much trouble to so many people for a mere silly accident.”

“Then it is settled — I shall leave when the time is right. I shall end my examination for now so your sister might come and see you. She was deeply worried — and rightfully so.”

“Thank you. I am eager to see her too.”

“We shall arrange your pillows so you can sit up. Just please avoid any strain or abrupt movements.”

“Of course.”

“What intrigues me exceedingly is the bruise on your temple. It looks superficial, but I am curious about it.”

“I wondered about it too,” Mr Jones said. “If Mr Darcy hit the top of his head on a branch — hence the swelling and the loss of his hat — what could have caused that clean, sharp bruise on his temple?”

“It looks almost like...” Dr Bates said, examining it closely, “like an abrasion from a missed shot. Like a bullet that just grazed the skin.”

“I really could not say. I have never seen such a mark before,” Mr Jones said. “I have seen some gunshot wounds — most of them deadly — but nothing of this kind.”

“I spent enough time in the army to see all sorts of wounds caused by all sorts of weapons,” Dr Bates said. “But I might be wrong — I cannot imagine anyone shooting pistols around Mr Darcy here in Hertfordshire.”

Darcy forced a smile despite the tightness in his chest; the impression of a scheme he refused to even imagine was taking shape in his mind. He felt bewildered, whilst his panic in regard to Georgiana increased. If such a plot had been conceived, if Wickham was directly involved in his accident, if he had tried to shoot him, that was proof the villain was desperate and prepared to do anything.

After the failed elopement Wickham had attempted to trick Georgiana into, their cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam had suggested that the scoundrel would never cease his devious actions. The colonel had spoken half in jest, but to Darcy, such a notion was unthinkable. And yet, there was now further evidence to support his cousin’s statement.

“Mr Darcy?”

“Yes? Forgive me, I did not hear you.”

“We shall send Miss Darcy in now, so you may talk. And we could move you to

Netherfield in two days if you continue to improve.”

“Two days at Longbourn? More disturbance for the Bennets? Can it not be done sooner? Bingley’s ball is planned for two days’ time, and the house will already be in uproar. Dr Bates, you must find another way.”

“Mr Darcy, I insist that you cannot be moved sooner. If your ribs suffer further injury, there is no way they can be repaired, and your life would be in great danger. Truly great danger, sir.”

“Very well, I shall do as you wish. Just please do not tell my sister anything that might scare her more.”

“It is not as I wish, Mr Darcy, but as it must be done for your benefit,” the doctor said with vexation.

“I understand that, Dr Bates. I am sorry if it sounded otherwise,” Darcy agreed. He had no choice but to obey.

Dr Bates and his late father, who had also been a physician, had been treating the Darcys and Fitzwilliams for longer than Darcy could remember. Dr Bates’s experience and knowledge was among the best in England and beyond. He had also spent several years in the army, tending to injured soldiers in the worst possible circumstances. There were few wounds and diseases Dr Bates had not seen or treated. Therefore, any recommendation was well grounded and admitted no contradiction.

Dr Bates and Mr Jones left Darcy’s room; minutes later, a gentle knock on the door followed, and Georgiana entered. To his equal surprise and pleasure, behind his sister was Elizabeth.

“Dear brother!” Georgiana whispered and ran to him. She leant over the bed to

embrace him gently. Over his sister's shoulder, he saw Elizabeth looking at them. She then nodded and closed the door, allowing them privacy.

“How are you feeling, Brother? Are you in pain?”

“Quite well, truly. Dr Bates says I must stay in bed for a few more days, but you have no reason to worry. You should not have come for a mere accident.”

“Not have come? Would you not have come to see me if I had an accident?”

“Of course I would, but—”

“Brother, I am not a child any longer.”

“No, you are not,” he replied affectionately. “You look tired. And pale.”

“So do you.” She smiled. “But you look better than I expected.”

“So, tell me, how are you? Have you met the entire Bennet family? What do you think of them?”

“Yes. They have all been very kind to me. Mrs Bennet says I am too thin, and she insists I must eat.” She smiled again.

“Does she? I absolutely agree with her — which is quite unexpected.”

“Miss Elizabeth brought me here, to your room. She is lovely.”

“I know they might be a little overwhelming, but Mrs Bennet and Miss Elizabeth found me and saved me.”

“I know, Brother. Mr Bingley told me, and I have thanked them already. I do not find them overwhelming when I know what they have done for you.”

“My dear, there is another matter we must discuss. It is the reason I wish you had not come. George Wickham is here.”

His sister’s face paled immediately.

“What do you mean, here?”

“He is in Meryton. Apparently, he has begun a new career as a militia officer and joined the regiment stationed here a week ago.”

“Oh...”

“Yes, it is just an unfortunate coincidence.”

“Have you spoken to him?”

“Briefly. Nothing of consequence. Considering you have no business in Meryton, I do not expect you will see him. But he is quite friendly with the Bennet family, and you might hear his name mentioned.”

“Oh...do the Bennet family know about...? Or Mr Bingley and his sisters?”

“Of course not. But I did mention to Mr Bennet that Wickham is not a man to be trusted. I think he believed me.”

“Brother, I wish to speak to no one else and see no one else but you. I shall stay here until you are fully recovered.”

Her love and concern melted Darcy's heart.

"Dearest, you cannot stay here. This is another matter we must discuss, which I am afraid will distress you. There is no room here for more guests. Dr Bates will need a room, there is a cousin who occupies another chamber, and Mr Bennet has already given me his. We are intruding and disrupting their comfort."

"I see..."

"Please do not be upset. You will be well attended to at Netherfield. There is a ball planned for the day after tomorrow, but that will not bother you."

"May I come and sit with you during the ball, Brother?"

"Perhaps. My main concern is to know you are safe. If you are, I shall be content."

"Very well, Brother. I shall do as you wish."

Another knock at the door interrupted them, and Bingley entered, apologising for intruding.

"Forgive me. There is something I wish to agree with you. Dr Bates told us you must remain here for a few more days. Since rooms are scarce, I invited all the Miss Bennets to stay at Netherfield for the next three days. And Georgiana and Mrs Annesley, of course."

"That is an excellent idea, Bingley. Did they agree?"

"Yes. And, since Dr Bates said you are improving, I am considering still holding the ball. Would you mind?"

“Not at all. It is your house, your ball, your decision. I am quite relieved I have an excuse not to attend it.”

“I imagined as much,” Bingley said with a large smile and obvious relief.

“Bingley, there is something important I must ask you. Please take care that George Wickham is never in company with Georgiana. He has been so disrespectful to our entire family that his presence is undesirable to us.”

“Of course. I have invited all the officers to the ball, but I shall revoke his invitation.”

“You do not have to do that,” Georgiana said. “If you reject his presence, there will be rumours. Please do not alter your plans. I shall not be anywhere in sight during the ball, so it does not matter who attends.”

“I agree with Georgiana. Let us keep the matter of my past dealings with Wickham private. I hope we shall not have to deal with him for too much longer.”

“Excellent. So we are all in agreement. We shall stay for two hours or so and then will all move to Netherfield.”

With that, Bingley left and allowed the brother and sister to spend more time alone. Darcy was given more medicine, he ate some soup, then he finally fell asleep. The rest of the party moved to Netherfield when the darkness slowly obscured the daylight.

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Dinner at Netherfield was an awkward affair. A table gathering Mr Bingley and his sisters, Mr Hurst, Miss Darcy and her companion, and all five Bennet sisters was inconceivable.

Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst exchanged appalled glares and only addressed Miss Darcy and occasionally Jane, disregarding the others almost entirely. Mr Bingley was equally attentive to Jane at Netherfield as he was at Longbourn, and as amiable as ever with everyone else.

Elizabeth watched the scene with amusement. She and Jane were sharing the same room as last time; Lydia, Kitty, and Mary were all in a guest apartment with two bedchambers, and all three were overjoyed by the circumstances.

Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley were offered rooms in a separate guest wing, on the same hall as Mr Darcy. Despite the Bingley sisters' efforts to flatter her, Miss Darcy remained timid and restrained.

“Will someone tell me exactly what sort of accident Mr Darcy suffered?” Miss Bingley asked. “Louisa and I have been in continuous distress since we heard, especially since we are not allowed to see him.”

“I told you, Caroline. He hit his head and fell from his horse. He was fortunate to be found by Mrs Bennet and her daughters. You cannot see him because he is not allowed to receive visitors.”

“It is unfortunate he rode so far from Netherfield,” Miss Bingley said. “Why would he remain at Longbourn when we have better accommodation and he would be more

comfortable here?”

“Dr Bates said my brother cannot leave his bed yet,” Miss Darcy replied. “He is perfectly comfortable at Longbourn and is well taken care of. The Bennet family has been exceedingly kind to him.”

“Of course they have. Who would not be?” Mrs Hurst said. “But poor Mr Darcy is accustomed to greater comforts.”

Elizabeth was already tired, and bearing the sisters’ rudeness was too much.

“Mr Darcy feels very comfortable,” she said. “I know without doubt because I spoke to him privately a couple of times. He feared he might be disturbing us, which is very considerate of him, but we hope he will not leave Longbourn until it is completely safe for him.”

“True,” Mr Bingley said. “And since you are all staying at Netherfield, there should be room for everyone.” His answer caused another exchange of glares between his sisters.

“Miss Eliza, how did you speak to Mr Darcy privately since Charles said he is not allowed to receive visitors?” Miss Bingley enquired.

“Mr Darcy requested to speak to me,” Elizabeth replied boldly, silencing the lady.

“Charles, I cannot possibly imagine why you have not cancelled the ball,” Mrs Hurst said a while later. “I opposed it from the beginning, and so did Mr Darcy. And now he is hurt, yet you still wish to entertain?”

“Mr Bingley promised to have the ball!” Lydia interjected loudly.

“Well, Miss Lydia — that is your name, is it not? Charles promised because he cannot refuse anything. But responsible people know when promises should be kept. Speaking of responsibility, are you not too young to attend balls?”

Jane and Miss Darcy looked dismayed, Mr Bingley looked uneasy, and Lydia became red-faced. Elizabeth’s vexation had reached its limit, and she replied, “We appreciate your concern, Miss Bingley, in regard to Lydia’s age.”

“Which is truly not for you to judge, Caroline,” Mr Bingley interjected. “And yes, we shall have the ball tomorrow. Darcy approved of it.”

After dinner, the party separated. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst withdrew immediately; Mr Bingley offered to take the ladies on a tour of the house, so another hour passed with the activity.

Afterwards, Lydia and Kitty declared they were tired, Mary took a book from the library and was happy to peruse it, and Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley were ready to withdraw to their rooms too.

“Mr Bingley, if you do not mind, I would like to go and see my brother in the morning.”

“Of course, Miss Darcy. We shall go immediately after breakfast.”

“I do not think I have the patience to wait so long. May I go earlier, if it is not too much trouble? Do you think Mr and Mrs Bennet would mind?”

“Miss Darcy, I shall go with you in the morning,” Elizabeth offered. “You may see your brother, and we shall have breakfast with my parents. And Mr Bingley will bring my sisters later.”

Mr Bingley looked at Jane, who blushed slightly. He seemed to hesitate briefly, then he nodded.

“I shall ask for the carriage to be ready early tomorrow. Once it delivers you to Longbourn, it will return for us.”

“Thank you. And thank you, Miss Elizabeth, for going to so much trouble for us.”

“It is absolutely no trouble, I promise. I generally wake up before all my sisters and take a walk before breakfast. So the timing is perfect.”

With that, Miss Darcy and her companion left; Elizabeth remained with Mr Bingley and Jane.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Bingley uttered, “I have a request to make of you regarding tomorrow morning.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Please avoid stopping on your journey from Netherfield to Longbourn. Especially... I know he is a friend of your family’s, but Darcy insisted on protecting his sister from any encounter with Mr Wickham.”

Surprised and puzzled, Elizabeth needed to glance at Jane and take a deep breath before she replied.

“I have no intention of meeting anyone, nor making any stop. We shall go home directly. And I would not really call Mr Wickham a friend — more of a new acquaintance whose company is agreeable at times.”

“Thank you.”

“Mr Bingley, do you believe Miss Darcy is in danger from Mr Wickham?” Jane enquired.

“No...not in danger...but I understand he has been disrespectful and disloyal, and Miss Darcy would be distressed were she to see him.”

“Oh...I am sorry to hear that...”

“You must not worry, Mr Bingley. I shall protect Miss Darcy from any inconvenience. As for Mr Wickham, I suspect he is not eager to encounter me either. When I do see him, I have a thing or two to say to him.”

“Mr Wickham might be at the ball,” Jane added timidly.

“He might. Darcy said there is no point in me revoking his invitation. Neither he nor Miss Darcy will be there in any case.”

“Mr Bingley, you said earlier that Mr Darcy’s horse returned here after the accident and that he too was injured,” Elizabeth suddenly said.

“Yes, he returned that very evening. He has a slight wound on his back right leg, like a deep, long scratch. It looks rather nasty, but his movement does not seem to be affected. My grooms are taking care of it.”

“That is very interesting. The horse has a wound on its right back leg, and Mr Darcy has a wound on his right temple. What are the chances?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Indeed, it is very strange and suspicious. I shall speak to Darcy tomorrow.”

“I believe you should. Now please excuse me. Would you mind if I looked for a book in the library?”

“No, not at all. Please do as you wish, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth left, allowing the two a little bit of privacy — something she needed too. The new information increased the mystery and the disturbance around the accident. If she had harboured any doubt about where the truth lay between Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy, it was all gone now; Mr Darcy would not request his friend protect his sister from Mr Wickham if the danger was not real.

As horrible as the realisation was, Mr Wickham’s presence at the accident and his abrupt departure seemed more sinister than mere coincidence.

When Elizabeth returned to the drawing room, she found Jane and Mr Bingley both flushed, wearing large smiles on their handsome faces. Elizabeth smiled too; apparently, Jane was no longer concerned about Mr Bingley’s friendship with Miss Darcy.

Soon afterwards, they all withdrew to their chambers. Unlike the previous night, Elizabeth fell asleep rather quickly and rested reasonably well.

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The next day began as planned. Elizabeth and Miss Darcy arrived at Longbourn before breakfast. Dr Bates and Mr Darcy were awake, and the reports were more upsetting than expected. Mr Darcy had suffered a high fever overnight, and he was troubled by a gripping inner pain. Miss Darcy went in to see him, and Elizabeth spoke to Dr Bates over a cup of coffee.

“Surely there is no reason for concern about Mr Darcy’s recovery, is there?” she enquired. “I mean — despite the troublesome night.”

“Hopefully not. He is young, healthy, and strong. However, we know so little of

medicine, especially for wounds to the head, that we can provide little real help. Prayers could be beneficial too.”

“Dr Bates, something has been bothering me. The scratch on Mr Darcy’s temple... Mr Jones could not be sure what it was. And Mr Bingley said there was a similar scratch — only deeper and longer — on his horse’s back leg. Also on the right side.”

“Was there?” the doctor repeated, then frowned, obviously concerned.

“Could it be a mere coincidence?”

“Hardly, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Do you know what it could be?”

“Yes. I already told Mr Darcy, but he requested I not mention it to his sister. He fears she is too scared already.”

“Oh...of course. Then I shall not insist.”

“You seem to be a clever, perceptive young woman, Miss Elizabeth. Last night, I spent a little time talking to Mr Darcy and your father. They both spoke highly of you.”

“Did they?” Elizabeth repeated, feeling her cheeks burning. “Are you sure they were not jesting?”

“Quite sure. Are you also able to keep a secret, Miss Elizabeth?”

“A secret? Of course...”

“The wound on Mr Darcy’s temple — I suspect it was a bullet that missed its target. I shall go to Netherfield and examine the horse to confirm my suspicions.”

Elizabeth held her breath while she stared at the doctor.

“A bullet? From a pistol?” she whispered. “So somebody deliberately hurt Mr Darcy?”

“That is what I suspect. I have discussed it with only Mr Darcy and your father. Neither of them requested I keep the secret from you, so I hope I have not been indiscreet.”

“Certainly not... Thank you for trusting me, sir. You may depend on my secrecy.”

Elizabeth could barely speak because of the sudden lump in her throat. Her worst fear was slowly turning into reality, and the burden of self-reproach pressed on her chest more and more heavily.

“Lizzy? Are you already here? What happened?”

Dumbfounded, Elizabeth turned to see her father.

“Nothing, Papa. Miss Darcy wished to see her brother, and since everybody else was still sleeping, I came with her.”

“Good. Lately, I have developed the bad habit of assuming the worst.”

“I shall go to Mr Darcy now,” Dr Bates said, while Mr Bennet asked for a cup of coffee.

“You look quite ill, Lizzy. Are you tired?”

“No, Papa. In fact, I slept quite well. Papa, Dr Bates told me...about the bullet...”

“Did he?”

“Yes...I began the conversation because I found out that Mr Darcy’s horse had a similar wound to the one on his master’s temple. And on the same side. Mr Bingley told me last night.”

“Does it? This is a vital piece of evidence, Lizzy. Now, I trust you know how important it is to keep that information from everyone else. Mr Darcy requested complete secrecy.”

“But...Papa, was it Mr Wickham?”

“Very likely. Mr Darcy mentioned to me — in the presence of Dr Bates, who was no stranger to the story — that this Wickham fellow received several important sums of money in exchange for that living he insisted was denied him. That he declared he had no interest in the church and wished to pursue another careers. Only after he had spent all the money on cards and other depravities, and that living became vacant, did he return and demand it. Mr Darcy’s refusal angered the scoundrel — hence all his lies that you and many others readily believed.”

Elizabeth felt a cold grip in her stomach. “Dr Bates was aware of this tale?”

“He seemed to be since he showed no surprise. And he did mention several illegitimate children Wickham fathered with young girls in Derbyshire.”

“Oh, dear Lord!” Elizabeth whispered, fighting a sudden weakness and dizziness.

“This is horrible... Outrageous... He must be immediately exposed.”

“Apparently, Mr Darcy revealed the truth to Colonel Forster, and the colonel

dismissed it, stating that is how most men — at least army men — behave. Therefore, Mr Darcy wished to wait until he felt better, gather some evidence, then act accordingly.”

“Papa, I am shocked! I feel so ashamed of myself... How could I have been such a fool to trust such a man?”

“Well, if it is any consolation, I heard the scoundrel has deceived many others. Others who are older, more experienced, and more educated than you, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth sipped from her cup, trying to compose herself, while her father gulped some coffee.

“Papa, may I ask how it happened that you and Mr Darcy are on such friendly terms? That he trusts you with his secrets when the two of you are barely acquainted?”

“My dear, I was a little puzzled too since Mr Darcy is such a private man. On careful consideration, though, he did not reveal any secrets to me. Apparently, everybody who knows Wickham well enough is aware of his behaviour and his character. He merely told me in advance what I would find out soon enough.”

“True...”

“As for the bullet wound, Dr Bates opened the subject, and the conversation went on from there. Did you tell him that the horse has the same injury?”

“I did. I assume he will inform Mr Darcy too.”

“We seem to be in the midst of a novel, and I am not sure how I came to be here,” Mr Bennet said, rolling his eyes. “Out of prudence, I wish to see no officers in the near future.”

“I am afraid you will have to see many of them at the ball tomorrow night, Papa. I only hope Mr Wickham will not have the audacity to be among them.”

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The rest of the day passed noisily at Longbourn with the presence of so many people in a relatively small house.

Mr Collins was at home too, and he did not miss the opportunity to express his adoration towards Miss Darcy and to relate the details of his connection to her aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Miss Darcy listened with her usual candour, throwing discreet yet desperate glances towards Elizabeth, who eventually saved her.

After breakfast, Miss Darcy returned to her brother and stayed with him until the medicine caused him to fall asleep.

Elizabeth struggled to control her nervousness as so many questions without answers stirred in her mind. Her sisters prepared their gowns for the ball at Netherfield, Mr Collins declared he would dance with all of them, Mrs Bennet complained about her nerves, and Mr Bennet moved to his library.

Around noon, Elizabeth had the surprise — and joy — of seeing Miss Darcy showing Mary something on the pianoforte. Within minutes, they tentatively began to play together, Miss Darcy explaining something with a sweet smile and Mary listening in awe.

“Miss Elizabeth?”

Dr Bates sat down next to her, then said, “Miss Elizabeth, Mr Darcy has asked whether you would go and speak to him for a moment, if you do not mind.”

Surprised by such a request, Elizabeth could only nod in acceptance.

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Although she was familiar with the room and had been there since Mr Darcy occupied it, Elizabeth stepped in timidly.

“Miss Elizabeth, please come in. Forgive my boldness in calling for you, but it will be short, and I have Mr Bennet’s approval.”

“Mr Darcy, how are you feeling, sir?”

“Not as bad as Dr Bates feared, nor as well as I would wish to.” He smiled. “Would you sit a moment?”

She chose a chair reasonably close to the bed.

“Dr Bates told me about your little chat. I had no objections as I trust your discretion, but I regret that you have been burdened with a situation inappropriate for a young lady.”

“The only thing I regret is my foolish trust in Mr Wickham when I first met him. I am as angry with myself as I am with him. May I ask — what do you plan to do?”

“I am not sure. Bingley confirmed to me the horse had a similar wound. But I did not provide him with the other details, so he is not aware of our suspicions.”

“Mr Bingley should be warned since he is hosting the ball and Mr Wickham might be there.”

“Bingley has been warned, but I am sure Wickham would not be a danger in public.

He is a coward whose every action is deceitful and dishonest. Disguise and secrecy are his usual weapons.”

“But why would he... My father told me of your past dealings with him. But why hurt you now? Could he expect some gain if you...?”

“Wickham must have felt desperate that I tried to expose him and he might lose his comfortable position in the regiment and within the Meryton community. He knew he could not stop me otherwise — that he had already done too much. I warned him a few months ago that... You do not know, Miss Elizabeth, but...”

He paused and averted his eyes for a few moments, while Elizabeth waited, silent and anxious.

“Besides my financial dealings with Wickham, something more dreadful happened this past summer. Something that I did not tell your father.”

“Oh...?”

“Once I refused him any assistance, Wickham tried to take advantage of Georgiana. She was in Ramsgate with her previous companion, and he followed her there on purpose. He convinced her to renew their friendship and tried to use her innocent affection for his personal benefit. The consequences could have been tragic if not for my sister’s wisdom and strength of character.”

Elizabeth held her breath, waiting for his narration to unfold. The few details he offered were enough for her to sketch the circumstances. His last words suggested the worst had not occurred, which allowed her a bit of relief.

“That is why you were angered by Mr Bingley’s letter. You feared Miss Darcy would come here and encounter Mr Wickham.”

“Yes. And that is why I wish to avoid any possible meeting — even a brief one — between my sister and that scoundrel.”

“Is Miss Darcy aware Mr Wickham is in Meryton?”

“Yes. I told her yesterday.”

“The poor girl! How she must have suffered at such a betrayal.”

“She did... I fear she still does... She would be distraught if she heard or suspected he might take further steps to harm her. When I take proper measures against him, I must ensure I destroy any evidence of the Ramsgate affair, and I must be certain Georgiana will not suffer any further because of it.”

“But you do remember he was near you? And we saw him.”

“Yes, but neither of us heard or saw a pistol.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I believe he tried to shoot me, but he missed and hit the horse, who panicked, reared, and tried to throw me. There must have then been a second shot, which grazed my temple. Then I hit my head on a branch, which caused me to fall from my mount and lose consciousness.”

Elizabeth quivered, pressing her hand to her mouth. The image Mr Darcy conjured was terrifying, and it was as if she could actually see it.

“Wickham approached me when I was on the ground and said something to me. I am not sure whether he would have attempted to fire another shot or just waited for the cold and rain to kill me. Fortunately, you passed by.”

“I do not understand why... Colonel Forster was not upset with him — you said so. And it is likely most people in Meryton would not believe any accusations against him. He suffered no real consequences. Papa has forbidden my sisters from going to Meryton and meeting the officers, but Mr Wickham would not care about Lydia and Kitty.”

“Perhaps he believed my death would open his path towards Georgiana, but my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam is also her guardian and would not allow him near her.”

“Could he be so horribly cruel?”

“I wonder too... Or perhaps he fears something else, and it has made him desperate. He wrote to me on the day of the accident, asking to meet and talk. I refused, of course.”

“But how was it possible that he knew you would be there, at that precise moment?”

“That is a mystery... His note said he would be there in the afternoon, close to the spot where I saw him with your youngest sisters last week. I remember mentioning that I used to ride out there. A well-detailed plan...mere coincidence...both... There are only assumptions.”

“Assumptions that are difficult to accept,” Elizabeth whispered. “So what can be done, Mr Darcy? Is there something particular you wish me to do?”

“No... I only wished you to know the truth and to explain the importance of keeping the secret. Please take care of yourself, and please watch over my sister since you are with her and I am not.”

“Of course, sir.” She stood up to leave but stopped at the edge of the bed. “And please take care of yourself, Mr Darcy. I hope you are keeping your promise to take

your medicine and to eat.”

“A promise is forever, or until it is no longer required, Miss Elizabeth,” he said. His smile looked a little broader, a little more at peace, and she was shocked to notice dimples in his cheeks. Chills ran down her spine, making her quiver, and she felt her face colour.

“Tomorrow is the ball,” Elizabeth said. “Miss Darcy wishes to come and sit with you during the evening.”

“She told me. Bingley will make the necessary arrangements. Mrs Annesley will come with her.”

Elizabeth took a few steps towards the door, but he called to her again.

“Miss Elizabeth, there is something else I must tell you. In regard to the ball.”

She turned and approached the bed again. He was gazing at her intently, and she felt the wave of heat spreading to her neck.

“The ball? Do you wish to confess you had the accident on purpose so you could avoid it?” she attempted to joke in order to conceal her nervousness.

He laughed. “No, indeed. Quite the opposite. I planned to ask you to dance at this ball, and I wondered whether you would have finally accepted my request.”

Utterly astonished, she looked at him, bearing his intense gaze. “Ask me to dance? Are you sure? We all know you believe any savage can dance and you dislike the activity.”

He laughed again. “That might be true, generally speaking. But not on this particular

occasion. I looked forward to dancing with you.”

“It would be rude to doubt your word, Mr Darcy, but I shall reserve my opinion,” she replied. She felt more at ease, and teasing him was rather pleasant. “But I must ask — what do you mean by finally accepting your request?”

“Well, I have already asked you to dance twice, and you have refused me.”

“That I can easily declare to be untrue, Mr Darcy. You refused to dance with me at the assembly — which was your prerogative, of course.”

She was still keeping a light tone, but his voice gained some gravity.

“At the assembly, my behaviour was outrageous, and I cannot apologise enough for offending you, Miss Elizabeth. My refusal to dance was caused by my own state of mind, which was not appropriate for entertainment. I was there at Bingley’s insistence, and it was a mistake.”

“I understand, sir. Now, I understand. But I shall not deny I was upset for a while. Therefore, I suggest forgetting that evening entirely.”

“That is very generous of you, Miss Elizabeth. However, I have asked you to dance twice since then. Once at Lucas Lodge, and once at Netherfield.”

Elizabeth needed a moment to think before she finally answered.

“Surely you are joking, sir! You certainly did not truly mean to dance on either of those occasions.”

“I would have danced if you had accepted me. The ball would have been a better opportunity, but the chance is ruined now. So, I must wait for the next one.”

“The next one? I was under the impression you would leave after the ball.”

“That was my plan a week ago. But everything has changed. New circumstances require new plans.”

“Oh...”

“I hope you are not displeased by the prospect of me staying in Hertfordshire longer. I would rather alter my plans than upset you.”

She was unsure whether he spoke in earnest or was joking. There was a glimpse of a smile in his eyes, his gaze still fixed upon her. She had never before wondered how she felt about Mr Darcy’s departure and the fact she would likely never see him again. At that moment, however, she felt a sudden, warm joy knowing he intended to stay longer and that he had asked her opinion in regard to his plans.

“I am certainly neither displeased nor upset, Mr Darcy,” she eventually answered, then left the chamber, her heart racing as never before.

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The conversation with Mr Darcy tangled Elizabeth’s mind even more. The revelations about Mr Wickham’s loathsome character and his attempts to murder the son of his godfather and to harm the young daughter of his benefactor were abominable.

She could now better understand the reason behind Mr Darcy’s responses to so many situations where she had judged him harshly. The two Darcys seemed to be bound by affection and care for each other — which was admirable and excused some of Mr Darcy’s arrogant manners towards strangers.

And then, there was much more she had to comprehend and accept. To her, Mr Darcy's behaviour had changed far beyond her expectations, beyond gratitude. He trusted her with his personal secrets, he smiled at her differently, he had befriended her father, he had asked to speak to her privately, and he had teased her. And now he had expressed his desire to dance with her and asked her opinion about his remaining longer in Hertfordshire. All this could not be understood, and the possible explanation could not be accepted. That Mr Darcy could have some particular interest in her was more inconceivable than all the other unbelievable things she was already considering.

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The day of the ball arrived, and Elizabeth had mixed feelings about it. She briefly remembered that they had all received the news of the ball with much anticipation, and she had hoped to dance with Mr Wickham, the same man she now loathed and wished to never see again.

Her disposition had changed, and she felt a strange desire to see Mr Darcy and talk to him more. She even imagined dancing with him — which was utterly silly.

Her sisters slept later than usual and, since they were already at Netherfield, began to prepare later. For the first time, they had maids to help them, about which they were overjoyed.

Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley were to go to Longbourn, and the same carriage would return with Mr and Mrs Bennet as well as Mr Collins. Dr Bates had declined the invitation for the ball.

Elizabeth was impatient; therefore, she dressed herself and arranged her hair quicker than her sisters. For reasons she refused to acknowledge, she offered to accompany Miss Darcy to Longbourn and then return with her parents. The arrangement seemed

perfect, and nobody opposed it.

Miss Darcy seemed exceedingly pleased with her company and complimented Elizabeth's appearance several times.

The carriage passed through Meryton, and from there it was only a short distance to Longbourn. The streets were already animated, with groups of people dressed up and ready to attend the ball. Most of them recognised Elizabeth and waved to her, while Miss Darcy was hidden behind the curtains.

In front of a shop, Elizabeth noticed a large group of people, including some officers. She startled, fearing Mr Wickham would be among them, and she immediately glanced at Miss Darcy. Fortunately, moments later, Elizabeth noticed the wretched man was not there, and she breathed in relief, forcing a smile. However, when she looked back at Miss Darcy, the girl looked disconcerted and fearful, biting her lip.

“Miss Elizabeth, do you know who that lady is?”

“Which one?”

“The one with the tall hat with green feathers?”

“Let me see. Ah, that is Mrs Harriet Forster, Colonel Forster's wife. I understand they married less than two months ago.”

“Oh...”

“Do you know her? Or did she look like an acquaintance of yours? Do you wish to stop?”

“Oh no, please no! Let us continue.”

Miss Darcy leant back into the bench as if trying to hide herself. Her nervousness was so obvious that Elizabeth gently squeezed her hand.

“Miss Darcy, what has happened? Is something wrong? Do you know Harriet Forster?”

“I do know her...”

“You do? May I ask how? I do not wish to intrude, but you seem truly troubled.”

The girl glanced through the window as the carriage left Meryton behind.

“I met her in Ramsgate this past summer. I shall be well, do not worry,” Miss Darcy finally answered, squeezing Elizabeth’s hand in return.

Elizabeth escorted Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley to Longbourn, where they were met by Mrs Bennet in her usual state of agitation.

“My dear Miss Darcy, I am sorry I cannot be a proper host, but I must dress for the ball, and I am already delayed. Hill has prepared a room for you — the one shared by Lizzy and Jane. There are two beds, all clean, ready for you to rest. It is not as large and elegant as you are used to, but I hope you will find it comfortable enough. Cook will prepare dinner for you and your companion and Dr Bates. I trust you will find the food to your liking. If you need anything, please ask Hill.”

“Mrs Bennet, please do not trouble yourself so much. You have been exceedingly kind to us already, and I cannot thank you enough.”

“Well then, I am going to change now. Hill, can you please help me a moment? Lizzy, you look very pretty! You are not as beautiful as Jane, but you look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you, Mama. Do you wish me to help you?”

“No, no, stay with Miss Darcy. We cannot all abandon her. Your father is with Mr Darcy and Dr Bates. I barely slept last night, and the doctor gave me some herbal tea for my nerves, and now I feel strange and dizzy. I might need to lie down a little at Netherfield. I hope Mr Bingley will have a room for me. Hill! Where are you?”

Mrs Bennet continued to shout as she walked to her chamber, while the ladies smiled at each other. Miss Darcy seemed to have regained her composure.

Mrs Annesley remained in the drawing room, while Georgiana and Elizabeth went to meet the gentlemen. Elizabeth took advantage of her father’s presence in Mr Darcy’s room, and she entered too.

The moment he laid eyes on her, his expression changed; his gaze warmed, and a little smile twisted the corners of his lips.

“Lizzy? What are you doing here? What happened?”

“Nothing, Papa.” She spoke to her father, while her eyes and her interest were a little bit behind him. “I was ready early, so I accompanied Miss Darcy.”

“How kind of you, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy said. “And please allow me to tell you that you look lovely too.”

“Thank you, Mr Darcy,” she replied, wondering why she was blushing at a compliment she had received so many times before from so many people. “May I ask how the patient is progressing today?” she asked the doctor.

“He is improving. I dare say we are on the right path,” Dr Bates responded.

“I am glad to hear that. Papa, are you ready? We should leave soon.”

“I am ready, Lizzy. Though I am still hoping for a reason to stay at home. An accident or an illness would be very welcome.”

“Papa!”

“Do not worry, Lizzy, I shall go, or else I shall hear of nothing else from your mother. Besides, I heard you will dance with Mr Collins, and I cannot miss such a spectacle.”

“Papa!” Elizabeth cried again, her cheeks heating with embarrassment. She stole a glance at Mr Darcy and noticed his amused expression and mischievous smile, which vexed her.

“Come, Lizzy, laugh with us. After all these distressing days, we need a bit of diversion.”

“I would rather not laugh at my own expense, Papa. But I do prefer to laugh at distress, and in the meantime, I shall seek revenge,” she concluded with mock seriousness.

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With more smiles and farewells, the three Bennets and Mr Collins — elegantly dressed and apparently very eager for the ball — departed for Netherfield, while the guests remained at Longbourn, all of them caught in a peculiar situation, with their places unexpectedly changed.

To have Mr Darcy staying in her father's room and Miss Darcy sleeping in her chamber was beyond imagination. And the fact that Mr Darcy had smiled at her and looked at her with admiration was even more astonishing and disconcerting. The dangerous part was that she kept thinking of him, that she had acted imprudently for the pleasure of spending a little time with him, and that she might be wishing for and assuming more than there was, exposing herself to ridicule and disappointment.

A week ago, Mr Darcy had been determined to go to London after the ball, with no intention of returning. Now, he had specifically told her he had changed his plans. Was the change due to the accident only, or were there other reasons adding to it?

She felt trapped in a storm of feelings — new, powerful, and overwhelming — stirred by someone whom a week ago she had considered proud, arrogant, and utterly unpleasant. Suddenly, his mere presence gave her more pleasure than any other man of her acquaintance. Would such a change of heart have been possible if not for the accident that threatened his life?

When the carriage stopped in front of Netherfield, Elizabeth's musings had not ended but were overwhelmed by the din of voices and the musicians tuning their instruments.

Most of the guests had already arrived, and the Bennet family reunited. Mr Bingley

was an attentive host, while his sisters displayed a proper yet cold politeness.

Mr Darcy's accident appeared to be common knowledge and the main subject of conversation. Consequently, the Bennets were part of the general interest, and Mrs Bennet happily answered any questions about her involvement.

Elizabeth spent some time with Jane; then Charlotte Lucas joined them. Across the room, Lydia and Kitty were in the middle of a group with several officers, including Colonel Forster and his wife. Lydia was laughing about something Mrs Harriet Forster was whispering in her ear.

Discreetly, Elizabeth glanced about for Mr Wickham; he seemed to be absent, so she could finally relax a little.

The first set was about to begin, and Mr Collins approached them. Elizabeth assumed he would ask her, but he bowed to Charlotte Lucas, who immediately accepted. Although she felt relieved, Elizabeth was also puzzled; however, Mr Collins's preferences were of no consequence to her, so she gave it little consideration. Mrs Bennet, however, looked positively displeased, while Lady Lucas rejoiced.

Then Mr Bingley took Jane's hand, and they opened the ball together — which pleased Elizabeth and her mother equally.

Elizabeth danced the first set with the eldest Lucas son. Then for the second, Mr Bingley asked her.

However, during that second set, Elizabeth was stunned and appalled to see Mr Wickham make an appearance. She and Mr Bingley exchanged worried glances. The wrenched man's audacity shocked Elizabeth. He must have known Miss Darcy had arrived and Mr Darcy was recovering. He must also have assumed Mr Darcy would remember his criminal actions. And still, there he was, like a cruel aggressor closely

observing the effect of his actions.

“He probably waited to see whether Darcy or his sister would be here,” Mr Bingley whispered to Elizabeth. “I shall ask my servants to throw him out.”

“Sir, as far as I know, Mr Darcy would wish you to leave him alone. Unless he does something to offend you or your household, I would kindly suggest disregarding him and avoiding a scandal.”

“You are probably right. I wonder what he did that was so terribly wrong for Darcy to resent him so much. Darcy is a fair and honourable man. I trust his judgment.”

“I trust Mr Darcy too, sir. That is why I suggested we follow his instructions.”

For the rest of the set, Elizabeth felt Mr Bingley’s restlessness, and she was no better. As soon as the music ended, Lydia and Kitty ran to the group of officers and engaged in conversation with Mr Wickham. From afar, Mr Bennet stared at them, his eyes throwing sharp arrows.

Mrs Bennet was talking to Mrs Phillips, and Elizabeth joined them when Lydia and Kitty returned, apparently agitated.

“Mama, we were wrong, you know! Mr Wickham said he was not there when Mr Darcy suffered his accident. He said he just heard about it. We were mistaken. I told you he would not abandon a wounded man.”

Lydia spoke loudly enough that everybody could hear, and other people were pausing their conversations to turn and listen.

Elizabeth felt her blood boiling with anger at yet another deception.

“He said he was not there?” Mrs Bennet said in a tone that worried Elizabeth.

“Yes, Mama!”

“Did he, now? So we were all mistaken, were we? Were we wrong, Lizzy?”

“We were not, Mama. I am absolutely sure. But let him be. Do not allow him to ruin your evening.”

“Do not worry, I am sure I shall have a very entertaining evening,” the lady said, then she walked decidedly towards the group of officers. Panicked, after a glance at her father, Elizabeth needed a moment to recover before she followed her mother, together with Lydia and Kitty.

“Mr Wickham!” Mrs Bennet said loudly.

“Madam. What a pleasure to see you again. And Miss Elizabeth — you look lovely tonight.”

“I am glad to see you too, sir, as I have long wished to clarify a certain situation.”

“Of course. I am happy to help, if I can.”

“Oh, I am sure you can. Where there is a will, there is a way, is there not?”

The awkward dialogue captured everyone’s attention; even the musicians put down their instruments.

“I assure you, madam, I am more than willing to answer you.”

“Then please do. I was wondering how it was possible that I and three of my

daughters saw you three days ago, at the place where Mr Darcy suffered an accident, and you left without helping him — or us?”

Elizabeth held her breath at the shockingly direct question. Mr Bennet approached them too, gently touching his wife’s arm to stop her.

Mr Wickham looked transfixed by feelings that were impossible to guess. He glanced at his fellow officers, including Colonel Forster and his wife, then cleared his throat before responding.

“I assure you, Mrs Bennet, that it was all just a misunderstanding. As I already told Miss Lydia, you must have confused me with someone else. I was certainly nowhere near that place.”

“Then perhaps all four of us suffered a case of sudden blindness. But we did call your name, and that person turned, then left. If it was not you, it was certainly one of the other officers, as the militia uniform cannot be mistaken.”

“I can only repeat that I was not there,” Mr Wickham said firmly.

“Well then, Colonel Forster, you find yourself in a difficult situation. One of your officers certainly found Mr Darcy unconscious and hurt and abandoned him there, in the cold and the rain.”

“Mrs Bennet, if that was the case, I assure you I shall investigate and take proper measures.”

“It was the case, Colonel. Fortunately, we arrived in time, and I waited there with Mr Darcy for more than half an hour while Lizzy ran home to fetch help. That particular officer should be ashamed of himself for acting in a less gentlemanlike manner than two women. I hope the men who are actually fighting in the war are braver.”

A general gasp of amazement was heard at such a harsh scolding. Colonel Forster looked mortified and glared at his officers, whose usual amiability disappeared.

“As I said, I shall investigate tomorrow.”

“I trust you will. You may wish to ask Mr Darcy himself. He might remember.”

“Just as you admitted you might have been wrong, how can we trust Mr Darcy’s recollection if he was unconscious?” Mr Wickham asked with increasing boldness.

“He might accuse someone who was not at fault.”

“I am sure nobody would accuse anyone without proper evidence,” Mr Bennet interjected. “But I must ask, Mr Wickham, what sort of accusation do you mean? Abandoning someone in a dire situation is not a breach of the law, only of honour and morals. Accusations would be in order only if someone harmed Mr Darcy intentionally or caused the accident. Do you suspect anything of the kind?”

Unlike his wife’s agitated tone, Mr Bennet’s voice was calm, his countenance composed, his right eyebrow arched quizzically. Mr Wickham’s face darkened instantly.

“I did not mean anything in particular, and I suspect nothing because I know nothing. I was speaking in general.”

“Ah, it is good we clarified that too. We shall return to our seats now. Mrs Bennet has had her fill of amusement for one evening, and you young people must be impatient to begin the next dance.”

Mr Bennet held his wife’s arm and led her towards the chairs where Mr and Mrs Phillips, Mrs Long, and Mr Collins were all sitting in stupefaction.

Elizabeth followed her parents, taking Lydia and Kitty with her, while Jane and Mr Bingley accompanied them.

Mrs Bennet's astonishing scolding of the officers was something nobody in Meryton would have imagined, and it caused an uproar of rumours, whilst the third set was delayed even more.

The officers were all gathered around Colonel Forster, talking animatedly.

Eventually, the music resumed, and pairs took their places in the line. Standing with Mr Collins was the worst situation for Elizabeth when she was still struggling to understand what had happened for her mother to act so imprudently.

Mr Collins kept talking, and Elizabeth nodded, glancing towards the officers repeatedly.

"What do you think, Cousin Elizabeth?"

"Excuse me? Mr Collins, I beg your pardon, but I cannot pay attention to the conversation. We have endured several exceedingly distressing days, and I am very tired. I believe I shall retire before the ball ends."

"I understand, of course. I was talking to Miss Lucas, and she agreed that everything that has happened has been most difficult for your family. Miss Lucas is so considerate and wise, and she seems very reliable."

"She is," Elizabeth confirmed absently. "I have known Charlotte since I was very young, and I assure you she is the best friend anyone could hope for. And yes, she is exceedingly wise and reliable."

"Dear cousin, it pleases me to know we are in agreement," Mr Collins said with

emphasis, and Elizabeth cast an apologetic glance towards Charlotte.

Shortly before the third set ended, everyone turned towards the door as a new guest entered. Tall and handsome, he drew the attention of the room, particularly as he was dressed in the uniform of an army officer.

Elizabeth looked at him, puzzled and intrigued, then Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst moved forwards to greet him. Mr Bingley, who was in the middle of the dance, bowed to his partner, then hurried towards the newly arrived guest.

Excusing herself from her own partner, Elizabeth left Mr Collins and went to Jane and her parents. Out of the corner of her eye, she observed Mr Wickham and Lieutenant Denny leaving through a side door.

Mr Bingley approached with the new guest. "Please allow me to introduce Colonel Fitzwilliam, Darcy's cousin. Colonel, this is Mrs Bennet, Mr Bennet, and their eldest daughters Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth."

"It is a great pleasure to meet you," the colonel said with a proper bow, "and to thank you on behalf of myself, my parents, and my brother for saving my cousin."

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Colonel Fitzwilliam's arrival had disrupted the ball even more. Elizabeth took a seat away from the dancing to avoid any further invitations. Shortly afterwards, Mrs Bennet's nerves betrayed her, and she needed rest. Elizabeth and Jane took her to their chamber, helping her onto the bed Elizabeth had been using.

"Jane, you should return to the others. I shall stay with Mama," Elizabeth said. "I need a little bit of rest too."

“Lizzy is right — you must return to Mr Bingley!” Mrs Bennet interjected. “I have a terrible headache. I might need to sleep for a little while. It might be from Dr Bates’s medicine or because this entire evening has been so distressing! I am so upset with Lizzy for neglecting Mr Collins. Did you see how he danced with Charlotte Lucas? And Mr Wickham — such audacity to lie to my face! I shall not have it!”

“Dear Mama, please try to sleep,” Elizabeth begged her. “I shall bring you some tea and something to eat. You need rest.”

“I am upset with you, Lizzy! If only Mr Bingley had proposed to Jane sooner, I would not have worried myself so much. And now Colonel Fitzwilliam — is he the son of Lord Matlock? I wonder whether he is married. Such a handsome man — and the son of an earl!”

“Mama, I am going to fetch the tea. And you absolutely must sleep! We can speak of all this in the morning,” Elizabeth insisted before hurrying downstairs for the tea.

From the ballroom, the sound of the music was loud, even though it was on the other side of the house.

She looked about a little, trying to get her bearings in the large house that she did not know particularly well. After taking a few steps, she stopped, frozen in amazement. Mr Wickham, Mr Denny, and Mrs Forster were standing in a darkened corner, talking privately. Seeing her, they separated abruptly, and Mrs Forster said, “I was looking for my husband, but I think I must have become lost myself.”

Then the two men greeted Elizabeth and left, while the woman returned to the party.

Dumbfounded, Elizabeth finally found a maid and asked for some tea. She could have simply rung the bell in her room, but she had not wanted to cause more work for the already busy servants on the night of the ball, and if she had done so, she would

not have witnessed the strange meeting that added to all the other dark details surrounding Mr Darcy's accident.

With Mrs Bennet finally sleeping soundly, Elizabeth returned to her family almost an hour later. Supper was being served, and Jane informed her that their father had returned to Longbourn, together with Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was eager to see Mr Darcy.

"Mr Bingley insisted that we all — Mama included — remain at Netherfield to rest after the ball. I hope you approve?"

"I do, of course," Elizabeth responded distractedly. "And the officers? I only see a few of them."

"I have not seen Mr Wickham or Mr Denny for quite a while. Mrs Forster felt unwell, so she and the colonel left before supper. Dear Lizzy, this ball is so strange that I cannot wait for it to end. I wish Mr Bingley had cancelled it. I should not have allowed Lydia to insist on it."

"It is strange, Jane, and quite tiresome," Elizabeth admitted. "But let us try to bear it to the end. You should try to comfort Mr Bingley and perhaps dance another set with him to compensate for his distress, while I shall take care of Lydia, Kitty, and Mary."

Despite Jane's worry, the rest of the ball passed without incident, although the conflict between Mrs Bennet and the officers, as well as Mr Darcy's accident, were further discussed between eating, drinking, and dancing.

Jane spent a lot of time in close company with Mr Bingley, which seemed to please both of them exceedingly. Elizabeth did little until the ball finally ended except think of Mr Darcy, as well as Colonel Fitzwilliam's unexpected arrival and Mr Wickham's sudden departure — which she believed must all be connected in some way.

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With Netherfield finally silent and everybody else asleep, Elizabeth allowed herself more time for reflection.

Since her mother had taken the bed Elizabeth had previously occupied, Mr Bingley had assigned her another room, and the solitude suited her very well.

Recollecting the events of the last few days, Elizabeth realised that she might be the only one in possession of all the details. She knew what Mr Darcy, her father, and Dr Bates had discussed in regard to the accident and the shooting. In addition, Mr Darcy had related to her Mr Wickham's attempt to deceive Miss Darcy at Ramsgate, and Miss Darcy had revealed her dismay when she had spotted Mrs Forster, whom she had apparently met in that same seaside town.

The unexpected connection made Elizabeth feel uneasy, even though she was uncertain of its significance. What were the odds that Mr Wickham and Mrs Forster had been in Ramsgate at the same time, particularly when he had been plotting against Miss Darcy?

Mr Darcy had not said exactly what the scoundrel's intention had been — he had only said the man attempted to take advantage of her. But what could he have meant by that? If Mr Wickham's aim had been monetary gain, he could only have achieved it in two ways: either by stealing something valuable from the girl — but how much money and how many valuable things could she have taken with her for a short stay in Ramsgate? — or, more likely, by trying to force a marriage upon her, perhaps an elopement since Mr Darcy would never give his consent. The last was the most logical and painful circumstance, which, as she had been told, had failed because of Miss Darcy's wisdom and strength of character.

Either way, Mr Wickham's actions were detestable and revealed his dreadful character.

As she reviewed her own behaviour towards Mr Wickham, Elizabeth became angrier with herself. If she was clever enough for such complex reasoning, how could she have been such a simpleton to trust a man merely because of her prejudice towards others?

There were so many more unanswered questions, and so many details that were still unclear, and these kept her awake for another hour. One peculiar concern troubled her exceedingly: with the presence of Miss Darcy and now Colonel Fitzwilliam in the neighbourhood, and following her mother's outburst, Mr Wickham must know his deceptions could not be successful any longer, and with the danger of being exposed to everyone, he must feel trapped. What would a man used to deception and betrayal do when he was cornered? Apparently, he had already attempted to hurt Mr Darcy, and that was before the confrontation with her mother, before Miss Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam's arrival. Would he now try something even more heinous?

With such tormenting thoughts, Elizabeth finally fell asleep, worried about what the next day would bring.

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Darcy was almost asleep when Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived with Mr Bennet, completely taking him by surprise.

When Georgiana had left London, neither the colonel nor their Matlock relatives had been at home. Furthermore, Darcy had written to Lord Matlock and to the colonel, mentioning the accident and the Bennets' help. He had explicitly stated he was in no danger, that he was residing at Longbourn while he healed, and that Dr Bates was there, supervising him until his complete recovery.

Despite his reassuring letters, he should have known his cousin would come. But that he had arrived on the night of the ball had surely caused more disturbance to his hosts than it otherwise would have done. Darcy had been amused by Mr Bennet's readiness to return home at the first opportunity, abandoning the dance. So, there they were, in the middle of the night — he, his cousin, the doctor, and Elizabeth's father, enjoying an animated conversation.

“When I arrived in Meryton and asked for directions, I was told everybody was at a ball at Netherfield,” the colonel explained. “That is why I went there. Mr Bennet was kind enough to escort me here. I should have waited till morning. I hope I am not disturbing you. How are you feeling?”

“I am well, thank you. Of course you are not disturbing me, but you should not have taken the trouble of coming all this way.”

“Surely you are joking! Would you not have come to see me if I was hurt? By the by, Mr Bennet told me Georgiana is here, at Longbourn?”

“Yes. She is staying till tomorrow. I shall explain everything — the situation is complicated. I have ruined the peace and comfort of the entire Bennet family.”

“Nonsense,” Mr Bennet interjected. “Colonel Fitzwilliam, I assume you are tired, hungry, and thirsty. I shall ask for some food to be brought and will pour you a brandy. My man will ensure your coachman is fed too.”

“Thank you, Mr Bennet. I admit I am almost as hungry as I am thirsty.”

“Excellent. I confess I am hungry too — I left the ball before supper, which was actually a blessing after all that bustle.”

“Mr Bennet, how did Mrs Bennet feel at the ball? She seemed unwell when she left,

and I gave her some medicine for her headache. I hope it helped,” the doctor said.

“Mrs Bennet appeared to be in a good disposition. Better than I have seen her in a long while. She was exceedingly animated, even unrestrained — a little too much so.”

“Was she? Hmm... For most people, the medicine causes relaxation, but there are a few for whom the effect is quite the opposite.”

“I suspect Mrs Bennet was among those few. By the by, Mr Darcy, in case you were wondering, Mr Wickham made an appearance after the second set. I assume he is now regretting his imprudence, as he happened to find Mrs Bennet in a particularly poor disposition.”

Darcy frowned, puzzled by such a statement, which seemed to amuse Mr Bennet.

“Wickham? Do you mean George Wickham?” the colonel burst out.

“Yes, George Wickham himself. We have a lot to discuss, Cousin.”

“Since I am pleased with Mr Darcy’s present state, I shall leave you now,” Dr Bates said. “I have already eaten dinner, and I am quite tired, so I shall retire for the night.”

“And I shall order some food for us,” Mr Bennet said, withdrawing and allowing the two cousins some much-needed privacy.

“Wickham is here. He joined the militia regiment stationed in Meryton a week or so ago,” Darcy explained as soon as the door had closed. “You can imagine I was just as shocked to see him here as you are to hear of it.”

“Surely you are joking! Wickham joining the militia? How? Who paid for his

commission? Have you talked to his colonel?"

"Cousin, calm down. I shall give you all the details."

"This is unbelievable! Can we not get rid of this degenerate once and for all? I need to refill my glass!"

"Yes, you do that. And pour me one too as I have much more to tell you."

A little while and a glass full of brandy later, Darcy finally provided his cousin with all the details. The colonel was shocked, furiously angry, and in need of another drink.

"So you suspect Wickham shot you?"

"Yes. Fortunately, he is as incompetent with a gun as he is with everything else. First, he wounded my horse, then me. Both superficial scratches."

"So you know for certain it was him?"

"I am. He even spoke to me, and I am sure he would have either shot me again or left me to die in the cold had he not been interrupted. Mrs Bennet and her daughters truly saved my life, though they do not know it. I owe them more than simply words of gratitude."

"So what should we do now? Such a criminal act cannot go unpunished."

"It will not, but I need more evidence. I also need to be cautious in regard to Georgiana. But first I need to return to Netherfield and leave the Bennets in peace. Nobody in the family has rested properly in the last week because of me."

“Mr Bennet seems not to mind. He was very considerate and helpful.”

“I know. He is also a clever man. He is aware of what happened, and I have shared my suspicions with him.”

“So is he the only one in the family who knows? Not Mrs Bennet?”

“Not Mrs Bennet, but he is not the only one. Miss Elizabeth Bennet — his second daughter — knows too.”

“Miss Elizabeth? The lady who ran for help? Why share such a story with a young woman?”

“Miss Elizabeth is an admirable person. Quite clever and sharp. Due to certain circumstances, she is now in possession of all the information. I also told her that Wickham attempted to deceive and hurt Georgiana, without offering details.”

“I am speechless. This Miss Elizabeth must be truly remarkable since you granted her so much trust. I hope you will not regret it.”

“I am sure I shall not. The irony is that the Bennets were among the first in Meryton to befriend Wickham. I am curious what happened at the ball — Mr Bennet mentioned something about Mrs Bennet and Wickham.”

They chatted for a little longer until they were interrupted by Mr Bennet’s return. He was followed by Tom carrying a tray of food.

“I hope I am not disturbing you, gentlemen?”

“Not at all, sir,” Darcy said. “We were waiting for you. Besides, we are in your home, so we are in your debt, and you could never disturb us.”

“Just please do not thank me again, Mr Darcy. You have already done so too many times.”

The tray was placed on the table; Tom left, and Mr Bennet and the colonel filled their plates.

“Mr Bennet, we were wondering what happened between Wickham and Mrs Bennet at the ball. You mentioned something?” Darcy enquired.

“Ah, yes. That was a spectacle not to be missed. As I said, Mr Wickham arrived after the second set. My silly youngest daughter spoke to him, and he denied it was him the ladies saw when your accident occurred. Mrs Bennet took it as a personal offence and went straight to confront him amidst a group of officers, as well as Colonel Forster and his wife.”

Darcy stared at the gentleman in disbelief.

“Truly?”

“Yes, but it got worse — or better. Mr Wickham vehemently denied he had been present, so in the end, Mrs Bennet concluded that it must have been another officer in Colonel Forster’s regiment who had done such a heinous thing, and she demanded he seek the truth. She might have mentioned that she and Lizzy were braver than the militia officers — which I am sure delighted all the men.”

“That, I would not have expected,” Darcy admitted. “Especially since I know Mrs Bennet considered Wickham a friend...”

“Sir, I look forward to meeting Mrs Bennet,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

“In truth, my wife surprised me too, which is not easy after five-and-twenty years of

marriage. Mr Darcy, you should know that Wickham has already suggested you have accused him undeservedly.”

“Of course he has. He always does.”

“Wickham must be properly punished, as he should have been years ago. At the very least he must spend a few months in debtors’ prison, which will not be enough, by far,” the colonel uttered. “Since you are still keeping to your bed, I shall see to him.”

“Being kept to my bed does not stop me from carrying out my duties. But I am glad you are here, Cousin.”

“You should be warned, though,” Mr Bennet interjected. “As a colonel, as the son of an earl, and as the nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, you will have to bear the admiration of my wife, my youngest daughters, and my cousin Mr Collins, who is Lady Catherine’s parson. You can ask Mr Darcy for advice to overcome that particular obstacle.”

The colonel was dumbfounded; Darcy laughed, and from there, the conversation continued whilst they ate and drank until the brandy defeated the gentlemen, and each of them was forced to rest.

At some point, the sound of a carriage announced Mr Collins’s return from the ball; fortunately, he went directly to his room.

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Daylight breaking through the half-open curtains woke Darcy. Strangely, he felt rested and succeeded in moving without much pain. Stevens helped him to sit up, supported by pillows.

Dr Bates examined him carefully, and finally, the report that Darcy had longed for was given.

“We can safely move you to Netherfield today, Mr Darcy. Your improvement is clear. I am quite sure the danger has passed.”

“This is the best news, indeed. It is time for the Bennet family to regain full use of their home. I hope you will stay a few more days at Netherfield, Dr Bates. That is, if your duties do not require your presence in town.”

“I shall stay two more days to be certain of your recovery. I must say, Mr Darcy, that I am as relieved as you are. In truth, I feared the worst considering your head injury. However, your ribs are still sore and need rest and protection. Not much effort, no standing for too long, no long walks, and absolutely no riding for at least a month. This is not something to trifle with, sir!”

“I am aware of that, and I hope I have proved to be an obedient patient. Shall I be able to travel by carriage?”

“With the exception of the short trip to Netherfield, not for another two weeks and no long journeys. To London, perhaps. To Pemberley, not before the spring.”

“I promise to adjust my plans accordingly,” Darcy concluded.

He felt relieved, but there were other conflicted feelings within him. Although the situation was still complicated, and he must employ care in dealing with Wickham, Darcy thought mostly of Elizabeth, wondering how his departure would affect his relationship with her.

Yes, as improbable as it had seemed a fortnight ago, he did have a relationship with Elizabeth — one based on trust, understanding, and remorse. She had come to regret

trusting Wickham, while he was burdened by remorse for his behaviour from the day he had arrived in Hertfordshire to the day of his accident.

So much had changed in such a short time that all his previous reflections, struggles, and decisions — especially those related to Elizabeth — seemed irrelevant and flawed. The danger he had found himself in and his gratitude to those who had rescued him had opened his eyes to the truth of his feelings and desires — and to how to fulfil them.

Prior to the accident, he had been resigned to the conclusion that Elizabeth's situation forbade him from considering her as the future Mrs Darcy. All the reasons he had gathered to support that belief had proved to be shallow, inconsequential, and even silly. He had confided in her and trusted her with Georgiana's safety. It was more than he would have done with any other woman — any other person, except the colonel. She was not just admirable but also reliable. And, of course, a woman so enchanting, so alluring that only thinking of her stirred all his senses.

Darcy had been long certain of his admiration and growing love for Elizabeth. Yes, love it must be — a word he had never used before, nor considered in regard to any other woman. And now, he was sure she would gracefully honour the Darcy name. The only uncertainty that remained was in regard to her feelings and her desires. That was still a subject he needed to explore with her, and the task would not be easy. He had earned her friendship, and his greatest fear was losing what he already had by attempting to gain much more.

As thrilled as he was to move to Netherfield, he was even more eager to see Elizabeth again, perhaps talk to her a little. Since he was still forced to spend most of his time in bed, at Netherfield, the chances of seeing her and talking to her would be few, and he already missed their little conversations.

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As the morning progressed, the household began to awaken. Georgiana and the colonel came to see him — both rejoicing in their reunion. Then Mr Collins tested their patience while Hill made preparations for breakfast. And then there was the sound of a carriage, and many loud voices were heard all over the house. He hoped — unreasonably, of course — that Elizabeth might come to his room to greet him.

The door was suddenly opened without even a knock, and Bingley burst in.

“Darcy, how are you? I understand you are coming home today! I am so pleased to hear that. But I have something to tell you too. I am engaged to Miss Bennet! Jane, of course. Can you believe it? I proposed to her this morning, and she accepted, and I just received Mr Bennet’s blessing.”

The news shocked Darcy and left him momentarily speechless. Although Bingley’s admiration for Miss Bennet was obvious, and such a possibility was inevitable, he had not expected it to happen so soon, or under such unsettling circumstances. However, Bingley had proved to be determined and confident enough to choose his own future without asking for advice or requesting approval.

“I am delighted to see you so happy, Bingley, and I wish you all the best,” he replied, but he could not say more as Mrs Bennet’s voice erupted in an outburst of unrestrained joy.

Bingley smiled, a little uncomfortably, and Darcy smiled too. “I congratulate you most heartily, Bingley. Truly.”

“Thank you, Darcy. I know I may count on you, even if you do not entirely approve.”

“I certainly approve of whatever makes you happy and trust your decision, Bingley. I am glad the ball was a success after all.”

“It was horrible, Darcy. So much distress, so much turmoil, and so much worry that I doubt I shall host another one soon. But I danced two sets with Jane, and now I am engaged — which makes it the best ball I could have hoped for.”

“True.” Darcy laughed. “It is all a matter of perspective.”

As the occasion required, Darcy had the chance to offer his congratulations to Miss Jane Bennet — and to see Elizabeth too, even lock eyes with her briefly. What pleased him even more than Elizabeth’s sweet smile directed at him was that next to her stood Georgiana, who looked more at ease with the Bennets than he had ever seen her among strangers. Indeed, the ball, with all its mishaps and turmoil, had concluded with the best possible outcome.

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The twenty-seventh of November had more meaning for Elizabeth than she expected. After a ball that had been close to disastrous, Mr Bingley had found the right moment to propose to Jane, and she had immediately accepted.

For a couple of hours, Elizabeth was the only one informed about the engagement, as the couple needed to obtain Mr Bennet’s blessing before making it public.

Mrs Bennet woke up rested; she still had a slight headache but was thrilled to have spent a night at Netherfield. She required details about the rest of the ball, was overjoyed that Jane had danced a second set with Mr Bingley, and was shocked by the news that Colonel Fitzwilliam, the son of an earl, was now staying at Longbourn. Such events tested her nerves and needed to be urgently shared with her sister and friends.

There had been a quick breakfast before their return to Longbourn. Mr Bingley's sisters and brother had declined to attend, so it was only the master and all the Bennet ladies.

Elizabeth did not have much of an appetite; she was still trying to comprehend and link together the pieces of information about Mr and Miss Darcy and Mr Wickham. Therefore, she was content when, finally, the entire party returned home.

They were informed Dr Bates was examining Mr Darcy, and they found Miss Darcy, Mrs Annesley, and Colonel Fitzwilliam, as well as Mr Collins and Mr Bennet, in the drawing room. Greetings and impressions of the ball were shared — loudly and enthusiastically — then Mr Bingley requested a private meeting with Mr Bennet. Mrs Bennet was so agitated and overwhelmed by having an earl's son and Miss Darcy in her home that she missed their departure. However, their return shortly after and the disclosure of their discussion caused an extraordinary burst of joy, and Mrs Bennet almost fainted while blessing all those around her.

Miss Darcy and the colonel looked surprised but immediately expressed their congratulations and best wishes. Mr Collins did the same — though with much more restraint.

Mr Bingley's face bore the largest grin. Only Jane was silent, with a happy smile and a becoming blush, her beauty enhanced by her discreet happiness.

Minutes later, Dr Bates presented his favourable report and the decision to move Mr Darcy to Netherfield. To Elizabeth, the news — though expected and necessary — caused a tightness in her chest. As unthinkable as Mr Darcy's stay at Longbourn had been, she regretted his departure. In a corner of her heart, there was a hidden fear that, once he was gone, she would not see him much — if ever — and she admitted to herself a sense of loss and sorrow at that thought. Of course, Jane's forthcoming marriage to Mr Bingley would provide them with many opportunities to meet again

— if he wished for that.

Her prior ill opinion of Mr Darcy had changed and improved; a sort of friendship had grown between them — one she valued and did not want to risk.

But she could not deceive herself either; he had other friends, and she had admired other men she had met before, but the kind of feelings that had slowly risen within her in the last week she had never experienced before, nor did she dare name them. Last night, before the ball, she had visited Mr Darcy briefly, and his intense gaze had warmed her for the rest of the night.

Now, as Mr Bingley hurried to inform him about the engagement, and Jane and Miss Darcy joined him, Elizabeth followed them.

She was curious to see his response. She was aware that Mr Darcy had not approved of his friend's admiration for Jane, just as he did not approve of her mother and sisters' manners. She had also heard him talking to the Bingley sisters about the Bennets' relatives who lived near Cheapside.

All this, Elizabeth could not forget, nor could she easily forgive. Was it possible to fall in love with someone for their goodness of character and despite their flaws?

Elizabeth entered Mr Darcy's room, which was already filled with people. All her worries eased when her eyes met his, even though it was only for a brief moment, before Dr Bates requested they all leave to allow the patient to be prepared for the move.

“Miss Elizabeth, I wish to thank you again for your kindness,” Miss Darcy said in the midst of all the agitation.

“And I wish to tell you again there is no need for thanks, Miss Darcy,” she replied

with a smile. “However,” Elizabeth continued after a brief hesitation, “if you do not mind, I would like to speak to you privately. Only for a moment.”

“Of course. Privately? Perhaps in your chamber, where I slept last night? I believe my coat and reticule are still there.”

“Yes, my room would suit perfectly.” Elizabeth led the way up the stairs, opening the door and allowing Miss Darcy to enter before closing it behind them. She took a seat on the edge of the bed and invited her guest to do the same.

“Miss Darcy, I know it is no business of mine, and I might sound presumptuous, but please know I am asking for Mr Darcy’s benefit.”

“Please do so,” the girl answered, a puzzled crease between her brows.

“You mentioned to me that you recently met Mrs Forster. Is Mr Darcy aware of that?”

“Oh...no...I did not mention it to him.”

“You looked quite affected yesterday, so I assume it was something important. And last night, at the ball, I happened upon Mrs Forster, Mr Wickham, and Mr Denny. They were only talking, but they dispersed as soon as they saw me. I just had a strange feeling about it. I might be wrong, but to me, they were not acting like mere acquaintances.”

“Oh...” Miss Darcy’s countenance darkened, and she was silent for a moment, her hands clasped in her lap.

“I am sorry if I am intruding,” Elizabeth whispered. “I hope you do not mind.”

“I do not mind, Miss Elizabeth. And you are not wrong. I-I met Mrs Forster a few months ago, in Ramsgate. Mr Wickham, who has been a friend of our family’s for a long time, introduced her to me. Her name was Harriet Gibbon, and she was with her husband.”

Although she was sympathetic to the girl’s evident distress, Elizabeth could not help gasping in disbelief.

“With her husband? Not Colonel Forster, I assume?”

“I have never seen the colonel. But I am sure her husband’s name was Mr Martin Gibbon. I met them a few times.”

“Dear Lord, this is very strange... I am not sure what to make of it all, but I am sure it is important for your brother to know. Please tell him about Mrs Forster. He will surely be able to connect all the pieces and will know what to do with them.”

“You are right, of course. I intended to tell him, but I am reluctant to bother him while he is recovering. I have given him so much trouble already, and he has always been so kind to me!”

“Trouble? I doubt it, Miss Darcy. I have heard Mr Darcy talking about you a few times, and he always sounded caring, affectionate, and proud of you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” the girl answered tearfully. “I hope to live up to his expectations and not disappoint him. He is truly the best brother, and the best master and the best landlord.”

“What a wonderful, loving description. Just what a brother needs from his younger sister. I wish I had such a brother, but I only have four sisters,” Elizabeth said, still smiling to put the girl at ease.

“I would very much like to have a sister,” Miss Darcy confessed in earnest.

“Well, from what I have observed, my sisters are in complete awe of you, so you may borrow them for as long as you stay in Hertfordshire. You should be warned, though, that at least two of them will probably want to return to London with you.”

Elizabeth was joking, but Miss Darcy looked positively delighted.

“Oh, I would like that very much! You all should come! I am sure my brother would approve! Besides, I have a house of my own, close to my brother’s.”

“That is very kind of you, Miss Darcy. For now, the most important thing is to see Mr Darcy fully recovered. And please, do not forget to mention Mrs Forster to him. The sooner the better.”

“Of course. I promise to tell him today. Miss Elizabeth, shall I see you tomorrow?”

“Certainly, I would like that very much. Will you come to Longbourn?”

“I am not sure yet. But I shall send a note if you agree.”

“That would be perfect,” Elizabeth said, and Miss Darcy thanked her again, smiling. Miss Darcy’s only fault was to express her gratitude rather too frequently; otherwise, the young woman was as pretty as she was sweet, well educated, kind-hearted, timid, and bright. Elizabeth imagined her other accomplishments, as mentioned by Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, and his sisters, were just as true.

For a moment, Miss Darcy’s invitation to London tickled Elizabeth’s heart. That she could visit Mr Darcy’s house was something she could not allow herself to even consider.

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By the evening, Darcy was finally settled in his old room at Netherfield. Georgiana, Mrs Annesley, and the colonel, as well as Dr Bates, had also been given rooms on the same hall, so they occupied the entire floor. Although Dr Bates had bandaged his chest tightly to protect his ribs, the move had not been easy. Climbing in and out of the carriage, enduring the journey itself — brief though it had been — then ascending the stairs, even though he had been carried on a chair by two servants, had affected Darcy greatly. The pain had returned with greater intensity, and he eagerly took the medicine Dr Bates offered, hoping for palliation. Without a doubt, he needed more time to heal — just as the doctor had suggested — so he was unlikely to leave that part of the house again soon.

Around dinner time, Colonel Fitzwilliam visited, holding a glass of brandy.

“Would you like a drink, Darcy?”

“No. I am already dizzy from the medicine. Are your accommodations comfortable?”

“Very much so. I called on Colonel Forster, and I talked to him army man to army man.”

“Did you? I cannot say I am surprised.”

“I am sorry to say this about a fellow colonel, but that man is none too sharp. He is older than me, I believe, but he has a childish naivety. I did not mention that Wickham might have shot you, since you asked me not to.”

“Thank you. Did you see Wickham too?”

“Sadly, no. Apparently, he is away on business with Mr Denny. I asked Forster why

his officers are free to come and go and whether their use of guns is equally unrestricted. He said militia officers have slightly different rules as they are not on the front line of war. As if they are only required to smile and dance.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes and gulped some brandy.

“I was equally frustrated when I spoke to the man. I fear he will learn about Wickham the hard way,” Darcy said.

“Well, one way or another, he needs to learn. I asked him to inform me the moment Wickham returns, without warning the scoundrel. I fear I cannot trust him to do that, though.”

As they spoke, Georgiana entered, and they immediately ceased the conversation.

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“Brother, please let me know when I can speak to you for a few minutes. It is quite urgent, but I do not want to disturb you,” Georgiana said timidly.

“Whenever you wish, dearest.”

“I shall let you talk privately now,” the colonel offered.

“In fact, you may stay, Richard,” Georgiana said in a small voice. She sat, looking at them with a shadow on her face that betrayed her torment, and Darcy worried instantly.

“Yesterday, when I went to Longbourn with Miss Elizabeth, I noticed someone I thought I recognised as we passed through Meryton. Miss Elizabeth told me it was Mrs Harriet Forster, the colonel’s wife.”

“I believe they married a month or two ago,” Darcy replied, puzzled.

“Yes, but I met her in Ramsgate... George introduced her to me... Her name was Harriet Gibbon, and she was there with her husband, Mr Martin Gibbon.”

“What?” Darcy and the colonel cried at the same time.

Georgiana nodded. “I do not know what happened. I told Miss Elizabeth... I mentioned I met the woman in Ramsgate but nothing more.”

“I see,” Darcy uttered, exchanging glances with Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Miss Elizabeth asked me to tell you. She was very kind, and she said I should tell you and that you would know what to do with the knowledge.”

“Miss Elizabeth is clever and wise,” Darcy whispered.

“It certainly seems so. Much cleverer than Colonel Forster,” the colonel murmured, taking another sip.

“Thank you so much for telling me, dearest,” Darcy said. “I shall thank Miss Elizabeth too, at the first opportunity.”

“Oh, you should not do that,” Georgiana responded, and Darcy frowned, confused.

“Why not?”

“She seems to dislike thanks. She told me as much.”

“Ah, I see. Then we must find another way to repay her.”

“Perhaps she would agree to come to London, after all.”

Darcy held his breath, his heart racing. “Come to London?” he enquired.

“Yes. I told her I would very much like for her and her sisters to come to London as my guests.”

Darcy’s amazement was now complete.

“I hope you do not mind me inviting them, Brother?”

“No, of course not. And what did she say?” he asked, his heart pounding as if he were

a young boy waiting for a surprise.

“She said not to make any travelling plans yet, since the main concern now should be your complete recovery.”

“Did she?” Darcy repeated, thoughtful.

“You seem to be very much at ease with the Bennets, my dear,” the colonel said.

“I am. They are very easy to speak to, and they were kind to me from the beginning. And Miss Elizabeth is always attentive and considerate.”

“I agree,” Darcy added.

“Besides, she saved your life — what else do I need? But I fear Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley do not like her at all. And they do not approve of Mr Bingley’s engagement. They said so.”

“Bingley’s sisters like few people and only those whose situation in life is above them. Do not let them affect you — your judgment is superior to theirs.”

“Bingley should be grateful that he secured himself such a beautiful woman, the daughter of a gentleman. He could not hope for a better choice,” the colonel interjected. “As for Miss Elizabeth, we have barely spoken two words to each other, but I already like her.”

“So do I, Cousin,” Georgiana approved.

“So do I,” Darcy whispered, causing an enquiring glance from the colonel.

Fortunately, soon after, dinner was announced, and he remained alone with his

thoughts and with Elizabeth's image in his mind.

While the pain in his chest was still intense, Darcy's mind became calmer, clearer, and brighter, as the shadows vanished.

Georgiana's disclosure was puzzling and probably of great importance, leading him to believe something bigger and potentially dangerous was afoot.

Wickham and this Harriet were undoubtedly well acquainted. Three months ago, Wickham had been in Ramsgate, trying to pursue Darcy's sister. He had befriended Mrs Younge and also introduced Georgiana to Harriet — a young, pretty woman who was supposedly married. That was probably a ruse to avoid suspicion and to gain his sister's trust.

When their plot failed in regard to Georgiana, they must have moved on to a different target. It could not be a coincidence that Harriet married a colonel, then a month later, Wickham happened to join his regiment. Whether Harriet was truly married to another man and whether Mr Denny was involved or not still needed clarification.

But Wickham and that woman were surely part of an elaborate scheme, in which Colonel Forster must be a victim, just like Georgiana.

Fortunately, Georgiana was clever, with a stronger will and an even stronger conscience, so she had revealed the elopement scheme. Colonel Forster, a man of at least forty, charmed by a pretty young woman half his age, did not stand a chance.

On further consideration, Darcy recollected that Colonel Forster had mentioned he had married in haste due to some particular circumstances. At the time, Darcy had disregarded that information, but now it seemed important. Wickham's whereabouts must be urgently discovered, as he was probably in hiding.

Yes, everything was taking shape like a drawing, answering the question Darcy and Elizabeth had debated a few days ago: Why would Wickham try to harm Darcy, threatening his life?

It was all clear now; Darcy's arrival and attempt to warn Colonel Forster about Wickham must have frightened him. The panic of being discovered, along with his accomplice Harriet, was probably so strong — stronger than reason or any trace of decency — that he had decided to get rid of Darcy by any means necessary.

He might have succeeded if the Bennet ladies had not happened to be there and had ruined his plans.

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Longbourn returned to its usual rhythm, but the agitation remained, partially due to Jane's engagement — which kept Mrs Bennet and consequently the entire family in lively spirits.

Against her expectations, once she returned to her own bed, Elizabeth slept poorly. She spent the night thinking of Mr Darcy, then Miss Darcy, wondering whether seeing the sister the next day would mean she might see the brother too. At Longbourn, she had entered Mr Darcy's chamber a few times; at Netherfield, such liberties were forbidden, unless Miss Darcy joined her.

From the two Darcys, her mind jumped to their enemy. What would Mr Wickham do next? Elizabeth also tried to question Lydia about Mrs Forster, but she found out nothing further. Colonel Forster had married his wife six weeks before the regiment came to Meryton — that fact was public knowledge. Miss Darcy's assertions could not be doubted, so there must be something suspicious linking Mrs Forster to Mr Wickham.

The next morning, even before breakfast, Mr Collins unexpectedly announced that urgent business required his immediate return to Kent. Mrs Bennet was too tired to express her disappointment and her daughters too joyful to conceal their relief.

Mr Bennet wished him a safe journey; Mr Collins thanked his host and handed him a letter, then hurried to the hired carriage.

“Mr Collins left because he was upset with Lizzy, I am sure!” Mrs Bennet uttered. “She is too wild to know what is best for her. I fear she will now become a spinster and will beg Jane to offer her shelter.”

“Mama, I am sure Lizzy will not be a spinster. Regardless, I would be grateful to have her by my side for as long as possible. And Mr Bingley is very fond of her too.”

“Well then, I am glad all is settled,” Mrs Bennet concluded resentfully, while Elizabeth struggled to conceal her laughter.

“You may mock, Lizzy, but we are all fortunate that Mr Bingley proposed to Jane. He is a good man, and he will not let us starve on the streets when your father dies. Though it would break my heart to see another master and mistress at Longbourn.”

“Mama, I shall not let you be homeless! By then, I shall have married a handsome officer,” Lydia declared.

“And by then I shall have married a handsome and rich man — either an officer or not,” Kitty added.

“Fortunately, I shall be dead by then, according to your plans,” Mr Bennet said, rolling his eyes, then he withdrew to his library.

Elizabeth hoped for a note from Miss Darcy, but one did not arrive. At noon, Mr

Bingley called, and Miss Darcy accompanied him, much to everyone's pleasure. The gentleman took a seat next to Jane, and Miss Darcy sat with Elizabeth and Mary.

"Is Mr Darcy in good health?" Elizabeth enquired.

"Yes, his improvement is very encouraging, Dr Bates said," Mr Bingley replied.

"And Colonel Fitzwilliam? Does he enjoy Hertfordshire?" Mrs Bennet asked.

"I believe so. He has been quite busy dealing with some personal business, as well as some tasks for Darcy. Even now, he is speaking to Colonel Forster."

"I hope Colonel Forster will keep his officers under better regulation. I expect to be informed which of them abandoned Mr Darcy — and us! — there in the rain."

"Mrs Bennet, to my knowledge, it was Wickham — as you rightfully said. There is no doubt of his identity. The only question is how he dared lie with so much audacity and so little remorse," Mr Bingley responded.

"Oh, I am sure Mr Wickham is not as bad as you accuse him of being!" Lydia cried.

"Sadly, I must disagree utterly and completely, Miss Lydia. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam have informed me about that man's character, and I trust their words."

"As you should, sir!" Mrs Bennet interjected. "And you, Lydia, stop arguing with Mr Bingley! He surely knows better than you, just as I know what I saw and when I am being lied to!"

Elizabeth noticed Miss Darcy's discomfort, and she gently touched her arm in a gesture of support.

“So, Mr Bingley, did you have in mind a certain date? For the wedding?” Mrs Bennet changed the subject, causing Jane to blush violently.

“Not yet, madam. I was about to ask your permission to discuss it with Miss Bennet. Darcy said he will help me to purchase a licence, so we can marry whenever Miss Bennet wishes to.”

“Oh, how lovely of you! And how kind of Mr Darcy! Upon my word, my good impression of the gentleman grows every day. I would save him again whenever he needs it!”

“Mama!” Elizabeth interjected with no success, as her mother continued.

“Did you hear, Jane? Yes, yes, of course you may discuss it privately. You may go to the dining room. Or perhaps take a stroll in the garden? No, no, the weather is bad, and you will only dirty your clothes.”

“I have no objections to whatever you suggest, Mr Bingley, as long as Mama and Papa approve of it,” Jane whispered to her overjoyed betrothed.

“We could marry shortly before Christmas, maybe, if it is not too early? Darcy will be confined here for another month, and I would like to have him by my side. And Miss Darcy, of course. If you approve.”

Jane looked slightly uneasy, blushed again, and looked at Elizabeth for a long enough moment for Mrs Bennet to respond.

“Of course we approve! Before Christmas? So soon? Is it not wonderful, Jane?”

“It is...” Jane whispered, a little bit lost, glancing from her betrothed to her mother then to Elizabeth. She needed a moment to compose herself, then she smiled and

repeated, “It is wonderful, indeed.”

Mr Bingley’s delight was clear before his words confirmed it.

For some strange reason, Elizabeth’s heart was pounding too, and thrills ran along her skin. The date of the wedding should not affect her — but it did, and she even felt her cheeks colouring.

“So, you and Mr Darcy will remain at Netherfield until after Christmas?” she asked Miss Darcy.

“Yes. Dr Bates has insisted my brother cannot travel for another month. And I shall stay with him.”

Those few words gave Elizabeth so much joy that she could hardly reply.

“It is good Mr Darcy is following the doctor’s orders. We shall be happy to have you here. Both of you,” she mumbled, annoyed by her silly response, while Miss Darcy smiled.

Mr Bennet soon joined the happy gathering, and they chatted for another half an hour before they were interrupted by Colonel Fitzwilliam’s impromptu appearance.

The colonel’s frown was a clear sign of his distress, and silence immediately fell over the group. Miss Darcy became instantly distracted, whilst Mr Bingley enquired, “Colonel, what has happened? Is Darcy well?”

“Forgive me for intruding. Darcy should be well — I have not been at Netherfield since early this morning. I stopped here to bring some unsettling news. George Wickham has left the regiment with no intention of returning, and he has taken some of Colonel Forster’s possessions.”

“Left? And what possessions?” Mrs Bennet asked, dumbfounded.

“An important sum of money and some jewels. The colonel has organised a search. The situation is unclear as yet, but apparently, the report has already spread around Meryton. I must inform Darcy, but I have come to fetch Georgiana. Darcy might need her presence.”

Pale and biting her lips, the girl stood, and Mr Bingley followed her.

“I shall come too — the matter seems to be of great importance. I shall visit again tomorrow. Please excuse me...”

“Of course,” Jane replied.

“May I be of any assistance?” Mr Bennet enquired.

“Thank you, sir, but I am not sure yet. I must discuss it with Darcy and decide further. We shall provide you with more details as soon as we have them.”

The three guests left before the hosts had time to recover fully from their amazement. Even when her parents and sisters began to chatter loudly, Elizabeth was still speechless, trying to guess the meaning of Mr Wickham’s latest act of betrayal.

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Darcy listened to his cousin relating to him the details of Wickham's disappearance. He had been told that Georgiana had returned to Netherfield too and had immediately retired to her chamber. Her suffering and guilt must be heavy now she realised the true abomination that was the character of that man — a man she had considered a friend all her life and had almost fallen in love with.

Unlike his cousin, Darcy was rather calm. He had expected Wickham to run away at the first sign of any trouble and to flout the rules that bind an officer to his regiment; but stealing the colonel's valuables was a step too far.

“Colonel Forster was distraught; besides being the victim of a crime, he is responsible for the disappearance of his lieutenant. He was in a hurry to leave, and two other officers were with him, so I had no time to enquire about his wife's past and her connection to Wickham. However, as inappropriate as it was, I waited for him to leave, then I returned to speak to her.”

“You did? That is surprising, indeed, but it was probably your only choice,” Darcy agreed. “And?”

“And, the little mouse proved to be a predator. A most impertinent one. She replied that I had no right to question her presence in Ramsgate and I should be more concerned about Georgiana's time there. She specifically said people might be curious about her own past actions, but they would surely be more curious about Georgina Darcy's.”

A sensation of failure, helplessness, and anger wrapped around Darcy. He tried to adjust his position, but the sharp pain reminded him that he was still incapacitated,

and his rage burst out.

“That woman is just as dangerous as Wickham — perhaps more so! She might be the inducement for his latest actions. To think that I judged her as just another silly girl, married young to an old man for comfort. I saw her speaking to Lydia Bennet — who is only fifteen — and I thought they were very much alike in wit. What an idiot I have been! I have judged everything wrongly! Everything!”

“Calm down, Darcy. We will get to the bottom of all this.”

“We certainly will. We must find Wickham. I am not sure where Colonel Forster’s men are searching, but Wickham is probably in London. There is no better place for him to hide. He has Mrs Younge too — I heard she bought a house and is renting rooms. My man discovered her, and I have the direction.”

“A boarding house? You certainly paid her exceedingly well,” the colonel said.

“I am in no mood for mockery, Richard. We must find Wickham and have him locked up. Enough is enough. I have purchased some of his debts and shall see he is thrown in debtors’ prison. Spending the winter there will surely teach him a lesson.”

“Wait — what? We are not going anywhere — I am going. You will keep resting, just as the doctor ordered. I am going to London and will find Wickham. Do not worry, I will make sure he is locked up — that is if I am in a good disposition. Come, Darcy, be reasonable, this is the only solution! I am going alone!”

Darcy hesitated, struggling to find arguments, until he eventually surrendered.

“Very well. But do not go alone — take Bingley, will you? He needs to purchase a marriage licence and see his attorney about preparing a settlement. He is trustworthy and will be useful to you. I shall give you the direction of a Mr Dunn — he is

excellent at finding anyone and anything. And Mrs Younge's address."

"We should leave immediately — I shall talk to Bingley right away."

"I shall write to Mr Bennet and explain the situation, to put his family at ease. Perhaps I should invite Mr Bennet here, to discuss the matter at length and explain about Harriet Forster too — since she was his daughter's friend."

"You should. Mr Bennet has already offered his help. I am going to prepare for our departure."

Once alone, Darcy tried to compose himself enough to consider the situation rationally. There were many things that could go awry and harm Georgiana. Not only Wickham but also Harriet Forster — if she was anything like the colonel had described her — could be a threat that was impossible to predict.

In the middle of his musings, Dr Bates came to examine him. Hearing about the colonel travelling to London, the doctor decided to join him, which Darcy readily approved. Things then proceeded with rapidity. He sent a note to Mr Bennet, mentioning Bingley and the licence and asking him to visit the next day.

The party bound for London departed soon after. In Bingley's absence, Darcy had to answer Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst's enquiries, which he did with as few details as possible. Dinner was served in his room, and Georgiana joined him. She looked as troubled as he feared and barely ate or spoke at all, and Darcy did not know how to comfort her; therefore, impulsively, he sent his valet with another note for Mr Bennet, asking permission for Elizabeth to visit Georgiana the following day.

?It was late when Darcy's valet returned from Longbourn and handed Darcy a piece of paper. He expected it to be from Mr Bennet, so he was shocked when he read it.

Darcy,

You have ruined yet another of my plans and forced me to abandon a most favourable position. Despite my hopes, I keep happening upon you; this seems to be a curse that I cannot break. I intend to leave England for good; there is nothing left for me here. However, I have no means to do it in a way that pleases me, but you certainly do, so I propose a final deal. For the sum of five thousand pounds, I am prepared to give back the letters Georgiana wrote to me, as well as your father's watch that has been in my possession since his death. After that, you will never see me or hear from me again.

If you accept the deal, there is a place called Oakham Mount. You will easily find it. Someone will wait for you on the roadside at the bottom of the path on the west side of the hill tomorrow from daybreak to sunset. I know your cousin, Bingley, and the doctor have left for London. They are foolish to search for me there.

I also know you are wounded, but if you act the gentleman you always are, this should not matter, as you will not even have to leave your carriage. Someone will come to your window, you will hand them the money, and they will hand you the letters and watch in return. If you do not have that sum in your possession, I would be happy to take a note from you and give it to your solicitor in exchange for the money. After all, I have known Mr Green for years; he would not even be surprised.

I am in a hurry, so I need your immediate reply. The boy will wait for it. Do not try to question him; he knows nothing. I shall take the note from him at my convenience.

If I get no answer or receive a negative one, I shall find someone else interested in purchasing the named objects, perhaps for even more. A scandal about Miss Georgiana Darcy would surely be a subject that would delight London's ton.

Be wise; if not for yourself, for Georgiana's sake. Your father always spoke of how clever and dutiful you are; surely you do not wish to disappoint him.

Darcy put down the letter, his hands trembling with fury, his head spinning, and a sharp claw gripping his chest. It could not be! It was beyond anything he had expected, and he had certainly expected the very worst.

“Where did you get this?”

“A lad gave it to me. He works at the inn, I believe. He cannot be older than ten. He was waiting outside the front door when I returned. I hope you do not mind me bringing you the note.”

“No, not at all. The note is from Wickham... I need to think. I shall only need a moment. Give me some paper, then go and speak to the boy. Do not scare him. Give him some cake and some milk and try to discover whether he knows anything useful.”

Stevens left, and Darcy pressed his fingers against his temple, trying to soothe the pulsations in his veins. His rage was so great that it silenced his voice of reason.

The last phrase about his father and Georgiana affected him more than all the others. He did not know Wickham had his father’s watch, nor that he possessed any letters from Georgiana. He was tempted to ask his sister, but it did not matter in the end. It was an opportunity that he would not miss.

Giving Wickham five thousand pounds to leave the country was a small price to pay for his peace; he would have given it in an instant if he trusted the scoundrel’s words. But the time for negotiating with Wickham had long passed. More drastic measures needed to be taken.

He closed his eyes and rested his head against his pillows until his mind and his body calmed enough for him to write.

Wickham, you fool,

You surely must know I do not have that amount of money with me. With what I do have and what I can borrow from Bingley and Hurst, I may have a little under four thousand. I shall send someone to leave the remainder with Mrs Younge, and you can collect it from there.

You cannot be so stupid as to believe I shall deal with anyone else. I shall be at the place you named tomorrow morning, before breakfast. You, in person, will come to my carriage, show me the objects you have, and I shall give you the money. Stevens and a coachman will be with me; you cannot be so naive as to believe I shall come alone either.

This is my counter-proposal and final offer. You may threaten me with scandal, but even an idiot like you knows that nobody would publish your stories without asking for my opinion, so I can easily thwart your ridiculous scheme.

I shall be there in the morning for no longer than one hour. I have no intention of wasting more of my time on a miscreant like you.

He put the letter down, closed his eyes for a moment, then re-read it, to be sure it had all the details that would trigger Wickham to act in a certain way. He rang, gave it to Stevens to give to the boy, then asked the valet to return so he could explain his plan.

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The news of Mr Bingley's sudden departure baffled Mrs Bennet and consequently the entire house. The explanation that he was eager to purchase a licence for the wedding was thrilling, but she still feared her daughter's betrothed might have run away in order to avoid marrying her — a supposition that Mr Bennet declared to be ridiculous and not worthy of debate.

Rumours of Mr Wickham's betrayal had spread all over Meryton, and Mrs Phillips came to discuss it with her sister. To make things even worse, another report upset Mrs Bennet: before leaving Hertfordshire, Mr Collins had proposed to Charlotte Lucas, and they were now engaged to be married in January. Such news almost overshadowed the joy of Jane's engagement, and the idea that Charlotte would one day become the mistress of Longbourn brought Mrs Bennet more suffering, despite her happiness that her own daughter would soon become the mistress of Netherfield. As expected, she blamed Elizabeth for being wild, inconsiderate, and selfish and for offending Mr Collins with her stubbornness, which she believed had caused him to turn his attention elsewhere.

“The moment Mr Collins set foot at Lucas Lodge, they trapped him. Sir William and Lady Lucas flattered him, Charlotte must have used her arts and allurements to charm him, and now there she is, betrothed and ready to steal Longbourn from us. And all because of Lizzy!”

Whatever anyone said, it was impossible for Mrs Bennet to be calmed, so Elizabeth chose to cease trying to reason with her. She had dinner, then retired to her chamber. There were so many things to think about, so many things to understand, so many things to worry about. She was disappointed with Charlotte for marrying a man she had just met and who lacked common sense and wit. However, her friend was a wise woman, reasonable and determined, who had certainly made a choice she believed was in her own best interests.

Mr Bennet informed her about the note from Mr Darcy and his recommendation to keep Lydia and Kitty away from Harriet Forster, which Mr Bennet had complied with immediately, despite the girls' strong opposition.

Mrs Forster was still in the comfort of her home in Meryton amidst all her husband's possessions, which seemed strange to Elizabeth. Why would the colonel allow it, when she was surely aware of Wickham's plans? But did Colonel Forster know that?

Had anyone informed him? Had he believed them? Or perhaps she was innocent, despite Elizabeth's suspicions. It was all exceedingly confusing and equally worrisome.

Later in the evening, Mr Bennet told Elizabeth about Mr Darcy's second note containing the invitation for her, which brought Elizabeth both pleasure and anxiety. She was delighted with Miss Darcy's company and pleased to be invited, even though Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst would be there. Furthermore, she was eager to see Mr Darcy. She missed him and kept him in her mind and her heart all the time — which was frightening. That she could have fallen in love with a man in such a short while and have such strong feelings for him was unthinkable — and yet, it was true.

Her night was restless, as many others had been lately. Jane was sound asleep, so at the first sign of daylight, Elizabeth dressed and left the house, disregarding Hill's reproachful glances and silent opposition. It was cold and misty, but the fresh air filled her lungs and dissipated the tiredness. After so many days of ceaseless bustle indoors, she needed a walk — a long one to exercise her body and calm her mind.

Careful to watch her step on the slippery ground, Elizabeth took the path towards Oakham Mount. She had not been so far from the house in over a month, and, with Jane's forthcoming marriage, she would likely not have another opportunity soon.

At that hour, even nature was still asleep, frozen, with no sound other than the wind and her own footsteps. Therefore, the sudden noise of a carriage's wheels and horse's hoofs alarmed her. She stepped off the road to let it pass, curious about who might be travelling at such a time. When it came into view she regarded it with amazement, recognising one of the men sitting on the box, and immediately called out.

“Stevens? Is that you?”

The man looked equally shocked and immediately signalled to his companion to stop.

Only then did Elizabeth recognise Mr Darcy's carriage.

"Miss Bennet? What...? Madam, where are you going?" Stevens mumbled, agitated.

"I am going for a walk," she replied, dumbfounded. She was close to the carriage door and tried to peek inside, but the face that greeted her from within was most unexpected.

"Mr Darcy?" she exclaimed, covering her mouth with her palm in utter disbelief.

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The window was lowered, and, without moving, Mr Darcy spoke. “Miss Bennet... What an unfortunate coincidence... Please enter and close the door. And keep silent,” he said in a tone that vexed and embarrassed her.

“Sir, what on earth are you doing here? You should be in bed! Where are you going? I am sorry if my presence bothers you. I shall leave immediately. I certainly do not want to be an imposition.”

“No, no...please...” he whispered, reaching out and grabbing her arm. “That is not what I mean... It is that... You should not be here. You cannot be here. You must return to Longbourn this instant.”

His countenance was transfigured and his voice unrecognisable.

“Sir, what should we do?” Stevens asked.

“Wait and keep silent!” he answered harshly, and his tone increased Elizabeth’s anxiety. She took a moment to look at him; he was formally dressed, and next to him, on the bench, were two double-barrelled, silver, heavy-looking pistols.

Elizabeth held her breath; her heart seemed to pause, then began to race. She put her other hand upon his, as he was still holding her arm.

“Mr Darcy, what are you doing? Where are you going?” she repeated.

“You should not ask, and I should not respond. If you have any feelings of friendship or consideration for me, I am begging you to do as I ask. We shall talk again later if

you wish.”

“I do have more than a little friendship and consideration for you, sir. Which is why I shall not leave until you tell me what is happening. You have pistols with you, and you are hurt and alone in a carriage. You cannot force me to return to Longbourn unless you shoot me. So, I am begging you, tell me what this is about.”

He sighed, and she could see the gesture was painful to him. He hesitated and moved his hand, causing their fingers to brush against each other, then entwine.

“You are an obstinate and headstrong young woman, Miss Bennet,” he said, attempting a trace of a smile.

“Let us not enumerate each other’s faults at this particular moment, Mr Darcy, as you are certainly at a disadvantage.” The brief teasing exchange brought them both a little comfort, while their hands were still joined.

“I received a note from Wickham last night. He is still in the neighbourhood, apparently, while others are looking for him in London. He has requested money in exchange for some objects he has in his possession. He declared his intention to then leave the country — which he will probably do, as he has no other escape.”

At this, Elizabeth gasped with horror and pulled her hand away, pressing it to her mouth. “Excuse me? And you are going to give him the money? Where? If you wished to pay him, why not invite him to Netherfield?”

“He requested we meet here. He certainly would not show his face in any place where he might be captured and cannot hide.”

“But why would you even listen to him? He is the worst villain! He has already attempted to harm you! He is trying to deceive you and steal more money from you.”

Her heart was pounding, and she could hardly control her anger.

“I could not refuse him as he asserts that he has some letters from Georgiana that he will make public otherwise.”

“Dear Lord...” she whispered. “He will hurt you. I know he will. Do you have the money with you? He will hurt you and take it. You cannot meet him — this is madness!”

Tears of anger and frustration burned her eyes, and she tried to wipe them away.

“Please...” she whispered.

“Miss Bennet, your tears and pleas are my greatest weakness at this moment. I must go — and this time I am prepared. But I cannot do it if you beg me not to.”

“Prepared?”

“Yes. I am armed and shall give him no time to make his move.”

“So you intend to duel with him? Have you lost your mind?”

“Not at all — to both your questions. I intend to do something highly dishonourable, of which I am deeply ashamed. I would rather not tell you, as I fear I might lose your good opinion forever.”

“Mr Darcy, do not trifle with me, sir! Just tell me.”

“As soon as Wickham approaches the carriage, I shall shoot him.”

She gasped again, staring at him with consternation.

“I shall not kill him. Only shoot him in his thigh or in his shoulder, enough to stop him and cause him to fall. Then my men will capture him. There is no other way. I cannot lose this chance. I cannot let him escape.”

“But...but...why would he allow you to shoot him without fighting back?”

“Because he does not expect me to do such a horrible thing. I have always kept my promises. I have always acted honourably. I gave him my word that I would bring him the money in exchange for the letters.”

“What if he has companions who will fight back? You only have Stevens and a coachman.”

“There are others. Stevens sent another three servants from Netherfield here before dawn. They are hidden somewhere, waiting.”

“Oh...”

“Yes. Wickham cannot have much help. Perhaps Lieutenant Denny — of whom we know nothing yet. And perhaps Harriet Forster. My cousin spoke to her yesterday and threatened to expose her as soon as her husband returned. She must be as desperate as Wickham.”

“And equally dangerous,” Elizabeth said.

“Perhaps. But we shall outnumber them in any case. I shall be in the carriage. I shall be in no danger. Trust me.”

“I do trust you — but I do not trust that which cannot be predicted. If there is truly no danger, I shall stay here, with you.”

“Miss Bennet — I shall not even reply to such nonsense! You must leave immediately! You are only delaying me, and your intervention will expose us all to risk. You must understand that!”

“I do understand that. And I understand you are trying to deceive me, sir. If there really was no danger, you would allow me to stay.”

“Elizabeth, you must understand that even with the most perfect plan, something unforeseen might occur. I cannot expose you to even the smallest danger. If you are here, I shall think of nothing else except how to protect you. I cannot keep my mind clear if you are with me. Even now, I can hardly think of anything else but you and your nearness intoxicating me. I would give anything to be alone with you in a carriage, yet there is nothing I have ever wanted more than to protect you now.”

His last plea, his tone, and the use of her given name were heart-wrenching for Elizabeth. Amidst his words was a hidden yet strong confession of feelings that she had dreamt of hearing without daring to hope it might ever happen.

She felt helpless and defeated, and tears choked her voice when she answered.

“I wish to share the risk with you. It is not fair that you are denying me that.”

“Then you may call me unfair and even worse. Just leave.”

“I am going back to Longbourn to tell my father. We shall return here together.”

“You may do that. But you must wait until at least an hour has passed.”

She nodded and was about to leave. Then, with courage enhanced by despair and fear, she turned, leant towards him, caressed his face, and gently brushed her lips against his. It was only a moment, so brief and soft that it felt almost unreal; then she

stepped away. Immediately, the carriage resumed its journey at an increasing speed.

Elizabeth remained in the middle of the road, gazing after it.

By the time she had walked back to Longbourn then returned, much more than an hour would have passed. Mr Darcy would probably meet Mr Wickham within half an hour, perhaps sooner. She looked from one side to another, then, driven by an impulse that admitted no reason, she turned off the road, pushed her way through the trees, and began climbing. It was steep, and she had to grab stumps, bushes, and branches and crawl on her hands and knees for what felt like an eternity until she finally found a spot that allowed her a view over the meeting point.

She saw Mr Darcy's carriage, and then, a short distance away, another carriage, much smaller, hidden behind the trees.

She wondered whether Mr Darcy or his men had seen it.

She tried to see where Mr Darcy's men were hidden, but she was too far away, so she carefully made her way back down, step by step. To support herself, she grabbed a branch — heavy and knotted — which she used as a cane.

There were enough trees to shield her presence, and she managed to reach a place that allowed her to both see and hear without being noticed. Nobody should know she was there — especially Mr Darcy. Hidden behind an oak, still holding the branch, Elizabeth barely dared to breathe.

She saw Mr Wickham stepping towards Mr Darcy.

“I have come in person, as you requested. Do you have the money?” he shouted.

“I do. I need to see the letters and the watch.”

“My partner has them — you can see she is holding them.”

Elizabeth observed Harriet Forster a few steps away, holding a package.

“Very well,” Mr Darcy said, and Mr Wickham stepped closer. Out of nowhere, the sound of a shot broke the air, followed by a sharp cry and moans.

“You shot me! Why?” Mr Wickham yelled, the shock obvious in his voice. He grabbed his thigh, which was bleeding.

“Why? I should have killed you years ago, as Richard suggested! You deserve nothing less. Everything I did to help you change, everything my father did for you, was all in vain. You tried to shoot me two weeks ago and left me to die there! Do not believe I am ignorant of that!”

“I did not!”

“Shut your mouth, Wickham. Enough lies. I shall not waste any more time with you. This ends now! No more!”

“You could have killed me!” Wickham whined.

“Stop crying like a child — you are an officer! I would have killed you if I had wished to, but unlike you, my aim is flawless.”

Mr Wickham turned and tried to run back to his carriage, but another shot, though only fired into the air, frightened him enough to stop him.

“Do not make me shoot you again, Wickham. There will be no other conclusion to this. My men will tie you up and take you away. Your wound is bleeding, and you need immediate help. You will go to prison, but at least you will live.”

As Mr Darcy spoke from inside his carriage, three other men appeared from the trees but kept their distance. Mr Wickham glanced from one to the other with obvious despair.

“He is not going to prison. Come, George, let us go, or someone else will be hurt!” Mrs Forster interjected. Elizabeth heard her voice but could not see her clearly.

“Mrs Forster, or whatever your name is, do not be ridiculous. You are a silly girl and have already ruined your life. We are six armed men, and you are holding a small pistol. You may shoot one bullet and hurt someone, and then my men will shoot you.”

“And whose life are you ready to jeopardise, Mr Darcy? How will you live with your honour and your conscience if one of these men dies because of you? You almost killed your childhood friend, but I cannot believe you would hurt a woman, nor have someone killed for money!”

The woman spoke loudly and boldly, and Mr Wickham was already moving towards her.

Without thinking, Elizabeth stepped out from behind the tree near the woman’s carriage. She was still holding the branch, without any particular intention of doing anything. The woman continued to speak, and Mr Wickham took another step towards her; the tension was palpable. When she reached the back of the woman’s carriage, Elizabeth had a full view of her; she was holding her pistol pointed towards one of the servants. She was paying attention to the men, with no idea what was happening behind her.

Elizabeth’s body acted more quickly than her mind, and she leapt out from behind the carriage, shouting, “Harriet!”

The woman turned round, startled, and with all her anger, Elizabeth hit her with the branch, right in the face and with so much strength that she fell to the ground. In a moment, Stevens had run to her and taken her pistol, holding her down in the mud. Mr Wickham showed no further opposition, and within minutes both were tied up.

Only then did Elizabeth look at Mr Darcy; he was trying to step out of the carriage with visible effort, gazing at her, his eyes and mouth opened in shock. She smiled and walked towards him but paused near the two who were sitting at her feet. Harriet's pretty face was now all bruised, with traces of blood and dirt; she was very young and looked pitiful, and Elizabeth felt momentarily sorry for her. Until she spoke again.

“How ridiculous that you believed George had any real designs on you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet!”

“Ridiculous indeed,” Elizabeth answered. “I trusted him for a while, not because of any designs but because of his appearance of goodness. And speaking of designs, your face is like a painting, Harriet. A very colourful one. You should have known that a gentleman like Mr Darcy would never hurt a woman, but a country girl would surely do so if you angered her enough.”

While the men pushed Wickham and Harriet into their own carriage, Elizabeth walked on until she found herself face-to-face with Mr Darcy.

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“You are a horrible person, Miss Bennet,” he said tenderly, with a large smile on his face that revealed his dimples and made Elizabeth shiver. “You cannot be trusted to keep your word, nor to see reason or to act reasonably.”

“One who promised to take his medicine and keep to his bed until fully recovered and instead is wandering around seeking justice should not be allowed to speak of trust and keeping one’s word, Mr Darcy,” she replied. “But we shall debate this subject later. You look truly ill. We must return to Netherfield immediately, and I shall fetch Mr Jones.”

She helped him climb into his carriage, and she entered too.

“Mr Jones should first take care of that pathetic idiot,” Mr Darcy said. “The shot was superficial but still needs to be attended to. The woman needs care too — your blow might have been stronger than my bullet.”

“I acted like a savage,” she said. “I cannot believe I hit a woman, and I am ashamed to admit I do not even regret it.”

“I acted like a savage too, shooting a man in the leg without warning. And I am ashamed to admit I do not regret it either,” he said, mirroring her words. “We seem to be a perfect match, Miss Bennet.”

He was clearly speaking at least half in jest, and so she responded, “I hope we are, sir. Except that I love to dance, and you loathe it.”

“Ah, yes, but I once told Sir William that every savage can dance. And here I am, a

savage. Although it might be a while before I am able to do so. Dance, I mean.”

Their eyes were locked, and they were sitting close to each other in the carriage, teasing each other.

He attempted to laugh at his joke, then moaned in pain.

She gently touched his face, and he took her hands, removed her gloves, and placed a kiss on each of her palms, while she watched, entranced, shivering.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “You must be. You are all wet and dirty. Would you please sit here, by my side? Let me remove your bonnet too. How did you find me? Where have you been?”

“Sir, I found this,” Stevens interrupted them, handing Mr Darcy a package. He took it and put it next to him.

“Shall we take Wickham and the woman to the regiment?”

“Yes. And be sure Mr Jones takes care of them as soon as possible. Then you may send those letters by express.”

Stevens hurried to carry out his duties, and their carriage began to move.

“Letters?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes. To my cousin and to Bingley, to inform them that I have captured Wickham. I wrote them last night, and they can be delivered now. There are still many things we have to discuss, so many things to clarify, so many things that I need to tell you, Miss Bennet.”

“You may call me Elizabeth. You have already done so,” she whispered.

“Thank you. Should I dare ask you to do something that you have already done too?” he enquired, gazing deeply into her eyes.

“Crawl in the mud? Or hit someone in the face?” she replied as warmth and thrills coursed through her.

“Not quite, Elizabeth. If you have forgotten, maybe I should show you.”

“You should, Mr Darcy.”

He leant towards her, his face coming closer and closer until finally her lips touched his again. But this time, everything was different; her lips surrendered to his sweet, tender possessiveness, hoping they would never have to separate.

He paused some time later and withdrew from her enough for their eyes to meet.

“I must speak to you first, Elizabeth. I am still uncertain whether this is real or another dream — one of the many I have had about you. I must tell you how ardently I love and admire you, and how I have longed for such a moment to happen.”

“You have? For how long?”

“From almost the beginning of our acquaintance. Perhaps before I refused to dance with you at the assembly.”

“Surely you are joking!” she whispered, dumbfounded.

“I am not. Surely you can see that. But I must ask you — how is this possible? I prayed that your feelings would be similar to mine one day, but now? So soon?”

“I am not sure...I cannot understand it either... I never imagined you had such feelings for me. Until the accident, we were not even friends. And then...I am not sure what happened. Day by day, you conquered my heart and my mind. And today...”

“Today you were willing to put your life in danger for me,” he finished for her. “And you actually did. Of everyone, you were the closest to Harriet’s pistol.”

“I was, but it was pointed in the wrong direction, unlike my branch.” She laughed, but only for an instant before his lips captured hers again.

“You should take me to Longbourn first,” she whispered, trying to catch her breath. “I need to change, and then my father and I shall pay you a proper visit, as per your invitation.”

“As you wish. I could speak to your father now. That is — if you will allow me to ask for your hand in marriage, Miss Bennet, and if you will grant it to me.”

“I shall answer yes to both, Mr Darcy,” she said, repeating one of his earlier answers. “But now, you must go and rest immediately. You have not another moment to lose!”

“Very well...”

“You must recover as soon as possible, Mr Darcy.”

“Fitzwilliam,” he said.

“You must recover as soon as possible, Fitzwilliam,” she repeated, then leant towards him for another kiss, just before the carriage stopped in front of the house.

She entered through the kitchen and ran up to her room. She changed her clothes and

washed her face as quickly as she could, placed several more pins in her hair, and glanced in the mirror one more time. She smiled and blushed seeing her lips were red and a little swollen. She could still detect Mr Darcy's — Fitzwilliam's — scent, and the recollection of his kisses made her quiver. She had often declared she would marry only for love, but she had never imagined that love would feel so overwhelming.

Doubtful, she touched her lips again. Could it be true, or was it only a dream? He had asked her the same question in the carriage. A fortnight ago, Mr Darcy was the last man in the world whom she imagined she could marry. Yet in a very short time, he had become the only one.

Perhaps she should be grateful to Mr Wickham, after all. He was the one who had made her despise Mr Darcy even more. He was the one who had hurt her and placed him in her path; he was the one who had caused fear, torment, and pain — which had helped them to bond with each other.

She did not have much time for reflection as she was eager to see him again and to be certain he was truly resting. And to have her father's blessing so she could openly rejoice in it.

She briefly wondered what Miss Darcy would say, as well as Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. That would be quite a spectacle, probably bigger than the one her mother would create.

“Lizzy, you are incorrigible,” Mrs Bennet scolded her when Elizabeth entered the drawing room. “Where on earth have you been, child?”

“I went for a walk, Mama. You know I always do that.”

“I do know — how could I not? I have given up any hope of correcting your bad

habits. You are too stubborn for your own good.”

“Forgive me, Mama. I know I am headstrong and obstinate — I was told that very recently. But I hope you will soon see you do not have to worry about me,” Elizabeth replied, unable to conceal her smile.

In the carriage that took her and her father to Netherfield, Mr Bennet watched her closely.

“Lizzy, where have you been? What happened? I can see on your face something important has occurred.”

“It has, Papa. But let us talk later, shall we? It is a long story — one that I hope will please you.”

Mr Bennet nodded; his eyebrow arched in reproach, but he did not insist.

At Netherfield, a servant informed them Mr Darcy was waiting for them. Miss Bingley and the Hursts were nowhere to be seen.

They found Mr Darcy lying in his bed, talking to his sister. The girl immediately greeted them, and she embraced Elizabeth — a clear sign that she had been informed and approved of the news.

“Mr Bennet, thank you for coming.”

“My pleasure, sir. Do you have news from your cousin or Mr Bingley? I sent John to Meryton to enquire about Colonel Forster...”

“That does not matter any longer,” Mr Darcy replied with a smile, puzzling Mr Bennet. “Miss Bennet, I assume you have not revealed to your father the most recent

news?”

“No, Mr Darcy. I decided to allow you the pleasure of doing that. May I ask how you are feeling, sir? How is the pain?”

“Not as bad as I expected,” he responded. “I have hardly thought of pain at all today.”

“So? Would you be so kind as to tell me what has happened?” Mr Bennet interjected impatiently.

“Of course. There is a bottle and some glasses on the table if you wish for a drink.”

“It is too early for drinking,” Mr Bennet said, and Mr Darcy finally began to talk.

In his story, he did not mention his sister’s letters, only named a few objects he wished to recover from Mr Wickham. Miss Darcy looked disquieted but not really surprised, which indicated she had already heard the tale once.

As Mr Darcy’s narration unfolded, Mr Bennet’s amazement changed his countenance several times. The gentleman glanced from Mr Darcy to Elizabeth with apparent disbelief; he frowned, asked for details, and expressed his doubts until the final part shocked him into silence.

Wordlessly, he poured himself a glass of brandy and resumed his seat.

“So people have been searching the country for Wickham, and he was still here?”

“Yes.”

“And you went to meet him by yourself? As injured as you are? You did not trust me enough to ask for my assistance?”

“Time was too short for such arrangements. It was not a matter of trust but of urgency and safety. It was my mistaken pride that prevented me from exposing Wickham sooner. It was my mistake, and I had to remedy it.”

“And you, Lizzy — you climbed the west side of the hill? In this weather?”

“Yes, Papa. It was not so difficult — you know I have done it before.”

“I remember. When you were twelve and fell all the way down! Your uncle and I feared you would die!”

“I assure you it was nothing so dramatic this time, Papa.”

“You assure me? You faced a pistol and punched a woman in the face! What else would you call it?”

“It was dramatic, Mr Bennet,” Mr Darcy interjected. “You may imagine my shock when I begged her to leave, she promised to do so, then she suddenly appeared out of nowhere.”

“Did that shock cause you to propose to her, Mr Darcy?” the gentleman asked in earnest, and Mr Darcy laughed despite the pain it caused him.

“Not at all. I have long admired Miss Elizabeth. You may remember that I confessed as much to you when we first spoke.”

“Yes, but... I did not imagine it was this sort of admiration. And you, Lizzy? This is all so unexpected and confusing to me.”

“It was confusing to me too, sir,” Miss Darcy interjected in a sweet, gentle tone, and everyone looked at her. “Miss Elizabeth told me many times that she and my brother

were enemies rather than friends, that he was proud and arrogant at first, and many others have told me how much they dislike each other.”

“I certainly believed the same,” Mr Bennet replied.

“When my brother told me about the engagement, I was certain of his feelings, but I doubted Miss Elizabeth’s reasons for accepting him. As I talked to my brother, I realised her actions showed her feelings beyond any doubt. He demanded she leave in order to keep herself safe, but she stayed against his wishes. She put herself in danger to protect him, even without knowing how to do that. There are few reasons why someone would do such a thing.”

The girl spoke with so much emotion that Elizabeth was tearful. Darcy looked at his sister with pride and joy, while Mr Bennet gulped from his glass.

“I cannot argue with your reasoning, Miss Darcy,” the gentleman finally said. “However, such a succession of events, with such a shocking conclusion, one can hardly imagine happening in a lifetime, let alone in less than a month.”

“I cannot argue with that, sir! I am still amazed myself,” Mr Darcy agreed. “And I apologise for asking for your blessing in such an unusual and hardly proper manner.”

“Of course I give you my blessing. You are the sort of man to whom I would never refuse anything he would do me the honour of asking. Also, you are one of the very few men I have liked from the very beginning of our acquaintance.”

“Thank you, Mr Bennet. The feeling is mutual, I assure you.”

Elizabeth embraced her father tenderly, then he took another sip. “I shall need another drink before I return home and give your mother the news. Considering everything that has happened this morning, it is surely not too early for a strong

brandy.”

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Mr Bennet had several more drinks that day, before and after the engagement was revealed at Longbourn. Mrs Bennet's response was so strong that Elizabeth feared her mother would faint. From disbelief to wonder, from denial to prayer, Mrs Bennet was beside herself.

"I saved Mr Darcy when I disliked him and found him proud and disagreeable, but I never imagined he would become my son-in-law! Mr Darcy! So tall and handsome! Ten thousand a year — perhaps more! It is as good as an earl! It cannot be! Lizzy, but are you sure, absolutely sure? Was he dizzy from the medicine, perhaps?"

"It is absolutely certain, Mama! He might have been dizzy," Elizabeth said, blushing at her own memories, "but there is no doubt about the engagement."

Mrs Bennet needed a few more days until she truly believed it. The return of Mr Bingley and the colonel was a great help. The former had purchased a licence and offered Elizabeth his heartfelt congratulations, which was the final proof Mrs Bennet needed. Also, Mr Darcy kindly asked Mrs Bennet to visit him one day, together with Mr Bennet and Elizabeth, and on that occasion, he dissipated all her concerns.

"Well, Mr Darcy, when you said you wanted to repay me for saving your life, I certainly did not imagine that you would marry Lizzy," Mrs Bennet declared.

"Mrs Bennet, I heartily admit that, at that time, I did not imagine it either."

"And to think you did not even want to dance with her! This is amazing, truly."

"I assure you, there are few things I wish for more than to dance with Elizabeth,

madam, and I shall do so as soon as I am fully healed.”

“Well, sir, once you marry her, dancing will be of no importance. But you may do whatever you please. I shall not oppose it,” she concluded, causing both Elizabeth and Mr Darcy to smile and blush.

Having two sons of such extraordinary value was beyond Mrs Bennet’s wildest dreams. Sadly, she had few opportunities to brag about it, as Meryton was alive with all sorts of distressing reports that captured everyone’s attention.

Colonel Forster returned to discover the shocking truth that he had been a victim of his wife, who had been friends with Mr Wickham and Mr Denny for a long time. Apparently, Mr Denny — who had already been an officer in the regiment — had introduced Harriet to the colonel in London, then she had charmed him and placed him in a situation that ended with a hasty marriage. A month later, Denny had been the one to introduce Wickham to the colonel.

The story of the failed elopement and the three villains’ connection with Georgiana Darcy was known only by Elizabeth and partially by her father and Mr Bingley. To the rest of the neighbourhood, the reports only spoke of Mr Darcy’s generous support of Mr Wickham, the latter’s betrayal, and the plot between the three accomplices.

Mr Denny was discharged from the regiment, but there was not enough proof for him to be lawfully condemned. Mrs Forster was banished by her husband and sent away from Meryton. Mr Darcy later discovered that she had been involved with Mrs Younge in questionable affairs.

By Christmas, Mr Wickham’s superficial wound had healed almost entirely, while Mr Darcy’s ribs were still tender and painful. Mr Darcy kept his word to throw Mr Wickham in jail once he was certain his life was in no danger, and he left him there from January to April. It was Mr Darcy’s men who also discovered other illegal

activities related to Mr Denny, who ended up keeping Wickham company in prison for two of those months.

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December was blissful at Longbourn and Netherfield — for almost everyone. Still forced to rest most of the time, Darcy missed all sorts of little things, such as small parties hosted by Bingley for the family, which he would have liked to attend. From his window, he watched Georgiana playing with Elizabeth and her sisters in the first snow of the year and hoped he would be able to join them the following winter at Pemberley.

Bingley's sisters were so shocked and angry at the news of the new engagement — which was even more distasteful to them than their own brother's — that they refused to spend much time with the Bennets, especially with Elizabeth.

The Gardiners arrived, and they were introduced to Darcy while he was still in his room. Also, Elizabeth was a daily visitor, and they spent several hours together. Even though there was also a chaperon, they could steal little private moments, share kisses and caresses, and make plans for their future life.

With Darcy on the path to a full recovery, Bingley suggested a double wedding. Much to Elizabeth's disappointment, Darcy declined.

“My love, I cannot marry you until I am completely recovered,” he confessed to her during their first moment of privacy. “I yearn to begin our life together and to prove to you my ardent love — on our wedding night and every night after — but I cannot allow pain to interfere. I cannot be cautious with my movements while I am loving you.”

The statement was not just an explanation but also a profession and a promise that

stirred Elizabeth's senses and kept her eager and restless for many weeks, turning the wait into a sweet torture that both shared.

Before Christmas, Darcy and Elizabeth had to overcome quite a few obstacles.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh — upon receiving a full report from Mr Collins — demanded that Darcy be brought to London, where he would receive better care. Darcy wrote back, sending his refusal and informing his aunt about his engagement to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Lady Catherine's response was something that Darcy would never show Elizabeth, so he threw it directly into the fire. In the following weeks, Lady Catherine continued to write poisonous letters to Darcy, to Lord and Lady Matlock to request their support in breaking the engagement, and even to Mr Bennet, declaring Darcy was already engaged to her daughter. The gentleman, exceedingly amused, showed the letter to both Elizabeth and Darcy, as well as his answer, which said:

Lady Catherine,

I can see your ladyship is determined to have Mr Darcy marry your daughter by any means; even by professing an engagement Mr Darcy does not recognise.

Since he is such an excellent man, you certainly cannot expect me to separate him from my daughter, breaking an engagement that he does recognise and very much desires.

I am sorry to disappoint you, but I trust my cousin Mr Collins will use his inclination for flattery to provide you some comfort.

Surprisingly but fortunately, that letter put an end to Lady Catherine's correspondence.

Lord and Lady Matlock and their eldest son expressed their surprise and reservations and hesitated to approve of the engagement. Colonel Fitzwilliam, once he had come to know Elizabeth better and had witnessed her affection for Darcy, became her friend and supporter.

Meeting each other daily, Elizabeth and Georgiana's bond grew under Darcy's watch. The girl came to trust Elizabeth so deeply that she shared the story of the failed elopement with her. She had feared censure and harsh words, but instead, Georgiana received a sisterly embrace and praise for her strength and wisdom.

Bingley married Jane Bennet two days before Christmas, surrounded by family and friends. His sisters and Mr Hurst attended the wedding but departed for London immediately afterwards. Darcy could not stand at his friend's side in church, but he made the effort to join the guests at the breakfast that followed, and he congratulated Mr and Mrs Bingley, rejoicing in their happiness.

Christmas dinner — the first one hosted by Mrs Bingley — brought together the Bennets, the Gardiners, the Lucases — including Charlotte Lucas, who was not yet married — Mr and Mrs Phillips, and the Longs, as well as Darcy, Georgiana, Mrs Annesley, and Colonel Fitzwilliam. It was generally agreed that marriage suited the Bingleys very much, as Mrs Bingley was more beautiful than ever before and Mr Bingley more joyful and talkative than usual.

At that party, Georgiana agreed to play for the guests, which was something that very rarely happened.

After a few songs that amazed and enchanted the audience, Mary joined her, and they continued to play, amusing themselves and the others with joyful music. To everyone's astonishment, Darcy gave an awkward bow to his betrothed, asking, "Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour of dancing with me? At least a few steps, until I need to rest."

Everyone stared at them, and Elizabeth laughed.

“Now, Mr Darcy? You wish to dance?”

“Why not? It is an opportunity that I do not wish to miss.”

“Then I shall be happy to oblige,” she teased him, placing her hand in his.

“Mr Darcy,” Sir William interjected, “do you remember, sir, when you told me that you avoid dancing even at St James’s Palace and that every savage can dance?”

Although the question was asked with a hint of malicious intent, Darcy smiled at his betrothed and replied, “I certainly do remember, sir. My opinion on this matter has changed only when I have Miss Bennet as my partner. Every savage can dance, and every man — even those who loathe such an activity — once he has found his perfect match.”

At this, Mrs Bennet gasped with pleasure, Sir William was silenced, and Darcy led Elizabeth to the middle of the room, exposing himself to everyone’s scrutiny. He had been wrong when he had refused to dance with her at the assembly, and his offence when he had called her tolerable was widely known. Therefore, he wished to prove to everyone how much he regretted those foolish words. The offence had been public, and so must the remedy be.

He had to stop soon enough and rest, but Elizabeth’s little smile and her sparkling eyes locked with his were a sweet reward deserving of the effort.

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At the end of January, on a cold yet sunny day with a light covering of snow, Miss Elizabeth Bennet finally married Mr Darcy in a ceremony that gathered the entire

neighbourhood. The only significant absence was Charlotte Lucas, who had married Mr Collins and moved to Kent.

The large crowd satisfied all Mrs Bennet's maternal feelings. Even Colonel Fitzwilliam returned for the event, accompanied by his eldest brother, the viscount, as proof of the Matlocks' acceptance of Elizabeth.

The long engagement allowed Darcy and Elizabeth time to get to know each other better and make plans, and the others time to become accustomed to the unexpected union between two people who had moved from dislike to love within a month.

It was established that the couple would return to London immediately after the wedding ceremony. The long wait had been trying for their patience and self-control, so being finally alone was their greatest desire.

Georgiana decided to stay another month in Hertfordshire, allowing her brother and sister privacy while she spent more time with her friends — the Bennet girls. It was also agreed that Lydia, Kitty, and Mary would come to London in April, then spend the summer at Pemberley, where the entire family was expected.

Emotional farewells were taken, and just before they were ready to leave, Mr Bennet approached them, embracing his daughter.

“Please do not be sad, Papa. We shall meet again soon.”

“I am not sad at all, Lizzy. In fact, I am grateful and content to see the improvement in your sisters and to be able to carry on reasonable conversations with them. Miss Darcy has certainly been a great help.”

“My sister has benefited from the friendship just as much,” Darcy replied. “I can hardly believe how much she has grown in self-confidence, and in joyfulness, in the

two and a half months she has spent in Hertfordshire. I have another reason to be grateful to your family, Mr Bennet. Forgive me — our family.”

“You know, Darcy, when you first came to talk to me, I could not understand why others declared you were proud and arrogant. I mean, you probably were, but it did not bother me,” he said, causing Darcy to laugh.

“I found nothing wanting in you,” Mr Bennet continued, “and for a moment, it crossed my mind that you were the sort of man whom I would choose for my dear Lizzy. Of course, considering your situation in life and ours, such a thought was quickly dismissed. I now wonder whether we should not be grateful to that poor wretch Wickham for this turn of events.”

Darcy laughed again. “Elizabeth and I were just talking about that a few days ago. It is probably true, to some degree. That is why I shall leave him in prison for a while, then make arrangements to send him abroad. I am willing to pay for the other two miscreants if they wish to join him.”

“You are a very generous man, Darcy.”

“Not at all, sir. I am quite selfish. I prefer to know they are as far away as possible and to be sure my father would approve of my actions.”

“Very well then. Lizzy, I shall miss you, but I am sure you will be happy. I could not have parted with you to anyone less worthy.”

With that, the farewell was complete, and the Darcys entered their carriage and left. As soon as they were alone, Darcy gently pulled his wife to him, then placed her on his lap, his arms closing around her. He captured her lips in a kiss that demonstrated their yearning and lasted till they were breathless. When they separated, Elizabeth glanced towards the window and gasped in surprise. He smiled.

“I felt the need to see these places again before we left, as they marked the beginning of our happiness,” he explained, gently caressing her face. It was the road along the west side of Oakham Mount. “A little bit farther is the place where you stopped my carriage.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, her fingers touching his jaw. “And here is the place where I began climbing. And there is the place where I came down,” she showed him, amused by his expression. “And here,” she said, brushing her lips gently against the corner of his, “is where I first kissed you.”

“That, I shall never forget, Mrs Darcy, no matter how many other kisses followed afterwards and how many more there are to come.”

Their whispers turned into moans of delight with another passionate kiss, while the carriage rolled along, taking them towards their long-deserved — though unexpected by many — happily ever after.

Pemberley, December 1817

The Darcys' sixth Christmas gathered all their families at Pemberley. The house was almost full, all of the guests carefully accommodated to ensure everyone's comfort and privacy. That was something Mrs Darcy had mastered, as Lady Matlock admitted.

Whether at Pemberley or in their London town house, Elizabeth excelled at her position as Mrs Darcy, earning respect and appreciation with gentleness, determination, and care.

Since the day of their wedding, most people from Darcy's circle had disapproved of Elizabeth, if only because she occupied the place at Mr Darcy's side that was coveted by so many. He did not care; he was perfectly happy with his choice and grateful for her love, disregarding anyone else's opinion.

However, Elizabeth chose prudence, and while she never felt inferior to anyone, nor questioned her place in her husband's arms, she understood she had to prove her worth to those who doubted her. The first person whose good opinion she desired was Lady Matlock, a severe woman with impeccable taste and education and deep affection for Darcy and Georgiana. It had taken months and many meetings until Lady Matlock had taken Elizabeth to her dressmaker and organised a party to welcome her to the family.

The following year, Elizabeth had given birth to their son, Alexander Thomas Bennet Darcy, and one year later, Lady Matlock had introduced her at St James's Palace, then at Almack's, and had helped her to host her own party and take her first steps in

their restrictive society. With Lady Catherine de Bourgh spreading her bitter resentment about town, there were many prejudices Elizabeth had to overcome, but the effort was worth it, not so much for herself but for Alexander and his future brothers and sisters, for Georgiana, and even for her Mr Darcy.

In the privacy of her own home, with her husband, Elizabeth Darcy was no different from Lizzy Bennet. Her spirit — tempered in society — remained undiminished. She became familiar with Pemberley's park on foot until her husband taught her to ride. She swam in Pemberley's lake on hot summer days, wore her more simple gowns, and sat on the grass whenever she felt like it.

And — most importantly — she valued her private time with her husband more than anything else. The servants quickly learnt to never enter a room without knocking and to never enter the master or mistress's suite unless they were rung for. Being Mr Darcy's wife felt like a dream to Elizabeth even six years later, but being Mrs Darcy required much more.

She became well acquainted with every tenant and every family in Lambton, and she made it a habit to visit them regularly, either with her husband or with Georgiana. Mr Darcy was often called the best master and the best landlord — kind, fair, but impressive, even frightening at times. The mistress, Elizabeth Darcy, won their affection, admiration, and loyalty with her bright smile, her natural manners, and her kindness. Her connection with Mrs Gardiner — who still had many relatives in Lambton — was a great help too, especially since the Gardiners visited Pemberley often.

Mrs Darcy had not been seen in public much in the last three months since she had given birth to her daughter. However, everyone was eagerly waiting for Boxing Day, hoping the usual presents would still arrive. A little party was also hosted at the Lambton Inn, organised and paid for by the Darcys for everyone who wished to attend.

“The decorations are exquisite,” Lady Matlock said to Darcy as they were walking towards the dining room.

“They are,” Lord Matlock agreed. “I do not care much about decoration, but I do recognise something that pleases the eye.”

“Elizabeth has developed a flawless taste for elegance and class,” the lady continued. Darcy smiled but said nothing. To him, Elizabeth had always possessed flawless taste in everything — except for that brief period when she had trusted Wickham.

“So you named your daughter Anne Frances?” Lord Matlock enquired.

“Yes. After my mother and Elizabeth’s.”

“I hope she will not inherit Mrs Bennet’s manners,” Lady Matlock said. “Yes, I know she saved your life, and I admit she can be amusing company—”

“I cannot argue with that. But she has some good character traits that I hope our daughter will inherit.”

“Catherine is ill, you know,” Lord Matlock suddenly said. “You should visit her.”

“Yes, Elizabeth told me the same. Does she require my presence?”

“No, but Anne does.”

“As you well know, we have seen Anne several times in the last few years. Elizabeth and I keep up a regular correspondence with her. But Lady Catherine refuses to talk to me — and I have no desire to insist upon it.”

They ceased their conversation as more and more people filled the room: Bingley, Jane, and their two sons; Mary and Kitty with their husbands; Georgiana with her

betroted; Lydia Bennet and her betrothed; the Gardiners and their children; Colonel Fitzwilliam and his wife, who had married three years ago; the viscount with his wife and his sons; and Mr and Mrs Bennet. For the first time, Mr and Mrs Phillips had come too, and despite arriving a week ago, they still had not stopped marvelling at everything around them.

“Mr Bennet is in the library again?” Lord Matlock enquired.

“Very likely,” Darcy answered.

“Upon my word, I have rarely seen a gentleman so easily pleased. He would spend an entire month in the library if he could,” the earl jested.

“That is what he said too. Now please excuse me — I am going to find Elizabeth and fetch my father-in-law. It is dinner time.”

Out in the hall, he encountered Mrs Reynolds, who was supervising the servants. Seeing Darcy, she whispered, “The mistress is in the library.”

He was not surprised. The library was one of their favourite rooms, and they spent quite a lot of time there, reading, debating, or indulging in other sorts of activities that could not even be mentioned.

He opened the door, and his heart melted. Elizabeth was there, not only with her father but also with their two children. Mr Bennet was holding little Anne in his arms while Alexander played on the carpet.

“I know we are a little late. We shall be there in a moment,” Elizabeth said.

“You are not late, my love,” Darcy answered. “You are the mistress of the house. You choose when you come.”

He kissed her hand, and her cheeks coloured briefly.

“You are very kind to say that, but late is late,” she teased him. “I just took a moment to talk to Papa.”

“I told Lizzy her mother is thrilled that you gave your daughter her name too,” Mr Bennet said. “I have heard of little else for weeks. You had no pity for my poor nerves.”

“Papa! We did give Alexander your name, did we not?”

“You did, and I am exceedingly happy about it, but I did not brag about it incessantly. Actually, I did, especially to Sir William, who kept telling me about Charlotte’s three children. But I am sure your mother was worse.”

They amused themselves for a little while, then two maids came to take the children and prepare them for the night. Alexander agreed to leave only after two rounds of kisses from his parents as well as his grandfather.

“I never thought I would like to spend time with a child so much,” Mr Bennet said. “He took the best from both of you.”

“He is very much like Elizabeth, both in appearance and in nature, which makes me exceedingly happy,” Darcy said.

“You are not so bad yourself either, Darcy. Lizzy was telling me about Wickham. I understand you have news of him.”

“I do. Shockingly, it is better than expected. When he left the country, I purchased a small cottage and a piece of land for him — all in my name, so he cannot sell them. Two years ago, he was in a conflict and was wounded — quite seriously. He has not been able to move one of his arms since. Now, reports say he is doing fairly well. He

works his land, has married, and has done nothing illegal for a while.”

“Ah. What about Denny and that Harriet woman? They refused to leave with Wickham, I know.”

“Yes. Sadly, Denny was killed three years ago. Harriet left Mrs Younge’s establishment and was last seen boarding a ship to India two years ago.”

“That silly woman ruined her life, as well as Colonel Forster’s. I heard he suffered a stroke and is kept to his bed,” Mr Bennet said.

“I heard that too. The poor colonel was a good man, though perhaps too trusting.”

“Oh well, you did everything you could to warn him and give those thieves another chance. It is more than most people would have done. Some people do not want to be saved.”

“Come, Papa, let us go for dinner,” Elizabeth suggested, taking Darcy’s arm.

“I must say you two look very happy. Even happier every time I see you,” Mr Bennet declared in earnest.

“We are happy, Papa. All the time, even when we argue,” she answered.

“I can see that... I shall go on ahead,” Mr Bennet said, leaving them behind while Darcy intentionally decreased their pace.

“Are you well, my love? You must be very tired,” he whispered.

“I am a little tired but very well. And I am certainly not so tired as to not wish to dance with you tonight. I look forward to it.”

“So do I, my love. I have found great enjoyment in dancing since I married you, for it allows me to hold you and touch you while we are in public.”

“Mr Darcy! This is quite appalling!” she joked, her cheeks burning.

“I beg your forgiveness for giving you a reason to complain, my love. Apparently, dancing does turn me into a savage at times.”

She laughed discreetly, then she looked about to ensure she would not be heard before she answered, her lips close to his ear.

“You are a savage at times, Mr Darcy, but not when you dance, not in public, and I certainly have no reason to complain,” she replied boldly.

Then she took her husband’s arm, and they entered the dining room together, which was already full of people waiting for them. Darcy helped his wife sit at one end of the table, and he went to the opposite end, watching her from afar with love, admiration, and gratitude. They were a little late, but she was the mistress and well worth waiting for.