



Painted with Love

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Category: Historical

Description: After visiting her friend Charlotte Collins, Elizabeth leaves Kent carrying the distressing recollection of Mr Darcy's marriage proposal. The letter he gave her after her harsh refusal has changed her opinion of the man and taught her how wrong she was in judging both Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham.

On her way back to Longbourn, Elizabeth spends a few days in London, reunited with Jane and the Gardiners.

A twist of fate brings her to a pawnbroker's window, where she recognises a few objects related to Miss Darcy, reminding her of Mr Wickham's betrayal and deceptions.

Despite the conflict that still exists between them and her certainty that Mr Darcy would never want to see her again, Elizabeth decides to inform him of her discovery, offering him the opportunity to save his sister's reputation.

Contrary to her expectations, Elizabeth's reunion with Mr Darcy shows her a less arrogant and more amiable gentleman, grateful to her and willing to take her past reproaches to heart. Furthermore, Mr Darcy does not come alone but brings Mr Bingley, who is equally amazed and happy to hear that Jane is in London.

The barriers towards a happily ever after seem to fall one by one, but there are still strong objections they have to overcome, and there is still Mr Wickham, seeking revenge.

Come and join Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, as well as Jane and Mr Bingley, in their search for happiness.

Painted with Love is a low angst, sweet, clean, and romantic Regency novella of approximately 20,000 words, appropriate for readers of all ages.

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“London is beautiful in the spring,” Elizabeth said to her aunt, Mrs Madeleine Gardiner. “Hyde Park was beyond words. The trees, the flowers, the lake... We should return when Jane and the children recover from their colds.”

“We certainly shall. And we shall bring your uncle too. I do not remember all four children and their father being ill at the same time before. Not to mention Jane. I know it is merely a cold, but I have been so worried that I have barely slept in the last week. Thank God they are much better now. Their fevers have gone, and the coughing has reduced considerably.”

“I am here to help you, Aunt. I feel guilty that I forced you to join me on this walk. I know you are eager to be home.”

“Dearest, to be honest, I have very much enjoyed being out for a little while. And since your uncle asked me to take those papers to his partner, we could not miss the opportunity for a little exercise. Jane, my husband, and the servants should be able to manage the children for a few hours.”

“Nevertheless, we should return home, but I hope for another walk soon. I love Hyde Park in the spring.”

“You love both London and the countryside in any season,” Mrs Gardiner replied. “And you love long walks through a park just as much as you love theatre and opera or reading a good book.”

“True.” Elizabeth laughed. “My favourite activity certainly depends on my mood.”

“I am glad to see you as lively as ever, Lizzy. I was a little worried when you returned from Kent. Your spirits seemed rather low and your disposition quite poor.”

“I am truly sorry for worrying you, Aunt. I was just a little tired, perhaps.” Elizabeth averted her eyes as she spoke.

She rarely — if ever — lied to her aunt, but now, the truth could not be revealed, not even to her.

How could she dare tell anyone that Mr Darcy — of all people — had proposed to her and she had rejected him, throwing at him horrible accusations, which had proved to be unjust?

How could she find the courage to admit to anyone what a simpleton she had been to trust Mr Wickham implicitly and to believe all his assertions without requesting evidence?

Never would Elizabeth have imagined that her visit to her friend Charlotte Collins — née Lucas — would bring her into close company with Mr Darcy.

Even more — or less — she would have never imagined that Mr Darcy might admire her and would propose to her.

She had always assumed he only looked at her to find fault.

Apparently, she had been just as wrong about him as she had been about Mr Wickham.

To receive a marriage proposal from such a man as Mr Darcy was unbelievable. To refuse such a man — and to refuse him for the wrong reasons — was quite inconceivable.

Her feelings for Mr Darcy would never allow her to even consider marrying him, despite his fortune and situation in life. Still, knowing he had loved her secretly for so long was as flattering as it was distressing, despite the dreadful manner of his address.

But then he had handed her a letter with detailed explanations of his actions, and her distress had turned into remorse and guilt. Three weeks had passed since that day, and while she did not regret refusing him, she felt terrible for accusing him of misdeeds she now knew he had not committed.

The suffering Mr Wickham had caused Miss Darcy — and through her Mr Darcy — made Elizabeth appalled and angry.

That wretched man had no morals, no shame, yet she had given credit to his tales of woe.

How could she ever forgive herself for such foolishness?

As for Mr Darcy, he certainly would never forgive her, and Elizabeth could not blame him for that.

“I am glad to see Jane in better spirits,” Elizabeth said. “I was truly worried for her, especially after she told me about the visit from the dreadful Bingley sisters. Hopefully, she will see what horrible characters those two have and will not try to find excuses for their insolence.”

“Jane seems to be better. But she has been deeply disappointed to not have seen Mr Bingley in four months. Apparently, she and everyone else assumed more than there was and read too much in his amiable manners. He is probably the sort of man who likes everybody but nobody in particular.”

“An indecisive, shallow man is not attractive at all,” Elizabeth said.

“Speaking of attractive men, do you have any news about Mr Wickham? I wonder whether he is engaged to that young woman you said he was pursuing a few months ago.”

“I have no news of Mr Wickham nor any interest in hearing any about him. I have had time to give it proper consideration, and I fear I was imprudent in trusting the man so readily and so implicitly. Several days after I met him, he shared the story of his misfortunes, and I believed it without asking for evidence. This certainly does not speak well of my wisdom and judgment.”

“Well, well! What a surprise and a pleasure to hear you say so, Lizzy. I agree with you, and I hope you will use your wit and your common sense in future. No gentleman is so eager to share his woes with strangers, and if he does, his words must be pondered carefully. But he was handsome and especially charming, I admit.”

“His charming manners induce people to see him in a more favourable light than perhaps he deserves.”

“Excellent point. You know, I was tempted to write to my cousins in Lambton and ask what they knew about Mr Wickham. I refrained from doing so, though, as I feared you might be upset.”

“Upset? Not at all. In truth, I am rather curious.”

“Really? Then I shall do it — perhaps even today. Let us see what we can find out from a reliable and impartial source.”

They returned to the carriage and continued their journey to visit Mr Gardiner’s partner, Mr Gill.

Mr Gill had been the first to fall ill with a bad cold, which he had passed on to Mr

Gardiner, who had then been kept from his business for more than a week.

The men had been exchanging daily letters, and Mr Gill often sent papers that needing signing and returning.

On that particular day, Mrs Gardiner had offered to personally deliver the signed pages from her husband to Mr Gill.

The office they shared was close to Gracechurch Street, but Mrs Gardiner had taken the opportunity for a longer ride in the company of her favourite niece, Elizabeth.

Now, they were on their way to deliver the papers, then return home.

The carriage waited on a corner while Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner walked along a street of shops towards the office.

Elizabeth glanced at the windows they passed, pausing for a moment in front of the book shop but only glancing absently at the dresses, bonnets, gloves, and reticules in other establishments.

“One day, when we have more time, we should come and give proper consideration to all these lovely shops. I am sure we would find something to purchase,” Mrs Gardiner said.

Elizabeth nodded, and then suddenly her attention was drawn to a window.

She stopped and leant in closer for a better look, narrowing her eyes.

Through a few old books, some watches and other items of jewellery, a few paintings, and other objects, she was shocked to see a miniature portrait of someone she knew only too well. Could it be? How was it possible?

Elizabeth looked at the shop's name and noticed it was a pawnbroker's. She looked closer at the portrait, drawing Mrs Gardiner's attention.

"What is it, Lizzy?" Soon enough, the lady recognised it herself and said with equal puzzlement, "That looks very much like Mr Wickham, does it not?"

"It does. The likeness is so strong that we cannot be mistaken. That is certainly Mr Wickham. What could his portrait be doing here?"

"Would you like to enter and enquire?"

"Actually, I would, Aunt, if it is not too much trouble for you."

"Not at all, my dear. In fact, I am curious too."

They entered, and a man of middle age welcomed them.

"How may I help you, ladies?"

"Sir, actually my husband has a business at the end of this street. You may know him — Mr Gardiner. His partner is a Mr Gill. And this is my niece, Miss Bennet."

"Of course I know them. How lovely to meet you, Mrs Gardiner. I am Mr Backer. I own this shop."

"The pleasure is mine, sir. I have a question, if we are allowed to ask. There is a portrait in the window — a miniature. That one," she pointed out.

"Yes..."

"We happen to know that gentleman, and we wondered why his portrait might be

there. If you would not mind telling us.”

Mr Backer immediately frowned.

“You know him? How fortunate! If so, please be so kind as to tell him that if he does not come and pay for his items, I shall sell them. He said he would return in a fortnight, but that was two months ago. He insisted that the objects were very valuable to him, but he needed some urgent funds. He begged me to keep them until he returned, but I have not heard from him since. This is not how I run my business.”

“So, the gentleman in the picture left it here?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes. His name is George Wickham, is it not? He said he is an officer.”

“Yes, that is his name,” Elizabeth confirmed.

“He did not leave only the picture. He left a pocket watch, which is a classic piece of craftsmanship and solid gold. It was kept in a velvet-lined box containing several miniatures. He asked me to take the entire box, to keep it safe until he returned.”

“Mr Backer, may I...I know is an impertinence on my part and probably quite unusual, but may I look more closely at the watch and at the portraits?” Elizabeth asked.

“Miss, usually, I would not allow a customer to touch an object, unless he shows serious interest in buying it. But since you are Mr Gardiner’s niece, I shall make an exception. I trust you will not steal the watch and disappear, will you?” The man smiled.

“No, of course not!”

“I was only joking, Miss. Besides, since you said you know the man, I admit I hope for your assistance in persuading him come back for his belongings. I have already lost a lot of money by holding them for so long without compensation. The watch is an exceptional piece, and I could sell it easily if not for that inscription. I should have it removed first, but that would involve further cost. I deliberately placed his portraits in the window, hoping he or some acquaintance would see them and come to discuss the matter.”

“It turned out your plan worked, then. We promise to inform Mr Wickham of your request,” Mrs Gardiner said.

Mr Backer took the box, the watch, and three paintings — all of the same face — from the window, placing them on the counter, and Elizabeth looked at them, then touched them gently.

She studied the miniatures one by one, and she felt a sharp pain in her chest when she read the same dedication on the back of each of them.

‘Painted with love for my beloved George. GD.’

The miniatures were also dated, in June and July of the previous year.

With her heart pounding, Elizabeth picked up the watch and opened it. Inside was a small miniature of a pretty young lady, and the inscription read,

‘From G to G, with all my love’.

Elizabeth’s fingers trembled, and she put down the watch. The chain made a strange sound as it fell onto the counter.

“Thank you, Mr Backer. I appreciate your graciousness. I must ask for one further

favour, one that will certainly cover all your expenses and quite possibly more,” Elizabeth said, while Mrs Gardiner looked at her, puzzled.

“I am a man of business, Miss Bennet. My purpose is to never lose money and to make a little bit of profit, if possible. You may ask me anything if this purpose is served.”

“Please put the objects back in the box, away from curious eyes, and please store it for me for two or three more days, and I promise you will be pleased with the result. If Mr Wickham does not return before then, I know exactly who would be interested in paying for these items — with a generous reward for your patience.”

The man gazed at Elizabeth with a frown between his eyebrows, then looked at Mrs Gardiner.

“Are you certain, Miss?”

“Absolutely certain, sir. This might be one of the best deals your business has made. You may find me in Mr Gardiner’s house if you need further details, which I doubt.

Someone will come to discuss the box and will tell you he was sent by Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

I am sure he will be as eager as you to settle this matter to the satisfaction of you both. ”

The man still appeared doubtful, and even Mrs Gardiner looked bewildered.

“Are you sure, Miss? Ma’am?” he repeated, addressing them both.

“I am. If something goes wrong, at the very least I shall pay you for the trouble of

holding the objects for three more days. Whatever fee you require, I shall pay it.”

Elizabeth could see her aunt’s confusion, but the lady supported her, nevertheless.

“I give you my word, Mr Backer. You may come with us to Mr Gill now if you need additional assurance.”

“That will not be necessary, Mrs Gardiner. There, I shall put everything in the box and wait.” He did so, then closed it and placed it inside a drawer, locking it.

“Thank you, sir. I promise your kindness will be rewarded,” Elizabeth said. Then together with her aunt, she quit the shop.

They walked on in silence for a brief while, then Mrs Gardiner turned to her.

“Lizzy, what was all that about? As much as I trust you, I shall require a detailed explanation, and so will your uncle since we used his name.”

“I shall gladly provide one. Besides, I cannot accomplish anything without Uncle’s help.”

“Good. Then let us deliver the papers and return home.”

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In the parlour, Mr and Mrs Gardiner were sitting together on the sofa, waiting. The gentleman was still coughing from time to time, attempting to fight the illness with a glass of brandy.

“As I have already told you, I met Mr Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam in Kent. During my stay, I had the chance to speak to Mr Darcy privately a few times. I learnt that Mr Wickham’s stories were all falsehoods and that he actually received a significant sum of money, at his request, in exchange for the living, which he stated he had no interest in.

I also learnt that Mr Wickham made a habit of polluting Mr Darcy’s name.

I was offered proof of all this, but I do not have the authority to share it. ”

“We do not need proof, Lizzy. And I confess I am not surprised — I never gave Mr Wickham too much credit,” Mr Gardiner said.

“However, now I am even more curious why you would want to protect his property and why you would put my name and my honour at stake for his debts,” Mr Gardiner said, his tone severe.

“I did not do it for Mr Wickham, Uncle. I have reason to suspect that those objects, even though they were in Mr Wickham’s possession, actually belong to the Darcys.

I would like to warn Mr Darcy about their existence and offer him the chance to buy them back before they fall into greedy and indiscreet hands. ”

“Oh...” Mrs Gardiner said. “This is quite shocking...and worrisome.”

“Indeed, Aunt.”

“But are you sure, Lizzy? Could it be a coincidence? It would be silly to disturb Mr Darcy — a gentleman with whom I am not even acquainted — on an assumption.”

“I am sure, Uncle. And I am also sure that, even if I am wrong, Mr Darcy would appreciate being informed and having the chance to see for himself and protect his family from great danger. After all, there is no doubt that the man is Mr Wickham!”

“That, I can testify to,” Mrs Gardiner added. “The identity of the man in the portraits is beyond doubt.”

“Very well. So how do you want to proceed?” Mr Gardiner asked.

“I shall write to Mr Darcy, enclosing a letter from you. But I do not know his address. We shall need a loyal servant to look for his house and deliver it to him — nobody else but him in person! Do you think we can do that?”

“During my visit to Miss Bingley, I heard Mr Darcy lives somewhere on Park Lane. His house should be easy enough to find,” Mrs Gardiner said.

“I shall send Gilroy. He is loyal, clever, and trustworthy. Though, on second thoughts, I might go myself. I am not so ill as to not be able to sit in a carriage. If the matter is as delicate as Lizzy says, and if it involves a man like Mr Darcy, I would not risk any indiscretion.”

“But are you sure you feel well enough?” Mrs Gardiner asked.

“My dear, there are men who are fighting in the war with colds,” Mr Gardiner

answered, attempting a smile. “Lizzy, make haste to write your letter. If it is so delicate and urgent, I shall deliver it today.”

With that, Mr and Mrs Gardiner went to their chambers, and Elizabeth began to write, her fingers trembling, her heart pounding, struggling to find the right words.

The notion that she was writing to Mr Darcy — the man whom she had abominably offended with false accusations, the man who had proposed marriage to her and she had harshly refused — was disconcerting.

He might be appalled and enraged by her audacity.

But the reason behind the letter was a serious one and justified any breach of decorum.

He may or may not know that his sister had given Mr Wickham a watch.

He may or may not know that his sister had painted the man’s portrait, but it was unlikely that he knew his sisters’ secrets were currently exposed to public scrutiny.

Mr Darcy might be angry with Elizabeth for refusing to marry him, but he would want to protect his sister’s reputation.

Mr Darcy,

I am writing this letter with the approval of my uncle and aunt, which you will have seen from the enclosed note and might already have learnt from my uncle himself, if he is the one who delivered it to you.

I shall be as concise as I can be. Today, by extraordinary coincidence, I passed a pawnbroker’s near Gracechurch Street and saw in the window a portrait of Mr

Wickham. I asked for details and discovered that the portrait had been drawn last July and signed GD.

There was also a pocket watch of great value, left at the shop by Mr Wickham himself in exchange for cash. Inside the watch, there is a lady's portrait and a personal and romantic inscription.

I was immediately worried for reasons you may guess, and I asked the shop owner to keep the objects safe and hidden for a few more days.

If you consider it worth the effort, you may see the objects yourself and decide how to proceed.

I enclose the exact direction — ask for Mr Backer, and tell him you were sent by Elizabeth Bennet.

Please rest assured that, although I trust my uncle and aunt implicitly, I have not disclosed to anyone details that must be kept secret.

I hope this strange situation will have a positive resolution.

Sincerely,

E. Bennet

She re-read the letter, then sealed it. A few minutes later, Mr Gardiner returned, and she handed it to him, grateful to her relatives for not requesting to read it.

As soon as Mr Gardiner left the house, instead of feeling calmer, Elizabeth's distress only increased. What would Mr Darcy say? What would he think? What would he do?

Mrs Gardiner, Jane, and the children were all around her, but Elizabeth could not keep her attention on the conversation, nor engage in her young cousins' play.

She counted the minutes, trying to imagine how long it would take for her uncle to travel from Gracechurch Street to Park Lane and back, how Mr Gardiner would be received — what if Mr Darcy refused to even see him?

— and how long the conversation might last.

The time passed painfully slowly, and it seemed hours before they heard the sound of the carriage returning. Nervous, she hurried to the door and opened it. The first thing she noticed was her uncle's pale countenance.

“Let us go to the library, Lizzy. We have quite a few things to discuss.”

He briefly greeted his family and said to Jane, “My dear, I hope you do not mind if I steal your aunt and Lizzy for a few minutes. Can you please watch the children? We shall explain to you later. Do not worry.”

Jane nodded, a worried frown creasing her brow, while the three of them entered Mr Gardiner's study and closed the door behind them.

“Well?” Mrs Gardiner asked impatiently. “My dear, you look unwell. I shall prepare you some medicine immediately.”

“Madeleine, wait a moment. I promise no medicine is needed. Briefly — Lizzy was right. Mr Darcy seemed exceedingly interested in my story and thanked me countless times for informing him.”

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. “So you spoke to him.”

“Yes. He was astounded when I revealed my identity and dumbfounded when I handed him your letter. He was reluctant to take it, but after reading it, his distress was apparent.”

“So, he said he will visit Mr Backer?”

“Actually, he asked me to travel there immediately with him and introduce him. I left him at the shop.”

“Oh...” Elizabeth said, quite distressed herself.

“I have to tell you, Lizzy, your supposition was apparently accurate. Mr Darcy acted as if you had saved his life, or at the very least his fortune,” Mr Gardiner joked. Elizabeth forced a smile, though she knew her uncle might not have been far from the truth.

“By the bye, Mr Darcy asked my permission to write you a letter to thank you, Lizzy. I granted it. I hope you do not mind.”

“No...of course not,” she answered, bewildered. It was simply a gesture of politeness, but she felt disconcerted at the thought of another letter from him.

“Now, let us prepare for dinner,” Mrs Gardiner suggested. “And you, sir, whether you think you need it or not, you will take your medicine.”

“I cannot argue with you, madam. But I must have a brandy too, just to increase my appetite.”

Elizabeth returned to her sister and cousins, still absent-minded. The situation was certainly of great importance since Mr Darcy had attended to it so urgently. Now that she had the confirmation, she wondered about the circumstances that had brought the

watch and the portraits to the pawnbroker's.

Miss Darcy, at the age of fifteen, must have been truly in love with that despicable man. Or at least she had fancied herself to be, maybe confusing childhood affection with romantic feelings.

Elizabeth knew a little of what had happened from Mr Darcy, but there were still many unknown details.

Was the watch purchased for Mr Wickham or a family heirloom?

The inscription on the back must have been made by a skilful hand — was there such a man in Ramsgate?

Had Miss Darcy been so bold as to request such an intimate inscription herself?

Had her dissolute companion, Mrs Younge, been involved?

There were so many questions without an answer, and it was such a distressing situation!

A twist of fate had placed her in front of that window and drawn her attention to that portrait, and those coincidences might have made a difference to a young girl's reputation.

The more she thought of Mr Wickham, the angrier she became with herself for falling so easily into that scoundrel's trap.

At dinner, Mrs Gardiner offered Jane a brief explanation for their private meeting involving their uncle's business, and Jane did not request any further details.

That night, Elizabeth slept little and poorly.

In truth, she had hardly had one restful night since the day of Mr Darcy's proposal, and that night was even worse.

When she finally fell asleep, strange and disturbing dreams ruined her rest; she woke up several times and fell asleep again with great difficulty.

In the end, she admitted that what troubled her the most was the question of whether she would see Mr Darcy again.

Would he call to thank her and her uncle?

It was unlikely but not impossible, and she could not decide whether she wished to see him.

What was she to say to him? The first thought that crossed her mind was to ask him about Mr Bingley.

Had Mr Darcy accepted that he was wrong in considering Jane indifferent to his friend? Could he have taken the blame? Was Mr Bingley even interested in Jane any longer? Had he ever been, or was it only a shallow admiration that had disappeared after a few weeks?

With such musings, time passed, and Elizabeth welcomed the morning. She helped her aunt prepare the children for the day, her mind still engaged with only one subject.

At breakfast, Mr Gardiner declared he felt well enough to return to his office, then asked the ladies about their plans for the day.

They had barely finished eating when a servant informed them a letter had arrived for Elizabeth. She startled, glanced at her uncle and aunt, and, after Mr Gardiner nodded, the servant handed it to her.

“Would you mind if I read it in my chamber?” Elizabeth asked, and her uncle nodded again.

With great anxiety — completely unjustified for what she knew to be a simple polite note of thanks, she opened it. Immediately recognising the handwriting — she had read his first letter so many times that she knew it by heart — her eyes ran over the neat lines.

Miss Bennet,

There are no words to thank you for your considerate gesture, nor to explain how significant it was for me and my sister.

Your assumption was correct, and it certainly saved my sister’s reputation. I am as grateful to you as I am ashamed of myself for all my prior wrong assumptions that hurt your own sister.

As for the matter itself, it has now been resolved, and I trust Mr Backer was as pleased with the final resolution as I am.

I would like to call on your uncle and aunt, to thank them in person, but I shall only do so if this is agreeable to you. My servant will wait for a simple yes or no from you. I shall understand if my visit would make you uncomfortable. If this is the case, I shall visit Mr Gardiner at his office.

I shall take this opportunity to mention that Bingley will finally return to London at the end of this week.

He has spent an entire month at a friend's estate, and I have had no chance to speak to him since I returned from Kent.

There are many things I intend to tell him, and I shall certainly do so at the first opportunity.

Please accept my deepest gratitude for your help in my sister's situation, as well as my sincere apologies for my interference in your own sister's affairs and all my past wrongs.

F Darcy.

With unsteady hands, Elizabeth folded the letter and put it into her pocket. The other letter she still kept in her reticule, safe from curious eyes.

She returned to her family and said, "Mr Darcy has requested permission to call on you, Uncle. He says he wishes to thank you and my aunt."

"Mr Darcy? Call here?" Mrs Gardiner repeated with apparent nervousness.

"Only if you agree, of course," Elizabeth replied.

"Of course we agree. But Mr Darcy, the master of Pemberley, to call at my house is certainly not something I expected."

"We would be honoured to receive him, of course. Should I write back to him?" Mr Gardiner enquired.

"No," Elizabeth said, blushing. "He said a simple yes or no answer, conveyed through his servant, would be enough."

“Then I shall speak to the servant immediately,” Mr Gardiner said, rising.

Elizabeth was in such a tumult of feelings that she could not define. The short letter contained so much significant information — more than she could have hoped for.

Mr Darcy had accepted his past errors and was ready to make amends for them.

And he had clearly stated that he had intended to speak to Mr Bingley since he returned from Kent, undoubtedly about Jane.

Could she hope for such a positive turn of events?

Should she tell Jane? Or perhaps she should wait and see whether Mr Bingley would act on Mr Darcy’s confession.

She was eager to read the letter again, but it was not the time for it yet as her cousins requested her attention, and even Jane looked curious and thoughtful. And first of all, she had to calm herself, as her heart was pounding so hard that she imagined everybody must be able to hear it.

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Before Mr Gardiner left for his office, Elizabeth felt she owed her relatives at least partial honesty, since they had been so supportive. Therefore, she related to Jane, as well as her uncle and aunt, more details about the objects in the pawnbroker's shop.

“I had reason to believe that watch belonged to the Darcy family and that Mr Wickham was not its true owner. That is why I wrote Mr Darcy a note and Uncle Edward delivered it. Mr Darcy confirmed my assumption was correct.”

“But Lizzy, surely Mr Wickham did not steal the watch!” Jane replied, clearly appalled.

“I am not sure. But I am quite certain that Mr Wickham is not the sort of man we believed him to be. In fact, I was wrong in judging his character. You, my dear Jane, counselled me to be more prudent in trusting him. Well, you were right, and I was wrong.”

“I must admit that your aunt and I were a little worried when we visited Longbourn at Christmas. You seemed quite infatuated with Mr Wickham. We only hoped you would be wise enough not to attach yourself to a man with so little means of providing you with a comfortable life,” Mr Gardiner said.

“I do not believe I was infatuated, Uncle. I was certainly not in love with him, since the news about him courting Mary King hardly affected me at all. But I found him charming, and I enjoyed his company. I was flattered to be the lady he seemed to prefer. Since he appeared to admire me, and Mr Darcy always criticised me and others, I readily assumed the flatterer was a better man than the critic. It was my vanity and prejudice that turned me into a laughable simpleton.”

“But Lizzy, may I ask, what did Mr Wickham do that was so wrong?” Mrs Gardiner asked.

“He has probably done many things, but I only know of a few, which involve him lying about Mr Darcy and betraying his godfather’s affection.”

Choosing her words carefully, Elizabeth revealed the financial transactions between Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham, while the others listened in amazement.

“Poor Mr Darcy!” Jane exclaimed. “To be so betrayed by his father’s godson. What a disappointment. And poor Mr Wickham! He has such an appearance of goodness but not enough strength of character to act in an honourable way. Such behaviour cannot lead to anything good.”

“I cannot pity Mr Wickham, Jane,” Elizabeth replied.

“He was offered all the support and means to live as a gentleman, but he willingly chose deception, depravity, and betrayal instead. He must live with the consequences of his choices. And I must live with the guilt of knowing what a simpleton I have been and how easily fooled by a scoundrel.”

“Do not be so hard on yourself, Lizzy. How could you have known? I am glad that, in the end, you realised the truth,” Mr Gardiner said.

“But to me, it was not a surprise. I spoke to your father about it at Christmas, and we both agreed that a man like Mr Darcy would not refuse to grant his father’s dying wish without good reason.

Besides, a man complaining about his misfortunes to a woman is nothing but pitiful to other men. ”

“That is precisely what I meant. You all guessed the truth — only I was a fool,” Elizabeth concluded. “At least I have now done something good to remedy my wrong by informing Mr Darcy about the items at the pawnbroker’s.”

“If that watch was stolen, Mr Darcy could easily throw Wickham in prison, and he may even face the noose,” Mr Gardiner said. “But if he did steal it, could he have been such an arrogant fool as to pawn it?”

“Perhaps he lacks wit as well as honour,” Mrs Gardiner added.

“Or is in desperate need of funds,” Mr Gardiner suggested. “Either way, Mr Darcy looked shocked and then enraged. I do not envy Mr Wickham at their next meeting. Now I must leave you, ladies. I shall see you again later.”

After Mr Gardiner left, Mrs Gardiner attended to her children, and the sisters continued the conversation.

“Lizzy, I was wondering... When you saw Mr Darcy in Kent...did he happen to mention Mr Bingley? I only wish to know whether he is in good health.”

“I was about to speak of this. Mr Bingley has been out of town visiting a friend for more than a month. Mr Darcy said he expects him to return at the end of this week.”

“Oh... I see...”

“Jane, I know nothing of Mr Bingley’s intentions, but I have reason to believe he was not aware of your presence in town. Mr Darcy said he would inform him as soon as he sees him.”

“What do you mean, Lizzy?” Jane asked, pale and distracted. “I was in his house. I visited his sisters. They told me he knew of my visit but was busy with other

engagements.”

“Yes, yes, I remember. They suggested he was busy with Miss Darcy, which I can tell you without a doubt was a cruel falsehood. If I tell Mr Darcy what sort of lies Miss Bingley is spreading about his sister, he might be just as angry with her as he is with Mr Wickham. That lady surely deserves such a confrontation!”

“Please do not say anything, Lizzy. Let them be. But are you sure? That Mr Bingley did not know, I mean?”

“That is what Mr Darcy told me. Mr Darcy might have many faults, but he is not a liar, I am certain. He had no reason to deceive me.”

“Dear Lizzy, I cannot believe it. All this time, I thought he knew I was in London but had no wish to see me again. Could it be true?”

“Dearest, it pains me to see your grief, and I do not want you to raise your hopes and witness your disappointment. We shall have our answer soon. Mr Darcy will tell his friend about your presence. What will happen next depends on Mr Bingley. Then you will know, beyond any doubt.”

“You are right, of course, Lizzy. I do not expect anything from him. But we were good friends, and I struggled to understand what I did that was so wrong as to prevent him from calling.”

“At least you know that he is not guilty of that. For the rest, we shall see. Now, come, let us find our aunt.”

Elizabeth expected that Mr Darcy might call on them — unless he changed his mind

— in the next few days. Secretly, she hoped Mr Bingley would join him, but she did not mention it to Jane.

Therefore, she was utterly bewildered when Mr Gardiner returned home a few hours later in the company of Mr Darcy himself. So affected was she by the gentleman's sudden appearance that Elizabeth needed a moment to steady herself.

“My dear, look who was so kind as to visit me at my office and accompany me home! I can hardly believe it! Allow me the privilege of introducing Mr Darcy to you,” Mr Gardiner said.

Elizabeth noticed that her aunt and her sister were also anxious, though for different reasons.

Mrs Gardiner — always calm and composed — looked exceedingly nervous.

“Mr Darcy, this is my wife, Mrs Madeleine Gardiner. You already know my nieces.”

The guest bowed elegantly. “Mrs Gardiner, it is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, I am delighted to see you again,” he said in a friendly voice. Elizabeth noticed he was not perfectly composed when their eyes met briefly.

“Mr Darcy, I am truly honoured to have you in my home,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I am not sure whether my husband mentioned it, but I grew up in Lambton, only five miles from Pemberley, and I have always held your family in the highest esteem.”

“In Lambton? I did not know! What a wonderful coincidence, Mrs Gardiner,” he said, finally sitting down.

“Truly wonderful. Till this day, Pemberley is still the most beautiful place I have ever

seen.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I believe the same, but of course, I am biased. Did you leave Lambton long ago?”

“About ten years ago. My father owned a shop in the town, and when he moved his business to London, we all came with him.”

“I see. If you happen to visit Lambton, please know you are welcome to visit Pemberley too.”

“That is very generous and kind of you, Mr Darcy, thank you.”

“Not at all. It would be my pleasure to host you,” he said politely.

Then he paused a moment and finally turned towards Elizabeth.

“Miss Elizabeth, I cannot go further without thanking you for your keen observation and wise decision. Recovering the watch was of great importance to me and my family.”

“You have already thanked me, Mr Darcy. I assure you there is no need for more. I am glad I could be of some help. It was the least I could do to compensate for my foolishness in trusting Mr Wickham.”

“It was my fault that I did not expose Wickham as he deserved and allowed him to deceive more honourable people. This is another error I shall immediately correct.”

“Mr Darcy, I hope you do not mind — I told my sister and my uncle and aunt about your financial dealings with Mr Wickham. About how he demanded compensation for the living and then continued to ask for more.”

“Oh...no, of course, I do not mind.”

“Apparently, Mr Wickham’s deceptive character was no surprise to my uncle or aunt. I was the only fool,” Elizabeth continued.

“Stop blaming yourself, Lizzy,” Mr Gardiner said. “The whole of Meryton was charmed by that man, so you may take some comfort in knowing you were not alone in your foolishness.”

Elizabeth laughed nervously. “That is comfort indeed. I am sure Papa will mock me on this subject for a few months at least.”

“You may depend on that,” Mr Gardiner replied with a laugh. Mr Darcy seemed slightly confused by their teasing exchange.

Mrs Gardiner ordered refreshments, while Mr Darcy continued, “Since you so generously helped me, I owe you a few more details. That watch belonged to my grandfather. It was one of only a limited number of similar pieces made in England. The young woman whose portrait is inside the watch is not my sister but my grandmother. Her name was Georgina, and my grandfather’s name was George, the same as my father. ”

“Oh dear,” Elizabeth whispered. That was certainly an unexpected turn of events.

“The watch was in my sister’s possession last summer, in Ramsgate.

She is very fond of a few family heirlooms, and she carries them with her.

They are never taken out in public, of course, but held privately, and nobody outside the family knows about them.

I have told her many times that it is not wise and that travelling with such valuables could expose her to danger, but they are hers, after all, and I cannot forbid her.

She discovered the watch was missing last August, but she did not mention it to me until yesterday, when I asked about it. ”

As he spoke, he looked troubled, struggling for words and hardly meeting their eyes. Elizabeth could not help but wonder whether the story was true or simply an attempt to disguise the truth and protect his sister’s reputation.

“This is shocking! It is theft, nothing less. Such a thief belongs in prison,” Mr Gardiner said.

“He does. I shall take care of that. The watch’s monetary value is high, but much more important is its sentimental value. It is irreplaceable.”

“I apologise for my bold question,” Mrs Gardiner interjected, “but I wonder how Mr Wickham was able to steal the watch from your sister? He declared he had not seen you or her in several years.”

The enquiry clearly took Mr Darcy by surprise.

Disconcerted, he paused for a moment, looked at Elizabeth, then said, “Wickham lies with every breath. He saw my sister last summer in Ramsgate. My sister’s companion, Mrs Younge, was seemingly a close friend of Wickham’s, and their acquaintance continued even after I forbade Wickham from having anything to do with my family.

As soon as I found out, I dismissed her, but she had caused enough damage already.

I have no proof yet, but Mrs Younge must have been involved in the theft. ”

“What a terrible story! To be surrounded by people you cannot trust and betrayed by those you confided in. If they are at fault, they certainly deserve harsh punishment!” Mrs Gardiner said.

“I blame myself for being too forgiving for too long. I shall certainly not persist in this mistake. Our good fortune was Miss Elizabeth’s perceptiveness.”

“We are grateful for this positive outcome,” Mr Gardiner concluded. “Even more so as it offered us the opportunity to finally make your acquaintance, Mr Darcy, since we have heard so much about you.”

“Not too many good things, I assume, and for sound reasons,” he replied, attempting a smile that puzzled Elizabeth.

“No, not many good things,” Mr Gardiner admitted, half in jest. “But we have just begun to form our own opinion, which is quite favourable, Mr Darcy.”

“I am pleased to hear that, sir,” Mr Darcy said, casting a quick look at Elizabeth.

The rest of the visit passed in pleasant conversation, and in a little over half an hour, Mr Darcy took his leave.

“If I am not asking too much, could I call again in a few days?” their guest enquired.

“It would be a great pleasure and honour, Mr Darcy,” Mr Gardiner said.

“Excellent. I might bring a friend next time if you do not mind,” the gentleman added, glancing at Elizabeth again.

“Not at all, Mr Darcy. Any friend of yours is welcome in our home,” Mrs Gardiner assured him.

He thanked them again, bowed, and left, while the family debated his visit until dinner time.

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Darcy sipped from his drink, looking at the sealed letter. He had been hesitant to write it, but in the end, he had steeled his resolve. It needed to be sent.

He was still bewildered by everything that had occurred in the last three days.

He had left Kent heavy-hearted, angry, resentful, and amazed that he had impulsively proposed to Elizabeth Bennet, and shocked that she had rejected him with a harshness that nobody had ever spoken to him with before.

She had castigated him for separating Bingley from Jane Bennet and scolded him for his cruelty to Wickham.

He had explained his side of the story in the letter he had given her the following day, but as difficult as it was to accept, he had to admit that some of her accusations were just.

What bothered him the most were his actions in regard to Bingley.

He had convinced his friend that Miss Bennet did not return his affection, then agreed with Bingley's sisters to conceal her presence in London.

Even if Jane Bennet had been the worst sort of woman from the worst sort of family, and even though he believed he had acted in his friend's best interest, lying to Bingley was reprehensible, and plotting with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst was embarrassing.

In an attempt to make amends, Darcy had decided to reveal the truth to his friend as

soon as he arrived in town, but Bingley's absence had delayed the confession.

As clear and painful as his memories were, Darcy had not expected to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet again, or at least not so soon. He had imagined that, if it had happened, such an encounter would have surely been by mere coincidence and awkward for both of them.

But before Bingley's return, that coincidence had taken place in a way Darcy could never have imagined.

A gentleman had knocked on his door, introducing himself as Elizabeth's uncle and delivering a letter from her.

Darcy had opened it hesitantly, fearfully, only to find a piece of paper that would save him from great distress.

He still wondered how the watch had ended up in Wickham's hands.

The miniatures had been painted by Georgiana; of that, there was no doubt, and she had admitted as much herself.

His sister's turmoil the moment he had told her about the pawnshop had been heart-breaking, and she had barely left her room since.

He had tried to comfort her but did not dare impose his presence upon her.

He needed to know who had stolen the watch — was it the scoundrel himself or that Younge woman?

It made little difference, but his anger needed release upon one or other of the miscreants.

There was a knock on the door, and his butler entered and announced Colonel Fitzwilliam's arrival, so Darcy had to put away his musings for the present.

"Darcy, I came as soon as I received your note. What is so urgent and important? What happened?"

"Thank you for coming, Cousin. It is an important and urgent matter, but it is mostly resolved now. I would not have troubled you, but, as Georgiana's guardian, you cannot remain ignorant of it."

"Georgiana visited my mother two days ago, and all seemed well. What happened?" he repeated.

"Take a seat, and I shall pour you a drink. Even though it is very early, you will need it."

"This sounds scary. I know you disapprove of the habit of early drinking."

"Not scary but serious. I am not even sure how to begin. A few days ago, in a pawnshop near Cheapside, someone noticed a few miniatures painted by Georgiana, as well as my grandfather Darcy's watch. They had been pawned by George Wickham."

"What?"

"Yes. He left them there, received cash in return, and promised to retrieve them in two weeks. That was about two months ago. The pawnbroker was ready sell the watch for profit if he did not receive his money back soon."

"This is madness! So you did not know he had the watch?"

“No. You can imagine my surprise when I received the news. I immediately went there and retrieved the objects. But what troubles me even more is that Georgiana did not mention the missing watch to me until I asked about it.”

“Wait, wait, slow down a bit, Darcy. What pawnshop? And who saw the watch? Who could have recognised it and informed you?”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Miss Bennet? But how? When? Where is she? How could she know?”

“Miss Bennet is in London, visiting her uncle and aunt, Mr and Mrs Gardiner, who live in Gracechurch Street. It was a mere coincidence that she saw Wickham’s portrait, painted by Georgiana.

She enquired about it, and the owner, a Mr Backer, told her that the miniatures belonged with the watch and that the man who had left it had never returned.

Miss Bennet asked to examine the objects, read the inscription, and made the connection. ”

“But how could she know about Wickham? I do not understand.”

“Wickham told her his story, with all those pitiful complaints about the living left to him by his godfather. She accused me of unfair treatment, so I had to reveal part of the truth, including Wickham’s inclination for depravity and deception.”

“But, Darcy, how come I was unaware of you having such a discussion with Miss Bennet?”

“It was not something I was proud of. But since Miss Bennet had been warned, she

made the connection when she saw the objects, then took it upon herself to inform me. Fortunately, I was able to correct the situation in only a few hours.”

Darcy bore the colonel’s curious scrutiny until the latter stood and began to pace the room, thoughtful, sipping from his glass.

“This is all so strange. So Georgiana gave Wickham the watch? And she said nothing to you?”

“Her exact words were, ‘it was not a gift for him to keep’. She seemed more hurt and tormented than appalled about the theft. What can you understand from that?”

“So he stole it? If he did, he should go to prison directly!”

“Her words were confusing. I am not sure whether she gave it to him or whether she knew he had taken it but wanted to let him keep it. I would rather have given that wretch some more money, because if he sold the watch, as he intended, he would receive far less than its true value.”

Darcy paused to sip from his drink.

“It pained me that she did not trust me enough to mention the watch was missing. If I had known, I would have dealt with it a long time ago. She deceived me, and the watch could easily have been lost for good, but imagine if someone had discovered the truth about it! You know Wickham will do anything when he is desperate for money.”

“What was Georgiana thinking? I cannot understand that girl. She is so clever, so wise, so prudent regarding everything else, except for that rogue.”

“She was prudent and wise when she told me about the elopement — we must grant

her that. But I believe she is scared, perhaps ashamed to admit all the errors she made during her stay in Ramsgate. I refuse to think too much about what truly happened. I...”

He paused again, took another gulp of his drink, and continued reluctantly.

“For months, I wondered how much had happened... I feared she might be with child, at her young age...”

“Thank God that was not the case,” the colonel replied, emptying his glass in one large gulp. “So, what are your plans now? What will you do with Wickham?”

“I am not sure. As long as Georgiana is hesitant to reveal the whole truth, I cannot risk a scandal. I cannot insist, as she is already very upset. She has not left her room since. Mrs Annesley takes up her food, and I have heard her playing the small pianoforte in her chamber.”

“I understand your reluctance. All you can do is to hope for no other surprises of that sort.”

“I have written to Wickham. I told him I have retrieved the watch, and I mentioned that thieves belong in prison, or worse. I asked him to come and discuss the matter.”

“What is there to discuss? Wickham will never change as long as he can find easy prey. You should have let me shoot him last summer.”

Darcy laughed bitterly. “Brandy always induces you to wish to kill Wickham.”

“I have enough reason for it. At least find a way to send him to war. Or somewhere abroad.”

“Send him away and make him someone else’s problem? That is not very gentlemanlike.”

“Well, you cannot depend on Miss Bennet’s wit and perceptiveness to resolve every problem he creates, and you do not want to shoot him, so what other choice do you have?”

The colonel was speaking half in jest, and Darcy laughed again.

“You always cheer me, Cousin.”

“It is the least I can do. Speaking of Miss Bennet, I applaud her intervention, especially since you and she are more enemies than friends.”

“Her gesture was kind and considerate. But it is not true that we are enemies. We both misjudged certain situations and are now trying to make amends.”

“I am glad to hear that. She is one of the most charming women I know. If she is in London, do you think I could call on her?”

“Why not? She will probably be pleased to see you. And Mr and Mrs Gardiner are very pleasant people.”

“Have you met them?”

“Yes. Mr Gardiner brought me the letter from Miss Bennet informing me about the watch. And then I called to thank them, especially Miss Bennet.”

“Then I shall join you when you visit next. Will you call again soon?”

“I shall wait for Bingley to return to town. There is something of great importance I

must discuss with him, then he may or may not wish to visit them.”

“Bingley? Oh, another mystery?”

“No mystery...Bingley was quite attached to Miss Jane Bennet — the eldest sister — when he was in Hertfordshire, and I was not convinced that she returned his feelings. Besides, there were some objections to her family as well. I convinced Bingley it was not a good match for him. But apparently, I was wrong.”

“Oh...”

“So, I must tell Bingley about my error and that Miss Bennet is in town. He is not aware of that. His sisters concealed her presence from him...and so did I.”

“That will be a difficult discussion.”

“Most likely. But it must be had.”

“Well, Cousin, there is another difficult discussion we must have,” the colonel said, puzzling Darcy.

“When we were in Kent, I escorted Miss Bennet on a walk...and we engaged in conversation...and I happened to mention that you congratulated yourself on separating one of your friends from a young lady unsuited to him. Now I understand it was Bingley and her sister. I am sure she guessed as much too.”

Darcy frowned while trying to remain calm. “Do you remember when you had that conversation?”

“Two or three days before we left Rosings. I think it was the day when she felt unwell and did not join the Collinses in taking tea at Rosings. You probably do not

remember.”

Darcy held his breath. He did remember — only too well. It was a day he would never forget — the day of the dreadful proposal. No wonder Elizabeth had been so angry with him regarding Bingley since she had just had confirmation of his involvement.

“I remember. Miss Bennet and I had quite a quarrel about it.”

“I am sorry I did not mind my words and my business, Darcy.”

“I should have minded my own business about Bingley, too, Cousin. Perhaps it was for the best that you told Miss Bennet. That way, I had the opportunity to offer some explanations. Which were also wrong, of course.”

“Giving advice in matters of romance and affection is certainly not your strength, Darcy. What I find difficult to understand is why Bingley would listen to you. When I hold a lady in special regard, I certainly do not listen to anyone who purports to know my feelings — or hers.”

“You know too well that Bingley is a decent, honourable man but rather modest. He cannot confront his sisters, and he especially cannot dismiss my opinion. So he obeyed, which makes my error even more significant.”

“Upon my word, I do not envy you, Darcy. You have Georgiana, Wickham, and Bingley on your shoulders — three difficult situations you must settle properly. Let me know how I might help you. What can I do to ease your burden a little?”

“Nothing for now, Cousin. If I need help, I shall certainly ask.”

The colonel remained for a few hours, and the conversation continued without any

reasonable conclusion. After he left, Darcy spent a few more hours reflecting on how to best proceed.

Georgiana sent word she would have dinner in her chamber with Mrs Annesley, and Darcy did not attempt to change her mind. He was ready to dine alone when Bingley was announced.

Darcy immediately welcomed his friend and invited him to join him.

“I did not expect you until tomorrow afternoon, Bingley.”

“I returned a day early. I am glad to see you, Darcy. I hope I am not bothering you. I know the hour is inappropriate.”

“You are certainly not bothering me. I am grateful for your company at dinner.”

“And Miss Darcy? Is she in good health?”

“Yes. She was a little indisposed and remained in her room tonight. And you, Bingley? How are you?”

“I am reasonably well,” Bingley replied, sitting down opposite Darcy. “A little confused as to why I spent so much time on someone else’s estate when I have a perfectly fine one that remains closed.”

“A fair question, I might say,” Darcy agreed. “Perhaps you should reconsider your plans, this time without asking for the opinions of others.”

At this, Bingley seemed bewildered, and a frown appeared on his face. Darcy continued with some uneasiness.

“There are a few important things we must discuss, and they might help you decide what to do. I owe you some explanations, and I am ashamed it has taken me so long.”

“What are you saying, Darcy?”

“Perhaps we should eat first. I do not want to ruin your appetite.”

“Well, it is a little late for that. What is wrong?”

“What is wrong was my arrogant presumption to advise you and to judge Miss Bennet’s feelings. I should not have interfered, especially since I am no expert on the subject.”

“Darcy, why are you telling me this now, after all these months?” Bingley asked, clearly dumbfounded.

“Because I have found out from a reliable source that my estimation was incorrect and that I might have induced you to act against your wishes.”

“May I ask what source?” Bingley asked, growing visibly uncomfortable.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I met her in Kent, and we had quite a quarrel on this subject and several others.”

Bingley’s countenance immediately coloured, and he put down his fork.

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“Miss Elizabeth? Oh...but...so she said you were wrong? I mean, did she mention Miss Bennet’s feelings for me? What did she say?” Bingley enquired, his anxious look becoming one of trepidation.

“She did not say anything specific about Miss Bennet, but she said so many things to me that I am ashamed to repeat. She blamed me for separating you from her sister, and she accused me of being selfish, arrogant and disdainful. I assume that is enough evidence that I was wrong.”

“This is quite extraordinary,” Bingley said, rubbing his hands restlessly. “So...is Miss Elizabeth still in Kent?”

“No, actually, she is in London now.”

“In London?”

“Yes... Bingley, there is something else you should know. Miss Jane Bennet is in London too. She has been here since January.”

At this, Bingley stilled, his eyes wide, staring at Darcy.

“She is in London? How do you know that? Did Miss Elizabeth tell you?”

“Yes...but in fact...”

“Yes?”

“Your sisters told me first.”

“My sisters? Did they know Miss Bennet was in town? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“How could they tell you but not me? How is that possible?”

“That, you should ask them. I take the blame for not informing you immediately. It was disrespectful to you and based on a ridiculous assumption that it would be better for you if you did not know. You have every reason to be angry with me. I did not act as a friend or as a gentleman.”

Bingley seemed to be struggling to breathe, and he quickly poured some wine into his glass.

“I cannot believe it! I need time to think about all this. This is so upsetting... So, where is Miss Bennet now? Do you know?”

“Yes. She is in Gracechurch Street, with her uncle and aunt.”

“I shall call on her immediately. Not now — it is already dark. Tomorrow morning. Do you happen to know the direction? It does not matter. I shall find it. I think her uncle’s name is Gardiner. I shall find him.”

“Bingley, I know you are angry, but I beg you to try to calm down a moment. I have already visited Mr Gardiner, and I might escort you there if you like. My cousin wishes to call on Miss Elizabeth too. We may all go tomorrow, if you do not mind. It might be easier—”

“I just want to call on Miss Bennet and apologise. She might believe I knew of her

presence but did not even visit her once. I must explain.”

“You will — tomorrow morning. May we join you? We could leave at eleven if you agree.”

“Yes...it does not matter. You may do as you please. I shall go nevertheless.”

“So, tomorrow at eleven. Shall we all meet here?”

“I shall be here. But now I must leave. I need to be alone and to think. I cannot stay any longer,” he said, agitated, standing up from the table.

He bowed his head briefly and strode quickly from the room, his expression dark. Darcy did not attempt to stop him; Bingley would certainly not accept any suggestion from him, and rightfully so.

Once alone, Darcy ate little, but he poured himself two more drinks. He sent a note to his cousin the colonel, informing him about the visit to the Gardiners’ the next day and inviting him to attend, though the call would surely be awkward for some of them.

The entire situation was distressing for both Bingley and Georgiana, and he was to blame in both cases.

He had been too indulgent with Wickham and too severe with Miss Jane Bennet and her entire family.

In other words, Elizabeth Bennet had saved his sister from a scandal, while he had carelessly ruined her sister’s happiness. He truly had nothing to be proud of.

Bingley’s anguish proved his feelings were still strong.

If Miss Bennet's were similar, she must have suffered deeply, assuming her suitor's attentions had been nothing but shallow infatuation.

And for all that distress, Darcy felt responsible.

He was nothing but a spoilt, arrogant rich man.

He had been taught good principles, but he had applied them selfishly and hurt people, even if unwittingly.

That night, he barely slept at all. At some point, he even considered going to Bingley's house and attempting to talk to him and apologising again, but it would have been a foolish endeavour.

In the end, he realised there was nothing he could do but wait for morning and take Bingley to see Miss Jane Bennet.

Darcy had barely finished breakfast when Bingley arrived. He looked pale and tired, and he said little.

"Bingley, I apologise again."

"Strangely, as upset as I am, I can understand your reasons, Darcy. I believe you would do better to apologise to Miss Bennet if your intervention truly hurt her."

"I shall. I already considered doing so, but I was uncertain of your plans. That is why I did not mention to her the possibility of you calling."

"You believed my admiration might have faded by now? Surprisingly, I am not as

shallow as you think,” Bingley said, then stopped as Colonel Fitzwilliam entered.

Greetings were exchanged between the men, and then a little after eleven o’clock, they called for the carriage.

“I have not seen you in a while, Bingley. How are you?” the colonel asked once they were situated in the conveyance. “I understood you were out of town.”

“I am well, thank you. I would have been much better if my own sisters had not betrayed me and tried to impose their will over mine by deception,” Bingley said sharply. “And the person whom I considered my best friend, the man I admired the most, seems to have plotted with them.”

“Ah... Perhaps I should not have asked,” the colonel replied.

“I apologise, Colonel, for my bitter and rude answer.”

“Do not worry,” the colonel responded. “You seem quite distressed.”

“I should be the one to apologise. And I have already done so several times,” Darcy interjected.

“May I ask what Darcy has done?” the colonel asked, and it was Darcy himself who replied.

“I interfered in Bingley’s relationship with Miss Jane Bennet. I made a presumptuous estimation about Miss Bennet’s feelings, and I convinced Bingley it would be in his best interest to leave Hertfordshire. And I did not inform him that Miss Bennet had been in town for several months.”

Darcy gave a summary of the story, even though his cousin was already aware of it.

“What upsets me the most,” Bingley said to the colonel, “is that Miss Bennet might have been hurt by their actions. Of course, my sisters were the main culprits! But from Darcy, I expected nothing but honesty. I would not have let my sisters convince me, but I trusted in Darcy’s advice.”

“You might not believe me, but I did consider your well-being. My reasons were honest, but my judgment was completely wrong.”

“So you trusted Darcy’s estimation of a woman’s feelings over your own feelings and judgment?” the colonel repeated.

“I know I am not innocent in this,” Bingley admitted. “I was weak and gullish, and I have every reason to be ashamed of myself.”

“You certainly should bear the greatest share of the blame,” the colonel said harshly. “But the thing that surprises me the most is why you would take Darcy’s advice in a matter where he has no experience. It is like Darcy asking for advice from you about estate management.”

Bingley looked at the colonel, his brow furrowed. “You are right, of course,” he finally said.

“The last thing you need is more advice, but if I were you, I would put the past aside, with all its errors, and concentrate your attentions on what happens today. You have the chance to make amends.”

“I needed that piece of advice, Colonel. Thank you,” Bingley replied.

Half an hour later, the carriage stopped in front of the Gardiners’ house. Darcy stepped out first, then the other two. Out of the corner of his eye, Darcy spotted someone at the window, and he recognised the two Bennet sisters. A moment later,

both disappeared from sight.

When they knocked, Mr Gardiner himself opened the door, and the first introductions were performed. Then the host invited them in, and in the drawing-room, they met the ladies.

Darcy looked at Elizabeth; she seemed surprised and nervous but smiled at the colonel, who hurried to her.

Jane Bennet was pale and silent, standing still, her hands entwined in front of her.

Bingley looked no better. Of all those assembled, only the colonel and the Gardiners seemed in good dispositions, and they immediately initiated a conversation.

The colonel sat near Elizabeth, with Darcy and Bingley on the other side of the room.

Jane Bennet sat between Mr and Mrs Gardiner.

“How kind of you gentlemen to visit us,” Mr Gardiner said. “We are absolutely delighted.”

“Darcy told us about Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth’s presence in town, and Bingley and I could not wait to come and greet them,” the colonel explained joyfully.

“I just returned to London last night,” Bingley added, his voice hesitant. “I was shocked when Darcy told me Miss Bennet had been in town for several months. I was completely unaware of her presence here. If I had known, I would certainly have called a long time ago.”

“Jane and my aunt visited your sisters, so we assumed they would have informed you,” Elizabeth said, and Bingley paled even further.

“They did not. I am very sorry... There was a sort of ...misunderstanding...”

“I am sure there was,” Mrs Gardiner offered graciously. “We are all happy to finally have you here, Mr Bingley. And the colonel and Mr Darcy, of course.”

Fortunately, Mrs Gardiner and her husband possessed excellent conversational skills, and with Colonel Fitzwilliam’s help, the atmosphere soon became more relaxed.

Elizabeth spoke to the colonel, and Darcy watched their easy, animated chatter.

His cousin had been charmed by Elizabeth from the very beginning, and the feeling seemed to be mutual.

Bingley hardly spoke a few words; he only glanced often at Jane Bennet, who seemed unwilling to meet his eyes.

“It was such a pleasure to meet Miss Elizabeth in Kent,” the colonel said. “Darcy and I visit our aunt Lady Catherine twice a year, but our visits are rarely — if ever — as pleasant as the last one was.”

“You flatter me, Colonel,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “I know it is not entirely true, but I am glad to know I was pleasant company.”

“It is entirely true,” Darcy heard himself saying before he minded his words.

Elizabeth cast a quick look at him, and his eyes met hers briefly.

“You cannot have any doubts if Darcy seconds my pronouncement,” the colonel said in jest. “We all know he is not accustomed to flattery.”

“Indeed. Mr Darcy is always honest, even when he is wrong,” Elizabeth said, and a

little smile appeared on her lips.

“I cannot argue with you, Miss Elizabeth, though I am not sure whether you are intending a compliment or a reproach,” Darcy said. The mere fact that she had smiled at him and teased him was enough to delight him.

“It was certainly not a reproach, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth replied, the little smile still on her lips.

The visit lasted almost two hours — and Darcy hardly noticed the time passing.

Minute by minute, Bingley seemed to regain his spirits and Jane Bennet the colour in her cheeks and her serene countenance.

A slight feeling of jealousy grew inside Darcy as he watched his cousin talking to Elizabeth with so much ease.

At times, her glances turned to him, and their eyes met, but they did not exchange more than a few words.

When they were ready to leave, Darcy was surprised by Elizabeth approaching him and asking in a low voice, “Mr Darcy, is Miss Darcy well? Was everything settled?”

“Almost...to both your questions, Miss Elizabeth. I am not quite sure how to best settle things. As you know better than anyone else, there are many details to be considered.”

“I imagined as much. I wrote to my father and warned him about Mr Wickham. He is no danger to my family, for we have nothing of interest to him. But I do not want my parents or sisters to consider him a friend any longer.”

“Very wise of you, Miss Elizabeth. Hopefully, Wickham will not be around your family for too long.”

“Miss Elizabeth, it was a pleasure to see you, as always. I hope we can meet again before you leave London.”

“We would like that very much, Colonel. We shall leave by the end of next week,” Elizabeth said.

Darcy needed a moment; he breathed deeply and suddenly said, surprising even himself, “Mrs Gardiner, Mr Gardiner, would you consider having dinner at my house, together with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, of course, before their departure?” As he spoke, he stole a glance at Elizabeth and noticed her flushed cheeks.

“We would certainly be delighted and honoured, Mr Darcy!” Mr Gardiner replied.

“Most certainly,” Mrs Gardiner agreed enthusiastically.

“Excellent,” he uttered. “Of course, Bingley and the colonel will be there too, as well as my sister.”

“It will be a great pleasure to make Miss Darcy’s acquaintance.” Elizabeth finally voiced the acceptance that Darcy so longed to hear.

“Perhaps in three days’ time, if that is agreeable to you all?” Darcy suggested.

“Very agreeable. We have no other fixed engagements,” Mr Gardiner said.

With that, the three men left the house. At the door, Darcy cast another glance towards Elizabeth and noticed the smile not only on her lips but in her eyes.

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As soon as the gentlemen left, Jane could not hold her thoughts any longer.

“I cannot believe this is happening! Mr Bingley did not know I was in London! I thought he did not want to see me! How could his sisters not tell him? If not for Mr Darcy, I might have returned to Longbourn and never seen him again!”

“Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst are not to be trusted at all — I have long told you that, Jane. At least now you know that Mr Bingley is most willing to see you,” Elizabeth replied, busy trying to control her own emotions.

Mr Darcy had invited them to dinner. Why would he do that?

He was barely acquainted with the Gardiners, and he had every reason to still be angry with her.

Perhaps he wished to apologise for separating Mr Bingley from Jane.

Or perhaps he wanted to express his gratitude for the recovery of the watch.

Many explanations could be found, but his gesture remained surprising.

“It was such a pleasure to meet Mr Bingley and Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Mrs Gardiner said. “But I find it hard to believe that we are to dine at Mr Darcy’s house. I cannot imagine why he would bestow such attention upon us. He surely is not obliged to do so.”

“I was surprised, too, especially considering what we heard about his pride and

arrogance,” Mr Gardiner added.

“Mr Darcy’s manners are much improved since I last saw him,” Elizabeth said.

“I have observed no improper pride in him so far,” Mrs Gardiner said. “And, considering everything I know about the Darcys, I am exceedingly flattered by his invitation.”

The conversation continued a little longer, then Mr Gardiner went to his office while Mrs Gardiner attended to the children, allowing the sisters a few moments of privacy.

“Dear Lizzy, I almost fainted when I saw Mr Bingley. I still find it hard to believe he was here! He seemed so sad and apologetic. And he had lost some weight, I believe.”

Jane’s enthusiasm was heartwarming, especially after all the long months of sorrow. Considering the responses of both Jane and Mr Bingley, the separation had not caused much harm to their tentative friendship.

Elizabeth continued to think of Mr Darcy and the reasons behind his amiability. She had enjoyed seeing Colonel Fitzwilliam again, but as pleasant as his company was, her interest was engaged by his cousin only.

The dinner at Mr Darcy’s house also meant an introduction to Miss Darcy, and Elizabeth wondered how affected the girl had been by Mr Wickham’s scheme. That wretched man’s insolence seemed to have no limits, and it would certainly be difficult to stop.

Later that day, Elizabeth received Mr Bennet’s response to her letter warning him about Mr Wickham. Mr Bennet had replied in his usual style:

Dear Lizzy,

Your old favourite Mr Wickham is of little concern to us, as I hear his efforts are concentrated on pursuing Miss Mary King. My brother Phillips said Mr King, her uncle, is not happy about the courtship, and he has certainly objected to the otherwise charming officer.

Furthermore, your uncle Phillips mentioned something about the officer's tendency to make purchases on credit, leading him to have accrued a long list of debts. I cannot imagine this situation ending well for him.

Mr Wickham aside, I hope you will return soon.

Since you have been gone, I have hardly had a few minutes of sensible conversation.

I look forward to hearing about Lady Catherine's fireplaces and the windows of Rosings.

Mr Collins has written to me, and I feel he is begging for some compliments he can convey to her ladyship.

Your father

T. Bennet

Elizabeth smiled, folding the paper. Apparently, Mr Wickham's recent actions were in congruence with his usual character — one that she had failed to recognise but Mr King had easily identified.

How long Mr Wickham would manage to keep up appearances inside the regiment and how long he would remain in the militia was hard to estimate, but she agreed with her father — the situation was unlikely to end well for him.

The following morning, one more surprise arrived after breakfast. It was a note from Mr Bingley to Mr Gardiner, and its contents left Jane bewildered.

Mr Gardiner,

After some deliberation, I have decided to reopen Netherfield. I feel that closing it was a hasty and imprudent decision, which requires amends.

Consequently, I intend to return to Hertfordshire as soon as possible.

Considering the circumstances, I am asking your permission — and theirs, of course — to travel back with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth.

I assure you that I shall provide them with extra protection and will escort them to Longbourn safely.

C. Bingley

Mr Gardiner read the letter to his wife and nieces wearing a large smile.

“What an excellent arrangement,” Mrs Gardiner said, while Jane responded with tears of joy.

“Mr Bingley has finally learnt to take action based on his own wishes,” Elizabeth declared, wondering how much Mr Darcy had influenced that decision.

“It seems so. If you girls have no objections, I shall write back immediately. I am sure his company will be equally useful and pleasant to you.”

“Please do so, Uncle. Tell Mr Bingley we are grateful for his offer,” Elizabeth replied, while Jane nodded, flushed and nervous.

“Darcy, I truly appreciate your support,” Bingley said. “As wrong as you were in the past, you have proved to me that you respect my choices and consider my happiness.”

The two of them were in Darcy’s library, the day after the visit to Gracechurch Street. They had spent the previous afternoon debating what to do next, ending with Bingley’s decision to reopen Netherfield and travel back to Hertfordshire with the Bennet sisters.

“I deserve no credit, Bingley. I am just relieved that your friendship with Miss Bennet was not completely ruined by my presumptuous intervention.”

“Will you visit me at Netherfield?”

“I would like to, but my plans are still uncertain. You should enjoy your time there, nevertheless.”

“I shall. I have already told Caroline and Louisa that they are not welcome to join me. They have tested my patience too much already. I need time to forget and forgive them.”

“You are the master of the house — you should impose your rules on everyone.”

“I intend to do so. Now I shall leave you. I am going home to wait for Mr Gardiner’s answer.”

“I am quite confident of it being in the affirmative,” Darcy replied as Bingley rose to depart.

While he was indeed confident that Bingley’s letter would receive a positive answer,

he was not equally sure about the one waiting on his desk.

He had received it earlier that day and recognised Wickham's handwriting, but then Bingley had arrived, and the letter had needed to wait.

Now that he was alone again, Darcy finally ripped it open, curious about what the scoundrel had to say.

Darcy,

I wonder how you found the watch and why it was given to you since I planned to retrieve it myself this week. Now that you have it, so much the better.

You are too hasty to accuse me of stealing. The watch was willingly given to me, and if you were not told that, it means a certain person chose to lie to you.

I do not know what other things you wish to discuss with me. If you have a business proposal, I shall listen to it. I am not so fond of life in the militia as to reject a more advantageous offer.

I shall be in London in two days, together with two friends who will join me if you request a private meeting. I shall send you a note when I am settled.

Darcy put down the letter, staring at the fire.

He could read between the lines and understood that Wickham had already done something to endanger his position in the regiment, so he was probably looking for an alternative source of funds.

It was always the same — wherever he went, he usually managed to maintain the appearance of goodness for a few months, then he revealed his true character and was

forced to move on.

What troubled Darcy was the reference to the watch being given to him as a gift.

A tightness in his chest made him doubt his sister and himself.

Could it be? He had to know the truth in order to negotiate with Wickham.

Any detail he missed would give that reprobate an advantage in their argument, and it could expose a secret he had struggled to keep hidden.

Georgiana had still not left her room, and it had been almost a week now. As much as it pained him to force her, it was time for a serious conversation. She might suffer momentarily, but she had to share the truth.

He walked towards his sister's room with a heavy heart and a reluctance he had never felt before. He knocked, and Mrs Annesley opened the door.

"Forgive me for disturbing you. I need to speak to my sister for a few moments. Privately, please."

Mrs Annesley hesitated, then she stepped away, allowing him to enter. Georgiana was sitting by the window, holding a book that she seemed to have entirely forgotten was in her hand. On the table was a tray with food and tea, barely touched.

"Dearest, may I sit for a moment? We need to talk," he said.

Georgiana nodded, while Mrs Annesley left the room.

"My dear, you look ill and pale. I am sure you are not sleeping and not eating. You must talk to me so I can help you."

“I do not need help. I am well,” she whispered. “I am so sorry for giving you so much trouble. I am nothing but a burden to you...”

“Georgiana, please stop,” he requested, a little too harshly.

“You are the only one who blames yourself, and you are suffering from guilt, even though the situation is not your fault. I cannot believe I allowed George Wickham to hurt you so deeply. I should have protected you from him and from Mrs Younge. I failed in my duty as a brother.”

“Please do not say that!” she begged tearfully. “Nothing pains me more than to know I hurt you!”

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“And how long can we go on like this? You suffering for me, me suffering for you, all because of George Wickham’s betrayal. This cannot be!”

“I feel like a fool... I do not know what to do...”

He took her hands. “You must tell me the whole truth. Nothing less. And I shall settle everything in such a way that he can never bother us again.”

“What truth?”

“First, about the watch,” he said, and she withdrew her hands. “Wickham asserts that you gave it to him willingly.”

“I did not,” she whispered, lowering her eyes.

“Not really...it was...” She wiped her tears, then cleared her throat and finally spoke.

“Mrs Younge knew about the watch...and George knew too. One day he asked to see it...when he planned the elopement. I showed it to him, and the next day, he said he felt the watch was a sign...a premonition...that Grandma Georgina looked like me and that the inscription from G to G seemed as if it was made for us...”

Darcy was almost suffocated by rage but struggled to remain calm and silent.

“Then, two days before you arrived, he asked me to let him hold the watch, as a reminder of our commitment. He said the watch would help him keep track of the time...that he would count every second until we met again. And I agreed. He said he

would keep the miniatures in the same box, so they would be safe.”

She could hardly speak; every word seemed to take great effort, but he did not stop her.

“And then,” she finally continued, “you arrived, and I told you what had happened...then George left, and you dismissed Mrs Younge too. I could not speak to either of them about the watch, and I did not dare tell you either, after everything that had happened.”

“I understand. It all makes sense now. Thank you so much for telling me. I am sorry for all your pain, my dear.”

“Thank you for being so patient and kind to me, Brother. I was such a fool...”

“No, you were not. You were kind and trusting, as is your heart and your nature. And you were brave and wise to tell me about the elopement in time. Very few women, even those older than you, would have shown such courage.”

“You are very kind, Brother,” she repeated.

“Please know you may talk to me about anything at any time. I know we are not close in age or nature or disposition, and I might not always be pleasant and easy company, but we only have each other, and I hope you trust me enough to know I would do anything for your happiness.”

“I do trust you! I just do not want to bother you with my foolish remorse. There are so many things I regret, so many things I would do differently...”

“My dear, I cannot tell you how many things I regret doing only in the last six months! So many things I wish I had done differently! I have been wrong in so many

ways, and I am trying to make amends now.”

“You? I can hardly believe that, Brother! You never do anything wrong!” the girl said with so much feeling that Darcy laughed and squeezed her hands affectionately.

“I am grateful to have your unconditional support, my dear, though I do not deserve it. If you wish, I could tell you some of the foolish things your older brother has done recently. You may laugh and perhaps see me in a different light — a less perfect one.”

Through her tears, Georgiana forced a smile. “You will always have my unconditional support, Brother.”

“I am glad to hear that, dearest, as I have some news. We shall have a small dinner party in three days. I have invited Miss Elizabeth Bennet, her sister, uncle, and aunt. And, of course, Bingley and our brave colonel.”

“Oh...” Georgiana whispered.

“I know it is sudden, but Miss Bennet and her sister will leave town at the end of next week. And Bingley was so happy to be reunited with Miss Jane Bennet. Besides, I wished to thank them for helping with the watch situation.”

“I see... May I ask...what do the Miss Bennets and Mr and Mrs Gardiner know about the watch?”

“Only that Wickham pawned it and I recovered it. The only one who knows a little more is Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She was charmed by Wickham too last autumn. He spread all sorts of lies about me, and she believed him.”

“Oh...”

“Yes. She trusted him over me, and we quarrelled harshly about the matter. I had to reveal some of my past dealings with Wickham before she was convinced where the truth lay. That is why, when she saw the miniatures and the watch, she questioned their ownership.”

“Miss Elizabeth seems like a special young lady. You have mentioned her several times, even in your letters from Netherfield.”

“I have. And yes, she is a remarkable young lady.”

“Her opinion seems important to you.”

“It is. And, ironically, her initial opinion of me was very poor. Very, very poor,” he insisted, trying to smile. “I am still not certain how much it has improved.”

“How can that be?” Georgiana asked with genuine disbelief, making Darcy laugh.

“Well, when I first met her, it was at an assembly. Bingley insisted that I dance with her, and I refused, calling her tolerable. Then I repeatedly offended her family with my arrogant manners, and I convinced Bingley that Miss Jane Bennet was not a good match for him, almost ruining their happiness. Do you need more proof?”

He kept a light tone, but Georgiana’s face displayed increasing shock as he spoke. He was at least pleased that some of her distress seemed to be gone.

“I can hardly believe it, Brother.”

“And yet, it is true. Therefore, dearest, I am counting on you to help me impress Miss Elizabeth when they come here,” he concluded, half in jest.

The girl smiled, still incredulous, and the conversation continued for a while. That

evening — finally — Georgiana and Mrs Annesley joined Darcy for dinner, returning to their usual habit.

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In Gracechurch Street, the dinner at Mr Darcy's house was still the main subject of conversation.

Elizabeth reflected on it often, wondering whether she was more thrilled or anxious about it.

Less than a month had passed since the dreadful marriage proposal, and she wondered how her opinion and her feelings could have changed so much in such a short time.

She also wondered why her opinion of him had been so ill in the first place since her uncle and aunt spoke so highly of him.

Her heart was pounding just thinking of him, and as much as she tried to keep her expectations under good regulation, there were still slim hopes that all his attention was meant for her.

He had certainly made amends for his errors, helping Mr Bingley reunite with Jane. Mr Darcy had the strength to admit his faults and remedy them.

Elizabeth had heard Lady Catherine and Mr Collins mention an engagement between Mr Darcy and Anne de Bourgh, but she knew it was not true.

If it had been, he would not have proposed to her at Rosings.

Was it possible that his feelings for her persisted?

Could such a man forget and forgive such a harsh rejection and the accusations that had accompanied it and propose a second time? Would any man be so generous?

There were still many things she did not know about Mr Darcy, but her limited knowledge suggested that, by his nature and education, he might be precisely the sort of man best suited to her.

They were different in every sense, but perhaps that would allow them to complete each other.

If only it was not too late for such reflections.

But, if he did not want a particular connection with her, why would he invite them to dine at his house?

He had already done enough to bring Mr Bingley back to Jane, so there was no need for further involvement on his part unless he wished it. Apparently, he did.

Two days after his first visit, Mr Bingley called again, this time alone.

Jane was delighted to see him, and Mrs Gardiner allowed them a little privacy in the drawing-room.

This time both the gentleman and the lady were more voluble, less distressed, and by the time Mr Bingley left, Jane was all smiles.

Mr Bingley surprised them again on the day of the dinner party when he called at Gracechurch Street as they were readying themselves for the evening.

“I have come to accompany you to Darcy’s house,” he said, confusing them all.

“Darcy and the colonel have an unexpected engagement. They might not return until

after we arrive, but Miss Darcy is there, expecting us.”

The statement caused utter puzzlement, and Elizabeth felt chills of worry.

“So, Mr Darcy is not at home? Did something happen?”

“Since we are all acquainted with the subject, I think I am allowed to speak of it. Mr Wickham is in town. Darcy and the colonel met with him last night, but I understand the scoundrel attempted extortion of some sort, and things...took a turn for the worse.”

“A turn for the worse? What do you mean?” Elizabeth asked, a shard of ice in her chest.

“Darcy would probably not want you to know — it is not a subject to discuss with ladies — but apparently he lost his temper and...”

“Mr Bingley, please speak plainly. We are truly worried,” Elizabeth said.

“Darcy lost his temper, and Wickham was the recipient of it.”

“I see... Well — I am sure Mr Darcy lost his temper for good reason,” Mr Gardiner replied. “From the little I know of the subject, I cannot blame him. If Mr Darcy is busy, perhaps it would be best if we postpone the dinner?”

“Oh no, that is precisely the reason why I am here. Everything is arranged, and you are expected,” he insisted.

“Very well, then,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I shall go and say goodbye to the children, then we may depart.”

“Will your sisters be attending the dinner?” Jane enquired.

“No,” Mr Bingley replied hastily. “It will be quite some time before Darcy issues an invitation to them and I allow them to accept it.”

“I see...” Jane whispered.

The encounter between Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham, although presented in a light tone, distressed Elizabeth.

She did not know Mr Wickham was in London and wondered about the gentlemen’s confrontation.

Why would Mr Darcy even meet that wretch if not to throw him in prison, as he deserved?

She was slightly reassured knowing the colonel was with him; otherwise, she expected the worst from the man she had once considered a friend.

While she fought all sorts of worries, she realised how important Mr Darcy’s well-being was to her and how it pained her to know he could be in danger.

Although still confused about her feelings, she had to admit they existed and seemed to be growing stronger every day.

For the whole of the ride across town, Elizabeth remained restless, with a tightness in her chest that remained till the moment they reached their destination.

In front of the house, Mr Bingley stepped down and handed the ladies out.

Out of the corner of her eye, Elizabeth observed the gentleman offer Jane his arm and

her accept it; all signs indicated that, in regard to her sister and her admirer, there were no more reasons for concern.

They entered, and Elizabeth looked about, but she barely noticed anything. Her main interest was in the master, who apparently was still missing. Instead, Miss Darcy and an older lady welcomed them, and Mr Bingley performed the introductions.

Miss Darcy seemed very young, and she was exceedingly pretty. Her manners were restrained, and her timidity made her search for support from her companion, Mrs Annesley, but her little smile and gentle voice showed friendliness.

They all moved to the drawing-room, and the conversation was awkward for a few minutes until Mrs Gardiner mentioned Lambton and Pemberley — and Miss Darcy's face brightened with obvious delight.

“I am so happy to finally meet you,” Miss Darcy declared. “My brother has spoken very highly of you.”

“It was a great privilege for us to meet Mr Darcy and now you,” Mrs Gardiner said.

The conversation continued for a while; Elizabeth glanced through the window at every sound of a carriage.

“Perhaps we should dine,” Miss Darcy said. “It is what my brother advised me to do if he was late. I shall ring the bell.”

“As you wish. We are happy to wait until the gentlemen return,” Mrs Gardiner answered.

“It might be rather late. We can begin now, and my brother and cousin will join us as soon as they arrive.”

They moved to the dining room, which was large and elegant, able to accommodate a large party.

The seven of them barely occupied a small part of the table.

The first course was served, but before they had filled their plates, the two gentlemen arrived, greeting the party with apparent good spirits.

They disappeared for a few minutes to refresh themselves, then returned and took their seats.

“We apologise for the delay,” Mr Darcy said. “It was an unexpected circumstance that interfered with our plans, and it could not be postponed.”

“Mr Bingley explained it to us briefly. I hope everything was resolved to your satisfaction,” Mr Gardiner replied.

“Mostly, yes. It is no secret — George Wickham has realised that the militia is not the career for him. Therefore, he asked my assistance to begin a new life, somewhere abroad. Preferably India. He intends to make this important move together with a fellow officer. A Mr Denny — I believe you know him — who has also suffered a change of heart and desires a change in career.”

He spoke in a light tone, choosing his words carefully, but Elizabeth understood his meaning perfectly. Mr Wickham and Mr Denny wished to escape from the regiment, and apparently Mr Darcy was willing to indulge them as long as their destination was the other side of the world.

“I trust you always make the best business decisions, Mr Darcy, and this peculiar situation is certainly no exception,” Mr Gardiner said.

“My decisions are not always the best, but in this case, I am confident it was the most convenient for all parties.”

“And now that is done, we may turn to more pleasant subjects, like this delicious food and the delightful company,” Colonel Fitzwilliam interjected.

Miss Darcy looked pale and distracted, keeping her eyes on her plate, though her brother glanced at her several times.

As everybody ate, Elizabeth’s eyes were drawn towards Mr Darcy’s hands. The back of his right one was dark and bruised, and he seemed to be moving it with some discomfort. Their eyes met in silent communication, and she blushed when a little smile appeared on his lips.

As the meal progressed, the conversation became more cheerful, and after the second course, they returned to the drawing-room together, with no separation of the sexes.

The discussion moved from one subject to another; only Miss Darcy remained silent, sitting close to her companion.

She was obviously struggling to entertain the guests, but to Elizabeth, the sadness in her pretty eyes was apparent, and she realised that Miss Darcy’s suffering was still far from healed.

When Mr Darcy rose to pour brandy for the gentlemen, Elizabeth boldly moved near him, filling her teacup.

“That injury looks quite nasty,” she whispered. “I assume it is painful too. I hope it was worth the discomfort.”

“There is some pain and some discomfort, but I admit it was absolutely worth it.

Though I should be ashamed of myself. Any savage can use violence, but a gentleman should always keep his temper.”

“There are times when a savage act can be justified, even for an otherwise flawless gentleman,” Elizabeth replied, still in a low voice, while they gazed at each other from only inches apart.

“Your approval means a lot to me, Miss Bennet. I shall dare to admit that the strike injured my hand but was deeply satisfying.”

With their eyes still locked, she answered, “I am glad, Mr Darcy. It was deeply satisfying for me only hearing about it.”

His smile widened, and she felt her cheeks heating. Mr Bingley came to help Mr Darcy with the drinks, while Elizabeth took her cup and resumed her place.

Once the tension dissipated, the evening became warm and entertaining, filled with unrestrained discussion and jokes. Elizabeth did not speak much to Mr Darcy directly, but she was delighted and flattered by his friendly manners towards her relatives.

His glances gave her reason to believe that, even if her assumptions were not completely correct, they were not utterly wrong either.

Mr Darcy did not hate her, nor did he hold a grudge about her offensive and unfair rejection.

Several times he mentioned the possibility of visiting Netherfield soon, and that increased Elizabeth’s hopes that their relationship would not end when she left London.

During the evening, Elizabeth approached Miss Darcy too.

The girl seemed so sad, so withdrawn in her own thoughts, that Elizabeth's heart ached for her.

She began a discussion about music, then theatre and opera and their mutual inclination for reading, and Miss Darcy's bearing eased a little.

Mr Darcy watched them with his usual little smile that sent shivers down Elizabeth's spine and kept her in a state of anxiety until the end of the party.

On their way back to Gracechurch Street, the Gardiners and Jane exchanged opinions with much animation, while Elizabeth said barely a word. She kept thinking of Mr Darcy and his bruised hand, wondering whether a gentle touch could bring him comfort.

Three days later, Elizabeth and Jane travelled back to Longbourn in Mr Bingley's company and in his carriage with a maid for propriety.

The evening prior, Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam had called for a final goodbye, conveying Miss Darcy's warm wishes.

There was no time or opportunity for more than a few warm words of farewell, so Elizabeth left London with a burden of regret in her soul.

She had also arrived in London from Kent with her heart heavy, and that had been due to Mr Darcy as well.

But the weight pressing on her chest was utterly different now, as were her feelings

for the man who had caused them.

The carriage had barely left town when Elizabeth began to feel a deep longing, as she had never experienced before, without knowing if or when it would be soothed.

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Elizabeth expected a strong response from her mother at their appearance in Mr Bingley's carriage, and she was right. After the first moments of utter stupefaction, Mrs Bennet shouted her joy so loudly that Hill immediately arrived with the smelling salts.

In Meryton, things were very much the same, except for the reports — shared by Lydia and Kitty — that Mary King had moved from Meryton to Bath and Mr Wickham was free again.

Elizabeth chose not to debate the subject, hoping that soon enough Mr Wickham would disappear from their lives just as suddenly as he had arrived.

Elizabeth wondered whether she would ever see that man again and whether he knew she was responsible for discovering the watch.

Nevertheless, she was ready to confront him and release herself from all the anger and resentment — towards him, as well as towards herself.

Her father was the only person she trusted enough to disclose the story to — excluding the details that required complete secrecy.

“This is quite a tale, Lizzy. Is it not ironic that Mr Darcy refused to dance with you and still you rescued such a precious possession for him?” Mr Bennet jested.

“Very ironic, Papa. I suggest we stop torturing Mr Darcy with memories of the assembly. I have held a grudge against him long enough. It was probably the main reason I trusted Mr Wickham's lies about him.”

“My brother Gardiner speaks highly of Mr Darcy.”

“I am glad to hear that, Papa. He has sound reasons to do so.”

“Mr Bingley mentioned that Mr Darcy encouraged him to return to Netherfield. That might induce even your mother to forgive Mr Darcy’s pride and arrogance. Not that Mr Darcy would care.”

“Mr Darcy’s manners have significantly improved, Papa. I dare say most of his improper pride has disappeared. Even my uncle noticed it.”

“If that is the case, I wonder what caused such a change.”

“We all wonder that, Papa,” she replied, hoping her father would not guess the truth.

Shortly after his return, Mr Bingley became a regular guest at Longbourn and dined there three times in a fortnight.

The whole neighbourhood speculated over the gentleman’s intentions, and less than three weeks after his return, he finally took the plunge and ended the rumours with a long-awaited marriage proposal to Jane.

Her sister’s happiness was sweet compensation for Elizabeth’s distress and longing.

She had repeated recollections of the day at the parsonage when Mr Darcy had proposed and she had refused him.

Her rejection had been true to her opinions and feelings at that moment, and she did not regret it.

What she regretted was the manner of her response; not that his manner of proposing

had been any better.

All in all, it could probably be called one of the worst proposals in history, and it was likely no man would repeat it.

Mr Darcy's plans were uncertain, though his name was mentioned often at Longbourn.

Mr Bingley kept up a regular correspondence with him, and much to Elizabeth's surprise, Mrs Gardiner wrote that the gentleman and his sister had called on them on two separate occasions.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner's already good opinion of Mr Darcy seemed to further improve every time they met, which pleased Elizabeth exceedingly.

Elizabeth had no opportunity to speak to Mr Wickham.

She saw him a few times from afar, but he avoided any encounter.

One month after her return home, Elizabeth, her family, as well as the whole of Meryton, received news that Mr Wickham and Mr Denny had left the regiment and were expected to travel to India, where they would be involved in some sort of business.

Lydia, Kitty, and some of the other local girls were saddened by the loss, and even Mrs Bennet, Mrs Phillips, and Mrs Long complained about it.

Elizabeth was relieved that the unpleasant story had come to a reasonably happy ending, without much drama to hurt Miss Darcy but probably with lots of money wasted by Mr Darcy.

And, a couple of days later, Mr Bingley informed them that Mr and Miss Darcy were expected to arrive at Netherfield soon.

“I look forward to finally seeing Netherfield and Longbourn,” Georgiana said. “And Mrs Annesley was grateful for the opportunity to spend a few weeks with her sister.”

“To tell you the truth, I look forward to returning to Hertfordshire too,” Darcy admitted.

He felt as eager as a schoolboy to see Elizabeth again.

For a while, he had been doubtful about her feelings, but Bingley, as well as Mr Gardiner, had hinted that Elizabeth had been asking about him and would welcome his presence.

He knew that if she did not want to see him again, she would not hesitate to let him know.

Even during their brief conversations in London there had been enough proof to keep his hopes high.

Despite his dreadful marriage proposal — who would propose to a woman by offending her family as he had?

— and her harsh refusal, despite his sense of disappointment and sorrow afterwards, there was still hope and still time for him to make amends.

“I imagine Mr Bingley and Miss Bennet must be eagerly anticipating their wedding. They are such kind people and so well suited to each other.”

“Indeed, they are.”

“Brother, I want to thank you again for helping George one more time. I know you could have punished him if you wanted to. I know our cousin helped you, and I imagine you spent a large sum of money to arrange George’s departure. I realise you did it to avoid a scandal, and I know it was my fault.”

“Dearest, I did what I believed to be best for everyone. It was certainly not your fault — my dealings with Wickham began many years ago, and his deception began when he betrayed our father’s affection.

This was the last chance I shall offer him, and I hope he will change his life for the better, though I doubt it.

From this moment on, George Wickham will be out of our lives.

How he will live is not our concern any longer. ”

There was silence for a while, then Georgiana continued, “I must apologise to Miss Elizabeth and Miss Bennet. I was in quite a poor disposition when we met, and my manners were not their best.”

“I am sure they will be happy to see you and expect no apologies. My manners when I first met them were definitely worse.”

“And yet, I am sure they will be happy to see you too, Brother.”

“I hope so,” he said thoughtfully.

They arrived at Netherfield in the early afternoon and were welcomed by a joyous Bingley.

As soon as they had changed after their journey, they called at Longbourn.

Their visit was a surprise for the family, but their reception was warm and friendly — quite the opposite to Darcy's previous dealings with the Bennets.

Elizabeth offered him a few words of welcome and a little smile.

Her countenance revealed some nervousness, but the joy was obvious in her sparkling eyes.

It was the proof he needed to put aside his last remaining doubts.

For a few days, Darcy and Georgiana spent time with Elizabeth and Miss Bennet and became better acquainted with the rest of the family. Darcy also spent a lot of time with Mr Bennet, while Georgiana became surprisingly comfortable with Mrs Bennet and the three younger sisters.

Quite often, Darcy observed Elizabeth and Georgiana together, enjoying little conversations, reading together, or even playing a duet at the pianoforte — something that Georgiana rarely did in company.

A week after they met, Georgiana was comfortable enough with the Bennets to paint them all together, on the small lane in front of their house.

As Mr Bennet said, it was their last portrait as a family with five daughters, before one of them married.

With the weather so warm and inviting, strolls in the garden were among their preferred activities.

On the first occasion, they all walked together — six ladies and two gentlemen, in a

large, chatty group.

The second time, Bingley and his betrothed walked ahead of the others.

Elizabeth and Darcy walked a little behind them, while the four girls brought up the rear, talking animatedly.

The third stroll took place only two days before the wedding, and this time Bingley expressed a desire to walk towards Oakham Mount.

Elizabeth and Darcy followed them, as chaperons, but the younger sisters — all four of them — preferred to remain close to the house.

Bingley and Miss Bennet were already ahead of them when Elizabeth began a conversation about the lovely weather and the beauty of nature in the spring.

“Miss Bennet, I have to confess I deliberately arranged this walk,” Darcy said, nervous about her response. She stopped and looked at him, puzzled. “I asked Bingley to suggest a longer walk and Georgiana to hold your sisters back.”

“So, it was a plot?” Elizabeth asked, blushing and smiling.

“Yes. I needed a few moments of privacy with you, and it was impossible to find it in the house.”

“Oh.”

“I hope it was not presumptuous on my part and you do not mind.”

“Not at all. In fact, I confess I hoped it was a plot, but I feared to assume too much.”

Her smile was sweet and warm, and her eyes seemed bright with delight.

“Miss Bennet, whatever you assumed, it was certainly not too much. You certainly know my feelings and desires, though I might have expressed them most inarticulately last time. You are too generous to trifle with me, so I beg you to tell me whether your feelings have changed since we last spoke in Kent. One word from you will silence me forever on this subject if that is what you wish.”

Her face coloured, her eyes widened, and her lips parted slightly.

“I do not wish you to be silent, Mr Darcy. My feelings and desires have changed so much that I would like nothing more than to hear you speak about yours. I hoped you would do so, but I feared it was all too late.”

Still incredulous, he held her hands and brought them to his heart.

“I would dearly love to tell you again how ardently I admire and love you, Miss Bennet. But, if I could be so bold, I would rather ask than just speak. Ask a question that was once improperly addressed and needs to be reworded.”

“I expect you to be bold, Mr Darcy, and I shall be the same by saying that your question will certainly receive a different answer. Furthermore, I must tell you that you are the only man in the world from whom I wish to hear that question.”

“Your wish is my command, Miss Bennet,” he said, moving even closer. “Would you do me the honour of becoming my wife and sharing love and happiness with me?”

“I certainly would, Mr Darcy,” she answered, releasing her right hand and caressing his face until he captured it again and placed a tender kiss in her palm, then moved closer, his lips claiming hers to seal their commitment to each other.

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Darcy looked at the sheets spread out on his desk, fighting tears in the corner of his eyes, his heart filled with love, gratitude, and pride.

They were all portraits of him, Elizabeth, and their son — Alexander Darcy, age two — painted by Georgiana.

It was his sister's present to him and Elizabeth.

What shocked him and impressed him the most was not just his sister's remarkable talent but the touch of love that Georgiana had put into those paintings.

It was the third anniversary of his wedding to Elizabeth, and they had celebrated it with the Bingleys, their own anniversary being less than a month earlier. The Bingleys also had a son, David, who was only a few days older than Alexander.

Their families and friends were in attendance, including Bingley's sisters, with whom he had finally made peace.

His marriage to Elizabeth had not just filled his life with joy but had also brought laughter and liveliness to the halls of Pemberley that had been silent for too long.

With Elizabeth by his side, he now understood the real meaning of felicity in marriage, and Georgiana had learnt the meaning of sisterly affection.

Under Elizabeth's guidance, Georgiana had managed to forgive herself for her past errors, to grow in confidence, and to smile more, and Elizabeth's sisters had become hers too.

She had put aside George Wickham's betrayal, but at the age of nineteen, she showed no interest in being in the company of young men, nor in opening her heart again.

The Bennet sisters were all engaged, and Mary was expected to marry in a month.

He gazed at the paintings again, caressing the one in which Elizabeth and Alexander were smiling. The sound of the door made him raise his eyes, only to see his wife walking towards him.

"What are you doing, my love?" she asked.

"I am admiring these paintings of the most beautiful woman and her son. I am taking advantage of a few minutes of privacy, as I expect your father to return at any moment," he jested.

She smiled and leant closer, and his arms closed around her. "You have no other choice but to share the library with Papa since he gave you his blessing to marry me. And you should be content that Mama is busy spoiling Alexander and David, otherwise she would give you all her attention."

"I have no complaints, my beloved wife. I enjoy having everyone here, especially your father and your uncle. But I still value my privacy — I shall not deny it."

Elizabeth looked at the portraits, brushing her fingers over them. "They are painted with incredible talent and genuine love," she said.

"I was thinking the same thing when you entered."

His lips captured hers for a moment, then she withdrew a few inches.

"I have something for you. For our third anniversary. You always offer me wonderful gifts, so it took me quite a while to find something that we would both like."

She pulled from her pocket a black velvet box, and he took it, surprised. Under her loving gaze, he opened it to reveal a beautiful pocket watch.

“I confess I stole the idea from your grandmother. And Georgiana helped me,” she explained. He opened it and inside saw a miniature of Elizabeth and an inscription.

‘Three years of sharing ardent love and pure bliss.’

“What do you think?” she whispered.

“I think I love the gift almost as much as I love you. Almost, but certainly not so ardently,” he said hoarsely, embracing her tighter. “It is a perfect gift, truly. It will always be in my pocket. Your portrait, your words, your love.”

“And it will remind you that a watch was the reason for our reunion,” she said, smiling, her face lifted to his.

“A watch and your perceptiveness, Mrs Darcy. But I am quite sure that, even without that lost watch and that coincidence, I would have found a way to earn your love and hand in marriage.”

“Would you have proposed a second time, without the circumstances that brought us together?”

“Absolutely. Unless you had requested that I stop trying, I would have never abandoned hope. But I admit I am grateful for the twist of fate that placed that watch in that window, before your eyes,” he said, a moment before she silenced him with a tender kiss.

They had discussed those circumstances so many times that no more words were needed, only one more kiss before they returned to their family and friends.

THE END