



Something Wickham This Way Comes (Mr Darcy's Honour #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: The tune was halting and imperfect, mirroring how their love had grown and would continue to grow in the next months and years.

When Elizabeth Bennet meets Mr Darcy, he is running away, for she is in the company of Mr Wickham, her suitor. Mr Darcy expresses vague concerns and hints at improprieties in Mr Wickham's past but does not give her any specifics on the matter.

Elizabeth had been immediately taken in by Mr Wickham's charm, as was everyone else within Meryton and Hertfordshire. Mr and Mrs Bennet, Elizabeth's sisters, Elizabeth's aunt and uncle Philips, and Mr Wickham's friend from the militia, Mr Denny, all believe Wickham and Elizabeth are perfect for one another. They both love walks, humorous anecdotes, and laughing at her disastrous playing of the pianoforte.

Ignoring her aunt Gardiner's warnings, and well as Mr Darcy's veiled criticisms of her beau, Elizabeth decides that if Mr Wickham offers for her, she will accept. Though the friendship between Mr Darcy and Elizabeth might be growing, it is not enough for her to be swayed from her original course.

Mr Darcy finds himself growing increasingly intrigued by Elizabeth Bennet but is reluctant to tell her the truth about the man, or to show her interest of his own. As he grows increasingly attracted to Elizabeth, he fears telling her the full truth of why Mr Wickham is unsuitable yet equally fears it will be too late to extricate her from his grasp.

Total Pages (Source): 15

CHAPTER ONE

After three days of rain, Elizabeth was thrilled to be out of doors.

The sunrise, seen from her bedroom window, had been pale and peaceful.

Mist spilled over the rolling hills, sheep dotted the green at impossibly perfect intervals, and the sky seeped to paler colours so slowly she hardly perceived the change.

The afternoon was bright, a relief after days of leaden low clouds that had refused to leave. She felt light and free.

Her younger sisters, typically so full of mirth, not only refused to appreciate the natural perfection, but had taken to complaining about everything, making Elizabeth regret bringing them on her walk.

“My hem is full of mud, Lizzy!” cried Lydia.

“And my slippers are ruined,” said Kitty.

Kitty had just stepped in a sizeable puddle on the path after ignoring Elizabeth’s warnings to watch her step, and there would be no recovering the silk slippers.

Their father often complained about waste, explaining repeatedly that this year’s harvest had been bad, meaning the tenants could not pay rent.

While their mother had suggested throwing the ‘delinquents’ off the land, Papa had reminded her that they were good people and good tenants who could not control the weather.

While their father could be too soft-hearted, Mama never suffered from such sentiment, unless it came to indulging her girls.

Watching Kitty and Lydia examining their garments filled Elizabeth with irritation. “I told you to dress properly for a walk. What did you expect with the weather we have had?”

Lydia scowled. “You cannot expect us to dress as you do, Lizzy.” Her gaze shifted to the coarse skirt and thick boots Elizabeth had felt no shame in wearing for the occasion. “Especially when men might be about.”

Kitty nodded emphatically. “One’s future husband might round any corner.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, disappointed to hear their mother’s marital advice emerging from her sisters’ mouths. “Men? There are no men about, and even if?—”

At that very moment, two male figures appeared around the bend. Elizabeth would have laughed had Lydia not lifted her chin in defiant victory.

“It is Mr Denny!” Lydia took Kitty’s hand and the two raced towards the men, the shorter one of whom the sisters had met at their aunt and uncle’s.

“Girls, it is not proper to—” Elizabeth stopped, for what would be the point? They would ignore any reprimand, and the damage was done. The gentlemen had already seen Lydia and Kitty scampering in a most indelicate manner to greet them.

Elizabeth followed, albeit at a slower pace, but feared tarrying too long lest the girls

find their way to more unchecked trouble.

Mr Denny, whom they had met at Aunt and Uncle Philips's house, was a kind man who told entertaining stories and enjoyed a good joke.

He was laughing heartily at something one of the girls said, and bowed at the approaching Elizabeth.

She bobbed a curtsy, and he gestured to the man at his side.

"May I introduce you to my friend, George Wickham?"

Elizabeth nodded and curtsied to the man.

As Mr Denny explained that they had met in the Regulars, Elizabeth took note of the new man's fine figure and handsome face: long and angular.

His blond hair fairly sparkled in the late morning sun, and his chin was bowed a bit, so that when he looked at her, it was through the veil of his thick lashes, which made Elizabeth's legs go weak, a reaction not produced by any of the men to whom she had been introduced in a very long time.

Mr Denny said, "Mr Wickham and I were just walking back to town, if you would care to accompany us."

"We would love to!" shouted Kitty.

Elizabeth cringed at her sister's unchecked enthusiasm. "But Kitty, you were just complaining of your slippers."

Kitty's cheeks pinkened. "As they are already ruined, it will do no harm to walk in

them further.”

Mr Denny looked to Elizabeth, and she nodded her consent.

He turned on his heel and the younger girls flanked him, nearly skipping to keep up with his long strides.

Their bobbing bonnets and flapping ribbons would have been an entirely comical sight if Elizabeth had not been concerned by their overabundant enthusiasm.

And at being left with a stranger with whom she was expected to converse.

“Shall we?” Mr Wickham asked, and when she agreed, they followed at a more measured pace. Elizabeth was relieved that he did not put out an elbow for her to take, though she was pleased to walk at his side. His manner was amiable, and she could not help but steal looks at his handsome countenance.

“I take it,” he began, “you are from Meryton?”

“Longbourn has been our family home for generations. It is a mile from Meryton. We have been enjoying the day. The rain has kept us locked away for too long, as you can imagine.”

“You prefer to be out of doors?”

She looked round the edge of her bonnet at him. “Yes, I do.”

“If you were a man, you might have become a huntsman.”

“If I were a man, I might have become a great many things.”

He raised an eyebrow in a most charming manner. “And what, pray, would you do if you had such a choice?”

“Become a soldier, perhaps.” When he scoffed, she decided she would remember to ask him why, but first she would answer him further. “I like adventure and I like to travel.”

“To travel? Where have you been?”

“Not many places yet, but I love exploring new places and learning new things.”

Mr Wickham smiled at this, and the tilting feeling this gave her was disorienting. She studied him further. His features were symmetrical, his teeth straight, his eyes a dazzling blue, like liquid sapphires— Heavens!

“Miss Bennet?”

She realised she had not heard something he must have asked. “Pardon?”

He smiled again, this time with a somehow lazier manner, as if he was accustomed to charming young women out of words. “To where would you like to travel?”

“Anywhere. France, when the war ends, Scotland, Italy, the Orient.”

He raised his eyebrows. “The Orient?”

“Yes. My father has books in his library describing it, and it intrigues me.”

“How uncommon for a woman of your realm.”

She nodded, wishing to say more about the challenges she had in finding entertaining

people with whom to speak, especially ladies, but knew that she was to keep demurely silent about her true feelings. Instead, she asked, “Why would you steer me away from a future in the military?”

He absently pulled at his uniform jacket, a bright red that stood out magnificently against the grove of trees through which their party was passing.

“There is much drudgery. Drills and endless polishing of boots and buttons, and odd hours to keep, and all of this to prepare for battle, where one might be killed or disfigured.” One corner of his mouth quirked.

“And disfigurement seems quite off-putting.”

She nearly agreed out loud, for disfiguring his face would be a tragedy. Heavens! And again, heavens! This man had a strange power that both thrilled and terrified her. She managed to reply to him, but only barely. “When you put it that way, it does seem rather unpalatable.”

They walked the last stretch before reaching Meryton’s shopping street, speaking of her wish that she could go to university, a subject which had caused him to grow oddly sombre.

She was relieved for the opportunity to change the subject to that of which shops he enjoyed, though she was curious to know what he had not shared.

Her sisters needed minding, and though neither Mr Denny nor Mr Wickham seemed troubled by their high-spirited silliness, Elizabeth did wish they might temper their behaviour.

The girls darted into Leary’s Haberdasher, and Elizabeth followed.

The men entered, as well, but after a few moments of Kitty and Lydia arguing over ribbons and lace, Mr Denny suggested the men go to the tobacconist.

“You go,” said Mr Wickham. “I shall remain with these lovely ladies.”

Elizabeth suspected he chose to stay to be near her, and heat rose in her cheeks.

While her sisters bickered over the wares in the shop, Elizabeth and Mr Wickham spoke of his travels about England, and she shared her desire to see the Lakes.

All the while, her sisters tugged at bits and bobs, and argued over who had more money and whose turn it was to pay.

Mr Wickham stepped in and offered to purchase one ribbon each.

“No,” said Elizabeth. “Girls, it is not proper.” She ought not need to explain to any of them that accepting a gift would be equivalent to an engagement.

“Lizzy,” whined Lydia, “you are too concerned with what is proper.”

Elizabeth wished to reprimand Lydia with “And you are not concerned enough,” but that would be, well, improper, as well! What was she to do to manage these girls?

Elizabeth said, “I think?—”

Lydia held out a red ribbon, much the colour of Mr Wickham’s coat, and placed it in Mr Wickham’s open palm. “This one, sir, if you please.”

And Kitty handed him a white one. “And for me.”

The girls fell into each other giggling, and Mr Wickham bowed, walking towards the

shopkeeper to pay. On his way, he took hold of a deep green ribbon and said, “It complements your dark eyes, Miss Bennet. It would be a shame not to let me procure it for you.”

Elizabeth shook her head, too filled with rage at her sisters to speak, and troubled by Mr Wickham’s lack of propriety.

“It need not mean a thing,” he said, as if reading her mind.

She shook her head again, but feared what he might think of her refusal. Why did she care so much about his opinion?

As they exited the shop, they were greeted by Mr Denny, who held a pouch of loose tobacco, accompanied by her aunt and uncle Philips.

“Good afternoon, my dear nieces!” Aunt Philips cried out.

The younger girls hurried over, bursting with news of Mr Wickham’s gifts, and more than one passer-by turned a head towards the commotion.

“My, my, my, what generosity, Mr Wickham!” Aunt Philips exclaimed. “Lizzy, were you given something as well?”

She shook her head, feeling her temples throb. Even her aunt would not help in reining in her young sisters!

Her aunt asked, “So, Lizzy, you and our dear new friend Mr Wickham are getting acquainted, I see?”

Elizabeth braced herself for what she knew would occur: her aunt would spread this news to her friends, as she did with every titbit that came near her, and insinuate

things about their attraction and future together. Elizabeth loved her aunt and uncle, but did wish they might keep their counsel.

“Mr Wickham,” Aunt Philips said, drawing out his name and making it sound untoward, somehow, “what a gesture, and you only having just met my nieces. My unmarried nieces.” At this she snickered, and Mr Wickham looked at Elizabeth with a shrug.

It seemed he had already become acquainted enough with her aunt and uncle not to be offended or too concerned by their prodding and gossip. This put him in an even better light.

Uncle Philips laughed heartily, his naturally ruddy face turning redder. “My dear, you must refrain from your matchmaking.”

“What is the fun in that?”

They both guffawed.

Elizabeth’s eyes flicked to Mr Wickham to see how he was judging this exchange, and was happily met by another of his warm smiles. A man not put off by the prospect of matchmaking or meddling relatives? Well, he was surprising.

Aunt Philips said, “Mr Denny, Mr Wickham, you must come to our home for tea along with our nieces.”

Though Elizabeth was pleased by the prospect, she did not leap for joy as her young sisters did.

“Unfortunately, we cannot,” Mr Denny said. “We must return to our duties.”

“Then you name the day and we shall welcome you with open arms,” said Uncle Philips.

The men conferred, and Monday was declared the date of choice.

Elizabeth knew the moments would drag until that appointed time.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am

CHAPTER TWO

The next afternoon at Longbourn, a man came calling, accompanied by a young woman.

Elizabeth had gone to bed early the night before, claiming a headache but being keen to read a book her father had loaned her from his library, and that morning, she had been out walking very early.

As a result, she had missed the announcement of anticipated visitors.

News that a Mr Bingley had let Netherfield, a stately home whose lands abutted theirs, had been at the fore of conversation for weeks, but no one had met the elusive gentleman.

Elizabeth had heard her mother musing that he was, in fact, unmarried, so he might marry one of her daughters—Jane, of course, being the prettiest and so held her highest hopes aloft.

Mama had begged Mr Bennet to call on him, but Elizabeth had not been aware that introductions and invitations had been made.

Thus, before their arrival, when Elizabeth walked into the house muddy and with tousled hair, she was surprised to be grabbed and marched upstairs to prepare for a caller.

As Sarah, their maid, buttoned Elizabeth into a clean dress, Jane sat quietly looking

out the window. Anyone who did not know Jane might think she was passively admiring the scenery, but Elizabeth knew her sister was nervous.

“Jane, do not fret. He is a visitor, nothing more.”

Jane’s fingers, which had been lacing, unlacing, and relacing themselves—Elizabeth’s clue to her sister’s anxiety—were now still. “I never know what to say.”

“Let him begin the conversation.”

Sarah had Elizabeth sit and began to braid her freshly washed hair. Elizabeth thought a bath unnecessary, but Mama would not hear of her refusing, given her ‘horrificing state’. Elizabeth thought leaves in the hair were hardly the same as war or natural disaster, but her mother was unrelenting.

“He might begin the conversation,” Jane said, “but I would not know where to take it.”

Elizabeth spun in her seat, accidentally undoing Sarah’s work. Apologising, Elizabeth turned back and spoke to Jane through the mirror. “You converse with me daily, as well as with Mama, Papa, Mary, Kitty?—”

“Yes, but a man?”

“Papa is a man,” Elizabeth replied with a teasing grin. She had intended it as both reassurance and a joke, but Jane’s brow remained furrowed.

“I fear I will make a jumble of things. I have been out for four years now, and no man has made an offer for me.”

Elizabeth desperately desired to go to her sister and hold her, but the maid was still pinning her hair. “Jane, you do not make a jumble of anything. The few men in our circle are undesirable. Even if they had been interested, I should have warned you away from every one of them.”

“Mr Parker is handsome and?—”

“Was secretly engaged.”

“Mr Abney was?—”

“A bore. And a boor! We have known both about him since we were children. You cannot find fault in yourself for not securing such men.”

“So few come through Hertfordshire. How ever am I to meet a husband?”

“Ask Mama and Papa to send you to London.”

She looked back out the window as a way of saying no.

Jane had always feared being amongst too many people, and their parents had never liked town, so invitations to stay with Aunt and Uncle Gardiner had gone unaccepted, much to Elizabeth’s disappointment.

Elizabeth would have liked to have gone to town for the excitement, but additionally, she did worry that their prospects were few and growing dimmer by remaining always in their small corner of Hertfordshire.

“A carriage,” Jane whispered, and the sisters, after thanking Sarah, hurried downstairs where their mother was in a flutter over whether the teacups, already set out, should have been the ones with pink flowers rather than the blue.

When Mr Bingley was announced, Mr Bennet greeted him warmly, and then was introduced to Mr Bingley's sister.

More introductions were made, and while Mr Bingley looked about with enthusiastic pleasure, his sister appeared as if she had eaten a lemon.

When shown a chair, she even looked at the cushion as if there might be dirt upon it.

Elizabeth fought back every urge to comment, or worse, slap her.

Mr Bingley tasted the sponge cake and smiled, complimenting Mrs Bennet and saying their cook must share the recipe with his cook. This set Mrs Bennet aflutter, which brought on more scowls from Miss Bingley.

The afternoon went on in such a fashion, only punctuated by Mrs Bennet suggesting a walk in the garden followed by a thunderclap, thwarting that plan and a longer visit, for Miss Bingley declared herself frightened of storms and insisted on a return to the safety of Netherfield.

While disappointing, Elizabeth noted that Mr Bingley's gaze went to Jane at this, and that they locked eyes for longer than expected.

Mr Bingley declared he would invite them all for tea, which set Lydia and Kitty to squealing, and Miss Bingley once again insisted that they hurry home.

CHAPTER THREE

The following days were filled with dress mending and glove finding and shoe assessing, for the girls were not careful with their clothes, and their finances were limited enough that new items could not be procured for every event.

And while Elizabeth enjoyed some of it, she preferred to escape for walks or time to read, and more importantly, looked most forward to tea at the Philippses' with the soldiers.

When Elizabeth and her sisters arrived at her aunt and uncle's, Mr Denny and Mr Wickham were already ensconced in the sitting room, a room which was too dark for Elizabeth's taste: dark red velvet curtains, low carved ceilings, and paintings of a severe hue covering up every bit of the dark wood panelled walls.

Some considered it intimate, but she favoured the more fashionable paler colours and higher ceilings.

Despite their surroundings, the mood was light and the food, as ever, was good. Her aunt and uncle sometimes vexed her, but they did serve consistently delicious treats.

They were a lively group, large enough to keep the conversation active but small enough that no one broke apart into separate discussions.

They spoke of the weather, and of a new opera in London all had heard of but none had seen, and of the distant war, though that subject was quickly deemed too upsetting for the ladies, so the subject of a forthcoming assembly was broached.

Musings about who might be there and which gowns would be worn and who might dance with whom kept them busy for some time until what music would be played was discussed, at which point Aunt Philips clapped her hands together and declared, “My nieces, you must play for our new friends.” Her hand swept to the pianoforte, carefully placed by the window at such an angle that the player could be admired as much as the view of the distant hills.

Kitty leapt up first, anxious to play *The Sussex Waltz* , which she had recently perfected. It was lovely and soothing, and set Elizabeth to dreaming of dancing with a man’s arms about her. Mr Wickham’s? She flushed at the thought even as she glanced towards him.

Lydia skipped to the bench when her older sister was finished to play a jig that had them all clapping along.

At its conclusion, Lydia gave a single elaborate curtsey, her head tilted just so at the gentlemen.

Elizabeth shook her head. It was astonishing that at such a young age her sister knew how to move and flirt.

Did Lydia and Kitty practise such flirtations in their room?

Elizabeth suspected they did. Practise or no, there was a comprehension that Elizabeth believed the girls, or at least Lydia, might be born with.

Their middle sister, Mary, did not know how to move in such a fashion, and truly, neither did Elizabeth. Not with such finesse.

“Now you, Lizzy,” Aunt Philips called to her.

Elizabeth demurred instantly. “I fear I have not practised in ages. I ought not to exhibit my fudges and slurs for your party.”

“Lizzy, you must,” her aunt said.

Considering her options of an ongoing argument or playing with errors, Elizabeth decided that simply agreeing was best. She rose and walked to the pianoforte, pulled the bench closer while wondering what to play, and lifted her hands, resting her fingers gingerly on the keys.

Mama’s instructions came back to her, as if she was seven years old again, pushing her tongue into the space where a front tooth had just fallen out.

She could hear her mother’s voice saying, “Lizzy, your third finger comes up and over to play E. Up and over!” Mama was a spirited teacher, and though Jane and Mary excelled, Elizabeth could never quite master their smooth movements, and would get stuck or tangled or both.

She did practise. Or she started. But then the birds would be chirping, the sun would be shining, and the hills would beckon her to ramble, and before she knew it, she had slipped out the back door and into the fresh air.

Now, however, she wished she had been more disciplined, for once again she was called upon to display a talent she did not possess as fully as desired.

The ability to wend one’s way through a dense wood did not seem to be a talent in as much demand as a perfectly played tune, not for a lady in any case.

Her fingers tapped away and the tune, Boccherini’s String Quartet in E , came alive.

It reminded her of dancing around the sitting room when her sisters and she were far

younger, dreaming of putting on their finest gowns and attending balls.

In some ways, balls were more than she could have dreamed, and in some ways more painful.

The pressure to meet the right man dampened the pleasure, but she did adore dancing and, if she admitted it, the possibility of scandal—someone else's scandal, of course.

Her fingers slipped, and she reprimanded herself for being so distractable, though mercifully the piece was nearly at a close.

When she finished, all applauded, and Mr Wickham called out, "That was marvellous."

She shook her head. "Passable at best—certainly not marvellous."

A smile played at his lips. "Miss Elizabeth, perfection is not needed to enjoy a thing. Too many people wait for all to be just so and in so doing miss the pleasures of life."

Elizabeth's heart quickened as she noted the sparkle in his eyes. What other man had she met that was so lively? That made her feel so alive?

Her aunt chided, "You do yourself too little credit, Lizzy. It was lovely."

Kitty rose to partake of more sweets, and Lydia followed. Another day, Elizabeth might have left the piano bench to scold them, saying they had had enough, but Mr Wickham's gaze on her was enthralling.

He rose and crossed the room, stopping at the side of the pianoforte and resting his hand casually on the polished wood. "I wonder, Miss Elizabeth, if I might persuade you to a duet?"

When she nodded, he reached for the stack of music, and in doing so, brushed her shoulder just the slightest, sending a shiver through her.

She ought to have asked him to step away, but she did not desire that.

She desired... What? A kiss? That he declare his ardent love for her this very moment?

Foolishness. Again, her cheeks heated almost as if she imagined him knowing her thoughts.

He remained close as he flipped through the music sheets.

This was too bold, too familiar. Her aunt or uncle should intervene, should they not?

Yet as she looked to them, their faces were placid, as was Mr Denny's.

A man and a woman playing a duet in front of company was not unheard of nor was it untoward, so why was she concerned?

Because they did not know how her heart raced, and her body tingled, as a result of Mr Wickham's nearness.

"Ah! This one!" he said. "I adore this tune."

He held the song sheet close to her, and she could feel his breath upon the skin of her neck.

"Forgive me, sir, I-I do not know it, and my abilities are not such that I can play by sight."

“That is a shame.” He sat beside her and reached for the keys.

“I know a different one. Let’s see...” He gazed up at the ceiling as if the notes might be transcribed there.

Then he cleared his throat, looked out over his audience—which by this time had dissolved into their own conversations—and sang as he played.

This world, they say, is a world of woe,

But that I do deny,

Can sorrow from the goblet flow,

Or pain from beauty’s eye?

The wise are fools with all their rules,

When they would joy control;

If life’s a pain, I say again,

Let’s drown it in the bowl.

She lifted her eyebrows, fighting back a laugh. “An interesting song. One perhaps better for a gathering of officers.”

He smiled and offered a nod, and she noted Mr Denny across the room smirking while shaking his head.

She wanted Mr Wickham to remain at her side. “Sir, there is one I know. Could you

play A Patriot's Waltz ?”

“I can play anything with the proper encouragement.” He winked, which sent another shiver through her.

They played, and though they hit many wrong notes, they laughed and continued on, and she thought it was perfection. How freeing to be with someone unconcerned with the right tune and the right notes and the right way to behave!

This man was wonderful or dangerous. She could not tell which.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three days later, Elizabeth was sitting again in her aunt and uncle's parlour with them, as well as Mr Wickham and Mr Denny. Kitty and Lydia had been most put out when they were required to stay home to meet a dance master their mother had secured.

"But we can learn another day!" Lydia had whined.

"We have paid for today. One day only," their father had admonished.

Lydia had lifted her chin. "One day with the dance master? Then it might as well be none, for Kitty has no affinity for dance."

As was her custom, Kitty began immediately to tear up while Lydia laughed and teased her about her lack of natural talent. Jane had managed to stifle the burgeoning argument while Mary looked on disapprovingly.

Later that afternoon, Elizabeth had walked alone to Meryton to call upon her aunt, and was not disappointed to be without her sisters. Mr Denny and Mr Wickham had arrived first and, after effusive greetings and much commotion, all had settled in the parlour.

"And so," Mr Wickham was saying, "the officer fell off his horse right into the mud puddle and was too drunk to even move!"

All began to laugh, and Mr Denny added, "He remained there until morning," which

set them to laughing even more heartily.

Aunt Philips wiped her eyes with her napkin. “You young soldiers. My heavens, the trouble you all get into.”

The men exchanged glances, which suggested more trouble than puddles and a few drinks, but Elizabeth asked no questions, for she did not truly wish to know the stories of men, as she thought it might put her off them entirely.

Then Mr Wickham looked her way and her cheeks flushed, and she thought renouncing men at this juncture might be premature.

Uncle Philips nibbled at the edges of a slightly burnt biscuit with a scowl on his face.

The Philipses’ new maid of all work had been asked to prepare their repast. It was unclear to Elizabeth whether the girl was attempting a new recipe or had no gift for baking, which, given the Philipses’ love of sweets would not bode well for her prolonged employment.

Uncle Philips set down the biscuit. “What a disappointment. We ought to have secured tarts. Allard’s tarts are the most delicious of any I have ever tasted.”

“The most delicious,” added Aunt Philips vehemently.

“I have never had them,” said Mr Wickham.

Aunt Philips clutched her bodice. “Never? In all of the weeks you have been in Meryton you have never— This must be remedied!” She twisted in her seat to look behind her. “O’Brien! Where is O’Brien?”

The maid was, indeed, absent. She was likely attending to one of the many tasks

required of her, but any time Aunt Philips needed her and she was absent, Aunt Philips became agitated.

Elizabeth was not certain how O'Brien could tolerate the constant bellowing and reprimands when she was, in fact, tirelessly managing the household, but it was not for Elizabeth to judge.

"We must have the tarts!" exclaimed Aunt Philips to her husband.

"Agreed, agreed," said Uncle Philips. "Where the devil is that woman?" Now he was craning his neck in search of the absent servant. "O'Brien!" he shouted.

Elizabeth did not believe Mr Wickham would be entirely put off by such a racket, for if he had found her aunt and uncle uncouth, he would have ceased attending tea at their house sooner. Even so, Elizabeth cringed.

"If you desire tarts," said Mr Wickham, rising to his feet, "I would be pleased to procure them."

Elizabeth thought it alarming to have a guest purchasing sweets for a household to which he had been invited, but Aunt Philips said, "Yes. Oh yes. That would be lovely."

"Miss Bennet," Mr Wickham said, "the day is warm and dry. Would you care to accompany me on the short stroll to the bakery?"

There was much wrong with this scenario, but the walls of the parlour suddenly felt too close, and her desire to remain with Mr Wickham was strong enough to ignore propriety momentarily.

She rose, relieved that Jane, who was even more propriety-bound, had not

accompanied her this day.

Mr Wickham opened the parlour door for her, and they walked out towards the front door.

O'Brien hurried towards them, and Mr Wickham refused his overcoat, saying the weather was fine, while Elizabeth allowed O'Brien to drape her deep green short cloak over her shoulders.

She might remove it later, but she did not desire to shiver in front of Mr Wickham.

As they strolled, a gust of wind blew up one side of her cloak, and Mr Wickham took hold of it and set it straight. The gesture felt intimate, and Elizabeth was simultaneously embarrassed and hoping the wind might blow again.

Along the road, she nodded at those she knew from Meryton, wondering if this might be her future: walking about with Mr Wickham greeting neighbours she had known all of her life.

Could he be all she had waited for? He had no title or lands, but he had a position with the militia.

Perhaps she could accompany him as he travelled, finally having the adventures she desired.

Undoubtedly, she could look at his fine face forever.

It was so perfect that it seemed as if it were made by some witchcraft: the sharpness of his chin, the prominence of his cheekbones, the crookedness of his smile that spoke of a mischief she could not help but be drawn to.

It was not just his face that she admired, though admire it she did over and over.

No, he was more than that. He was amiable and kind, and had an unnameable power that drew her in.

She noted that others were drawn to him, as well, and she found that bit all the more enticing.

Case in point: as they passed the tailor's shop, the proprietor came out to speak with Mr Wickham, asking about a coat and pants he had altered, though since the conversation quickly turned to hunting and the weather, it seemed the man simply desired time with Mr Wickham.

Elizabeth understood why. His easy smile and ability to speak with anyone not only put others at ease but lured them closer.

At last, Mr Wickham smoothly extricated himself, explaining they were on an errand for the Philipses, and the tailor begged Mr Wickham to visit soon. Only then did the man nod to Elizabeth and offer his well-wishes, apologising for not attending to her earlier.

Mr Wickham walked away, his fingers pressing momentarily on Elizabeth's back to direct her down the path. Elizabeth's heart quickened. She felt electricity run through her body and wondered if he felt the same.

Just before they entered the bakery door, Elizabeth spotted the gentleman she had met a few days back at Longbourn.

She offered a nod. He smiled and approached, and only then did she recall his name: Mr Bingley.

She ought to have remembered, for he had been the sole topic of conversation for days in her household, but she had not imagined meeting him in town.

People always seemed stranger in different locations and situations than expected.

“Miss Bennet, how lovely to see you again. How is your sister?”

Elizabeth hid her joy at knowing he was thinking of Jane.

The two had seemed quite compatible, and Elizabeth hoped for a match, though would not say any such thing to Jane lest her sister retreat into herself and no longer share her confidences.

Nor had Elizabeth said a word of her thoughts to her mother lest it send Mama into an optimistic fit of wedding planning.

“My sister is well, thank you. Mr Bingley, may I introduce you to Mr Wickham?”

An expression flicked across Mr Bingley’s face so quickly that Elizabeth had no time to identify it.

Mr Bingley consented to the introduction, and Elizabeth performed the office.

Strangely, Mr Wickham gave no hint of knowing Mr Bingley, which made her all the more curious about Mr Bingley’s initial reaction.

The gentlemen spoke of Netherfield and their thoughts on Hertfordshire, both commenting on the region’s beauty.

Mr Wickham’s eyes flicked to her at the last, and her stomach flipped. What made him so alluring?

Just then a man came out of the shop. He was tall with dark hair and a knit brow as if he was lost in thought. Then he startled upon seeing his friend in conversation with others.

At his approach, Mr Bingley said to him, “Darcy, may I introduce you to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

The man gave no reply, for his eyes were locked on Mr Wickham, his jaw clenched.

The silence pressed on them like leaden clouds before a storm.

“A-and,” stammered Mr Bingley, “Mr?—”

The tall man turned on his heel and marched away with quick paces. Elizabeth’s breath stopped. He had refused to be introduced. How rude!

Mr Bingley offered an apology and excused himself, but not before a quick glance at Mr Wickham.

The humiliation of the refusal burnt in her chest. And yet, no.

She had not been the object of the man’s distress.

It had been Mr Wickham. But why? Never had she seen such a violent reaction by one gentleman to another.

Surely some past encounter had soured their relationship, but how egregious could it have been that the brown-haired man—Mr Darcy was his name—had stormed off without engaging in the expected pleasantries?

She looked to Mr Wickham, and there was a darkness in his face she had never seen.

“How odd!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Why would?—”

“Miss Bennet,” interrupted Mr Wickham, his expression shifting to cheerfulness—forced cheer, she might say—“were we not bound for the bakery? Your aunt and uncle will be disappointed if we arrive without their beloved tarts.”

She agreed but was unable to ignore the darkness she had seen. No, perhaps it had been more than that. Had Elizabeth seen fear in Mr Wickham?

CHAPTER FIVE

After the much-commented upon and quickly consumed tarts, Elizabeth made for home amid promises made for another visit soon.

Upon Elizabeth's arrival to Longbourn, she was surprised to find guests at tea. Mr Bingley, his elegant sister, and Mr Darcy! The very man who had refused an introduction!

The guests were ensconced in the parlour with her entire family fluttering about them.

The men rose in greeting, and Elizabeth curtseyed.

Her father said, "Lizzy, I know you are acquainted with Mr Bingley and Miss Bingley."

Elizabeth nodded. She curtseyed to the open-faced Mr Bingley and smiled, then she and Miss Bingley curtseyed to one another.

Elizabeth, noting the blankness of her expression, wondered whether Miss Bingley was dull, or was masterful at hiding emotion.

Given her brother's liveliness, Elizabeth suspected the latter.

Her father then said, "May I present their friend, Mr Darcy?"

Elizabeth nodded and curtseyed to Mr Darcy who bowed and looked at her as if he

had something to say, but instead tightened his lips.

Elizabeth was drawn into the mystery of his reserve.

Some men were aloof due to snobbery, while others were disinterested in anything but a game of pursuit that might end in the ruination of a young lady.

Though she and Mr Darcy had only had that single—and singular—interaction, he did not strike her as either of those sorts of men. What was he about?

“Mary,” her father announced, “was about to play for us.”

Elizabeth sucked in a breath. Why would her family allow such a thing in front of new acquaintances?

Elizabeth asked for some tea, hoping that distraction might delay or cancel the display, or at least give her something on which to focus during the music as she attended to sugar and cream and a spoon to stir and stir.

“Did Jane already play?” asked Elizabeth, and her father affirmed. She turned to the guests. “Jane practises daily. We do so enjoy hearing it. The discipline it takes to become proficient is impressive.” Why was she speaking so when she ought to be silent?

Her heart was pounding, and she wanted nothing more than to rush towards the piano bench where Mary was fussing with the music sheet and straighten Mary’s skirts, which were bunched up awkwardly, or to shove Mary off the bench completely.

This was like watching a wagon approach a cliff, and she was powerless to stop it.

Glancing down at her gown, Elizabeth rose, conscious of Mr Darcy’s curious look in

her direction. “I have been out all morning. Excuse me while I change into something?—”

“Sit down, Lizzy,” her mother snapped. “You look lovely.”

Elizabeth did enjoy this dress, one she had chosen specifically for Mr Wickham, believing both the deep red colour and style flattered her.

Even so, she was sweating and blaming the material for being too thick to wear on such a mild day, though not five minutes earlier, this thought had not been in her mind.

Mary began the sombre, religious tune, and then, worse, began to sing.

Elizabeth glanced towards Mr Darcy whose face was impassive. His eyes widened when Mary hit a particularly unfortunate note, but he did not react further. She supposed she should thank him for that much.

Miss Bingley was less circumspect. As Mary strove for a particularly high note, Miss Bingley reached out to grip Mr Darcy’s arm, as if sharing a joke.

Though he did not respond to her touch, the intimacy of the gesture made Elizabeth suspect they had an agreement or understanding amongst themselves.

It would be sensible, given that Mr Darcy was friends with Miss Bingley’s brother, and from what she could surmise, they were of equal social standing.

Miss Bingley’s delicate features irritated Elizabeth, though why that was she could not say.

Miss Bingley’s pert nose raised higher and higher as the song went on, and her pale

skin, which showed that she did not spend as much time in the sun as Elizabeth, pinkened with the apparent effort of not laughing at Mary. Elizabeth was ready to do her violence.

At long last, the song ended. Mary rose to tepid applause and, looking pleased with herself, returned to the sofa.

Mrs Bennet smiled as if her middle daughter had not just performed disgracefully. Unperturbed, she said, “Do play, Lizzy. The gentlemen would like to hear.”

Though Mr Bingley’s eyes were bright, Mr Darcy looked from under his brow with an expression that was a comical mix of boredom and trepidation, prompting Elizabeth to say, “Mama, perhaps we have had enough music.”

“Nonsense. All of my girls must display their talents.”

“Talents? Mama, I think we can agree I am the least accomplished of the Bennet sisters when it comes to the pianoforte.”

Elizabeth glanced at the guests, pained by Miss Bingley’s unhidden sneer and Mr Darcy’s look of dread. She had no desire to argue in front of them, nor to show how much she lacked of this particular skill.

“If she does not wish to play,” suggested Mary, “I could play again.”

Mr Darcy, and even Mr Bingley, appeared alarmed by this suggestion. Elizabeth shot a desperate glance towards her father who was roused to say, “Once is enough, my dear, but thank you.”

Mary’s eyes brimmed; despite the inadequacy of her performance, she always took offence to being asked to abstain.

She rose and excused herself, and by the time she reached the door, was nearly at a run.

Elizabeth began to rise, as well, hoping to comfort her, thinking it unfair to humiliate Mary at such a tender age.

But before Elizabeth could depart, Mrs Bennet said, “Play the Liszt, Lizzy.”

She looked towards the door, but then Jane said, “Perhaps a short song. One we could all sing along to?”

Elizabeth felt betrayed, for Jane knew she desired to leave. Then, struck by mischief, Elizabeth nodded. She stretched her fingers, sat, and began some introductory chords.

“Oh heavens,” she heard Jane whisper, and her mother said, “No, Lizzy. You—” but it was too late.

In Scarlet Town where I was born,

There was a fair maid dwellin’

Made ev’ry youth cry “Well-a-day!”

Her name was Barb’ra Allen.

Only Kitty and Lydia sang along with Elizabeth, who played with surprisingly few errors.

By the time she finished the short song, her mother’s eyes were wide, and Jane’s were fixed to her lap.

When Elizabeth rose from the piano bench, Kitty and Lydia cheered, for they did love the song about love and loss, and her father clapped, though with less enthusiasm.

Then Mr Bingley clapped, his eyes twinkling, and Elizabeth felt her insides relaxing.

Perhaps the song had not been a misstep, despite its mention of virgins and death, but then she saw Miss Bingley's cruel amusement and Mr Darcy, whose face was tight with judgment, and doubted herself.

Unease gripped her, but she lifted her chin in an outward show of defiance. "You are not a fan of folk tunes, Mr Darcy?"

"It depends," he said, each word clipped, "on the song."

Mrs Bennet, apparently sensing trouble, stood and suggested a walk in the garden, "which has the finest roses blooming in all the county"—an absurd bit of affectation, most certainly in October, but no one argued with her assertion or suggestion.

All but Elizabeth rose and began to file out the door.

She did not wish to follow Miss Bingley and her imperious stride, or her younger sisters as they giggled and quarrelled, or even Mr Bingley as he paid court to Jane.

Though it gave her hope that he might be what Jane desired, it made her feel peevish just then.

Elizabeth sat plunking out the melody of the Liszt song her mother had wanted her to play, and Mr Darcy, about to cross through the doorway, turned back.

"Why did you not play that for us?" he asked.

Elizabeth fought back a smirk. Though his feelings had been clear, she feigned innocence and asked, “Did you not like the song I chose?”

“I prefer songs of love to those of death.”

She rested her fingertips on the keys, but ceased playing. “Have you experience upon which to draw?”

“Experience in love or with death?”

“Either. Both.”

She feared she was too blunt, for he stared off as if lost in thought for a moment. Then he answered, “With death I certainly do, which is what makes me loathe such songs. Experience with love of the romantic sort? No.”

His candour surprised her. Why was he confessing this truth to her?

Elizabeth studied him. A man so handsome, so tall, and—if his attire had anything to say about it—so wealthy had not found love? It was hard to conceive. Yet he seemed remote and discerning, so perhaps he had not allowed any lady to become close enough to him to feel such emotions.

“Have you looked for love in earnest, Mr Darcy?” She knew she ought to cease this too-forward line of questioning, but her curiosity, as it often did, thwarted sense.

“You are a curious creature, Miss Elizabeth,” he said.

“I suppose I am, but having begun so candidly, you must have expected further questions.”

He chuckled, took a few steps towards her, and leant against the pianoforte. “Would you say you have a talent for music?”

She shook her head, wishing he had not changed the subject. “I was not merely being modest when I declared my playing poor.”

“We must all be aware of our limitations and behave accordingly.”

His turn of phrase caused her to let out a hearty guffaw. She covered her mouth in embarrassment while he looked on with raised eyebrows.

“You find that amusing?” he asked.

“I find it blunt. Though, as you can see, I enjoy bluntness.” She stroked the keys absently for a moment and asked, “Pray, what is the need for me to play perfectly?”

“To be accomplished.”

“And this shall win me a husband?”

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “In theory.”

“Are you attracted by the mastery of a woman’s playing?”

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He paused and studied her, clearly wondering whether to answer. “I do not enjoy poor performance of any kind.”

“For you there is no room for error?”

He paused. “No.”

She was more amused than fearful. “You are a stern judge, Mr Darcy.”

“Having had to endure lengthy tunes of questionable quality, un-masterful art displays, and butchered attempts at French, I believe I have earned my judgment.”

“So it would be better not to play if one knows one’s playing is poor?”

“Yes.”

“This was my argument today to my mother.”

“I thought it wise of you, and pleasingly modest.”

“So, it might be said that I could find a husband in spite of my poor playing—because I am modest about it.”

He smiled, revealing a surprising dimple in his left cheek. “In theory, yes.”

“What would be more attractive than proficiency at the pianoforte to you, Mr Darcy?”

He backed away from the pianoforte, and she realised her error.

“I am not investigating your personal preferences for myself,” she said, her words tumbling out as fast as she could say them, “but rather, I am curious about the opinions of men. As you can see, there are precious few at Longbourn. Thus, allow me rephrase my enquiry: Men whom you know, likeminded men of your acquaintance, what would be most attractive to them?”

“The men I consider friends desire companions with knowledge of the world and the arts, as well as possessing good qualities, such as kindness and honesty.”

“Not painting, or playing, or sewing?”

He shook his head. “I dare say that more women could benefit from this knowledge, for they might, then, spend time developing their minds so as to become intriguing companions.”

“Indeed. Though women are not encouraged to develop these talents. And a woman too headstrong or knowledgeable might put off some men.”

“She might, that is true.” The smile crept back to his lips. “But not all men. A man secure in his own cleverness ought not to fear cleverness in a wife.”

“Just so. And I should add that a woman with a strong mind would not desire to be matched to a man with a weak mind.”

He nodded. “I have met so many dull people at balls and assemblies that I fear never finding new friends, let alone a wife.”

“Perhaps you are better off practising pianoforte and escaping conversation all together.”

“As a man, that is not where I am encouraged to spend my time or my energy.”

“Shame. Musical prowess in a man is tremendously attractive. To some ladies, anyhow.”

He leant closer to her again. “Will you play another tune for me?”

She laughed. “Never again shall I play for you, Mr Darcy. You are too stern.”

“I am stern because the world is weak and frivolous.”

“And you are quite judgemental.”

“I have been told as much; I cannot deny that.”

A silence hung between them, though it felt like a teasing silence.

He added, “My judgment sometimes fails me. Even now I cannot help but desire to hear more of your wretched playing.”

She laughed aloud. “Are you a man who enjoys being tortured?”

He smiled fully for the first time in their brief acquaintance. “I am a great many things.”

“There are secrets in your past, Mr Darcy. I would bet my life upon it.”

All mirth drained from his face.

“Were you crossed in love,” she asked, “or did you betray some lady?” Despite his severe expression, she pressed, “Do tell me everything.”

He rose straight. "I am not a gossip." His voice was low, almost a growl, and Elizabeth recoiled from it. He seemed to notice it, and continued in more moderate tones. "Gossip leads to ruination, and there are too many keen on ruining the innocent as it is."

Just then, Kitty scampered to the glass doors of the parlour which led directly out into the garden. "Lizzy! Mama is displeased that you have remained indoors and insists that you join us at once."

Elizabeth said, "Tell her—" But Mr Darcy bowed and strode towards Kitty, and Elizabeth saw how clearly he wanted to leave her and this conversation.

As soon as he reached the door, he turned back to her. "You and your family are too keen to speak of others and to disregard decorum. It will be your downfall if you are not careful."

Her mouth fell open and a hot flush rose on her cheeks, but he did not seem to notice, bowing again and leaving the room.

She had been foolish to speak as she had, but had he not appeared to enjoy it?

He had! At least until the end. His insult about her family was not untrue, but it was not kind.

She had thought he was kind. No. No, she had not.

He was sharp. He was amusing. But he was not kind.

Yet neither was she, at times. She had liked his honesty, but she could not let herself like a person who would willingly hurt her.

She would not join him in the garden or anywhere else if she could help it.

She had not seen to Mary, and so decided she would go to her sister instead.

Darcy exited into the garden, breathing deeply to regain his composure. That girl! What was it about her that had tempted him so? She had wormed her way into his deepest thoughts, it seemed.

He had not wished to leave their conversation, or the privacy they had enjoyed, but it would have been improper to tarry.

All sense told him he must go. No, the voices of his mother and father, God rest their souls, told him he must. Over and over, they had reprimanded him in an attempt to tame the wild spirit of his youth.

Speaking with Miss Elizabeth, he had felt joy bubbling to the surface, something that had been too long absent in his life.

Yet, the voices said, “Be good. Do what is expected. It is not your whims that matter, Fitzwilliam! You are a Darcy.”

Their memory had turned his mood sour, and he hoped he had not sounded too severe when he said what he had about her family.

He meant it as a friendly warning; with George Wickham lingering about, acting the gallant in his red coat, any family with so many young ladies had to be on their guard.

In retrospect, however, he thought—no, knew—it sounded cruel. It was cruel.

He saw that Miss Catherine was leading him towards the rest of the group which had gathered round the denuded rose bushes.

At once, he realised he could not face the others or own what he had done, so he darted out a side gate and quickly returned to Netherfield, knowing his good-natured friend would forgive him for it later.

CHAPTER SIX

A few days after the humiliation in her mother's parlour, Elizabeth sat miserably alongside Jane in the parlour at Netherfield.

She had received an invitation to see her dear friend, Charlotte Lucas, that afternoon, but Mrs Bennet insisted Elizabeth accompany Jane to call on Miss Bingley.

Mrs Bennet was sure that the invitation portended great things, certain that Mr Bingley would propose that very afternoon.

Elizabeth was certain that was not the truth, but held her tongue.

What would be the point of arguing with Mama?

Mama's commentary about Mr Darcy had been even less welcome. All had wondered at Mr Darcy's disappearance, but Elizabeth knew more about his motives than the rest of her family who merely said he had a bad character and deemed him unfriendly and unworthy of further invitation.

Heavy yellow curtains blocked much of the light of the dim day, which deepened Elizabeth's dark mood.

The portraits on the wall were not Mr Bingley's family, but had come with the house as had all of the furnishings.

Mr Bingley was explaining that over time he planned to acquire his own art and

redecorate, but that it would take time.

Mr Darcy said to Mr Bingley, “Though before such a commitment to decorations and furnishings, you must be certain that this is a place in which you plan to settle.”

Mr Bingley smiled. “I have told you it is. I find this county more pleasing than any other, as I do its company.” His eyes flicked to Jane’s, and she blushed.

Elizabeth watched Jane smooth her skirt and knew her sister was doubting herself.

That morning, Jane had changed her gown and had the maid rearrange her hair so many times that Elizabeth had mentioned they would be too late for the tea, a possibility that had hastened Jane’s preparations.

Elizabeth had not spent more than a moment choosing a gown, for things had ended so poorly with Mr Darcy that she held no hopes in that quarter.

All was not lost for romance, as she was due at her aunt and uncle’s for supper with Mr Wickham and Mr Denny the next day.

That engagement would require her to take some consideration for her attire.

This periwinkle gown she wore today suited her well enough, but it was a day gown, not evening.

Among the evening gowns she had, the yellow satin was her favourite.

Thinking of it even now, she decided on the yellow.

Elizabeth thought back on her conversation with Mr Darcy.

Presumptuous as it was, she had thought it had gone well, had even enjoyed their little piece of verbal swordplay.

She had pushed the boundaries of propriety, but Mr Darcy had not seemed to mind. Until the end.

What had she said that so turned the conversation and ultimately led to his cruel departing words?

She was not certain. She had not shared what he said even with Jane, for she did not desire to sour Jane's opinion of Mr Bingley.

One's friends pointed to one's character.

This thought led her to believe that Mr Darcy, having his closest friend be the amiable Mr Bingley, could not be as harsh as he seemed.

No, 'harsh' was not the word for him. Something had upset him, but what?

Now that she thought on it, his countenance had been equally severe when he encountered Mr Wickham. Could there be a connexion?

Darcy's fists clenched unintentionally, watching Bingley flirt so boldly with the eldest Miss Bennet.

His friend seemed to be fixing his attentions on the sister of the most alluring and maddening woman he had ever met...

and whose family was abominable. He had attempted to dissuade Bingley from pursuing Miss Bennet, reminding his friend that Society was full of other beautiful ladies, but Bingley found something in Miss Bennet that was lacking in any he had

met, and Darcy, to his dismay, had to agree.

Miss Bennet was perfect for Bingley. Darcy had at first thought the lady cool, but he was coming to understand that she was merely shy.

Furthermore, unlike many ladies of the ton, Miss Bennet seemed unconcerned with wealth and its trappings, therefore removing the concern of every man of marriageable age of means that he was only desired for his income per year.

If Bingley fell in love with Miss Bennet, and meant to make the attachment permanent, Darcy would not stand in their way.

As Bingley and Miss Bennet continued to chat, Darcy gazed upon Miss Elizabeth, who seemed quieter today than she had on other occasions.

Periwinkle was not his favourite colour, but she looked handsome in it.

He could not think of a colour he would not find her handsome in.

Miss Bingley, who sat to his left stirring tea as if the leaves had done her wrong, was wearing brown, and it paled her as it did most ladies.

Even men who wore brown suits never looked as well as in black or blue or grey or even deep green.

He was partial to his forest green velvet coat and would ask his valet to be sure it was clean and ready for wear when the weather turned.

What was he to do now? He felt a bit stupid, sitting silently, not contributing even the barest civility to the discussion.

He could not speak with Miss Bingley, for she took every interaction as a hint at feelings he did not have for her, and clung to him like a peregrine upon a falconer's glove.

He feared speaking with Miss Elizabeth, as his last words had been unkindler than intended and he did not know how to make amends.

Thus, he crossed the room and took hold of a book he had been reading.

Once he sat down, however, it felt rude to read, so after opening it and staring at the same sentence over and over, he then closed it and spent the rest of the time counting flowers on an embroidered pillow on a chair across the room.

"Miss Bennet," said Miss Bingley, "would you care to take a turn through the gallery? The weather is too frightful to be out of doors, but as you seem to admire Netherfield's art, perhaps we might walk through the gallery? There are some beautiful paintings to be seen."

Jane agreed and the two ladies rose.

Elizabeth was irritated. The weather was not 'frightful', merely cloudy. She would have taken her chances with a walk, but she suspected Miss Bingley was not the type to enjoy fresh air unless the day was absolute perfection so that she might comment repeatedly on its absolute perfection.

"Let us all go," suggested Mr Bingley.

Miss Bingley's face twitched just enough to suggest the beginning of a scowl, but she smoothed it into a cool smile.

Noting this, Elizabeth wondered what Miss Bingley was playing at.

Why would she want to separate Jane from her brother?

To assess Jane herself? To provoke Jane into saying something that might be used to dissuade Mr Bingley from his obvious interest in her?

Mr Bingley rose, and, to her surprise, so did Mr Darcy. Now she was obliged to walk indoors, as well.

Mr Bingley asked, “Miss Elizabeth, do you admire art as much as your sister?”

They all began to stroll out of the parlour, and Elizabeth said, “I have not the eye Jane has, but I do enjoy looking at art. I have no talent for painting.”

Mr Darcy asked, “What do you have a talent for?”

“Vexing men, apparently,” she said over her shoulder.

Jane’s head snapped towards her, and Elizabeth might have been more concerned had Mr Darcy not been fighting back a smile.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Bingley said, “I suspect you have a great many talents.”

“This painting is my favourite,” Miss Bingley said, pulling Jane, with whom she had locked elbows, towards an enormous landscape of craggy mountains and a dramatic sky of light and clouds. Elizabeth noticed a small carriage in the bottom corner and stepped closer to study it.

“Miss Elizabeth,” asked Mr Bingley, “whatever did you find?”

“This carriage.”

Mr Bingley stepped closer. "I did not even notice it!" He smiled. "I only ever saw the gathering storm."

Jane said, "Which is quite beautifully rendered," and locked eyes with Mr Bingley. Quickly they both looked away, their cheeks pink.

Elizabeth had no time to be pleased with her sister and this fine suitor because Mr Darcy asked, "What draws you to the carriage in particular?"

Elizabeth turned to him. "I always look for hidden objects in paintings, wondering what the artist wants us to see or not see." With all eyes on her, she had the urge to end there, but she had thought often about this and never told anyone.

"Humanity is small and frail compared with nature. It is why I enjoy walking about so often. It reminds me that concerns with estates and balls and gowns and marriages mean nothing to the world. It prevents me from thinking too much of myself."

"I despise walks," said Miss Bingley in the drollest of tones.

Elizabeth tucked her lips between her teeth to keep from laughing and caught Mr Darcy's look of disdain directed towards Miss Bingley, though he hid it as quickly as it had come upon him.

"Mr Darcy," asked Elizabeth, "do you enjoy nature?"

He nodded. "The park around Pemberley, my home, is large and with a great variety of grounds. There are woods and gardens, both formal and informal, ruins, roses, poplar stands. It is nearly as impressive as our library, though most would comment upon the grounds rather than the library. Both have been the work of many generations, and I am proud of and enjoy both in equal measure."

Elizabeth brightened. “My father allows me to borrow his books. I attempt to educate myself on?—”

“This one,” called Miss Bingley, pulling Jane along with her to an enormous painting in an elaborately carved gold frame, “shows the importance of position. Our housekeeper told us that it depicts an ancestor who married an earl and was elevated beyond Hertfordshire.” She eyed Mr Darcy who looked away.

He stepped closer to Elizabeth. “On what sort of subjects do you educate yourself?”

“Matters of science, philosophy, books considered important. Lest you think I am other than I am, I enjoy poetry and novels most. I have been reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and am finding it very entertaining.”

“My sister has been enjoying that, as well.”

“You have a sister? I did not know.”

“One sister, Georgiana, who is above ten years my junior.”

“Meaning she is...?”

“Sixteen. She is not yet out.”

“Mr Darcy, you are falling behind!” called Miss Bingley.

Elizabeth noted how Mr Darcy brightened when he had spoken of his sister, and of his land and of books, but now that he trailed Miss Bingley, dullness had settled over him again like fog.

She wondered if his remark about his sister being not yet out was meant as some sort

of censure against her two youngest sisters, both out.

Perhaps it was. She would not have advised it herself, had Mama asked her opinion.

Miss Bingley continued along the hall, still gripping Jane, and pointed as if that tiny motion exhausted her.

“Apparently this young woman,” she said at a painting of a blonde wearing a scarlet gown, “was the sole daughter of the family who owned Netherfield in the middle of last century. When their daughter eloped, it brought such scandal that the family lost everything, not just this estate.”

As Elizabeth attempted to recall if she had heard this rumour, Mr Darcy suddenly turned and strode away from the group.

Mr Bingley watched him go with a knit brow, but made no attempt to follow.

Curious. What duty might have called upon him so suddenly?

Or could it have been the chatter about rank and elopements that sent him running?

CHAPTER SEVEN

To Elizabeth's pleasure, her aunt and uncle Gardiner came to stay with their four young children for a fortnight on their way north to Derbyshire from London.

Her aunt was graceful and calm, and thought before she spoke—all qualities to which Elizabeth aspired.

The visit required extra mattresses be brought into the girls' rooms, as Longbourn had not enough space for each to be accommodated separately.

It was not an imposition, however, as the Gardiner girls enjoyed sleeping with their cousins and the Bennet girls enjoyed the change.

The littlest, two boys, hung on Jane's skirts, for she was so good with children, but they were relegated to the nursery, as was customary.

Elizabeth feared the visit would mean no callers or calling, but Mrs Bennet extended invitations that stretched the capacity of the parlour, irritating only Mr Bennet and Mr Darcy. The rest seemed content with the commotion.

Seeing Mr Darcy's apparent distress, Elizabeth suggested he accompany her on a walk in the garden, and he agreed with relief replacing the distress he had shown.

Once they stepped into the bright sunlight, Elizabeth asked, "Do you not enjoy children?"

A pointed question from a young lady. Or perhaps it was a natural question given his clear discomfort in the parlour with the boisterous young Bennets and the four little Gardiners.

“In fact, I do,” he answered. “However, I find too much commotion sets me on edge. It is why I do not enjoy balls, either.”

“I find satisfaction in both solitude and a crowd. I do not find myself lonely when alone in the woods, though I admit that at times in a crowd, I can feel quite lonely indeed.”

“Exactly!”

Elizabeth loved this garden, though not as much as the woods. She would have preferred to show him the old growth trees and the stream that ran a bit outside Longbourn’s gates, but it was proper to stay within sight of her family.

She said, “I find myself searching for joy and often wonder when to accept dissatisfaction as a part of life and when to fight against it.”

“Precisely.”

“Much is expected of us,” she said, running her fingertips across the tops of the hedges absently.

“Rules to follow, spoken and unspoken, and while we must accept discomfort and frustration as a natural course of life, it seems more people would be less cruel and bitter if they allowed themselves more joy.”

“And what are your sources of joy?”

“Walks, the woods, good books, time spent with my sisters?—”

“Not playing the pianoforte?” He gave her a teasing grin.

She laughed. “That is a source of frustration, which leads to bitterness.”

“If you practised more?—”

“It would become more natural for me, though the practice itself is a chore, and interferes with my pursuit of joy. Quite a conundrum.”

He smiled at her, and it was an easy smile that reminded Elizabeth that her first impression of him did not seem to be faithful.

“Mr Darcy, I must turn your own question back to you: What are your sources of joy?”

He snapped a deadened leaf off a hedge and rubbed it between his fingers. “My sister, friends like Bingley, my library, new friends, possibilities?—”

Just as Elizabeth was drawn into his gaze, Lydia came running to meet them. “Lizzy, come quick! Mr Denny and Mr Wickham have just arrived!”

Mr Darcy froze, and Elizabeth glanced at him curiously.

He did not meet her gaze, mumbling something about ‘had Bingley known’ before turning quickly and walking off.

It appeared to be his usual manner of behaving when things grew distasteful to him...

but why? She knew he was capable of conversing amiably.

But not when Mr Wickham was about. What history was between them? Surely it was serious.

“Come inside, Lizzy!” Lydia insisted.

She could not stop Mr Darcy, and even if she could, it was not the right thing to do. She walked towards the open parlour door, the jovial chatter enveloping her even before she entered.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Wickham said, “I have just met all of your charming relations.”

She forgot about Mr Darcy just then, caught in Mr Wickham’s web of charm, but as she approached, she noticed Mr Bingley bowing to Jane and then excusing himself from the gathering, a reminder of what had just transpired, and she wondered what might be between the men.

Elizabeth sat near Mr Wickham for hours, talking as if no one else was present, even though the house was full.

They laughed and teased, and Elizabeth found that with each sentence uttered they seemed to have more in common.

He seemed unconcerned with her family’s foibles or rollick.

In fact, he remarked at how amused he was by them.

She learnt a little of his past, surprised to find that his father had been the steward at Pemberley, under Mr Darcy’s father.

“I thought perhaps you knew the current Mr Darcy better than it seemed,” she remarked lightly.

“I did once. Not anymore,” said Mr Wickham, then eased into asking about her interest in travel.

The subject was put aside, but not forgotten until late that night when, after their bedside candles had been snuffed, Elizabeth whispered to Jane about the coincidence of the men knowing one another, and of Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley’s disappearance.

Jane pointed at their young cousins, then to her own closed lips, and the subject was at an end.

The next morning, Elizabeth found herself alone with Aunt Gardiner at the breakfast table, for the others were yet to rise, which made her happy until her aunt began to speak.

“Lizzy, before we leave this afternoon, I need to discuss a difficult but important matter.” Aunt Gardiner lifted her teacup to her lips, giving Elizabeth time to worry. “I know your mother is keen on your marrying, but pray do not grow too attached to Mr Wickham.”

Her aunt had only spent one afternoon and evening with the man, and Elizabeth could not understand how she might have formed such an opinion of him. “Why do you say so? He seems very amiable to me.”

When her aunt set down her cup, eyebrows knit, but said nothing more, Elizabeth said, “He is respectable. And fun. And handsome, and kind, and thoughtful. He is—he is, in fact, all I have wanted in a man.” She sat back, amazed at the words that had come forth from her lips.

Aunt Gardiner blinked a few times, and it seemed to Elizabeth she was holding back a sigh. “I know you feel that way now, but I am older than you and therefore more experienced. There is something in Mr Wickham I do not trust.”

“You have only just met him, and I dare say you do not know him.”

“I know his type.”

“And what is that?”

“He is a taker, Lizzy. He makes you feel special, but he is...like a fox looking for prey.”

“I am no rabbit, Aunt.”

“In many ways, no, but you are an innocent.”

Elizabeth reached for her own cup, stirring the sugar that had already dissolved to give herself something to do.

Mr Darcy did not like Mr Wickham, but that was a personal matter the source of which neither had disclosed.

She had always trusted Aunt Gardiner, but though her aunt was sensible, she was not infallible.

And what did she know of Mr Wickham after so brief a time?

Ah, Mr Wickham. He had eyes that drew her in and a laugh that brought all around him joy.

He had the entire parlour laughing until they gasped for air while sharing a story of a new recruit lost in the woods calling for assistance.

Her mother had blushed at his compliments about the offerings at the tea table and

with his profound thanks at the invitation.

Lydia had complained that Elizabeth had met him first, certain that if she had, they would be married already.

Elizabeth and Mr Wickham had many of the same interests, they both loved to laugh, he had a good position in a profession that could support them both, and he respected her.

When he took her hand to kiss it upon his bow goodbye, her body tingled entirely, and she knew no woman had ever felt such a thrill. What more could she ask for?

“Aunt, I believe...I believe I might be falling in love with him. Certainly if he made me an offer, I would be inclined to accept it.”

Aunt Gardiner set down her tea, shaking her head. “It would be a grave mistake, Lizzy. Consider my words carefully.”

Two days later at the Philipses’, Mr Wickham took advantage of what he believed was a private audience to speak the words Elizabeth had imagined hearing.

They were alas not alone, as Aunt Philips’s shriek of delight from the hall revealed, but it did not signify.

Elizabeth’s mind was flooded with images of Mr Darcy’s fury and Aunt Gardiner’s concern, but looking at Mr Wickham, who held her fingers tenderly, face full of innocent hope, all doubt was chased away, and she nodded her assent.

Mr Denny and the Philipses entered the parlour and cheered.

Many congratulations poured forth, along with happy chatter and plan-making, and

Elizabeth relished the general mood of felicitation. Nothing could be ill. Or could it?

Doubt began to creep in at the edges of her consciousness as she sipped from a glass of wine, and she asked if she and Mr Wickham might be allowed a moment in the hall alone. Her uncle agreed, announcing that she must still be reeling from the shock of it all.

Elizabeth nodded but smiled broadly, aware that the smile felt more forced than she would desire. Once alone, she said to Mr Wickham, “I-I did not expect a proposal so soon.”

“Why wait when we know we are a perfect match for one another?”

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Were they a perfect match? She thought so, but could Mr Darcy and her aunt be wrong?

She trusted her aunt more than nearly anyone, and both thought this engagement would be a misstep, but the Philipses and Mr Denny were celebrating vociferously.

It was confusing, but she had said yes, and it was done.

Done. The finality of that stole her breath.

“Mr Wickham,” she said, “when did you speak to my father? I did not see you alone with him.”

“I have not yet done so.”

She paused. “You do know I am only twenty? His agreement is required.”

“I thought you might speak to him first and make it clear that you desire to be married to me, and then I would ask him for an audience.”

“Of course,” she said quietly. “I am certain he will give his blessing.”

She said the words and she thought she believed them, for her father enthusiastically welcomed Mr Wickham each time he called, even more so than Mr Darcy, who was more reserved than Mr Wickham.

But Mr Darcy suffered from self-doubt, and suffered in a crowd.

He had told her so. What did it matter? She was to marry Mr Wickham and not Mr Darcy, and was sure of her father's enjoyment of the former.

"Let us go and speak to him now," suggested Mr Wickham.

Elizabeth shook her head. Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley had been invited to dinner that night, as had the Philipses, so she knew the house would be buzzing with preparation.

Further, she did not want the men's paths to cross, so they agreed upon the morrow.

She swore her aunt and uncle Philips to secrecy until the agreement was official.

The Philipses, however, had difficulty not revealing what had occurred in their parlour.

In fact, they found great amusement in hinting about it at the table that evening.

They laughed and exchanged glances, asking her if she had any news to share, and expressing their great love of all matters that began with the letter 'W'.

"Water!" called out Aunt Philips.

"Wheel!" replied Uncle Philips.

"Wisteria," said Aunt Philips.

"Windows," said Uncle Philips.

"Wi—" Aunt Philips locked eyes with a horrified Elizabeth, and said, "Winter."

"What is this foolishness?" asked Mr Bennet, and Aunt Philips broke Elizabeth's

gaze and replied, “Just a little game we play.”

Jane looked questioningly at Elizabeth, but Elizabeth simply smiled, forcing her face into innocence.

Aunt Philips said, “Let us begin anew, my dear brother-in-law,” and Elizabeth hoped that they might begin a new topic. Unfortunately, she asked, “What are your favourite things beginning with... ‘D’?”

When Mr Bennet would not reply, Mrs Bennet entered in the game. “Duck!” She giggled like a young girl.

Lydia and Kitty chimed in with their words, and Mr Bingley, swept up in the mirth, shouted, “Darcy!” and everyone was set to giggles and guffaws.

A baked custard was served, mercifully ending the game, and while the rest delighted in the sweetness of it, Elizabeth continued feeling as miserable as Mr Darcy looked.

Mr Darcy did not smile once the entire evening, and Elizabeth could not help but fear what would come when the official announcement was made.

She enjoyed Mr Darcy’s company, and she was increasingly certain that a connexion to Wickham meant she would forever lose his friendship.

The evening could not end quickly enough as far as Darcy was concerned.

He thought he knew what the aunt was hinting at with her silly little letter game, and hoped and prayed that he was wrong.

She might have thrown in his initial as a joke, for that woman, that boorish woman, would never be hinting at a secret involving him. But ‘W’? Wickham without a

doubt.

And what might such a secret entail? A simpleton like Mrs Philips would only comprehend or care about things of a romantic nature. Women like her loved gossip, and an attachment would give her much fodder for conversation, direct or coded.

As he looked upon Miss Elizabeth's beautiful countenance, bidding the company farewell, he thought, Please let me be wrong. Let Miss Elizabeth not have bound herself to a reprobate like George Wickham.

The next day, Mr Wickham called and requested a private audience with Mr Bennet.

Mr Bennet agreed without hesitation, and Mrs Bennet gave way to all her delighted effusions, listing everyone she would call on to announce that her daughter was engaged, most notably the Lucases.

Elizabeth asked her not to, but her mother replied, "What joy is there in having a daughter engaged if one cannot boast of it?"

Elizabeth knew she ought to allow her mother this pleasure, but she felt self-conscious about the prospect of being the centre of gossip, even if positive.

Mr Wickham was invited to dinner with apologies at the fare being plain due to their not having planned for a guest, but he said he did not mind a humble meal, for anything would be better than that which soldiers were served.

All the family sank into the warmth of his presence, and of the pleasure of considering him family, and the meal was a success.

After dinner, Elizabeth was allowed to walk with Mr Wickham to his horse. He took both of her hands in his and kissed her knuckles while gazing at her. "Elizabeth, you

have made me so very happy. I look forward to a long and prosperous marriage.”

His words and affection reassured her, and she felt herself reasonably content upon his departure.

She basked in the congratulations and well-wishes of her parents and sisters the rest of the evening, fairly floating to bed later that night persuaded that all was well and that her misgivings were merely the strangeness of being an engaged woman.

Once under the covers, however, she was struck by an unpleasant thought: she would have to share the news with Mr Darcy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At tea the next day at Netherfield, Mr Bingley asked Jane if he might show her a new sculpture he had acquired and had placed in the music room. “Surely Darcy and your sister can amuse themselves for a short while?”

Elizabeth felt faintly ill as she agreed, watching Jane’s delighted countenance as Bingley led her away. She decided to announce her engagement since they were alone and did so with as much speed as was seemly.

For a long moment, he said nothing. Then, “You are a fool.”

His words were so like a slap she nearly touched her face.

“You cannot be happy for me?”

“Happy? Why should I be?”

“Because I like him. He is amusing, and I must marry.” She paused. “And no one else has offered for me.”

When Mr Darcy looked up, her stomach did a little flip.

She had not, of course, meant him! Or had she?

The thought had crossed her mind, certainly, but she had reminded herself that they were friends and he was too high for her.

He would need an accomplished wife with a suitable fortune and connexions and a place in Society.

A little defiantly, she added, “My family is very happy for me. They like Mr Wickham too.”

Her words seemed to snap him directly out of the reverie he had sunk into. His eyes looked dark and his tone was enraged when he spoke, although she had no idea why.

“Your family? Of course they are happy. They have no sense. Not one of them, save your eldest sister.”

Tears sprang into her eyes, but she would not go down so easily. “You are jealous of him. Jealous of us, of our happiness.”

“You think I am jealous of Wickham?” he said scoffingly.

“I have found love and you are still alone.” Elizabeth could not understand why a man so lovely as Mr Darcy was alone.

Clearly, he needed more than what most women offered.

Despite the fact that he was hurting her in this moment, she still desired to be his friend.

“Mr Darcy, the woman for you will come along and she will make you happy. She is somewhere.”

“This absurd decision comes as no surprise. Your family needs each of you girls to marry and soon, what with your father’s poor management of his estate and the entail, which no one in their right mind would have created.

It is a cruel circumstance that is leading you and your sisters to agree to marry the first man who comes along and asks. ”

The cruelty was stunning. Elizabeth sat frozen as if Medusa had turned her to stone, yet he continued.

“Your parents have hardly cared for your reputations, and any men who would link themselves to the Bennets would be fools. George Wickham is just such a fool. Enjoy him, and do not run to me when this match brings you misfortune.”

With that, Mr Darcy leapt to his feet and disappeared into the hall.

No one else had offered.

Her words rang in his ears. Had she meant him? He could have asked for her hand. He thought of it more than once, but her family was absurd, and he needed a wife who fit his station. Did he not? His parents, rest their souls, said that he did. But why? Was it for appearances?

Gossip could not minimise his holdings nor the size of his estate. If he made a choice that defied expectations, and those in power did not wish to socialise with them, would it signify? He scarcely enjoyed spending time among most of his circle anyhow!

What harm would it do? True friends would like her, just as Bingley did. Yet his deceased father’s and mother’s faces flooded his mind. ‘Her,’ they would say. ‘She will never do.’

He paused halfway up the stairs that led to the bedchambers. Cold crept through his veins. No, she would not do, not for a man such as he. And he would not cause a scandal by stealing another man’s betrothed, even if said man was Wickham.

She was engaged to the most despicable man he had ever known.

If only he could tell her why Wickham was so dangerous!

He could not stand by and watch Wickham ruin her.

It was why he had been so cruel, so seemingly unfeeling.

He had to push her far, far away, so far that she would never again cross paths with him.

Could it have gone any other way? He thought not. He hated hurting her, but what else was he to do: Accept this engagement quietly? Chance encounters with Wickham? No, he was right to have done this. He was right. His head throbbed. He had to believe he was right.

Elizabeth sat alone in shocked silence until her sister and Mr Bingley returned.

Jane, no doubt seeing and understanding her sister's state, said they must hurry her home.

Only a passing mention was made of Mr Darcy's absence, and soon, though not soon enough for Elizabeth, she was tucked into her bed and treated for an unnamed but potentially life-threatening malady, at least according to her mother, who added that to die before a wedding would be a cruel irony if ever there was one.

The next afternoon, Jane entered their still-darkened room. "Mr Bingley is gone."

"What?" asked Elizabeth, half sitting up.

"He left with Mr Darcy this morning for London."

“How did you learn this?”

“Hill heard it in town from one of Netherfield’s servants. She hesitated to tell me, but feared my hearing it from anyone else.”

Elizabeth sank back into her pillows with a thud. “I see.”

“Why, Lizzy? Why would he have left in such a fashion? Without even saying farewell?”

Because Mr Darcy tore him away from Netherfield and from the dreadful Bennets.

When Elizabeth made no reply, Jane said, “I wonder if I shall ever see him again.”

Her voice was plaintive and Elizabeth’s guilt overwhelmed her. “I have no doubt, Jane. He loves you, surely.”

Jane looked doubtful, so Elizabeth threw her arms around her beloved sister, and Jane hugged her back.

“You seem restored, Lizzy. Let us join the family. Mama will want to tell us who knows about your engagement.”

Elizabeth rose and allowed herself to be pulled along with the day, attempting not to think of Mr Darcy or Mr Bingley or Jane’s disappointment or even Mr Wickham. Today she would be a Bennet amongst family, immersed in their rollick and cheer.

CHAPTER NINE

The militia had gone away from Meryton for a month—training exercises abroad or so they were told—but soon they were back and Elizabeth was reunited with Mr Wickham.

The Philipses invited her and Jane for tea the moment the men could join them all, but Jane refused.

The last month had seen her ushered into a pervasive sadness that led her to refuse any invitations, so Elizabeth went alone.

The first visit went well, during which Mr Wickham entertained them all with tales of drills gone wrong and food gone rotten and bedrolls too wet to sleep upon.

The second visit, a week later—which struck her as odd, for how could he not have found time to steal away for a tea or a meal or a walk?

—was cut short by a messenger whose appearance Elizabeth did not think much of.

The third visit was delayed by the return of Mr Bingley, for Mama insisted that Elizabeth stay home to receive him.

She had rather hoped that Mr Darcy would accompany him, but was told he was delayed in town.

He would be back by week's end, though he would not come to Longbourn, a fact

whispered to Elizabeth by Mr Bingley as they parted ways one evening.

Elizabeth attempted not to be overly bothered by that, instead concentrating her mind on the fact that Mr Bingley and Jane seemed as enamoured of each other as ever.

Everyone expected a proposal soon, and Elizabeth hoped they were all correct in that.

When next she saw Mr Wickham, he appeared at Longbourn's door with a split lip and a black eye, and was ushered into the parlour with excited concern. After a time, he begged Mr and Mrs Bennet to allow him to speak with Elizabeth alone, and they obliged.

Elizabeth gestured to a chair, one she could not help but notice had grown frayed from use, and wondered if her mother had noticed or had not the resources to attend to it. She sat across from Mr Wickham in what was typically Jane's seat, looking over his injuries once more with shock.

"What happened to you?" Elizabeth asked. "Was it a training accident?"

He shook his head, which he then dropped. "I have got myself into a bit of a fix." When she did not ask more, he looked up and said, "My gambling has not paid off of late."

"Gambling?" She had not been aware of this pastime.

"This," he said, pointing to his half-shut eye, "was a reminder that I need to settle my accounts."

If gambling had led to such an injury, it had to be more than a casual pursuit or a small sum. "Was this some sort of warning? Or a punishment?"

“A bit of both.” He ran his fingers through his light hair, mussing it but not seeming to notice. “I must, I am afraid, ask for money from your family. An advance, if you will, on your dowry.”

She blinked a few times while she absorbed that request. “How—how much do you need?”

“Three thousand pounds.”

“Three—” The words emerged in a squeak, and she took a moment to gather herself. “Did you speak of the sum of my dowry with my father?”

He pursed his lips. “There was mention, but I am sure there is more than the one thousand he suggested.”

“There is one thousand pounds settled on each of us from our mother, who is, as you might have noticed, very much alive.”

He barked a bitter laugh. “Well surely you must have something! I mean, look about! Your family have been on this estate above a century, surely...”

His words died as he noticed the same shabbiness that she herself had noted earlier.

Elizabeth scooted to the edge of the sofa cushion and leant towards him. “My father does not have more. He has five daughters, and the money must be divided between?—”

“Your father could sell off part of his lands.”

She narrowed her eyes, studying this man whose easy charm had been replaced by bare desperation, and a chill ran through her. “No, he cannot. The lands are not his to

sell.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“The estate is entailed.”

“Entailed? It cannot be.”

She nodded. “It is.”

Mr Wickham was on his feet, thrusting one pointed finger towards her. “You deceived me!”

“I— How?”

“You never said you had no money.”

“You never said you were in debt! From gambling no less!”

He began to pace. “Your father will have to find the money or I...I cannot marry you.”

“What?”

“Those are my demands. Meet them or I shall call off the engagement.”

She gasped, unable to comprehend this turn of events.

Who was this man? He had appeared so smooth, so handsome, so generous, but he was none of those things now.

And how could she have allowed herself to fall for his lies?

How could she marry a man who would make demands after his own folly?

She did not truly know him, nor did she desire to.

She rose, fully in control of herself now. “Consider it done. You are released, with pleasure. I refuse to marry someone who only asked for my hand in the hopes of obtaining a fortune. One that he planned to squander.”

He had a hold of Elizabeth’s throat in a flash. “You will do no such thing!”

She attempted to back up, but the sofa was at her legs. She feared his tightening grip might leave a mark. Or worse. Where was her family? Could no one hear her distress?

“Stop,” she gasped out. “Let us discuss it.”

He dropped his hand but did not back away.

Instead, he kissed her suddenly and hard, grabbing strands of her hair to hold her in place, the pain of the yanking intense and her shame profound.

Then, still kissing her, he let his hands drift down her back until they grabbed her bottom, squeezing tight.

She tried to scream, tried to push him away from her, but could not extricate herself until he stepped back, a smirk on his face.

“You will get that money or I shall tell the world that I ended our engagement due to your infidelity. You have one week.”

He backed farther away and then made for the door, and Elizabeth sank back onto the sofa with despairing relief. Relief he was gone. Despair for what he had wrought.

This was Elizabeth's first kiss. Her first kiss!

She had waited all her life for this moment, but it had been painful and humiliating, and she never wished to be kissed again.

She touched her lips, which still ached from the press of his against hers.

She wanted to bathe, to wash away the scent of him.

Her fingertips drifted to where he had held her throat, and she fought back tears.

What was she to do? She was engaged to this man who, it turned out, was violent and greedy and dishonourable.

She could not marry him. She would not! But to refuse him now would lead to humiliation and even the destruction of her family, not to mention the end of her sisters' hopes of good marriages.

She heard her father in the hallway speaking to him. "Mr Wickham, leaving so soon?"

"Yes, yes," he said, his voice smooth as if all was well.

It was a talent that terrified Elizabeth more than anything else that had transpired that afternoon.

"Thank you for tea. Your home is always so warm and welcoming. I shall have no chance to return for the next week, but I look forward to our next visit."

When her father entered the parlour, Elizabeth was yet shaking, and she had no doubt her father could perceive her distress.

“Lizzy, what is the matter?”

“N-nothing,” she said, too ashamed to admit how fooled she had been—how fooled they all had been. “I am tired is all.” She rose and excused herself over Mr Bennet’s protests, then ran to her room and buried her head under the pillow.

For the next few days, Elizabeth hid herself away, living in silent fear and regret.

The rest of the family permitted her to be alone, presuming to imagine she was merely missing Mr Wickham.

Jane gave her the occasional worried glance, but was too much distracted by Mr Bingley and his attentions to think of it overmuch.

At last, after much cajoling by her younger sisters, Elizabeth was talked into leaving her bedchamber and accompanying them to the shops in Meryton, which she insisted had to be brief.

They had only just arrived in the town and her sisters were bickering about whether to first go to the bakery or the shop that sold fripperies when Mr Denny came round the corner.

His face flushed when he saw her, and he told the man accompanying him to go on without him.

“Miss Elizabeth, might I have a word with you?”

Elizabeth, a feeling of dread in her gut, told her sisters to make haste into the bakery

and that she would join them in a moment. Once Mr Denny had had his say, she ran into the bakery, telling Kitty and Lydia to come with her at once back to Longbourn.

They returned to Longbourn to find the house in an uproar. Mr Bingley had at last proposed. Though Elizabeth wished to share in the felicitations for her beloved sister, she was too undone. The commotion allowed her to sneak away, and she cried in her room and shook through the night.

“Are you not happy for me?” Jane asked her in the morning.

Jane was dressed but Elizabeth was yet abed, a reversal of their usual circumstances.

“You disappeared from our celebration. I thought you liked Mr Bingley.” Her clear blue eyes searched Elizabeth’s face, and were set with such concern that it pierced Elizabeth’s fragile composure.

She began to cry, absently wondering how many tears she could possibly have left in her.

“I am a terrible sister. I-I am thrilled for you. Of course—” But she could no longer speak.

Jane took a seat next to her on the bed. “What is it, Lizzy?” She asked, holding Elizabeth and rocking her as she had when they were children. “You have acted strangely ever since Mr Wickham was here.”

What did she know? Nothing. She could never have guessed, and Elizabeth could not tell her.

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“Perhaps it is nerves,” Elizabeth said, wiping at her face. “It is all changing so fast.” Yes, this Jane would believe. “We will not share this room or this house, or even our lives once we are wed.” Thinking on these facts made her even sadder.

Jane squeezed her. “It is true, but we will still visit. Let us not dwell on sadness when enjoyment is to be had.” Jane kissed Elizabeth’s cheek then stood to leave the room.

“By the way, did you know Mr Darcy is back? We can all spend the afternoon together.”

Mr Darcy was back. He would understand. He was her only hope.

Elizabeth walked to Netherfield after breakfast without telling anyone of her destination, and asked the footman for Mr Darcy. This was irregular in every conceivable way, she knew, but what choice did she have? She could only pray that for once the servants’ tongues would remain still.

She was escorted immediately into a small drawing room, one she had passed but in which she had never been received.

The walls were a pale pink and the furnishings were white with gold trim.

Instead of portraits, the walls were decorated with delicate landscapes, one of which she recognised as the hills between Netherfield and Meryton.

Considering the art calmed her, but the moment he entered, all composure was gone. Unable to contain her vast relief at his presence, she could only blurt out, “Mr

Darcy!”

He stepped closer and looked her over, looking worried. Very kindly, he enquired, “What has brought you here at such an hour?”

His expression gave Elizabeth pause, wondering how she appeared—apparently as frantic as she felt or perhaps ill. He suggested that she sit. Unsure how long she might remain steady if she stood for much longer, she agreed, and sat on a cushioned chair, gripping the arms as he sat across from her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he began, his eyes searching her face, “you have me worried. Is your sister well?”

“My sister?” she asked. “Jane? Yes, yes. She is well and elated at the prospect of the wed—” At the mention of a wedding, her lower lip trembled.

“I am in need of your assistance.” His brows drew together, and while she feared his disapproval, she could not allow her fear to impede her request. “You see, I am in— No, let me begin from the beginning.” She swallowed hard.

“I know that you and Mr Wickham have some shared unpleasantness in the past that has remained unspoken.”

Mr Darcy nodded tightly.

“I now understand I ought to have heeded your warning, but I was taken in by him.” She laced her fingers together in an attempt to keep her hands from shaking. “He— I do not—” A tremble overtook her.

“Did he harm you?” Mr Darcy enquired, sounding as though his anger was barely suppressed.

When she only looked at her lap, he sprang to his feet. “Did he...ruin you?”

Her head shot up. “No! No, nothing of that sort.” She desired to explain but found more words would not come.

Just then a servant entered with a tray of tea.

Mr Darcy looked like the interruption irritated him, but Elizabeth was relieved, for the business of pouring and sharing her preferences for cream and a bit of sugar allowed her time to gather herself so that by the time she had sipped and replaced the cup in the saucer, her equanimity was much restored.

Once the servant had departed, Mr Darcy asked, his lip curled, “What has he done?”

Her fingers drifted to her neck where light purple marks that she had hidden with some fichu were fading. Mr Darcy did not seem to notice them. “Our engagement has been broken.”

He let out a gusty breath. He rose then and pulled at his waistcoat. “I did warn you against him, yet you heeded none of my words. There is nothing I can do to help you in any of that. I am sorry.” He gestured to the door, but she did not make any move to depart.

She could not leave. Not before he knew the truth.

“I have business to attend to, Miss Elizabeth.”

Mr Darcy’s coldness had returned, it seemed. He turned his back and strode towards the doorway.

As he reached it, panic filled her. She could not let him go. She needed his help! She

called out, “He is spreading rumours about me!” She felt a tremor begin within her and set the saucer down for fear that she might spill her tea. “About m-my...fidelity. Whether I am...chaste.”

That stopped his retreat. He turned to face her. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Perhaps I ought to begin from the beginning of this...unpleasantness.”

He leant his back against the wall next to the door and nodded.

She said, “I rushed into an engagement with Mr Wickham, which you warned me against.” Though she noted his jaw set at this, she carried on.

“I thought all was well. It is difficult for men and women to truly know one another when time is so short and expectations for marriage—” She shook her head.

No, she could not blame her behaviour on expectation, for she ignored expectations when it suited her.

Nor would she regale Mr Darcy with the thrill she had had in being near Mr Wickham, which, though replaced with disgust, she knew had been real, at least at first. “I thought you were prejudiced against him and could not understand the reason. He seems to fit into Society, and he is charming?—”

“Indeed.”

She noted his clenched fists and knew this conversation was causing him discomfort but had to proceed. “My mother, especially, was thrilled by the prospect of a daughter set to marry, and to an officer, no less. And all might have been well until he asked?—”

“For money?”

Elizabeth felt a frisson of dismay, knowing that Wickham was such a blackguard that Mr Darcy had scarcely had to know anything to guess the truth. “He has debts I am only now understanding he has accrued.”

“And?”

“He is demanding his debts be paid off if he is to honour our contract, yet there is no way the amount he demands can be accomplished by my father.”

“I warned you?—”

“Yes!” She was on her feet without realising it.

“I know you did. I—I must tell you... About my family’s situation.

” She pulled in a slow breath and sank back into her chair.

“Longbourn is not profitable and is, as you know, entailed. When I explained this, Mr Wickham flew into a rage. The things he said—I-I dare not tell you.”

Elizabeth looked at her lap, feeling his gaze upon her. “I called off our engagement, but he said that would not be enough. He added that if I did not pay, he would tell others that I was untrue, that I had had...that I was not?—”

“You need not say more, I understand.”

“Then, yesterday morning, Mr Denny—I believe you have met him—told me that Mr Wickham told him that I am... That I—” Elizabeth did not wish to say the words, but the full truth had to be out.

“He told Mr Denny not to share this yet, but that I had been with some of the officers. More than one. That I was... I cannot. Please do not make me say the rest.” She swallowed to try to move the lump from her throat, but it would not go.

Would he judge her? Would he believe Mr Wickham’s lies? Would he advise his friend not to marry dear Jane?

When she looked up, there was a look in his eyes she had not seen in the past. But before she could fully feel relief, his face turned red with anger. Was he cross with her?

“Wickham is despicable, plain and simple.”

“But what is to be done?”

He crossed the room silently and dropped back into the seat he had previously occupied. “Did you say that you broke things off? He could still sue you for breach of promise.”

“But he threatened to break things off with me first.”

“Threatened, but he did not do so.”

Elizabeth deflated. “I did not think anything but that I wished to be finished with him. As for the rumours, I did none of what he will say, but a woman cannot defend herself against such claims. I am powerless.”

“Your family’s reputation should protect...” He frowned, unable to finish the false assurances.

Elizabeth suspected he pictured her younger sisters gallivanting about, too loud, too

exposed.

Anyone of consequence, as well as those of none, knew her father refused to rein in his youngest daughters.

Why not suspect that that neglect extended to the eldest two?

Would Mr Bingley break ties with Jane? Why would he not?

Throwing Jane off was preferable to sully his reputation permanently even if it cost him money.

And the shame might kill one or both of her parents.

If her mother did survive the shock of two broken engagements, her nerves would suffer, and who could guess when she might recover or what torture she might inflict on her brood as their unwedded years passed?

Elizabeth groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "I have ruined myself and everyone associated with me."

When she looked up at him, Mr Darcy's eyes were so kind upon her.

He looked as if he might fold her into his arms, and with a jolt, she realised that that was what she desired more than anything.

But he was her friend. Merely a friend. Surely, he was repelled by her story and the damage that was being done to her reputation this very moment while they sat in this perfectly appointed parlour gazing at one another.

"He must be stopped." Mr Darcy rose. "I shall investigate the matter."

“Investigate?” Elizabeth blinked rapidly. “You mean, enquire? You will speak to others about me?”

“How else am I to put an end to it?”

She had thought he would simply speak to Mr Wickham. The thought of the officers forming a negative opinion about her, and worse, spreading this gossip to her acquaintances here and even in town set her to crying again.

“Where is he now? Has he gone back to his regiment?”

She sniffled. “He did not say. He s-simply r-rode away.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I could escort you home, but I believe speed is of the utmost importance.”

“Yes, I daresay it is.” Elizabeth rose, knowing she ought to let him go, though wishing their time together might be longer.

CHAPTER TEN

The wait was torture. Elizabeth feared Mr Darcy might forget about his search and return to business or friends or simply decide her plight was not worth the effort, for she had, after all, brought this upon herself.

Then she reminded herself that Mr Darcy was a better man, and that he appeared genuinely determined to find Mr Wickham.

Even so, doubt snuck in at the edges over and over.

Walking provided her no joy, for every leaf and hill near Longbourn reminded her of walks with Mr Wickham or rides to meet him.

The entire landscape seemed tainted, and while she would like to have begged Aunt Gardiner to allow her to visit her in town, she feared the rumours might have reached London, and being there would be all the worse.

Jane was consumed by wedding plans and her trousseau, and said she could not understand why Elizabeth refused to attend fittings and shopping excursions in Meryton for her own.

Elizabeth could no longer stand the secrecy and confessed to her family about the gambling and Wickham's demands, and that she had refused to marry him.

Jane sat in shocked silence while Mama screamed, "A broken engagement? Lizzy, how could you do this?"

“How could I go through with it? Mama, he is of terrible character.”

“But you were to be married!”

“Would you see me married to a reprobate?” Elizabeth looked to her father. “Papa?”

“He would have taken too much. You will find another young man, to be sure.”

She had to tell the rest of the story, and though she dreaded it, she shared all, including his touching her in ways he ought not to have done.

When she was finished, Jane, still silent, was staring out the window, body rigid, her youngest sisters were whispering God knew what, and her mother began to sob.

Her father’s face was grim. “Lizzy, my dear, you did nothing that bears resemblance to his accusations?”

Those words would haunt her forever. That he believed them at all pained her more than the ending of her engagement. More than having told Mr Darcy of the rumours.

“No, Papa,” she had said, swallowing a lump in her throat. “How— You surely do not believe me capable of such a thing?”

He tented his fingers and leant his chin on the tips. “My dear, of young ladies and gentlemen, I believe anything, especially where relations of these kinds are involved. The blood runs hot in one’s youth. I deem it possible, though improbable.”

Elizabeth sank into desolation. Even her own father did not believe her.

Her beloved father was betraying her now?

Hot tears threatened but she refused to give way.

She did not wish for him to see her fall apart.

He did not deserve to know her true feelings or thoughts.

Not on this. Perhaps not on anything ever again.

What she needed now was faith and protection, not love in spite of belief of a poor character.

Especially in spite of something she did not do!

“What now?” wailed her mother. “What will become of us now?”

Elizabeth looked to her father, but he offered nothing more than a shrug.

“And I...I asked Mr Darcy for help.”

She could not bear to look at anyone but her father.

“Why him?”

“Because...they have a shared history. I know no details, but Mr Darcy was determined to set things right and is searching for Mr Wickham as we speak.”

“Mr Darcy?” Mama said with disgust. “Why would he help you? Or anyone, for that matter? He does not seem the sort.”

Elizabeth laced her fingers together, pulling at them to calm herself. “He is a good man, Mama.”

“I find him rude. Everyone does.”

“Not everyone, Mama,” Jane said to the window.

“We have to hope,” said Papa, sounding weary, “that Mr Wickham does not follow through on his threats. And that he does not sue us.” He rose slowly, appearing ancient. “Go to my study, Lizzy, and borrow a book. You need distraction.”

She considered his world of words and rejected it. She then looked at her mother, who ran from the room crying, complaining of her nerves, and then to Jane, who still sat staring out the window.

“Jane?” Elizabeth said, barely above a whisper.

Jane’s eyes met hers, and they were hollow. She knew Jane was thinking of her own engagement, undoubtedly fearing it might come to an end due to Elizabeth’s foolish actions.

“I am sorry,” Elizabeth said, wishing to receive comfort or reassurance rather than offering it, but Jane merely nodded and stared out the window again.

Her heart breaking so painfully she thought it must surely kill her, Elizabeth drifted to the pianoforte. Playing it would be torture, and torture suited the moment. She would let the practice hurt her fingers and her spirit. She would play, hating every moment of it.

She played the rest of the evening, then the next morning, the next afternoon, and the next evening, and the same the next day and the next.

To her surprise, she ceased hating it. She began to enjoy the repetition, the discipline, and the focus it took to practise a tune.

She had begun with tunes she had not known, allowing herself the pain of her errors, of not knowing what came next or how to improve it.

Like a puzzle, the pieces came together and became a tune that was pleasant.

Next, she returned to songs she had butchered in the past, songs she had played for her parents, her sisters, her aunts and uncles, for Charlotte and the Lucases, songs for Mr Darcy, and yes, even Mr Wickham.

Those she played with ferocity until they lost their connexion to him and became, once again, mere songs her mother had insisted would sound pleasing and, in fact, did.

Her family noticed the improvement and commented, and though she nodded in thanks of the compliment, the true joy came from within. She played to fill the hours until Mr Darcy might come back with news of her reprieve or her ruination.

On the fourth day, Jane came to sit with her on the bench and they played a duet.

They hit a wrong note and dissolved into a laugh.

Jane rested her head on Elizabeth's shoulder and said, "I am sorry, Lizzy. I was selfish. You have been hurt in the most horrid fashion, and I did nothing to provide you solace. I could think only of myself and for that I am mightily sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I would hate myself until the end of my days if I ruined your chance at happiness."

Elizabeth kissed the top of her dear sister's head, lifted her fingers into place, and began to play again. Jane joined, and no more was said of the matter. Mr Bingley was joining them for dinner, so she had to imagine that all was well with their

engagement.

Elizabeth made one outing to Meryton with Jane, and that was to find new music. The weather had been lovely, and Jane had urged her to take advantage of the break in the rain.

What a strange reversal , Elizabeth thought, for Jane to encourage me to take a walk .

Elizabeth rose to get her pelisse, and only then did she notice Mr Bingley in the parlour.

She realised that a walk had been suggested so she might be their chaperon.

She did not mind, and she, Jane, and Mr Bingley stepped into the bright sunlight.

It had been a similarly lovely day when she had met Mr Wickham, when he had made her swoon with a smile and laugh with the smallest of efforts. Now, were he in front of her, she would be tempted to slap him. Or worse.

At last, they stepped into the bookshop, and Mr Hopkins, the proprietor, bowed to Mr Bingley and said, “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, it has been some time since we have seen you.” The girls nodded, and he said to Elizabeth, “I have been holding a book on the Scottish Highlands I thought you might find intriguing.”

“You are so kind,” she said, stepping forwards. “You remembered I wish to visit there one day!” When he nodded, she said, “Though I cannot imagine others in town clamouring for it, I appreciate your thinking of me.”

He nodded with knowing appreciation, and she smiled the first genuine smile she remembered having in weeks. Weeks! When would Mr Darcy return? “I am here for music sheets.”

“For Miss Mary?” Mr Hopkins asked, moving towards the display with the more serious and complex tunes.

“No, for me.”

Mr Hopkins stopped short. “I do not believe you have ever bought music sheets for yourself.”

“I am working on my accomplishments,” she said, with only a hint of irony.

“Would you like dance tunes? Folk tunes?”

Thinking of their prior discussion, she said, “Anything Scottish?”

“I have these.”

He pulled out a stack, and Elizabeth flipped through the sheets, studying their mood and complexity. Earl Breadalbain’s Reel. Miss Moore’s Rant. Revenge.

Oh yes, Revenge. She continued to look, so as not to appear too obvious, said yes to that and added The Barley Mow and Dusky Night to her purchases. It was an extravagance, but doing something for herself felt nice and, perhaps, a little deserved.

After a bit more time spent in conversation with the proprietor and his wife, whom Jane and Elizabeth adored for her warm smile and hearty laugh, their party walked home.

Just before reaching the lane towards Longbourn, they heard Charlotte Lucas calling out to them.

Elizabeth’s heart sank. She had neglected her friend terribly, not just for these past

weeks but for the months since Mr Wickham had entered her life.

“Charlotte!” Jane called out, and their friend hurried towards them.

Elizabeth did not desire for Mr Bingley—though he might know all from Mr Darcy or Jane—to overhear the particulars, so she hurried to meet Charlotte after urging Jane to give her a moment. Jane turned to Mr Bingley with a smile, seeming only too pleased for a moment alone with him.

Elizabeth would speak the truth to Charlotte and speak first. “I have been an abominable friend.”

“No, no Eliza, I would say that?—”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am

Elizabeth held up a hand. “I have. I lost myself in—” She drew in a breath to summon the courage to utter the name. “—Mr Wickham’s company. And now, to my shame, our engagement is broken.”

“Your shame? Perhaps it will be embarrassing, but I am mightily glad to hear that. He seemed a schemer, and I did not like him. I am relieved you can find someone more suitable.”

“Even if I never marry at all, which just might be the case, it will be better than a life spent with such a man,” she said. “I only wish I had seen in him what others did!”

Elizabeth flung her arms around Charlotte and squeezed, nearly knocking them both over, which set them to giggling.

“Charlotte,” said Jane, “come to our house. We have missed you!”

“I cannot today.” Elizabeth’s heart sank, thinking Charlotte’s kindness had been superficial, but Charlotte added, “My mother is entertaining callers shortly, but perhaps another day?”

“Tomorrow or the day after or the day after. We could use your good cheer.”

Charlotte agreed to the next day, and Elizabeth felt lighter than she had in ages.

She, Jane, and Mr Bingley directed their steps towards Longbourn. She held the music sheets, and was imagining the keys under her fingers, just as a voice called out, “Miss Elizabeth!”

The group stopped and turned, finding Mr Denny fast approaching on foot.

“What might he want?” asked Jane, her cheeks flushing. Elizabeth loved that Jane, though she would never say an unkind word, was so loyal that, under the surface, she was roiling with rage at Mr Wickham’s friend who dared approach.

When Mr Denny was near, he bowed to them, but Elizabeth noted it was perfunctorily done, as if he were rushing through the necessary formalities to complete an urgent errand. How right she was.

“Miss Elizabeth, when was the last time you saw Wickham?”

Elizabeth sucked in a sharp breath. “It has been some time.”

“How long?” His voice was tense. Angry. Was he angry with her?

Elizabeth drew herself up. She had done no wrong, and would not cower before this man whom she had, until recently, considered a friend. “I do not know, and I do not care.”

“Wickham is missing.” Mr Denny clenched his jaw. “He has been missing for five days, and I thought perhaps he was hiding at Longbourn.”

She heard Jane gasp.

“He deserted?”

Mr Denny appeared stricken. “He is...missing. Without permission.”

Though she desired to feel sorry for Mr Denny, whose reputation would be sullied by his association with Mr Wickham, she could not forget or forgive Mr Denny’s

complicity in spreading lies. Or at least his threat to do so.

She reconsidered this. Had he threatened or had he simply shared Mr Wickham's threats? He had been suspicious, but cautiously so. It seemed he was beginning to understand Mr Wickham's wicked nature.

"Mr Denny, when last we spoke, you were sharing shameful claims he was making about me. Claims you knew to be untrue. After all Mr Wickham said and did, you think my family would be giving him safe harbour?"

Mr Denny shook his head, his brow furrowed.

"It was foolish of me to have asked. I am sorry to have disturbed you." He paused.

"And sorry to have spoken to you of Wickham's lies as if there might be truth in them.

I ought not to have given them any purchase, and I ought to have said so to him and to you.

He has made enemies with the men over money owed, and vanishing was, in a way, the safest choice.

Even so, it is dishonourable and has caused a commotion.

"He bowed. "I shall leave you and beg your forgiveness. Perhaps one day we can be friends again."

"Heavens!" Jane said when he was no longer within hearing.

"Indeed," said Elizabeth.

Mr Bingley looked with concern to Jane, but Jane merely looped her arm through his and they began to walk, allowing Elizabeth a moment to think.

Was she vindicated? Saved? Perhaps both, yet her engagement had been broken. She had broken it. And some might still believe the lies he had concocted if he chose to tell them. A man in debt was a scoundrel, but that did not unquestioningly make her an innocent.

She longed to disappear into the notes of her new music and forget about these troubles.

The next day, Charlotte arrived with an armful of hothouse flowers and was embraced heartily.

Longbourn's cook had prepared Charlotte's favourite biscuits and seedcakes, and Charlotte was elated.

After eating more than their fill, Elizabeth brought her friend to the garden, where Elizabeth shared all that had transpired.

Charlotte reached out to Elizabeth's neck as if there might still be a mark there and then took Elizabeth's hand. "Oh Eliza, how terrible a man he is! I thought him just a schemer, but he is so much worse."

Elizabeth nodded.

"Whatever must be done to protect you, we shall all do it. My parents, our acquaintances—why, the entire town shall know of his treachery and violence."

Squeezing Charlotte's hand, Elizabeth gave a little laugh. "We need not rally the town."

Charlotte pulled away. “Eliza, how can you make light of this?”

“I am not. I have simply had more time to consider the matter. I have railed and wept and have asked for help, but not from those who might enjoy and spread the gossip. Rather, I have gone to the one person who might actually be able to stop Mr Wickham.”

Charlotte nodded. “Mr Darcy is a grave fellow, but you say—you say he is kind?”

“More than kind. He is...” Elizabeth looked about, remembering walking with him in this garden, talking about music and life with such ease and humour. “He is lovely.”

When Elizabeth looked back at her friend, she noted Charlotte’s eyebrows were raised.

“Eliza, I cannot tell if the tumult of the past months has damaged your judgment.”

“My judgment is undamaged. Thus, my throwing off Mr Wickham.”

Charlotte leant back on the garden bench. “There has been so much commotion of late at Longbourn.”

“As if that was not enough, we have had a letter from our cousin, Mr Collins. He is to stay with us in a month. I daresay, Mama is in a coil. She insists that he is coming only to see the house he shall steal out from under her once Papa has died. It is grim, Charlotte. I do not know whether to laugh or cry at her tirades.”

“You have done too much crying of late, I suspect, so laugh as much as you can. Your mother will be taken care of, no doubt, by Mr Bingley if no one else.”

“It is a shame to think of Longbourn being lost to us.”

“Perhaps Mr Collins will be delightful and you will still be acquainted with the house through marriage to him; or perhaps he will be awful enough that you will be relieved to be rid of him and Longbourn along with him.”

Elizabeth doubted that but attempted a smile.

Charlotte took her hands. “You must put your mind to other things than Mr Wickham.”

“All I can do is wait and worry. And when Mr Darcy returns, what shall it matter? I am ruined, Charlotte. I ought to have done truly pleasurable things to earn this reputation. What good was being good?”

They laughed and leant their heads together, restored to be in each other’s company once again.

“I have at least been using my time profitably, practising at the pianoforte.”

Charlotte sat up straight. “That I believe even less than the lies Mr Wickham is threatening to spread.”

“It is true. Come, let me show you.” She took Charlotte by the hand, and they hurried back in the house and to the pianoforte so Elizabeth might show off to her friend.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day, Mr Darcy approached Longbourn. Elizabeth saw him from the side, for she was sitting under her favourite oak, a tree in whose shade she had found comfort since she was a small girl. Of course, by now there were no leaves, but the air was crisp and cool so the shade was not needed.

Mr Darcy dismounted and strode towards the door with confidence and purpose, two qualities she admired. She had had confidence, but one man had crushed it, and she fumed at the thought of how easily what she had admired most about herself had been destroyed.

Before he was able to knock, Elizabeth called out to him, arresting him in his steps. He immediately turned, looking for her. She rose and jogged towards him. “Mr Darcy, how good it is to see you, sir.”

He offered a quick bow. “Miss Elizabeth.” A contrariety of emotions played across his countenance, but she knew not what most of them meant.

“Did you locate him?” she asked, forgoing all pleasantries that were expected.

“Eventually, yes. He proved more wily than anticipated.”

“And?” she asked. “Is my family ruined? Am I?”

“How good you are,” he said quietly, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Even in the midst of despair, you ask on your family’s behalf first.”

“Were I any good, none of this would have happened in the first place,” she admitted, looking down. “And here I had always considered myself the sensible sort.”

“Miss Elizabeth, ought this news be shared with your family?”

“In a moment, yes, for they are well aware of Mr Wickham’s treachery, but I would like to know how to prepare myself for what is to come.”

He nodded. “I located Wickham in London.”

“London? How could you find him in such a sprawling place?”

“One must know what rocks to turn over. He had somehow inveigled his way into White’s and was gambling heavily. It was the wrong crowd for him—he was lost well above his touch.”

“Mr Darcy!” called out Mrs Bennet from the front door, her voice shrill and unwelcome. “Have you come to call or have you any news for us?”

“I come bearing news, madam,” he said, his eyes not leaving Elizabeth’s face. It warmed her somehow.

“We will enter presently, Mama,” she called. “We need just a few minutes to?—”

Mrs Bennet marched closer as if Elizabeth had not spoken. “We understand that you went to find that wretched Mr Wickham. None of us ever liked him. I said to Lizzy, ‘Be careful of that one, dear. He has a dishonesty hanging about him like smoke’.”

Elizabeth would have sighed had she not been so entirely irritated by her mother’s lies, as well as her intrusion. “Mama, please allow me to speak with Mr Darcy a moment, and then we will come in for tea and you can express all you desire about Mr Wickham.”

Whether it was the prospect of setting out a tea to impress such a fine gentleman or Elizabeth's fierce expression, Mrs Bennet excused herself and disappeared within, though they could hear her ordering poor Mrs Hill about from where they stood.

"White's," Elizabeth offered to remind him of their conversation, her skin tingling with anticipation and also regret over her mother's manners.

He turned his head to glance at the door, clearly hoping not to see Mrs Bennet re-emerging, or any other Bennet for that matter.

"Yes. White's. While the men of the club were enjoying taking his money, Wickham was becoming a liability to a new friend whose good graces had earned his admittance.

When I spoke with Mr Redding, he expressed relief that I had arrived, for he had only just begun to realise the trap he had fallen into with Wickham, and was not sure how he might extricate himself. "

"Where is Mr Wickham now?"

"Gone."

Elizabeth inhaled sharply before asking, "Gone where?"

Mr Darcy shrugged. "The important thing to note is that he will not ever speak of you again, nor will he return to London or Hertfordshire."

"How can you be certain of that?"

Though it was good to hear his assurances, all that she truly wanted was for him to wrap his arms around her and whisper in her ear that she was safe. She had not appreciated how reassuring his presence could be.

“When I confronted him at White’s, he attempted to sully your name and mine, telling his new friends that you and I had...

but never mind that. He claimed that this was why he had been forced to end his engagement with you.

I assured the gentlemen this was not the truth.

I asked how many of them had loaned him money, and how many he had paid back.

Their expressions said it all, and once each realised they had been tricked, as had their companions, their opinions began to turn.

Next, I asked if they had noticed his flirtations with women, specifically if he had directed his attentions to the wealthiest in the crowd.

They affirmed this. Without using names, I shared multiple stories, not just of you or of—but it was enough. ”

Elizabeth was curious about the bit he had begun to say before he stopped himself, but other concerns were more pressing.

“Just as I thought I had fully ensnared him, he asked for permission to gather his belongings and to leave town. I agreed, as long as he went where neither you nor I had acquaintances. He found these terms acceptable, and I thought the matter settled. I desired to tell you myself in person, and planned to return promptly. The next day, however, Mr Curtis, one of the gentlemen at White’s, called on me.

He was frantic, for his family had found a note from his sister explaining that she had eloped with Mr Wickham.

Wickham had left London at least twelve hours earlier.

Mr Curtis and I, along with two other men, raced north, but we were too late.

Upon our arrival, we discovered they were married. ”

Elizabeth could not take it in. Mr Wickham was married.

To someone else. This was both appalling and wonderful simultaneously.

Perhaps he would be settled now and would be consumed with his new wife rather than with defaming her name?

Yet this new woman had to have been fooled in some fashion.

What had she to offer? Likely money, perhaps a title, but would any of it be his if an elopement was involved?

She had no doubt that Mr Wickham had chosen his mark more carefully this time.

She searched his face. “So that is all? This chapter is at an end?”

Mr Darcy nodded gravely.

“Mr Darcy, I cannot thank you enough. I still do not understand why you agreed to help me, travelling all the way to Scotland to do so!”

His eyes left her face for the first time since the discussion between them had begun.

With a deep breath, he began to tell her a tale she could never have imagined.

He spoke of his sister, whom Wickham had seduced, and of an attempted elopement thwarted at the very last minute.

She expressed her anguish at the effect on his poor young sister who had been left bereft and sure that she would never find love again.

“I beg you to keep this a secret, for well you know the damage rumours and indiscretion can do.”

She nodded and thanked him again, and again, as did her family when all was shared.

Darcy was invited to stay and dine with the family, an invitation he accepted gladly. After the meal, when they had all removed to the parlour, Miss Elizabeth surprised him by announcing, “I shall play for you all.”

He raised his eyebrows in her direction, trying to appear exaggeratedly doubtful.

“I have been practising!” she said with an impertinent smirk.

“She has,” said Miss Lydia, “enough to make us all sick of the tunes.”

Miss Bennet gave her youngest sister a severe look, and Miss Mary added, “I can play next, if you like.” No one objected to her offer, not even Darcy, who would never be so rude, but mostly because he was focused on Miss Elizabeth, her fine figure gliding to the seat, settling the sheets in the haphazard and yet still graceful manner unique to her, and lifting her long fingers to the keys.

The tune was jaunty: a country dance that echoed the Highlands. When she was finished, Darcy called out, “And what, pray, is the name of that? I do not think I have heard it before.”

“It is a new favourite of mine called Revenge .”

They all laughed, he harder than the situation necessitated, but it felt so right and such a relief after the heaviness and concern he had felt for the past weeks.

Searching for Wickham, finding him only to lose him, thinking over and over how this fate might have befallen his dear sister, Georgiana, if matters had turned another way, and what damage Wickham could do to Miss Elizabeth, whom Darcy admired more than was reasonable.

“Shall we play a song together?” he asked.

Miss Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled, setting his heart to flutter. “Has your playing improved?”

“Not the least bit.”

She smiled broadly, and now his heart pounded like drums in a marching band.

“Perfect,” she said. “Let us play terribly together.”

He sat, their hips lightly touching and their elbows grazing. The warmth of her sent a shiver through his body. Dare he hope that she was affected by his presence as well? Her first note was misplayed, and he noticed a little tremor in her hands.

“Heavens, Miss Elizabeth, I thought your playing had improved.”

She laughed, though her mother lifted her chin and said, “She is not bad, Mr Darcy.”

“It was a joke, Mama,” Miss Elizabeth said gently.

“What kind of joke is insulting? A joke is funny!”

She offered a sigh that only he heard, and he replied with an equally quiet snicker that he followed with a compliment that was effusive enough to pacify Mrs Bennet.

The tune was halting and imperfect, mirroring how their love had grown and would

continue to grow in the next months and years.

He wanted to propose the very moment he sat next to her at the pianoforte, but knew she would need time to trust again and so spent days and weeks doing as a proper gentleman would, courting her, spending time among her family, giving her all the little compliments that she deserved.

He grew accustomed to her family, and while he never was comfortable or quite approving of their ways, he decided he could accept their becoming relations.

He knew he did not mislead himself when he felt their love grow, and when he did finally declare himself to her, she assured him that she had grown to love him more each day and hoped each day would continue in the same way.

A year later, they would sit at the grand piano at Pemberley, a child of their own growing within her, but still with a promise as thrilling as the moments before the first notes of a practised tune were played.