



Until My Last Breath (Courtship & Courage: The Darcy & Elizabeth #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: This thrilling 'Pride and Prejudice' variation will take you beyond the events of Jane Austen's novel, hurling Mr Darcy and Miss Elizabeth into a dramatic adventure neither could ever have imagined.

After his unfortunate marriage proposal, Darcy writes Elizabeth a letter. In his attempt to hand it to her, everything changes and both of them are kidnapped. In a few days, Elizabeth is at the mercy of ruthless mercenaries, facing a destiny worse than death.

Despite his injury, Darcy is determined to save the only woman he has ever loved. Together with his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, they embark on a dangerous journey which will push them to the limits of their courage.

"Until My Last Breath" is a romantic adventure depicting many journeys, criminals and pirates, and bloody fights able to determine life or death. But above all, it is a story about how Darcy and Elizabeth realise that hope, faith and their mutual love can never die—as they are the only things keeping them alive.

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3rd April 1812

Darcy put his quill down; his fingers drifted over the large ledger in front of him, closing it. His attempt to concentrate on his work was again frustrated by thoughts beyond his control.

“I cannot continue like that...” he whispered, looking down at his desk. The pile of papers and letters had only grown in the last few days.

There was a knock on the door.

“Excuse me, sir,” the butler said, entering his master’s study. “Your coffee, as requested.” Resting the tray on a side table, Osmond poured the fragrant infusion into a cup, added some milk and handed it to his master.

“Thank you, Osmond,” Darcy said, sipping from the cup, closing his eyes. At least his coffee was as it should be. The strong beverage was one of the few things helping him to continue with his work.

“I believe we have everything I need for my trip tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir. Everything is ready. You can leave at first light as requested.”

“Excellent, Osmond. Thank you again. That will be all.”

Darcy stood up and went to the window. The persistent rain of the last few days had left the streets of London empty; not even the crows had ventured out today. It was as

if the quietude of the day was mocking his inability to work, forcing him to admit the real cause for it.

He should take some holidays and forget about estate responsibilities .

Darcy rubbed his forehead. The last thing he was going to do for the next two weeks was that. His aunt's ledgers and tenants were always a steady source of headaches.

At least a change in scenery and Richard's company should be enough to distract him from this inept state of mind.

He returned to the coffee pot and poured another cup.

How things had changed in his life in the last months.

Indeed, he no longer was the man he used to be — not after spending time in Meryton, where he had met the most intriguing and unsuitable of ladies. Not only her family was vulgar and inadequate for polite society, but she, Elizabeth Bennet, had dared to question his honour regarding that scoundrel Wickham. The mere memory of the Netherfield ball, and her angry eyes glaring at him were enough to make his blood boil.

He was Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley! Nobody questioned his honour!

With no control over them, Darcy's memories dragged him again to Meryton, and the day after the ball — the last time he had seen her. Once again, he repeated to himself that their hasty departure had nothing to do with his infatuation for that lady. It had been just a genuine and selfish desire to support Bingley in his decision to leave the area.

Nothing more.

Yes, he had done that for Bingley.

While in Netherfield, Darcy thought that perhaps this time his friend had found someone who had truly touched his heart. Bingley seemed genuinely taken by the elder Bennet sister. But nothing had come of it. Darcy could not avoid worrying for his friend. It had been a trait in Bingley's character to, first, frequently fall in and out of love, and, second, give too much consideration to his sisters' opinions — especially those regarding their prospects in life. Darcy had tried to help his friend, encouraging him to stand for his decisions without interference from his sisters. But after a couple of days in London, Bingley had decided to give up Netherfield's lease .

Miss Jane Bennet's serene and pleasant countenance also came to his mind. She seemed pleased to receive Bingley's attentions. And why would she not? Bingley, after all, despite his... well, non-confident, fickle nature, was a good catch. Was he not?

The thought brought a scowl to Darcy's face.

Perhaps not. Bingley was still too immature to be married; and she, too kind and too sweet. Bingley and Miss Bennet would never match.

Perhaps it had been for the best.

But if Miss Bennet had indeed developed any attachment to his friend — as Darcy suspected to be the case — Miss Elizabeth would not be happy. She adored her sister.

Darcy exhaled loudly. He poured himself another cup of coffee, but to his disappointment, the liquid was already lukewarm. He put the cup down and went back to the window.

If he was to be honest, he remembered that time in Meryton as one of the most

exciting in his life. He had travelled through the Continent a couple of times, seeing amazing places and meeting all kinds of people. Nevertheless, there was nobody quite like her. She was intriguing, challenging, handsome. Her fine eyes, her lips...

He growled and quickly opened the window, allowing the fresh breeze of the morning to hit his flushed body.

He should stop thinking about her.

Fortunately, he had something to distract himself — the preparations for his annual visit to his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

The best thing he could do at the moment was to concentrate on that — and forget about Elizabeth Bennet.

Yes. He was going to make a great effort and enjoy his day in the best way possible. Rain and drizzle could go hang. A walk in the muddy park would be a good start.

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Elizabeth jumped from her bed and ran to the window, only to growl in frustration. It was another rainy day. For how long had it been raining? Weeks? Months? If the answer depended on her mood, it surely had been raining for years!

Yesterday, she had attempted to distract herself by packing her things for the journey ahead, to see her dear friend, Charlotte. But even that had failed.

She shut her eyes and sighed, wishing for some changes. When she reopened them, nothing had happened. It was as if a storm had devastated her bedchamber. At her feet, the almost empty trunk lay beside many pieces of clothing and ladies' accessories. Dresses and gowns, bonnets and shawls, stockings and shoes — all were

spread everywhere on the bed and on the floor. On her desk, a pile of books waited to be chosen and included in her luggage.

Restless, Elizabeth walked around her room like a caged animal. “Why can I not forget it and move on? Why?” she mumbled, raising her hands in the air.

The last four months had been quite trying for the Bennet family; so many hopes and laughter, and then, so much disappointment and tears. She had been concerned about Jane — or, so she preferred to think. Her beloved sister had suffered an undeserved disappointment when that man — Mr Bingley — had left Netherfield with his party the very next day after the ball, with no intention of coming back.

At first, Mr Bingley had been very attentive to Jane, raising everybody’s hopes. But that had not lasted. Despite his initial attentions towards Jane, he had left the neighbourhood without even saying his goodbye. Just a short letter from Miss Bingley had explained his decision.

How wrong Elizabeth had been.

She lowered her eyes and fetched the golden ribbon she had used at the Netherfield ball. Guilt crushed her heart. What had she done to her sister, encouraging her in that way?

Elizabeth looked through the window again. The crystal drops of rain trickling down the panes reminded her of a solitary tear dropping from Jane’s eyes. Jane had raised her hand and dried it, saying she would be fine. Elizabeth had tried to comfort her sister, saying she would find a much better and more honourable man. Jane had just smiled.

At first, Elizabeth’s concerns for Jane had obfuscated another, much deeper, reason for sadness. As Jane’s melancholy slowly turned into resignation, Elizabeth still

found herself upset and dreary. But she knew the reasons for it. Her own forlorn mood was not entirely caused by Mr Bingley's rejection of her sister. The silk texture of that ribbon on her fingers reminded her of his soft touch on her hands while they had danced...

Mr Darcy.

She shook her head, resuming her pacing up and down the room. "Hateful man! So arrogant and self-confident, believing himself to be above other people. I would not be surprised if he was in some way involved in Mr Bingley's decision to leave Netherfield. How could he consider himself a gentleman, meddling in people's lives like that?"

Rubbing her forehead, she collapsed on her bed, bringing her chin to her knees. It was disconcerting to realise that, amongst all the men of her acquaintance, the enigmatic Mr Darcy was the most handsome and intelligent one. He had something that had made him stand out among the other men. He was not just handsome and intelligent — she forced herself to admit — he was also well read, and open to debates and different opinions. Moreover, she could not stop believing that he, in some way, had even provoked her into discussion for the simple pleasure of seeing her debating with him.

But what infuriated her the most was his contradictory nature. In some bizarre way, she could see goodness in him and, at times, even consider him a pleasant companion. If it were not for his selfish behaviour, arrogance and pride, not to mention his disregard and even disdain for the feelings of others, she could almost feel attracted to him.

Vexing man!

"But what does it serve me to think about all those things now? They are gone and

probably I will never see him again. ”

The sudden melancholy did not surprise her. Would this feeling ever go away?

“Well,” she said standing up in front of her mirror. “You are not made to dwell on unpleasant memories, young lady. Your family has endured the last months and will continue to do so. For now, you will concentrate on finishing your packing and looking forward to your visit to dear Charlotte.”

Another look through the window showed that the rain seemed to be finally ceasing. “What I would not give to be allowed to run in that mud again.”

Some cheerful memories of her childhood resurfaced. A tentative smile reached Elizabeth’s lips when she remembered the way Charlotte was always scolding her for her lack of femininity and unladylike behaviour. Had her interests in female affairs been a little greater than completely non-existent, she would not have spent her childhood years running in the rain, climbing trees, swimming in the lake — and fencing or hunting.

She surely could blame her father for her boyish behaviour. Missing the presence of a male in the house, Mr Bennet had found in Elizabeth his perfect companion. She was not like the other girls; she had enjoyed playing games with her father as if she was a boy. Yet, he never allowed her to wear breeches — at least, not without wearing her dress on top. They could spend hours discussing British Naval history, literature, French, and that would not have been so unacceptable had her father not also introduced her to fencing and hunting with real weapons. Her mother would suffer an apoplectic attack had she so much as suspected that such activities were taking place under her very nose.

Elizabeth’s musings were interrupted by a knock on the door. A maid peeked her head inside her room. “Miss, your father requests your presence in his study.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Elizabeth replied, grateful for the reprieve.

Downstairs, she knocked at her father’s study door and entered.

Mr Bennet, who was reading the newspaper with a rather stern expression, startled by her entrance and put the paper down .

Elizabeth turned her head and read the newspaper headlines.

“Another lady is missing in London. Again, family and authorities discarded the possibility of an elopement and the case is being regarded as another heinous crime...”

“Ah, Lizzy,” Mr Bennet said, folding the paper as he noticed her eyes on it. “Are you too busy? I know you must be very... well, engaged preparing your things. But considering you are going to stay away for the next six weeks, would you care...” — he lowered his voice and looked over her shoulder at the door — “...to join me in our little ‘training’?”

At his invitation, Elizabeth forgot about everything else. “Thank you, Papa. I would like it very much,” she whispered merrily.

Half an hour later, they were in the old barn used to house the cattle in wintertime.

“Lizzy,” Mr Bennet said, his hands on her shoulders. “As an old man, I think it does not benefit you to keep fencing only with me, especially after what has happened to my leg.” He was referring to the accident he had had some years ago. He paused, considering that now he had some other concerns for his daughters, especially after following the news about the missing ladies. “So today I have invited one of your old friends to join us. Mr Lucas?” he called, turning from Elizabeth. “Would you mind joining us?”

A young man in his mid-twenties stepped out from behind a large pile of hay and approached father and daughter with a shy smile.

“Papa! I thought it was supposed to be our secret. How could you ask John to join us?”

Mr Bennet smiled. “Ah! I can understand your concern, Lizzy. But it should be enough to say I caught Mr Lucas here kissing your sister Kitty in this very place some days ago. He asked for her hand, as it should be expected, professing his love for her, but also begging me not to tell his father. Until their engagement can be announced, I proposed to exchange one favour for another — or rather, one secret for another.” Mr Bennet chuckled at his own wit, then sobered. “I know he is a worthy opponent. It will do you good to train with someone younger, stronger and with better techniques than I can ever teach you.”

John Lucas, Charlotte’s youngest brother — who had perfected his skills as a swordsman at Cambridge, one of the best centres in the country in that sport — had recently finished his studies and returned home to help with his father’s political career. After Sir William’s knighthood, his business had been prospering, and his son would make an invaluable contribution to his works.

Elizabeth’s gaze rested on her future brother-in-law with warm affection. “Well, John, it seems like your secret has at last been discovered,” Elizabeth said, turning her smile to her frowning father. “But is my secret safe with you?”

They both smiled — John in a nervous way. He had been nurturing a secret love for Catherine since before he had left for university, promising her he would come back and marry her.

“I can guarantee it is, Lizzy. Now,” John quickly said, rubbing his hands, and before Mr Bennet could make further enquiries about the meaning of her mischievous

words, he added, “show me what you can do. I confess to being surprised when Mr Bennet told me you were an excellent swordsman... um, well, swordswoman? Is there such a word?”

Elizabeth laughed, rearranging her clothes. She was wearing an old-fashioned riding attire not well adjusted to fit her now womanly frame. Her auburn hair was braided and pinned up in a single bun; not very fashionable, but much more efficient.

“I do not think so, John. But it does not matter, does it?” Elizabeth said, fetching her sword, an old sabre. She moved it in the air, testing its weight and balance, nodding towards John in approval. “What really matters is what I can do with a sword.”

They positioned themselves, and John indicated that she should be the one to start.

As the attacks and defences progressed, so did the complexity of their moves. John was fascinated by Elizabeth’s skills and decided to try something more audacious. Once or twice, she was taken by surprise when John stopped his sword just under her chin, or in the middle of her chest. They paused for a short time, just long enough for him to explain to her how to attack in the same way. She was delighted. A quarter of an hour later, Elizabeth had managed to imitate his moves. An hour later, she could attack and defend almost as well as he could.

“You are a fast learner, Lizzy,” John said still panting when their training ended. “I hope never to be a real enemy for you. I assure you that any man who underestimates your abilities will be sadly surprised.”

Exhausted and absolutely joyous, she thanked him, and they left.

Back home, a spent Elizabeth, ironically, found the energy to finish her packing. And when that arduous task was at last accomplished, she sat on her bed and thought about the weeks to come.

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4th April 1812

On the following day, Darcy's staff had everything prepared, and he and his valet departed just after sunrise. Some minutes later, his cousin, Richard, joined them when the carriage stopped in front of Darcy's uncle's townhouse some streets ahead.

"Good morning, Darcy. Morning, Wilfred," Richard greeted them with his usual enthusiasm. "I cannot wait to see Aunt Catherine and... Anne. Do you not agree, Darcy? I believe you share my feelings..." he added, winking and laughing.

The valet bowed his head, and Darcy did the same, releasing a long breath. It would not do to start the day being baited by his cousin. Richard had always teased him about their aunt's wish for Darcy to marry her daughter, Anne.

They left London and after reaching the main road, the carriage set a comfortable pace, despite the recent rains. After some time looking outside the window, Darcy turned and saw Wilfred dozing. Wilfred had been serving his family since before Darcy was born. His sixty years of age were now taking their toll on the old man's disposition.

Turning to his cousin, Darcy found Richard staring at him. "Good Lord, Richard! What do you mean by looking at me like that? Are you trying to scare me? "

"No, but I can see you have been unhappy about something. What is it?" Richard had been observing Darcy in the last weeks since arriving for his new assignment in London.

Wilfred snored and moved his head slightly.

Richard left his seat beside Darcy and sat in front of him, looking him in the eyes. “I know I have been a thorn in your side our entire lives, but you know I care for you like you were my brother.”

Darcy hated that Richard could read him so easily. Indeed, his cousin had been like a thorn in his flesh; and yet, to be honest, he would not change anything — though, perhaps he would change the long periods Richard had spent fighting on the continent. Thank God, with his new assignment, Richard would be allowed to stay in London for some time. Darcy had missed him. The respect and friendship they shared was one of the few things Darcy treasured in his life.

“I was thinking about going on a trip; perhaps to Scotland, or even Ireland,” said Darcy. “Somewhere far away. I think I need to... rest.” A pair of fine eyes invaded his mind, and he shook his head.

Bemused, Richard pursed his lips. “Fine. If you do not want to tell me, it is fine. But do not offend my intelligence. I know something is wrong — you keeping it from me or not.”

There was a long silence before Darcy spoke again. He cleared his throat. “I met a lady last October...” The words slipped quickly from Darcy’s mouth, as if he could change his mind about them.

Richard’s mouth fell open. “Tell me. Everything.”

Despite himself, Darcy chuckled at his cousin’s childish behaviour. It did not matter how old he was, Richard would always be this playful character – especially regarding matters of the heart.

Darcy started his story with Bingley inviting him to visit a property his friend had planned to lease in Meryton, Hertfordshire, finishing with the disturbing dance at the Netherfield ball, his escape from the area on the following day, and Bingley's decision not to return — without making any connections or mentioning any names. It would not do for Richard's loose tongue to put Darcy in a delicate situation with his family. Richard was a trustworthy man, but could speak a bit too much, especially with pretty ladies were concerned.

“Are you in love with her?” Richard asked, amusement plastered on his smiling face. “Could it finally be that my fastidious cousin has at last succumbed to love?”

Darcy turned back to the window, remembering the ball at Netherfield. “Our interaction was somehow... disappointing. There were other inconvenient things to consider.”

There was silence again, and Richard arched his eyebrows.

“What?” Darcy whispered, glancing at his sleeping valet.

“You did not answer my question.”

“Well, perhaps this does, then. This lady questioned my honour about Wickham's present situation, as if I was responsible for it. There, you see? How can I love, or even care for someone who thinks so ill of me?” He stopped, lowering his gaze to his joined hands. “I believe she has fallen prey to his deception.”

“And how on earth did she meet the miscreant?”

“You know he had joined the militia after... last summer. What you do not know is that they were camping close to Meryton at the same time I was there.” Darcy sighed. “It can only be a sign, can it not, Richard? Stay away from the lady. And that is what

I am doing.”

“You said she was acting as if questioning your honour regarding that reprobate. But you are not sure she was, are you? Perhaps she was just... curious. You know. The female mind. You know sometimes you can overreact—”

“It does not matter anymore. Her family is not what we would consider proper. They are... objectionable. Besides, I am never going to see her again,” Darcy retorted. “I was just concerned for her safety. That is all. Nothing else.”

“If your concern is for this lady’s safety, Darcy, then fear no more. I have been tracking Wickham since last summer. He sold his commission in the Militia and left the area of Meryton last February. ”

Darcy looked back at Richard. This new information indeed brought some relief to him. At least she would...

A thought occurred to him. “Richard, you said he sold his commission and left the area. Do you know if he was alone?” A sudden trepidation took hold of his heart.

What if he had married Elizabeth?

“I am sorry, but I do not know. My informers in the Army did not add any other information. The truth is, after he left the Militia, I lost track of him. I do not know where he is now. What I do know is that he had debts of honour and was forced to sell his commission and use the money to repay his creditors.” Richard leant back. “You must know that some fellows are not as forgiving as you were.”

The carriage jolted, and Wilfred straightened up, apologising for having been asleep. Darcy accepted his apologies with a grace which quickly vanished.

Damned Wickham! The man was like a ghost haunting Darcy's life. Firstly, attempting to elope with his younger sister, and then, shadowing over Miss Elizabeth, feeding her with his lies and cheap charm.

With Wilfred awake, they did not have another opportunity to resume the conversation.

Darcy closed his eyes and tapped his head against the carriage seat behind him. This was much worse than before. How could he have peace of mind not knowing what had happened to Miss Elizabeth?

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After arriving at Rosings Park and changing their clothes, Darcy and Richard headed for the drawing room, where they were greeted by their aunt and cousin. Refreshments were ordered and the usual conversation took place; Lady Catherine talking as if alone in the room, Richard smiling and gesticulating to Anne, and Darcy lost in his private thoughts.

It was not until Darcy heard that Mr Collins had recently married that he gave some attention to what his aunt was saying .

“Mr Collins, married? I mean, um... I met him last November in Hertfordshire...” Darcy said.

“Yes, yes, he had mentioned it. He met his wife there, apparently after a ball...” Lady Catherine replied, sipping her tea.

This new information took Darcy's breath away. He excused himself and walked to the window, rubbing his aching temples. How could he be so pathetic? First, he had been tortured by the dark idea of Elizabeth being married to Wickham. And now this

maddening possibility that Elizabeth could, in fact, be the new Mrs Collins. He remembered the parson's attentions towards her at the ball, taking her for the first set, and that the man was also the heir of Longbourn. It would make sense to marry him.

Lady Catherine, oblivious to Darcy's struggles, continued. "Mr and Mrs Collins are already settled at the parsonage since last March. Today, a sister and an old friend of the new Mrs Collins have arrived to visit them. I was just waiting for them to rest before inviting them for tea."

Darcy turned quickly, an idea coming to mind. "Excellent idea, aunt. I could go there, invite them for tea, and pay my respects to the new neighbours, especially considering I am already acquainted with most of them from my time in Hertfordshire."

The truth, however, was quite different. Darcy neither cared enough for Mr Collins to pay his respects, nor was he concerned if they were resting. He could not wait one more minute before being sure that Elizabeth was really there — which would mean she had not married Wickham. Or, if she was there, whether she had married her stupid cousin or was the friend visiting. Mercifully, at least this satisfaction was within his reach.

"Richard, would you care to join me?" asked Darcy heading towards the door.

Richard raised his eyebrows, surprised by the invitation, but followed his cousin.

Before Lady Catherine could voice any objection, they had already left.

The walk to the parsonage was fast and silent. Darcy had his eyes fixed ahead of him; his mouth, a single and tense line. Richard did not ask anything. By the agitated state of mind of his cousin, he could only hope that Darcy would feel better after meeting this new Mrs Collins — or whoever was at the parsonage.

Richard paused his thoughts as an idea came to mind. Could this newly married lady be the one they were talking about earlier?

Once at their destination, Darcy knocked on the door with more strength than would be necessary, and after a short wait they were finally admitted into the house. In no time, Mr Collins was in the drawing room, greeting and welcoming them.

Darcy returned the greeting with impatience but was soon rewarded when three ladies finally entered the room. The first one, still wiping her hands on her apron, was followed by a younger one and a flustered Miss Elizabeth.

“Sir, I believe you are already acquainted with my wife, Mrs Charlotte Collins.”

Darcy froze, blinking a couple of times, slowly moving his narrowed eyes from Elizabeth to the new Mrs Collins.

Mrs Charlotte Collins .

Noticing that all the eyes in the room were now observing him, Darcy cleared his throat and forced a polite smile. “Indeed. How do you do?”

A heavyweight was lifted from Darcy’s chest. Elizabeth was neither married to Mr Collins nor Wickham.

They sat to partake from refreshments.

Elizabeth kept her eyes fixed on her fingers entwined on her cup. She did not seem happy to see him again.

Inhaling deeply a couple of times, Darcy decided there was only one path to tread. “I hope your family are in good health, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes, they are. I thank you,” she said, lowering her gaze to her cup again, clearly ending their short interaction.

Darcy was wondering about how much more awkward this situation could become, when he noticed Richard sitting at the edge of his armchair, looking at him with mirth. Foreseeing his cousin’s intention, Darcy stared back at him, pursing his lips and shaking his head.

Too late.

“Miss Bennet, what a pleasure to meet you at last. My cousin told me so much about Meryton and its inhabitants that I was seriously considering spending some time there in the future.”

“Oh. Indeed, sir? Considering?”

From the top of her teacup, Elizabeth gave Mr Darcy a meaningful glance. “Mr Darcy is all politeness, but it seems he was not very convincing, or you would not have any doubts. Perhaps he found Meryton just tolerable and not pleasant enough to tempt him. ” She took another sip of her tea.

“Lizzy!” Charlotte admonished, elbowing her friend.

From his side of the room, Richard did not miss Mrs Collins chastising her friend. But what surprised him was Miss Elizabeth’s witty reply. He never more curious. “I am sorry, Darcy. I think I have put you in a delicate position.” He turned to her again. “Miss Elizabeth, you are quite right. My cousin always has some difficulty in finding any other place as beautiful as his birthplace in Derbyshire. I would wager he has never admired the beauty here in Kent. We usually come to Rosings Park more to help our aunt with the maintenance and finances of her estate rather than to enjoy ourselves, especially considering the short length of our stay.”

Elizabeth turned her inquisitive gaze back to Mr Darcy. “I can understand, Colonel. In our short acquaintance, Mr Darcy has revealed himself as the perfect gentleman to offer his assistance in people’s personal affairs.”

Her double meaning was not lost to Richard. What had his cousin done to cause her such annoyance?

“Allow me to disagree, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy intervened, a little stung by her words. “I would rather say I agree to assist than offer my assistance. I am always glad to assist my friends and family when they ask for my help.” Darcy made a great effort to remember anything he had done in her presence to create such an impression. He could be guilty of pride, but meddling? Was she talking about Wickham?

“Would you say then, sir, that it would not be your custom to offer help, even when you see your family or friends, are making a mistake?”

Well, not Wickham then. Darcy paused. It seemed she was referring to Bingley in some way, but he could not grasp how. He decided to answer honestly. “I would say you are correct, Miss Elizabeth.”

Mr Collins asked the colonel how he was finding Rosings Park this time, distracting Richard from his cousin’s conversation.

Taking advantage of the respite, Elizabeth pondered about Mr Darcy’s reply. Could it be that he was not responsible for Mr Bingley’s desertion after all? She needed to find it out.

As he kept his intense gaze on her, she gave him an enigmatic smile. “Well, it seems I have had the wrong impression after all.”

“I would be happy to oblige you, Miss Elizabeth. It would be my pleasure to clarify

any... misunderstanding,” he responded in the same tone, hoping with all his being that he could do exactly that.

Elizabeth bit her lip and lowered her gaze to her empty cup. To her eternal vexation, she was tempted by the chance of having Mr Darcy explaining himself. During that fateful evening at the ball, she had provoked him to do exactly that. His answers, however, were... elusive. He did not admit or deny anything.

She turned back to him and wondered what he would say given the opportunity. Something in his eyes encouraged her. She smiled. “I would be delighted, sir. How long do you intend to remain in Kent?”

Darcy blinked. He could not believe the sudden change in her attitude and felt pleasantly... confused. He decided to be cautious. For the life of him, he could not understand what she was about and decided to keep his strategy of honesty, as it seemed to be working. Taking a deep breath, and choosing well his words, he replied, “We usually stay for two weeks, but we are always inclined to spend the necessary time to accomplish our obligations.”

“I am glad to hear it. And I hope you and your cousin have time to enjoy your stay this time. The over prolonged winter we just had, forced the daffodils to a late blossom. It is so wonderful to see everything starting again.”

Darcy held his breath, wondering if he had understood her correctly. Was she offering him an opportunity to explain and... make amends? God help him. He smiled back. “I will try to keep that in mind, Miss Elizabeth.”

After the appropriate time for the visit was over, Darcy and Richard extended their aunt’s invitation for the eventual dinner, thanked their hosts and bade their farewells.

Elizabeth blushed effusively when Darcy bowed over her hand. “I hope to see you

soon, Miss Elizabeth. Perhaps we could talk more about the... spring and... daffodils.”

He kissed her hand and left.

Their reencounter had been much better than he had anticipated.

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Richard and Darcy made their way back to Rosings in silence. Darcy was feeling that same tingling in his stomach he felt back in Hertfordshire and held back a smile. He must be mad for just considering what she was offering him. Could they... start fresh?

As they approached the great house, Richard took Darcy’s arm and pulled him close. “Tell her.” Widened eyes started back at Richard. “Tell her about your feelings and what happened with Wickham,” Richard said exasperated, then paused. “Why do you insist on insulting my intelligence? Goodness, Darcy! Even a blind person could see she is the one you told me about. Your eyes! They had betrayed you much sooner than any of your words. Do you think I did not hear all that mumbling about harsh winters, spring and daffodils, and starting again?”

Darcy had the decency to avert his gaze.

“She is a jewel,” Richard said, putting his hands on his cousin’s shoulders. “And in the little time we were together, I believe the two of you would be perfect for each other. For once in your life, forget about the others, forget about inconveniences and whatever other excuse you can think of, and think about you and the gift of being genuinely happy with a wife you can admire and love.”

Richard walked towards the front door, then turned back. “Do it, Darcy, and do it

soon,” he said closing the door after him.

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9th April 1816

Darcy woke up early again, but this time daylight found a smile on his lips.

During that week, he and Richard had been quite busy with their obligations to their aunt's estate, but Darcy had made an effort to enjoy his time. In particular, on his morning walks with Miss Elizabeth, when they had, inadvertently — he chuckled at the use of that word — found each other on one of the many paths around the estate.

Perhaps the first one had indeed been accidental, but not the second, or the third, or the fourth. Unfortunately, in none of those meetings were they alone, as Mrs Collins was always there. Darcy concluded that, after their first awkward conversation a week ago, Mrs Collins, as an old friend and Elizabeth's chaperone, felt responsible for her reputation — and her loose tongue. Mrs Collins, like Richard, seemed to have a very sharp mind.

He looked at the clock on the mantel. Ten past six. It was still a little early to find Elizabeth, so he decided to ride for a while.

In a swift movement, Darcy left his bed and rang the bell for Wilfred. Once he was shaved and dressed in his best riding attire, he left. On his way out, he stopped at the kitchen, greeted the servants, enjoyed a good cup of coffee and took two slices of fresh bread with butter and strawberry jam to eat on his way out.

Whistling an old tune, he approached the stables and asked for a horse, and smiled again.

“...think about you and the gift of being genuinely happy with a wife you can admire, and love .”

Darcy had not gone that far — yet. His main intention at the moment was to clarify her misunderstandings about his character.

Nothing more.

Well...

Perhaps that was not entirely true. Richard's words kept echoing in his mind, his heart always skipping a beat.

Could it be possible?

He marrying Elizabeth?

As Darcy lost himself in that strange and conflicting contentment, prompting his horse into a gentle canter, he became aware of something he had never noticed before; Rosings Park was indeed a beautiful place. Far away from the great manor, where the surroundings had been artificially modified accordingly to his aunt's particular taste, the beauty of the green meadows, spotted with different dots, were a feast for the eyes. Daffodils, dandelions and delicate primroses, daisies and violets covered the land up to where the horizon touched the sky.

Damned his perceptive cousin!

The sight of a pink silhouette wavering in the distance brought Darcy's heart to a frenetic rhythm. He slowed his horse to a trot and drew closer.

Yes, it was her, her back turned to him. He looked around, searching for Mrs Collins,

but did not find her. Was Elizabeth alone?

Darcy brought his horse to a halt, cogitating whether he should go and talk to her. After their reencounter a week ago, and despite his many struggles, he found himself enslaved by thoughts of her, of how it would be having her as his wife, mistress of Pemberley, having the right to hold her in his arms; kiss her...

He stopped his thoughts before they could go too far.

He could not deny it; he was infatuated with Elizabeth. He had tried, and failed, to forget her. It did not mean, however, that he could easily forget his obligations to his name, or to his family, or her family circumstances. Even if he had the opportunity to explain what happened between him and Wickham, her family would still remain the same.

It would not do. Perhaps it had been for better their separation. During that time, he had been able to see things more clearly. Infatuated or not, her family was still a great disappointment. Despite coming from a traditional family from Hertfordshire, the Bennets had no important connections in the ton. But above all, the mother and the two younger sisters were too vulgar. It would be a nightmare to receive such a family in his townhouse. He began to imagine the reaction of his uncle, Lord Matlock, or even Lady Catherine, sharing refreshments in the drawing room with the boisterous Mrs Bennet and Miss Lydia.

Doubts. Doubts!

Darcy groaned, turning his horse to leave, shaking his head remembering his ungenerous thoughts about Bingley and his fickle nature. As it seemed, he was not much better after all. But unlike Bingley, he had his position in life to consider. In his case, the dismissal of an unsuitable spouse was not just reasonable; it was necessary. He would—

“Mr Darcy!” Elizabeth called out. “You have not yet dismounted and are already leaving? I hope you are not afraid of me.”

He looked back at her and frowned.

The minx!

Elizabeth had been standing at her easel, painting, when she heard a horse approaching. And there he was. Shoulders stiffened; lips and brows pressed together. But then, he was turning as if to go away. Before she knew what she was doing, she had shouted the challenging words, and his frown had only deepened.

A wave of heat rose from her stomach blushing all the way up to the roots of her hair, creating a huge blur of red. Too embarrassed for her own good, she returned to the painting and pretended to resume her work.

Darcy took a couple of deep breaths. She had shouted to him — challenged him. Why should she be so infuriatingly... enticing? Her impertinence and spontaneity, despite being considered unfitting for a lady, were strangely invigorating to him.

“I would say, sir, your hypothesis that women are not as intelligent as men — and for this reason we do not have many famous women in history — can be also used in the opposite way. Famous men are usually associated with war, destruction and death: Alexander the Great, Nero and Napoleon for instance... Is that what you are calling intellectual superiority?”

Yes, that discussion in Bingley’s library had been... enlightening. Miss Elizabeth, despite not coming from a fancy family of the ton, was surprisingly well educated and had no intention of keeping quiet. And yet, Darcy could not find fault in this. In fact, it was one of the things he really admired about her. His wealth had no consequence to her. Their verbal fencing had always been annoyingly refreshing, and

that one, on the very first day, had not disappointed. It almost caused him to break out in a sweat.

He could only be truly mad. And then he smiled, looking back at the meadows.

Spring and daffodils .

Darcy dismounted, and as if working on their own volition, his feet took him to the lady who had disturbed his perfect life. He always had everything under control: finances, properties, schedule and thoughts.

Until her.

After meeting her, he had not been able to sleep well, and even his ledgers and estate affairs had become boring. His whole life had become dull and... monochromatic.

Elizabeth looked at him over her shoulder. Her bright eyes met his and Darcy stopped, mesmerised by the sight in front of him. His heart raced wildly against his chest, and his whole body came alive. He swallowed hard a couple of times, and, all of a sudden, his cravat seemed tighter than usual. He fought back the urge to loosen it as his eyes perused every detail of her.

She was so full of life; so full of colour. The beauty of her long and dishevelled auburn tresses, dancing at the sunlight and falling over her shoulders and back, framed the modest décolletage of her pink dress; creamy milk skin contrasted with her honey-coloured eyes, rosy cheeks and heavenly strawberry-like lips, making him dizzy; all that covered in bewitching light dusting freckles, giving her heart shaped face its final touch. He never thought freckles could be so enchanting.

Delectable.

He balled his fists to fight the urge to touch her face and feel if under those freckles her skin was as soft as it looked.

God! He was in real trouble!

Noticing his reaction and silent staring, Elizabeth blushed all over again. She had shouted at him. What kind of lady does such a thing? She was almost behaving like her younger sister.

A quick breeze made one of her tresses tickle her nose. Lifting her hand, she noticed with some despair that her hair had escaped their pins, and she was not wearing her bonnet — as if she needed another reason to raise his censure.

Taking her eyes from him, she started looking around for the incriminating accessory.

Her brisk movements broke the spell over Darcy and following her eyes, he realised she had misunderstood his silence. Coming closer, he extended his hand and held her by the arm, stopping her before she could reach for her bonnet. “No, please.”

“I am sorry about my untidy appearance, Mr Darcy.” She lowered her eyes. “I was not expecting anyone venturing these parts of the meadow so early.”

Well, she was not expecting. Just hoping.

Clumsily, and suddenly shy, Elizabeth cursed that traitor thought and began rearranging her hair and brushing off the small pieces of grass attached to her dress, hoping there were not any blots of ink on her face.

“I am the one who should be sorry,” Darcy said hoarsely, releasing her arm. “I became... distracted by the astonishing sight of...” your beauty , “the flowers. You do not need to wear your bonnet on my account. I would not suspend any pleasure of

yours. ”

She smiled, amused by his choice of words. It seemed Mr Darcy was not so disagreeable as she had been inclined to believe. “Oh, do not apologise, sir. In fact, I am happy you are here—”

As soon as the words left her lips, her smile faded, a sad memory spoiling her contentment. Not only his harsh words about her not being handsome enough to tempt him, but also his judging eyes after that, especially on her mother and Lydia. If Mr Darcy could be so judgemental, cold even, then the way he had treated Mr Wickham was just the consequence of it. How could she enjoy the company of such a man?

She looked at him, and there he was. Frowning and staring at her. “I... mean,” she added, turning away from him. “I am happy you are here to... um, enjoy the flowers. They are indeed beautiful.”

She sighed. Why should life be like this? While Mr Darcy had been distracted observing ‘the flowers’, she had the opportunity to observe him. She blushed at her unladylike thoughts about his dashing figure, and what she would not give to be able to marry a man like him. His dark curly hair, hidden under his hat, prolonged in enticing sideburns, framed his well-shaved and strong jawline and neck. He was tall, and due to the perfect cut of his riding attire, she could see he had a slim but strong frame. But it was his eyes — dark and penetrating — that could really unsettle her. And to make things even worse, beneath that enchanting cover there was an intelligent and perceptive man.

What could be more infuriating than a handsome and secretive man? And, which man was the real Mr Darcy? The insensitive and proud man she saw at those first and last balls, or the gentle and clever one she had been meeting this last week?

“Good morning,” Darcy suddenly said, his expression softening into a smile.

Elizabeth startled, forgetting her musings. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said good morning, Miss Elizabeth. I just realised I had not greeted you properly when I arrived.” He also suspected that her sudden silence could be related to his staring at her and tried to remedy it.

His smile disarmed her. She bit her lips, raising one eyebrow, somehow, forgetting all about her displeasure. “Well, good morning to you too, sir. Are you enjoying your stay this time?”

Something was happening to him, and with an unexpected move, he took a step closer to her and then stopped. Stiffening his back and holding his hands behind him, he averted his eyes from her lips before his escalating need propelled him to take her in his arms and kiss her senselessly.

“Indeed, Miss Elizabeth, much better,” Darcy replied, turning from her. He cleared his throat. “Are you unaccompanied today?”

“Yes, I am,” she replied, oblivious to his struggles. “Charlotte and Maria went to town to buy some supplies with Mr Collins, but I begged them to leave me behind. I could not waste such a beautiful day inside a carriage.”

“I see,” Darcy said, feeling his heart skipping a couple of beats —again. He could not trust himself to be alone with Elizabeth. He respected her too much to take any liberty, but he could not vouch for his words — and he was only one step away from saying something he certainly would come to regret. “Well, I did not mean to interrupt your enjoyment. I bid you a good day.”

With that, he fled from her.

“Mr Darcy,” she called, the words escaping from her mouth. “Before you go, do you mind, um... holding my easel? I need to fetch more water, but as this painting is still fresh, I am afraid it would be ruined if the wind turns it.”

He looked down at the easel. For the first time since his arrival, he noticed what she had been doing. “You are painting a watercolour?”

“Surprised, sir? I know I am not exactly the epitome of accomplishment, but indeed I can paint watercolours, and the better part is that I really enjoy it. It is not like embroidering countless handkerchiefs. Do you know how many handkerchiefs I have with my initials?”

Elizabeth noticed his stare again and tightened her lips. “There is a small brook just behind those trees, I will not be long,” she said, running away before he had the chance to answer. “Thank you,” she shouted from afar.

Darcy grinned, forcing his eyes to turn from her running figure to examine her painting more carefully. He was not an expert, but he thought her work was very good. He looked around, and then back to the painting. She had captured the real colours of that beautiful meadow with a surprising accuracy. The explosion of colours on her canvas was just like her. The position of the sun was also—

A high-pitched scream reached his ears.

A rush of blood ran through Darcy’s veins, and forgetting her painting, he ran to where the sound came from.

“Elizabeth!” Darcy shouted after passing the first line of trees. He felt ridiculous worrying so much about her just because of a scream. But he could not help himself. “Elizabeth! Where are you?”

“Mr Darcy! Over here...”

Darcy followed her weak voice, his concern mounting. Why was her voice weak?

He caught sight of her pink form beside the brook and ran towards her, halting at the sight before him.

~ ? ~

When Elizabeth decided to fetch some water, she did not expect the softness of the ground around the brook would be the cause of an enormous humiliation. She had done this before on previous occasions, but in none of them had she been daydreaming about Mr Darcy. While fetching the water, she had stepped into the mud and continued there until her feet were so deep that, in her careless attempt to free herself, she had lost her balance, falling on the muddy edge, sinking her posterior deeper into the mud with a very unladylike shriek.

Soon after, a familiar voice reached her ears, and she rolled her eyes. Mr Darcy . If someone was supposed to see her in such a state, it had to be him .

Hearing his anxious calling, she blushed once more, her cheeks burning like two ripe apples in the oven. “Mr Darcy, over here,” she called back without much conviction, lowering her head, almost hoping he would not hear her.

Why did she have to scream? Why not just fall in silence?

She tightened her fists feeling the soft mud squeezing through her fingers as the growing sound of his boots against the ground became louder and louder.

Then it stopped.

Elizabeth slowly raised her eyes.

There, in front of her, a panting Mr Darcy with hands on his knees, stood staring at her.

Sticking up her chin, she glared at him, challenging him to make a clever comment.

To his credit, he did not. But by the way he was pressing his lips together, it would be just a matter of time.

“Miss Elizabeth, are you well? What happened?”

“I fell,” she said, moving some hair hanging in front of her eyes to behind her ear, leaving a trail of mud across her forehead.

Darcy’s gentlemanlike manners were thus short lived; he pressed his lips together again, but to no avail. A strange, snorting noise escaped his nose, followed by a loud laugh as his head went backwards.

Her jaw fell and she huffed, furious. How could a gentleman behave so shamefully?

As if hearing her thoughts, Darcy brought both hands to his face and pressed his eyes, inhaling deeply a couple of times. “I am very, very sorry, Miss Elizabeth,” he said, making a phenomenal effort to stop his laughter. “Here.” Darcy removed his glove and stretched his arm. “Take my hand and let me help you.”

She lowered her eyes from his amused face to his bare hand, and stubbornly shook her head. “No, sir. I am not sure you will be able to pull me out. I am quite stuck here—”

“Nonsense,” he interrupted, now just smiling. “I am much stronger than you. Here,

please, take my hand.”

Elizabeth bit her lower lip. It was not as if she had any other choice. She sighed, awkwardly standing up and wiping her hand on her already ruined dress.

Darcy took her hand firmly and pulled.

On his third attempt, she made a strange noise, and he raised his gaze to her face. She was laughing. He smiled at her amusement, and the unimaginable happened. One of his feet slipped behind him. He lost his balance and wobbled. Elizabeth screamed again as he finally tumbled, hauling her with him into the mud with a loud splosh .

Good Lord!

It took them some seconds to realise what had happened. Darcy’s left side was deep in the mud. On his face and hair, splashes of mud were trickling down; his expensive coat, breeches and snow-white cravat were covered with the smelly, brownish mixture of earth and water.

From below him, a warm breath tickled his face. He turned and found a muddy, enchanting Elizabeth lying partially beneath him. Her widened eyes and agape mouth were inches away from his own.

He froze, holding his breath.

Her mouth closed and then curved; her eyes narrowed. With no warning, she puffed and started laughing; a sound he had never heard before. He raised both his eyebrows and, suddenly, could not help himself. In the next moment, they were both laughing, louder and louder, careless like two naughty and dirty children they now resembled.

“When I was a child, I always liked to play in the mud, but never thought that one

day I would do that with such an illustrious figure!” Elizabeth said, bursting into laughter again. “Your face!”

“Oh! But you are not much better, my dear. I can only imagine your child version doing this. What a sight it must have been...”

What a sight it was now...

His amusement slowly faded, as he began to scrutinise her beautiful eyes, now so close to him. He knew she had honey-coloured eyes but did not know they were sprinkled with golden flakes. Perfect for a queen .

His eyes moved to her cheek where a lock of muddy hair was still plastered to her face. He raised his clean hand, and with a feather-like touch, moved his fingers alongside her cheek, pushing the dirty hair away.

He was right. Her skin was as soft as he had imagined.

Looking back at her eyes, he searched for any sign of discomfort, but found none. She seemed to be as fascinated and enchanted as he was.

His eyes moved down to her lips, as he gently stroked her cheek again. “Elizabeth,” he whispered, lowering his lips towards hers.

“Darcy!” the familiar voice resounded from some distance. “Where are you?”

The unexpected sound froze them. The spell was broken. Darcy closed his eyes, and exhaling heavily, looked up at the approaching figure still at some distance.

Elizabeth took a long and deep breath. Was she... disappointed?

He looked back at her but did not move. “I am sorry, Eliz— Miss Elizabeth. You were right. Trying to pull you out was not one of my brightest ideas. Because of my presumption, I almost hurt you. You are not injured, I hope?”

She shook her head slowly. “No, I am not. Perhaps just my pride for being caught in such embarrassing circumstances. But no harm is done.”

“I will explain what happened to my cousin. You can trust his discretion,” Darcy said, sitting up and helping Elizabeth to join him as Richard, at last, caught sight of him.

“What must you be thinking of me, stuck in the mud like that?”

He smiled. “What do I think? I think you are quite... fetching. In fact, that was the reason I lost my balance.”

She tilted her head confused. “What—”

“Darcy, I found your horse and—” Richard stopped, his foot still in the air while dismounting as he caught sight of Miss Elizabeth at Darcy’s side. He scowled. “Darcy, what in heaven’s name are you doing in the mud, and with Miss Elizabeth no less? Have you lost your mind?” His angry voice echoed around the trees and a flock of birds flew away.

“Nothing like being discreet about delicate subjects,” Darcy muttered .

“I know you too well to think the worst, Darcy. You are too much of a gentleman to act like a rogue, but it does not mean Miss Elizabeth’s reputation cannot be ruined by your reckless behaviour.” He gave his cousin a threatening glare. “What if somebody else found you both here instead of me?”

The idea of such a compromise perversely appealed to Darcy. It could make things much easier for him ‘to be forced’ to do the right thing and marry her.

But Richard was right. Elizabeth did not deserve that. She deserved to be courted properly and feel cherished.

Coward . If he really wanted to kiss her — and God help him, but he desperately wanted to kiss her — he would need to conquer her heart and make her his wife. That was the way of a true gentleman.

Richard turned to Elizabeth. “Am I to understand you are well, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Colonel. Thank you for your concern, but what you see now is just the result of a bad attempt at rescue.” She turned to Darcy, holding his gaze. “Your cousin was gallantly trying to help me out of this mud, when he also lost his balance and joined me. And as you can see,” she said, turning back to the colonel, “we are now both stuck. If you do not mind, your help would be much appreciated. Would it not, Mr Darcy?”

Their eyes met again, and Darcy nodded, touched by her discreet but brave way of defending him.

The thought that she would have allowed him to kiss her — even if after that she would grant him a good slap on the face — made him feel warm inside.

Darcy inhaled long and sharply, averting his eyes from her and rubbing his forehead. What should he do? Could he ignore what have happened, wait for another week to pass, and finally return to his life as it had been? Despite not being in any way the most appealing option, it was probably the best one. In good time, he would find another lady, more aligned to what was expected from the future Mrs Darcy.

And Elizabeth will find another man to marry .

A bitter taste filled his mouth. A husband who will hold her, kiss her, and make her his wife, giving her children . The thought brought a sickening sensation, and suddenly Darcy could barely breathe.

He looked up and was arrested by the sight of one of his cousin's hand sticking his sword in the ground, while the other was... entwined with Elizabeth's as he pulled her out of the mud.

An inexplicable sensation possessed his body: anger — and a raw and possessive jealousy.

In that moment, Darcy realised that his desire to be close to Elizabeth, to talk to her, hold her and kiss her, was not just infatuation, or the natural attraction of a man to a beautiful woman.

No, it had been far beyond that for some time now.

He could not live knowing that Elizabeth belonged to another man. Reason and logic could go hang. What he felt for Elizabeth was much deeper and genuine; it was the reason poems were written and some wars were fought.

I love her .

Richard turned his attention back to Darcy, noticing his glare. With the strength and determination of a man used to fighting for his own life and the lives of those under his command, he pulled Darcy up to his feet and out of the mud.

But instead of letting Darcy's hand go, Richard pulled him closer, looking at him straight in the eyes. "If the sight of another man holding her is enough to bring that

fierce look in your eyes, then, for heaven's sake, be a man and do the honourable thing. Marry her. Stop this ridiculous game you are playing. Do not trifle with her feelings. And do not deny it. I saw the way you were looking at each other."

Darcy scowled, holding his cousin's gaze and hand for a moment longer, then relaxed, releasing him.

His deuced cousin was right. Again.

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On that fateful morning, Darcy's mood was as sour as a bottle of curdled milk as he looked through the window. After his adventures in the mud the day before, he had spent the rest of the day working hard, revitalised. But by afternoon, a message arrived. It was from his aunt's steward, and he was requesting Darcy's company to solve an important dispute between two of the tenants. For that reason, he was expected to meet the man earlier than usual and, regretfully, would miss his morning walk.

Yet, despite his annoyance, the recollection of the previous day brought a smile to his face. He raised his hand and touched his lips and chuckled as he remembered Elizabeth's dirty face so close to his own, her eyes; their almost kiss.

"At least now I know what I need to do," he reassured himself.

But that would have to wait for an appropriate occasion. Checking his pocket watch, Darcy sighed. It was time.

He tried to console himself by remembering that Mr Collins and his party were expected to dine with them again at Rosings Park that evening. Perhaps, then, he would find the right time to execute his decision.

~ ? ~

Hearing his aunt's guests arriving, Darcy went downstairs taking two steps at a time, while buttoning his coat.

Mr Grant was a good steward, but even he had given up the discussion, leaving Darcy dealing alone with the two bickering tenants. The whole business had taken much longer than expected, and after arriving, he just had time to wash in the basin and change his dirty clothes.

Mr and Mrs Collins entered the room, followed by Maria, and then... the door was closed behind them.

“Where is Miss Elizabeth?” his aunt asked, stealing the words from his mouth.

“She went for her walk this morning and came back not feeling very well, I am afraid,” Mrs Collins informed her. “We thought it would be better to allow her to stay and rest.”

Darcy’s countenance darkened. Elizabeth was not well and after her morning walk. Was she expecting him to ask for her hand after what had happened between them? Or was she suffering the consequences of being trapped in the cold mud?

After tolerating the agonisingly long dinner and some of the necessary polite conversation afterwards, Darcy could not stay there any longer. He excused himself from the room, giving Richard a meaningful look, while his cousin mouthed something back to him.

But Darcy paid no attention.

After some long strides, he felt the cold door handle and the fresh breeze of the night. Then, without a second thought, he sprang into the night towards the parsonage.

~ ? ~

Elizabeth had gone for her habitual walk that morning, secretly expecting to see Mr

Darcy again, wondering how he would behave after their muddy encounter.

She smiled, but soon she became serious again. She hated to admit that she was actually enjoying, even desiring his company, and it made her very confused.

Mr Darcy, the same man who had been so mean in his comments after arriving in Hertfordshire, had touched her hair, her cheek. His dark eyes had looked straight into hers with such an intensity she was absolutely sure he would have kissed her had the colonel had not arrived to save them. A strange warmth spread throughout Elizabeth's body — an alien sensation. Her heart raced and her breath faulted.

Could that mean...?

The sound of hooves interrupted her reverie. She turned in the hope of seeing the man who had occupied her latest thoughts only to be frustrated when she saw who was dismounting the horse.

“Colonel.”

“Miss Elizabeth. How are you faring this morning?” Richard asked with an enigmatic smile. “I hope yesterday's event has not caused you any inconvenience.”

She blushed. “I am very well, thank you, Colonel. And no. No harm was done, and no inconveniences took place — well, apart from a long lecture from my friend about the need to watch where one walks.”

Richard laughed and offered to accompany her on her walk, which she gladly accepted. It would be good to have some company and, perhaps, some distraction from her earlier thoughts.

As they walked and conversed about many things, Elizabeth could not avoid

comparing the two cousins. Colonel Fitzwilliam was a pleasant and voluble man, naturally inclined to make people comfortable around him. In contrast, Mr Darcy was more reticent, aloof, mysterious. She could well imagine the two cousins together in a ballroom. Colonel Fitzwilliam would be dancing all sets, laughing, surrounded by giggling ladies, while Mr Darcy would only dance the unavoidable sets, just to return to a corner of the room to brood in his aloofness or discuss the latest news from Parliament with those knowledgeable enough to follow his deliberations.

The thought made her smile.

But what had truly amazed her was the colonel's care for his cousin, and his honourable behaviour. She remembered the way the colonel had scolded Mr Darcy; he had not only been concerned for his cousin, but also for her reputation — for which she was grateful. The last thing she wanted was to have the man forced to marry her, especially when her feelings for him were still so confused.

It was in this unguarded state that the colonel let slip something Darcy had said about his visit to Meryton and Bingley's decision to give up the lease.

“Oh,” Elizabeth said interested. “And did Mr Bingley give any reason for such a decision?”

“I understood Bingley was not exactly impressed with the property or the town. I am not sure. But I know his sisters were definitively unimpressed. As you hail from that area, perhaps you can understand it better than I do. Darcy said Bingley liked the neighbourhood well enough but preferred to stay in London for the time being. Apparently, some of the neighbours were a little... inconvenient. One of the local young ladies seemed to have attracted Bingley's eyes, but Darcy said her family was not the most appropriate one. There were some strong objections against a mother, or younger sisters. I cannot remember. But I was very sorry to hear that. Bingley is a strange fellow; a little too concerned about status. By the way Darcy described this

lady, she sounded perfect. I know I would not allow such a lady to escape if I had the means — family or not.”

But Elizabeth was not listening anymore; not after understanding that her family was not the most appropriate one was surely referring to her family. She felt dizzy and could no longer walk.

Richard noticed her pale face. “Are you unwell, Miss Elizabeth?”

“No... I mean, I am well. It is just a sudden headache. Perhaps I should go back and rest,” she said, clumsily turning towards her friend’s house.

Richard offered his arm. “Then allow me to escort you.”

Despite her desire to be alone, she was thankful for the support of the colonel’s arm; her eyes blinded by unwanted tears.

As they walked back, Richard thought about their recent conversation and a thought crossed his mind. “Was it something I said that distressed you? If that is the case—”

“No, Colonel,” Elizabeth interrupted him with a broken voice. “Your account just brought back some memories I would have wished to forget.” Jane’s sad face appeared before her. All the levity of the last few days was smashed by her previous disgust and prejudice against Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy. “But they are not your fault.”

A realisation struck Richard. Miss Elizabeth was not just his cousin’s love lady; Bingley’s neighbours were, in fact, Miss Elizabeth’s family! It could not be anything else. Darcy would put his champion greyhounds after him before he could finish his excuses — and with good reason. By her reaction, it would seem that the prospect of a possible courtship between them had been seriously damaged.

“Miss Bennet, please forgive my insistence, but I can guarantee that whatever happened, my cousin did not mean to offend—”

“I beg you to stop defending your cousin, Colonel,” Elizabeth interrupted him again, this time in greater distress. “Your loyalty to your cousin is admirable and speaks highly of your character. But I have spent two months in Mr Darcy’s company, and despite his civility, I know exactly what he thinks of my family.” I have just deceived myself believing he was not that man .

As if in a dream, she was again at the ball, dancing with Mr Darcy and seeing how annoyed he had become with one of her questions about Mr Wickham and his relationship with the man. After that, Mr Darcy’s mood had only worsened. He remained aloof, glaring at everyone, judging all, condemning all — including her, as if she had done something terrible. She had just asked a question.

To make things worse, Lydia had been laughing and teasing young men to chase after her, causing one of the local matrons to spill her wine over another gentleman. Elizabeth’s mother could not have been more embarrassing, visibly inebriated, shouting at her naughty daughter from the other side of the ballroom.

Mr Darcy had stared at them with contempt and disdain. If it was not for Jane’s interest in Mr Bingley, Elizabeth would have run from that place at once, not caring for the darkness and the cold. Anything would have been preferable to meeting Mr Darcy’s scorning eyes.

Richard observed Elizabeth’s changed countenance with great distress. As much as he desperately wanted to clarify the story, he could not go against her wishes and remained silent until they arrived at her friend’s house. There, without even a small glance, she quickly thanked him and entered the house.

Back at Rosings Park, Richard realised he would not be able to talk to Darcy as he

was still out, busy with Mr Grant. He only hoped he could talk to him before dinner.

Alas, Richard did not have the opportunity. When Darcy excused himself from the gathering, Richard knew exactly where his cousin was going — and what was waiting for him. He only had time to shake his head and mouth ‘no’.

To no avail.

Without a second glance, Darcy was gone.

~ ? ~

By dinner time, as Elizabeth’s disposition had only worsened, she was allowed to miss the gathering at Rosings. She retired earlier to her bedchamber, and after a long time crying over her newly found disappointment, she was finally sleeping.

There was a knock on the door, and a small head peeked inside. “Miss,” the maid called, entering the room. “Mr Darcy is downstairs asking to see you. I don’t think I can send ’im away, Miss. Could you please come down?”

Elizabeth was surprised. She dismissed the maid with the assurance she would go down as soon as possible. But she did not hurry. She did not wish to see the man, not after what had been confirmed about his character, and certainly not as she was at that moment. Her eyes were puffy, her face red, and her head throbbing. But her greater pain was for her broken heart. She felt demeaned by the reminder that Mr Darcy, a man whose company she was beginning to appreciate, even desire, thought so badly of her and her family. He considered them beneath him. Despite their respectful position in the local community, her family lacked propriety and was not even worthy of his friend’s affection.

Her last impression of him, before their re-encounter, had been the correct one after

all.

When she finally managed to make herself presentable enough, she went downstairs, praying to be able to keep her temper.

She found Mr Darcy in the drawing room, pacing from one end to the other. Pausing to see his agitation, her heart only hardened. You can go and hang yourself, Mr Darcy. I do not care.

“Mr Darcy,” she called, swallowing her anger. He was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he did not notice when she quietly closed the door after her. “I am sorry to make you wait for so long, but as I was not expecting any visitors, I was already in bed, sleeping.”

She did not need to continue. The effect of her cold words made Darcy swallow hard.

He seemed to hesitate, then looked straight into her eyes. “I am sorry to have disturbed you at this time, Miss Elizabeth, but I could not rest before making sure you were well. Please forgive me. I hope you are feeling better.”

The warmth of his eyes and manner made Elizabeth uncomfortable. “I thank you for your concern, but at the moment I am feeling... very bad.” She did not care that she was being rude. She only hoped her honest reply would be enough to make him leave.

She wanted him gone. Forever.

But instead of leaving, he gently took her hands and helped her to sit, dragging another chair for himself closer to her.

“Miss Elizabeth, I was worried that your sudden illness was, in some way, a result of

my... absence this morning.”

She gasped, but did not dare say anything, hoping he would find a way to explain such an assertion.

Her temper was starting to boil.

“I know we have been meeting in the morning when we go for our walks,” Darcy continued hesitantly, “and after yesterday, we... um...”

He looked down at his hands and shook his head. He stood up and went to the window. “I cannot even dare to imagine what you might be thinking of me,” he said, distressed. He turned to her and added in almost a whisper, “I would have come to you, but I was detained by Mr Grant and had no way to let you know.”

She frowned, her discomfort escalating with his unexpected, kind words and consideration.

He resumed his pacing around the room before stopping and looking at her again. For some reason, her pained countenance, even her silence, seemed to be enough encouragement for him to continue.

He knelt down in front of her and took her hands again, looking at them. She flinched but did not oppose. “I have given much consideration to our... relationship, and I would like to tell you...” He raised his face, caressing her with his eyes. “I love you, Elizabeth. You do not need to worry—”

She gasped and pulled one of her hands to her mouth. Her pained expression softened, then turned into one of incredulity.

He seemed gratified by her reaction and exhaled. “I know the situation of our families

is quite different. And I know of my duty to marry someone with more distinguished origins—”

She stood up, and walked to the other side of the room, suddenly torn apart by the cruelty fate had reserved for her. For a fraction of a second, she thought she could overlook the displeasure she felt for him.

He loves me!

“I know some in my family might consider our alliance a social step down,” Darcy continued, oblivious to her agony. “But I cannot help it. I love you, Elizabeth. I have loved you for a long time, but only recently have I fully comprehended the depth of my feelings. So, I came here to see you, to pour out my heart and to beg you.” He approached her, gently resting his hands on her shoulders. “Please, consent to be my wife. Marry me.”

Elizabeth kept her back to him, paralysed, sinking and drowning into her inner turmoil. Could it be possible that all this time his stares, his stiffness... were signs of a man in love?

Confused beyond words, she turned and looked back at him, as if seeing him for the first time, and in his eyes, she found the truth. The same eyes that had followed her in Hertfordshire, at their dance at the ball, yesterday in the mud — and now.

A sharp pang cut her heart, and she raised her hand to her chest. Mr Darcy loves me! His warm hands on her arms and his loving eyes on her should be proof enough.

But his words about her family echoed in her mind once again, reviving the pain of that day at the ball. Imagining what he could think of her family, even hearing it from the colonel’s mouth was quite different from hearing it from his own lips; “ my family might consider our alliance a social step down ”. She knew he was from a far

superior circle, but to constantly remind her of that was not the most appealing gestures. Quite the contrary; it just showed his ever-present condescension.

She could not look at him and turned away again.

Her hands started to tremble, and she shook her head in an attempt to keep her temper. All in vain. A wave of blind anger washed away any sensible thought and all her previous prejudice against him resurfaced with such strength that she could have vomited it.

Only a proud and arrogant man would assume he could know about her feelings; to believe she was pining for him! Even if there was a grain of truth in his words, who was he to talk to her in such a patronizing way?

“... you do not need to worry...”

She could not think well of him. Not anymore.

Inhaling loudly, and gathering all her courage, she forced herself to face him, and reply in the most civil way she could muster. “I cannot deny the honour of your offer, sir, but I cannot accept it. I do not desire to expose you and your family to the derision of society with a close relationship with me or my family. I hope you can soon change your mind, especially consid—”

“What? Why you are saying these things?” Darcy interrupted in horror. “I would never consider our marriage a reason for the derision of society.”

He desperately tried to take her hands, to make sense of her words. But this time, she held her hands away from him.

“My God, Elizabeth! I only mentioned those things to show that I had overlooked our

differences, and this was not an easy task. It took me many months to finally understand that those things mean nothing to me, if only I could have you by my side.”

“Do you think it would be possible for me to accept a man whose opinion of my family is so low?” Elizabeth replied, her eyes full of tears. “What do you expect from me? To abandon my family and rejoice in the love of a man who sees himself above people who do not belong to his own circle in society?” She put a hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying. “I cannot understand. Firstly, you offended me. Then, you treated me with consideration, and then you changed again and left. Now this? How can you come here today and propose marriage? How can I take your proposal seriously if you keep changing your behaviour? How can I trust you will still love me after some months of marriage? Besides, my family will still be the same. Nothing can change that. What will you do then?”

Her pain became clear to Darcy. He tried to approach her again, chastising himself. He had never told her how much she meant to him. “Elizabeth, please, let me—”

“No!” she shouted, raising her hand to stop him. “I do not want to hear your excuses. What does it matter if a lady is kind and beautiful when she has an embarrassing family? Do you think I ignore what your friend had done, Mr Darcy? My poor sister...” Elizabeth stopped as she finally broke into sob. “She is the most selfless person I have ever known, and your friend snubbed her — because of our family. Do you think I could ever accept the hand of a man who calls such man a friend? You are just like him, if not worse. ”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “You certainly cannot blame me for my friend’s poor attitude,” he retorted. “How can you compare me to him? Bingley falls in and out of love as often as he changes his clothes. But I am the one here, asking for your hand in marriage. I am the one overlooking all those barriers, family or not, and deciding they are not enough inducement to keep me away from you. Can you not see it? I love

you, Elizabeth. Those things do not matter to me — not anymore.”

For a moment, he thought she would relent; see reason. In the silence of the room, only their ragged breathing denounced their distress.

Elizabeth brought both hands to her face and desperately tried to control her sobs.

He loves me. Oh, good Lord. Is it really true?

But another shadow filled her mind, and again his behaviour at the ball came to her mind.

“And what about Mr Wickham?” she asked in a grim tone. Why a simple question about this man could incite so much ire in Mr Darcy? “How can you defend yourself against the cruelty you have inflicted on him? Was it just because he was the son of your steward?”

“So, is that what he is saying about me now?” Darcy’s countenance changed drastically, all his pain turning into anger. “I would not believe everything he says, Miss Elizabeth.”

“He never gave me reason to doubt his word. He never disdained anyone nor was he contradictory in his attitudes. He was always kind and—”

“What? Kind?” Darcy chuckled mirthlessly. “Are we still talking about the same man? Elizabeth, how can you be so blind?”

“Perhaps because of his humble position in society, he is able to see the real person beyond appearances and situation in life, and you cannot. I do not believe you proposed to me because of love, but because you cannot bear to be denied anything you want; I saw that in your eyes yesterday. I wonder what you really have in mind,

sir. You accused your friend of being inconstant, but what about you? Today you say you love me. But what about in some months? Will you marry me and then once used, throw me away and find your pleasure in the arms of another?"

Her words reached its target like a dagger in the hands of a trained assassin. He looked around, as if searching for a way to rip out that agony, struggling even to breathe, horrified by her assumptions. He felt humiliated having professed his love and being so cruelly rejected.

"So, this is what you think of me," he whispered, staring at her with so much pain that for the first time since the beginning of their argument, Elizabeth knew her loose tongue had taken her too far.

She turned her face from him, unable to see his grief.

Darcy could not speak another word or continue to stare at her back — a physical proof of her rejection.

Not only she did not care for him; she hated him. And now he would live knowing it.

Gathering the little dignity that was still left in him, he added, "I am sorry for having taken so much of your time."

Then he left.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

11th April 1816

“Mr Darcy!”

Elizabeth opened her eyes again, sitting up on her bed. It had been just a dream, had it not?

Even with the dim light of dawn timidly peeking through the curtains, she saw she was still wearing the same dress from last night.

It had not been a dream. It had been real. All of it.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

Forcing her mind into some distraction, she poured water into the bowl, washed her face and rinsed her mouth in a desperate attempt to remove the bitter taste of their confrontation.

The mirror in front of her reflected someone she could not recognise. Someone cruel and selfish.

The need to be alone prompted her to change her clothes without any help; she would choose a dress that did not have a hundred of those blasted buttons.

Braiding her hair and planning to go for a very long walk before anybody in the house was awake, she left her room.

Mr Darcy's face, hurt by her abusive words, appeared before her again.

Shaking her head to dissipate that painful memory, Elizabeth hurried downstairs, reaching the kitchen where she grabbed some pastries before leaving. Seeing Cook, she did not stop to chat, but offered instead a quick nod, running through the door before anyone else could ask after her. She decided that after a long walk and with a clearer mind, she would think about the whole situation again.

Once outside, and with a safe distance between her and the house, Elizabeth could not avoid thinking about Mr Darcy and their dreadful confrontation the night before. Still struggling with her conscience after an agonising night, she forced herself to believe that Mr Darcy probably had received what he deserved.

But, then, why this ache in her chest? She remembered the pain in his eyes as she turned from him.

She was still considering those things when the strange sight of somebody, a man lying, no, slumped against a tree, caught her attention. By his clothes it seemed...

She gasped. "Oh, no. Mr Darcy." Without thinking further, she ran towards him.

What if he had suffered an accident after their argument?

Had he spent the night outside?

Was he... dead?

~ ? ~

Dawn found Darcy still seated in his chair, trying to finish a letter, which he hoped would explain in writing what he had not been able to explain in words.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his painful temples. The battle he had fought against feelings of rage and bitter resentment towards Elizabeth, Richard — somewhere in the middle of the night, Darcy had understood his cousin's silent warning — and God — for allowing him such deep disappointment when he had finally surrendered himself to his love for Elizabeth — had drained him, physically and emotionally. He would have howled like a wounded animal if only it could have appeased his aching heart .

Yet, good sense prevailed. After many hours of struggle, Darcy had finally been able to understand what her disturbing words meant.

How could she know about his feelings or even believe them after what he had said and done? How could she have known how enchanted he was by her beauty and kindness if he had never said a word? Instead, he had acted like a brute, offending her and giving attention to silly behaviours.

What was really important in life?

What a fool he had been.

And her enquires about Wickham. She had asked about that scoundrel already, at the ball, but Darcy had been too proud to explain himself to her.

If he had answered her questions and behaved like a proper gentleman, none of this would be happening now.

Fool. Fool! No wonder she could think him capable of abandoning her and taking a mistress, quite a common thing among his peers.

But he was not like that; he could never give his body to a relationship while his mind and heart were still engaged to someone else.

It was too late to regret it now. If Elizabeth could not be his wife, at least she should know the truth about him. It was a matter of honour to present her with the facts as they truly were.

Darcy finished the letter, put down his quill and stretched his painful fingers. Then, melting some wax, he sealed it.

He rubbed his head again. A growing headache had been afflicting him since he sat down to write many hours ago.

Weary and defeated, Darcy washed his face in the water left there from the day before and dressed himself in some fresh clothes. He could not face Wilfred and present a plausible excuse for his dreadful appearance.

The clock on the mantel was showing almost six; the sun was about to rise.

Despite the early hour, Darcy planned to leave the house by the same way he had entered it the night before — the servants' stairs — thus avoiding any possible contact with Richard or his aunt .

Taking another deep breath and arming himself for the task ahead, he left his room.

On his way down, he met one of the upstairs maids and greeted her with a small nod. Downstairs, he could hear the sound of the servants in the kitchen and smelled the delicious aroma of fresh bread and cooked apples with cinnamon. But he could not allow himself the pleasure — not until his letter was delivered. Coming back to his senses, he forced his tired body to walk in the opposite direction, reaching, at last, the back entrance of the house.

The early spring breeze was cold, but not unpleasant. He closed his eyes, allowing himself a brief moment of contemplation before heading to the path where he usually

met Elizabeth on her walks.

On his way, he pondered about the small chance of actually finding Elizabeth after what happened the night before. He knew that if she was as distressed as him, she would not be able to keep herself indoors.

Despite his despondence, he continued walking; after all, this might easily be his last chance to make amends.

As he progressed along the path, he noticed with great sadness that the same daffodils, which had marked one of the most important days of his life — the day he had decided to ask Elizabeth to marry him — were now withering into an unappealing hue of brown.

If this was not enough to make him believe that it was the end, waiting in the same place for more than half an hour with no sign of her certainly was.

Darcy's hopes of delivering his letter and letting her know the truth suddenly vanished. Perhaps it was that painful thought; or perhaps it was the fact that he had been awake for more than twenty-four hours. At this point it did not matter; his spirit was finally broken.

In this nauseated state, he could not restrain himself anymore and surrendered to despair.

Collapsing on the floor close to one of the big oak trees, from which the place was famous for, Darcy threw his hat on the ground, leant back on the rough surface of the trunk and shut his eyes, squeezing his head in a useless attempt to lessen the excruciating pain engulfing his body and soul.

~ ? ~

Elizabeth knelt at his side, calling his name and timidly touching his shoulder. But Mr Darcy did not respond. She called for him again and, this time, he moved his head towards her. He tried to open his eyes, but the pain caused by the light was unbearable and he moaned.

His reaction panicked her. Without any further consideration, Elizabeth removed her bonnet and gloves, held his head with both of her hands and carefully examined it.

“Mr Darcy,” she called him again.

Darcy struggled to understand what was happening. Perhaps he had finally fallen asleep for he was dreaming about Elizabeth. He could hear his name being called by her sweet voice and could feel the warmth of her soft hands on his face.

The recollection of all the events of the previous night — their strife, their angry exchange of words and accusations, her rejection, his pain, his letter — rushed into Darcy’s mind and he opened his eyes.

Her honey-coloured eyes were there, just in front of him, looking at him intensely, worrying for him. He could even feel her warm breath caressing his face.

Darcy thought better than to allow himself to hope for anything beyond her Christian duty to someone in his present situation, as a wave of shame came over him. Gathering the little strength that was left in his tired body, he forced himself to stand, trying to maintain his last bit of pride.

She helped him up. “Mr Darcy, are you hurt?”

Her caring question pierced his soul. Yes, Elizabeth, I am broken hearted . “No, Miss Elizabeth. I am fine,” he replied instead. “I beg your pardon for causing you any concern.”

She puffed and trembled, finally exploding. “Fine, sir? How is that possible? I have been calling you for some time and you did not respond. How can you say you are fine?”

“I am sorry to have caused you any distress,” he repeated, schooling his face into that aloof expression she absolutely hated. “I did not sleep... much... last night and, after walking for some time, I stopped to rest. My head was plaguing me, and my tiredness must have caught up with me. I believe I had just slept,” he concluded without meeting her eyes.

“Really? Very well, then. If it is as you say, I am sorry for having interrupted your rest. I bid you a good day, sir.”

She began to walk away from him, angry stamped in the way she fetched her gloves and shoved her bonnet back on her head, not even caring to tie the lace.

Swallowing his pride, Darcy ran after her; he would not achieve anything without being honest with her. “Elizabeth, please, wait.”

She stopped and shut her eyes, balling her fists beside her, but did not turn. She could sense the constriction in his voice. He had called her by her Christian name again, as he had done when he declared his love for her and when they had quarrelled.

She shook her head. She did not want to listen to what he had to say.

Darcy took a deep breath at seeing her reaction. He knew that if he really wanted her to receive his letter, he should choose his words carefully.

“I am sorry,” he said in a whisper, brushing his hands over his legs. “In truth, I was hoping to find you.”

“Sir, please.” She did not want to listen to him. She was still too hurt to talk to him; and too proud to make any amends.

“I know how it sounds, but my intention was — aargh!”

The strange noise was enough to make Elizabeth turn. To her horror, two masked men were surrounding Mr Darcy and subduing him, while he offered no resistance. She gasped at the sight of blood trickling down from his head to his collar.

Before she could react to what was happening, a third man came from behind, grabbed her arms and covered her mouth. In her struggle, he seemed to hesitate, allowing her to free one of her hands and rip off his mask.

“Mr Wickham!” Despite his swollen and bruised face, she recognised him at once.

One of Wickham’s companions saw what had happened and, lifting his pistol, he pointed it towards her. “Duck!” the man shouted to Wickham.

Wickham hesitated but let go of Elizabeth, throwing himself on the floor.

At the man’s voice, Elizabeth turned and saw the barrel of the pistol pointed in her direction.

She just had time to close her eyes.

At the loud noise, her bonnet flew in the air and she could not breathe, as the smell of smoke filled the air.

Still holding her breath, she opened her eyes and saw Mr Darcy in front of her, his gaze locked on her, his face strained by pain.

“Eliz...” he started saying but collapsed onto the floor. A growing blur of blood started to stain his white shirt around his neck and chest. In the centre, the burnt hole of a gunshot.

“Mr Darcy. No!” She collapsed, kneeling beside him, blinded by the sudden flood of tears.

Oh, God, no. Please, no.

From her reticule she pulled one of her embroidered handkerchiefs and pressed it against his wound, but the bleeding was too intense and soon the small cloth was completely sodden. She opened his coat and searched in his pockets for his own handkerchief. She saw an envelope first, but then found what she was looking for and pressed it together with the other piece.

Someone seized her by the arm.

“No!” she shouted again, flouncing and kicking, trying to fight against her captor, but with a precise blow to the side of her face, she was knocked out and everything turned into darkness.

~ ? ~

Wickham was horrified by the scene before him. His plan had been very simple: kidnap Darcy, pay off his debts — and live. After his frustrated attempt to seduce Georgiana, Darcy’s younger sister, he had tried, and failed, to attach himself to another rich heiress. He was penniless, burdened with an enormous debt, which had almost cost his life, and, because of that, he had been forced into a life of crime.

As he stood up, he saw Brown violently striking Miss Elizabeth on the face, knocking her out.

The man then turned his murderous eyes towards him. “Wickham. Your useless idiot. What was that?” Brown’s strong accent, typical in the streets of the dirty Seven Dials area in London, echoed in the air. “Can’t you even hold a woman? Come ’ere and help us with this,” he roared, pointing to the immobile couple at his feet. “You carry the girl, Ned an’ I will carry the gent.”

The idea of kidnapping Darcy had come to Wickham after being severely beaten and left hanging by his left foot by those same criminals, while Brown pointed a gun to his manly parts, threatening to send him to hell.

Wickham knew about Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam’s annual visit to their aunt. He told Brown and Ned about this wealthy gentleman and that Kent would be the best place to carry out their scheme. Mr Darcy would be far away from home in a place where the servants and villagers were not as loyal to him as they were in Derbyshire.

“It cannot be that difficult,” Wickham had shouted, while still receiving punches from the men. “He usually walks or rides alone in the morning.” Wickham hoped his old acquaintance was still keeping his old habits. “He is good with his sword and pistols, but the three of us should be enough to catch him by surprise. We just need to be sure that his bear of a cousin is not nearby.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m not as forgiving as my cousin. I’ll finish what I’ve started...” Brown had barked back at him.

How was Wickham to know that his companion in the militia — the one to whom he had lost a handsome amount of money after a dreadful card game — had a cousin in the underbelly of London and would sell Wickham’s debt to him?

“I’ll take care of ’im,” Brown had promised his cousin. “I’ve got somethin’ he can do for me.”

It had been a stroke of luck that as soon as they arrived that morning, they had seen Darcy walking alone and sitting by a tree, with no sign of the colonel.

Then, a lady reached Darcy before them. She could not be more than a nuisance, they decided. But Wickham was not counting on the fact that the lady in question was actually Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the same lady who had caught his attention in Hertfordshire. Due to the swelling around his eyes, he had not been able to recognise her from afar. Then, while grabbing her, in his momentary distraction as he recognised her, Miss Elizabeth had removed his mask, revealing his identity, something Brown had said he would not tolerate.

“Put both of them in the carriage and let’s go,” Brown barked again. “Someone must have heard the shot. Hurry.”

There was nothing Wickham could do, so he obeyed. Kidnapping was a crime punishable by hanging — deportation at best. He was not a murderer, but he would not swap his life for Miss Elizabeth’s. He knew he could run from the law, but not from these merciless criminals.

While carrying Miss Elizabeth to her uncertain fate, he could not fathom why Brown had suddenly changed his mind, taking her with them after trying to kill her. Wickham saw the bleeding bruise on her split lip and was filled with remorse. At that moment, his left foot faltered and he wobbled. The pain just reminded him of that horrible day he had been captured and tortured by Brown.

Why did Miss Elizabeth, of all the women in the kingdom, have to be the one there at that moment?

Ned took his place as the driver with Brown beside him. Wickham laid Miss Elizabeth beside the man who had ruined his life and closed the door of the old carriage.

He mounted his horse. "I am going ahead to buy some supplies for our trip. Our man there," Wickham said, with a pang of guilt, pointing to the carriage, "will not survive if we do not stop that bleeding."

"And who said I care? Nobody will know if he's dead or alive," Brown spat.

"That would be a mistake," said Wickham, regaining part of his courage. "He is a gentleman and the nephew of an earl, you fool, and I know his family. We will never escape the hangman if you let Mr Darcy die. Not today, and not in a hundred years."

Brown seemed to consider his words and then nodded. "Right. Just remember to come back. We're not stopping. Reach us along the way."

"What about the girl, Brown?" Ned asked while urging the horse to move. "She wasn't part of the plan. Why spare her?"

"No, she wasn't," said Brown rubbing his chin. "But now that we've got 'er, I've an idea about what we can do with 'er." He looked at Ned with mischief in his eyes. "Besides, we'll need someone to look after the dandy during our journey."

Wickham shivered and tried to swallow the lump in his throat as he saw the dust rising behind the moving carriage. He took a deep breath and, feeling a great disgust towards himself, shook his head. He cursed his luck and urged his horse forward. He would burn in hell for eternity for he could not bear to think of what those ruffians were planning for Miss Elizabeth. Unfortunately, he had his own neck to save now.

Not too far from there, a small pair of eyes had witnessed everything. The little boy was now running away as if his life was depending on it.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

Richard was in the breakfast room, taking his coffee and reading the newspaper, when he heard a muffled sound he knew well enough — a gunshot. He ran from the room towards the back of the house, looking for somebody to enquire about the noise, when he found the stable boy. “Did you hear that sound? ”

“Yes, sir. It sounded like a gunshot coming from the area close to Mr Collins’s house.”

Richard did not think twice. “Gather some armed men and meet me here with the horses as soon as possible.”

It could not have been someone hunting as it was not the season yet. He ran back into the house and to his bedchamber, where he found his own sword and pistol, and some munition. On his way out he checked Darcy’s room, but there was only one of the maids cleaning it. He asked her to tell Mr Darcy, and nobody else, he was out with some men investigating some trespassers, and that he would come back soon.

In no time he was back at the stables, where the other men were now gathering. “We heard a gunshot coming from around Mr Collins’ house,” Richard said, mounting his horse and leading the group away. “Please be careful. We do not know what has happened.”

When they arrived at the parsonage, Mr Collins was already at the gate, his face pale as chalk. “Dear Lord, sir! Thank you for coming; I was already on my way to call for help. I fear something dreadful must have happened. Cousin Elizabeth is not here. Cook informed us that she went out for her morning walk. Then I heard what seemed like her shouting and the noise of a gunshot. It came from the end of the south path,

down the valley, close to the brook.”

Richard had the answer he needed, and in seconds they headed in the direction Mr Collins had pointed out. He knew the place; it was where he had found Darcy in the mud with Miss Elizabeth.

~ ? ~

The jolt of the carriage awoke Elizabeth. She brought her hand to her sore face, struggling to see in the darkness. Then, she heard muffled voices.

“Yes, I’ve a plan for ’er. Go back to London and wait for my instructions. I need to arrange somethin’ for you. Quick, you can’t be seen with us. ”

The door opened. The bright light dazzled Elizabeth as the silhouette of a man shadowed over her. “So, our lady’s awake. Good. Take this.” The man threw a large bag on the seat. “Make sure he doesn’t bleed to death,” he said, shutting the door.

A moment later, the carriage was on its way.

The sudden movement made Elizabeth wince. Still a bit dizzy, she touched her right cheek again; the corner of her mouth was swollen, and her lower lip was bleeding. She frowned, confused by the man’s words.

“Oh, no. Mr Darcy,” she shouted as she remembered what had happened.

With her eyes adjusted again to the dim light inside what she now understood was a carriage, Elizabeth looked up at the seats, but saw nothing. Perplexed, she tried to sit up, when her fingers felt something on the floor beside her. Mr Darcy’s dark hair and green coat had blended his still body with the shadows on the floor. Tears stung her eyes as she carefully tried to turn him onto his back, praying for his life. She did not

need light to see the large stain of blood on his once white shirt.

“Mr Darcy,” she whispered, caressing his dirty face with trembling hands.

He was so cold.

A shiver ran down her spine. Please be alive, please! She quickly lowered an ear to his mouth and released a deep sigh when she heard his weak but steady breathing. A mixture of feelings — disgust, rage, fear and despair — engulfed Elizabeth. “Cowards,” she finally shouted, hot tears finding their way down her face, burning the cuts on her skin.

The realisation of their situation hit her hard; they had been kidnapped and Mr Darcy was seriously wounded. She could not contain her emotions any longer and surrendered to uncontrollable sobs, wondering what she could do for him.

The horrible man’s words echoed in her mind. “ Make sure he doesn’t bleed to death .”

The bag.

With some effort, she reached for it. It contained bandages, a small brown bottle on which she managed to read ‘laudanum’, three other bottles, which by the smell she concluded were water bottles, and, surprisingly, a loaf of bread.

She used the back of her sleeves to dry her face, while trying to remember what she had learnt about caring for a wound — although most of it for animals.

Pulling back one of the curtains to let light flood the interior of the carriage, the blood stain on Mr Darcy’s shirt turned into a vibrant shade of red. She felt dizzy. But that was not the moment for weakness. Inhaling deeply, Elizabeth began to open Darcy’s

coat, unbuttoned his waistcoat. Starting from the burnt bullet hole, she tore the fabric of his shirt, opening her way into his wounded flesh. Once the injury was at last exposed, she tried to understand what she was seeing.

Her face softened as she passed a hand over her own neck and shoulder, comparing it to his body. Not his heart! Despite the fortunate position by which the bullet had passed through Mr Darcy's body, he was still bleeding.

A sudden movement of the carriage bounced their bodies, and he moaned and mumbled incomprehensible words.

Elizabeth cupped his cold face. "Mr Darcy? Please, can you hear me?" At his lack of response, she decided to do what was necessary. "Forgive me, but this will hurt..." she murmured. Then, counting to three, she held her breath and pressed the front wound with a piece of bandage.

Darcy gasped, grimacing as he cried out in pain, quickly reaching for her wrist with so much strength that she did not know if she should be happy to see him very much alive, or scream in pain.

A moment later, he loosened his grip, relaxed his body and started breathing again.

"Mr Darcy," she whispered, taking his face with her other hand. His forehead was wet with his perspiration. "It is me, Elizabeth. Please, talk to me."

~ ? ~

Once Richard and the other men reached the end of the path, he dismounted and started looking around, telling the other men to do the same. He walked towards the grove and something on the floor caught his attention. It was a lady's bonnet — with a hole in it. He brought it to his nose. The burnt smell was still fresh.

“Colonel, over here!” one of his men shouted, pointing to a dark puddle on the grass.

Richard crouched down and touched the damp area with his finger. Blood . “Good Lord. Poor Miss Elizabeth,” he whispered.

It did not take them long to find the bullet; but it was the second object, in fact two sodden wads of cloth, that froze Richard’s heart as he separated the red-stained handkerchiefs and saw the initials of his cousin on one of them.

Without turning his head, he addressed the stable boy. “Please, go back to the house as fast as you can and find out if Mr Darcy is still there. Go!” Then, he asked a footman to go to the village to try to find any information he could about anything suspicious or unusual.

After a short time, while they were still searching the area for more clues, the stable boy returned, panting from the exertion of his efforts, and confirmed Richard’s deepest fear.

“Sir, Mr Darcy is nowhere to be found. His valet said he must have left very early for his walk. His horse is still in the stable, sir. In the kitchen, one of the maids confirmed she had seen Mr Darcy leaving the house very early. She thought he was going out for his usual walk.”

Richard closed his eyes in agony.

Oh, Darcy .

Looking down at the bonnet in his hand, he tried to make sense of it. Had Elizabeth been holding her bonnet when she was shot? Or Darcy? Whose blood was this?

In the end, he abandoned his useless attempts at trying to figure out what had

happened. In any case, despite whoever had been shot, the victim was not dead; otherwise, the perpetrators would not have taken the trouble of carrying the body.

After ensuring that they had not missed anything else, Richard asked Mr Collins to fetch his wife and meet him at the manor house, then send another man to the village for the constable.

Due to the circumstances, they had no time to waste.

They were already back at the stables, when the footman returned from the village with information.

“According to some of my acquaintances, a strange rider, quite bruised, stopped by the apothecary and asked for some provisions. Apparently, when questioned about the reason, the gentleman said one of his servants had been seriously burnt in the furnace of a local blacksmith, some place north from here, and they were on their way to London to look for a doctor. When the apothecary offered to see the victim, the gentleman said he was in a carriage further ahead and he had to reach it by horse as soon as possible. ‘The poor man must be in agony,’ he had said. He then ordered quite a lot of bandages and a small bottle of laudanum. Before that, the baker said the same man had stopped at the bakery to buy some bread.”

By that extraordinary account, Richard did not have any further doubts. Both Darcy and Elizabeth had been taken, and one of them, if not both, was seriously wounded.

~ ? ~

Despite his agony and the sickening pain spreading throughout his entire body, Darcy managed to open his eyes and recognise his companion. “Elizabeth,” he whispered, trying to reach for her hand on his face, closing his eyes again.

“Oh, Mr Darcy. Thank God you are alive,” she whispered in relief. “I am so sorry, but before anything else, I need to try to stop your bleeding, and I need your help. Do you think you can sit?”

Darcy took a deep breath and nodded. Elizabeth stood, helping him to sit up. He winced but managed to keep his position .

“You must forgive me, but I will need to remove your coat and waistcoat, and check for more bleeding on your back.”

Darcy just nodded.

As she pulled pieces of clothing from his body, her suspicions were confirmed; he had another hole on his back. The bullet had torn through his body.

She repeated the process of pressing his other wound, torn apart by his agonising moans of pain. Once she was satisfied with her efforts, she wrapped him with the bandages and put his clothes back on him, helping him to sit on the ripped seat of the carriage.

“It will keep your shoulder immobile and, I hope, will help you with the pain,” Elizabeth concluded, accommodating Darcy’s left arm inside the improvised sling she had made, then sat opposite him.

“Thank you,” he said with a weak voice. His painful expression was replaced by one of rage as his gaze rested on her face. “You are hurt! What have those bastards done to you?”

“I am fine. I mean, it is nothing serious,” she said, touching her mouth. “It is a little sore, but apart from this cut, I am well. I think I put up too much resistance when they were trying to take me away...” from you .

Elizabeth's voice cracked and she lowered her eyes to Darcy's neck, then to where his arm rested in her improvised sling. She stopped and covered her mouth as a new flood of emotion brought tears to her eyes; tears she could not fight again as she remembered all that had happened. The memory of her bonnet flying in the air, just a couple of inches from her head, confirmed how close she had come to dying. "But I am alive, and because of you. Thank you."

"Please, do not thank me. I did what needed to be done."

Shame and embarrassment overflowed, and she shook her head, trying to find words to express her confusion, to make sense of the thoughts crossing her mind. "Why, sir? Why did you do that, after... after the way I have treated you?"

Darcy swallowed hard. "When I heard you saying Wickham's name, and then one of the other men shouting for Wickham to duck... and saw the gun... I understood what was happening. It was when..." He paused, swallowing again. "They were holding me tight. I could not fight them, but I could... knock into him." He stopped again, frowning, and then looked back at her. "I could not live in a world if you were not in it, Elizabeth. I could not live without the hope of being able to see you again, look into your eyes, even knowing... how little you think of me." His eyes lowered to where his hand was pressing his thigh. "I love you, Elizabeth. That is why."

Listening again to his declaration stirred violent emotions and made her feel completely unworthy. More than she ever thought possible. She brought both hands to her face and cried until she had no tears left.

All her dislike for him was not just because of his prejudice against her family or Mr Wickham's words, but, in fact, a defensive response to his rejection of her, and his abandonment of Hertfordshire.

But now, whatever the reason he had to leave her behind, they did not matter, not

after what he had done for her.

He had no way to know he would survive that gunshot.

Now that the hard truth had finally been admitted, she knew what she needed to do.

Under his saddened gaze, she carefully took the seat beside him, gently taking his cold hand. Between tears, she brought it to her lips and kissed it, holding it against her wet cheek. "Please, forgive me," she said at last. "I have been so blind and unfair. I accused you of things I am so ashamed of I cannot even repeat. I have misjudged you and treated you shamefully. You were right... about everything. Can you ever forgive me?"

All of Darcy's discomfort suddenly lifted away. Could it be that she was not as indifferent to him as she had wanted him to believe? He could have sworn on his life that he had seen regard for him in her eyes.

A small spark of hope warmed his heart.

Then Darcy understood.

He had been right about her feelings for him. But in his desperate need to convince himself of the unsuitability of her family and circumstances, he had buried his happiness with his bare hands. He had not needed Wickham or Bingley's help for it. He had done that himself.

Was it really necessary for him to be shot to see this truth?

Darcy looked down at her again, her shoulders moving as she sobbed. He could feel the moistness of her tears in his palm and his heart filled with tenderness for the young woman beside him.

They were both so stubborn.

Oh, God help them.

If he was going to die, at least he would leave this world with the woman he loved in his arms.

Hang the discomfort and the pain. Placing his finger under her chin, he raised her face. Her beautiful eyes were puffed and red, still filled with unshed tears. His thumb caressed her wet face. "There is nothing to forgive, Elizabeth. I have been a fool." He slid his hand to her back, bringing her into his embrace. She gently nestled in his chest, as he placed kisses on her hair.

"How can you even say you still love me after what I have said?" she mumbled against his chest.

He thanked God for this opportunity, and, by heavens, he would not waste it. "I love you in a way I never thought possible, and that scared me. I love when we talk. I love our discussions and even our disagreements." He grimaced as the frenetic movements of the carriage shook them from one side to another. "You saw the man behind the facade, and that made me defenceless against you, my dearest Elizabeth. You are intelligent, kind, and generous. I love everything about you... your beautiful hair, your bright eyes, your lips... but I adore your freckles. God knows how difficult it has been to not kiss every single one of them."

Elizabeth giggled at his declaration, and suddenly all her pain and guilt were forgotten.

How foolish she had been.

But her newfound happiness was short lived. Looking up at him she saw small drops

of perspiration forming over the stubble on his upper lip.

“Oh, sir. You must be in so much pain,” she said reaching for a bag. “I shall give you some laudanum. It would do you good to have a little.”

With his eyes still closed, Darcy shook his head. He could not be any more defenceless than he already was.

“It is not like any of us can fight against those miscreants when they have guns,” said Elizabeth, as if reading his thoughts. “Please, it would make me feel better to know you are not in so much pain. You need to rest to recover your strength. You have lost too much blood.”

Darcy sighed, feeling very queasy, and then nodded, but not before indignation brought a bitter taste to his mouth.

Elizabeth reached for the bottle of laudanum, looking around. “Usually, we need to dilute it with some water or tea, but we do not have a cup.” She paused, thinking, then took a piece of bread and wetted it with some drops of the laudanum.

As Darcy was still keeping his eyes closed, Elizabeth put the piece of bread in his hand and raised it to his mouth. “Please eat it. It will taste quite bitter, but this is the only way for you to have it.”

Darcy ate the piece of bread and almost emptied the contents of his stomach — had he eaten anything that morning. Elizabeth offered him some water, which he gladly accepted, followed by another piece of bread, this time plain.

“Thank you,” he said between forced gasps. “How did you know how much I needed? Have you already had another patient?”

Elizabeth smiled at his attempt of levity. “My father broke a leg some years ago. An accident with one of the horses. He had to stay in bed for two months, but the first couple of weeks were the worst. The apothecary taught me how to add a couple of drops of laudanum to his tea. This not only helped my father to cope with his pain, but also assisted us to cope with his bad temper. Papa can be quite unpleasant when frustrated.”

She thought about her family. Was she ever going to see them again?

Darcy leaned back, also thinking about his family, and Georgiana.

A sombre thought passed through his mind.

“Elizabeth, there is a letter in my coat pocket. Would you please read it? I spent last night writing it, trying to explain everything. ”

She looked surprised but reached for his pocket and found the letter she had seen before. As she broke the seal, a neat and elegant handwriting appeared before her eyes.

“If something happens to me, and I do not survive, I want you to know the truth. I do not want to die knowing you think ill of me.”

Those were the last words she heard from his lips before he fell into a troubled sleep.

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Richard had a most difficult task ahead of him. Of all the battles and campaigns he had fought against Napoleon on the Continent in his many years in His Majesty's Army, nothing had prepared him for what he was about to do from this day on.

Lady Catherine had been displeased by the apparent desertion of both her nephews and rumours of trespassers, and asked her butler, Mr Gilbert, to inform her of Fitzwilliam and Darcy's presence as soon as they were seen inside the house. So, when he saw the colonel entering the house, he did not waste any time in obeying his mistress and went to her.

"Gilbert!" Richard called the butler, halting the man quick steps. "Please tell my aunt to meet me in the drawing room as soon Mr and Mrs Collins arrive. Oh! And ask Cook to have some herbal tea prepared. At least two pots. Very strong and very sweet."

Mr Gilbert, who had been Lady Catherine's butler for the last fifteen years, had never seen Colonel Fitzwilliam's countenance so dark. He knew something was amiss. Without any further delay, he went to the kitchen and passed on the colonel's orders.

Mr and Mrs Collins did not take long to arrive, and they were directed to the drawing room. Lady Catherine soon joined them.

After a few more minutes, Richard also entered the room.

"What is the meaning of this, Fitzwilliam?" Lady Catherine asked, concern stamped on her face. "And where is Darcy? Why are Mr and Mrs Collins here?"

The immediate silence in the room became heavy.

Richard inhaled deeply a couple of times. All eyes were on him now. “Please take a seat... and a cup of tea. Gilbert, would you mind pouring the tea, please?”

Richard waited for everyone to accommodate themselves before continuing. He knew his aunt’s weak heart would need him to be careful. “This morning, while I was breaking my fast, I heard a gunshot. I left the house...” he begun, narrating all the events as they had happened. “And so, I believe they were both taken away, and one of them, if not both, is seriously injured.”

Richard turned to Charlotte. “Mrs Collins, considering you are better acquainted with Mr Bennet and his family, would you mind writing a letter informing him of these events? Let him know we are doing everything to find not just my cousin but also Miss Elizabeth.”

Lady Catherine mumbled some strange words; she had a green expression that inspired care. Her lady’s maid was called to assist her. She was then conducted to her bedchamber and, after receiving some sleeping draughts, was left sleeping.

Richard excused himself and headed to his bedchamber. He had some letters to write.

~ ? ~

Making sure Mr Darcy was still breathing, Elizabeth took the remaining bandages and balled them into an improvised pillow, resting his head on it. Then, sitting on the opposite seat, she observed his broad chest rising and lowering in time to his laboured breath. He looked so vulnerable. She lifted another prayer for his life, begging once more for God to spare him.

After a long time, when her eyes were finally dry and she was able to focus them

again, Elizabeth opened the curtains and started reading Mr Darcy's letter.

11th April 1816.

To Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

Please forgive me for presuming you would allow me the right to defend myself against the accusations you pressed against me last night, but my honour demands I clarify them.

The first of them is of a very personal nature and, therefore, I beg for your secrecy, as these facts could seriously damage my sister's reputation.

Mr Wickham and I grew up together as he was the son of my father's steward. My father was very fond of him and, after Wickham's father passed away, my own father supported Wickham at school and later at university. Contrary to what you said yesterday, he received the education of a gentleman. Unfortunately, his behaviour was not consistent with it and soon I found out that his manners were lacking and far from proper, actually more aligned to dissolution and debauchery.

Wickham knew my father wanted him to take orders and receive the valuable living of our family, but when my father passed away five years ago, he seemed to have changed his mind, insisting he would rather prefer to study the law. He then received a compensation of three thousand pounds and our acquaintance was severed — until last summer.

My sister, Georgiana, is more than ten years my junior. After my father's death, my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam and I shared her guardianship — our mother having died shortly after Georgiana was born. Last summer, my sister was enjoying holidays with her companion, Mrs Younge, in Ramsgate, where Wickham presented himself as a family friend. After spending some time in her company, he led my sister to believe

she was in love with him and that an elopement was the best way to keep them together. He cleverly pointed out that I would never be favourable toward someone of such low birth marrying my sister .

Fortunately, by God's grace, planning to surprise her, I arrived at Ramsgate three days before the supposed elopement. On seeing me, my sister could not keep the truth to herself and acknowledged the whole plan immediately.

To my own mortification, I found out that Mrs Younge — the companion I had personally hired for my sister — and Mr Wickham were already lovers and had planned to use my sister's dowry to start their new life somewhere far away, leaving her behind, disgraced and broken hearted.

You can imagine how I acted.

I do not see any of my decisions as unnecessary or cruel. I swore to him that, if he was found less than two miles from my sister, I would take him to justice. As I had already bought his previous debts in Cambridge and Lambton, I knew I had enough proof to send him to the debtors' prison for many years.

If you still have any doubts about the veracity of this account, I can only appeal to the testimony of my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, who is acquainted with all of these details.

I hope that with this explanation you may absolve me from the accusations he so deceptively presented to you. What they were, I know not. But I, once again, appeal to your kindness and sense of justice.

About the other accusations you presented before me, of my disrespectful behaviour towards you, your family and neighbours, I cannot say anything, but plead guilty. Yet, it was not until the early hours of this day, after a considerable battle reliving

that dreadful quarrel we had and the remembrance of the deep pain in your eyes, that I was convinced of my shameful behaviour.

Perhaps, after knowing all the circumstances of my life, you might understand my reasons.

I was brought up to be a gentleman in all senses of the word, which includes being fair and kind to those below my position in life. I am ashamed to say that, although I believe I have done that to my servants and tenants, I did not treat other members of society in the same way. In my defence, I must say I was never comfortable in social gatherings. In fact, it would be more honest to say I loathe society in general.

Yet, you have accused me of being selfish, and that I was not able to see beyond the material circumstances of a person. In a way you were correct about the first point, but not the second. As I said, I despise society in general, but especially that of my own sphere. The ton is a savage beast, sanctioning marriages without love, selling daughters to the highest bidder — usually ‘noble’ rogues and cads, heirs of our kingdom, whose occupation in life is to look for pleasure in the arms of a courtesan, or at the card tables of some hell, while their estates are left in the hands of stewards. Some of them use their new brides’ dowry to pay their infamous debts, while their younger brothers are forced into a life of hard work. I lost count of how many of my school and university friends had fallen into this social abyss.

I would like to say that most of those young women are innocent, victims of their circumstances, but I cannot. I have seen enough of the ton to know they are raised to deceive, to look like something they are not; in general, they lack compassion, intelligence and honesty. And, when they do not achieve their primary goal in their first two seasons — to find a husband — they appeal to subterfuges and compromises. Balls are nothing more than a hunting field for ‘proper’ wives and husbands.

And, yes, I despise all those things.

But the recent events concerning my sister, and having witnessed beforehand the deceitful nature of people I had known and trusted — all of which added to my concern of being equally trapped in a compromised situation and, consequently, a loveless marriage — brought out the worst in me. The distress of having my baby sister almost ruined by a man I once considered a friend — almost a brother — simply exacerbated my cynical view of the world and reinforced the barriers around my own heart.

So, when I saw you, such a beautiful and gracious lady, sitting alone at that assembly, I could not think in any other way. Your intention was to call my attention — as Miss Bennet was doing with Bingley — and by your mother's instruction. I could see the mischief in your mother's eyes when, even from far away in the room, I could hear her saying 'ten thousand a year'. My offensive words about your appearance, therefore, more than reflecting what I really thought about you, were spoken as a warning to dissuade your supposed plans — although I was not sure you had heard them.

How I can atone enough to earn your forgiveness is beyond me.

Regarding Bingley's behaviour, I must trust your secrecy again. I cannot doubt he was touched by your sister's beauty and amiability; however, his infatuation did not grow strong enough to overlook the limitations of your family and his personal ambitions in life. His mother was a gentleman's daughter, but his father was involved with trade, so to be accepted in society he needs to marry well.

Please, do not think ill of him. He lost both his parents when we were still at Eton and having known him since that tender age, I know he is a good man. Unfortunately, the desire for status has been a strong inducement in his life.

In the end, if Bingley's admiration for your sister did not increase, I believe it was for the best. I know in a way I am betraying my friend's confidence, but, again, I can only count on your discretion. As my admiration for you started growing, so did my understanding of your sister's true nature. My impression is that Miss Bennet is too kind and too gentle to thrive as Bingley's wife. I hope you understand what I mean.

I have no doubt your sister, who, in many ways, reminds me of Georgiana, will find a man who can love and cherish her for what she is and not for what she does or does not possess.

When we left Hertfordshire, my intentions were not to flee from an inferior society or unpleasant company as you have thought, but to try to forget you. I had never yearned for any lady until I met you. Your generous and kind nature, and even your interest in Wickham's situation, a man you could not have known was lying, despite hurting my feelings, showed me how fiercely a defender of those wronged by the injustices of our society you can be. Your intelligence and wit, and even your teasing and impertinence, captivated me. My wealth never impressed you. Even your strong refusal told me of your character; you could not marry a man who you could not trust or respect.

Regarding my resemblance to my fickle friend, in not being consistent with my attentions to you, I could blame the responsibility of maintaining the Darcy legacy; after all, hundreds of lives depend on me. But I cannot. You are the daughter of a gentleman. Your family's importance in Hertfordshire is testament to the connections they have in the region. Any excuse for this subject would be null. And regarding your mother and sisters' behaviour, they were no worse than those of many illustrious families in the town.

No. The truth is much simpler than that. I was an arrogant and pompous man.

I am the sole heir of a large estate; hundreds of lives depend on me. I could not be

taken away by infatuation. I have the sole responsibility for maintaining the Darcy legacy. So, I believed you unsuited to the position of Mrs Darcy. And you were right. It was never about you but your family.

How can I atone for such arrogance? If there is an answer, I confess, it is beyond me.

My undoing — or rather, my salvation — was that I have failed to forget you, and when I saw you again and knew what a fool I had been, I could only hope everything would end well.

I am not as good with the spoken words as I am with my quill; the result was what we experienced yesterday. For all those things, I cannot say anything else, but ask you to forgive me. My intention was to tell you, show you, that nothing was strong enough to keep me away from you. You are perfect to me.

I could only hope I could be the same for you. In my selfish presumption, I believed I knew about your feelings for me, that I was seeing in your eyes the same consuming fire I had inside my heart. I misread you in so many ways.

Please, disregard this last paragraph. I was led astray. Unfortunately, I do not have the time or the disposition to rewrite this whole page again.

I could say so much more about my motivations and feelings — that I would never have a mistress if I had someone like you as my wife — but I shall not do so, fearing it would be repulsive to you.

I can only hope this letter can mitigate my errors at least a little in your eyes.

Darcy

After reading the letter for the second time, a much greater shadow of regret came

over Elizabeth; she could barely breathe. This was much worse than before. Never in her life had she felt the weight of her own shameful behaviour as she felt it now. All her contempt and annoyance for a man whose only crime was to have hurt her vanity, showed her how proud and prejudiced she could also be.

She read the whole letter again, seeing all the facts there mentioned, some unknown to her until that moment, some from another perspective.

The part where he hoped Jane would find a better man certainly spoke highly of his kindness towards her sister. That Mr Darcy would say she would be better without his friend — and not the opposite.

In her blind fury, she had also disregarded his declaration of love, even despised it as a simple expression of his personal whim, offending his feelings and honour, suggesting he would be unfaithful.

How foolish she had been. Had anyone tried to tell her how much Mr Darcy loved her, that he was capable of risking his own life for her, she would have laughed.

Mr Darcy had his flaws, like any other creature of God, but lack of honour and love were not among them. His love for his sister and his need to protect her, and now this declaration of his own feelings, were enough proof of it. He did not lack love or honour, nor was he selfish, as she so harshly accused him of being. No. He was the kindest and most honourable man she could ever meet.

If regret could kill, she would be a pile of ashes.

She looked back at him. Swallowing her pride, she forced herself to admit the truth; she also loved him.

And God help her if she was not going to live every single day of the rest of her life

proving that to him.

She only hoped that this end would not come too soon.

Moving back to his side, she took his hand again. For now, this was the only place where she could find peace for her troubled heart.

~ ? ~

Mr Bennet was in his study sorting through his ledgers and letters. It was late in the morning and he was about to finish all his tasks before his midday meal, when an agitated Mrs Hill, the housekeeper, came with a letter in hand, saying it was from an express, and that the messenger was instructed to wait for a reply.

Mr Bennet frowned and took the letter. He did not like expresses, especially those coming at the end of the morning to disturb his meals.

“Send the good man to the stables and give him a meal and some tea while I read my letter, will you, Mrs Hill?”

Curiously, the letter was from Charlotte Collins. He wondered what that could mean. Why would Elizabeth not write instead? A shadow of concern came over Mr Bennet as he looked at the letter. Whatever was in there, he knew he would not like it.

He broke the seal and started reading it.

11th April 1816.

My dear Mr Bennet,

I am very sorry to inform you that a sad event took place early this morning here in

Kent. I know not any other way to inform you about it, so I beg you to keep your courage and faith.

This morning, my dear Lizzy and Mr Darcy, Lady Catherine's nephew, were kidnapped from our neighbourhood by some unknown men. We do not know any details, so I am sorry I cannot tell you more. Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr Darcy's cousin, is committed to investigate what happened. He asked me to send you this letter informing you of what has occurred, and to put himself at your service.

I do not know what else to say. You are very welcome to come and stay with us, if you so wish. Our house is open to you. Please, let us know your decision.

Yours sincerely,

Charlotte Collins

"Oh, dear God! My dear, dear Lizzy," Mr Bennet burst out.

Collapsing in the nearest armchair, Mr Bennet felt a tightness in his chest as he reread the letter. This news was much worse than anything he could possibly imagine. His beloved child, abducted. Who would do such a thing? And why?

A deeper concern grabbed his heart, as he remembered those news reports about ladies being taken from the south of England. Could his Lizzy have been taken by those same men?

Good God. No.

Jane entered the room. "Papa, is everything all right? I heard you shouting." The pale face of her father frightened her. "Papa, what is the matter? Was the news so bad? Mrs Hill told us about the express. Please, Papa, talk to me."

“Come here, my child,” Mr Bennet said, rubbing his hands over his face. “I need to share this dreadful, dreadful news with someone with good sense. Please read it.”

Jane took the letter and after reading it, she slowly sat on the other armchair, unable to contain her own tears. “Oh Papa. What shall we do? Will you go to Kent?”

It took Mr Bennet some time to react to what his daughter was saying. “ Yes, yes, my dear. I think I must. I am going to Kent and I beg you to come with me. I do not believe I can cope with this pain on my own. Call Mrs Hill and ask the messenger to come in. I have my reply to send.”

After Mr Bennet had written his response and ordered his luggage to be prepared, he gathered his family in the drawing room. The general reaction did not surprise him. Mrs Bennet felt ill and had to be helped to her room. Despite her careless country manners, she loved all her daughters. Lydia and Kitty were speechless for some seconds and then broke down in tears.

Mr Bennet, however, refused to give them too much attention and focused instead on what needed to be done. About half an hour later, he and Jane were ready to leave.

Once the carriage was loaded, they left for a destination that promised no leisure or entertainment, only pain.

~ ? ~

The sun was high in the sky when the carriage finally stopped. Elizabeth’s heart raced when she awoke. Her tired body had betrayed her, and she had fallen asleep. Looking down, she noticed she was still holding Mr Darcy’s hand, and that he was still sleeping.

The door was abruptly opened, and Brown’s gruff voice came from the outside.

“We’ve arrived. Leave.”

Elizabeth tried to stand up, but her legs were stiff and cramped.

Ned put his head inside the carriage and shouted at them. “Why are you taking so long? Do you think we can wait ’ere the whole day?”

But Mr Darcy did not even flinch.

“Sir, Mr Darcy is not well,” Elizabeth pleaded as she stepped out of the carriage. “If you treat him harshly, I am sure he will not survive.”

Brown and Ned exchanged a disgusted glance, and Wickham was nowhere to be seen.

“What are we going to do with ’im?” Ned asked .

Brown looked inside the carriage. “We’ll need to carry him upstairs.”

“He has been bleeding since we left Rosings. I am sure he will need a doctor,” Elizabeth added, trying to stretch their luck a little more.

Brown approached her. Elizabeth recognised him as the man who had shot her. “I’m telling you this just once, so for your own sake, pay attention. We’ve already called a doctor. He’s a local fellow. When he arrives, we’re telling him that our friend was hurt during a hunting party. You’ll be his wife, Mrs Smith. I’ll be with both of you all the time the doctor’s in the house. If I suspect you’re trying to pass any kind of message to him, I’ll personally kill the dandy, then the doctor and lastly you. Do not try me, lady. Have you seen Wickham’s face? I did that. Are we understood?”

Elizabeth shivered as the image of Wickham’s disfigured face appeared in her mind

and nodded.

He came closer to her. “And don’t try to escape.” He did not need to finish. She understood what he meant.

When Brown moved towards Mr Darcy, she was able to breathe again. Thankfully, her efforts were being rewarded as the men, with some measure of care, carried Mr Darcy inside the house and then upstairs.

Only in that moment did Elizabeth notice her surroundings. They were somewhere on the coast, and the house, a small, three-floored cottage, quite fanciful and picturesque, was situated on the highest point of a cliff. It had an astonishing view.

It was ironic that they could be in such a beautiful place under such dreadful circumstances.

Were they to die there?

They went upstairs, to the third floor, and the only door was opened. Inside, there was a spacious and light bedroom. The walls were covered with a charming and expensive wallpaper that Elizabeth had only seen in fashionable warehouses in London. The remaining furniture comprised a sofa, a well-crafted vanity with a mirror and stool, and a large, elaborate four-poster double bed where they dropped Mr Darcy.

Brown turned to her with a sneer and threw the bag with bandages at her feet. Then, they left.

Ned noticed Darcy’s blood on his arm. “I bet the dandy won’t survive the night,” he said closing the door behind him.

Alarmed, Elizabeth ran to Mr Darcy, sitting by his side on the bed, and feared the

man might be right. "I hope the doctor does not take too long to arrive," she whispered.

Darcy eventually opened his eyes. "Elizabeth..."

"I am right here. Please do not talk. They said a doctor is coming to see you."

Ignoring her reassurances, Darcy continued. "I need to ask you a favour," he said slowly, looking down at his blood-soaked bandages. "If the worst comes to pass, please, I beg you, find my sister... give her the love I shall not be able to give. I am confident the two of you will be great friends. I knew it from the moment I saw you with your sisters. Would you do that for me? Please?" He spoke in an almost imperceptible whisper, his strength failing him.

Elizabeth looked down at him with her heart full of compassion and fear. She could not deny Mr Darcy his wish but promising him this would give him the peace of mind she was not sure she wanted him to have. What should she do? How to give Mr Darcy a good enough reason to fight for his life, or even hope they would escape this place, when she had none?

After further consideration, she saw a way, and with his pleading eyes still on her, Elizabeth took a deep breath. "No, Mr Darcy, I am afraid I cannot do that. I am sorry."

Darcy gasped painfully.

"But, hear me. You have proved that you would die for me," she added, taking his hand and giving it a light squeeze, "but dare I believe you would... live for me? To live with me enjoying happiness, mutual love and respect? Would you live to ask me... again... to be your wife?"

His frown deepened, but slowly his face lit up as his eyes moved from her wet eyes to her mouth, and to her cheeks, which he slowly tried to reach. She helped him, resting his cold hand on her face.

“What are you saying, Elizabeth? Are you— ”

“I am saying no to your request. I am not going to look after your sister, because I want you to do that yourself.” She spoke with tenderness, kissing the palm of his hand. Then she whispered, “I am begging you to live for us — for me.”

For a long time, they remained there, looking at each other. Darcy’s eyes became moist. “If I live...” he started, emotion hidden in his ragged breathing as he caressed her face. “If I live, would you give me the great honour of being my wife, Elizabeth?”

“If you live, and I live, I promise I will listen to your marriage proposal — a more proper one this time. Would you... live for me?”

A wave of different feelings filled Darcy’s heart, and his breathing became even more difficult. With such strong emotions running through his body, how could he remember his pain? His expression softened. “I will Elizabeth. And may God give me strength to bravely face all that is ahead of us. To see the day when you will finally make me the happiest of men and be my wife.”

“And that is all I need to hear,” Elizabeth said, caressing his face and leaning down to place a kiss on his head, shutting her eyes, lingering there more than was necessary.

Before Elizabeth could move away, Darcy brought his hand to her nape and gently held her forehead against his. For the first time since they had met, their hearts were fully united. No more misunderstandings; no more resentment; no more pain — just love.

Pulling back, Darcy looked at her bruised face, and his heart melted again. He needed her as he needed air. “Elizabeth,” he whispered.

She gazed at him and saw the same expression she had seen when they had fallen in the mud. All of a sudden, feeling the same need, she leaned forward, closing her eyes.

That was the invitation he needed, as their lips touched each other; soft, warm — sublime. Their first kiss, and how wondrous it was.

Slowly, Darcy released her mouth. “I am sorry. Your lip must be sore,” he whispered, looking at the cut in her mouth again.

“The only thing I can feel is your love,” she whispered back .

All the uncertainties, fears and pain intruded again as their lips resumed their mutual passion, and they kissed as if there was no tomorrow.

With a ragged breathing, Darcy slowly broke their kiss again, keeping his hand on her nape. “My God, Elizabeth. You will be the death of me if you keep kissing me like that,” he said perusing every detail on her freckled face. “I love you. And I give you my word I will live... to make you my wife.”

“And I love you, Mr Darcy.”

Darcy froze, his brows coming together, as if doubting her. He would face ten more shots just to hear those words from her lips. “You do?”

The vulnerability in his eyes made Elizabeth shed the tears she had hold back until that moment. “I do, with all my heart. I will never forget that day my eyes rested on you for the first time. You were like a dream, like a full moon shining among the stars. I have loved you for a long time, but because of my pride, I had not admitted it

until now.”

He understood her words. She had shouted them at him after his unfortunate proposal. “How could I ever believed I could live without you? It took me being shot to realise that part of what you are is because of your family. I have condemned your mother and younger sisters, but now I can see that despite their occasional unguarded behaviour, you love each other. And that is what counts. I promise you I will give them all the respect they deserve. They will always be welcome in our homes.”

Elizabeth rested her head on the good side of his chest, shedding more tears. This time, however, they were tears of joy. What else could she desire from the man she loved?

A smile reached Darcy’s lips at the ironic thought that he could die of happiness at that very moment. Instead, he raised her face and kissed her once more, pouring in that act all the love he felt for her — and just to make sure he was not dreaming.

Unfortunately, too soon, their crude reality intruded again, and he gently released her, shutting his eyes. Darcy did not know if he was dizzy because of the most amazing feeling was now running through his veins, the feeling of her soft, sweet lips finally brushing against his, or because the damned pain in his shoulder and head were almost unbearable. An enormous wave of frustration engulfed him. Why should the happiest moment of his life be marred by this bloody pain?

“William...” he suddenly said. “Would you mind calling me William?”

Elizabeth’s expression sobered at the sight of his discomfort, but she nodded. “I love you... William,” she said gently, pressing her fingers on the wrinkles of his strained face. “From this moment on, you are bound by your word to stay alive and with me. I will not release you from it. Now, please, do not talk anymore. Save your strength. And please, try to rest, I beg you.”

He was exhausted, in agonising pain, but never happier.

In that moment, the future did not seem so bleak anymore.

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The door was opened and a distinguished man in his mid-sixties entered. He was shown into the room by Brown, who stood guard by the door.

“Mrs Smith, I am Dr Hayford and it is nice to meet you,” he said, entering the room with his eyes already on the patient on the bed. “Unfortunately, under such distressful circumstances. How is your husband—”

He flinched when his eyes rested on her face. “Good God, I heard your husband was accidentally shot during a hunting party, but I was not expecting to have two patients. What happened to your face?”

Elizabeth ran to the mirror to check her appearance. The purple bruise on her cheek and the cut on the swollen lip were a frightening sight. “I had not noticed it was so bad.” She paused, just enough to think about what to say. “While attending to my husband, I... hit my face against the door of the carriage. It was a silly accident. But, please do not concern yourself with me. I am well.”

Dr Hayford approached, gently taking her chin. He gave her face a good look and frowned. Elizabeth held her breath while the doctor kept his eyes on her face, until he nodded. “Thank goodness it is not a nasty cut. Just put something cold on it, will you? Now let me see your husband. What an unfortunate event,” he said, turning from her.

Elizabeth released her breath slowly, looking at Brown, who had his hand on his hidden pistol. Fortunately, Dr Hayford seemed to be the kind of man who once focused on his own work would not pay attention to anything else.

“Yes, sir, very unfortunate indeed,” Elizabeth said, performing her role in the farce. But she had more important things to be concerned about. “Doctor, after the... incident,” she said looking back at Brown, “I tried to stop the bleeding, and as you can see, I tied it up with some bandages. I hope that was enough.”

Dr Hayford opened Mr Darcy’s shirt, and Elizabeth averted her eyes, trying to control her effusive blushing. She had done the same before, but this time the light was much better. She kept reminding herself that there was no reason to be embarrassed. God willing, she was going to marry Mr Darcy.

The doctor, however, contrary to what she had done before, could not work with his patient still wearing his shirt. And now, with some renewed alarm, she heard him ask, “Mrs Smith, would you mind giving me some help here? He seems to be unresponsive.” She gasped, widening her eyes. “I do not want to move him more than is necessary to remove his clothes. If you hold him, like this. Yes. Perfect.”

Elizabeth found herself in the most awkward situation ever. She was sitting on the bed, holding Mr Darcy by his undressed chest, while the doctor was pulling the shirt off by the sleeves.

“Elizabeth...” Darcy mumbled confused.

Moved by an array of feelings which she would not bother to understand in that moment, she just held him still, resting her head against his good shoulder while the doctor finished his task.

Dr Hayford huffed. “Thank you, Mrs Smith. Now let us lay him down again. Yes. Good. ”

As soon as they had placed Darcy against the pillows, Elizabeth blushed effusively. She could barely believe her eyes, blinking a couple of times before turning. She had

never seen an undressed man in her life, not even her father when they used to swim in a lake not too far from Meryton when she was still a child. But she had been to museums and seen some of those ancient Greek marble statues. If what they said about their singular masculine beauty was true, well, then Mr Darcy was indeed a very handsome man.

“Yes, you have done a good job, Mrs Smith. Essential, I would say, as you managed to stop his bleeding. Now, if you could continue holding his arms, I will start looking after this wound. Mr Brown, would you mind removing his boots? I want him to be as comfortable as possible. The poor fellow will feel a lot of pain from now on.”

Elizabeth quickly saw the opportunity. As soon as Brown moved from her side to the bottom of the bed, without taking her eyes from the evil man, Elizabeth noticed the doctor’s eyes on her. Her glance quickly shifted between the doctor and Brown; then, when Brown bent down to pull Darcy’s boots, Elizabeth looked at the doctor and silently mouthed, “help”. She immediately moved her eyes back to Brown, who fortunately missed the brief interaction.

She did not know if the doctor had understood her meaning. Hopefully, he would at least suspect that something was amiss.

But, if the doctor had understood her, he did not show it in any way, as he continued carefully removing his patient’s old bandages.

Darcy moaned and opened his eyes momentarily.

“It seems your husband is waking up, Mrs Smith. Well, who can sleep with such pain?” Dr Hayford asked, looking apologetically at Elizabeth. “However, for me it is better to assess my patient’s real condition before I determine the treatment. I advise you to be strong, please. If you think you cannot cope with witnessing his suffering, I do not mind you leaving the room. Mr Brown can certainly help me.”

Elizabeth did not need to look at Brown to respond. “Do not fret for me, Doctor. I will be fine. I cannot conceive the idea of leaving my husband’s side in a moment like this.” It was a strange feeling to realise she really meant it. She would not leave Mr Darcy’s side, unless they dragged her from him.

“Very well,” replied the doctor. “As you wish. Let us start then. Would you have some towels and water, Mr Brown?”

From where he stood, Brown shouted somebody’s name and the person immediately entered the room with a jug and a washing bowl, and some clean towels. Brown obviously did not want to give her the chance to be alone with the doctor.

“What is your husband’s name, Mrs Smith?” Dr Hayford asked a little surprised with Brown’s consideration.

“Ah, um... William, sir. William Smith.”

“Some people in his state of consciousness react better when they are called by their Christian names,” the doctor said. “Would you mind calling him, Mrs Smith? He will be more responsive to a familiar voice.”

Elizabeth nodded. “William, dear,” she said, caressing his face. “Please, William, wake up...”

She smiled when Darcy opened his eyes, blinking a couple of times.

“Elizabeth...” he whispered, closing his eyes again.

“William, the doctor is here to see you,” she continued. “He needs to talk to you.” Elizabeth sighed in relief when he looked back at her with some understanding. “Dear, we are back at the cottage. Perhaps it will be difficult for you to remember,

but you were shot while you and the others were hunting.” She hoped he would understand the hidden meaning behind her words. “We came back to the cottage as soon as possible and the doctor was called. He is here now.”

Darcy, more alert now, tried to sit up. His eyes found Brown — the man who had shot at Elizabeth. Rage filled his heart and he started panting while locking his gaze with the man.

Elizabeth cupped his face, forcing him to look at her. “William, dear, look at me. You do not need to worry. Everything will be fine.”

It worked. Darcy looked back at her, shutting his eyes, reluctantly nodding his acceptance .

She sighed in relief. “This is Dr Hayford, and he will look after you. But Mr Brown and I will be here with us all the time ,” she concluded, trying again to say with her eyes more than was possible with words. He nodded, this time looking at her.

“Good, good. Now, Mr Smith, do you remember how you were hurt?”

“Not much, I am afraid. I... was standing in the grove when I heard the noise from behind me. Last thing I remember was Elizabeth holding me inside the carriage, explaining what had happened while we were heading back here.”

“Ned, the idiot,” Brown intervened for the first and only time, “did not see Smith behind the bushes and accidentally shot him.”

“Indeed?” Dr Hayford asked raising one eyebrow, turning to Darcy. “So, I am guessing this big lump on the back of your head is the result of your fall. Ah! And more blood. No wonder you are so dizzy. Well, anyway, now that I am sure you are well enough, I suggest you take some more laudanum. It will be for your benefit, but

also for mine. Sewing a screaming person is not a pleasant activity; it reminds me of the war..." He turned to Elizabeth. "Would you still have some left?"

Elizabeth went to fetch the bag Brown had thrown on the floor earlier. She sighed, giving Brown a quick glance. "The bottle fell on the floor and the cork loosened. I am afraid it is practically empty now."

Dr Hayford took the bottle, giving it a good look. "Well, it will have to do. It is not enough to make Mr Smith free from pain, but we do not have any other option. Unfortunately, in my hurry, I did not put any laudanum in my bag. Unless you have some brandy or whisky, Mr Brown? We could try a bit of that as well," he said, pouring some water into the bottle, shaking it, and handing it to Darcy.

"Unfortunately not, Doctor," Brown lied. The last thing he would do was waste his whisky on that dandy.

"Well, never mind. Mrs Smith," the doctor said, turning to her, "if you could help your husband to sit and stay still, I will start cleaning the wound as soon the laudanum has taken effect. We can put some pillows here. If you sit on those pillows beside your husband, we can put his good arm around your back, and you can hold his head and the other arm. There. Now I can see both sides of the wound. You see? The bullet entered here," he said pointing at Darcy's back, "and left through here. Well, it is a blessing I do not need to remove it. Nasty thing, it is. Fortunately, Mr Smith's condition, although precarious and delicate, is not life threatening," he said, turning to organise his things.

"I am so sorry for this..." Darcy whispered, looking down to his bare chest where Elizabeth had her arms.

"It means you must marry me now," she said, shyly smiling at him.

“There. Let us start. Unfortunately, you will need to wait for a while before wielding a sword again, young man. For now, I suggest you firmly hold onto your wife. This will not be pleasant. Bite this,” he said, giving Darcy his handkerchief. “It will help you afterwards. Now, Mrs Smith... you do not look very comfortable. Perhaps Mr Brown could help you—”

“No,” Elizabeth interrupted. “I mean, I can hold my husband, Doctor. Do not worry about me.”

“Very well then. Mr Brown, you can hold Mr Smith’s legs. It seems the laudanum is already working.”

Darcy bit the handkerchief as his mind became foggy. His head was resting against Elizabeth’s chest, her discreet scent of lavender and rose filled his nostrils, while she held him in her arms, her fast breathing caressing his skin. If his head could go a little further down, his face would be exactly over her breasts—

Darcy gasped. His inappropriate thoughts were cut short by a sharp pain.

“Easy there, Mr Smith! Mrs Smith, please keep his head down. You are a very lucky man,” Dr Hayford continued. “Your wife took good care of you. She did an excellent job staunching the bleeding. I say, what a task. The shot was very close to an important vein between your neck and shoulder. Had the wound been a bit lower, we would not be talking right now.”

After a few minutes the doctor looked up at Brown. “Mr Brown, would you mind holding this for me? Thank you,” he said, fetching some new instruments from his bag. Elizabeth glanced at Brown, just to see his narrowed eyes on her; eyes of malice and evil. Brown was enjoying all he was seeing.

The doctor looked down at Elizabeth. “How are you doing, Mrs Smith? Although

your husband is not completely awake, he is feeling a lot of pain, so I need you to keep holding his arms. I have finished cleaning, and now I will start stitching the wound.”

During the procedure, Dr Hayford kept talking and asking questions, and Elizabeth was glad for it. It distracted her from what was happening. The distress of holding Mr Darcy in that way, hearing each one of his moans as the needle pierced his flesh, pressing his sweaty body against her, was almost unbearable. Elizabeth was sure she would die if the doctor did not end it soon.

“I am almost finished... some more bandages here... Can you lift his arm a little? Yes. Done.”

After the job was concluded, the doctor asked them to carefully put Darcy back, rearranging the pillows below his head to keep it higher, drying the sweat from his face, and covering him with the blanket.

“I must warn you, my dear. This kind of injury can cause him to develop a fever.” He stopped and checked his pocket watch. “Um... five o’clock. I can come back at nine this evening to check on him again.”

Giving Elizabeth all the extra information she needed to care for her husband and his possible fever, Dr Hayford left after collecting his things.

Before quitting the room, Brown turned to her. “Well done, miss. Even I could believe you were his wife. But your blushes were the best part. An innocent damsel... you’ll be perfect.” He laughed and approached her, his fowl breath turning her stomach. “I wonder how it feels to be hugged in that way by a soft body like yours. I almost wanted to be shot for it,” he said looking at her curves from head to toe. He sneered and left the room, locking the door after him.

Elizabeth shivered, and for the first time was concerned about what those ruffians might do to her.

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11th April 1816

The day continues...

After a long and tiring journey, Mr Bennet and Jane arrived at the parsonage later that afternoon. The servants informed them that Mr and Mrs Collins were at the manor house. The great lady had taken the news of her nephew's abduction far worse than expected, and Charlotte was helping with her care.

As soon as Richard was informed of their arrival, he did not waste any time and made haste to meet Elizabeth's father and try to appease the old man. Once he entered the room, Mr Bennet, who was standing by the window beside Jane, turned to him with a painful expression.

There was no one to perform the introductions, so Richard stepped forward. "Mr Bennet, my name is Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. I am Mr Darcy's cousin. I came as soon as I heard you had arrived."

Mr Bennet approached him, stretching out his hand. "Colonel Fitzwilliam, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am just sorry that our acquaintance is taking place under such sad circumstances."

Jane, who was dabbing her red eyes with her handkerchief, turned from the window and forced a weak smile. Richard was immediately struck by her uncommon beauty. The sad contrast between her deep green eyes and the red circles around them did not diminish her allurement in the slightest.

Mr Bennet did not miss the colonel's small lapse. "Colonel, please allow me to introduce my eldest daughter, Miss Jane Bennet."

"Miss Bennet..." Richard hesitated, lost in the beauty of her eyes, "it is a... pleasure to meet you. Unfortunately, as your father mentioned, in such sad circumstances." He cleared his throat and turned again to Mr Bennet, blinking a couple of times.

Had Mr Bennet not been so distressed by their current circumstances, he would be amused. Jane often had that effect on some men.

"I am at your service, Mr Bennet," Richard finally said. "If you have anything you would like to ask, please do so. I asked Mrs Collins to write to you, but I am not aware of how much was said."

"Would you mind sitting down, Colonel? Indeed, I have some questions, as she did not say much. If you could tell me more, I would be most obliged. But, please, do not let me keep you from your obligations. I am aware that, so far, you have taken it upon yourself to investigate what has happened."

"There is not much I can do for now, so I think it is better if I tell you all the facts from the beginning."

Within a few minutes, the whole story was told.

"We have the local constable conducting the investigation, but my father has also hired a private detective from the Bow Street Runners to help us. He arrived about an hour before you. They are currently making enquiries in the village, but I do not think I will have any further information before night-time."

"May I enquire... I mean, one of Charlotte's maids said you were not sure whose blood was on the handkerchiefs you found." Mr Bennet stopped and cleared his

throat. "I am sorry, Colonel, but Lizzy is very close to me and Jane, and I confess I am at a loss as to what to do or think. I never felt so desperate in my life... my poor child." He stood up and walked to the window, leaning his head forward.

Another sniff came from Jane. Richard turned to her and saw her silently dabbing her eyes again.

"Miss Bennet," Richard said gently. "I am very sorry for not being able to give you both better news. My aunt and I, we are devastated by this. All we can do for now is wait for news and support each other while I try to assist the investigators. I cannot imagine how my parents will break the news to Georgiana, Darcy's younger sister."

Richard felt tired. The pang in his chest at the thought that Darcy could be dead by now was much worse than anything he had experienced during the months spent on the battlefields of Spain. He looked down to his entwined fingers. "Darcy is not just my cousin, Mr Bennet, he is my best friend. His generous heart and care make him one of the best men I know. He did not deserve this."

This last statement took both Bennets by surprise. Obviously, the good colonel would praise his missing cousin, but something in his voice caused Mr Bennet to wonder how such a generous man could disgrace a boyhood acquaintance. "It is good to hear Mr Darcy is appreciated by his family. That he can be seen as a good man."

Richard did not miss the strange hint in Mr Bennet's remark and remembered his disturbing interaction with Elizabeth the day before. "Mr Bennet, I am sorry, but do you have any complaint against my cousin? I hope he has not offended you or your family in any way." He could not abide someone thinking ill of his cousin in a moment like that. It was now a matter of honour to clarify whatever had happened on Darcy's behalf.

"I am very sorry, Colonel, I spoke out of turn," Mr Bennet replied with regret. "But

as I have already incited your concern, I will just say that Mr Darcy did not make a good impression by the end of his short stay in Hertfordshire. He was never impolite — well, maybe once or twice — but, in general, his manners did not impress our local villagers. But again, I am sorry to bring this up; it was unnecessary, and I apologise.”

“Mr Bennet, I do not have much more to do until the investigators come back to report any news. So, if you do not mind, we could take this opportunity to elucidate any misunderstandings about my cousin’s behaviour. I believe I owe him this much, as he is not here to defend himself.”

Mr Bennet cursed himself for raising such an insensitive subject. On the other hand, Colonel Fitzwilliam was right, for now the only thing they could do was wait.

Resigned, Mr Bennet related to the colonel about Mr Darcy’s general behaviour, pointing out his and his friend’s discontentment with the neighbourhood, finishing with his poor behaviour towards an old friend without mentioning Wickham’s name.

As Mr Bennet continued with his story, Richard’s eyes widened. Something did not fit. When Mr Bennet finished, Richard was silent for a moment.

“When did Darcy first arrive in Hertfordshire?”

Jane answered the question. “It was the beginning of October, when we were having our local assembly. I was dancing with Mr Bingley and when the dance ended, he approached Mr Darcy and suggested he should dance with Lizzy. As you heard, he was rude to her. Mr Darcy did not dance or talk to anybody else, apart from Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.”

Miss Bennet’s story not only gave Richard a full understanding of his cousin’s behaviour; it also explained why the Bennet family had good reasons to dislike him.

Richard knew Bingley was no more than a fickle man, but what happened to Darcy?

“Our interaction was somehow... disappointing. There were other inconvenient things to consider,” Darcy had said.

Richard turned and observed Miss Bennet’s dejected countenance. Perhaps it was the sad tale about his cousin’s lack of manners, or perhaps the disgust against Bingley’s attitude before leaving the area, or even the thought of what a fool Bingley had been to leave someone like Miss Bennet behind. It did not matter. Her sniffs and tears stirred something inside him that he had not felt for quite some time. A strong urge to take her hand and offer her some comfort surprised him, and he coughed to alleviate the sensation.

“I am sorry for their lack of manners and consideration,” Richard said at last. “Indeed, this is not what one would expect from new friends. But Mr Bennet, you also mentioned that my cousin had mistreated an old friend. Who is this person?”

Father and daughter exchanged quick glances, but they had no other option now than to clarify everything to the colonel.

“Well,” Mr Bennet began uncomfortably. “During the time Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley were in Hertfordshire, the militia came to camp there, and we had the opportunity to make a new acquaintance with someone that I believe is also known to you, as he hails from the northern area of Derbyshire. A Mr Wickham? He became a regular visitor in our house, and on one occasion he told Elizabeth how... well, how your cousin had denied him something Mr Darcy’s father have left him on his testament. This was quite shocking for everyone—”

“Mr Bennet, I am sorry for interrupting you. But before you go any further, I need to defend my cousin and unmask Wickham’s lies.” Richard’s tone was grave.

Asking for their discretion, Richard disclosed of all of the facts as they really occurred, alarming not just Mr Bennet, but especially Jane, as she knew her sister's dislike for Mr Darcy was partially based on Mr Wickham's accounts.

"Now that you mention it, Colonel," Mr Bennet said thoughtfully, "I can tell you that I found Mr Wickham's behaviour quite extraordinary. He waited until Mr Darcy had gone from the neighbourhood to spread his story. Now it all makes sense," he murmured, lost in his thoughts. "I heard reports that some of the shop owners were quite angry with Mr Wickham for not paying them in time. Apparently, Mr Wickham left town, and the militia, without honouring his debts. Of course, I did not give it too much attention, but now it all makes sense. I wonder..."

Richard looked back to Jane, and she shrugged without saying anything.

"Mr Bennet, is there something else?"

"Oh, yes, sorry. Yes, yes, quite extraordinary indeed," Mr Bennet continued. "Colonel, now I can see that some of the reports from my fellow companions in the village also make sense. They told me, not long ago, that Mr Wickham had left the militia, fleeing from some of his own comrades after a card game. Apparently, accordingly to Lieutenant Denny, one of the men had sworn to kill Wickham, after punching him in the face, if he had not paid the money by the end of the month. And that was... February. We have not seen Mr Wickham since then. I must admit, I had forgotten all about it."

Richard frowned. "You said he had his life threatened by one of his fellows before fleeing from Meryton? That is very interesting indeed."

After a few minutes of silence, Richard and Mr Bennet looked at each other, and frowned at the same time.

“Colonel,” Jane called, bringing her hand to her chest. “Do you think it could be possible that Mr Wickham is in some way... involved in this kidnap?”

Mr Bennet and Richard exchanged glances again, nodding. They had already considered that possibility.

“Well,” Jane said, “at least we know he would not hurt Elizabeth; they were friends for some time. He would not, would he?”

Richard scowled, averting his eyes from her. “I am sorry, Miss Bennet, but I would not count on it. Wickham is a not a murderer, but I know he would be capable of anything else, especially considering the company he can arrange. If he believes his life is in danger, he would not spare any sordid method to obtain what he needs. After he left Lampton, we started hearing horrible stories about his gambling habit, and some ladies... mistreatments. I am very sorry.”

The despair that his words brought, not just to Jane but also to her father, squeezed his heart, but he could not feed them with empty hopes.

Yet, not everything was hopeless; a thought crossed his mind. “Miss Bennet, Mr Bennet,” Richard said, standing up and looking directly at Jane. “Please have courage. If Wickham is somehow involved in this, perhaps it could make things easier for us. I believe I have a way to locate him. I will do everything in my power to find them. You have my word. For now, it is time for me to leave. I will write to my father straight away and ask him to notify the London Magistrates’ Court. After all, being the son of an earl must be useful for something.”

“Oh, is your father an earl, Colonel?” Mr Bennet asked surprised.

“Yes, Mr Bennet. My father is the Earl of Matlock. I am confident that after being informed of all the details, he will use all his connections to help us. He has important

friends in the upper hierarchy of the Magistrates' Court, Parliament and the army. I bid you a good afternoon and please, do not hesitate to contact me if you have any concerns. Goodbye.”

~ ? ~

Elizabeth slept in the chair. It had not been her intention, but she was more tired than she imagined. After hours valiantly fighting the growing fever Darcy developed, she was not thinking anymore; just carrying wetted towels from one side to the other as in a trance, until she had finally collapsed.

In that moment, the door opened again. Dr Hayford entered the room and was taken aback by Elizabeth's appearance. She was still wearing the same dirty clothes of earlier; her hair was down and her face pale, and dark circles surrounded her eyes.

“Good God, Mrs Smith,” Dr Hayford said in alarm. “What do you think you are doing? If you faint, who is going to look after your husband? I demand you stop everything immediately and look after yourself.”

If she was not so tired, she would be amused by the doctor's concern for her appearance, when her entire condition was so much worse.

Brown, as it seemed, had again anticipated the situation, entering the room with a trunk in his hands. “I am so sorry.” His voice could have deceived even her, had she not witnessed with her own eyes what that wicked man was capable of. “I forgot to bring your trunk upstairs before, Mrs Smith,” he said, putting the trunk on the floor, looking at her.

Elizabeth understood that he was expecting her to approach him. When she was close enough, he said, “Don't make yourself too comfortable. I've arranged some clothes for you and for him.” He gave her body a disgusted look. “Go to the next room and

make yourself presentable.”

Opening the trunk, Elizabeth found some old gowns. She got one closest to her size and did as he said. The room behind the small door was a kind of dressing/pot room. There was some lukewarm water in a bowl. She assumed there must be a servant’s entrance somewhere, as she did not recall anyone entering the room to bring the water.

She remembered Brown’s eyes examining her before and locked the door; a shiver ran down her spine. Disgusting man. She removed her dirty dress and washed herself. While she was drying, a knock on the door startled her.

“Mrs Smith,” came the voice of the doctor, “we are going to wash your husband and redress him with clean clothes.”

The mere thought of being forced to help them to completely undress and wash Mr Darcy filled her with panic; she would not be able to cope with that. She closed her eyes and prayed.

“But we need some of the towels that are in there,” the doctor added.

She looked at the small cupboard and saw the towels and sighed loudly in relief. “Of course, Doctor, just give me a moment, please.” She wrapped herself and gave the towels to him.

Once she finished drying and dressing herself, she sat on the floor, hoping they would finish their task before she returned. After what she thought was enough time, she peeked into the room to be pleasantly surprised by Mr Darcy’s refreshed appearance. It was good to see him clean and comfortable again.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“You are very welcome, Mrs Smith,” he replied. “I just want to remind you to keep watch. It is quite likely his fever will last the whole night, but if we are fortunate enough, he will be better by morning.”

Dr Hayford started gathering his own things and was about to leave, when he looked back at Elizabeth. “My dear, I know your appetite is probably not the best at such a moment, but you need to eat something. Have courage,” he said looking into her eyes. “Everything will be fine.” Turning to Brown, he added, “I know you are short of servants here, Mr Brown, but I urge you to try to keep these two well fed. Mrs Smith needs all her strength while looking after her husband. I am sure you understand.”

He walked to the door and without looking behind, he left saying, “I will see you in the morning, at first light. Have a good night.”

Elizabeth remained where she was as Brown approached her. “I hope you’re worthy of our efforts,” he said with disdain before leaving.

She sat beside Mr Darcy and examined him. His hair was wet, and his expensive clothes were now replaced by much simpler, but clean, ones. Despite his improved appearance, he did not seem to be feeling better. The expression of pain on his face concerned her.

Some minutes later, Elizabeth heard the door opening again. The same young man who had brought the water earlier entered carrying a tray with some food. He put down the tray and left without a word or even a glance in her direction.

The food was not appealing but considering she had only eaten a piece of bread many hours ago, she said grace and ate some of the stew with bread. The tea was very weak and there was no milk or sugar, but at least it was hot, and she took comfort from it.

She sat beside Mr Darcy and started spooning some tea into his mouth.

It would be a long night.

~ ? ~

That night, the local constable, Mr Brand, and Mr Duncan the detective sent from the Bow Street Runners, entered the library where Richard was sealing some letters.

“What news, gentlemen? I am in need of good news,” Richard said, standing up.

“Colonel, indeed, we ’ave some news. However, whether it’s good is yet to be determined,” Mr Duncan said, Richard recognising his strong accent from the east area of London. “In our investigation, we questioned every single soul in the village, includin’ the children. We also visited some of the tenants’ houses and after many hours, our efforts were at last rewarded. We came across a blacksmith, who mentioned his younger son, earlier this morning, had come back ’ome with an extraordinary story about guns and criminals and people bein’ dragged into an old equipage. The man didn’t give his son too much attention, apparently the boy’s known for ’aving a vivid imagination, and the subject was dropped. We went to talk to the boy, but he was silent as a grave. He won’t talk to us.”

Richard scowled. “Why would the boy not talk to you?”

“He told his father that he was afraid we were the criminals who had taken the people he saw earlier,” replied Mr Brand, “and that we had come back to take him as well. Apparently, Mr Duncan’s accent was partially responsible for that,” he added, glancing at Mr Duncan.

Richard sighed. By this account, another person was involved, and quite likely, someone from London.

There was not much they could do without listening to the boy.

Pacing around the room, Richard rubbed his hand on his chin, looking at the two men. Then, he paused, his face softening. "I think I can help you with that." He rang the bell, ordered a carriage to be prepared and went to change into his uniform.

It did not take long for the three men to be heading towards the parsonage. After the introductions, Richard explained, "Mr Bennet, Miss Bennet, we have some news and a request to make."

"Yes, yes, of course," Mr Bennet promptly agreed. "Now, tell us the news, Colonel. My heart is not as strong as it used to be, and this expectation is killing me."

Richard informed them of the recent news about the boy. "As you can see, Miss Bennet, we have a delicate situation, but I believe you can help us."

"Of course, Colonel. What can I do?"

"I thought the boy would be more comfortable talking to someone who was not so threatening in his eyes," Richard explained. "And I think you would be the perfect choice. Would you come with us to talk to the boy, Miss Bennet?"

Jane did not think twice. "Of course. Just give me a moment to grab my pelisse and bonnet," she said, hastily rising to fetch her things.

Once they arrived at the blacksmith's cottage, Richard asked the three gentlemen to stay in the carriage, while he and Miss Bennet talked to the boy.

He was correct in this strategy. The boy, who looked quite frightened when he heard another carriage approaching, relaxed when he saw Miss Bennet and an illustrious member of His Majesty's Army in full regimentals entering his house.

While Richard thanked the blacksmith for receiving them, Jane was already inviting the boy to sit with her. The boy, quite in awe of Jane's beauty, gladly complied.

"What is your name?" Jane asked gently.

"Tommy, ma'am," the boy replied. He paused, then added, "You look like an angel."

Jane gave him a weak smile but was too anxious to appreciate the compliment. "Tommy, I heard you saw something this morning, and I need you to tell me everything about it. You know, the lady they took..." Jane paused, taking a deep breath. "She is my beloved sister and I am very concerned for her safety. We need to find her as soon as possible, and I believe you could help us. Would you help me, Tommy, to find my sister, please?"

Tommy, mesmerised by her sweetness, nodded vigorously. "I'll tell you what I saw, ma'am, and I'm glad I can help."

Tommy then began to relate his extraordinary story.

"I woke up very early, as I always do. I needed to fetch water for Da's workshop. I have a big bucket and I go to a small brook on the way to the big house, you know, where the great lady lives. I was on my way, when I saw an old carriage with two men and another one riding a horse. I didn't know them and was curious about who they could be. Then I followed them, hiding behind the trees." Tommy stopped and looked up at his father with some guilt in his eyes. His father just nodded in encouragement.

"They stopped," the boy continued, "and were looking ahead of them at a man who was lying down against a tree, and I saw a lady coming towards him very fast. She woke him and he stood up and they were talking, but then I saw one of the men coming from behind the man, the one who was there resting. That bad man hit him on

the head with a big branch.”

Jane heard Richard gasping behind her and she squeezed the boy’s hand. “Yes, Tommy, what happened next?”

“The man fell on his knees and the two other men were holding him. I think they were trying to tie him up, and when the lady tried to help him, the other man, the one riding alone... Ah! Did I tell you they all had masks?” Tommy was now very excited with his story. “He tried to hold the lady, but she fought him and pulled his mask off. She was very brave, your sister, ma’am. I don’t think they were happy, so one of the men grabbed a pistol! A pistol, sir! Like the one we see in the papers, about the war, and he shot at her—”

Jane gasped in horror, bringing both her hands to her face while tears found their way down her cheeks.

Before Richard knew what he was doing, he sat beside her, bringing her into a tight embrace. She rested her head on his chest and sobbed.

“They shot her, Colonel,” she cried. “They shot my poor sister.”

“No, ma’am! They did not shoot the lady. The man saved her.” Tommy, now on his feet, was speaking as loudly as possible.

Both Jane and Richard looked at Tommy in surprise.

Richard let go of Jane, stood up and gently placed his hands on Tommy’s shoulder, kneeling in front of him. “Which man saved her?”

“The man who was on his knees. He freed himself and stood up in front of the pistol. He was the one who was shot,” Tommy said, quite satisfied, looking at Jane as if

waiting for her to be happy as well.

But Jane's eyes were on the colonel. He let go of the boy, slowly moving his tight fists down to his side. He closed his eyes, inhaling sharply.

It was now Jane's turn to act impulsively. She stood up and gently pulled Richard to sit beside her, taking his hand in hers. "What happened then, Tommy?" she whispered, keeping her eyes on Richard's strained face.

"Well, he fell on the floor, ma'am, and the lady, your sister, she was crying a lot... I am sorry, sir." Tommy stopped again, seeing the agony in the colonel's face.

Richard took another deep breath. "Is there anything else, Tommy?"

Tommy fidgeted on his feet, squeezing one hand over the other. "Yes, sir." He looked back at Jane. "One of the men came and... hit the lady... in her face... and she fell. The bad men took both of them and put them in the carriage and went away."

A long silence filled the room.

Richard raised his gaze and found Jane's eyes filled with despair. He looked down to where their hands were clutched together.

"I am sorry, sir," Tommy said again, lowering his eyes.

Tommy felt his father's arm around him, but he did not say anything else.

"Thank you, Tommy," Richard finally said, standing up. "But I have one more question, and I want you to think very hard before answering it. Why do you think they tried to shoot the lady? What did she do to deserve being shot?"

Tommy scowled as he concentrated on the colonel's question; his eyes were darting around the room, as if he was reliving what he had seen. "The man tried to shoot her after she... yes, after she pulled the mask from the other man who was holding her."

"Did she look surprised when she saw who the man was?" Jane asked, also standing.

Tommy's face illuminated. "Yes, ma'am, she did! She was quite surprised when she saw him. And I am sure the man was a gentleman. He had very fine clothes, ma'am, but his face was strange... scary."

Jane and Richard looked at each other again. Wickham was, after all, involved in Mr Darcy and Elizabeth's kidnap.

Jane turned to Tommy. "Thank you very much for your help, Tommy," she said, taking his small face in her hands, kissing him on the forehead. "You are a very brave boy. "

They made their farewell and left, but Tommy ran after them. "Will they be safe, ma'am?" he asked, his heart in his voice. "Will you be able to find them, to find your sister, I mean?"

Jane's eyes were filled with tears again as she stroked the boy's cheek. "I hope so, Tommy. I hope so."

A silent sob escaped her lips, and she felt Richard's hand on her shoulder. He offered her a handkerchief and his arm and escorted her back to the carriage.

She felt Richard's hand over hers and lifted her eyes to him. He looked tired. "Courage, Miss Bennet. Keep your strength. We are going to find them."

She had no words. What else could be said? She put her other hand on top of his,

gently squeezing it, and nodded.

As soon as they arrived at the carriage, Jane threw herself into her father's arms. "Oh, Papa. It was Mr Darcy's blood. They shot him then they hit Elizabeth and took them both."

It took Mr Bennet some time to grasp what Jane was saying. "Is it true, Colonel?" he asked in a trembling voice. "Did they shoot Mr Darcy? Did those cowards hit... and take my girl?"

Richard nodded. He did not have words to explain anything else and lowered his head.

They sat in silence on their journey back to the manor house; only the sound of the wheels on the hard ground and Miss Bennet's quiet sobs could be heard.

Later, in his chamber, Richard made his prayers and hoped that the next day would bring better news, for he had decided to visit an old acquaintance.

~ ? ~

The room was dark and cold, the only light a flickering flame of an almost extinguished candle. Elizabeth opened her eyes, awakened by a weak noise.

She looked around and realised she was lying on the bed. After having eaten the frugal meal and helping Mr Darcy to drink at least a cup of tea, she had surrendered herself to exhaustion. This time, however, she had lain down on the large bed as far away as possible from Mr Darcy, as if it could make any difference to her already settled disgrace.

Then she heard the noise again.

“Oh, William!”

His face was hidden in the shadows, but a simple touch was enough to make her heart pound; he was burning with fever.

Chastising herself for having slept, she repeated her afternoon routine, pressing wet pieces of cloth on his head. Remembering his pocket watch, she had retrieved from the pile of dirty clothes, she checked the time. It was almost the four in the morning. It would be two to three hours before Dr Hayford’s return.

“Mother?” Darcy said, startling her.

She frowned, confused. “No, William, it is me, Elizabeth.”

“Mother, where are you?” he asked again, more agitated.

Elizabeth did not know what to do as he kept calling for his mother. The sadness in his weak voice broke her heart. She remembered what he had written in his letter, that his mother had died when Georgiana was born.

An idea crossed her mind when he called again. “Yes, William. I am here, beside you,” she said, taking his hand.

Darcy opened his eyes and looked at her, but he seemed to be in another place. “I did not... I did not want... to leave you, Mother.”

“Oh, William. What are you saying?”

“I did not want to leave you. You... were so weak... I knew you were not well, but Father sent me away... back to school... holiday was over. When I came back home, you were not there. You were gone... Forgive me, Mother...”

“Oh, William...” She could not fathom the pain he must have felt returning home and not finding his mother there; just a cold stone on the ground.

That information added to all she had learnt about his sense of duty. His mother's death and Georgiana's almost elopement were heavy burdens he had been carrying.

With no hesitation, Elizabeth squeezed his hand. “William,” she whispered in his ear. “It was not your fault, my dearest. I never doubted you loved me as much as I loved you.” She remembered a passage from the Bible. “Do not fret for me. I am well. And we are going to see each other again. Now rest, my dear. Rest and be well.”

Darcy's ragged panting slowed down and soon he was breathing normally again. Elizabeth gently caressed his face until he fell asleep, preparing herself for the labouring hours ahead of her.

12th April 1816

It was still early, but Wickham was already cleaning his pistol, compelled by a fear that had become his closest companion. Somebody knocked on his door. Startled, he stood up slowly, approached the door and waited.

“Who is it?” he finally called out.

A bored but familiar female voice replied, “George, it is me. There is a boy downstairs. He says he has a message from a Mr Brown.”

Wickham opened the door quickly. “Ah! Clarice.” He pulled the woman inside and looked down both sides of the corridor, closing the door behind him. Brown and his messenger could go hang. He would use this opportunity to persuade Clarice to give him another chance.

“Why did you take so long to come to my bedroom? I have not seen you since I arrived yesterday.” His dark eyes perused the woman from her face all the way down to her bosom, his arms moving around her waist, bringing her closer to him.

In a blink of an eye, she stepped out of his reach and walked to the other side of the bedroom. “I told you, don’t put your paws on me ever again,” she said between gritted teeth.

“I am sorry, my love. I forgot myself,” he said in a smooth voice. “But it always happens when I am far away from you for a long time. I cannot wait for us to be together again.”

Clarice shook her head. "Forget about it. I don't want anything to do with you, especially now." She looked at his face with disgust. "What happened to your face? Have you stuck your head inside a beehive? Oh, don't bother. I don't care. Just stay away from me."

The look of repugnance on her face would have quenched a burning log. He went to look at the mirror for the hundredth time since he had arrived at that lodge where Clarice was now working. A purple, swollen eye, bruised cheeks and a nasty cut at one corner of his mouth disfigured his once pleasant countenance. Damn you, Brown . At least he still had all his teeth.

After the frustrating attempt to seduce Georgiana Darcy, Wickham's life had become unbearable. His dalliance with the woman in front of him had suffered a sudden death when she realised he had not been faithful to her. Later, he had finally found someone with class, Lady Margaret. It had not mattered she was almost a decade older than him; she had indulged his every desire.

But his newfound luck was short lived. His late source of pleasure and money had recently died. Once again, he had become a victim of injustice, forced to humiliate himself and ask for Clarice's help. In the end, she agreed to help, arranging a room for him to stay for a couple of days, but nothing else. In return, she had demanded he would never trouble her again.

"Very well. Send him up. I will see him here; it is safer," Wickham said exasperated, still looking at his reflection.

Without another word, Clarice left the room. Some minutes later, the boy was upstairs.

"Sir, Mr Brown sent you a message. He said to wait for a reply."

Wickham snatched the piece of paper and walked to the window to read it. The message made his blood boil. He raised his head and looked through the dirty glass panes with rage in his eyes. How low had he fallen to be associated with miscreants like Brown? He crushed the paper, and with trembling hands missed the intended pouch, letting it fall on the floor.

Miss Elizabeth was a decent lady; she did not deserve this. He would have been happy to take her as his wife, had he more time to woo her. After telling her of his misfortunes, he had been forced to leave the area. Unfortunately for her, his own life was on the sharp edge of a sword. Between the two of them, he would choose himself.

Wickham tried to cheer himself with the prospect of moving to America and starting a new life, far away from everything and everyone who had treated him with so much disrespect.

He sighed, looking through the window at that miserable part of London. Even this false hope could not lighten his mood. He would never be able to leave England unless he could stay alive and remain far away from Brown's murderous hands, and the hangman's noose.

Wickham fetched another piece of paper and scribbled his answer, giving it to the boy and sending him away. He checked his watch and groaned. He still had sometime. Grabbing his things, he went downstairs.

"Mrs Younge, I am going out," Wickham said walking to the door.

"May I ask where you are going?"

"I am going to sell my soul to the devil."

~ ? ~

The rosy light coming through the window announced the new day. With a sigh of relief, Elizabeth rubbed her forehead, exhausted. Since Darcy called for his mother, burning in fever, she had been putting cold wet pieces of cloth on his head and chest, as the doctor had instructed her. Fortunately, his fever had broken some time earlier. Knowing he was out of danger, she had lain down on the bed beside him and slept.

She woke up again with a strange sound, a chuckle this time. Opening her eyes, she saw Darcy's gaze on her.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," he said gently, smiling. "I did not mean to wake you. I am sorry."

"Good morning, William," she greeted back, rubbing her eyes, sitting up. "May I enquire what is so funny?"

He kept his smile. "You talk in your sleep. "

Her mouth fell opened. "I do not think this is the kind of comment a single gentleman should make to a lady." Then she frowned. "What did I say?"

Darcy could not hold his laughter anymore, immediately regretting it. Taking a deep breath, and still struggling to contain his amusement, he said in a higher pitch tone, "Please put this bonnet away, it is... monstrous."

She smiled at his boyish behaviour. His features were so handsome when he was relaxed. The arrogant and haughty man that she once believed him to be was definitely gone.

"Well," she said embarking in his jest, "If that is the case, I believe it was not just a

mere dream but a nightmare. No respectable lady wants to be seen using such an unfashionable item.”

The light-hearted moment was interrupted by a sound at the door. Elizabeth stepped out of the bed as Dr Hayford and Brown were bidding them good morning.

“Well, well, what do we have here today?” Dr Hayford remarked. “It seems our young man has had a good night’s sleep, have you not, sir? You look much better today.” He smiled and placed his hand on his patient’s forehead. “Yes, capital. No fever. Now, let us see this wound. Sorry, sir, it may sting a bit,” the doctor added quietly, pulling the bandage from Darcy’s wound.

Darcy shut his eyes, pressing his lips together. Perhaps the old, proud Mr Darcy was not completely gone, after all.

Elizabeth’s thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a curious Mr Brown attentively looking at the doctor’s work.

“The wound is healing splendidly, much better than I would expect. Mrs Smith, you have been an excellent nurse,” the doctor said without raising his eyes.

“If Mr Smith is so much improved, perhaps they could join us in the dining area,” Brown said.

Elizabeth widened her eyes. What was the man about now?

“Oh, no,” said Dr Hayford. “Good gracious. Although Mr Smith is much better, going up and down those stairs is still beyond his abilities for now. Waiting a couple more days would be preferable. It would be better if you could keep sending their meals upstairs for now.”

Elizabeth sighed in relief and wondered if the doctor was been too precautions for their benefit.

After the doctor had changed the bandages, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “My dear, why do you not take advantage of the doctor’s presence and go and refresh yourself?”

She understood his meaning. “If the doctor agrees.”

Without taking his eyes from his work, Dr Hayford gave his assent with a slight movement of his head and hand. “Of course. Go my dear.”

To Elizabeth’s surprise, the bowl in the dressing room was full again with fresh water and the chamber pot, which she had used during the night, was empty. She blushed at the thought of Mr Darcy having his needs attended by the doctor, just behind the door. For this very reason, she took her time. When she thought it was safe to go back, she opened the door, peeking outside. Thankfully, they had already finished.

“Well, my dear Mrs Smith,” said Dr Hayford. “It seems your husband is on his way to a full recovery. I will come back tonight. Have a good day.”

Before leaving the room, he gave Elizabeth a meaningful look. “Everything will be well, my dear. I promise you.”

After closing the entrance door behind the doctor, Brown went to the kitchen and asked the servant to take some food upstairs. He approached Ned, who was sitting at the table, drinking a cup of tea while cleaning his pistol. Brown served himself the same and sat in front of him.

An ugly grimace distorted Brown’s face as he spat the tea back into the cup. “Heaven and ’ell, Ned. What are you trying to do, kill us all? This tea is ’orrible.”

“If it’s so bad, why don’t you prepare some yourself?” Ned roared back, suspiciously pointing the pistol he had been cleaning in Brown’s direction.

“Whoa! Put that thing down,” Brown said looking at the pistol. “Doctor said our dandy will recover. Perhaps tomorrow we can take him away from ’ere.”

Ned chuckled. “Ah! What an idiot, that doctor.”

“Yeah,” Brown replied, sneering. “The good doctor is an idiot, blind as a bat to what’s ’appening around him. He’s quite taken by the girl, always reassuring her that her husband will be fine in no time. He has even taken upon himself to change the man’s clothes, and help him to use the chamber pot, just to avoid the good lady from being overtired!”

“And the lady, what are we going to do with her? We can’t take her with us, can we?”

“We won’t,” Brown replied, a sneer illuminating his wrinkled face. “I sent word to Wickham and told him to make the necessary arrangements for her. By now, he must have received the message and be doing exactly that... If he wants to live, of course.”

~ ? ~

Doctor Hayford’s amiable countenance turned into a deep frown as he entered his carriage.

“So, Doctor. Was your first impression confirmed?” a man in the dark corner of the carriage asked. “Was the lady really asking for help?”

The doctor hit the carriage roof and they started moving. He looked up to the house. “Yes, Constable. As I said yesterday, it is not possible for a gun to cause such a wound from the distance they have described. No, no. It was a point-blank shot. I

have seen plenty of wounds in the battlefield to be sure of it. Something about the angle does not fit. And the story about hunting? We are not even in season. Unfortunately, I cannot fathom the real reason. What I am sure of, however, is that the pair up there is in real trouble. I am quite sure they are not even married.”

“Why do you say that?”

“After spending some time with them in that room, I realised the lady — Mrs Smith, as she calls herself, although I do not believe that is her real name — cannot be married to the man, even if she is treating him with real care. Betrothed, would suit the situation better. Yesterday, when I took his shirt off, she was blushing like a piece of burning coal. Her relief was immediate when I asked her to go to the adjoining room to refresh herself as we changed the man’s clothes. It was unmistakable. And this morning, the young man suggested the very same thing again. He needed to use the chamber pot. What a situation.”

“Why do you think they are being kept here?”

“I can only suspect that the man was taken against his will. Perhaps kidnapped. I thought about that when I noticed he had a signet ring, which suggests he is from a noble or wealthy family. And the ‘friend’, Mr Brown... I am quite sure that Brown and Smith are false names, they are too common, easy to disguise... I am not sure, however, if Mr Wickham is aware of that...” The doctor was lost again in his own thoughts.

“Doctor,” the constable called.

“Oh, yes, yes. That man, Mr Brown, is always around while I attend the young man. He would not take his eyes off the lady either, as if watching her.”

“If that is the case, Doctor, we need to act fast. I will send an express to the London

Magistrates immediately asking if there is any request for a missing couple. Huxtable is there. When are you due to go back?"

"I told them I would return tonight. Do you think you will have a response by then?"

"I believe it is possible," said the constable thoughtfully. "In the meantime, I will have a man watch the house, so we do not lose them. I can only hope, if your suspicions are correct, that we have enough time to act."

~ ? ~

Richard woke up very early and asked for some food to be brought to his chamber, as he prepared for the day ahead. He was returning to London and had invited Mr and Miss Bennet to accompany him. The invitation had been sent first thing that morning. Miss Bennet would be an invaluable help with Georgiana.

Well, that, and his growing desire to be close to her.

He stopped in the middle of the room, his mind reviving the moment he had taken her in his arms. Her tearful eyes so full of pain had given him no other option. He had to do something. But what had surprised him was that she had done the same for him when he needed it. She had tried to comfort him; the soft touch of her hands soothed him as nothing else had done before. And now, he felt connected to her in a strange way.

His reverie was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was a message informing him that Mr Duncan had arrived and was ready to leave, and Mr Wilfred would be welcome to accompany him in his small carriage.

Finishing his breakfast, Richard rang the bell and asked Wilfred to help him to dress before leaving; he would wear his civilian clothes today.

Once ready, his thoughts returned to Miss Bennet. Jane . She was the most beautiful and kindest person he had ever met.

An old, nagging doubt came back to him.

Richard shook his head, dismissing the feeling, persuading himself that this sudden attraction to Miss Bennet was nothing more than a natural reaction of a distressed man to a beautiful and kind woman.

Sadness squeezed his chest and he sat on the bed.

Would he ever be able to think of Jane Bennet, or any other woman? As an army man, his allegiance was to his country and to his king. There was no space in his life for a wife. He could not marry and just leave — not without knowing if he could ever return. But who could foresee whether another dictator would rise? Wars, whatever the reason, were always around. No woman deserved to be abandoned, especially Miss Bennet. The kindness in her heart could easily turn into a bitter loneliness until the day she would be informed of his sad demise. Despite his small inheritance left to him by his grandmother, he was only a second son; he did not have the means to support a wife. In other words, he was doomed to a lonely and loveless life.

He thought about Bingley again. The only word coming out of his mouth was “fool” .

In any case, he could not be distracted while Darcy was still somewhere out there, hanging between life and death.

For now, his cousin’s recovery was his priority. He would think about his situation when these terrible affairs were resolved.

With both carriages loaded, Richard went to his aunt to say goodbye, and reassure her of his commitment, promising to keep her informed.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam. You will find Darcy, will you not?” Aunt Catherine pleaded with moist eyes.

“I shall do whatever is needed, Aunt. I promise.”

Mr and Miss Bennet were already waiting when Richard’s carriage arrived. He tried to avoid looking at Miss Bennet, but his rebellious eyes kept betraying him. He felt his heart tighten when he noticed the dark circles underneath her eyes.

There were no other words beyond their formal greeting as they boarded the carriage, and in a few minutes, they left for London.

“Mr Bennet, Miss Bennet, thank you for accompanying me. Apart for having the pleasure of your company, I believe Miss Bennet will again be an important help.”

Jane smiled and nodded. “I am happy to help with whatever I can, Colonel.”

At the sight of her smile, Richard stammered a bit at the beginning, but then explained how Darcy’s parents had died, leaving Georgiana in her brother’s care, ending with her almost elopement with Wickham.

“Miss Bennet, this is the reason I have asked you to come with me. I am convinced that despite the pain you are now suffering for your sister, you will be able to bring some comfort to Georgiana, especially when she learns about her brother’s injury and who was responsible for it.”

There was nothing else to say, so they kept silent. Mr Bennet soon fell asleep. The poor man was beside himself with worry.

As Richard observed the passing scenery, Jane took the opportunity to study him. Something about him had touched her heart, stirring something strangely deeper than

Mr Bingley had ever reached. The colonel was a tall man with a strong constitution. In her opinion, he was as handsome as Mr Darcy, if not more so when wearing his elegant uniform, despite some scars on his face. That, in fact, just added to his charm. Although his manly features were very attractive, it was his manners that had impressed her most. He was kind, open and honest. And in spite of his experience in war, he showed a vulnerability that spoke of a man of strong feelings; he had not lost the ability to love. But above all, she felt that he was a man who could be trusted and surprised herself by thinking she would do anything to see him smiling again.

That thought startled her.

How was that even possible? She had known him for no more than two days. She did not know what to think of it.

Richard noticed they were approaching London, and his expression darkened. "After stopping at my father's house, I am planning to visit Mrs Younge, one of Wickham's former paramours. She worked as Georgiana's lady companion before we realised it. I need to see if she can give us any information about his whereabouts."

Richard and his guests were received by red eyes and anxious faces. Introductions were performed and refreshments ordered. But he was not inclined to waste any time and quickly shared with his father his intentions to visit Mrs Younge. They decided that Lord Matlock, Mr Duncan and Mr Bennet would accompany him. Jane would remain in the house with Georgiana and his mother, Lady Madeleine.

Before leaving, Richard and Jane exchanged glances, and nodded to each other.

The four gentlemen left for a less noble area of the town. Only minutes separated Mayfair from their destination at St Giles. The carriage stopped in front of an alley, and they walked down a narrow path between old houses until the colonel stopped at one particular door. He rang the bell and waited.

“How did you know where she lived?” Lord Matlock asked his son.

“After last summer’s incident, I tracked down most of Wickham’s old acquaintances.”

In a few minutes, a beautiful young woman opened the door. Recognising Richard, she startled. “Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Mrs Younge, we meet again. You must remember my father, Lord Matlock. That is Mr Bennet, and this is Mr Duncan, a detective from the Magistrates’ Court of Bow Street, who is investigating a very delicate situation. I told them that you would be glad to assist us. Can we come in?”

With trembling hands, Mrs Younge showed them in, heading to a small parlour. She knew that a visit from the colonel and someone from the Magistrates’ Court was not a good sign, but the fact that the earl himself was there was even worse. She was petrified at the thought of what Wickham could possibly have done. Why else would they be here?

“Well, gentlemen, how can I be of assistance?”

“We are looking for a Mr Wickham, ma’am,” Mr Duncan started. “Do you know where we can find ’im?”

She swallowed hard, squeezing her hands together. “I’m sorry, but I cannot help you. I have not seen Mr Wickham since last summer. We took different paths since then.”

The gentlemen exchanged glances, and Richard nodded to Mr Duncan.

“Mrs Younge,” Mr Duncan said slowly, “We don’t have a minute to waste, so I’ll be quite direct, and then I’ll ask the question again. This time, I want you to think

carefully about how you're going to answer it." He looked at her for a moment to ensure she understood the meaning of his words. "Mr Wickham is a prime suspect in the kidnap of Miss Bennet and Mr Darcy, Lord Matlock's nephew. Mr Darcy was shot, and both of 'em were taken hostage yesterday morning, from Rosings Park, in Kent. I'm sure you know that kidnapping and attempted murder are both punishable by death, not only for the perpetrators but also for those somehow involved in the crime. I'd be very happy if you could 'elp us to locate Mr Wickham." Seeing the panic growing in her eyes, he added, "And I would be very grateful, of course, to anyone who could 'elp us to find these criminals and bring them to the justice."

Mr Duncan's words had the desired effect. Mrs Younge brought a hand up to her chest, as the words left her mouth. "It cannot be. "

"Mrs Younge, please, we need to find him as soon as possible," Richard intervened. "If you help us to find him, I am sure the magistrate can find a way to mitigate your share in this sordid plan."

"Do you swear I won't be hanged?" she asked, suddenly taken by panic. "I didn't know any of this."

"I give you my word, Mrs Younge. I will guarantee your personal well-being during the whole trial. You can count on it."

She gave the gentlemen one last look, then said, "Yesterday, the miscreant came to me again, his face disfigured as if he had brawled with a big boar and lost, saying he needed my help; that he was going to obtain some money and would pay me later. I told him he could go back to the same hole he had come from, and that I didn't want anything to do with him ever again. He begged and asked me to provide him with at least a room, just for a couple of days, and after that he would leave." She lowered her eyes. "I know I was being na?ve to believe him, but I agreed. I just... I mean, I didn't know he was... in such a trouble."

“Is he here now?” Richard asked.

“No. He went out this morning and didn’t say whether he would return today. He did not bring any personal belongings.”

“You said something about his appearance. What happened?” Richard asked.

“I believe he had been beaten, quite badly actually.”

Richard remembered Tommy’s comment about the man’s face.

“Did he say where he was going?” Mr Bennet addressed her for the first time, squeezing his hat.

“Yes... well, no... He received a message from a Mr Brown and soon after sending his reply, he left. When I asked him where he was going, he said he was going ‘to sell his soul to the devil’. I swear that was what he said.”

The gentlemen looked at each other. Mr Duncan turned to her again. “I’d like to see his bedroom. Please, take us there.”

Fortunately, the lodging was quite empty, and Mrs Younge was quick in finding the keys, asking them to follow her upstairs. After opening the door, the gentlemen entered the room and started looking everywhere.

It did not take long for Mr Bennet to find a crushed piece of paper on the floor and read it. He lost his balance, needing Richard’s assistance to reach a chair.

“Mr Bennet? What is it?” Richard asked, taking the paper from Mr Bennet’s trembling hands.

11th April

Wickham,

Doctor came today and said the dandy will recover. It was a wound flesh. I believe tomorrow we'll be able to proceed with our plans, but we can't keep the lass.

I want you to meet Digory tomorrow, at noon, in Seven Dial. He'll be waiting for you in front of the bookshop. Do as he says. I own those pirates some money and a lady of quality like this one is what they are paying for. It can cover most of your debts as well, so be careful.

And don't worry. He'll recognise you.

I expect you tomorrow.

Brown

Richard's feelings were overwhelming. On one hand, he was relieved to know that Darcy had survived and was under the care of a doctor, whoever he was; on the other, the message was unmistakable. They were planning to sell Elizabeth to someone, and that was not a very comforting thought. Wickham must be really desperate.

Richard showed the message to his father and Mr Duncan. "It is dated yesterday," he said. "That is probably why Wickham left this morning. He was going to meet this man."

Taking his pocket watch, Richard saw the time. Almost two o'clock. "It is too late to follow him there. By this time, he could be anywhere."

"Good Lord!" Lord Matlock said, raising his hand to his head and rubbing it. "I never

imagined those kidnappings were related to what... human trade? We were believing, as it had been in the past, that some passionate young men were behind all this, encouraging others to do the same. But pirates? Are we seeing a revival of what happened here by the hands of the Ottomans? Where are they taking those young ladies? Gentlemen, we need to stop it.”

“Well, at least we know that both of ’em are alive. I’m sorry, Mr Bennet, but try to focus on that. I need to go now.” Mr Duncan walked towards the door then turned to look over his shoulder. “I need to send the news of this Digory and his possible activity to the officers investigating those disappearances. See you later, gentlemen.”

Richard cursed Wickham under his breath. If the devil was buying that miscreant’s soul, he would make sure that Wickham would meet with his new master as soon as possible.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

The three men left the lodge, and after another silent journey, they reached Lord Matlock's residence. Mr Bennet did not look well, and as soon as they entered the house, Richard invited him to a guest room, seeing personally to his comfort. He offered him some brandy, which Mr Bennet gladly accepted, despite the early hour; it seemed the old man needed something strong to calm his nerves.

In his own chamber, Richard succumbed to his bed and brought both hands to his face. He would need all his strength before facing Miss Bennet with such dreadful news. Mr Bennet could not be trusted with that task now. The man was devastated and by the amount of brandy he had gulped, he would probably be asleep.

After washing and changing into fresh clothes, Richard went to Mr Bennet's chamber and found the man sleeping in his bed.

He went downstairs. As soon as he stepped into the drawing room, three pairs of expectant eyes turned to him .

"Son, your father has gone to conclude some 'unfinished business', refusing to give us any further detail," Lady Madeleine said with a frustrated expression. "He said you would tell us what happened."

Richard sighed. Lord Matlock had left the frontline of the battle for him to fight alone. The man could face a Parliament full of Lords but could not face a drawing room full of anxious ladies. He met Miss Bennet's eyes. She and Georgiana were on a sofa, hands together. Waiting.

He served himself half a glass of brandy, which he took in one gulp, and then sat

down on the empty sofa.

“Well, son, are you going to say something, or are you waiting for one of us to die of anticipation?”

“We found Wickham’s hiding place, but he was not there,” Richard finally began. “Detective Duncan ordered a man to stay behind and watch the place. If he comes back, we have him.”

“Oh! At least, some good news!” his mother said in relief.

He took a deep breath and lowered his gaze to his empty glass. “We also found a small missive left behind that revealed Darcy is alive, and under the care of a local doctor, and that Miss Elizabeth is also well.”

Jane kept her inquisitive eyes on him as she sat beside him. “Colonel, please tell me all.”

Her pleading eyes broke his heart. As he could not find words, he just reached for his pocket and grabbed the small piece of paper, giving it to her.

Jane took it with trembling hands and raised her eyes in search of any sign of hope. Instead, her gaze was met by Richard’s sombre expression. She slowly opened the letter and read it.

A deep sob escaped her mouth and she dropped the paper on the floor, putting both hands over her mouth to muffle her cry. Her entire body shook violently.

Once more, the sight of Jane’s despair moved Richard into action. Forgetting about everything else, he embraced her, resting her head on his chest, wishing he could take her pain away.

If his mother was shocked by such intimacy, she did not demonstrate it. Instead, she bent down and retrieved the small piece of paper and read it. A shadow filled her eyes. She gave the missive to Georgiana, who was now standing and fidgeting from one foot to the other beside her.

There was a knock on the door and the butler entered. Lady Madeleine looked at her faithful servant with an air of reproof but trusted her man enough to know he would not intrude such a family gathering without a good reason.

“I beg your pardon, milady, but there is a messenger from Detective Duncan. He said he should deliver the message personally to Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

Richard, hearing his name, gently cupped Jane’s face drying her wet cheeks with his thumbs. “Please, Miss Bennet, keep your courage. I beg you.”

She nodded. “Please, sir, go. I shall be well,” she said, fetching her handkerchief.

“Well, then. Let him in,” Lady Madeleine said.

“Colonel,” the messenger said once inside the room. “Detective Duncan asked you to come to the Magistrates’ Court as soon as possible. They have found Mr Brown.”

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Richard was fetching his hat and gloves when Jane approached him. “Please, Colonel, let me go with you. I cannot stay here any longer. I need to do something. Please.”

Richard looked at his mother.

Lady Madeleine regarded Jane for a second, her delicate brows coming together.

Then she sighed. “Oh, propriety can go hang. You can join him, Miss Bennet. But please, promise me that you will not put yourself in any danger. I will stay here with Georgiana waiting for your news. And you, Richard, look after her.”

Richard nodded, kissing his mother’s cheek. “I will. Thank you. ”

It did not take them long to arrive at their destination. Richard helped Jane out of the carriage, keeping her hand on his arm as they entered the crowded and smelly building of the Magistrates’ Courts. All sorts of criminals and women of questionable reputation filled the place, shouting mocking invitations and shrieking laughs. But Jane kept her eyes fixed ahead of her.

Richard thought again how admirable she was.

“Thank you for coming to my aid, Colonel,” Jane said meeting his eyes. “I am very sorry. I am not usually this tearful, but it seems I cannot control myself lately — not since we learnt that Elizabeth was taken.”

“There is no reason to be sorry, Miss Bennet. You are—”

Mr Duncan met them, ending the conversation. Beside him there was another older man they had not met yet. “Colonel, Miss Bennet. This way, please.” Mr Duncan took them to a small room. “Allow me to present Mr Huxtable. Mr Huxtable has been recently promoted from the constabulary of Sussex and has very interesting news to share. Mr Huxtable?”

“Of course. About an hour ago, I received this.” He produced a letter. “An express from the Sussex police. They have come across a couple who we believe to be your cousin and your sister.”

Jane looked at the colonel, holding her breath.

“They are both being held as hostages in a cottage in the surrounding area of Eastbourne. The local doctor was summoned to attend what was reported as a hunting accident, but the man’s injury was not consistent with it. Apparently, let me read it again... Ah. Yes. It was your sister’s silent message asking for help that really raised the doctor’s suspicion. I know the man. He used to work for the army. Very clever fellow. He shared his suspicions with the constable, and here we are.”

Jane reached for the colonel’s hand and squeezed it; a spark of hope grew in her red eyes.

“And how are they?” Richard asked, squeezing Jane’s hand back.

“Fortunately, both of them are well. According to the doctor, Mr Darcy sustains a nasty lump on his head and a flesh wound between his neck and shoulder. He also lost a considerable amount of blood but is already out of danger and recovering. This was thanks to Miss Elizabeth, who attended to his wound — and that, according to the doctor, was the main reason Mr Darcy has survived. Had he been alone... well, he would most likely have bled to death.”

Richard looked down at Jane and they both smiled in relief.

Mr Huxtable added, “We just need a plan to rescue both of them tonight. You know, before Mr Wickham... takes her.”

“Then, Mr Huxtable, allow me to help you,” Richard said. “Some good men from my battalion are currently in London, and I am sure they would be happy to assist us. I will send for them immediately.”

“I thank you, Colonel,” replied Mr Huxtable. “That would be excellent. It just leaves us to decide on a strategy of how to rescue them.”

“And do you ’ave any suggestions, Mr Huxtable?” Mr Duncan asked.

“In fact, Dr Hayford has already come up with an idea. It seems our brave doctor offered to keep the ruffians as busy as possible tonight, as he pretends to be checking on his patient. He thought we could use that moment to strike them. Dr Hayford said one of them, a man called Mr Brown, usually accompanies him upstairs. If we manage to invade the house while the doctor is examining Mr Darcy, there will only be two of them downstairs. With the help of your men, Colonel, I believe we can succeed.”

“What about the man in the room? Brown. Do you think he keeps a gun with him?” Richard asked.

“It is quite likely,” replied Mr Huxtable. “If we manage to enter the house in silence as soon as the doctor enters, we can keep watch on the staircase and surprise Brown when he leaves the room. Mr Darcy and Miss Elizabeth would be out of danger.”

“What about the doctor?” Miss Bennet asked. “Do you not think he might get... hurt?”

“Miss Bennet, Dr Hayford was a brave officer in his time. I am sure he is aware of the risks.”

It was decided that Mr Huxtable, Richard and his officers would head towards Eastbourne as soon as they could contact the men and gather whatever was necessary.

Once inside the carriage on their way back, Jane raised her eyes and met Richard’s concerned gaze on her.

“I will do everything I can to bring them back. I promise.”

“I know,” Jane replied, her cheeks reddening. “Colonel, please do not judge me... I do not know if I will have another opportunity, or the courage, if I do not do it now.”

Richard frowned. “What is it, Miss Bennet?”

“I would like you to take this.” She took something from her reticule, placing the small object in Richard’s hand. “It was a present from Lizzy to me. I want you to keep it, to remind you of the lady you are going to rescue. But also,” she raised her eyes to face him, “to remind you of the lady who will be waiting for you... to have it back when you return home, safe and sound.”

Their gazes locked and Richard’s mouth suddenly became dry at the look of tenderness on her face. His heart was beating so loudly he was sure even she could hear it. He looked down to his hand and found a small golden cross attached to a delicate necklace.

Inhaling slowly a couple of times, he took her hands and brought them to his lips, kissing them. “I will cherish it,” he said softly. “And I promise you, I will do everything in my power, I will move heaven and earth to bring your sister back to you... and your father.”

An unknown wave of happiness washed his soul. In that carriage, surrounded by uncertainties, he was sure of one thing: despite their short acquaintance, Jane Bennet had stolen his heart. From that moment on, he knew he would do anything for her. He cupped her wet face and caressed it, finally smiling. “God help me. I will come back.”

Richard understood finally what had possessed Darcy to act so recklessly when Miss Elizabeth was concerned.

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Back home, it took Richard less than two hours to gather his men, swords, pistols and munition and begin their journey to Eastbourne. Mr Darcy's personal physician, Dr Alden, had joined the group as a particular request from Georgiana.

Mr Duncan, who had already presented a report to the Magistrates' Court in Bow Street about the pirates, decided to stay behind and help in that part of the investigations as an alternative plan, in case the rescue attempt did not succeed.

Lord Matlock sent several letters, among them one to the Prime Minister explaining the involvement of the army and requesting further assistance from the navy.

The remaining details would be discussed on the way to Eastbourne. The weather was dry, promising a reasonably fast trip, giving them enough time to arrive at their destination before sunset, around eight o'clock at that time of the year.

As they approached the coast, the horses became agitated.

"It seems the weather here is not as favourable as it was in London, Mr Huxtable," Richard observed, seeing the curtain of fog ahead of them.

"I am sorry to agree, Colonel. This cold breeze coming from the sea together with the wet and warm soil are the propitious conditions for a foggy night. I was hoping to have a normal day length, but with this fog, I believe it will be dark much earlier. We shall need to move faster and position our men around the house before the fog becomes too dense."

Richard agreed. His mind was now completely focused on the strategy they had planned. He felt the cold blood running through his veins almost as if he had been informed Napoleon's troops were approaching. This time, however, he was not defending his country, but fighting for the life of his cousin and Jane's sister.

When they were close enough, they dismounted. With a nod from Mr Huxtable, the men silently approached the house, scattering around the property. The main objective was to invade the house at the agreed signal. Richard and Mr Huxtable positioned themselves at the front, some yards away from the entrance. The unkempt garden had been very useful for this .

The trap was arranged. They just needed to wait for the doctor to arrive.

As they feared, the fog became denser, reducing the visibility. For this reason, they did not see the shadowy figure lurking around, sneaking inside the house by the servants' door — someone familiar with the house and its vicinity.

Dr Hayford arrived at 8:15 pm as arranged. Looking around, he knocked on the door. It was opened some minutes later, and after their usual greetings, he was inside.

“It is time,” Richard whispered.

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Lord Matlock was in his library when the butler announced Mr Duncan.

“Ah, Duncan, please come in. Any success?”

“Indeed, sir. Nothing like some guineas to open people's mouths to the right questions. We found out about the pirates. As it seems, the old days of piracy 'ave been revived by the smuggling trade during the war. Apparently, the ease in which this black market grew inspired other old vices — among 'em, smuggling young ladies. There's a ship leaving from Portsmouth to meet with the pirates. The only question is where.”

“Unbelievable! How is that even possible?” Lord Matlock asked moving his hands in

the air.

“It seems, my lord, that the navy was too busy with Napoleon. Who would’ve thought that this business of smuggling brandy would become such a nasty thing?”

“Indeed. Well, at least their departing point is in our favour. Portsmouth is not exactly a big place; with enough men, we should be able find them.”

“Indeed, sir. I’ve already sent word to the authorities in the area to stay alert. ”

“How did you find about all this, Duncan?” Lord Matlock asked, letting his large body collapse on his leather armchair, closing his eyes.

“It was an old sailor, a bit in his cups, who swore a ship with a suspicious contraband will be leaving Portsmouth in two days’ time. I took the liberty of bringing ’im here. I thought it’d be better to keep him with me, to avoid, you know... a sudden disappearance. I just suggest some strong coffee, and perhaps some food, to keep him on his feet. The poor man’s no more than an old rag.”

Lord Matlock’s eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. “Duncan, did you bring this man here, now?”

“Yes, my lord,” Mr Duncan replied calmly. “I thought the prospect of talking to someone who could help us to end this terrible business, exceeded by far any fear we could ’ave about the man himself. He is an inoffensive fellow, and I have the impression, due to his background, that he can provide some invaluable assistance.”

Strong coffee was ordered, and the old man was brought into the library, and introduced to Lord Matlock.

The old Irish sailor — Mr Lynch, as the man presented himself — had a pitiful,

crooked appearance, smelled of sweat and fish, and reminded Lord Matlock of an old barnacle. But despite his sad facade, his blue eyes seemed quick, and he his deference was faultless. He was offered a cup of hot coffee and a plate with ham, cheese and fresh bread, which he gladly accepted, bowing.

“Thank you, Mr Duncan, milord,” he said, smelling the food and closing his eyes in visible appreciation.

After eating and drinking, the old man looked more human again.

“Now Mr Lynch, as I told you before, we’re investigating the disappearance of numerous ladies. We were informed they might ’ave been kidnapped and delivered to a group of pirates, who sell ’em in countries of Eastern Europe — God knows what for. You told me this afternoon that you were aware of the facts. Could you tell us more? Keep in mind that any ’elp will be generously rewarded and... any indiscretion gladly overlooked.”

Surprisingly, in contrast to his dreadful appearance, Mr Lynch had a good diction, despite his strong accent, and vocabulary. “Indeed, sir. I knew a chancer who lost his life couple of years ago dealing with those condemned manky souls. After that, I left Portsmouth and came to work here in London.” He paused and looked at his empty plate. “Could I have another piece of ham? I cannot remember the last time...”

Under the man’s satisfied grin, Mr Duncan refilled his plate with another portion of food. “You were saying?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. I had earwigged some lads saying the smugglers would dock at Portsmouth this year.” At the confused expression in both men, he added, “They depart from different ports every year on the same day. Clever buggers, the bunch of them.”

“Have you, by any chance, also heard when they are leaving?” Lord Matlock asked hopefully.

“Yes, sir. On the 14th April. At least, that’s what I earwigged. But I don’t know anything about the pirates — may their bodies be infested with purulent wounds for eternity.”

Mr Lynch saw both men blinking and was not sure if it was because of his swearing. “I know what you might be thinking, how can he know that, isn’t it? Well, I have lived the last twenty years like a cobblestone on the road. I have become part of the place, you know; people do not see me anymore. And sailors, ah! When in their cups, their mouths can be like a lash from the skies. They will tell you even about the thumb they used to suck when small lads.”

Mr Duncan and Lord Matlock frowned, exchanging confused glances. Whatever Mr Lynch was conveying, it sounded like he knew what he was saying.

“But why do they sail on the same day every year? And why ’as no one reported it before?” Mr Duncan asked.

“I don’t know, sir,” replied Mr Lynch, “but it seems their reputation was yielding them a good profit; they smuggle a variety of other things. Manky men from all around the country seem happy to provide them what they need, even if the sentence for such acts is death. The only thing money cannot buy is the salvation of your soul.”

The two gentlemen exchanged glances again. This time, however, the message was clear.

“Please, tell me Mr Lynch, what was your activity in your youth?” Lord Matlock asked.

Mr Lynch stopped eating and looked back at Lord Matlock, a shadow covering his eyes. "I was in the navy, sir. But I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were at the Antilles and a local lad was badly injured and died. A witness described the perpetrator as a white man with blue eyes and no hair. The suspicion fell on me, as if I was the only man with such a description in that port. After some confusion, they spared me from the noose, but condemned me to a ten-year sentence, which I served there. After that, they would not receive me back as I had brought shame on the Royal British Navy ." Those last words were spoken with strong bitterness. "I paid for a crime I did not commit. Being a mere armourer was not enough to allow me a fair judgement, and I was abandoned there. After that, I fell into a life of misery and shame, and became what you can see now."

Lord Matlock was touched by the man's story and made a vow to help him. But for now, he had more pressing things to worry about.

He stood up and rang the bell. When the butler arrived, he asked for the two fastest messengers that money could buy to be brought to him as soon as possible. He sat down and wrote two letters.

Half an hour later, two thin young men entered the room. He approached the first boy, remembering using his services before, giving him a piece of paper and a silver coin. "You have in your hands a very important message, my boy, and I need it to reach Colonel Fitzwilliam in Eastbourne at this address, as soon as possible. It is a matter of life or death. Do you understand?"

The young man nodded.

"Then go, and Godspeed."

Turning to the other lad, Lord Matlock gave him another letter and another coin, and sent him to Commodore Norton, hoping he was being overzealous in contacting the

navy. The Prime Minister had authorised him to contact any member of the army or navy. This small note could open a most needed door for Richard, if necessary.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

Dr Hayford arrived at the house of his last patient at a quarter past the eighth hour. The weather was not exactly cold, but the thick fog brought a shiver to his old body and a frown to his white brows. He had been informed that the rescue would take place that night, in fact, as soon as he entered the house.

As he looked around, it was as if he could see his whole life parading before him. His battles and losses, but also his victories and gains. He had always been proud of having served his king and his country. He shook his head and chuckled. Who would ever imagine that at his age he would be doing it again? His breathing was short and irregular, and his heart was like a drum in his ears. Was he fearing death today, after all that he had seen? After all the pain and sorrow his life as an army doctor had propitiated him? Dr Hayford took a deep breath and smiled. If this was to be his last day in this world of God, so be it. He was happy to end his life fighting again for justice and freedom.

With a fresh determination, he knocked on the door.

“Good evening, Doctor,” Brown greeted him gruffly some minutes later, ushering him into the house.

“And a good evening to you, Mr Brown. I hope our young man has maintained his improvement. I am sure he will be able to leave his bedroom by now,” Dr Hayford said as they climbed the stairs. The irony of his words brought another smile to his lips.

They entered the bedroom. Now fully aware of their plight, Dr Hayford looked at Darcy and Elizabeth with renewed kindness. “Good evening Mrs Smith, Mr Smith.

Let me see how you are faring this evening. ”

But instead of pulling the old bandages away to proceed with cleaning and re-covering Mr Darcy’s wound, he just added another layer of bandages, as if reinforcing his previous work; the real reason known only to him. In no time, quite different from the previous visits, Dr Hayford had already finished. “Marvellous. I believe—”

A loud noise of shouts and gunshots downstairs interrupted the doctor.

The four heads looked towards the door.

Brown jumped, running to lock the door, but the doctor grabbed him by the neck, and in seconds the two men were involved in a fight. The poor doctor, despite his great efforts, was no match for the much younger and stronger man, quite used to fights in the dark alleys of the Seven Dials.

Darcy was already standing with the intention of helping, when Brown threw Dr Hayford against the chair, as if the old man was no more than a doll. The poor fellow collapsed, falling on the floor with a loud thud.

Darcy, regardless of his still healing injury, threw himself over Brown, grabbing the ruffian by his neck as they both fell to the floor. With the impact, the pistol Brown was hiding in his jacket fell and skidded across the floor.

Elizabeth saw the shiny metallic part of the gun in the dimmed candlelight and ran to fetch it. When she looked up, Brown was sitting on Mr Darcy’s chest, punching his face.

“Stop or I will shoot you,” she yelled at Brown, firmly pointing the pistol in his direction.

Brown stopped, whipped his head up and stared at her. Then he sneered. “Ah! This is one thing I would love to see. A genteel lady like you,” he said through clenched teeth. With a subtle move, Brown stood up, cleaning the blood from his own injured mouth, leaving behind Mr Darcy with his face covered in blood.

Steadily, Brown fetched a small knife from his boot. “I am going to finish what I started a couple of days ago. Debt or not, I am going to kill you...” — he roared, twisting his knife in the air — “...slowly and painfully. ”

Elizabeth knew he was not bluffing. Holding her erratic breath, she did not take her eyes from the man, even for a second, not even to look at the man she loved lying on the floor, bleeding. In that moment, her mind was on her father’s words when he was teaching her to hunt. “ Keep your eyes on your prey, control your breathing and, at the right moment, shoot .”

Suddenly, Brown plunged towards her.

Mr Darcy, who was valiantly trying to sit up, watched with horror as the man charged towards Elizabeth, wielding his knife.

In the following second, a shot. Both of them fell to the floor with a deafening sound.

“No! Elizabeth!”

~ ? ~

In the darkness of the night, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Huxtable stealthily moved to the front of the house. A peek through the window showed that there were just the two men in the parlour. Richard nodded to Mr Huxtable. A strange sound, like the chirp of a bird, soon echoed around the house, and from its four sides the soldiers forced the doors open.

Their intention to move swiftly upstairs did not work as planned. As the two criminals exchanged shots with the intruders, it took them precious minutes until they were finally able to overpower the barricaded men and pass through them.

The sound of another gunshot, this time from upstairs, froze Richard and Mr Huxtable.

Richard was the first to enter the bedroom and gasped at the sight before him. The place resembled a battlefield. A chair was broken, and the bed was in complete disarray; near to the door, a bleeding old man was lying on the floor, immobile; further away, another wounded man was on his knees trying to stand up.

“Darcy!” Richard called, running to him.

The entire left side of Darcy’s face was covered in blood; he had a cut on his eyebrow and a bleeding nose, and by the red blur on his shirt, the old wound had reopened.

But instead of acknowledging the presence of his cousin, Darcy kept his moist eyes fixed ahead of him, mumbling and pointing at something in the shadows. Richard squinted and saw the body of another man on the floor.

“Help her, Richard. Elizabeth...”

Richard moved to where the man was, gasping in horror at the sight before him. “Miss Elizabeth!”

He pulled the man from her, but her body remained still, her clothes soaked in blood.

Darcy reached them, kneeling beside her. Taking her in his arms, his words were lost in a sob.

Richard ran to the door and shouted, “Dr Alden, please, this way. Quick.”

He turned and squeezed the door threshold until his knuckles were white. Had he been too late?

A breathless Dr Alden approached, asking Darcy to give him space while he examined Elizabeth’s body. As the seconds crawled by, Darcy and Richard could only observe the doctor’s efforts to find the cause of Elizabeth’s bleeding.

Raising his eyes to the two men beside him, the doctor said, “She is not harmed, gentlemen. She does not have a single scratch on her body. The only thing I could find was a good bump at the back of her head.”

“What?” the two cousins shouted at the same time.

Darcy lean down and caressed her face. “Elizabeth. Elizabeth, please, wake up.”

She moaned and her eyelids opened.

“Elizabeth,” Darcy whispered gently, embracing and kissing her. “My Elizabeth, you are safe now, my love. You are safe.”

As he held her in his arms, Darcy felt her body shaking against his chest. He embraced her tighter, whispering words of comfort. For some time, both of them remained there on the floor, crying together .

Mr Huxtable commanded some of his men to carry Dr Hayford downstairs. Fortunately, the doctor was alive; a bleeding nose, some scratches, and probably one or two broken ribs were the extension of his injuries.

“I am taking Dr Hayford back to the village and those ruffians to the constable. And

do not worry about that man,” Mr Huxtable said, pointing to the dead body on the floor beside Elizabeth. “I will prepare a report and inform the magistrate of the circumstances. I am sure there will be no enquires about his death. Colonel?”

Richard nodded, his eyes fixed on his cousin and the lady in his arms.

After their cries subsided, Darcy released Elizabeth from him. “How are you, dearest?”

“I am well, William. I am well.”

“How did you...” But Darcy could not find the words to compose his question. Everything had happened so fast.

“My father,” Elizabeth said with a weak smile. “He taught me how to use guns and swords. I never told a soul about it, but we still hunt and fence together when we have the chance; it is ‘our training’. It seems our little deception bore good fruits, after all.” She cried again. “Oh, William, I killed a man. Oh, God, forgive me...”

Darcy kissed her head. “Oh, my dear and brave Lizzy. We all consider a human soul to be sacred before God, but it was because of your courage that we are alive now. You, Dr Hayford and I. You saved us all.”

She took a deep breath and nodded, and raising her moist eyes she frowned, staring at his face, then at his shoulder. “Oh, William...”

“Yes, sir,” Dr Alden intervened. “Let me see to your injuries. Miss Elizabeth will be fine. Come.”

Darcy could barely stand, so Richard helped him.

“My dear,” Dr Alden said, turning to Elizabeth helping her up while Richard helped Darcy to sit on the bed. “Do you have any spare clothing? Yes? Good. Then take off those dirty clothes and refresh yourself while I see to Mr Darcy. Will you, my child?”

She looked at Darcy, who nodded to her. “Dr Alden is right. You should wash yourself and change your clothes. Then, as soon as you have finished, we will go home.”

Yes, home.

On her way, she looked down at the dead man on the floor and shivered, and her steps faulted, but the colonel was just beside her.

“Miss Elizabeth?”

“I am well, Colonel. Just a little shaken. Thank you.”

“Take your time. We will be waiting for you,” Richard said as she closed the door.

As Dr Alden pulled at Darcy’s reinforced bandages, his expression became sombre. “Unfortunately, Mr Darcy, it is as I suspected. Your previous wound has reopened; it is bleeding considerably and in great need of new stitches.” He reached for a small bottle in his bag. “I will need to go a little deeper to find some intact flesh...” He put a small amount of liquid into a glass of water and offered it to Darcy. “I will need you to take this.”

“Can it not wait until we are back home, Dr Alden?” Darcy asked, quite discontented. “I do not want to... leave Elizabeth alone.”

“Unfortunately not,” Dr Alden said adamantly. “If this wound remains opened like this, your fragile recovery will be badly jeopardised.”

Darcy looked at Richard, who shrugged. “You need to do as the doctor says.”

“I understand,” Darcy said, upset. “Let me to talk to Elizabeth before you start then.”

At Dr Alden’s acceptance, Darcy went to knock on the door. “Elizabeth, are you dressed?”

“Not yet,” came her reply from the other side. “Do you need anything from here?”

“No. I just want to talk to you.”

The door opened, and Elizabeth peeked her head through the gap. She was wrapped in a towel, and her hair was loose, covering her shoulders and chest. Darcy looked at her and frowned. She was indeed an extraordinary, beautiful woman. He comforted himself with the thought that it would not be long now until they could marry; he could not stay away from her a second more.

“Dr Alden needs to stitch my wound again, and he wants me to take laudanum. I am afraid I will not be awake for some hours.”

Stretching her hand to take his, Elizabeth squeezed it affectionately. “I am sorry, William, that you will need to go through that all over again. But the doctor is right, of course. I will finish here and come to stay with you. I will be right beside you when you wake up. I promise. Now go and let the doctor look after you. I will be ready shortly.”

Darcy brought her damp hand to his lips and kissed it. “I will see you later, then.”

Despite the many injuries on his face, Darcy’s mouth was not hurt enough to prevent him from drinking the vile medicine; what he did in one gulp, grimacing.

As his eyes became heavy, Darcy laid on the bed and turned to Richard. "Please, look after her." He looked back at the door of the dressing room and thought about going back home and finally being able to marry Elizabeth, hold and kiss her without any impediment. This time, his proposal would be quite different... He would profess his love... tell her how much... he... loved... her...

He was still holding this thought when everything became dark, and he fell into a deep sleep.

"Let us put those pillows here," the doctor said as they repositioned Darcy on the bed. "If you could hold him, it would be easier. Yes, thank you. With this amount of laudanum, he can become agitated and hallucinate, and I do not want him moving."

During the whole process, Richard could not take his eyes from his weak cousin, forcing himself to remember that both Darcy and Miss Elizabeth were finally safe.

He smiled. They would be happy together; he had known it from the beginning. They were perfect for each other.

His thoughts drifted back to London, where another beautiful lady was waiting for him, and wondered if she could be the one he would love, and be loved in return, accepting the simple life he could afford to offer .

Lord Matlock had told him he had inherited a small property his maternal grandmother had left to be shared among the younger grandsons in the family. Fortunately for him, he was the only younger son. Perhaps he would be able to sell his commission and assume the life of a modest gentleman with a beautiful wife at his side. Yes, that would be much better than continuing fighting and risking his life in those senseless wars. He smiled again. He had something to offer Miss Bennet after all.

But would that be enough for her?

“... a quick death.”

Richard startled at Dr Alden’s word. He had not noticed the man had started talking about the body on the floor.

“I can see it now,” the doctor continued. “The bullet has passed straight through his heart, causing him to die immediately. That explains the amount of blood on Miss Elizabeth’s dress, and the bump on her head. Literally, a dead weight falling on her.”

At the mention of her name, Richard thought that perhaps Elizabeth was taking a little too long to finish whatever she was doing.

As Dr Alden had finish his work with Darcy, Richard went to knock on the door.

There was no reply.

He knocked again, stronger. “Miss Elizabeth?”

No answer.

Dr Alden looked at him alarmed. “Perhaps she has fainted?”

Richard did not think twice and broke through the door.

The dressing room was empty.

~ ? ~

Elizabeth had just finished changing her clothes and was braiding her hair. She heard

a click behind her head. As she turned, all blood drained from her face.

Wickham .

And he was holding a pistol.

“ Shhh . Do not make me use this,” he whispered. “After what you have done to Brown, I will not hesitate to hurt you if necessary.”

With widened eyes, Elizabeth looked at the door, but there was no way for her to escape.

“Come,” he ordered, pointing to the opened panel door behind him. The small corridor was illuminated by a single candle on the floor, which he took after pushing her ahead of him.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Wickham put the candle down. Pulling a dagger from his boot, he grabbed Elizabeth by the neck, placing the sharp edge under her chin, drawing a small trail of blood in her skin. Silently, they approached a soldier who had his back turned to them. With a precise blow, Wickham slammed the handle of his pistol on the man’s nape; after a sharp moan, the unconscious officer fell to the floor.

Once outside, he searched for the horses. He shoved his handkerchief on Elizabeth’s mouth, and dragged her with him while stealing one of them, for he had arrived on foot. He forced her up and mounted behind her, keeping his knife on her belly. They left unseeing, camouflaged by the foggy night.

She was spitting the piece of cloth from her mouth when she heard men shouting behind them. Turning, she saw a rider charging in pursuit. Wickham also noticed their chaser. Pressing the sharp blade against her stomach, he said in her ear, “Do not

even think about it!"

Not much further ahead, when she hoped the rider would reach them, Wickham turned his horse in a drastic manoeuvre, taking a side path, covering Elizabeth's mouth with one of his hands.

Alas. Horse and man passed by them without noticing the subterfuge. Wickham waited a little longer, then released her mouth. "Not a single sound," he hissed.

Elizabeth had silent tears running down her face. "Why are you doing this to me? You could have escaped. Brown is dead, but you have decided to take me and now have the entire army is after you. Why?"

Wickham breathed deeply a couple of times, nudging his horse in the opposite direction. "Unfortunately, it is too late. I have already sold you, and now I need to deliver you, or I will have..." he trailed off, shivering, thinking of his nether parts. "I know you will bring the lady intact, or you will never have any problem with ladies again..."

"What do you mean by selling and delivering me?" Elizabeth remembered the story on her father's news sheet. "You cannot possibly be that evil?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I have no choice," Wickham stated. "My neck is already in the noose. I need to take whatever chance I have. And you, Miss Elizabeth, are my guarantee out of the mess. But I will be careful with you. You surprised me. You shot a man, good heavens! Granted, that scoundrel did not deserve to live, but I am surprised, nevertheless. At least in that I am grateful to you. I will not need to pay Brown back now."

If only I can survive those pirates now .

By the sudden tension of her body, Wickham knew she was disgusted with him, and he could not blame her for it. He had finally hit the bottom of the pitch.

After some time galloping, they reached an old equipage she remembered well. They dismounted, and still holding his knife, Wickham pushed Elizabeth inside.

“How was everything?” the man who would drive the carriage asked.

“It was as we had planned,” Wickham lied, entering the carriage behind Elizabeth. “Now let us move.”

Alone with Wickham, Elizabeth could not hold her tongue any longer. “So that was your plan? To have your partners arrested or killed? I am ashamed to think I ever considered you a friend; believed your lies. I confronted Mr Darcy, demanding him to answer my questions about his dealings with you as a gentleman, only to realise the crude reality that you are not just everything he said you were, but much more! A scoundr—.”

A violent slap in her face threw her head against the window cutting the words from her lips.

“Be silent!” Wickham shouted at the top of his lungs. “I do not need you to tell me what I have become. I hate all of you. All of you who had forced me into what I am today.”

Rubbing her cheek, Elizabeth brought her finger to her already sore lips and found fresh blood on them. It took all her strength to calm her irregular breathing as she fought back enraged tears. But she would not cry, not in front of him.

So, was that her fate? Being sold and transported to a distant country and forced for the rest of her life to...

She shivered. Dreadful thoughts were now impossible to contain. How would anyone know where to look for her?

She turned to the window, observing the dark and foggy scenery of the night. They passed by them at the same breakneck speed as her hopes vanished.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. There was no way out. She was lost forever.

No .

She could not accept it.

She would not surrender; at least, not without a good fight — even if it meant losing her life. In this case, death was preferable. Wickham could join the army of demons in hell if he wished, but she would try one last time.

She opened her eyes and slowly raised her gaze back to him, a plan forming in her mind.

After what seemed like an eternity, Wickham was finally looking away.

Now .

She kicked the hand holding the knife and lunged at the carriage door, opening it.

Wickham growled, cursing aloud, his hat flying through the door into the darkness. Plunging after her before she could jump, he grabbed her arm and soon they were engaged in a fight for their lives. It took him all his strength to hold a wild Elizabeth as he shouted a couple of times for the driver to stop.

The jolt of the carriage threw both of them forward; Wickham landed on his shoulder

and Elizabeth on her head. Dizziness weakened her and she could not resist her captor anymore.

“Bloody wild cat! Damn, you Elizabeth!” Wickham cursed again, wiping some blood from his upper lip. “Johnson! Get me the rope!” Wickham shouted to the driver. “I want to see you trying to escape now.”

~ ? ~

Richard could not believe his eyes. The bloody room was empty!

But how?

“Perhaps a servant’s entrance,” Dr Alden suggested.

Richard bumped his shoulder against the panelled walls until one of them opened to the servant’s corridor. He stopped, looking into the darkness, cursing under his breath.

Some muffled words could be heard from the bedroom.

“He is in there,” Richard heard the doctor saying.

“Colonel?” somebody called. A young officer entered the small room. “Beggin’ your pardon, sir, but we found Lieutenant Carter on the floor, unconscious. He was hit on the head. There is also a horse missing—”

“What? How is that possible?” Richard thundered, interrupting the young man. “Has anybody seen anything?”

“Yes, sir. One of the men heard Lieutenant Carter’s moans and ran to him, just in

time to see a man and a woman, both on the same horse, riding down the road towards the village. He could not see the man's face, but someone suggested it could have been Mr Darcy and the lady escaping. But if Mr Darcy is still here... Captain Owen rode after them anyway."

"Wickham!" Richard breathed between gritted teeth. "Fetch a candle and go down these stairs and see if you can find anything. I need to see what is going on," he said, running down the main stairs.

"Carter!" Richard called when he saw his man was already on his feet. "How are you?"

"I am well, Colonel," Carter replied, rubbing his neck .

The younger officer appeared behind Richard, shaking his head. "There was nothing there, sir."

"Colonel," another officer shouted from outside. "There is a rider approaching."

They all went outside, keeping their eyes on the road as the sound of a horse's hooves became louder. Pointed pistols welcomed the approaching figure.

"Hey! Put your guns down. It's me," Captain Owen shouted, still panting. "I lost track of them in the fog. I am sorry, Colonel. Instead, I found him."

The messenger, weary to his bones and still breathless, was already dismounting and looking for the colonel. "Thank God I found you, Colonel," he sighed. "I have a message from your father, sir. Sorry for the delay — the fog. I could not find the house until I recognised the captain riding in this direction and followed him."

Richard thanked the boy and read the message.

Dear Richard,

We found out that a ship loaded with contraband (and, unfortunately, some young ladies) is supposedly leaving England in two days' time, on the 14th April, from Portsmouth. I hope this information is already irrelevant and the rescue attempt successful.

If by any chance you still need anything else, feel free to do whatever you need, at any cost. The Prime Minister has allowed me to do everything necessary to find Darcy, and to arrest those bloody mercenaries and pirates. We are already sending reinforcements to Portsmouth.

Please, send word as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Father

“At least I know where to hunt you,” Richard muttered. “James! Find Mr Huxtable and inform him that Wickham managed to enter the house and... kidnap Miss Elizabeth, again. Give Mr Huxtable this letter and ask him to send word to London, to my father and Detective Duncan, telling them I am going to Portsmouth straight away, and hope to meet the reinforcements there as soon as possible. And someone, prepare my horse,” he shouted to no one in particular.

Returning to the house, Richard quickly went upstairs. Dr Alden was helping some of the soldiers to tie up several blankets and bring his unconscious patient downstairs.

“Dr Alden, please, wait,” Richard said in a lower voice, kneeling down beside his cousin. “Forgive me, Darcy. But I swear on my life I will not come back home until I have Miss Elizabeth safe and sound with me.” He raised his eyes. “Take good care of

him, Doctor.”

Richard gave his cousin one last look, and before Dr Alden could voice a reply, he ran downstairs again asking for his horse. He could not fail his cousin or Mr Bennet, but especially, he could not fail Miss Bennet.

“Colonel,” Captain Owen shouted as he quickly approached Richard. “You cannot possibly be planning to ride this time of night and with this fog, sir. I could barely see my way coming back. And by these winds, I believe a storm is coming.”

“Owen,” Richard said angrily, “if that scoundrel Wickham can ride his horse holding Miss Elizabeth atop of it with him, I can certainly do the same myself.” He turned and left, without looking back.

Captain Owen was not finished and ran after him. “Colonel, I ask permission then to accompany you on this trip. Sir.”

Richard paused and, finally, sighed, nodding. “Very well. Get ready then. It will be good to have a friend with me.”

“Thank you, sir,” Captain Owen said, already running towards his horse and preparing everything for their trip.

Richard called for Carter, giving him specific instructions to reach London as safely and as quickly as possible, preferably, leaving before the rain. His cousin’s health and safety should be his priority.

As they mounted their horses, Captain Owen looked at Richard. “Portsmouth then, Colonel?”

“Yes, Owen. And may God help us on this long journey.”

Some minutes later, the two riders were engulfed by the dark and foggy night as they headed to an uncertain fate.

13th April 1816

The warm sunlight and smell of clean linen reached Darcy's senses before he opened his eyes. He struggled with his eyelids until he could keep them open. Looking around at the blur of light, the silhouette of a woman sitting beside him brought a lazy smile to his lips.

"Elizabeth?"

"Oh, William. No, it is me, Georgiana," she said, running to the door. "Uncle Alfred, he is awake."

He blinked a few more times, but his eyes closed again. He stretched out his hand to his sister.

"Oh, brother. I am so happy you are back to us. I almost died worrying about you," Georgiana said, squeezing his hand. Then she began to ask hundreds of questions about how he was feeling, if he was hungry, what had happened, if his scratches were hurting.

Darcy opened his eyes again and smiled at his sister's enthusiasm. Before he had the chance to answer any of her questions, his uncle and aunt entered the room and greeted him with equal agitation. Lord Matlock did not spare words to express his relief, while Lady Madeleine kissed him on the head.

"Where is Richard?" Darcy asked.

And where is Elizabeth ?

The room felt silent. Everyone looked down or at each other, but nobody answered him.

Darcy frowned. “Uncle, where is Richard?” he asked again, his voice clipped. He sat up, grimacing with pain despite all the protests for him to keep to his bed.

Perhaps it was the laudanum or the long hours he had been sedated — after all, he was back home and did not remember anything about their return; or yet, perhaps because they were not answering his deuced question, but Darcy could not control the dread squeezing his chest.

Lord Matlock tried to remain calm, remembering the words the tired doctor had said as they arrived early that morning.

“ Mr Darcy has plenty of reasons to behave badly when he wakes up. And recovering from the prolonged use of laudanum will not help him. ”

With those words in mind, Lord Matlock addressed his favourite nephew with caution. “William, calm down, I beg you. I shall explain everything, but do not be agitated, my boy.” He asked his wife and niece to leave. When the room was quiet again, Lord Matlock began, “Unfortunately, your rescue was not completely successful; Richard was forced to go after the last member of the group responsible for your kidnap.”

“You mean Wickham, do you not, Uncle?” he said, trembling with rage.

“William, I understand your anger. But please, my boy, do not let that scoundrel take away your health. Dr Alden told us you would have a difficult recovery. And for more than one reason.”

With his entire body aching and shaking uncontrollably, Darcy closed his eyes, inhaling deeply a couple of times, calming himself enough to speak again. “You are right, Uncle. That miserable man does not deserve anything from me.”

At last, when Darcy was more relaxed, he asked his uncle to help him to stand. “My back aches and I am tired of being kept on a bed. I need to walk.”

Lord Matlock was glad to help his nephew get to his feet.

“And what about Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy finally asked, disappointed that she was not at his side as she had promised. “Is she still resting?”

“That is why Richard went in pursuit of Wickham. The reprobate managed to put his hands on her again and took her away with him. The scoundrel is taking her to Portsmouth to sell her to pirates.”

Darcy stopped walking; everything became dark. His breath was stuck in his throat and a sharp pain pierced his heart. He could not hold his weight anymore and collapsed to his knees, gasping for air.

“Wilfred!” Lord Matlock cried out.

Immediately, Wilfred was in the bedroom, but even the two old men could not lift Darcy back to his feet. Lord Matlock shouted again, and two other footmen entered the bedroom and helped to put Darcy back on the bed. They untied his shirt, opened the window and tried everything they could to ease his breathing.

Darcy was beyond what any rational word could explain. The lacerating pain from hearing the news about Elizabeth, his rage towards Wickham, and his body’s reaction to hours of sedation by the laudanum, took away all his dignity and when he was able to breathe again, he wailed like a wounded beast.

~ ? ~

After the arrival of Darcy and Dr Alden that early morning, nobody could return to bed, and Georgiana had barely left her brother's side.

The other occupants of the house remained in the drawing room in vigil, with the exception of Mr Bennet. Darcy's sore face and precarious condition, added to the news that neither Richard nor his Lizzy were with them, had proved too much for poor Mr Bennet. He had been assisted to his room by Dr Alden, who decided to give him something to sleep, preventing the old man from completely succumbing to his sorrow.

Jane remained quiet on a sofa in the corner of the room. There were no more tears now, just an empty feeling of despair. Lady Madeleine, sensing her misery, took Jane in her arms, comforting her in the best way she could, also suspecting Jane had another cause to worry beyond her sister's welfare. She had seen the way Richard and Jane looked and supported each other and was secretly happy for her younger son.

If only he could come back to them.

When Lady Madeleine had heard Georgiana's voice, she excused herself from Jane and went to see how Darcy was faring.

Some minutes later, both ladies returned with divided hearts. On the one hand, Darcy being strong enough to raise his voice and express his anger was a good sign; on the other, they were all very sorry to have him informed that the rescue attempt did not end as planned. A moment later, his cries were heard throughout the entire house. Nobody knew what to do. Even the servants were working with their gazes down.

Lord Matlock entered the drawing room and shook his head. "I am sure you all heard... I believe it is better to give Darcy a couple of hours to recover. Remember,

Dr Alden said he would probably react badly once awakened.”

He pulled a bell and instructed his butler to take a pot of very strong coffee, together with toasts and jam, to his nephew and not to disturb him after that. Perhaps one of his favourite repasts could bring him some comfort.

About an hour later, a very embarrassed Darcy dragged himself into the drawing room and was immediately helped to take a seat. His puffed eyes were still focused on the floor when he addressed those in the room. “First of all, I want to apologise for my...” — he took a deep breath, still trying to control his rage against Wickham — “...shameful behaviour. If Dr Alden informed you about what took place in these last few days as my uncle has told me, you must know I was expecting to find not just Richard, but also Miss Elizabeth by my side when I woke up.”

Jane and Georgiana exchanged glances.

Lady Madeleine sat beside Darcy and took his hand. “Oh, my darling. He warned us about the difficult recovery from the laudanum but did not offer any further detail. What happened between you and Miss Elizabeth?”

Darcy raised his sad eyes to his aunt. “I love her, Aunt, and I have asked her to marry me... And I have failed her.”

The compassion he found in his aunt’s eyes gave him courage to tell them what had happened between him and Elizabeth in that last week. Then he turned to Jane, needing to justify his feelings for Elizabeth. “We clarified our misunderstandings. I have begged her to forgive me. She did the same while confessing her bitterness towards me. It is all clear now. The days of sadness are behind us — if only I can find her again. Your sister is the most kind and courageous person I have ever known. She looked after me when I was wounded and feverish in bed. She comforted me when I had lost all hope of seeing Georgiana...” — he paused, looking at his sister, then to

his aunt and uncle — “...or my family ever again.”

Darcy's words brought fresh tears to Jane's eyes.

Silence filled the room.

“Miss Bennet, would you mind getting me a cup of coffee?” Darcy asked.

Confused by his request, Jane stood up and went to the side cabinet where a tray with coffee and tea was set. She almost dropped the cup, when she turned and found Mr Darcy just behind her.

“I am sorry, Miss Bennet, but what I have to say is not for the ears of my family.”

He took the cup from her hands and after sipping it, he gave her a weak smile.

“Elizabeth told me how you like your coffee, sir,” Jane explained, noticing his surprise. “As you can see, she had noticed you much before you have imagined.”

“Yes, she did,” he said frowning and looking at his cup.

Oh, my sweet Elizabeth .

Darcy felt a pang of regret for having judged her and her family so harshly. “Miss Bennet, do you think you can forgive me? I have behaved in a most shameful way towards you and your family. Elizabeth told me of your... disappointment with Bingley's departure. I am sorry I did not try—”

“Mr Darcy, please.” Jane interrupted him, her cheeks turning into a deep hue of pink for discussing such personal matters. “I cannot allow you to take the blame. I believe Mr Bingley is his own man and there was no point in pressing him into a situation

that... was not in his heart.” She paused, then smiled shyly. “But I forgive you. I cannot keep anything against someone who has saved my sister’s life.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet, but Elizabeth is far from safe,” Darcy said quietly.

For some time, they were lost in sad thoughts.

“Your cousin will bring her back. He promised me that.”

Darcy was surprised by her sudden change. “Do you trust my cousin’s words to that extent, Miss Bennet? Do you really believe he can bring Elizabeth back?”

“Yes, I do. He promised he would return, and he cannot do that without her. So, you see, he needs to find her and bring her back with him,” she said full of hope.

Darcy looked at Miss Bennet with a renewed interest. For the first time, he noticed her eyes were as green as the hills in Derbyshire in spring and had the same liveliness as those of Elizabeth...

He scowled, feeling his chest tighten. What if he were never to see those sparkling eyes again?

Returning the cup to Jane, he excused himself from the room, walking out to the gardens at the back of the house.

The fresh breeze welcomed him, and he breathed more easily. He walked further into the garden and rested his forehead against the cold stone wall, closing his eyes. What in heaven’s name was he to do? His wound was still throbbing, but the pain in his heart was the one consuming him.

A small ivy leaf tickled his nose. He opened his eyes and with another irrational wave

of anger, he pulled it from the wall with all his strength, unburdening his frustration on the poor plant. But it did not matter how much he pulled it, there was always a root attached to the wall. He silently cursed the tenacious weed as his actions only caused his injury to hurt more. He groaned.

He should not be there. He should be with Richard searching for Elizabeth.

Panting and huffing, he looked down at his hand still clutched to the stem of the ivy, tightening his grip, and pulling it again. "Let go you damned plant!" he shouted.

The ivy did not comply.

He stopped, turning the plant on his hand.

And a small smile grew on his lips.

He had been shot, punched in the face, tortured with a needle, and only God knew what else while he was unconscious, but he would never give up searching for her, even if it cost him his life. He looked back at the stone wall and the ivy. He would be like this miserable ivy and never let go!

With this fresh resolution, Darcy hurried back to the house and sat down beside Jane. "Miss Bennet, where is your father? I need to talk to him."

"He was not feeling very well this morning after receiving the news about Lizzy. He must be still in bed. What is it, Mr Darcy?"

"I need to talk to him as soon as possible. Would you please inform me when he is awake? Or perhaps send him to see me. I will be in the library."

About half an hour later, a still half-sedated Mr Bennet entered the library, where

Darcy was writing some papers.

“Ah, Mr Bennet, please, sit down,” Darcy said. With no preamble, he informed Mr Bennet of the details of his and Elizabeth’s kidnap. Mr Bennet was making a great effort to follow his fast and anxious words, some of which did not make any sense to him at all.

“I love your daughter,” Darcy finally said, “and I need your consent to act as an interested party, as her betrothed, and do whatever is necessary to recover her. I need your blessing for our marriage.”

Mr Bennet blinked a couple of times. “You want to marry my Lizzy?”

“Yes, sir. With your blessing, I will be able to do more to find her.” Seeing the incredulity in Mr Bennet’s eyes, Darcy continued, “I love your daughter more than my own life. I cannot live without her. Please, sir. ”

A hundred and one questions were on the tip of Mr Bennet’s tongue, but despite the fog still present in his mind, he noticed Mr Darcy’s determination. But above all, he saw the eyes of a man in agonising pain, and desperately in love. In a way, this realisation brought Mr Bennet more comfort than the draught Dr Alden had given him earlier.

Mr Bennet finally nodded. “I assume you have already asked her the same question.”

“Indeed, I have, sir. And she has accepted me.”

“Well, in this case, I have nothing else to say. I will entrust you with my daughter’s life, Mr Darcy. Not just because I cannot even dream about how to save her, but because as a man in love you will do whatever you can to bring her back.” As he spoke, he placed his hand on Mr Darcy’s good shoulder. “You have my blessing, son.

Do what you need to find our Lizzy.”

“Thank you, Mr Bennet,” Darcy said, shaking hands with his future father-in-law. “I shall. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go.”

Darcy turned and bumped into his uncle’s large frame at the library door, almost sending them both to the floor.

“What you mean you need to go, Darcy?” his uncle asked, regaining his balance.

Darcy’s wince took time to dissipate, and when he spoke, his voice was pained. “I need to send word for my men to prepare my carriage. I am going to Portsmouth.”

~ ? ~

The uproar in the Matlock residence was like nothing else before. Protestation and raised voices formed a loud cacophony that only stopped when Mr Duncan and Mr Lynch — now sober, clean and shaven — entered the house. Mr Darcy was introduced to the men and thanked them both for all they had done so far.

“Your arrival is well timed, Mr Duncan,” Darcy continued, “for I would like you to accompany me on this trip. I believe your services will be highly appreciated.”

“Mr Darcy, please take me with you as well,” Mr Lynch asked, surprising everyone in the room. “I might be an old sea dog, but I am better than a bloodhound. Portsmouth is a place I know well. I know I can help.”

Darcy promptly accepted it; he would need all the help he could get.

Once more, Lord Matlock tried to dissuade Darcy from this mad idea of travelling so soon. His reply was the same old stubbornness he saw perfected through the years in

the boys of his family. “Would you at least take Dr Alden with you? It would give us peace of mind,” he said trying a compromise.

Darcy finally agreed and the doctor was immediately summoned.

It was a quarter past ten when the great carriage with the Darcy crest left Lord Matlock’s house for its long and painful journey to Portsmouth.

And Darcy would not have it any other way.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

Riding through a sudden and relentless storm, wet and tired through to the bones, Richard and Captain Owen finally arrived in Portsmouth.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when they found the address of the local constable. Poor Mr Dayton, a fine and agreeable fellow in his mid-thirties, left the warmth of his bed to meet two soaked-through officers of His Majesty's Army on his doorstep.

"I am deeply sorry to wake you at this ungodly hour, Constable, but our mission demands immediate action. I am sure you will agree as soon as you are familiar with the details."

Mr Dayton was not surprised by the information, and quickly ushered the two men inside the house. After a pair of chairs not too fashionable to be ruined by their sloppy attire were provided, they shared their information about the smuggling ship, its supposed contents, and the possibility of such a ship being moored there at Portsmouth .

"Gentlemen, I have received a letter from London last night and was already planning a search in the area at first light. In the meantime, I recommend the Rose and Crown Inn for you to eat and rest. I promise to keep you informed of any news. Have your rest, that I am sure you must need, and meet me again here at eight o'clock. We should have some information by then."

Richard was glad to see that the place Mr Dayton suggested was comfortable and the owner very attentive, despite the hour. After having eaten and rested until the time suggested, the officers met again at the entrance of the inn and headed towards Mr

Dayton's house to see what information he had.

Mrs Dayton was up now, and tea and fresh bread was served while they talked.

"Colonel, Captain," Mr Dayton began, "I have conflicting information to share. We have found some small ships loaded with contraband and arrested some men, but there was no sign of any lady. Are you sure your informer is reliable?"

Richard rubbed his forehead. "Mr Duncan, a detective of Bow Street Runners, and my father, Lord Matlock, are the people who provided this information. I cannot believe they were mistaken. Perhaps we should widen our investigation in some other way."

The three men remained silent for some time.

Mr Dayton stood up. "You are quite right, Colonel. I will request the manifests of all ships and boats moored at this port and we can see if there is anything suspicious. But that will prove to be a time-demanding task," he said, rubbing his chin. Suddenly, his face lit up. "Ah. I believe I have the perfect solution for that. Maggie dear," Mr Dayton called, leaving for the kitchen, returning some minutes later with his wife beside him. "Gentlemen, we need to go to church."

Richard and Captain Owen exchanged surprised glances and hastened their pace to follow Mr Dayton out of the house. While they were on their way, a boy was sent to the port area with further instructions for his men to collect the manifests .

At the church, a group of women of all ages were already gathering. Mr Dayton explained that once a week all the ladies from their village were invited to the church to perform any kind of community service, and it was quite fortunate that this was the day for such an undertaking. His intention was to ask the ladies to read the manifests.

Despite the unorthodox approach, Richard could see the benefits of such a choice. The few men involved in keeping the law in the area were already engaged in searching the port, their task made more difficult by the inclement weather that had not abated since the early hours of that morning.

When the manifests finally arrived, Mr Dayton explained to the ladies what he expected from them, emphasising the great importance of pointing out anything unusual; even the slightest suspicion should be communicated to him personally.

Richard and Captain Owen were amused by the enthusiasm on the women's faces. They agreed to help, and in no time were reading the papers provided. It did not take more than an hour for one of them to find what she considered to be a very unusual passenger list. Half of the names of the passengers on one of the ships were preceded by the title Miss or Mrs .

The three men smiled. That was it. In this way, the kidnapped ladies were not cargo, but registered passengers — quite likely false names.

The boats and ships had already been inspected, so the remaining option was to go to the local houses, inns and hotels and look for the names that were on the list, claiming to solve some problems before they embarked.

Richard and Captain Owen took part in the searches and, although Portsmouth was not big, it took them half the day to discover that at least one third of the passengers were, in fact, the kidnapped ladies. They were found locked away, waiting to be transported to the ship, which would take them to their final destination.

But where?

It was hard and distressing work to invade houses, break down doors and arrest people, and the sight of some of the young women rescued was heartbreaking; some

of them had been kept in dreadful conditions for weeks. How had this business thrived so much under the nose of the authorities?

By midday, reinforcements arrived. Dozens of soldiers from the militia filled the surroundings of Portsmouth and the searches were re-established. More young women were discovered in the neighbourhood. Every house was meticulously searched. The women from the parish were very useful in encouraging their neighbours to open their houses and help with the search, enquiring about strangers in the region, or anything unusual. Dozens of men and women were arrested, letters were written and soon the town was beaming with the results.

But despite all their efforts, there was no sign of Wickham or Miss Elizabeth. If the information received from Lord Matlock was correct, tomorrow a ship would be leaving from a port, wherever it was. And that concerned Richard. Deeply.

Mr Dayton, on the other hand, was beyond satisfied. He was already dreaming about having his name included in the history books as ‘the constable who helped to disrupt a group of international pirates, smugglers and mercenaries in Portsmouth’. With all the twelve Miss and Mrs from the manifest list thoroughly checked, recovered and sent back to their families, he knew he had fulfilled his duty.

“Colonel, I will be forever grateful to you and Captain Owen for your invaluable help. God willing, we have finally put an end to this disgraceful chapter of our country’s history. I believe all outlaws involved, at least here in Portsmouth, were arrested. Thanks to you.”

“Indeed, Mr Dayton. And it is to your credit that we achieved such success,” Richard said thoughtfully. “But my mission is far from over. I am still looking for that particular young lady, and her captor.”

Neither Captain Owen nor Mr Dayton knew what to say. In the end, Mr Dayton

offered them a decent hot meal at his home and a place to dry their clothes after many hours in the heavy rain. The invitation was gladly accepted. It was already getting dark when the three men were back at the constable's house.

During the meal, Captain Owen thought about a possibility. "What if there is another departing point besides Portsmouth?"

Richard straightened his back and frowned while his mind engaged the idea. "That is indeed a possibility, Owen. Do you have a map, Mr Dayton?"

The remaining food and dishes were replaced by a map. It did not take them long to realise the number of possible places those smugglers could be setting off from; too many for their small group to reach in time.

Someone knocked on the door, and Mr Dayton left the table.

Richard groaned. After many hours keeping his temper under control, he was now extremely frustrated and angry. He did not know how to proceed or where to go. In a rare manifestation of lack of self-control, he hit his fists on the table, releasing a strong grunt. "Damn you, Wickham."

"Richard," a familiar voice came from behind him. "It seems you are in need of some help."

Richard turned and gasped. He could hardly believe his own eyes. "Darcy. What the hell?"

~ ? ~

Elizabeth opened her eyes, feeling someone poking her feet.

“Wake up. We have arrived,” Wickham said, leaving the carriage.

The coldness of his words brought Elizabeth back to reality. She tried to move, but her hands and feet were tied, and she felt a sharp pain in her head. A wave of nausea swept over her. An uncontrollable shiver ran down her body as cold and fear invaded her mind once again.

Wickham put his head back inside the carriage and extended a hand holding a small knife and cut the rope.

“Come,” he ordered.

“Where are we?” she mumbled, struggling to stand up.

Wickham grabbed her by the arm, pulling her out. “Brighton.” He looked at her face, now illuminated by some lanterns, and saw the fresh marks he had left on her already bruised face. Guilt shook him to his core. “I am sorry I hit you, but—”

“Do not dare apologise to me for any of this,” Elizabeth interrupted angrily. “If my fate is to be taken away and suffer for the rest of my life, at least one thing will bring me great consolation: that I will never be forced to see your face, ever again!”

Wickham flinched at her words and for a brief moment, he felt ashamed. He could not avoid that inner voice telling him what a monster he had become. But it was too late. He had a deal to close and his neck to save.

The bitter irony of his present situation did not escape him either. Had Brown died the day before, Wickham would not just be free from his debts, but would have avoided this sordid deal he had closed with those pirates — selling them Miss Elizabeth — and would be free to go. Damned fate!

“Very well then. Be it as you wish,” he said turning his attention to his companion. He motioned his head to the man who had been driving the carriage and told him to join them.

Johnson, as the driver was called, took a dagger from his boot, and held Elizabeth by the arm with the sharp object in her back.

As they walked at the weak light of some lanterns, her senses sharpened; the ground beneath her feet turned from sturdy earth to loose and noisy planks of woods; the strong, wet and salty wind, added to water sounds and moored boats hitting against the pier were enough to make her heart freeze. Brighton port. Boats. Sea. The world.

She looked around to see if she could find a way to escape, but the place was empty, with the exception of a couple of men ahead of them. She would never make it.

Approaching the two men, Wickham lifted his hand and Johnson stopped, pulling Elizabeth to a halt with him. Wickham approached the two men. They talked, and when he returned, she knew her fate had been sealed.

It was the end of her life as she had known it .

She thought about Mr Darcy — William — his tender kisses and his words of love, only hoping he was safe. She also thought about her family, and that she would never be able to see them again. Desperation suffocated the tiny bit of hope she had been clinging to.

Despite all the pain, Elizabeth would not let a single tear fall from her eyes. Whatever was ahead of her only God knew, and it was to Him that she commended her soul.

Only a miracle could save her now.

Wickham waved to Johnson, and the man led her inside one of the nearby fishing boats, big enough to accommodate three people. A mumbled sound of voices attracted her attention. She was surprised to see one of the men arguing with Mr Wickham. By the way he was reacting, it was not a good conversation.

“Mr Fisher,” Elizabeth heard Wickham whispering exasperated, “this is not what we have agreed. You said you could take her.”

“And when I agreed to take a passenger to the island, you didn’t mention it was a young woman!” the man hissed back. “You said a person . I don’t care for your troubles, sir, but I’m not taking her in my boat without a chaperone. My missus would be furious! Besides, women bring bad luck on a boat. I can’t be responsible for her safety. I’ll not take her if you don’t come with us.”

Wickham rubbed his hands over his face. “But I cannot go. Johnson,” he called to the man beside Elizabeth. “You go with them. When you are back, I will pay you more than we have agreed.”

Elizabeth turned to Johnson and whispered, “Ah, yes. He is going to pay you as he paid your other fellows.” The man widened his eyes to her. “Oh, he did not tell you about Mr Brown, did he? He is dead. And you will soon follow his fate if you listen to him.”

Johnson looked from Elizabeth to Wickham, then back again, pursing his lips. “I’m not going, sir,” he shouted back. “It’s your plan. You take her.”

Trembling and tightening his fists, Wickham plucked a small bag from his coat pocket and shoved it into Mr Fisher’s hands. “Here, I will pay you more. See? It is all yours! Now, take her with you.”

“I won’t take your money,” Mr Fisher said crossing his arms over his chest. “I won’t

take her alone. If you want the lady to be delivered, someone needs to come with us. Who is going to deliver her to her father's house once we get there?"

Wickham raked his hands through his hair, swearing all the vile words he could remember. Was it too much to ask? To hire a boat and send Elizabeth to the pirates in exchange for his life and a little money? Unfortunately, in his haste, he had not thought about this particular detail. Elizabeth was hardly going to leave the boat and run into the arms of a pirate.

He growled, cursing his luck again. That damned soldier from the militia had sold Wickham's debts to his cousin, Brown. But Brown — may his soul burn in hell for eternity — had his own debts with those pirates and had contacted them promising to pay them with a lady of quality.

Wickham did not want to sell Elizabeth, but when he tried to deal with the situation, things became even uglier. His life was threatened, and a slow and painful death promised — again. Brown and that damned Digory had agreed that Elizabeth's value would cover Brown's debts, plus some extra money to make the arrangements necessary to bring her to them. If Wickham failed to supply her, he would be hunted and killed as promised.

All because Brown could not die a day earlier.

It seemed Wickham did not have many options left. He would need to deliver Elizabeth personally. "Fine," he shouted. "I will go. But you will wait for me to come back, so we can leave the island as soon as possible. I will return her to them, I mean, to her family, and will come back with you."

At last, they agreed.

Wickham boarded the decrepit small boat thinking that the pirates would not need to

kill him after all. With his luck, the sea would take charge of it.

He approached Johnson, who was still holding Elizabeth. “You bloody idiot,” Wickham said quietly, spouting a series of curses and insults again. “Tie her to the berth and lock the door after you, and leave the port as soon as possible. And if you want to see your coins, meet me in two days at the arranged spot.” Then he turned to Elizabeth. “If you cause me any further problems, I swear, I will kill you, or Mr Fisher or whoever else gets in my way. I am a desperate man, Miss Elizabeth. Do not try me.” The rage in his eyes bore testimony to his sincerity.

Mr Fisher at last intervened. “This is no way to treat a lady. It doesn’t matter what she’s done.”

Wickham laughed. “You have no idea what she is capable of. Believe me. She is dangerous.”

Before Elizabeth could protest, Johnson dragged her inside one of the cabins, and did as instructed before leaving.

“Very well,” replied Mr Fisher. “You know her better. We sail at first light.”

“First light?” Wickham roared. “But I thought you... we were leaving now.”

Mr Fisher regarded Wickham with visible disdain. “Nobody sails off in a small boat like ours from a port as busy as this, with low tide in the dark. If there is a ship arriving, they won’t see us. We don’t want that, do we, Mr Wickham?” Wickham shook his head reluctantly. “Dawn should be in about three hours. I suggest you rest for now. You can use my cabin. I’ll stay with my son.”

“How long is it going to take us to arrive at Saint Anne Island?” Wickham asked anxiously. “I need to be there by tomorrow.”

“If the weather holds and we have good winds, we can reach the island in ten to twelve hours, fifteen at the most. Now rest.” Mr Fisher concluded and left.

“Darcy, what the hell are you doing here?”

“It is good to see you too, Richard,” Darcy said with a weak smile .

Astounded, Richard could not avoid noticing each detail of his younger cousin standing in front of him — face still disfigured by a swelling above his left eye, bluish marks all around, cuts on both sides of his mouth, his left arm still wrapped around his torso — and could think of nothing else but his own failure.

He was not expecting to confront Darcy so soon; guilt and shame filled his heart. Twice he had failed Darcy, neglecting in his care of Miss Elizabeth. Firstly, allowing Wickham to put his hands on her again, and now, for not being able to locate them. He just lowered his eyes.

Darcy approached his cousin and with his good arm pulled him into an embrace.

“I am sorry, Darcy,” Richard whispered, hugging him back. “I can only guess how it was to wake up and not finding—”

“It was not your fault, Richard. I do not blame you.”

And Darcy truly did not. But waking up and finding out Elizabeth had been taken again was the most bitter and painful thing he had ever experienced. But he knew better than to blame his cousin. Knowing him as Darcy did, he knew Richard was doing everything he could to find Elizabeth.

“Let us find her together, Richard. Let us find Wickham and put an end to all this

sordid business, once and for all.”

Richard let go of Darcy and looking into his eyes, he saw not only determination — but also the stubbornness by which his cousin was known. He nodded. “Yes. Let us find them together.”

Darcy returned to his companions, who were silently observing the interaction, and proceeded with the introductions. A report of the day’s activity and achievements was presented.

“I am glad. Indeed, very good news. I can only hope now that Mr Lynch, who is familiar with the town and the port, along with Mr Duncan’s help, can be able to reach places and people that you could not, and find out where that bloody pirate ship is,” said Darcy flaring his nostrils.

Mr Lynch and Mr Duncan left the house to make their way to the port and the local jail, as some of those arrested might have some information to share.

After their departure, Darcy excused himself to change and be attended to by Dr Alden. Once properly dressed, he sat to have something to eat, and Richard took the opportunity to talk to his cousin again. He was curious to learn how Darcy had managed to bear the journey from London to Portsmouth in his present condition.

Darcy’s countenance darkened at his cousin’s enquiries. “You above everybody else should know I could never stay back when so much is at stake; when Elizabeth’s life is in such danger. They say that love and hate are the two most powerful forces to move a man. I guarantee you I have plenty of both.”

“And how are you faring?”

Now Darcy smiled. “Not very well, I am afraid.”

“I do not need to ask about your heart,” Richard said, full of remorse. “I have already guessed what happened between you and Miss Elizabeth, but I would be more assured if, at least, you were not in much pain.”

“I am sorry, but I cannot oblige. Every part of my body hurts like hell. I cannot see very well with my left eye, and with these cuts to both sides of my mouth I am afraid to open it, fearing that the top of my head would be detached and fall.”

Richard, who was mortified by his cousin’s first words, frowned, finally realising Darcy’s teasing. “May the devil carry you, Darcy, you big buffoon!” he said, half angry, half relieved, smiling back at his cousin. They were in need of a good laugh.

Too soon the levity of their exchange was replaced by stern glances.

“Richard, I have left my new will with your father. If for any reason I am not able to come back, I have left Pemberley and half of everything I have to Georgiana. The other half I divided between you and Mr Bennet, hoping that Elizabeth does not share my fate. It is the least I can do for her and her family after she saved my life.”

“I am sure it will not come to that. We will find her, Darcy, and we all will return home. You will see.” Richard’s lips quivered. “So, did you manage to solve your problems with Miss Elizabeth? ”

Darcy gave him another weak smile and was about to relate his story, when the door was opened and Mr Duncan and Mr Lynch entered, their clothes soaked through. What a time for such strong storm. They were quickly conducted closer to the fire to dry themselves and have a hot drink.

“So, gentlemen, did you have any success?” Darcy asked.

Mr Duncan gave him a satisfied smile. “Indeed we ’ave, sir. Questioning some of the

men arrested today in exchange for deportation instead of 'anging was enough to find out that the real pirate ship has never moored in England. Instead, they sailed from the tiny Saint Anne Island, off the northwest coast of France. As we know, English smugglers and mercenaries started to add young ladies to their cargo of contraband recently. Considering that piracy practically ended in the Atlantic for some time now, those pirates are in fact supplying buyers from the east part of Europe at a market in Istanbul. They receive supply of goods and ladies from other countries as well. They plan to sail from the island on the 14th , or 15th at the latest if the weather wasn't favourable — which surely was the case today. It seems Providence is smiling at us, Mr Darcy. We 'ave a chance to reach them at last."

"Richard," Darcy said, standing up. "We will need a ship."

"I am sure there must be a ship belonging to the navy in Portsmouth," Richard said. "My father said he had contacted the Prime Minister and he has authorised us to seek help from the army or navy."

"You are right, Colonel," Mr Dayton intervened. "There are a couple of ships from the Royal Navy moored here. I confirmed it from the manifests we gathered this morning. One of them, I believe, would be perfect for the task ahead. I will send a man to ask the captain to receive us."

Around eleven o'clock that night, they received an invitation to meet the captain at their convenience. As for their request for help, the captain would just need to wait for an authorisation. Word would probably reach them by next morning.

After some further conversation, it was decided that Darcy, Richard, Dr Alden and Mr Lynch would go on board. Once the expected confirmation arrived, Captain Owen would take a message to Lord Matlock, informing him of their success in rescuing several young ladies, and all the remaining details of their possible sea journey. Mr Duncan would accompany Owen, as his services would be more useful in London

investigating the network around the kidnappings.

Soon enough, Darcy's carriage was ready and loaded, and the four gentlemen were on their way to the ship.

The Ulysses was a magnificent warship with an experienced crew. Its captain, Mr Benjamin Walker, was a serious man in his late forties, with enough scars on his body to testify to his tough life at sea in times of war.

Despite his stern demeanour, Captain Walker gave the group a warm welcome. "Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to receive you all on board the Ulysses . I am just sorry that the circumstances are so dreadful." He gave Mr Darcy a sympathetic look. The message had informed him about Mr Darcy's ordeal and the abduction of his betrothed.

Turning to the colonel, he continued. "I have heard many admirable stories about Lord Matlock and his family, serving king and country, not just in Parliament, but also in the battlefield. It is an honour, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Now, please, tell me all."

Once all the facts were finally presented, Captain Walker said, "Yes, I have heard stories about these new pirates, but was never asked to check on them. It seems that the war against France was regarded as a higher priority. But with this information, it would be a great mistake not to finish this bloody business as soon as possible. The fact that your betrothed is directly involved in this sad affair and further help was granted by the Prime Minister, I am sure Commodore Norton will not hold his approval."

"May I dare to believe the Ulysses would be ready to sail as soon as this authorisation arrives?" Richard asked. "As we mentioned before, our information is that the pirates would be leaving the day after tomorrow. If we cannot arrive at Saint Anne in time, it will mean a much longer pursuit down to the Mediterranean."

There was silence in the cabin. Darcy's heart was beating so loudly that he could almost believe his companions could hear it. He had not thought of such a possibility. He knew he would search for Elizabeth until the end of the world if necessary, but the more they delayed, the colder the clues leading to the pirates' location would turn — and only God knew what she was going through already.

Captain Walker's expression was one of confidence. "Gentlemen, the Ulysses is a very fast ship. We have an experienced crew, which I trust completely. I would say without doubt that when we receive a positive reply by morning, we will be ready to sail, at the latest, at sunset tomorrow, perhaps even earlier. If we have good winds and favourable weather, we should reach the island by the following morning."

The loud noise of sighs filled the room. Darcy felt hope growing in his chest again.

As nothing else could be done until morning, Captain Walker encouraged them to stay on board and rest, which was gladly accepted. Darcy, Richard and Dr Alden would share the guest cabin, while Mr Lynch would share one with the rest of the crew.

Dr Alden checked on Darcy's bandages again and helped him to change into his night clothes before going to rest.

Lying in his berth, Darcy looked beside him and saw his tired cousin already snoring. He could only imagine how exhausted Richard must be after such a busy and stressful day.

But Darcy could not rest. Elizabeth was out there, a hostage of evil and unscrupulous men. His concerns for her had been so intense that he did not even remember feeling any pain since arriving in Portsmouth.

He forced his thoughts to the captain's reassuring words and hoped that morning

would bring the news he was hoping for. He also prayed for her safety and begged the Lord to give him the strength to hope and believe they still could find her.

~ ? ~

Elizabeth was feeling sick. The movements of the boat were like a hammer hitting her head and stomach; the rope around her wrist scraping deep into her flesh. And if those things were not enough, she was fuming with anger and indignation. She had heard the conversation between Mr Fisher and Mr Wickham.

“So, he is taking me back to my family,” she muttered bitterly.

She sat on the berth and tried to calm herself. Losing control would not help.

Looking around, she noticed her cabin for the first time. It was very simple. There was a small table with a washing bowl, a dirty chamber pot, and the small berth where she was now lying. She grimaced at the smelly hay mattress and blankets. The thought of being forced to live under these conditions, enslaved, submitting herself to every whim of cruel men, brought back those persistent tears. At that moment, alone in the world, she could not hold them back anymore.

A loud thunder startled her. In a matter of minutes, the boat started rocking violently. A strong storm had reached them, throwing the moored boats against each other. The mixture of sounds was deafening.

Elizabeth could only pray now.

When the day finally broke, the news was the worst possible. Mr Fisher informed Mr Wickham they would not be able to sail until he could repair some of the damage, and if the storm did not abate, not even after that. “It seems today is not your lucky day.”

Wickham shut the small door after Mr Fisher left. “Damn!” he shouted, cursing and cursing again, until his throat grew sore. “If only I had not been so greedy.”

Digory, the pirate Brown had instructed him to contact in London, had given him enough money to hire a good boat. But Wickham had the brilliant idea of hiring a smaller vessel, saving the difference. After all, it was not as if he was swimming in gold.

Well, now he was paying a much higher price.

As the hours passed, his idleness only added to his distress. He decided to go and pay Miss Elizabeth a visit. He knew she would not welcome him, but the worst she could do was to ignore or attack him. In both cases, he could easily cope with her, considering she was tied to her berth.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said, unlocking the door to her cabin and entering, putting his handkerchief over his mouth and nose. The smell there was repulsive, much worse than in his own cabin.

Elizabeth sat up on the berth narrowing her murderous eyes. She was about to send him to hell, when she thought better of it. There were many questions to which she still had no answers.

“Well, well, if it is not my favourite travel companion. Make yourself comfortable, Mr Wickham. Perhaps you can find a place to sit on, well... the dirty chamber pot or this smelly, decayed mattress.”

He had the decency to blush, then smiled, trying his old charming tricks. “I thought about keeping you company. It has been a long day.”

“I would rather enjoy being stricken by scarlet fever than having you as company, Mr

Wickham,” said Elizabeth calmly. “But considering my situation, I do not think I have a choice, do I? I am tied to this berth and nowhere to go. Why do you not untie me and then we can talk?”

“Ah. But this is your own fault, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Are you afraid of me, Mr Wickham? I am not even armed,” she said, looking at his boot where the sheath of his small knife could be seen.

Wickham laughed nervously, following her eyes. “Let me just say that I do not gamble anymore.”

“About that,” Elizabeth started. “I was wondering. The house where we were imprisoned. Did it belong to a friend of yours? Seeing the other men, simpletons as they were, they could not boast such good connections, could they?”

Wickham smiled, missing the hidden sarcasm. Suddenly, he seemed too eager to talk and forget their circumstances, grabbing the opportunity as a dog would grab a meaty bone.

“Indeed, Miss Elizabeth. You are very perceptive. That house belonged to a very rich widow. Lady Margaret Wilson. Despite being... well, much older than me, she and I were... close.” He swallowed hard and his expression darkened. “Unfortunately, she passed away at the beginning of this year. That was when my luck turned sour.” He moved closer to the small porthole, admiring it as if it was a very fine piece of art.

Elizabeth could easily guess how Wickham had gained the widow’s favour. She could well envision it: an old and solitary widow, and a man eager to comfort.

Mr Wickham knew how to be charming.

Liar .

A bitter taste came to her mouth at the memory of how she too had been so gullible.

“That was when I returned to gambling,” Wickham explained. “While she was alive, she had this amusing inclination to indulge every one of my whims.” He frowned. “But she fell ill after the terrible winter. Her lungs became weak, the doctor said.” Wickham lowered his eyes and, for some seconds, was silent. “She did not last three weeks. The house was closed, of course, but I kept my keys.”

His expression turned to one of sadness again. For a long time, he did not say a word, looking at the deserted port and wild sea through the small porthole.

“The doctor who attended her was the same one who attended your beloved Darcy, Miss Elizabeth. I sent him a message, asking him for his assistance again, to go in aid of an acquaintance. I told him that Brown and his friend, Smith, were having fun, trying a hunting party before the season, and that one of his stupid men had accidentally shot Smith. I told him I had offered them the use of the house due to the seriousness of the event. Dr Hayford was not aware I had left the militia, so I told him Mr Brown would be there looking after his wounded friend without me.”

Wickham proceeded to tell her all about his debts to his fellow companion in the militia, how this was connected with Brown and, finally, his current situation with the pirates.

Elizabeth felt her rage emerge like lava of a volcano. “Enough! If you expect any commiseration from my part, Mr Wickham, you can go to hell and wait it to get cold before I comply. You reap what you sow. It is a pity, though, that an intelligent man was wasted in such low designs. If you had used your talents for a good cause, I have no doubt you would be under very different circumstances. Instead...” She stopped and looked straight into his eyes. If he was to outlive her, then he would live with the

memory of her scorn. “Instead, you wasted years of your father’s hard work, just because that was not good enough for you. You did not want to work hard for anything. You wanted what was not yours. You envied position and status. For goodness’ sake! You seduced Mr Darcy’s sister and I am not sure if marrying her was ever your plan!”

“I did what I needed to survive! I am not the monster you think I am.”

“Does it matter now? Look at us. My present situation is proof enough. You are a miscreant, Mr Wickham; a scoundrel as Mr Darcy said once, and I hated him for it. You disgust me. Leave me. Now! I cannot bear to look at you anymore.”

Wickham flinched at her words, turning his back to her. He had made a mistake. She could hurt him. Deeply. She could remind him the reality of what he had been trying to forget about himself. He swallowed hard. For the first time in his life, he regretted some of his actions.

Wickham made for the door, but then turned back and fetching his knife, cut the rope around Elizabeth’s wrist, then he left, closing the door after him.

Sometime after Wickham had left her cabin, Elizabeth heard Mr Fisher talking to him. The damage to the boat had been mended, but they would not be able to set sail yet, as the sea was still too rough for their small boat. She looked through the porthole. The wind was lifting waves like walls of water, battering against their small boat.

Some hours later, she heard the clanging of keys again. This time it was Mr Fisher. He entered her cabin carrying a tray. “I suggest you eat something. That is the only meal for today. I was not expecting this storm to last this long. It’ll be dark soon, but I can’t give you a candle. I’ll come back tomorrow. There is a small pot under the berth if you need it. You can empty it through the porthole.”

He left the tray on the small table and looked at her with some guilt in his eyes, shaking his head. Whatever the man was thinking of her, it was probably the worst due to Wickham's lies.

"Thank you, Mr Fisher, but—"

"I'm sorry, miss," Mr Fisher interrupted her, raising his hand. "I can't talk to you. It's part of my agreement with Mr Wickham. He warned me that you would try to insinuate yourself on me to obtain my favour. I might be poor, but I'm an honourable married man," he said as he left.

Before she could recover from the shock of such slander, the door was closed. She ran and bumped her fists against it, shaking the door handle. "Mr Fisher, please. Please!"

She spent some time holding her breath until the stinging tears abated. Walking back to the small table, she looked at the meal: something similar to a stew, two pieces of stale bread and a small jar of water — which she would lose very soon, if the up and down of the boat were any indication.

She fetched the spoon and ate, hoping the food would poison her or make her sick and die — by its appearance, that did not seem impossible.

Both thoughts perversely pleased her. It would save her from a much worse fate.

Once finished, she put the tray away and laid down, trying to find a reason to keep living.

There she stayed for minutes, hours — who could tell? Anxiety and boredom pushed her to the limit of reason.

“Why not finish it before it gets worse?” she burst out, standing up again. Her mind was now wandering, giving up as the darkness of the stormy day invaded her cold cabin — and soul. “At least, if I die, Mr Wickham would find himself with a much greater problem.” She laughed, and then she stopped.

She was losing her mind.

Her eyes darted around the cabin, imagining how to end her life in a fast and painless way. Among the many objects at her reach, the spoon caught her attention. She allowed her imagination to fly, conjuring up all the possible ways using such an object for the morbid task.

How would Mr Wickham react on seeing her lifeless body on the floor ?

She allowed herself some more minutes of madness, then she sighed. She could not take her own life, and she could not simply kill Wickham in cold blood, despite all the hatred she felt towards him. She had killed Brown, granted, but the circumstances were far different.

Shivering, she shut her eyes. The feeling of utter hopelessness was breaking her spirit, slowly choking it; even the tears had dried, there was just an empty lethargy to which she finally surrendered.

God help her; she wanted to die.

But Mr Darcy’s face slowly appeared before her, his dark eyes on her, his warm, soft lips on her sore ones, kissing her with such passion that took her breath away. He had risked his life to save her. “ If I live and you live...” she had said.

She shook her head, bringing both hands to her eyes as if the movement could bring back her hope, or escape the dark hole engulfing her soul.

She could not die. She could not give up.

A thunder interrupted her sombre thoughts. They had spent almost the whole day docked because of that storm.

A sparkle of hope rekindled.

She stood and went to the porthole, seeing the wild waves and darkening sky with different eyes. Every minute they had spent waiting to set sail, was another minute Mr Darcy could use to find her.

She grabbed this small hope as a drowning person would grab a piece of floating wreck in that sea.

She would believe. And trust. And wait. And with the help of God, Mr Darcy would find his way to her.

Outside, Mr Fisher's voice shouting orders startled her.

She closed her eyes in prayer.

They were departing.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

14th April 1816

Darcy awoke with the sound of men shouting. He looked through the porthole. Against the pink and orange dawn, he could see the figures of the men working frenetically. A smile graced his features. 'After the storm comes the calm' is the saying, and he would believe it.

"Morning, Darcy," Richard said, joining him at the porthole.

"Morning, Richard."

"It seems the preparations for us to leave have already started. We should go on deck and see the captain."

Darcy looked across at Dr Alden and noticed the old man was still deep in his sleep. "Would you mind helping me to change my clothes? This thing..." Darcy said, pointing to his wrapped shoulder.

Richard smiled at Darcy. His cousin seemed a different man. More human? The look in Darcy's eyes, as he asked for help, was not the same since last year: arrogant and full of self-importance. But there was something beyond humbleness. Darcy's expression this morning was hopeful and determined.

And that was exactly what they needed.

Once they got dressed, they went up to the deck. Mr Lynch was already there, working; his face had that glad expression of someone being back home.

There were men everywhere, and none of them was idle. Captain Walker was at the stern of the ship, shouting his orders, when he saw Richard and Darcy. “Morning, gentlemen.” He had a grin on his scarred face. “I hope you slept well, because I have good news. I received a letter about half an hour ago. Commodore Norton gave orders for us to set sail as soon as possible and do whatever is necessary to finish this piracy business once and for all. He also advised me to allow your presence on the ship, something that is not usual on a mission like this,” he said, giving Darcy a significant look. “If everything goes according to my plans, we should be setting sail by noon. We can reach the island six hours earlier than I originally planned. Now, if you will excuse me.”

Darcy turned to his cousin and smiled. “We will find her, Richard. I know it. God help us, we will.”

Richard patted his cousin’s good shoulder. “Yes. We will.”

Excited, Richard excused himself and went back to the cabin to write the news to his father, together with another one, more personal, to Miss Bennet. He hoped to come back, and court and marry her. But in the inconvenience of not being able to do so, he would like her to know of his regards for her.

As soon as his letters were written, he went back to the deck and asked one of the men to deliver his mail to Captain Owen in the constable’s house.

Dr Alden joined them at the upper deck and received the news with equal enthusiasm.

In the next couple of hours, the frenzy on board the ship was beyond anything the three gentlemen had ever seen. Members of the crew were running from one side to the other, carrying goods and heavy munition, shouting commands in incomprehensible words, pulling ropes and turning wheels. Around eleven o’clock, when everything was as it should be, Captain Walker gave the command everyone on

board was anxiously expecting. “Mr Chase, haul short the anchor and make sail. We have a pirate ship to capture.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Mr Chase replied. “Haul the anchor and make sail!” he shouted to the crew, the order echoing throughout the ship. In a few minutes, they were leaving the port as the hoisted sails were billowing with the power of the wind.

Later, once calm was restored and the crew set into their routine, Darcy approached the captain. “It has been quite some time since I have put my feet on board a ship, Captain. But I must confess I never saw such efficiency.”

Captain Walker was satisfied with his comments. “Mr Darcy, the Ulysses is what the Royal Navy calls a fifth-rate warship, with two hundred and fifty crew and thirty-two cannons. Our objective is to be fast and agile. Every single man on this ship is prepared not just to act as a sailor, but also as a soldier. Efficiency is not a commodity, Mr Darcy, it’s the only way to survive.”

These last words brought a silent discomfort for the three gentlemen.

“Gentlemen, do not be disheartened,” the captain added, trying to appease them. “I have never fought against pirates, but I have fought against Napoleon’s frigate, and we have the upper hand. If the wind keeps its strength, we should be at Saint Anne Island before midnight. This island has been used as a whaling station for many years and has just one small village. It will not be difficult to find them. But be advised. If we encounter any resistance, my orders are to sink the pirate ship and avoid their escape.”

Darcy and Richard exchanged concerned glances.

Captain Walker approached Mr Darcy. “I will do everything in my power to recover your betrothed, and all the other prisoners, sir. However, I cannot guarantee their

safety while they are on that ship. That is why we need a solid rescue plan. Those pirates know their end is in a hangman's noose. They will never surrender."

Darcy paled. He looked around him, at the land left behind and the Isle of Wight they were contouring to reach the English Channel ahead of them. There was nothing else he could do, so he just nodded. Their fate was in God's hands. He needed to keep his faith, and the belief that they could rescue Elizabeth without causing her any harm.

Seeing his sombre countenance, Captain Walker was moved by compassion for the young man before him. He had been young once and as any other man of the sea, had had his sweetheart waiting for him back home. It brought back the sad memory of his beautiful wife, dying in childbirth many years ago. He had lost his young wife and a son in one night. From all the bloody battles he had fought and all the death he had seen, nothing caused him more devastation than that loss. He would have done anything to save his wife and son — if only it had been in his power to do so. But it was not meant to be. He had not become bitter, though. He knew many things were beyond his reach and despite his struggles, he had learnt to accept them.

But if it were in his power to recover Mr Darcy's betrothed, he would do exactly that.

~ ? ~

After their midday repast, Darcy found his cousin at the stern of the ship, distractedly looking at the sea.

"Richard, would you fence with me?"

Richard looked back at him and frowned. "Darcy, you are not fit enough for that yet."

"That is precisely my point, Richard. I need to know if I can fight. The captain will not allow me to leave the ship if he does not believe I can defend myself. I cannot

stay behind, Richard. I simply cannot.”

Richard could perfectly understand his cousin’s concerns. But Darcy could not be allowed to disembark with them in his present condition. He would be a hindrance, jeopardising their efforts to rescue Miss Elizabeth and anyone else, even putting his own life in danger. Darcy should be able to see it. Richard considered the alternatives. Perhaps if Darcy was made to see that he was in no condition to fight, he would give up. “Very well. Let us look for a place.”

They enquired of the crew where would be a good area for them to practise, and Mr Chase suggested the cannon deck. As the crew were not expected to be there until much later, the area was spacious and should be empty for some time.

“Darcy, I will allow you to set the pace,” Richard said, once they were ready to start. “Although we have not fought for some time, I am well aware you are a very good swordsman. But how good you are with just one arm is now to be seen. En garde !”

Richard’s attack was quite precise, not intended to hit his cousin, but get close enough to provoke him. Darcy’s defence was good enough to evade the attack, but not strong enough to convince an enemy.

“Again!” Darcy shouted.

As the attacks and defences progressed, Richard was impressed. Instead of showing weakness, Darcy seemed possessed by a determination that defied comprehension. He was relentless. Only the wrinkles and drops of sweat accumulating on his face were evidence of his pain. He would not give up until he knew he had a chance in a real combat.

It did not take long for the clanging sound of their swords to reach the ears of the crew, who were now perched along the stairs, jostling each other to have a better

view of the extraordinary sight before them as the two gentlemen fought. Instead of shouts of encouragement, as it would be expected from dozens of men watching a fight, there was an almost reverent silence.

When the fight was over, and although there was no winner, a round of applause could be heard from behind the two men. Richard and Darcy startled at the sound of the crew cheering them.

And to their much greater surprise, from the small crowd gathered at the stairs, the captain himself approached them. "Colonel, it will be my honour to fight at your side should the opportunity present itself. Your skills are remarkable. And you, Mr Darcy," Captain Walker said, turning his attention to the bandages around Darcy's shoulder before raising his eyes to the man's face, "I confess I am quite impressed with your performance, despite your present limitation. You are not a military man, but you fight as one."

"Thank you, Captain. Growing up with an older cousin can have its advantages," Darcy said, pointing his sword towards Richard.

The two cousins smiled at each other and went to their cabin for a well-deserved rest.

As the hours passed, the crew began to rehearse tactical manoeuvres, loading and unloading the cannons, cleaning pistols and sharpening swords. Richard was happy to provide some help in this respect.

Darcy spent most of his time resting in the cabin after their fight, pleased with Dr Alden's comments about the satisfactory healing process of his wound, despite his foolishness to resume physical activity.

Later, while taking a walk to stretch his legs, Darcy found Richard again. This time his cousin had his eyes closed and a fist pressed to his mouth.

“Is something troubling you, Richard? I mean, beyond the purpose of our journey.”

Richard took a deep breath. “I was thinking about a lady I have met.”

“A lady, Richard?” Darcy asked, his face lit.

“Yes. Miss Bennet,” Richard said distracted.

Darcy stared at him, confused.

“I am sorry, Darcy,” Richard said smiling. “I meant to say, Miss Jane Bennet.”

“Oh, I see,” Darcy said, actually not seeing anything.

Richard was now looking down at a chain dangling around his neck. “I believe I love her.”

Darcy’s brows raised, mouth agape.

His reaction amused Richard. Not even he could understand it. “We have not had the opportunity to talk about it, but after you and Miss Elizabeth were kidnapped, Mrs Collins wrote a letter to Mr Bennet at my request. He arrived that same afternoon with Miss Bennet to keep him company. We spent a lot of time together, talking and sharing our pain, encouraging and comforting each other.” He looked at his shocked cousin. “We did not know if either, or both, of you were dead or alive. When we heard about you and Miss Elizabeth being held hostage at Eastbourne, I promised Miss Jane I would do whatever was necessary to bring her sister back. As we were saying our goodbyes, she gave me this.” He showed Darcy the golden cross hanging around his neck. “She asked me to come back and return it to her.”

Darcy nodded, once side of his mouth curving up. “I see.”

The sudden prospect of having Richard not only as his cousin, but also as his true brother, brightened Darcy's countenance. He knew Elizabeth would be very happy. Richard was the best husband he could desire for his future sister-in-law.

"What can I say? If you are serious about it, I will give you all my support. You could not have made a better choice, especially considering Elizabeth is no longer available," Darcy said mischievously, resting his hand on Richard's shoulder, remembering his initial thoughts about Bingley and Miss Bennet's unsuitability. "I dare say you two would be perfect for each other. Miss Bennet is the most amiable and kindest lady I have ever met."

Richard chuckled. "I thought you should be saying that about your betrothed, Darcy."

"Elizabeth is very kind too, but in another way. While Miss Bennet has a serene and loving nature, Elizabeth is more passionate and impetuous. She has a peculiar way of showing her concerns, and love. You know what she is capable of doing."

Richard nodded, but his levity was gone. "Was Miss Bennet the lady Bingley snubbed? Was it about her family you were talking when you mentioned her unsuitability and lack of decorum?"

Darcy averted his eyes but nodded.

"And how is it that you ended up betrothed to Miss Elizabeth after all?" Richard asked, truly confused. "The day before you were kidnapped..." Richard lowered his eyes, ashamed. "I... inadvertently confirmed your prejudiced views of their neighbourhood."

"I had my suspicions. I remembered the way you were silently trying to warn me when I left Aunt Catherine's drawing room." He paused and then said, "I asked for Miss Elizabeth's hand in marriage that night."

“Well, I should hope so. You have been informing everyone that she is your betrothed,” Richard said, laughing.

“Unfortunately, you are partially correct. She rejected me.”

Richard frowned. “W—what do you mean?”

Darcy slapped his cousin’s back in jest. “It seems we are destined to shock each other today. I went to her that night, so sure that she wanted me as much as I wanted her. I poured my heart out to her, but not without mentioning some of my feelings for her family...” Darcy paused at the sound of Richard’s gasp. “Let me just say she was not very subtle in her displeasure. Actually, she was quite vocal. In truth, she despised me for the way I had treated her, her family, and indirectly for supporting Bingley in his decision to leave Hertfordshire, and for treating Wickham in an unfair way.”

Richard’s jaw fell as Darcy revealed not only the details of that fateful night, but also how later they had the opportunity to clarify everything and to unmask the truth about their feelings for each other. “I have been an arrogant ass,” he concluded. “Both Elizabeth and Miss Bennet have forgiven me for my shameful behaviour, Richard. Could you do the same?”

Richard was surprised by his cousin’s humble request, and opened his mouth to reply, but could not find the words. He loved Darcy more than he loved his own older brother. In his cousin, just two years his junior, he had found a true friend and companion for their childish adventures. Unfortunately, as the years passed, adult responsibilities gradually replaced their leisure time. England’s war against France had taken Richard to the Continent, and Darcy’s father’s unexpected death had thrown him into a world of duty, responsibilities and work; they were as far away from each other as it was possible. In Richard’s absence, Darcy had turned into a bitter, cynical and arrogant man. Richard remembered his surprise when he returned. He had found Darcy to be almost a stranger. But he could not blame Darcy for it. Had

he not seen the horrors of war, he probably would be the same. English society could be very hypocritical.

“I could, but there is nothing for me to forgive,” Richard said. “I cannot judge you. You always were a good man, and the best of friends. We were raised to fulfil our duty. Unfortunately, that also changed our perception of the world; always waiting for those outside our circle of friends and family to prey on us. But I am pleased to know you realised your mistakes and are determined to change your ways without needing to go to war as I did.”

After a moment of silence, Darcy looked at Richard with some mischief in his eyes. “Miss Bennet said she believes you can bring Elizabeth back to her. She said she trusts you. I confess I was a bit embarrassed to remind her that, actually, it was I who was going to rescue her sister... but—”

Darcy’s words were interrupted when a strong hand gently squeezed his good shoulder. “Do not dare to mess with my girl,” Richard said frowning.

They both burst into laughter.

Richard let go of his cousin and looked back at the sea, so different from the day before. “We will soon return home, Darcy. You will see. And God will help us.” He closed his fist around the little cross and kissed it.

To their great surprise, a strong wind began to hit the ship.

It did not take long for the captain to shout a new command. “Mr Chase, we have good winds! Set studding sails.”

“Aye, aye, Captain. Set studding sails!” Mr Chase repeated to the crew. Immediately, the extra sails were released, capturing the strong wind and adding some valuable

knots to their speed.

Darcy and Richard approached the captain, who turned to them with a bemused expression on his face. “It is curious, gentlemen. The sea was as calm as my bath, and now this,” he said, indicating to the sails. “If I was a religious man, I would say God is blowing at us right now. Whether this is the case, I know not, but I will not waste a good blessing.”

~ ? ~

“Land, ho!”

Elizabeth was startled from her stupor by the shout. After partially recovering her senses, she stumbled to the porthole and saw a tiny island on the horizon.

Her long and painful confinement, the up and down of the small ship and lack of fresh air during their sea journey, had caused a terrible headache and nausea, and she had vomited several times.

Barely able to stay on her feet, Elizabeth went to the table and poured some water in the bowl to wash her face. The reflection in the small mirror hanging on the wall was not the most welcome one. She looked terrible; she felt terrible. Not having the means to brush her hair or have a proper bath for three days, and having passed God knows how many hours in company with that rotten hay mattress and the smelly chamber pot, twice filled with her urine and many others with her vomit, her smell could kill a pig.

Despite her pitiful situation, she laughed. At least her appearance would surely keep any man away.

The door opened, and Mr Fisher came in. “I brought you some tea. We’ll dock in

about one hour. Be prepared to leave—”

“How long have we been sailing?” Elizabeth interrupted before Mr Fisher could leave again.

He stared at her. “About fifteen hours. The winds, although strong, were not in our favour.” And with those words he left.

Fifteen hours! No wonder she was feeling so bad.

Recovering from her shock, she remembered his order. As if she had anything to prepare. She did not believe she could keep anything in her stomach, but she drank the tea.

One hour later, the sound of men shouting told her of their proximity to the port. She went to the porthole, but it was facing the sea. More men were talking, some more shouting, strange noises, bumps, and then silence. They had moored.

She looked around searching for something, anything that she could use to escape, but it was too late. Wickham was at her door with a stern expression on his face.

“Come. ”

She did not obey. He roughly reached for her hand, putting it in the crook of his arm. From inside his coat, he poked her with his dagger. “Shhh. Not a single word. There is no one here to help you,” he said, pulling her through the small cabin door.

As they stepped off the boat, Mr Fisher gave her one last look, but did not say anything. When she looked back, his eyes were still on her, but she knew he would not help. Soon he was out of sight as they walked along the extension of the small port.

Saint Anne's port was not big or busy. Apart from a few small vessels and fishing boats, there were just a couple of large ships.

Mr Fisher's son ran towards them from the opposite direction. "Mr Wickham, Captain Macedo is waiting for you in his cabin. It is the last big ship over there."

Wickham said nothing but nodded. He glanced at Elizabeth, who noticed the small beads of sweat on his upper lip.

"Is this the meeting you have been fearing—"

The sharp point of the dagger reminded her of his initial order. Wickham looked at her and shook his head, pulling her along again.

As they approached the ship, a short, tanned man came to greet them.

Digory .

"Ah! Mr Wickham, nice to see you again. El Capitan te aguarda . Please, your weapons." He inspected Wickham's clothes and confiscated his pistol and dagger. Before Elizabeth could think about escaping, the tanned little man grabbed her arm. "Senorita, por aqui ," he said, pointing to the plank which connected the pier to the ship.

Once on board, she noticed some other dirty gazes staring at her hungrily. She swallowed hard as they were admitted into the captain's cabin. The small man released her arm and closed the door behind him.

Despite the large windows, the room was dark, and smelled of tobacco and something acrid. The few pieces of furniture were scattered around the room: a bed in the far corner, many chairs and two tables. By the smaller one, crowded with paper and

strange objects, two men stood; another man, scarred and bearded, sat behind it, writing .

Noticing their presence, he put down his quill and stood, walking in their direction. By his haughty demeanour Elizabeth could only guess he was Captain Macedo.

His tanned skin was wrinkled with white marks around the eyes, and many white hairs tinted his dark, untamed curls at his temples. Now close enough to notice the smell of rum and cigars in his breath, Elizabeth raised her gaze and his black and penetrating eyes told her of a merciless man used to having his every whim attended to, as did the menacing yellowish smile now forming at his mouth. He was not a tall man, just a bit taller than her, but his tight jacket and breeches denounced his strength.

She was doomed.

He turned his eyes to Wickham and twisted his nose as if looking upon a worm. “You are late.”

Wickham trembled, and before he could reply, the captain raised his hand to silence him.

Then, he turned to Elizabeth again. She held her breath as his exploratory eyes narrowed when resting on the bruises of her lips and cheek. He lowered his gaze to her body, to her décolletage, and sneered, then to her waist, slowly walking around as if checking whether the commodity was good enough for his taste. Then he stopped. “Muy bonita , Mr Wickham,” he whispered, still sneering. “You have not exaggerated. She is a beauty. I will keep her.”

Grabbing Elizabeth’s face, he pulled her towards him as his thin lips sucked hers. She gagged and he released her, laughing aloud.

She tried to slap him, but he held her wrist. “You, my dear, will need to get used to that,” said Macedo with his strong accent. “I, on the other hand, cannot abide smelly women. Gonzales, send word for Consuelo. La senorita needs a bath and a new gown,” he added, turning his nose. “We cannot allow a beautiful lady to remain like that. Ahora, hombre. ”

Elizabeth gagged again, rubbing her mouth with the back of her sleeves as one of the men made haste to leave.

“Jose,” Captain Macedo called to the other man, “take the lady to her cabin. I have business to discuss with Mr Wickham. ”

Elizabeth tried to protest, but the widened eyes of Wickham persuaded her not to say anything, at least for now, so she followed the man.

On her way out, she saw Captain Macedo striking Wickham’s face, sending him against the table.

“I am always telling the same thing! I like my women unblemished, and you almost ruined her face...” she heard as the door closed.

Elizabeth shivered at the thought of what those words could mean. After that disgusting kiss, she had no more doubts; death was a far more preferable option. Shutting her eyes, she conjured with all her will the memory of William’s passionate kiss to erase the sour taste on her mouth. God help her, but she would die before kissing another man — especially Captain Macedo.

When they reached her cabin on the third deck below, Jose took the large key ring from his pocket and opened the door.

What she saw inside churned her stomach. At least five other young women were

cooped up inside the small and dirty cabin; bruised and pale faces grew in horror as the door opened, denouncing their mistreatment. Jose shoved Elizabeth into the room and closed the door behind her.

The rest of the day was a nightmare. The young women were scared to death. When one of them calmed, another one would cry, and they would all become hysterical again. Elizabeth tried every possible way to comfort them, but her efforts were in vain; they could not even understand her language and flinched every time Elizabeth extended her hand. She wondered about how long they had been kept there.

Around nine o'clock that evening, a big pan filled with pieces of bread and a bucket of water were shoved inside their cabin. Elizabeth could not hold back her tears as the scene of the beautiful young ladies fighting for a piece of stale bread unrolled before her.

If Mr Darcy could not reach her in time...

The door was opened again, and an old lady came in and shouted out in a very strong accent, "Elizabete."

Elizabeth assumed she was Consuelo and stepped forward .

The old lady grabbed her by the arm. "Come."

Cries of panic and despair grew behind her as the door was closed again.

The old woman took her down the corridor to another empty cabin where Jose stood with the key ring. She exchanged a couple of words in their language and the man closed the door behind them. Inside, there was a bath filled with lukewarm water, and a fancy red gown awaited her on the berth. The old woman stripped Elizabeth from her old and dirty clothes and pushed her into the aromatic bath. Consuelo was quick

in her task of washing Elizabeth's body and hair. In less than ten minutes, she was done.

The old woman pulled Elizabeth from the bath, looking at her naked body and nodding in an approving way. Elizabeth could only shiver, powerless. She dried and dressed Elizabeth and, when she had finished pinning her hair, Consuelo called for Jose to escort Elizabeth back to the captain's cabin.

A shiver ran down Elizabeth's body at the thought of what was waiting for her.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

“My lord, Captain Owen arrived with a message from Colonel Fitzwilliam,” the butler said breathless after opening the door to the drawing room.

“Thank God!” cried Lord Matlock. “Oh, yes, yes, Cason. Bring him in.”

Captain Owen was shown into the drawing room, where all were gathered, with the exception of Mr Bennet, who was still in his room.

“Lord Matlock, ladies. I have a letter for you, sir, if you please.”

“Thank you, Owen.” Lord Matlock took the letter. “If you ladies excuse me, I will read it in the library. But first things first. Cason, please prepare a bath and a meal for the captain. I am sure he is in great need of both. ”

After reading his letter, Lord Matlock’s large body sank in the armchair as he sighed. Good news at last: young ladies rescued, criminals arrested, Darcy’s safe arrival, and the involvement of Captain Walker and his crew in pursuit of those damned pirates.

His eyes returned to the part where Richard tells him about his feelings for Miss Bennet, and his audacious request to pass a note to her. Lord Matlock thought about having two of his dear boys falling for the power of the Bennet sisters and smiled. He had always tried to be a good man, fair and just, and could see the same desire in his brave younger son. God knew where they were and whether they would succeed. If he could give his son this small comfort, he would. But was Miss Bennet returning Richard’s feelings in the same way? By the way they were interacting in the last few days, it was quite likely, but yet to be confirmed.

He stood and returned to the drawing room.

Captain Owen was upstairs refreshing himself after briefly informing the ladies about what had occurred. Lord Matlock approached Miss Bennet and asked her to follow him to the library.

Firstly, he confirmed the good news and then added, “Miss Bennet, Richard has made me an unusual request. He asked me to give you a small letter. I hope you do not consider it improper. I also hope you can understand his reasons. If you cannot, I beg you to disregard his request and forgive him, ignoring his letter.”

Jane, who was now crimson, nodded shyly. “I would be happy to receive his letter, if this is acceptable to you, my lord.”

Lord Matlock smiled. His doubts were put to rest. He extended his hand with the letter in it.

Giving him a quick glance, Jane took the letter and thanked him.

“You can stay here, if you wish. You will have more privacy to read your letter.”

Jane thanked him again. As soon as Lord Matlock closed the door behind him, she broke the seal .

My dear Miss Bennet,

I hope the pain of knowing I was not able to rescue your sister was not too overwhelming. I cannot blame you for being disappointed with me, and for that I can only beg your forgiveness. Your feelings now cannot be too different from what mine have been.

However, with the arrival of my cousin and the excellent news that Captain Walker and his warship are engaged in our endeavour, I can tell you my hopes are restored, and I humbly renew my promise to bring your sister back. With Darcy at my side, I have a new incentive. The man is courage and determination itself, and absolutely in love with your sister.

And talking about love, please, allow me a few more words. The token you have given me is hanging close to my heart. If for any reason I cannot return to give it back to you, I would like you to remember me as one who admired you deeply, although this would be just part of the truth.

The whole truth is that, since the first moment I saw you, your beauty surprised me. But after spending some time with you, I found that your caring nature, kindness and gentleness are, in fact, your strongest qualities. The beauty of youth vanishes, but the steadiness of a kind heart is timeless and as precious as a treasure.

Please, never change it.

I do not have much to offer beyond the heart of a man who found someone special to admire, respect, and love. I only pray to God this can be enough.

Your humble servant,

Richard

His written words were a balm for her sore heart. Jane pressed his letter against her chest after reading it again a couple of times, and wept. Lowering her head, she raised a desperate prayer, begging the Lord to bring them all safely back home.

~ ? ~

About seven o'clock that evening, Captain Walker and his guests went to his cabin for their meal, where they started discussing the last details of their endeavour.

"Gentlemen, if my calculations are correct," Captain Walker began, opening a map on the table, "we should arrive at Saint Anne in about two hours, much sooner than I thought. Fortunately, we will still be covered by darkness. The element of surprise will give us a huge advantage. I am planning to anchor the ship in this hidden part of the island, at the north-east area, here, at Corblet Bay," he said, pointing at the map. "With small waves and sandy beaches, it is the perfect point to reach land by rowboats. We just need to be aware of possible sentinels. As the island is very small, no more than a mile long, we can cover the distance on foot. As soon as we arrive at the village, we can divide into two groups, one heading towards the back of the village and the other to the port. In this way, we can surround them, and guarantee no one will escape—"

"Excuse me, Captain. What if they have already set sail?" Darcy asked, anxiety dripping from his words.

"We gather as much information as possible and go after them," Captain Walker replied. "Few ships are faster than the *Ulysses*, Mr Darcy, and we have enough supplies to last for a whole month without docking. But, if my instincts are correct, the pirate ship will not leave until tomorrow. The whole operation in Portsmouth was conducted with great success. All the men involved in the kidnappings were arrested — at least in that port. No boat or ship has left Portsmouth without a thorough inspection, which means no one has warned them about our arrival. Considering the bad storm we had yesterday, and the twelve ladies the pirates should be still expecting, I believe they will risk waiting a little longer."

Darcy released a long breath and nodded.

Once the plan was revised and settled, Captain Walker excused himself to pass the

final instructions to his men, suggesting Richard and Darcy to get some rest before disembarking.

On his way back to the cabin, Darcy paused on the deck. The wind was strong and fresh, and the night clear and silent. The arch of the Milky Way divided the sky into two halves and made Darcy reflect on what was to come: two groups of men; just one would succeed.

He opened the door to their cabin and stopped. Richard was kneeling by his berth, his sword in hand.

“Richard, is something wrong?”

“I am praying, Darcy, as I always do before going into battle. Commending my soul to our Lord.”

Darcy nodded, and solemnly knelt down beside him.

“Then, allow me to join you. May God have mercy on our souls. May we find justice and be able to rescue Elizabeth and all the other captives unharmed, and return home safely.”

And there they remained for some more minutes, preparing their spirits and bodies for what was to come.

~ ? ~

“Land ho!” someone shouted from the top of the mainmast. After two of the longest hours of his life, Darcy was content that the captain’s prediction was correct; they had finally arrived at Saint Anne Island.

Captain Walker was familiar with the area and their approach to the island was as smooth as they could hope. As previously arranged, around a hundred men with guns, swords and munition in hands, were queuing to fill the rowboats heading towards shore.

As Darcy and Richard went to join them, Captain Walker stepped in their way. “Mr Darcy, I am sorry, but I cannot allow you to disembark. Your present physical condition will not serve us in this mission.”

Darcy had asked Dr Alden to release his arm from the sling and reinforce his bandages. He was prepared to face and fight the devil himself if necessary; he would not be left behind. “With all respect, Captain Walker, you would have to kill me before I could agree with you. I promise not to be in your way and take care of myself.”

The serious expression on the captain’s face slowly changed. Almost imperceptibly, the corners of his mouth turned up when he finally nodded. “I would not expect anything less from you, sir. Dr Alden,” he said, turning to the doctor, “be prepared to receive the wounded, which, I hope, will not be many.” He gave Mr Darcy a final nod before commanding his men to proceed.

Finally, the rowboats started on their way towards shore.

As they arrived, the boats were silently pulled through the sand.

A gunshot broke the oppressive silence, freezing them all.

From above one of the small sand dunes, the body of a man fell down, rolling towards them, as Colonel Fitzwilliam put down his smoking pistol. “You said to be alert against sentinels,” he said sternly.

“Well done, Colonel. Now let us move faster,” said Captain Walker releasing a deep sigh. “The sound of the shot might have announced our presence. Mr Chase, Mr Jones, go. You know what to do.” The remaining crew walked towards the small port area.

About half an hour later, Mr Chase and Mr Jones returned from their scouting and informed the captain that the pirate ship had been identified. They had also found the lady they were looking for and her captor.

“Elizabeth! Have you found her? Where?” Darcy almost shouted.

“Yes, sir. She is here, and well,” Mr Chase replied, trying to appease Darcy, who seemed ready to make something crazy.

Darcy felt his cousin’s hand on his good shoulder. “No, Darcy. We need to abide to our plan. For her own safety.”

Despite his frustration, Darcy nodded.

Mr Chase told them they had spoken to the owner of a small boat. They had arrived late that morning, and that the lady they were transporting had already been escorted to her family by the gentleman who had hired the boat.

Richard and Darcy frowned. “Escorted to her family? What the hell was he talking about? Where is this man? ”

“I would not waste my time with him, sir. My impression is that this poor fellow had no idea about Mr Wickham’s intentions,” Mr Jones said. “He told me that he was appalled by the way the gentleman was treating the young woman. He said Mr Wickham told him that the lady had eloped with a sailor and he, the gentleman, was doing her family a favour by bringing her back. But the curious part is that Mr

Wickham had asked them to wait for him but had not returned yet.”

As was to be expected, Darcy was still fighting his mixed feelings. At his side, his tight fists were trembling.

“Darcy, at least she is alive and in our reach. And so is Wickham. Keep that in mind,” Richard whispered.

Darcy turned his eyes to the port. “What else can you tell us?”

“Part of the crew is in the village celebrating their last day before setting sail again,” Mr Chase added. “Their captain preferred to stay behind to enjoy the company of a new lady — beggin’ your pardon, sir — a wild cat, as they said.”

Despite Darcy’s distress, Captain Walker was pleased with this information. They could attack both locations at the same time and arrest the whole crew. “How many men do you estimate?”

“Not many, sir. I would say no more than ten on the ship,” said Mr Chase.

“And about twenty-five in the village,” said Mr Jones. “And Captain, their orders are to come back to the ship by midnight and set sail immediately.”

Captain Walker consulted his pocket watch; nearly ten to eleven. If the wind had not been so favourable, they would need to pursue the pirate ship down the Atlantic instead of having this opportunity now.

“Gentlemen, it seems God is on our side,” he said. “We have enough time and men to capture the crew and the ship. Mr Chase, take the colonel and Mr Darcy, and thirty men with you, and try to invade the ship silently. Keep in mind the possibility of more ladies being locked inside it. I will take the remaining men and head towards

the village to arrest the crew and search for any more hostages. I will join you as soon as possible. Good luck.”

Once the first group arrived at the ship, Mr Chase went to check how many had remained behind to guard their cargo, while another scout was instructed to climb the vessel and check inside the captain’s accommodation and lower decks.

Both reports were favourable. The scouts found only five young ladies in one cabin, with no sign of others; thirteen crewmen have stayed behind, including the captain. The captain himself was in his cabin with three of his men and two guests, one of them, Miss Elizabeth.

As they approached, music coming from the captain’s cabin echoed through the air.

They decided that Mr Chase, Richard and Darcy would take another eight men with them to confront the captain and the men in his cabin, while the others would go down to the lower decks of the ship.

An angry “I prefer to die!” broke the silence. And Darcy knew well to whom that female voice belonged.

~ ? ~

As Jose and Elizabeth returned to the cabin, Captain Macedo was telling one of his men to remind the crew to return at midnight when they would set sail. They could not wait any longer.

He moved his devilish eyes to her, and with a malicious sneer, he moved towards her, taking her by the hand and kissing it. “Ah, much better now, is it not?”

She cringed at his touch and pulled out her hand.

“ Bienvenida , Miss Elizabeth,” Captain Macedo said, looking at Wickham and laughing, “or should I say, wild cat ?”

He pulled a chair out for Elizabeth. She obliged him but did not say a word; she was too disgusted to trust herself to speak.

One of the tables was filled with many varieties of meats, fruits and vegetables, and a large decanter of wine. The sight churned her stomach. The picture of the ladies almost starving to death two decks below invaded her mind. Beside the table, a man was playing a violin. And with fresh wounds on his already bruised face, Wickham was also seated, supposedly invited for dinner.

The captain took his place at the head of the table, having Wickham at his right and Elizabeth at his left. He nodded to the man standing beside him, who immediately took a plate and filled it with portions of everything, placing it in front of her.

“Eat,” the captain ordered. His gaze travelled down her neck, lingering on her cleavage. “I prefer my women with curves in the right places.”

“Like the young ladies you are starving to death in this ship?”

The captain sneered. “I can always blame the long journey for their pitiful appearance before selling them in Istanbul. Never had problems in the past. But you, mi querida , I am still considering what to do with you. Now, eat.”

Elizabeth shivered and looked at Wickham, who was now sweating and staring at her.

Grabbing her knife and fork, Elizabeth looked down at her pork as if it was still alive, and cut a piece, slowly bringing it to her mouth. Despite tasting good enough, especially considering she had not had a decent meal for the last four days, she found it difficult to swallow. The small piece of meat seemed to grow in her mouth, and she

almost choked trying to swallow it. At last, the offending morsel made its way down her throat, washed away with some wine.

Captain Macedo seemed satisfied and started eating.

After some time, he and his men were laughing and speaking in their language. Wickham answered the questions that were directed to him, but apart from that he seemed to have lost his voice.

Elizabeth, disgusted by everything, tried not to change her expression during the long and distressing meal while she pretended to eat.

As the end of the meal approached, Captain Macedo turned his attentions to her. “Your friend here told me everything about you, Miss Elizabeth. If half of what he says is true, I confess I am very impressed ,” he said, emphasising the last word. “For you have the courage to kill a man. Mi Dios . It is beyond anything I have ever heard about any English lady! A wild cat, indeed,” he said, laughing and bringing his glass of wine to his lips, wiping them with the back of his sleeve, never taking his eyes from her.

“If he has told you everything about me,” Elizabeth said, giving Wickham a murderous gaze, “then he certainly told you that, in fact, we are not friends. I consider him no more than a damned coward.”

A thunderous laugh filled the cabin. “I love her already, Wickham,” Captain Macedo said cheerfully, clapping his hands. “Now that she is tolerably presentable, I can understand what you said. Perhaps in your country she is not a conventional beauty, but in mine she would be considered exotic with those fire tresses and dangerous honey-coloured eyes... but especially by her hot temper. They are enough to bring a man’s blood to boil in madness.”

Captain Macedo paused, rhythmically pulling his long beard. “Yes,” he whispered. “I will not sell you. I will keep you for my own, personal... pleasure.” He lowered his gaze from her narrowed eyes to her décolletage, now much more generous thanks to the gown Consuelo had provided for her. Standing up and slowly moving towards Elizabeth, he extended his hand. “Come. I am going to show you what a real man can—”

Elizabeth jumped to her feet with her table knife in hand, raising it towards him. “I prefer to die!” she cried out.

The captain laughed again and turning to his men, Jose and Gonzales, tilted his head in a silent order. Immediately, the three men surrounded Elizabeth, forcing her into the corner at the end of the cabin.

She looked around. There was no escape. She was trapped.

So, this is the end.

The door of the cabin burst open. Darcy and Richard entered the room, pointing their pistols at its occupants.

And then, they froze. They could not shoot the men; Elizabeth was just behind them .

The fourth man, the one playing the violin, ran towards the door, fighting against Mr Chase and his men before they could enter the room. The pirate grabbed his pistol and shot at a soldier, wounding his arm. The other soldiers retreated, giving the criminal enough chance to push the heavy door. Mr Chase shot back at him, hitting him in the shoulder, but the miscreant had enough strength to close the door, locking the iron bolt before collapsing to the floor.

Startled by the commotion, Wickham ran, hiding behind the smaller table.

Darcy and Richard exchanged quick glances. Realising their vulnerable position, they turned over the large table. It collapsed on the floor with a loud thud; scraps of food, plates, cutlery and cups were strewn across the floor; the smell of wine from the broken decanter filled the air as three gunshots hit the table as Jose and Gonzales were already charging at them, wielding their swords.

Wickham was in a complicated position. If the pirates killed Richard and Darcy, he was as good as dead; it was only a matter of time before the rest of the soldiers forced the door down. If Darcy and Richard ended up killing the pirates, he would probably be arrested... and hanged.

Unless ...

Richard and Darcy had good hearts. If he could help them, perhaps he could have his sentence changed to deportation. It was worth trying. He had nothing else to lose.

Captain Macedo turned and grabbed Elizabeth, taking the table knife from her hand, keeping her in a firm grip.

Darcy and Richard, now isolated from Mr Chase and the other men, had only two pistol shots and their swords to defend themselves, while the captain held Elizabeth in a most vulnerable position.

Things were not good for them.

Jose and Gonzales reached behind the table and engaged Darcy and Richard in direct combat, the clink of the swords echoing around the cabin.

“We need to hold until Mr Chase can break the door,” Richard shouted, defending himself against Gonzales’s lunge .

“Yes,” Darcy shouted back, also defending himself against his attacker. He was trying to focus all his attention on his fight, despite his mind stubbornly turning to Elizabeth and fearing for her safety.

From her end of the room, Elizabeth watched in horror as the two cousins fought for their lives, while she kicked and flounced, looking around for anything she could use to free herself from the captain’s claws.

Captain Macedo, who had been simply observing, confident that his participation would not be necessary, realised that his men were no match for the two younger swordsmen. They were fighting as if the devil had possession of their bodies.

He snarled when he saw the man in uniform plunge his sword through Gonzales’s body. Cursing, he took a dagger from his waist and hurled it towards the colonel.

“No!” Elizabeth shouted.

The dagger reached its target, stopping at Richard’s abdomen, who cried out, falling to his knees.

With eyes flashing in fury, Captain Macedo discarded Elizabeth, unsheathed his sword and walked towards Darcy, who was still fighting Jose.

Seeing the wounded colonel falling down, Elizabeth remembered what John William had said about her swordsmanship — that “any man who underestimates your abilities will be sadly surprised”. She fetched the table knife from the floor and ran after the captain, kicking his leg and sticking the knife in his back as he wobbled.

The man howled, shouting profanities as he collapsed on the floor.

Elizabeth turned and saw Gonzales’s sword beside his body. She grabbed the sword

and turned to reach Mr Darcy, but Captain Macedo was already standing before her, blocking her way.

With a guttural cry, he pulled the bloodied piece of metal from his back. “It will give me great pleasure to torture you,” he shouted loud enough to catch Darcy’s attention.

As Darcy and Jose attacked each other and locked their swords together, Darcy looked towards Elizabeth and his heart froze. An enraged man was lunging towards her. Elizabeth was swaying her sabre in a way that reminded him of his fencing days back in Cambridge.

Darcy just had time to look to the other side of the room and see Richard on the floor, bleeding.

“Are you a fighter? So, let us see what you can do,” Captain Macedo mocked, charging against her. “Do you want to kill me?”

With his heart bumping erratically in his chest, Darcy pushed Jose and, with a skilful defence that came to his mind while observing Elizabeth, he allowed the man to pass beside him as Jose lunged at him. The pirate lost his balance and Darcy thrust his sword into his back.

Another mighty snarl came from the other side of the cabin. Elizabeth not only had defended herself against the captain’s first attack, but also erased the sneer from his face, as she cut his hand counterattacking.

Wickham’s eyes, locked on the fight between Captain Macedo and Elizabeth, caught a movement at his side. The fourth pirate, despite his injury, was grabbing another pistol from his boot and pointing it towards Darcy’s back. With the colonel down, and Elizabeth engaged in her fight, he was the only one left to do something.

Without further consideration, Wickham ran towards the man. The pirate startled by his fast approach and shot at him. Wickham winced in pain, tumbling on the floor.

Opening his eyes and groaning, Richard sat up, witnessing Wickham's shot. Using his own pistol, Richard killed the pirate as the miscreant reached for another pistol. With the dagger still pierced in his side, Richard collapsed on the floor again.

Darcy pulled his sword from Jose's body and raised his gaze towards Elizabeth. With sword in hand, she looked like a Greek Amazon.

Captain Macedo was livid, spitting obscenities. With three of his men dead, he turned all his ire against Elizabeth. "This ends now," he roared, lunging at her. The impact threw Elizabeth's body backwards. "No one, and especially no woman, will ever defeat Captain Pablo Hernandez Macedo, the great pirate." With these words, he raised his sword and once more lunged at her .

The metallic sound of crashing swords echoed around the room as Darcy crossed his sword with the captain's.

Surprised by the interference, he thundered, "I am going to kill you both!"

The shout brought Richard's back to his senses. With drops of sweat trickling down his face, he raised his eyes and gasped. Darcy and Elizabeth were fighting, side by side, against someone who by the fighting skills could not be other than the captain himself. But his heart missed some beats realising that a wounded man and a woman were no match for a man who had not reached his position without merit.

Richard's attention was turned to the loud bangs against the cabin's door, as men were shouting behind it.

Mr Chase .

Being the door as thick as a rampart, it would take the men too long to open it if the bolt was not unlocked.

Richard raised the hand pressed against the dagger and saw blood slowly oozing from his wound. The whole cabin started spinning as his heavy eyelids insisted on closing. A pair of green eyes smiled at him. "I will be waiting for you to come back."

Jane .

Crying out, Richard crawled towards the door leaving a trail of blood behind him. Mustering all his strength, he stood up.

A cry of pain froze him.

He turned back and saw Darcy falling on the floor with his face covered in blood. Captain Macedo had hit him on the nose with the hilt of his sword.

"No!" Elizabeth screamed and turned to help him.

But Captain Macedo was again in her way. With a strong blow, he sent her sword flying into the air, grabbing her by her arm, twisting it backwards. Elizabeth's cry of pain cut through the air. With a final turn, the captain threw her against the wall. She hit her head and bounced back to the floor, bleeding.

Darcy opened his eyes and saw her red blurred figure collapsing .

His worst nightmare was happening all over again. Once more, his wounded body was failing him, stealing from him the strength he needed to help Elizabeth.

A diabolical laughter reached his ears, and he turned. Breathing became impossible. The distorted image of the man he and Elizabeth were fighting, fetching a small pistol

from his boot and aiming it at Elizabeth, drained all the blood from Darcy's face.

"No!" he yelled.

There was a loud noise; then the sound of the shot.

Smoke filled the air.

Darcy's world shattered. Blinded by his tears, he let his head hit hard the floor. After all their struggles, after being so close to saving her...

All in vain.

The last thing he saw was Elizabeth's face covered in blood as darkness engulfed him.

"Forgive me, my love... I have failed you."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

14th April 1816. The day continues...

“Forgive me, my love... I have failed you,” was all Darcy could say before surrendering to total despair.

From the darkness that was swallowing him, a muffled thud of something hitting the floor brought him back to his senses. Forcing his eyelids to open, he raised his head and gasped. The lifeless body of that cruel man lay on the floor with a burnt bullet hole between his opened eyes.

Darcy frowned, his distressed mind struggling to understand. He forced himself up on one elbow and turned. There, by the now opened door, Mr Chase stood with his arm extended, the smoking pistol still in his hand, as his men were entering the room after him.

Understanding dawned.

The shot...

Not Elizabeth...

With a renewed determination, he tried to stand, just to fall as everything spun around him.

Elizabeth .

He needed to reach her.

He crawled to her. Ignoring the muffled sound of shouting voices, the red drops trickling from his nose down to his throat and chest, and the excruciating pain engulfing his entire body, he dragged his battered body closed to her; his mind focused only on her.

She needed to be alive...

Darcy put his hand on her chest. Tears filled his eyes as he felt her breathing. Her ashen face, blurred with the vivid red of her blood, was raised with tenderness, as his tears washed away his sorrows. "Elizabeth," Darcy whispered, kissing her head.

She winced and gasped.

Darcy noticed her shoulder. "Richard, Mr Chase, someone... please..." he cried with a crooked voice.

Captain Walker knelt beside him.

The surprise attack to the village had been much faster and easier than the captain had anticipated. The pirates were so drunk that they offered little resistance to his trained crew. Satisfied with the results, Captain Walker had left his men to finish the job, while he and some other men headed to the ship. It was when they heard an isolated shot. At their arrival, they found a wounded Richard already being attended by Mr Chase, five dead men on the floor, and Mr Darcy calling for help while holding his betrothed.

As Captain Walker examined Elizabeth, he rubbed his forehead. "Her shoulder, Darcy, it is dislocated. I will need to put it back; and now. It will be painful, but it needs to be done."

Darcy nodded, but could not take his eyes from her. "Elizabeth?" he said stroking her

bruised cheeks.

She fluttered her eyes. “William... you came...”

“Yes, my love. I came for you. I am here,” he said, tears still falling down his face. “Elizabeth, please listen to me. Your shoulder... it is dislocated, and we will need to put it back. But it will hurt, my love...”

She opened her eyes again and saw his handsome, bleeding face before her. “Do what you must,” she whispered. “Nothing can hurt me more than being away from you.”

Elizabeth’s declaration of love was his undoing and he could not hold back his sobs anymore. He would take another shot if it could save her from feeling any more pain. Gently stroking and kissing her face, he just added, “Everything will be fine, Elizabeth. I promise you.”

The entire crew present in the cabin stopped as anticipation grew between them. They had never heard of such braveness in a gentleman’s daughter.

“Darcy,” the captain said. “Hold her firmly.”

Forgetting his own pain, Darcy lay on the floor beside Elizabeth. As she had done for him before, he held her firmly in his arms, leaving her dislocated shoulder free.

“Miss Elizabeth, I need you to be brave, just once more.” Captain Walker stopped and reached for his handkerchief. “Please, bite it. It will help you.”

He turned back to Darcy, but found his moist eyes shut, and his face buried in Elizabeth’s hair.

Captain Walker took a deep breath and pulled Elizabeth’s shoulder with all his

strength. Her sharp cry of pain, muffled by the handkerchief in her mouth, was followed by a solemn silence. Mercifully, she fainted just after that.

“She will be fine, Mr Darcy. Now let me see to your nose.” Taking Elizabeth from Darcy’s embrace, Captain Walker signalled to one of his men to take Miss Elizabeth back to their ship. “Be quick. She needs the doctor.”

“Richard!” Darcy remembered, trying to stand up again.

“The colonel is being attended already. Mr Chase is taking care of him,” Captain Walker said, holding Darcy down.

“How is he?”

Captain Walker smiled. “He will survive. It seems the two of you are too stubborn to die.”

Fortunately, despite the dagger having pierced his flesh on the left side of his abdomen, and caused a significant leakage, Richard’s heavy uniform had prevented the blade from going lethally deeper. Despite still being a nasty and painful cut, it was not enough to pose a threat to his life.

Nearby, a movement from Wickham’s body caught Richard’s eyes. With Mr Chase’s help, they knelt down beside Wickham. The man was still alive, despite the massive bleeding from his stomach.

“Colonel,” Wickham called in a weak voice, “It was never... my intention... to go this far... Forgive me...” He gasped for air as he extended his hand.

Richard flinched in surprise. He was not expecting that. He had wanted, even planned, to send Wickham personally to hell. But now, seeing the pain of his old

acquaintance, disfigured by torture, his youth wasted on lies and crimes while dying alone — even if, as Richard had witnessed with his own eyes, Wickham had saved Darcy's life — something stirred inside Richard. As he looked down at Wickham's wound, he knew he would not survive.

Wickham grimaced in pain, his hand shaking in the air as blood trickled from his mouth.

Richard took his hand.

A weak smile formed on Wickham's lips. "Thank you..."

The grip of his hand weakened, and Wickham took his last breath.

Richard held his hand a little longer, and then let it go.

Leaning closer, Richard closed Wickham's eyes, taking a deep breath. He felt the pull of Mr Chase's hand. "Let us go, Colonel. It is over."

Some members of the crew entered carrying litters. Carefully placing Elizabeth in one of them, they carried her away.

Darcy remained on the floor with Captain Walker beside him pressing a cloth against his bleeding and most certainly broken nose. One of the soldiers approached them. "Captain, we recovered four ladies from the village and five others from the lower deck, all of them foreign and in quite bad condition. None of our men fell, just five wounded in the village, and three here on board, including Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy — and Miss Elizabeth, of course. All the pirates from the village were captured or killed; the survivors were arrested and are now being taken to the ship. Six of the pirates on board are dead, four of them here in the captain's cabin, including the captain himself. Colonel Fitzwilliam recognised the seventh body as

George Wickham, Miss Elizabeth's captor. It seems our mission was successful, sir."

"Indeed, Lieutenant. Thank you."

Once the ship was emptied, and the wounded removed, Captain Walker gave one last look before giving his command. "Lock the helm and tie up the sails. In a few days, another crew will arrive to sail this ship back to England."

But for them, it was time to return home.

~ ? ~

After some time waiting outside, Mr Darcy was invited into their former cabin, now reassigned as their temporary infirmary. One of the berths was occupied by Richard, who was already sleeping. On the other, Darcy saw Elizabeth's immobile form; her arm wrapped around her body and part of her face covered with clean, white bandages.

"How is she?" Darcy asked as he sat on the third berth and Dr Alden started attending him.

"She is fine, considering everything. Apart from the several scratches on her face, the soft part of her nose was damaged. But nothing time cannot heal. And her arm? Dear God. The way Captain Walker described it. The strength he said he applied to put her shoulder back. I would have expected it to be broken, but fortunately it is not. We have a very brave and lucky lady among us, Mr Darcy. Very lucky indeed. I gave her a dose of laudanum and expect her to sleep for some hours."

A moan escaped Darcy's lips as a sharp pain spread throughout his face. Only the memory of Elizabeth fighting at his side gave him strength to endure it.

“It seems you have fractured your nose too, Mr Darcy—”

“Daaarcy?” a slurred voice called interrupting the doctor.

Darcy frowned, looking at Dr Alden.

“Your brave cousin refused to take laudanum. He was adamant about it. He said he would not go through the same experience you had. I was forced to get him drunk with rum before stitching the wound.” Dr Alden pursed his lips while stuffing dressings into Darcy’s nose to raise the broken bone. “He has a nasty cut in his abdomen, but... God knows how, the blade did not damage any vital organs. I am reluctant to keep using this word, but you all were very, very lucky, Mr Darcy. Do you have any idea of the odds of everything ending as well as it did?”

“Arghh!” Darcy hissed in pain, as tears escaped his closed eyes.

Dr Alden stopped. “I am sorry, but in your case, rum will not help; this is a bone fracture and not a flesh wound. Shall I give you some laudanum?”

“I thank you, but no. At this moment, Richard and I share the same opinion,” Darcy said with a strained voice. If it was in his power, he would never take laudanum again.

“Daaarcy, how are ye?” Richard asked concerned after hearing his cousin’s moan.

“Well enough, Colonel,” Dr Alden replied instead. “Mr Darcy and Miss Elizabeth share something more than their mutual affection. Apart from their superficial scratches, they both have damaged noses.” He paused, admiring his work. “There. Now, let me see your old wound. God help us if I need to find flesh to stitch this hole together again.”

Fortunately, the stitches had held together, and although the area was still quite swollen and red, there was no further damage. Dr Alden simply cleaned everything and replaced the bandages, shaking his head. “Now, for heavens’ sake, lie down and rest — both of you. I need to see the others.”

Richard opened his eyes, taking a peek at Darcy’s face. Then, he began to laugh. But his amusement was short lived as he placed his hand over the area where the dagger had opened his flesh. “Daaarcy, I am sorrrrry,” he slurred, bursting into laughter again, more restrained this time. “You look... you look like one of those maaasked men in the theatre. You should see your face.”

“I am happy that, at least, someone can find amusement under these circumstances,” Darcy replied with a nasal voice, trying not to smile as an excruciating pain spread all over his face again .

It was in this relaxed atmosphere that Captain Walker found his guests teasing each other. In his way in to see them, he had found Dr Alden who explained the erratic behaviour of the colonel and Mr Darcy’s broken nose.

“I confess I am quite relieved to have you back in one piece, Mr Darcy,” Captain Walker said. “I was not completely sure it was the best decision to allow you to come with us. But as I would never stop you from doing what you needed to do to save your beloved, I can only be glad I was right.” He told Darcy of his personal experience with his wife and son. “Fortunately, everything ended well.” The captain stopped and looked down at Elizabeth. “You are a lucky man, Mr Darcy. Always remember that.”

“Yes, I am,” said Darcy, looking down at the woman who held his heart. “But, please, allow me to thank you for understanding what I needed to do, and for saving Elizabeth’s life — our lives. I am sure that, had your men not forced the door down, we would all be dead by now.”

“Forcing the door? No, sir. It was your cousin who opened the door for us. The fact that he found the strength to do so with a dagger nailed to his belly was... admirable. If you want to thank someone, you should thank your cousin — and Mr Chase, whose excellent aim saved your betrothed’s life. But, in everything else, you are very welcome. It was my honour to help you. I am sure the Crown will be very grateful.”

Darcy looked at his snoring cousin with a much deeper respect and admiration. Richard had sworn on his life he would bring Elizabeth back, and he kept his word. Laying down, and despite the pain, he was finally able to sleep.

Elizabeth was safe.

A couple of hours later, Dr Alden went to check his patients and found the three of them in deep sleep.

All was as it should be at last.

18th April 1816

During their long and slow-paced return to London, Elizabeth and William encountered many of those men and women who had kindly helped Richard on his painful journey. Many of them, like the ladies from the small parish in Portsmouth, brought Elizabeth flowers, wishing her happiness and health.

The gang of smugglers and mercenaries acting in the south of the country had also been dismantled, thanks to the brilliant work of Mr Dayton, Mr Duncan and the other runners from Bow Street.

A letter from the constable in Eastbourne informed them that Dr Hayford was recovering well and sent his regards and congratulations for their upcoming nuptials. Upon the honour of having one of the couple's sons named after him in recognition for his invaluable help, he declined. Habakkuk was not a name the good doctor would impose on another innocent child, he had told the constable.

It was with cheerful hearts that they finally arrived at Lord Matlock's house in London.

"Lizzy! My dear, dear girl!" Mr Bennet shouted, running to his daughter as she stepped out of the carriage, enveloping her in a strong embrace. "Thank you, sir, Colonel, for bringing my girl back," he added turning to the gentlemen with tears in his eyes.

Finally, the two families were reunited. Hugs and kisses were exchanged, and more tears were shed. This time, however, tears of celebration and laughter.

After that initial reunion was over, they all sat to dine and listen to the details about the perilous journey.

Richard, taking upon himself the responsibility of narrator, was as cheerful and voluble as ever — or at least, what his wound would allow him to be.

To Jane's great delight, Richard's gaze, not rarely, was upon her. Theirs had been a more discreet and reserved reunion, as they did not have a formal understanding yet.

Around eleven o'clock that evening, Richard, Darcy and Elizabeth, exhausted by having relived all the tense moments of the last week, begged their relatives to allow them to retire. Their wishes were reluctantly conceded, as the family still wanted more details of what had happened. In the end, they all agreed to take up the conversation in the morning.

“And you, Darcy, are going to stay here with Georgiana until I am convinced you are well enough to return to your house,” Lady Madeleine said, assuming her role of mother goose again.

Darcy chuckled. It was good to be home.

~ ? ~

Around two o'clock in the morning, Jane was awoken by Elizabeth's muttering. Unable to be separated just after a small time together, they had insisted upon sharing a bedchamber.

Jane got out of bed and went to check if her sister needed anything, but Elizabeth was still sleeping — a talking, sleeping girl. Nothing new there. It usually happened when Elizabeth was anxious, too sad, or too happy. In any case, it was not worth waking her up.

Giving up going back to sleep, Jane found herself heading towards the library. Perhaps a book would help pass the time.

As she entered the room, she was surprised to find the fireplace still burning and the place warm and cosy. She looked around but did not see anyone. Closer to the fire, the large armchair had been turned from its usual position. She looked beneath it and saw a pair of male bare feet on the carpet.

She blushed and turned to leave the room, but a familiar noise caught her attention. Her heart beat faster. Moved by a sweet curiosity, Jane quietly approached the front of the chair, careful not to wake its occupant.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, in all his glorious being, was peacefully sleeping on it.

She knew she should not, but she could not help but observe his handsome features. As Jane looked at his hand, she saw he was holding something, and smiled. It was the cross she had given him before he left.

“Oh, Colonel,” she whispered.

She turned to leave, but as she walked away the wooden floor creaked beneath her and Richard woke up.

“Anybody there?” came his sleepy question.

She froze on the spot, embarrassed for having been caught in the library with him at such a time. She heard him standing up and stopping behind her. But she could not turn; she was too mortified to look at him. How was she going to explain her presence there?

“Miss Bennet,” Richard called gently.

Slowly, Jane turned and raised her gaze to him, just to find a lovely smile on his face.

The sight took her breath away. “I... I...” But when those two vowels finally left her mouth, she could not stop anymore. “I... was having trouble sleeping because Elizabeth is having dreams. And when she dreams, she talks, and I cannot sleep. How could I possibly think about waking her up? My poor sister has been through so much. She is sleeping... but I... I could not.”

Richard had now a large, open grin on his face. “Do not worry, Miss Bennet. I know exactly what you mean. I should not say it, but Darcy suffers from the same problem. Well, it is a problem for us who stay awake anyway,” he said chuckling .

Richard’s expression became serious as he lowered his eyes and noticed that Jane was in her nightclothes. He was an honourable man, but a man, nonetheless. He could not trust himself to stay with her under such dangerous circumstances.

Raising his eyes, he found her gaze — her flushed, beautiful and enticing gaze — on him. He knew that what he had been nurturing for Miss Bennet was more than physical attraction. It was love. And, like mist in the sunlight, all the previous doubts he had that night — doubts that had prevented him from sleeping, of his suitability, her feelings and acceptance, a future together — simply vanished.

He smiled again, and as if it had an independent will, he found his hand gently caressing her cheek. Jane closed her eyes at his touch. Reluctantly, he lowered his hand before his hungry lips could follow it. “Would you give me a moment of your time tomorrow morning? There is something I would like to ask you.”

Jane’s green eyes widened, her surprised face slowly melting adoringly. “I will look forward to it, Colonel. Good night.”

~ ? ~

Early the following morning, Richard reached for two objects in his chest of drawers. He put both of them in his coat pocket and went downstairs. He was delighted to notice the breakfast room was empty, hoping that Miss Bennet would join him there at any moment.

Serving himself a cup of coffee, he closed his eyes, savouring the fragrant beverage with such pleasure that he did not notice when Jane finally entered the room.

Seeing the dreaming expression on the Colonel's face, so content with such a simple thing as a cup of hot coffee, made her smile.

He opened his eyes and saw her. The smile on his face made her heart beat faster. And she felt lightheaded remembering his request.

He invited her to sit beside him, serving her a plate .

As they ate, they exchanged smiling glances which conveyed more than mere words.

Darcy entered the room and felt like intruding something. He was about to excuse himself and leave when Elizabeth also arrived.

"Morning Jane," Elizabeth said slowly after greeting the Colonel and had her hand kissed by Darcy.

The two sisters glanced at each other with mischief in their eyes, pursing their lips. The memory of their mutual confession in the intimacy of their bedroom last night was still too fresh for them to ignore. Elizabeth had awoken when Jane returned to their bedroom after her impromptu meeting with the colonel in the library, and they had spent the next couple of hours opening their hearts.

Seeing that Miss Bennet had already finished eating, and not being able to endure any

more delays, Richard invited her for a walk in the gardens, which she gladly accepted. They excused themselves and left the room.

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged glances and smiles.

“I think we can expect some good news very soon,” Darcy said buttering his toast.

Elizabeth grinned, sipping her tea. “I believe we can. At last Jane has found a man worthy of her love. And I am very happy for them.”

As they left the house, Richard offered Miss Bennet his arm. They walked in silence around the small but manicured garden. Upon reaching a bench, he invited her to sit.

Jane noticed him wincing. “Is it still hurting?”

He looked down and smiled at her concern. “No more than is to be expected. But there are other things that can make a man wince...” He raised his troubled gaze and found her attentive eyes on him.

Richard looked down at his hands, rubbing them nervously. “Miss Bennet, I think it is time for me to return this to you.” He reached for his pocket and fetched one of the small black velvet pouches, placing it in Jane’s hand.

As he closed her hand around the small object, he kept his hand on hers. “Thank you. It gave me hope when I needed it most.” He tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry. He loosened his grip on Jane’s hand, but she did not let go.

“Then I am happy it served its purpose,” she said, blushing.

Richard looked down at their entwined hands and gave a sad smile. “I... I love you, Jane. You must know that already. And although my heart is the only thing I can

offer for now, I will freely give it to you, if only you will have it. I do not have much to offer. As an officer, my life is not easy—”

His speech was interrupted by a finger on his lips. She had given this subject a great amount of thought. So, when the words left her mouth, she knew she meant every one of them. “What else could a lady desire more than to be loved by a brave and honourable man? A man who keeps his word, is honest, who looks first for the interests of those who are vulnerable and who depend on him? You are a good man, Colonel. I doubt any lady would find anything wanting in you.”

He cupped her cheek, closing his eyes and resting his forehead on hers. “Am I a fool to believe you return my feelings? Oh, God. How could I not desire with all my heart that a woman like you could care for me? In my selfishness, I dreamt about you saying yes to my request and living by my side for the rest of our lives.” He paused and sighed, frowning, slowly lowering his hand and averting his eyes from hers. “But I do not have the independence to decide my own fate. How could I ever hope to ask you to marry me, even when I love you more than my own life, knowing I have so little to offer?”

Jane’s heart warmed at Richard’s pained words as he opened his heart to her, exposing to her his deepest concerns. In that moment, she could not avoid thinking about the feelings she had had for Mr Bingley. Nothing could compare to what she was feeling now.

She took Richard’s hand again and, when he raised his sad eyes to her, she caressed his bluish cheek and smiled. “I would say just ask and see what I have to answer.”

Richard smiled; his eyes now filled with hope. In that moment, he did the only thing he could do. He knelt down in front of her, in the middle of Lord Matlock’s gardens, reaching for his coat pocket to find the other object. The small box revealed an engagement ring. He looked back at her. “Jane, would you give me the great honour

of being my wife? I love you, more than I thought it was possible to love anyone. I offer you my heart and everything else you might want. Please, say you accept me.”

A small queue of tears followed down her face, but the smile never left her lips as she nodded. “Yes... Richard. I would be honoured to be your wife.”

Richard’s lips stretched in a grin. He stood up and pulled her into his arms, whirling her around like children in a time of innocence, laughing and enjoying the bliss of their newfound love. Her happy expression and melodic giggles were beyond anything Richard could ever feel, and he promised himself he would do anything to keep them for ever.

When they stopped, and still panting from his physical exertion, Richard gently brought his thumb to her cheek again and said, “Would you mind if I kiss my future wife?”

She lowered her face, smiling, but looked at him through her long lashes. “No, I would not. In fact, I would encourage you to do exactly that.”

Those eyes and words were his undoing. Richard leaned down to the woman who soon, very soon God willing, would be his wife, and reverently claimed her lips. A brief, but loving and meaningful kiss; a mark of the beginning of a happy life together.

He broke the kiss and looked into her eyes, his breathing deep and ragged. What he found was not much different. Her passionate eyes and blushed cheeks were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

As expected from a couple who was just starting to share their love, a second kiss followed, and then a third.

From a window above, on the second floor, another couple hugged each other at the sight of such a beautiful scene in their garden.

“They will be happy together, will they not, Alfred?” Lady Madeleine asked her husband, while drying her tears .

“I am sure they will, my love,” Lord Matlock replied, placing a gentle kiss on the head of his wife and companion of the last thirty-five years. “I am sure both of our boys will.”

~ ? ~

That evening, a great celebration took place in the Matlock home. The Fitzwilliams, together with the Darcys, the Bennets, Captain Owen, Mr Duncan, Dr Alden and his wife, and Mr Lynch all gathered for the engagement dinner of Mr Darcy and Miss Elizabeth, and Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Bennet.

Surprisingly, what had been a cause for concern for Darcy when he first met Mrs Bennet and her younger daughters — a meeting between his family and Elizabeth’s — was unfounded. The ladies’ behaviour was beyond reproach. The reason for that? Only God knew. Sometimes, suffering affects people in strange ways. In this case, however, the transformation was, without a doubt, very welcome.

As soon as dinner was served, Darcy stood up and asked for everyone’s attention. “I would like to take this opportunity to propose a toast and express my gratitude to a man who, throughout the years, has proved to be much more than a relative.”

Darcy paused and looked Richard in the eyes. For the first time for many of those present, the proud and arrogant Mr Darcy proved to be definitively gone. In his place was a man marked by suffering and pain, but also by love and hope.

“Richard, you have been more than a cousin to me. You have been at my side when I most needed help since we were young boys. You risked your life to save Elizabeth and me. You did not measure sacrifice or discomfort and have shown you are a faithful and trustworthy man. But, for me, your strength is not based on force, as many could attribute to a colonel in our Majesty’s Army. No. Your strength is here...” he said touching his own chest, “in your kind heart. And, for that, I will be forever grateful. I always considered you like a brother...” Darcy paused and gave Jane a smile. “But, now, this privilege will be mine by right, and I could not be prouder. I will thank our Lord every single day of my life for having favoured me with your strength and friendship. Thank you.”

Darcy and Richard exchanged proud glances and nods.

“Please raise your glasses with me,” Darcy continued, “and toast the honour of Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, the best friend and brother anyone could ever have.”

“To Richard!” The loud voices echoed in the dining room, as all of those present stood up, raising their glasses and drinking to the honour of that great man.

But Darcy was not done. For someone who considered himself not very good with words, he did not waste the opportunity to use them. “I would also like to ask you to join me in a thankful prayer. You have all heard about the many things — miracles, as I prefer to call them — that have happened to us, without which we would not be here today celebrating.”

As the room fell into silence, Darcy raised his voice in a simple but quite sincere prayer. “Dear Lord, we want to thank you for your kindness and mercy for our lives. Thank you for all those who crossed our path and, in some way, helped us. Thank you for the blessings that enabled us to succeed in our mission. And thank you for allowing Richard, Elizabeth and I to live and taste what happiness can truly be, together with our friends and family. Amen.”

That night, friends and families ate and drank, cheered and laughed. Georgiana played the pianoforte, and they danced and celebrated not only the engagements, but also the promise of a bright and happy future.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:07 pm

Pemberley, Derbyshire, 14th September 1824

Eight years later

The weak light entering the bedroom through the gap between the curtains reached Georgiana's eyes. The morning was still cold, but the clear sky was promising a bright day ahead.

She looked beside her, where her husband, Edward, was still fast asleep, and carefully left the warmth of her bed to draw the curtains together. By the small gap, she saw the familiar shape of her brother outside walking towards the old chapel.

"Oh, William," she whispered.

She rang the bell for her maid and, a few minutes later, she went after her brother, finding him in the small family graveyard, down on one knee, a small posy of fresh white roses over their mothers resting place.

He stood up and touched the cold tombstone. "I will never forget you," he whispered.

Georgiana entwined her arm in his and rested her head on his shoulder. For some minutes, they shared the solemn moment in silence.

"Today is the anniversary of her death," Darcy said.

Sophie looked up at him and squeezed his arm, taking hold of his hand. "I would love to have met her."

Darcy nodded, still looking at the tombstone.

The moment was broken by the sound of a boy calling from faraway. “Papa, Papa. I found you at last. ”

Darcy smiled at the boy and crouched down; his arms opened to receive his son.

“Mama told me to look for you here, but I did not listen. I went to the stables instead, but you were not there.”

Georgiana smiled at the boy’s enthusiasm. Little Richard, as her nephew was called by the family, was the image of his father; brown eyes and dark curly hair, and quite tall for his six years of age. But his temperament was much more like his mother’s. “Where is your mama, Richard?” she asked.

“She is coming this way, but I was much faster than her and Benjamin,” he answered with a proud voice.

“William, there you are,” Elizabeth said breathless, running with Benjamin, approaching Darcy and kissing his lips. “Good morning, darling. Good morning, Georgiana. Say good morning to your father and aunt, Benjamin.”

The little boy, flushed by the exercise and still holding his mother’s hand, said the words in the best way his tender age permitted him.

Georgiana smiled back at her sister-in-law, taking Benjamin into her arms, kissing his round cheeks. “Good morning, Benjamin.”

“I am sorry for leaving the house without talking to you, but I needed some time alone, here...” Darcy explained, looking back to the grave beside them.

“I knew you would be here,” she said wrapping her arms around him. “Are you well?”

Sensible to the moment, Georgiana turned to the little boys. “What do you think of having a lovely picnic today? You two could help me and Uncle Edward to arrange it. Uncle Richard and Aunt Jane are also coming with your cousins.”

The expression of happiness on both little faces was contagious. “Yes. Let us go!” they both said, clapping their hands and jumping.

Richard turned to his mother. “Mama, would you tell your story again today? I cannot wait to hear it.”

“Of course, my dear. Go now and prepare the picnic. Then, when we are all sitting, I will tell you the story. I promise.”

With this assurance, the two boys and Georgiana left, leaving the couple locked in their embrace.

“Would you care for a walk, or would you like to return to the house?” Darcy asked his wife.

“I would love to go for a walk. I am in great need of exercise,” she said, rubbing her swollen midsection.

“You look as beautiful as ever, my love. Just knowing you are carrying the fruit of our love is enough to make me feel the most privileged of men,” said Darcy, bringing her hand to his lips and resuming their walk.

After some minutes of silence, Darcy said thoughtfully, “I realised something this morning. I have not given it too much attention in these last years. I remember I used to have horrible nightmares, waking up in the middle of the night in a sweat. I always blamed myself for not being with my mother when she died a few months after Georgiana was born. My father told me he sent me back to school hoping she would improve; but she never did. Later he begged my forgiveness, but despite forgiving

him, I always felt guilty. After we were married... No, actually, it was a bit before that... those nightmares... that guilt, they have... gone.”

The memory of that night, many years ago, when he was delirious with fever after being shot, came back to Elizabeth, and she told him how she had appeased his mind. “I am sorry if this—”

Darcy put his finger on her lips. He took her hands, rose them to his face, and kissed her open palms. “Do not be sorry. It worked. I never dreamt of her in that painful way again.” He looked at her, perusing every detail of her freckled face. “I do not deserve you, Elizabeth. You are the best thing that happened to me.”

She carefully pulled his face towards her and kissed his moist eyes. “I beg to disagree. After all you have done for me, I am the one who does not deserve you,” she said, gently kissing the small scar over his nose, still visible even after so many years .

Slowly, she let go of his face, lowering her gaze. It was always an emotional moment to recall what he had done for her, all the suffering and the pain, especially now in her present condition. “You saved my life, William. You came to rescue me.”

He put his finger under her chin and gently pulled her face up again. “And how could I not? I could not live without you. Remember?” He frowned. “I will never forget the sight of you fighting against that Captain Macedo.”

Darcy leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes as those memories brought back so many contradictory feelings. “I love you, Elizabeth Rose Darcy. I never regretted one jot of what I have done for you, and I would do it all again without a second thought. I would search for you until the end of the world, until my last breath.” His expression lit up. “And thank you for being honest with me and teaching me how to be a better man. With the grace of God, now I can teach our sons how to be good men — and never to disdain a wallflower in an assembly.”

They burst into laughter.

He pulled her for another embrace and kissed the top of her head. Her lovely smell of lavender and rose reached his senses, and he thanked God, once again, for the wonderful woman He had allowed in his life.

Cupping her face, Darcy kissed her lips — slowly, tantalising, lovingly. Even after so many years, the taste of her kisses was as delicious as that first one.

He slowly pulled away and his browns came together.

Yes. That first one when they did not know what the future had reserved for them.

He kissed her again, this time as a hungered man, with urgency, purging away all his fears once more. She was his now.

Elizabeth returned the kiss with the same urge.

When Darcy pulled away, he had a grin on his face. “But I have a complaint. You will be the death of me if you keep kissing me like that.”

“I see this is a serious complaint, indeed. I remember you saying the same thing the day you proposed to me for the second time, and I accepted it.”

The scene of that precious day came back alive.

Darcy had asked Jane and Richard to take Elizabeth for a ride, claiming they needed a chaperone. On her return, she entered her bedroom just to find a sea of flowers, and Darcy among them with her engagement ring.

He had approached her, taking her hands and kneeled. “It was among the daffodils, violets and primroses that I realised I loved you. And it is among them that I ask you

to accept me as your husband. My life is empty and colourless without you. I need you, Elizabeth, as I need my next breath. Please, marry me.”

It had been the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. That was the best marriage proposal she could have ever expected. And the kiss which followed had been the best they shared — before marrying.

And Darcy had said exactly the same thing; that he would die if she did not stop kissing him like that.

Her reverie was interrupted by his mouth in her ear. “Yes... But let us return before I take you to our bedroom and show you the reason you almost kill me every time you kissed me like that...”

Her melodic laughter filled the air.

~ ? ~

“... and once Lord Darcy and Sir Richard saved the young lady from the claws of those terrible pirates, Darcy and Elizabeth married and lived happily ever after. The end.”

As soon as Elizabeth finished her sons’ favourite story, Little Richard and Benjamin stood up and ran, renewed in strength and full of enthusiasm, holding their wooden swords, fighting and chasing each other.

“I am going to be Sir Richard — because I am already called Richard — and you, Benjamin, can be Papa!” .

It was not a coincidence that their favourite story was a mild version of what had, in reality, happened to their parents and uncle many years before.

In fact, a month after Darcy and Elizabeth married, Richard and Jane joined them in that blissful state. About a month after that, Lord Matlock personally delivered a letter from King George IV to Darcy and Richard, inviting both of them to Windsor Castle where Richard was to be honoured with a knighthood for his services to the Crown. At that celebrated occasion, all the officers involved in the arrest and execution of the pirates and smugglers were decorated for bravery and compliance of duty. Mr Lynch received a formal apology from the navy and was invited to join the Naval Academy as an instructor.

With the knighthood also came a monetary reward, which, to the complete happiness of the Fitzwilliams, allowed Richard to sell his commission and his grandmother's small estate, and buy a larger one about twenty miles from Pemberley, settling himself as a respectable gentleman and landlord. Their family, so far, had been blessed with two children, Alfred and Elizabeth, now five and three years old.

Little Richard raised his sword and shouted “ en garde !” with all his lungs, charging against his Uncle Richard.

“Darcy! What have you done to this boy? He is relentless!” Richard shouted, falling on the floor with his giggling nephews atop of him, his own children joining their cousins.

“He is just following your example!” Darcy shouted back, embracing his wife and placing a lingering kiss on her mouth.

“What was that for? Are you still thinking about... complaints?” Elizabeth asked chuckling.

“No... I mean... I am always inclined to help you understand my complaints. But no. This one was for making me so happy and for giving me this beautiful family.”

Elizabeth looked at him with adoring eyes. “Who would ever guess that a freckled

young lady, not handsome enough to tempt anyone, and from an inconvenient family, would inspire such love?” She could not help teasing him every time she had the opportunity. “I love you too. And you are very welcome. It has been my... pleasure, always.”

Could he ever have enough of this woman?

Sometime later, Darcy commissioned a renowned artist to paint the family portrait. The Blessed Darcys , as the painting was later called, could be appreciated by the new generations at the gallery in Pemberley. Beside it, many watercolours picturing happy moments of their life — including one of their favourites, The Muddy Encounter . Curiously enough, this watercolour had only a spring flowery meadow on it.

Like the portrait, the story of their deadly adventure passed from one generation to another.

It is unnecessary to add that all the children in the Darcy and Fitzwilliam families were well versed in shooting, fencing, swimming and riding.

One never knows when such skills might prove useful.

The End