Summary

Long after Ramsgate, Georgiana meets George Wickham in a shop.

The first time Georgiana Darcy laid eyes on George Wickham after what she privately thought of as her criminally foolish lapse of judgement at Ramsgate, she was not with Elizabeth, or her brother, or her soon-to-be husband, or any of her friends. In fact, she was quite alone, accompanied by her companion, who had gone off in search of somewhere to relive herself, and a bored footman. He, laden down with packages, was too busy flirting to be paying attention.

She froze when she saw him. The world swam and turned grey, and her stomach dropped to her knees. She groped for support, finding it in the table that displayed the incunabula that she was contemplating as a gift for her brother. He seemed in that moment to transform into a monster, a wolf in a tail coat.

It took her a moment to realize that he had not noticed her, no, not even glanced in her direction. He was tagging along after two men, looked bored, and seemed more interested in his nails than the collection of priceless books and manuscripts displayed around him. He had never cared for books, or bothered to improve himself with their wisdom. Clearly a sign of a deranged mind, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Elizabeth's said in her mind. Georgiana bit her lip to avoid letting out a panicked giggle.

When he appeared to look her way, she quickly bent and buried her face in the only book that was open on the table, an edition of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*.

"Does the young lady speak Latin?" the owner of the shop asked, appearing beside her.

"A little," Georgiana said quietly. "It is for my brother."
"That volume is a true work of art. I will be a sorry to part with it, though if it must go, I am glad to think of it finding a home with your brother. He is a man of true taste, and values books almost as much as I." He sounded truly sad, as though preparing to see a beloved daughter wed, and shook his head as he walked away.

Georgiana peered at Mr. Wickham from under the brim of her bonnet. He was no wolf, she thought. He was only a man, and not a good or a fine man at all. Handsome, yes, but already his looks were beginning to fade. Too much drink, too little rest, and no doubt a great many of the debaucheries of which she knew little, but still more than her brother would like, had taken their toll on him. His face was puffy, and splotched where it was not pale.

She turned a page of the book, in no way seeing what was in front of her. What would have become of her if her brother had not come to her when he did? Wed to a man with no honor, given to drink and gaming...Elizabeth and her brother never spoke of Mrs. Wickham in front of her, and she was usually conveniently from home during her visits, but Georgiana knew that it could not go well for her.

She pressed her lips together and turned another page, this time caught by the beauty of the woodcarving. She ran a gloved finger lightly across the page. A fine gift for her brother.

She stood up, glancing at Mr. Wickham. He noticed her then. It was an odd pleasure to see his expression when he first saw her. He paled slightly, and glanced at his companions.

She nodded to him, just so that he would know she had seen him, and turned away as if he were of no consequence. Her heart was beating so hard in her chest that she thought the whole world must have heard it, but she was determined to keep her fear from showing on her face.

"I will take this one," she said, glad to hear that her voice did not shake.

The shop owner came over at once. "A fine choice," he said, whisking it away to be wrapped.

"Miss Darcy. How very good to see you." Wickham bowed low and gave a smile, but she could see worry in his eye.

He fears me, she thought. Wickham would never again get real financial or professional support from her brother, but if he were ever to cross the line into meddling with Georgiana or Elizabeth, or treating his wife very badly, Darcy would disavow him entirely, and that Wickham could not afford.

Georgiana did not curtsy. Instead, she drew herself up very straight and lifted her chin. "Mr. Wickham. I am afraid I cannot return the compliment."

"You did enjoy my company once," he said in a voice she knew all too well. Honeyed and cloying, designed to flatter and ingratiate. It was easy to fall for. She had fallen for it once, years ago. Barely more than a child, he had used that voice and his good looks and her naive good faith to very nearly trick her into making the biggest mistake of her life.

"I imagine most people do, before they get to know you." It seemed impossible that the steel in her voice could have come from inside of her. Perhaps it was her Aunt Catherine’s, and perhaps the unexpected poise that she found was borrowed from Elizabeth.

Wickham cleared his throat. "My congratulations on your impending nuptials. I understand he is a major in the army."

"A colonel soon, and also an earl, but more than all that, an honorable man."
"We should all aspire to such heights."

She frowned at the sarcasm in his voice, and looked away.

"Come now," Wickham said, like a man scrambling to recover from a stumble. "We were friends once. Very good friends, as I recall."

She shook her head. "Once, yes, but I was a child then and you were," she glanced at the buttons on his coat, which were just starting to pull, "handsome."

In truth, his looks were still quite good, but she could see by his expression that she had dealt a blow. Oh, he was vain, yes. He knew that his good looks gave him a sort of power and means of pleasing. Vain, cowardly, manipulative, tiresome...how could she ever have loved him?

Why did she still fear him?

She cocked her head slightly to one side and walked out from behind the table. She felt as though the whole store must be watching them, but the shop owner was busy wrapping her book, and Wickham's companions were arguing about something. Her footman was still occupied with a girl, and her companion had not yet returned. Georgiana met his eyes. Her heart was still beating quickly, but her hands were steady.

"Good bye, Mr. Wickham." She snapped open her fan and turned away to accept her package.

Her companion had returned. Mrs. Annesley had left them a year back, to care for an ailing cousin, and Mrs. Wood knew of Mr. Wickham, but had never seen him, so she saw nothing untoward in the gentleman who watched them as they left the store. Georgiana declined to give up the book to her companion. It was a short walk home, and the weight and history of it was comforting.

She did not bother to look back.

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