Bruises

by PutItBriefly

Summary

“You see what a strange circumstance it is,” Elizabeth said, feeling some fleeting relief. “You know our acquaintance has not been easy.” “I admit we did not have the best of beginnings,” Darcy said, “but you must understand, that was many years ago. We have moved beyond all of that.”

Elizabeth wakes up to discover she and Mr. Darcy have been married ten years.

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Bruises

Chapter One

Someone was shaking her. She woke up, understood nothing of what was happening around her and was allowed to go back to sleep.

The culprit struck again later. She no longer remembered the first instance. He was a stranger, his accomplice equally unrecognizable. Though she was alone with two unknown men, she never thought to fear them. She wished only to be allowed to sleep, and soon enough, they left her to her own will.

He awoke her again.

And again.

And again.
Exhausted and achy, Elizabeth looked up at the tense man who saw it fit to torment her all night and exclaimed with no small amount of surprise, "Mr. Darcy!" He smiled, broad and bright. Wrinkles and smile lines blossomed across his face. The corners of his eyes and mouth suffered the most, where innumerable creases punctuated his skin.

He said - to someone else, not to Elizabeth, because he was too rude a man to respond to someone calling him by name - "She recognized me!"

The other person, a gentleman Elizabeth could not recall meeting previously, said, "Excellent, sir, excellent." The other man approached her bedside, causing Elizabeth to note that she was still abed. Her mind fogged with pain, she struggled to sit up. Her limbs were heavy and unresponsive. Mr. Darcy moved to assist her. She balked at his hands slipping behind her and bracing her back.

Instantly, she regretted sitting up. Her courage demanded that she not face such a disturbing circumstance lying down, but now that she had sat up in her night things, her modesty protested. To have Mr. Darcy and a stranger see her in such a state of undress was mortifying.

"Sir," Elizabeth protested, "I must..." but her words died then. She could hardly formulate an end to her idea. She must protest the presence of the two men. She must protest Mr. Darcy's touch. She must protest lying about in bed like an invalid when she was a perfectly healthy young woman.

The stranger leaned very close to Elizabeth and declared, "Mrs. Darcy's pupils are the same size."

"Is there any danger?" Mr. Darcy asked.

"At this juncture," the stranger replied, "It is difficult to say. I can recommend rest." He wandered away from Elizabeth's side, seemingly more interested in cryptic remarks and riddles. "Mrs. Darcy should stay in bed. Do not expect her to do any activities that require concentration. Reading, sewing, household accounts are all absolutely out of the question."

"Good news at last," Mr. Darcy said, voice strained. "I know how you have wished to give up needlework."

The stranger was evidently the sort to who did not appreciate it when Mr. Darcy cast off his serious mien in a poor attempt at teasing. Somberly, he insisted, "She will likely remain disoriented for some days. Expect some memory loss. Mrs. Darcy will likely never remember what happened immediately after the accident."

"The Lord has had mercy upon her," Mr. Darcy answered, accepting the stranger's demand to abandon all attempts at mirth. "If He would rather have her memory than her life, I can only thank and praise Him."

"There may be pain," the stranger added, "A household of this size...I trust you are well stocked in laudanum."

Sternly, Mr. Darcy said, "I will not have a child born addicted to opiates."

"As you will, sir," the stranger replied. "I trust you have sent word for the midwife to examine Mrs. Darcy?"

"I have."

"Prepare yourself. It is by no means certain her news will be as happy as mine."
With a cool, dismissive tone, Mr. Darcy said, "Thank you."

This signaled clearly to the stranger that his presence was no longer desirable and, after making some vague promises to return whenever he was needed, he quit the room.

Lying abed quite alone with Mr. Darcy, without even a maid to ensure his good behavior, Elizabeth silently willed him to leave. Not heeding the edicts of her innermost thoughts, Mr. Darcy pulled a chair up very close to her bedside and inquired, "Is there much pain?"

"I do not understand," Elizabeth answered. The question he had asked was simple enough. She could comprehend his words. But that he was here, that he was being solicitous of her comfort, that she was lying in bed with only this man for company. All this, Elizabeth could not understand.

"You are still very disoriented," Mr. Darcy said. She did not need anyone else pointing out her confusion. Elizabeth understood that well enough.

"If you are here only to point out the obvious," Elizabeth said, "and explain nothing that wants for explanation, I would rather you go."

He frowned. Then, "Is there pain in your head?"

"Yes."

The always imperious Darcy, determined to have his own way, ordered her, "Tell me what you remember."

Elizabeth should not take pleasure in catering to his requests even if she was capable of doing so. In this instance, she was too lacking in information to even make a play at doing as he had asked. "In reference to what?"

Equally determined to be as difficult as may be, Mr. Darcy chose to not share anything helpful and instead said, "The accident."

"I can recall no accident," Elizabeth answered.

"A sconce fell off the wall and struck you upon the head," he said, finally feeling it necessary to give even the barest of details.

In Elizabeth's experiences with sconces, they were generally secured to the wall in such a way that striking a person on the head seemed unlikely at best. However, she did have a great pain in her head. Though it did not make the stranger's words make any more sense, the idea that he was an apothecary appeared reasonable to Elizabeth. Having no other recourse, and believing Mr. Darcy to be an honest man, if an ill-tempered and vengeful one, Elizabeth decided to believe him. "When did this occur?"

"Nearly twelve hours ago," Mr. Darcy replied. "This is the first you've been sensible since."

Being of a disposition to make light of what distressed her, Elizabeth said, "Papa will be disappointed."

"Your father will be relieved," Darcy argued. "I was of a mind to write an express to Longbourn the moment you were carried into the family wing, but was persuaded to wait until we had more news. Had I written your father directly, the happy news of your progress could not have reached him. He and the rider would have passed each other on the road."
Elizabeth was somewhat impressed with this speech of Mr. Darcy's, as it was the longest stretch of
time she had ever heard him speak without being insulting. It was, however, rather rambling and
nonsensical. She did not wonder at his usual terse silence if this nonsense was what he normally
produced when inspired to go on. Never in her life had she been so much as half a day's journey
from Longbourn and the idea of her father's missing an express because he was on the road
himself was ludicrous. "Papa hates to travel."

Mr. Darcy raised his eyebrows. "I have never found that to be the case."

Elizabeth could hardly credit his having an opinion about her father's tendency or not to travel.
"You do not know him," she pointed out.

Unwilling to accept the idea that he was not the most informed person in all respects, Mr. Darcy
said, "The proper inducement is all he requires. A favorite daughter is reason enough for any man
to travel half the kingdom."

He was a very tiresome man to converse with, and the short discourse they had had left Elizabeth
drained of all the energy she had upon waking up. The fact that she was still in bed, while
initially revolting to her modesty, now struck her as perfectly proper and convenient. "I am very
tired," she confessed. "I shall sleep now."

"Of course, my dear." He leaned over and kissed her upon her brow. "I shall return when you are
feeling better."

Elizabeth, whose head was aching fiercely, exercised none of her limited energy on the
contemplation of this unfathomable man. She could scarcely stand thinking about him when she
felt well. She certainly would not labor over him while feeling ill.

When Elizabeth next awoke, a maid was seated by her bedside. Though her father kept several
maids to work inside the house, there had never been so many as to preclude any of the family
from learning their names. Elizabeth engendered to reproduce this bit of civility everywhere she
stayed and always made a point to learn the Christian names of any of the servants she could be
expected to see inside the house. Elizabeth had no idea who the girl diligently darning stockings
was, which lead her to a second conclusion that she had no idea where she was.

It was an open room, with a merry fire crackling and the few pieces of furniture she could see
where light and delicate. Had she found herself alone in a drafty place, like the heroine of a Gothic
novel, Elizabeth supposed she would have been quite frightened. In a nicely fitted up room and
with a hard working maid for company, she could not be expected to be afraid. Still, she certainly
wanted for information about her present circumstance and to that, she applied to the maid.

"Miss," she addressed the unknown girl, "if you could be so kind, I am very curious as to where I
am."

"I shall send word for Mr. Darcy straight away, ma'am," the maid replied, abandoning her needle
and thread.

"There is no need for that," Elizabeth insisted. "I would much rather you give me what
information you can."

But the maid had scurried away to ring the bell. "Oh, no, ma'am," she replied. "Mr. Darcy was
very clear. He said as soon as you woke up, I should send for him."

Where ever they were, Elizabeth reflected, Mr. Darcy's directives held more sway over the staff
than her own. Rosings seemed like the best theory. Though the pain in her head was still great, she could think more clearly now than she had been able earlier. If an accident occurred while visiting Charlotte and Mr. Collins, perhaps the great condescension of Lady Catherine de Bourgh was such that she insisted the invalid convalesce at the great house. Lady Catherine's servants could hardly be expected to listen to Miss Bennet over their mistress's exalted nephew.

A second maid answered the bell and quickly disappeared in search of the man. It would create talk below stairs, to have Mr. Darcy come and see her in such a state and to have the maids know if it. Perhaps that was his goal in insisting he be notified when she was awake. The first maid began rushing around the room, adjusting screens and pillows in minor, cosmetic ways, which only served to solidify Elizabeth's belief that he had intentions the servants would be gossiping about.

He appeared.

The maid curtsied.

He said, "I will be brief. The midwife is come. See that she had been offered refreshments before examining Mrs. Darcy."

"Yes, sir," the maid answered.

When they were left alone, Mr. Darcy crossed to Elizabeth's side and cupped her cheek in his hand. He kissed her upon her cheek, her brow and her mouth in quick succession. Still holding himself so close that she could feel his breath upon her, he whispered, "Elizabeth. Tell me you are well."

All of her previous assurances that she was in no danger had left her and Elizabeth was beginning to feel some panic. Recollections were returning to her. She was injured. This man did not dislike her, as she had always believed, but thought himself in love with her. This vicious man who had injured her sister's heart, who scorned the companion of his youth, who proposed to her with vile, abusive language had her alone and defenseless. The maids knew she was in bed in her nightdress and they had let him come to her. He had touched her and kissed her.

Elizabeth's first instinct was to scream, but as she drew breath to do so, she realized the folly that would be. It would alert the entire house to thing which she needed to keep as secret as possible. Her only recourse was to appeal to his compassion, to beg for his silence, but what compassion did such a man have? What use for silence did he have, when spreading the news could only help his cause?

"Please, sir," she whispered.

Mr. Darcy stroked her hair and kissed her again, this time on her temple. "You are still in pain," he said.

The conjecture was both true, and she hoped, enough to make him leave her before it was too late. "I am."

"Is it your head alone," he wondered, "or?" The second option, he could not bring himself to name, but Darcy ran his palm over her stomach. The pain in her head and her own confusion and fear had dominated Elizabeth's thoughts. She had given not a thought to the rest of her person, but her stomach was round and distended underneath his hand. Many a mention of Mrs. Darcy and a midwife had been made since she found herself in this bed.

She clutched at her belly herself, her limbs finally answering her commands for movement. There
was a ring on her left hand. Of course there was. She was his wife; he was frantic with worry for his baby.

"We are married." Never could she have believed herself uttering such a phrase to this man, but evidently, it was so.

He said simply, "Yes."

It may be an easy thing for this infuriating man to talk about, but for herself, Elizabeth was shocked. What she really wanted to know was how such a thing came to pass, but she would apply to another source for that information. She had little interest in Mr. Darcy's account of how he once again overpowered the objections of anyone else to get his own way. She resolved to write Jane as soon as she felt equal to holding a pen. As for Mr. Darcy, she decided to limit her inquires to him to facts. "When did this occur?"

He made an odd, strangled sort of noise. "Elizabeth, please," he said. "I am in no frame of mind to allow for teasing just now."

"Mr. Darcy," she said, voice strained, "I can assure you, my frame of mind is not at all one to admit to jokes at the current time." Her stomach rolled violently and she was unable to tell if it was sickness or her baby making himself known or perhaps even her injury traveling to inflict itself upon her womb. She had shed tears over him before and was desperate not to do so now, with Mr. Darcy before her.

He took her head in both of his hands and said, "Elizabeth, no."

The tears did come, then. Whether it was due to her own horror alone, the devastation clear in his every word or a combination of the two, Elizabeth could no longer keep herself from weeping. He drew her against himself, held her until she could no longer cry.

"November," he said thickly, when her tears had subsided enough that he could be heard over them, "1813."

He was seated upon the edge of the mattress, having moved himself somewhere in the course of their conversation and holding her. Elizabeth drew away from him. To have increased as much as she had, she had been with child for some months. She had no frame of reference for 1813 versus the current date, but feared that his inclusion of the year of their wedding meant some time had passed since then. "And how many years have we been wed?"

Mr. Darcy replied, "Ten years, madam."

She inhaled, sharply. Elizabeth had recognized that he was older than he was when she last knew him. That the gulf of time proved to be so large should not come as a surprise. She was now one and thirty years old. In a marriage of such duration, this pregnancy would not be the first. How many babies had she birthed? How many still survived? Would she recognize them as her own when she saw them? Would she, Elizabeth wondered, recognize herself in a mirror?

Realizing she did not know him well enough to judge how old ten years passing made him, Elizabeth asked, "How old are you, sir?"

"Not yet forty," was his reply.

"Forgive me," Elizabeth said, though she did not feel she had done any wrong but in fact considered herself the wronged party. "I am finding this rather difficult to comprehend."

"The apothecary advised that you should not take on anything that requiring concentration,"
Darcy said. "Perhaps all of this is beyond your powers at this time. You must concentrate on rest, both for your body and your mind." He ran his hand over his face. "When you are rested, you will be more yourself."

"I assure you," Elizabeth said, affronted, "that no injury could damage my mental powers such that the concept of matrimony would be beyond my comprehension."

"Perhaps not matrimony itself," Darcy conceded, "but finding yourself married to me, and finding our marriage as old as it is."

"You see what a strange circumstance it is," she said, feeling some fleeting relief. "You know our acquaintance has not been easy."

"I admit we did not have the best of beginnings," he said, "but you must understand, that was many years ago. We have moved beyond all of that."

"It is very recent to me," she answered. "I have no other conception of you but the one I first formed when you came to Netherfield."

"Our meetings in Hertfordshire that first autumn is all you know of me?" Darcy asked sharply.

It was hard for her to determine how he felt about that. His accent was normally so sedate — a fashionable ennui towards the world. His reaction to the idea of her only knowing him in Hertfordshire was caught by a powerful emotion, but she could hardly tell what. He could have been pleased to have her forget how terribly he behaved in their later meetings or hurt to think their acquaintance was so trifling.

Taking a small amount of pity on him, Elizabeth added, "I should like to forget that we met again in the spring, but that I can recall perfectly."

To her surprise, his reaction to this was categorized largely by relief. He further compounded her surprise by saying, "Then the circumstance you find yourself in now cannot be so surprising. You know my sentiments."

"Knowing your sentiments does nothing to alter my own."

After struggling a moment to find his voice, Darcy said, "Your opinions are not so unalterable."

"On the contrary," Elizabeth replied, "I always believe in first impressions."

He stood swiftly and paced about the room. "You will not," he said after sufficiently expressing his agitation, "object to the midwife visiting you?"

"I have no objection to that at all," she answered.

Mr. Darcy paced more, started to say something several times without much success, and finally addressed his words to the mantle piece, "I shall send her in directly."

He fled from the room.

Elizabeth was not upset to see him go.

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