



Rivalry & Reparations (The Victorian Vagaries #3)

Author: *Caroline Cartier*

Category: Historical

Description: How would the story change if Elizabeth wasn't poor? What if she wasn't lacking in noble connections? What if Jane was not an angel? What if there were telegrams and a bit more industry? How would the story change?

The Victorian Vagaries are a bit of a fairy tale. Have you ever read *Pride and Prejudice*, a *Variation*, a sequel, or any other book, and just wish it could go on for years? The Victorian Vagaries is the story of the Bennet women over twelve years of life and love. The men and heroes we love are ever present of course, but this is the story of the Bennet women in a slightly more modern setting, while keeping to the historical fiction theme that we all love.

Moving the story forward 36 years brings us to a time where more women were working, and the industrial revolution is taking over. Times and opportunities are changing for men and women alike, and Lady Elizabeth Astley, a society widow, and the eldest of her siblings, must protect herself and her vast fortune earned by investing with her uncle from fortune hunters and heiress snatchers, as well as support her step mother and four half sisters as they each break free from the fates laid down before them and meet their destinies. Some characters deviate from canon, others remain charmingly as we know them, and friends from other Jane Austen worlds join us, but never how you might expect, though everyone we love finds their happy ending, and when Elizabeth and Darcy find their happiness, their bond is as strong and beautiful as any of us could hope...

In Volume Three of our Victorian Vagaries, when one of Elizabeth's cousins has been caught meeting with a man in secret, misinformation abounds, creating disaster for poor Kitty, who then vanishes. The search for Kitty drags on far longer than it ought, as the Darcys struggle to manage their business and estates, deal with the wagging tongues of society, console their missing relatives, and find their missing sister. As any story worthy of Jane Austen should, our journey ends with a Bennet wedding.

Some friends from *Sense Sensibility* also join us, though not how the reader might expect, in this 89,000 word slow burn, sweet and clean Victorian era vagary.

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Meryton

August 1849

Elizabeth and Darcy watched with their guests as the white carriage bearing Mary and Richard to London pulled away from Netherfield. Lord and Lady Darcy and their guests returned to the house as Elizabeth began discussing plans with Mrs Bennet for Kitty to return to Pemberley with their party the following week. Shortly later, she asked Banks to have a suite prepared at Netherfield and sent an express to Mrs Hayes asking her to prepare rooms for Kitty and the Bingleys, who, Darcy had just informed her, would be returning with them to Pemberley.

Charles Bingley had asked Darcy to assist him in looking at several estates that were for sale or lease in Derbyshire. The two gentlemen hoped to spend as much of the month as possible fishing and shooting, like they had before their marriages. Charles had apparently informed Jane that they would spend some weeks at Pemberley, and she would have to live with it and be civil. Jane had been positively uncivil all afternoon, which Elizabeth felt was an ill omen. She was not looking forward to a month in Jane's company, without even Mary present to ease the tension. She envisioned that she would spend much time visiting the tenants and her stables before the Bingleys departed, and would leave Jane to spend time with Charlotte, Kitty, and their cousins.

Darcy was more realistic, and gave Elizabeth no orders or ultimatums. "Do you mind having your sister at Pemberley for so long?" he had asked considerately. Of course, Elizabeth could deny Will nothing. She assured him that Jane's coldness would be tolerated for as long as Will desired to be in Bingley's company.

Bingley and Darcy, having been used to spending a great deal of time in each other's company before their marriages, had decided to begin the visit immediately, and even as the wedding guests departed, a cart arrived from Longbourn with the Bingleys' trunks, and the couple were installed in one of Netherfield's guest apartments. When the last of the wedding guests had left, and the last who were staying the night had gone to their rooms, Jane requested a tray in her rooms late that evening for supper and went upstairs to rest. After the long day and the excitement of Mary's wedding, Elizabeth and the rest of the party had agreed that they would all take trays upstairs later that evening, to save the staff from serving them in the dining room. Thus, valets and ladies' maids were dismissed for the night, and the occupants of Netherfield retired upstairs after the day's excitement.

The following morning, the rest of the guests departed for London and while Mr Bingley spent the day with Darcy, Jane went to the village to visit her aunt, leaving the rest of the household to prepare for their departure north. The day after that was Sunday, and all the servants had worked extra hard to remove all signs of the wedding so they could have their typical day of rest. There was a great deal of food left from the wedding breakfast, and since Elizabeth did not prefer to do much cooking in the summer, there was also plenty of cold selections such as ham or chicken ready in the kitchens for meals.

Sunday was spent quietly. The household walked to church, and everyone but Jane enjoyed quiet conversation in the drawing room in the afternoon, while Georgiana, Marianne and Margaret spent much of the day amusing Diane and young William Collins. Elizabeth relished not being expected to provide entertainment to her guests due to it being the Lord's Day. Any attempt to converse with Jane was never a welcome prospect, and Jane rarely willingly participated in any activity with her sister. The family read and talked and rested while Jane ignored the rest of them and looked out of the window serenely.

In the week leading up to their departure, Elizabeth visited her tenant farmers and

their wives, made lists for Netherfield's steward, and Mrs Nichols regarding preparations for the winter and Boxing Day. She assisted Kitty in packing and preparing to move to Pemberley, where she would likely reside much her the time henceforth until she wed, now that Mary had married. It was a good opportunity for her to polish her manners and accomplishments alongside Georgiana before her debut, living among the other young ladies at Pemberley, and she would have the opportunity to meet new people in Lambton. She would return to visit Longbourn for a few months a year, perhaps, but she would not likely reside there very much in the future until she wed. Elizabeth had to make the same promise to Mr Bennet regarding not assisting Kitty to wed without his consent, and Kitty reconciled herself to being under the supervision of Mrs Annesley until she wed or at least grew a bit older, knowing Elizabeth would not allow her to run wild as her parents had done in Meryton.

They had planned to announce to their family that Elizabeth was with child before they left Hertfordshire, but a conversation Elizabeth overheard between Jane and Mrs Bennet, who had called to visit a few days before their departure, made Elizabeth change her mind. As Elizabeth approached the drawing room, she heard Mrs Bennet chastising Jane soundly for not having fallen with child. She was in rare form. Elizabeth had not heard her stepmother so frantic since before their conversation the day Mr Collins had proposed to Kitty. Mrs Bennet was ranting at Jane, insisting that Mr Bingley would set her aside if she did not give him an heir, and going on endlessly about all of the advice she had sent to Jane in her letters, which was apparently, according to her, going unheeded. Elizabeth managed to interrupt without the two ladies realising they had been overheard and at Elizabeth's entrance, Jane gave an excuse and made a fast escape.

Elizabeth turned her eye on her stepmother and said, "Why do you plague her so? Mr Bingley has no entailed property, and my uncle has informed me of the details of their marriage settlement. Jane is Mr Bingley's sole heiress. She has no need to produce a child in order to achieve her security."

“She must give him an heir, Lizzy. Not only for her own security, but for that of her sisters! I never produced a son, and if Jane does not either, people will remember it. Do you wish for men to hesitate to offer for Kitty and Lydia out of fear that they may never produce heirs?” raved Mrs Bennet frantically.

“If they are only marrying my sisters for heirs, then yes, I would indeed prefer that they abstain from offering for them. My sisters are not breeding bitches,” Elizabeth replied firmly.

“Lizzy, after producing four girls and never a son, if my daughter cannot produce one either, I shall be a laughingstock in Meryton,” Mrs Bennet insisted.

“There we have it. You are concerned for your own reputation,” observed Elizabeth. “You should realise that if anyone were going to laugh at the Bennets for producing no sons, they probably began seventeen years ago, when you were carrying Lydia after producing three girls already. I am certain the neighbourhood has got over their amusement, Mama.”

Elizabeth’s stepmother continued to fret and fidget over the matter, and Elizabeth finally snapped, “For heaven’s sake, did no one ever instruct you during your marriage that you **MUST** produce a son at all costs?”

Fanny Bennet was quiet a moment. “My sister and your Aunt Josephine did so a number of times.”

“And were you able to do so, just because you had been commanded to?” continued Elizabeth. “You do not need to answer. I know all too well that no amount of cajoling, commanding, or chastisement made the slightest difference. I was there. I watched as girl after girl came forth. Indeed, I am sure it made matters quite worse by destroying your nerves, did it not?” Mrs Bennet refused to meet Elizabeth’s eye, and she continued. “Making demands and distressing Jane is not going to assist her in

falling with child nor will it have a beneficial effect upon her relations with her husband. You must cease importuning her. Her state of motherhood does not reflect upon you, and you have no lack of daughters to give you grandchildren. Not to mention some women take years to fall with child. Look at Aunt Josephine. Look at Aunt Madeleine. They have lovely families that are no less wonderful for having waited for children for a few years. Your distress is quite premature.

“You must allow your daughters to manage their own affairs. You cannot cause them distress or marital discord because they are not fulfilling your expectations. If they marry, wonderful. If not, it is of little importance. Whether they have children or not is also their own affair. The unmarried all will have independent incomes of their own by a certain age, and their connections will be incomparable by the time they have finished their first seasons. They shall not suffer socially from not having married or borne children, and with so many daughters, it is certain you will one day be a grandmama.”

Fanny looked sad. “I just have such hopes for them all.”

“That is perfectly natural, and many of your hopes will likely be fulfilled. But it matters little. My sisters are well provided for and well connected. They will not fade into insignificance due to their status as wife or mother, or lack of status thereof,” insisted Elizabeth. “My late husband used to maintain that anxiety is the enemy of pregnancy. Distressing Jane is not likely to have a positive outcome. Let her alone. Stop asking about her condition. If she has something to share, she will do so. If she has not informed you that she is with child, then she probably is not, or it may be too soon to announce it. There is no need to keep inquiring about the matter.”

“You are correct, of course. People always talking about boys when I was with child was always painful to me when I proved to be carrying only girls. Perhaps I ought to apologise to Jane,” said Mrs Bennet.

“Well, if you do so, certainly do not tell her I had anything to do with it,” joked Elizabeth. “That would not be well received at all.”

Mrs Bennet smiled. “I shall write to her after your party has left Meryton. I should like to see this Pemberley myself, Lizzy. It is tragic that I travel so poorly.” Elizabeth’s stepmother always became ill on very long carriage rides, and so had no interest in travel outside of Meryton, or occasionally St Albans. A visit to her brother in London had always been a rare event indeed.

When Elizabeth shared the discussion with Darcy later that night in their bedchamber, he confided Bingley’s concerns from when they had been in London. “I had not brought it up before, because Bingley told me in confidence, of course, but now that you are aware of it, it cannot do any harm.”

Darcy did not mention the part that Jane was worried that Elizabeth would conceive first. He rather thought that Mrs Bingley might be quite distressed to learn that Elizabeth knew the private fears she had shared with her husband alone. Indeed, he was not even certain that it had been proper of Bingley to tell him at all, but he would do his best to support his friend and protect his wife’s secrets. It was obvious to him that in his concern for his wife, Bingley had slipped into his old habit of confiding everything to Darcy, but it would go no further.

The two agreed that their announcement must be made long before the Bingleys departed from Pemberley, for it would very soon become quite apparent on its own, but it did not need to happen while Mrs Bingley was still smarting from her mother’s reprimand. They decided they would wait until they had been at Pemberley for a week or two, then inform the rest of the family by letter.

Eventually the party took their leave of Hertfordshire, and headed north to

Pemberley. Concerned about Elizabeth's health in her condition, as well as the comfort of his grandmother at her age, Darcy slowed their journey, and included many rest stops, resulting in the journey taking five days instead of three. Elizabeth rather thought it made the journey even more exhausting to drag it out so; she told Darcy on their last night at an inn that she could not wait to lock herself in her chambers at Pemberley with a book and a cup of chocolate for an entire day. When Darcy asked if that tradition might not be rude to Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth replied with a wry smile, "You shall keep Bingley occupied, I am sure, and I am certain that Jane will leap at the chance to avoid me for an entire day. Indeed, if she has been distressed about falling with child, perhaps she could do with a restful day on her own in environs such as Pemberley offers. Or perhaps your steward will monopolise you as he always does when we return, and Bingley might spend the day alone with his wife."

Darcy agreed that she very well could be right. "I must say that the casual, relaxed element that you have brought to Pemberley's environs might be just the surroundings the Bingleys need to relax and forget their troubles. I am going to suggest to Bingley that he use this holiday to court his wife all over again. Her happiness and contentment at his attentions might assist with their goals. He should plan many outings and romantic activities just for the two of them while they are with us, and utilise Pemberley's hothouses to his benefit. Perhaps once Richard and Mary return, the Bingleys might like to use our cottage at the lakes for a time before returning to London."

Elizabeth agreed that it sounded like a marvellous idea, and the next afternoon when they were escorting the carriages on horseback, Darcy mentioned the idea to Bingley, who smiled. Darcy was a good friend, who Charles knew cared about him sincerely and wished wholeheartedly for his happiness. This was why he had braved Jane's displeasure with this trip, and by seeking an estate in Derbyshire. Jane did not care for the idea at all, but Bingley missed his close friend's steadfast support. Jane had grown rather distant in recent weeks, and his friend's advice was sound. Bingley

would begin to court his wife in earnest again.

At length they finally arrived at Pemberley, and Elizabeth was correct. Jane had found the five-day journey just as exhausting as had Elizabeth and the other ladies, and she too, welcomed the idea of resting in her apartment for an entire day, while the gentlemen rode the estate and occupied themselves with Darcy's steward, who had a mountain of tasks awaiting Will's return. Mrs Hayes could always be counted upon, and had all ready for the ladies to rest in their chambers the next day. Once Elizabeth had a day of blissful leisure, she joined Darcy in riding the estate to see the progress of the work on the new stables and tenant houses.

The tenants were quite pleased and excited about the improvements to their homes. Wives confided to Elizabeth that their chores and taking care of their children had never been easier now that they had pumps, drains, proper basins, tubs, and water boilers in their homes. It had been an unfathomable expense for the comfort of mere tenant farmers, but the benefits were already making themselves known. As well as the objections. It was hard to believe there could be any. Still, several local estate owners disliked hearing of the Darcys' improvements. There were letters of reprimand from his neighbours waiting for Darcy. It could hardly have been a surprise that the tenants of other estates nearby had heard and wanted such comforts for themselves. Their masters, the ones sending the letters of great disapproval and outrage, were not inclined to offer them.

"I will not hear a word," Darcy confided in Elizabeth. "Perhaps if they would make some investment into their tenants' health and comfort, their estates would be so attractive that farmers and their families would never want to leave. The cities and factories are eating up good workers from the farms as it is. Pemberley still takes care of our people, and so we had not experienced the exodus of tenants that our neighbours face. But many Derbyshire landowners have complained of tenants moving en masse to the cities for better jobs, pay, and conditions in recent years. Your investment has only ensured that families are happy to remain at Pemberley for

generations to come, I hope. It is only right that the estate is improved by us for our heir. I have always disliked the idea that tenant farmer families ought to be as poor as some of them are. If I am doing what I am meant to do, then every person at Pemberley must be thriving, and living in dignity and comfort. Pemberley farmers have always been rather genteel, due to my insistence that they do their best to read and write and educate their children as best they can, and due to those efforts, Pemberley has thrived.”

The new doctor at Pemberley, Mr Lloyd, had visited all of the families on the estate several times, gaining the trust of the tenants and their families with his calm and reliable demeanour and gentle touch. News travelled quickly that he and Mr Clarke were not like the sawbones of old, who were more likely than not to drain the life from their patients like vampires. There was already talk of fewer illnesses among the tenant families since Mr Lloyd had begun to advise the wives on the estate, and one farmer had named his new son Lloyd after the doctor had assisted the midwives to bring his wife through a difficult breech birth.

The new stables were spacious and modern; many of the horses had already been delivered from Newmarket, and Elizabeth’s assistant stablemaster had stayed behind in Newmarket to see to the care of the foals who were not ready to travel a long distance yet. Due to so many rival stables trying to steal Elizabeth’s secrets, Elizabeth’s stablemaster had moved most of the Palomino operation first. The stablemaster and grooms at Pemberley’s house stables had grumbled a bit, and so Darcy arranged for those stables to be rebuilt, with improved quarters upstairs for all the outdoor staff.

A new foal had been born, the very first of the new Pemberley stables, a lovely black colt with a white blaze upon his forehead that resembled a strike of lightning. From the colt’s excellent lines, proportions, and pedigree, it was obvious he would be a stunning and enviable piece of horseflesh. Elizabeth gave him to Darcy as an anniversary present and Darcy named the young horse Jupiter, inspired by the blaze

on his head, and Elizabeth's tendency to name her horses after mythology. After the colt had been weaned from his mother, he would be sent out to run in the meadows with the other young colts until he was old enough to be trained. Georgiana's horse Persephone and Elizabeth's Athena would soon be making the journey to Pemberley with the other young horses from Newcastle and then Elizabeth and Georgiana would begin working with the stablemasters to train their mares. Elizabeth believed in training her own horses herself when possible. She insisted that Georgiana and Darcy do the same, to better bond with the animals.

Marianne, who was an accomplished walker, was wild to go back out exploring the countryside, but her mother persuaded her that Viscount St Claire would call as he had promised, and Marianne was determined to be there when he presented himself to Darcy. This led to three weeks of Marianne and Kitty sniping at each other, constantly remaining indoors, and bored out of their minds in the drawing room until Marianne, discouraged by the interminable waiting, abandoned the house and began walking for hours each day. This had been her usual habit before leaving Pemberley for the summer, sometimes with and sometimes without her younger sister Margaret. She had a terrible propensity for getting caught in the rain, and she almost always managed to evade the stable lads and footmen that Elizabeth had insisted must accompany her. Elizabeth had chastised the girl every way she could think of, but technically the Dashwoods were guests, and Marianne was not under the authority of Mrs Annesley, though Elizabeth thought she ought to be, due to her impulsive nature. Elizabeth loved her exercise, and still did a fair amount of daily walking herself, but she knew the dangers to young girls walking alone in the countryside. Marianne paid little heed, and continued to evade her walking companions.

Margaret attended to her lessons under Mr Mason, and continued to excel in geography. She spent time with the other young ladies, learning ladylike pursuits, but like Elizabeth, she had no patience for embroidery, and little for pianoforte. She could

draw fairly well, but it did not hold her interest until Mr Mason interested her in cartography. Georgiana began to give her lessons on the harp, and Margaret took great interest in Elizabeth's industry periodicals, and though her mother voiced concern, Elizabeth encouraged the young girl to read whatever took her interest. She amused Will and shocked her mother at dinner when debating about the news or advances in industry or agriculture; debates that Marianne never failed to roll her eyes about, sometimes muttering that it was unnatural and contrary to the sensibility a proper girl should display.

As to the menfolk, Bingley and Darcy made trips every few days to view estates within a day's travel, and Bingley compiled a list of acceptable homes to present to Jane. After visiting more than half a dozen, they determined that only four were acceptable, all within a one or two hour carriage ride of Pemberley. He planned several drives for just he and Jane to view these estates alone, bringing picnic lunches and the like, allowing his wife to view the houses at her leisure so they could decide together what would suit them.

Bingley planned his outings to view the estates well, and the couple happily settled upon Tatton Hall, a grand stone Georgian mansion somewhat larger than Netherfield. With a twenty-acre park, and only an hour carriage ride from Pemberley, Charles was ecstatic. In no time, he met with the solicitors in the nearby market town, negotiated a purchase on favourable terms, and signed the requisite documents to make Tatton Hall the Bingleys' country estate. They were to take possession just before Christmas, and would reside at Pemberley until their new home was ready for their arrival.

Of course, until then, Jane would be at Pemberley. But Elizabeth found that she could find ways to politely avoid Jane's company quite easily. Charlotte, being out of mourning, was quite friendly with the local ladies, and Jane accompanied her on calls quite often. Elizabeth hosted several dinners and parties welcoming the Bingleys to the county, and ensured they were included in the invitations she accepted, to give Jane the opportunity to become better acquainted with other landowners and their

families in the area. At least once per week, Bingley arranged a private dinner with his wife in the conservatory or the orangery.

Dear Colonel Brandon became a regular visitor. He rode and fished with the gentlemen regularly, and dined with the family frequently; Mr and Mrs Ferrars often accompanied him. Elizabeth noticed that the colonel watched her sister Kitty often and intently. She had no opinion on such a match. There was a considerable difference of age, but many couples did not find that to be an obstacle, and she would not object if she believed Kitty wanted it, especially since it would have to be a considerably long and very quiet courtship. She did note that Kitty had not yet discerned the gentleman's interest. If Kitty noticed him on her own, and an inclination began that survived to her majority, it would certainly be an abiding one. Kitty was not the childish, immature girl that Elizabeth had once been so suspicious of Wickham for paying attention to. She was maturing beautifully, becoming Catherine Bennet more than simply Kitty, although Elizabeth would prefer it if she waited a few more years before settling on a suitor, and there was every chance that she would. Indeed, she spent most of her time studying fiercely, and in something of a friendly academic rivalry with Georgiana. She avoided Marianne, and pretended not to care when the other girl boasted of her imagined attentions from Willoughby, who himself had conveniently never materialised.

Darcy had confided to Elizabeth that he knew the young man was in the area, that he had sent his card round to him, and that after his attention to the ladies at Pemberley while the Darcys had been away, the more time that passed before the young man presented himself, the less likely it would be that Darcy would receive him if he did.

“It is unacceptable that the man called upon my house so frequently, like a close acquaintance, when I was not here, and then to abandon those calls when I return. It is very likely that if he does not materialise, I will inform the staff that he is not to be admitted when we go away again. As it is, I have already informed them that he is not to call upon any of the ladies of the house until I have met with him. That is basic

propriety, but somehow, he seems to have missed that lesson. I will not, however, have him seducing our young ladies when I am away from home.” His wife quite agreed with him, although they had not spoken of it to Marianne.

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Eventually Elizabeth and Darcy agreed that they could wait no longer. Their impending arrival must be announced. Elizabeth suspected that Lady Rose and Charlotte had already noticed, but she knew they would say nothing until Elizabeth chose to speak of it. She had confided the news privately to Mrs Hayes, but that had been it. Indeed, Elizabeth did not know how Jane had not noticed, as she was sure she had not, since Elizabeth's figure was quite close to hiding the matter no longer and indeed, it had been very nearly noticeable for weeks. Only Jane's adherence to ignoring Elizabeth as much as possible had kept it from her notice. Sarah had exhausted her skills with Elizabeth's wardrobe, but there was no way to hide the matter with cleverly altered gowns and layered shawls any longer. After the news was out, Elizabeth would invite the dressmaker from Lambton the following week to make her a number of new gowns for her rapidly increasing figure.

Elizabeth and Darcy agreed that they would inform Jane and Charles separately and alone, before making an announcement to the rest of the household. Late one morning, Elizabeth met Jane in the upstairs hall and asked her if she had a moment. Jane, being Jane, attempted to brush Elizabeth off by saying that she was expected downstairs to pay a call with Charlotte. "Very well, I cannot make you sit down and talk to me, but I must have a moment of your time," said Elizabeth exasperatedly, following her toward the stairs and moving in front of her to block her path. "Jane, I am hoping I may ask for your help with Kitty this upcoming season in London."

"What help could I possibly give you, Lizzy?" asked Jane sharply, not inclined to be generous to the sister that she was going to be seeing too much of against her will for the rest of her life. Jane was delighted with Tatton Hall as a house, but she had no desire to live so close to Elizabeth and be forced to pay her deference in her own county. She had only agreed to it for Charles's sake, and would have gladly settled

anywhere else. She would even have been happy at Netherfield Park, and had been incensed to learn Elizabeth owned it. One might have thought that Jane would not wish to live so close to Longbourn so soon after being turned out by her mother, but if Bingley had purchased Netherfield and Jane had returned as its mistress, she would have nearly outranked her mother in their neighbourhood, which would have suited her very well indeed. As it was, Jane had refused to live in the house once she learned who its owner was.

“When we return to London for the Season, Kitty will be coming out. We must make the same effort for her that I did for Mary, it is only fair, but I will be recovering from childbirth. I will need help this year. I am hoping that Kitty will be able to attend events with you and Charles, and Mary and Richard have also promised to assist. I plan to have a number of events at Pemberley House, but otherwise, I hope that I will not need to attend too many major events myself this season,” explained Elizabeth.

“Recovering from childbirth?” Suddenly Jane was shrieking at Elizabeth, ranting that her sisters were not there for Elizabeth to pick up and put down again whenever she was not busy with her own affairs – which was rich, coming from Jane – and that she would take Kitty with her to Tatton Hall when they moved! This continued, as she moved on to berate Elizabeth for her vindictiveness at constantly showing Jane up, and how Jane would be humiliated not to have produced a child when Elizabeth had two, but that of course her feelings meant nothing to Elizabeth! Georgiana and Kitty had crept from their private sitting room to see what was happening in the hall as Elizabeth attempted to reply calmly to Jane’s irrational cries.

Darcy and Bingley had been in the stables when Darcy had shared the news. “We had planned to make an announcement before leaving Hertfordshire, Bingley, but it came to Elizabeth’s attention that Mrs Bennet was distressing Mrs Bingley about her own lack of results, and we decided to wait a while before saying anything. But it cannot be delayed any longer. It is rapidly becoming visible, and it is far past time for us to tell the household. Elizabeth plans to tell Mrs Bingley privately this morning.”

Bingley turned white. “That is wonderful news, Darcy! I cannot tell you how happy I am for you! Do you think Lady Darcy has told Jane yet? I am overjoyed, of course, by your news, but I ought to check on my wife and ensure that she is well. I am sure she will be quite pleased.”

Darcy agreed that it might be prudent to go into the house to see their wives. The two gentlemen entered the house through the back, made their way to the great hall and turned to the stairs, hearing raised voices coming from above. “I believe,” Darcy said quietly, “that my wife has told your wife the news.”

As the gentlemen reached the bottom of the stairs they heard a shriek and both men looked up and clearly saw Jane reach out and shove Elizabeth in the chest with both hands.

Darcy took in Jane’s expression of horror as she realised what she had done. He cried out for help as Elizabeth rolled down the stairs, desperate to stop her fall. She came to a stop halfway down the staircase on a landing, and he and Charles raced up two steps at a time. Darcy and the footmen who were at the bottom of the stairs rushed to Elizabeth, Charles continued to Jane as Georgiana and Kitty flew to the top of the stairs screaming in reaction to what they had apparently just witnessed from the upstairs hall.

Darcy was just about to lift Elizabeth into his arms when Kitty cried out, “Wait! You cannot move her; you do not know how she is injured!” When Darcy argued, she insisted, “Will, it was something taught to me by the nurse midwives when we were helping to open the school last summer. A worker fell from a scaffold, and the nurses would not allow him to be moved until the doctor arrived. You could make her injuries worse! We must send for the doctor immediately!” Kitty took command of the situation, sending servants running to fetch blankets to cover Elizabeth, and to

find the doctor as quickly as possible.

“Please also send a carriage to the nursing school, and ask them to send a midwife without delay,” Darcy said hoarsely as Kitty gasped sharply, met his eyes in horror, then covered her mouth with her hand and closed her eyes in fright as she understood the implication behind his order. As Darcy allowed his sisters and housekeeper to take charge of the situation, for once in his life he knew not what to do. He could only hold Elizabeth’s hand and beg her to wake as her maid Sarah arrived in tears at the state of her mistress, followed by Charlotte. His grandmother and the other ladies had soon joined the others, watching from nearby, weeping.

At the top of the stairs, Jane Bingley was screaming hysterically. Georgiana and Charles attempted to calm her for a moment, but she was insensible, and her screams were making the situation intolerably worse, perhaps the only blessing being that Elizabeth could not hear them. Charles scooped Jane into his arms, and carried her into her bedchamber, shouting for her maid and begging Jane to calm herself. Georgiana assured Charles that she would stay with Jane until he returned, and Charles ran out of the room to return to Darcy and Elizabeth. Marianne and Aunt Josephine joined Georgiana and Jane’s maid in Jane’s room as Jane cried, “No, no, Lizzy! I did not mean it!” Over and over again. Aunt Josephine eventually slapped Jane hard across the face, and Jane swooned, falling blessedly unconscious and silent.

By some chance of fate, the doctor had actually been in the house, and it had taken little time to find him. Apparently Mr Lloyd had found that once he had started to be trusted locally, if he visited the Pemberley servants’ hall and kitchen for a cup of tea and a biscuit once a week, to let the housekeeper know about any particular needs of the tenant families, the servants would find a moment to catch him alone, and confess any illnesses or concerns they had about their health, or that of their families. Even at Pemberley, where the staff had always been cared for, servants were not likely to volunteer information about their illnesses or concerns, but he found ways to gain their trust when they happened to wander in on one pretext or another.

The doctor examined Elizabeth to the best of his ability there on the stairs, complimented Kitty on her presence of mind in managing the situation just right, and declared that he could find no broken bones or immediate evidence of significant damage to Elizabeth's spine. He instructed the gentlemen on how to safely move the patient to her bed, and withdrew while Kitty, Charlotte, and Sarah changed her into a nightgown. They had to force Darcy from the room, and in the end his grandmother had to speak sharply to him to make him come away so the ladies could assist his wife.

The doctor examined Elizabeth again, and later, when Sister Augustine arrived with Evie in her wake, they both agreed that Elizabeth was unconscious and clearly had a head injury, based on the large lump on the back of her head, but that she was not yet showing any signs of losing her child. All they could do was watch her and see what happened if or when she woke, and pray that her labours would not begin.

Darcy had no idea how to feel about the pregnancy as he later sat at his wife's bedside. He had been equal parts elation and apprehension since Elizabeth had told him of their blessing. He wanted a child, of course. But he remembered the fear and anguish in the house each time his mother had lost a child, and he could not accept losing his wife the way he had his mother. He needed Elizabeth like he needed air. He could not think of the dark and lonely times from before their marriage any longer. As Elizabeth had advised, he thought only of the past insofar as it gave him pleasure. He could not go back to that dark and lonely place. Elizabeth had to live, no matter what else was lost. He could never do without her again.

Charles came to him as Darcy sat with his wife. "Darcy, what can I do?" he begged. Darcy shook his head in anguish. "There is nothing we can do but wait. How is Mrs Bingley?"

Charles looked tortured. "I cannot believe that you would inquire after her after what she has done. She has fainted in a hysterical fit in our rooms. The doctor has left

laudanum to quiet her when she wakes. I do not know what I will do or say when she does. Darcy, I cannot say how sorry I am. I knew Jane would be upset, but I had no idea she could do something like this.”

“She did not mean to do it,” said Darcy.

Bingley gaped at him. “Darcy, we both saw her push your wife quite intentionally.”

“Yes, but I saw her expression as my wife fell, and it was pure horror. I do not know what was happening in their conversation, but in her distress, I do not believe Mrs Bingley perceived the danger of the stairs,” Darcy replied.

“Even if that is the case, her actions were still beyond appalling. There is no call to assault any person in such a way, let alone a pregnant woman! One’s own expectant sister. I cannot conceive how my wife could do so. It is in defiance of everything I know to be true about her,” cried Charles. “I am so sorry. This is very wrong of me. Your wife needs you, Darcy. You cannot deal with my problems now.”

“Elizabeth is going to wake up,” insisted Darcy. “She is going to be fine. She only has a bump on the head. She will wake soon, I am sure of it,” Darcy babbled, practically incoherent as he refused to look away from his wife’s pale face. “Go to your wife, Bingley. Keep her quiet and contained to her rooms, please, but use no cruelty. Elizabeth cares deeply about Mrs Bingley. and will never forgive us if she wakes and we have treated her cruelly. I am determined that she shall wake soon and when she is well, we will discuss the rest.”

Darcy sat by his wife’s bed for more than three days and looked increasingly wretched as time passed. The midwife was concerned that Elizabeth needed water and liquids, and they forced her to take as much water and broth as they could, which was not much, with an invalid feeder. Sister Augustine took turns sitting close by with Evie and Sarah, but Darcy never moved from her bedside until, the second night,

when his grandmother came in and berated him to take some food and go bathe. Only her solemn promise to stay with Elizabeth the entire time would convince him to go to his room and bathe and have a small meal.

When he returned to Elizabeth, his grandmother said, “I believe we should send word to Mary and Richard.” When Darcy objected, insisting that there was no need because Elizabeth was certainly going to wake soon, she shushed him, “They were due to stop here on their return from the Lakes next week in any case. Mary is less than a day’s journey away [*] , and will never forgive you if you do not send word. You could use Richard’s firm hand around here as well.”

When Darcy inquired as to her meaning, she replied, “Elizabeth is well loved here by the servants and tenants. With Mrs Bingley remaining at Pemberley, and Elizabeth taking so long to wake, many of the staff are angry with Mrs Bingley, calling her a murderess, and saying the magistrate ought to be called. I am aware you do not wish this to happen at this time. I advise that Bingley and his wife travel to Lake Cottage, bring the news to the Fitzwilliams, and perhaps stay there until matters settle here.”

“Is Mrs Bingley well enough to travel?” asked Darcy disinterestedly.

“Not particularly, in my opinion, but there is nothing else to do. The lady does nothing but cry since she woke after the incident. She has said nothing sensible. She just cries for hours until Bingley can take no more and doses her with laudanum so she will sleep. Her sister Catherine fears she has gone mad. But I believe it will be better for Mrs Bingley to be anywhere else just now. I will ask Miss Catherine to accompany her. I think she should have one of her sisters with her, and I fear Mrs Fitzwilliam will not be very tolerant of Mrs Bingley when she learns of the matter.” Darcy told her to arrange matters as she saw fit, uncaring of Mrs Bingley’s state or anything else, the longer Elizabeth took to wake.

At first light the following morning, Mr Bingley carried his heavily dosed wife to a carriage, followed by her second younger sister. Kitty had promised Granny Rose that she would do her best to see to her sister's care and comfort while they awaited news from Pemberley, although it had not been easy so far. Jane had fought them hysterically whenever she was awake, and had not allowed them to do anything for her comfort.

After several hours, the carriage pulled up to a lovely house. Kitty was amused about it being called a cottage, because it was far grander than any cottage she had ever seen. Richard and Mary came outside as the footman opened the door of the carriage. They all greeted each other, and Charles stepped down and asked if there was a room Jane could lay down in. "Something has happened, and I will need to tell you of it immediately. You will want to ask your servants to begin packing for you, for you are needed at Pemberley. But first, Jane is unwell. Is there somewhere that I can bring her to rest?"

Mary was slightly panicked at the idea that something was wrong at Pemberley, and flew into action. A room was prepared, and Charles carried Jane upstairs, wrapped in a cloak, and left her in Kitty's care. When he returned downstairs, Mary and Richard awaited him impatiently in the drawing room. As he sat and accepted a cup of tea from Mary gratefully, he hesitated while he attempted to think of what to say. "Mrs Fitzwilliam, I am aware that you know that Lady Darcy had news to share regarding a new addition to the family."

When Mary confirmed this, he continued, "Lord and Lady Darcy have been aware that Jane has been struggling with her hopes for falling with child, and that she was distressed at the idea that Lady Darcy might fall with child before her, so they waited as long as they could to make an announcement of their news, which they did three days ago."

Mary took in a breath and squeezed her husband's hand tightly as she feared what

news regarding Elizabeth's condition might come next.

“When Lady Darcy shared the news with Jane privately, for some reason they were conversing near the stairs. Jane became distraught, and we have not determined everything that was said or that happened, but somehow Jane pushed Lady Darcy, who fell down the stairs.”

Mary began weeping, and Richard demanded that Bingley tell the rest immediately. “She is alive, and has not lost the child, nor does she seem to have any significant injuries to her body, but there is a rather large lump on her head, and she has not yet woken.”

Mary demanded to know why Charles had brought Jane hither and he responded, “So far, I have not known what to do or what to think. But Darcy and I were at the bottom of the staircase and witnessed the fall. Darcy insists that he is certain that Jane did not intend what happened. He thinks that in her distress, she must have forgotten the risk, and proximity of the staircase. He saw her expression as Lady Darcy fell, and he believes she did not intend what happened.

“I have difficulty knowing what to think, but her behaviour since has suggested that he may be correct. We have had to keep her heavily dosed with laudanum and when she becomes too conscious, she weeps hysterically. But the longer she takes to wake, the more the servants have begun demanding that the magistrate be called for. Darcy does not wish for it at this time, but he is too busy sitting with Elizabeth to take charge of the household and enforce his edicts. He and Lady Rose have requested that you come immediately, Fitzwilliam, and that Mary come to be there for her sister. Lady Rose believes that Jane should remain here until Lady Darcy is well, because Darcy is determined she should have a say in what happens next.”

Richard began to grumble about his cousin and Elizabeth's strange way of managing their affairs when Mary silenced him with a gentle hand on his arm. She thanked

Charles, who looked perfectly wretched, for bringing them the news, and went immediately to the housekeeper to prepare her for the Bingleys to take over the house, with the understanding that Mrs Bingley was ill, and Mrs Bingley and Kitty would be attending her, so the house would need to run itself for a time. They dined in their rooms that night, Bingley preferred to sit by his wife, Mary was too distressed to be in company, and Kitty was exhausted by the trip and overwhelming worry of the last few days.

Late that evening, Darcy had refused to allow Charlotte or indeed anyone take his place by Elizabeth's side. Eventually he fell asleep with his head upon the bed, as he had done many times over the last days and nights. Evie sat quietly in a corner and practised knitting a scarf by candlelight. The two of them had several conversations, and Darcy learned that the girl was nearly as tortured as he was about Elizabeth's condition.

"We saved each other, yer Lordship," said Evie quietly. "I saved her life, but then she saved mine. She coulda sent me back there to that place with a shilling an a meal, and I woulda thought myself lucky, but she saved me from it, and I never have to go back there again. She told me that she put it in her will and everything. Imagine that! Her ladyship, thinking of me in her will! She's the smartest, most beautiful, the bravest lady I ever knew, 'sides Sister A! It pains me that there is nothing I would not do to see her well, but I can't make it so."

Darcy understood exactly how the girl felt, and the two sat vigil together into the night. Close to sunrise, the room turning grey with the first light of the new day, Darcy woke with his head upon the bed, and felt a hand in his hair, followed by a gasp from Evie's corner of the room. His head jerked up to find Elizabeth's fingers stroking his hair.

She was not fully conscious, but Darcy spoke to her and encouraged her to open her eyes as she moaned in discomfort, and Evie ran for Sister Augustine and the doctor. “Elizabeth, can you hear me? Can you open your eyes, darling? How do you feel?”

Elizabeth winced at the dim candlelight and moaned. “As if I’ve been beaten. What has happened to me?”

“Do you remember anything, my love?” asked Darcy.

After a moment Elizabeth whispered, “Jane. Jane was angry. And then she looked so frightened. It is all so muddled; I cannot remember anything. Is Jane well? Was she hurt also?”

Darcy assured Elizabeth of Jane’s safety. “Mrs Bingley is safe. You have fallen down the stairs. It is a miracle that you have been returned to us, and so far, our babe has not been lost. All will be well now, my darling!”

The doctor and midwife entered, and Darcy was persuaded to step out of the room so Elizabeth could be examined. When he returned, she had fallen asleep again, but the doctor told him not to worry.

“Now that she has awakened and seems to be coming to her senses, she will need a great deal of healthy and healing sleep, Lord Darcy,” explained Mr Lloyd. “She should remain in bed for a number of weeks, I should think. For at least one week, perhaps more, she will be in danger of losing consciousness at unexpected moments after her head injury. It would be better if she does not exert herself and if she is in bed, she will not fall and harm herself further. She also must take care to ensure her pregnancy is safe. She should remain in bed for at least three weeks, perhaps longer, depending on how quickly she recovers, for the safety of the child.”

Darcy thanked the doctor, who agreed to stay in the house for a few more days until

they were sure Elizabeth was on the mend. An express messenger was sent with all speed to Lake Cottage, with instructions to keep an eye out for the Fitzwilliam's carriage on the road.

Mary had gone in to see Jane after dinner the evening before, and Richard persuaded Bingley to join him in the billiards room. As much as Mary did not like her next elder sister very much, she was excessively distressed by what she found. Mary had gone to the kitchens and made a bowl of pastina and egg when her maid told her that the word among the staff was that Jane had taken nothing but tea and laudanum since the incident at Pemberley. When she arrived in her sister's bedchamber, followed by Kitty, she was shocked at Jane's appearance. "Why does my sister look so unwell and unkempt? Is she not being cared for properly?" Mary asked sharply. Jane's face and hair had been covered by her cloak and bonnet when she arrived.

Kitty assured Mary that they were doing all that Jane would allow them to do, but that Jane was too distressed when conscious to be overly meddled with. Mary frowned. Jane's pallor looked unhealthy and pale, her eyes had dark hollows beneath them, her hair was dull, limp, a tangled, greasy mess against her face. "Leave her with me for a while." Mary said finally. When Kitty raised a brow, knowing how Mary felt about their elder sister, Mary chastised her younger sister for such thoughts, and shooed her from the room, instructing Kitty to go and get some rest. Mary then dismissed the maid and sat with her sister, who was quietly crying and muttering to herself. Richard had encouraged Bingley to stay downstairs with him for the evening after dinner, knowing that Bingley would have the major part of Jane's care for at least several days when he and Mary left them. Bingley clearly needed at least a few hours reprieve from the days spent attempting to comfort his wife.

When Mary and Jane were alone, Mary sat and watched her sister quietly for a few moments. Mrs Bennet's "fits of nerves" over the years were silly flutterings

compared to Jane's condition. This was the real thing. Jane fretted and sniffled and muttered, "Lizzy, I am sorry." until Mary reached forward and clasped Jane's hands and began to pray aloud. Jane whimpered as Mary prayed, thanking God for his miracles, and humbly begging him to bring Elizabeth back to health and Jane back from despair. She prayed and recited passages from the Bible aloud from memory, untiring, for nearly a half hour. Then she began to sing quietly, a hymn that was a favourite of the Bennet daughters when they were children, one that they had sung together often whenever they had been outside in the garden and out of their mother's sight and hearing, which was the only time they were ever able to play with Elizabeth. They did not do so often, but occasionally when their mother was not watching, and Jane was feeling generous, the girls might all have a game together, and most of them having lovely voices, often sang together when they were out of doors.

Mary remembered two years before Elizabeth had married, her eldest sister decided during one of her visits to Longbourn that the girls would learn the hymn in three-part harmony to surprise the family for Christmas. It was one of the few times she and her sisters had paid Elizabeth any significant notice, mostly because she had made a nuisance of herself about it, and Jane had capitulated in an effort to restore peace.

The five girls had practised in secret in the cold gardens of Longbourn for weeks, and had sung accompanied by their Aunt Gardiner on the pianoforte on Christmas Eve. It was the last and possibly only time Mary had ever felt at one with all of her sisters. Now, as Mary sang, she felt Jane's hands tremble until suddenly her sister was sobbing loudly and uncontrollably. The high keening drew Kitty back into the room, followed eventually by Charles and Richard, who stood in the doorway. Kitty moved to the bed and embraced Mary and Jane, and joined in the singing as they rocked their sister as she wept.

Mary shook her head at Charles, who had begun to move toward the laudanum. It was time for Jane to get it all out, not to sleep more. She waved the gentlemen out of

the room as she continued to sing and rock with her sisters. The gentlemen withdrew and went back downstairs, leaving a footman outside the door to fetch them if they were needed. Eventually, the sisters' singing trailed off quietly once Jane had cried herself out, and lay in her sisters' arms, sniffing and hiccupping. They were all quiet until Jane said clearly, "I did not mean it."

"Of course you did not mean it, Jane. Everyone knows that. Even Mr Darcy knows it," replied Mary.

"Mr Darcy?" Jane asked weakly.

"Mr Bingley informed us that Mr Darcy was the first to say so. He saw your face as Lizzy fell, and he believes that in your distress at the moment, you must not have realised the danger of the stairs," said Mary gently.

"Poor Mr Darcy!" cried Jane. "Poor Lizzy! Her poor baby! How could I do such a wicked thing! I never meant it!" Jane began to cry again until Mary said sharply, "Jane you have cried enough! In your shock you have heard nothing that is happening around you! Elizabeth has not woken because she struck her head, but she has not lost her child! There is still a chance! We still have hope! She must wake up, Jane, we must keep praying that she will do so!"

The sisters embraced and held hands and prayed together for Elizabeth. Eventually Mary rose and went to Jane's vanity and retrieved what was needed to take care of Jane's appearance. She sang softly as she used some damp towelling to scrub some of the grease from Jane's hair, then brushed it out, then plaited it into a neat braid. She then brought a basin, and assisted her sister to wash her face. She took no arguments as she prepared Jane a cup of tea and pressed her to eat something. Jane's appetite was not ready for much, but Mary was satisfied that Jane took at least some of the soup.

“I must leave in the morning, Jane, before you have woken. Richard and I are leaving with all haste to travel to Pemberley. I will send you an express the moment I arrive. Promise me you will not fall back into despair. Promise me that you and Kitty will pray together every day for Lizzy, and that you will bathe in the morning, and eat something, and take care of yourself,” urged Mary.

“I will try. I do not know that I am strong enough,” answered Jane.

“You must be. You must be strong for Charles and Kitty. They are frightened as well. You must be strong and send all your prayers to Lizzy. It is wrong to despair, Jane. To despair is to lose your faith in God,” insisted Mary. The sisters stayed together until they fell asleep together on Jane’s bed. Charles and Richard found them that way a few hours later when they returned to retire. After Richard kindly declined to invite Charles to share his bed, brothers or no. Charles laughed for the first time in days, and took himself to the daybed in Jane’s sitting room to be close to his wife in case he was needed in the night.

Mary and Richard departed at first light, after Mary had pressed Charles for his promise that he would avoid dosing Jane with laudanum again unless she was in the worst possible distress. “She’s not wrong, old chap. The last thing you need is for your wife to become dependent upon the substance, Bingley. Better to make a clean break of it, before it’s been too long,” advised Richard as he handed his wife into the carriage. Charles and Kitty promised to do everything they could to lift Jane’s spirits, and they all promised to send expresses daily as the carriage pulled away.

The express rider did find their carriage midway through their journey. Mary burst into tears with terror, then sobbed with relief in the courtyard of the inn when the messenger approached them with the missive. Now that good news had come, Richard wished to take a room for a few hours so Mary could rest after her distress,

but knowing Elizabeth had woken only made Mary more determined to reach her as quickly as possible. Four horses were procured for the carriage, and they made excellent time thanks to Richard's driver and the fair state of the weather and roads.

At the cottage, Jane became slightly hysterical, and wept with relief when the messenger arrived from Pemberley. Eventually Charles administered one last miniscule dose of laudanum to his wife to help her rest, vowing that now that Lady Darcy had awoken, that his wife must begin to return to herself again. Jane slept for much of the day, and when she woke again her sister was able to persuade her to eat and bathe. Charles felt more hopeful than he had since that fateful morning. He wrote a joyful and indecipherable letter to Darcy full of splotches and blots and returned it with the messenger, begging for more news as soon as it became available.

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Elizabeth was awake when the Fitzwilliams arrived at Pemberley, and Mary would hear no objections or calls for her to rest or refresh herself. She went straight to Elizabeth the moment she entered the house. Charlotte explained as Mary ascended the stairs that Darcy had temporarily not told Elizabeth yet that she had been pushed, and that she did not yet remember, but that she would be told reasonably soon. Mary agreed not to mention it until Darcy agreed, or the situation made it necessary. She then entered her sister's apartment, while Richard stood in the private sitting room waiting to be admitted or for Darcy to come out and speak with him.

Darcy came out while Mary visited her sister and appraised Richard of all that had occurred in the last few days. Richard promised Darcy that he would address the household, assure the staff of Elizabeth's improvement, and see to it that the staff understood that there was no reason to involve the magistrate unless Elizabeth chose to do so herself. After a time, Mary came from Elizabeth's room to inform them that Elizabeth was feeling better and was requesting tea and a tray of food.

Mary berated Darcy for his dishevelled appearance and sent him to his rooms to bathe and make himself presentable. Richard assured Darcy that the house and the household would be well managed, and Elizabeth would be safe under her sister's care for a time. The newly married couple insisted that he go and rest, and that he was not to be seen outside his rooms until the following morning.

Hazel and Mrs Pottinger argued dramatically in the kitchens over who was to make the pastina and egg soup for their mistress. Mrs Pottinger won, but Hazel insisted upon carrying the tray upstairs herself, arguing vehemently with William the entire way up, and would not be dissuaded. She gave Elizabeth the best wishes of all the kitchen staff, and cried with relief to see her mistress sitting up and taking

nourishment.

Mr Farinacci, who had stood by wordlessly as the fight over the soup raged in the kitchen. He then insisted on starting the fires in the old kitchens so that he could devote himself to creating delicacies to tempt Elizabeth to eat well during her recovery. Not to be outdone, Mrs Pottinger and Hazel went to work on planning as many of Elizabeth's favourite meals and treats as possible over the next weeks. Elizabeth joked to Sarah that the battle in the kitchens would make her fat before her time.

Evie's relief at Elizabeth's recovery was profound, and she begged to be allowed to stay at Pemberley and assist her guardian until she was well enough to resume her usual activities. Surprising Elizabeth, Darcy argued insistently in Evie's favour, so Sister Augustine allowed it on the condition that Evie study her lessons while she sat with Elizabeth. They had lively conversations, and Elizabeth was very well pleased with how Evie was turning out. All of the ladies of the house fought for their turn to sit and amuse Elizabeth, and bring her the news of the house.

It was not long before Elizabeth had enough of being in bed. On the third day after she had awoken, Evie came to find Darcy in his study and led him to understand that Elizabeth had insisted upon getting dressed in a loose, comfortable dressing gown and house slippers, and was threatening to leave her rooms and walk to her study. Darcy, having expected Elizabeth to get bored very quickly, summoned Banks to bring Elizabeth's correspondence to him. With a heavy stack of letters in hand, he entered their apartment and gave her a stern smile. "I knew you would not stay abed," Darcy teased.

"Since it is what you expected, then you will not be alarmed," said Elizabeth cheekily from the chair she had obediently sat in when Evie had insisted she would fetch Mr Darcy right away. Will explained to Elizabeth that she was in danger of swooning for several days, and the doctor felt she must stay off of her feet for three weeks, for the

sake of their child. When Elizabeth began to argue, he said “However, I did get him to agree that once your headaches subsided and you felt well enough, that you could attend to your business and correspondence IF you can remain reclined while you do so.”

Darcy spilled the envelopes into Elizabeth’s lap, then scooped her into his arms. He carried her to a daybed that he had asked the footmen to install in their private sitting room. Once she had been deposited on the daybed, Darcy brought her a travelling writing desk. “You have a great deal of correspondence to attend to, and I have left a stack of novels that I know you intended to read. Perhaps you can teach Evie to play chess if she likes. If you can remain here without getting up for the next few days, I will carry you down to the library or the music room if you are feeling up to it.”

Elizabeth promised to remain on the daybed, and Darcy opened the doors to the balcony to let the breeze in, then left her only to return a few moments later with Beau. “Diane asked if you might not become lonely sitting here in bed with nothing to do at breakfast this morning. It was her idea for Beau to spend his days in your company until you can leave your rooms. She says he brings her much comfort when she feels ill.” Elizabeth was touched and settled down happily with the gentle and affectionate dog at her side while she read her correspondence, now and then reaching over to give a scratch to the dog’s ear. She worked until luncheon before she grew weary and developed a headache. Forgoing the noon meal, she napped with the dog cuddling close to her, and awoke two hours later famished.

Darcy was sitting close by when she woke, rang the bell for Elizabeth’s meal, and then carried her to her bathing chamber, where she was assisted by Sarah. When she returned, Beau had been sent outside with a footman to do his business, and Diane was waiting to visit with her.

The next days passed in much the same fashion. Darcy and Evie had formed an alliance. With the assistance of a footman assigned to the task, Evie kept Darcy

informed of Elizabeth's every movement. Before Elizabeth could even anticipate what she might do next, Evie had sent for her husband, who always appeared like magic to carry her to and from their sitting room, and he was always by her side whenever she woke.

After a few more days, Darcy began carrying Elizabeth downstairs to rest on a couch in the music room with the other ladies for company, which brought her some entertainment, particularly when Georgiana and Marianne played duets. When Elizabeth had been recovered for one week, Darcy told her about Jane pushing her down the stairs. He had no desire to distress her, but felt she ought to know sooner rather than later. He told her how he had seen Jane when she fell, and he was convinced she had not meant it. Elizabeth agreed with him completely. Jane may not like her, but she would never hurt her on purpose. Once she had been told all she began to remember the bits and pieces of what happened all jumbled in her mind. Eventually Elizabeth set herself to writing her sister a letter.

Pemberley,

Derbyshire

Dear Jane,

I hope that your visit to Lake Cottage has been restful and that you, Charles, and Kitty are well. Everything here is quite as usual. Georgiana and Marianne have been working on a new duet, and their music fills the house daily. Young Margaret is still most interested in cartography, nearly to the point of neglecting her other studies. Aunt Josephine does not fret about Margaret's lessons, but Marianne chastised her quite soundly and took away her drawing pencils and paper until she completed all that Mr Mason assigned to her and threatened her with the removal of her beloved atlas if it occurs again.

Margaret and I had a conversation yesterday where I confessed that when I was her age, I was more interested in reading industry periodicals than I was about my lessons. When Aunt Madeleine learned that I was behind in my lessons I was chastised severely. Uncle Gardiner locked my periodicals away in his study, and did not allow me to have them back for a week entire. Margaret agrees that in the future, it will serve her much better to complete her lessons before she enjoys her other pursuits, in the interest of having her drawing materials always available to her when she wants them.

Marianne continues to go on the longest rambles and routinely escapes the grooms and footmen sent to accompany her. I worry that she will sprain her ankle again when she is alone, but she pays little heed. It is difficult to determine when we should send someone looking for her, for she is frequently gone for hours, much like my old summer rambles at Longbourn. However, Pemberley is so much more remote than our home, the tenant farms are much farther apart, and in such wild country she could encounter nearly anyone while out alone, and so I do worry.

The Parson's wife from Lambton, as well as the Merriweather sisters, and a few of the other neighbourhood ladies, have paid me several quiet visits this week, and I am grateful for their kindness. I am sure you must look forward to settling in at Tatton Hall and making your own friendships in your new neighbourhood. I am told there are many excellent families in the village there. You should enjoy a lively social circle much like Meryton, or perhaps slightly more refined, when you take the place over.

Mary clucks over me constantly, and I love her devotion and care, but I admit it is wearing upon me. Thankfully Richard knows how to distract her, and he has spirited her away to give me an hour to myself on several occasions. I shall have to thank him with a fine gift at Christmas, though I have a strong suspicion that our new brother's motives are not always entirely altruistic. I have another week and a half of bed rest ahead, and I find it very tiresome. There is nothing more tiresome than being

confined to a couch or daybed. The very day I am allowed to get up and move about, I shall probably run screaming down the drive.

I pray this letter finds you well and in good spirits. Do not be too cruel to yourself about what happened, Jane. I know you would never intentionally wish to hurt me, and God willing, there appears to be no lasting harm. I pray that you are able to find peace and comfort in Charles and Kitty's care, and remain your loving sister,

Elizabeth

Jane had wept when she read Elizabeth's letter. By not making a fuss about the matter, and just moving on with everyday conversation, Elizabeth was giving Jane the opportunity to turn her behaviour around and be amiable, and Jane refused to believe that she deserved such kindness. She agonised for several days about how to respond to her sister before finally Kitty took it upon herself to take up her pen.

Lake Cottage,

Coniston

Dearest Lizzy,

Words cannot express how relieved we all were to receive your letter. As you can imagine, Jane has yet to return to her usual self, and as much as she has tried to put pen to paper to reply, I believe she cannot find the words to respond.

Jane was terribly affected by the events that happened when we were all last together at Pemberley. She struggles to forgive herself, and also seems to still be struggling with her hopes of falling in the family way. When her courses came last week, she locked herself in her apartment and cried for two days. She has confessed to me that she is terribly happy for you and my brother Darcy, but she cannot separate those

sentiments from her own personal affairs, and it causes her great shame. A letter was forwarded from Pemberley from Mama yesterday that apologised to Jane for chastising her on the matter, then ended with more admonishments and Jane cried again. My brother is ready to begin intercepting all of her mail because even his sisters inquire on the matter every time they write, and Jane becomes distressed in the extreme. Charles has threatened to go and purchase a great number of orphans if it would only bring Jane comfort.

I have enjoyed my visit to the Lake District exceedingly, Jane's troubles aside. Once we heard you would be well, Charles began to exert himself a bit in the neighbourhood so that I might have some society. We have not gone out very much, but what I have seen of the neighbourhood has been interesting and the scenery is divine. My pencils call me outside daily. Here is a sketch of the house, is it not charming? I believe you would like it here very much.

Charles has put it about the neighbourhood that his wife is ill, so we have not been expected to entertain or attend dinners, but a few local gentlemen have paid calls. Jane has received visits from a few ladies of the village, before Charles instructed the housekeeper to say we were not at home when those ladies constantly speculated about the nature of Jane's illness in her presence, believing that it must have something to do with being in the family way or perhaps losing a babe. Jane became so incoherently distressed after one such visit that Charles will no longer admit the neighbours to the house, and now, we are not at home to anyone. But before that occurred, he did escort me to a public assembly. Jane insisted that we should go and that I must be allowed some entertainment while we are here. The assembly was great fun. As always, Charles is very good at meeting and talking to new people. I danced nearly every dance; it was nearly as fun as having the militia in Meryton.

The shops in the village are divine. I have purchased gifts for all of the ladies at Pemberley, and some fine lace for Lydia and Mama. One of the shops had the most amusing stuffed parrot, and I bought it for Lydia for Christmas. Do you not think it

will be amusing when she uses it to trim a bonnet? I am nearly overcome with laughter whenever I think of it. If anyone can make such a bonnet attractive, it will be our youngest sister.

Is Marianne still walking for hours every day, and pretending that she doesn't care that Willoughby has yet to come for her? You were so right about him, Lizzy. When I see how he has treated more than one young lady, I feel, as Colonel Fitzwilliam is fond of saying, as though I have dodged a bullet. I beg a thousand pardons for my silly behaviour, Lizzy. You are a saint for tolerating me! He was not at all worth it. Please remind me to always listen to your good advice, Sister! I look forward to returning to Pemberley when Jane is well, and remain your devoted sister,

Catherine

Elizabeth was troubled upon receiving such a letter, and shared her concerns with Will. "Poor Jane can get no rest from such attentions! She is a young married woman, and therefore everywhere she goes she must be pestered by these clucking English hens about when she will deliver a child! It is enough to drive any lady to distraction!"

Darcy too, was concerned. He had been in communication with Bingley, who had voiced the same worries. It seemed that even when residing in an unknown village, Mrs Bingley could not escape speculation, gossip, and unsolicited advice on when and how she ought to become pregnant. Some matrons, even those who were practically strangers, felt perfectly comfortable giving the most shocking, and occasionally dangerous advice. They discussed the matter at length, and eventually Elizabeth announced that when she was allowed up from her bedrest, which was in just a few days, she would immediately travel to visit Jane.

Darcy panicked at such a suggestion, but Elizabeth would not be moved. The doctor was brought to discourage her from such a scheme, but Mr Lloyd did not believe that

such a short journey would overly tax Elizabeth's strong constitution. She had recovered well, had not had a single fainting spell as the doctor had feared, since she left her bed, and she had felt perfectly well for two weeks. Charlotte thought that Elizabeth had shown remarkable patience and obedience, considering her usual obstinate nature. Elizabeth had wanted desperately not to endanger her child nor worry her husband, and so she had been nearly angelic compared to how she could have behaved had she not been expecting.

Elizabeth insisted that the family was to journey to London soon anyway, to fit Kitty and Georgiana for their wardrobes for the upcoming season. This shorter journey was the perfect way to determine if travelling would upset her health in any way. Darcy was of a mind to cancel the London trip entirely, but Elizabeth made her arrangements, and paid him no mind. Two days after the doctor pronounced Elizabeth able to get up from the chaise lounge, she and Darcy boarded her carriage, accompanied by Richard and Mary, and travelled to see Jane and Bingley.

Bingley was much his usual self, friendly and gregarious, and Jane could not keep her composure, but burst into tears and threw herself into Lizzy's arms the moment she stepped down from the carriage. Elizabeth was unsure if Jane was crying from her own anxiety or because Elizabeth was now quite enormously pregnant, or perhaps both. In just over three weeks, suddenly Elizabeth's girth had finally made itself quite visible, and also her gowns no longer made any attempt to conceal it. The only way Elizabeth had been able to hide her condition before was by the employment of several layered shawls. Now that it was so evident, and Lizzy was quite well, Sister Augustine had confessed to Lizzy that she suspected that she might be carrying twins. Elizabeth, not wishing Darcy to become even more of a mother hen, did not choose to share this suspicion with her husband until the moment arrived.

Elizabeth allowed Kitty to lead her, Jane, and Mary upstairs, where they had a good

cry together, then promised to be the best of friends in the future and never allow anything to come between them again. After this interlude Jane was exhausted. Kitty assured Elizabeth that this was not uncommon after Jane had been particularly emotional. Elizabeth encouraged Jane to lay down and rest until dinner. She, Mary and Kitty returned downstairs, and Kitty served tea in the drawing room. When they all had their cups and had begun conversing, Elizabeth said directly, “Charles, I believe you should take Jane away on a long journey.”

“I had considered that, Lady Darcy, but here we are as far away from anyone we know as we have ever been, and yet Jane still receives remarks from ladies who barely know her. I fear it is making her quite reclusive,” answered Charles.

“There is more to the world than England, Charles. Why not take Jane to the continent?” suggested Elizabeth. “Travel to Paris is quite safe, and if you stay in a hotel, you will have no acquaintance there. Jane does not even speak French! It will be exceedingly simple to pose as a newly married couple on your wedding trip. No one would expect Jane to be in the family way on her wedding trip. You could spend time in Paris, and perhaps travel about to different areas, not staying in one place too long, thereby not allowing anyone to come to know you well enough to begin asking such questions. And not to mention, but the French are less curious about others’ private affairs. That is an English character flaw. Here every matron has her ear to the ground, ready to spread all the private business of their neighbours or even perfect strangers. I would not be surprised if there is a neighbour listening under the window right now, or a local matron who has already paid the servants here to inform them as soon as it is known if Jane is in the family way.

“Ladies in English society are not given enough to keep their minds occupied, and so they are relentless with their intrusive manners and gossip. In France, the ladies there could not care less about Jane’s condition, unless she cared to share it with them. As long as you do not fall in with other travelling Englishmen and their wives, Jane should be able to enjoy her time alone with you and your adventures together without

enduring constant speculation. You can stay away as long as you like, and either return home when Jane is finally expecting, or you can wait and return home when your child is born, presuming you are so blessed. There is no reason you could not go away on a very extended journey, as long as it takes. Take Jane away from all of this. Travel for a year or perhaps even two. If Jane's hopes are not eventually realised, then you may adopt an infant girl if you choose before you return, and no one need be the wiser."

Charles found this to be an intriguing idea. He and Darcy immediately began discussing the particulars for such a journey. Elizabeth and Kitty retired upstairs, Elizabeth to rest before dinner and Kitty to pack her belongings, for she would return to Pemberley with the Darcys in a few days. Darcy and Bingley discussed Darcy taking over as Charles' agent for the renovation and administration of Tatton Hall and other business affairs, including the administration of Miss Bingley's dowry, should she receive an offer of marriage. The Bingleys prepared to travel to London to finalise their plans and before the two parties left Lake Cottage Bingley sent the following letter (dictated to Elizabeth so it could be read) to Longbourn.

Lake Cottage,

Coniston

Bennet,

I write to inform your household that Mrs Bingley and I will be leaving England's shores for an extended journey to the continent. I will not attempt to hide the fact that the reason for our journey stems entirely from the behaviour of your wife and other women like her. Mrs Bennet refuses to cease admonishing Mrs Bingley regarding falling with child, causing my wife sincere distress. Mrs Bennet has been asked to refrain from this behaviour by myself and Mrs Bingley, as well as by Lady Darcy, and even Miss Kitty, without result. Each week, another insensitive letter arrives,

which affects my wife's sensibilities in the most distressing ways.

Your wife is not the only quarter from which these unwelcome queries originate. Mrs Bingley often receives similar missives from Mrs Phillips, other matrons of Meryton, our acquaintance in town, and even my own sisters. Even in the Lake District, where we know no one, Jane begins to endure subtle hints, innuendos and outright intrusive questioning and unsolicited advice from local matrons we hardly know looking for gossip.

I will no longer tolerate my wife's distress, sir. I am taking Mrs Bingley to Paris, and later to tour the continent as we like. I expect our journey will be of long duration, and I do not expect to return in less than one year, perhaps even two. My business has all been turned over to Darcy, and no one but Lord and Lady Darcy will know where we are or how to reach us. Please ensure that your wife understands that even if a letter or communication from herself were to find its way to us, that I will consign it to the fire before Mrs Bingley reads it.

It is long past time my wife and I were allowed to enjoy our marriage as we ought, without the intrusion and interference of gossiping women who insist upon meddling in the affairs of others. If Jane wishes to write to her mother on occasion, I will allow a letter to be forwarded to her through Lady Darcy. If she does not wish to do so, then I will not press her, and I will thank you to ensure that your wife does not insinuate herself into our private affairs again in the future.

Your Servant,

Bingley

After reading and rereading this, Mr Bennet enjoyed himself immensely, relaying the information to his wife that her meddling had driven her favourite daughter to cease all contact and leave the country without so much as a forwarding address. Mrs

Bennet became so agitated that she fell that evening when her husband was needling her nerves, and severely sprained her ankle. Mr Bennet's enjoyment was cruelly increased by this.

While the Bingleys and the Fitzwilliams travelled to London, the Darcy party returned to Pemberley, and Elizabeth and the ladies began preparing for their journey to London, which they were to embark upon in two weeks. Two days after their return from Lake Cottage, Colonel Brandon and the Ferrars had joined them for dinner, and Charlotte said to Kitty when the men had rejoined the ladies after the meal, "Well, Kitty, it is obvious that someone has missed you." When Kitty asked as to her meaning, Charlotte laughed, "Kitty do not tell me that you have not noticed that Colonel Brandon is in love with you. The gentleman never looks away when you are near."

Kitty looked over at the gentleman and blushed to her roots when she found him observing her from across the room at that very moment. This in turn caused the gentleman to blush to his roots as well, and that was all it took. The pair could no longer make eye contact without blushing, and everyone in the room noticed. Embarrassed and unable to maintain her composure, Kitty excused herself and retired early. When Marianne began to derisively abuse Kitty once she was gone, Elizabeth cornered her. "Marianne, I have had enough of your cruelty to my sister. You have rubbed your attentions from Willoughby in her face quite unapologetically since the summer, and I will not tolerate you making sport of her now. Kitty is your family, not your rival, and I shall thank you for remembering that."

Marianne, impulsive child that she was, immediately began to defend herself until her elder sister took her by the elbow to another corner, and chastised her most severely. After this, Colonel Brandon and the Ferrars took their leave, and returned to Delaford.

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The next afternoon, Kitty came to Elizabeth in her study and asked, “Lizzy, what do you think of Colonel Brandon?”

Elizabeth answered, “That is quite easy to answer, Kitty. I have the highest esteem for the colonel. He is loyal and steadfast, a good friend to those he cares about, and a kind and honourable man. I cannot find enough positive things to say about him. Indeed, I could belabour his good qualities for weeks, given the time. Why do you ask?”

“Do you think he likes me?” asked Kitty apprehensively. Elizabeth laughed, but kindly. “Darling, I have known he likes you since we arrived at Pemberley this summer.”

“Why would you not tell me?” cried Kitty. “Why must I have found out from Charlotte?”

“Because, my dear sister, I have no desire to meddle in your affairs other than to ensure your safety. Yes, I am aware of the colonel’s regard for you, but the man is eighteen years your senior. I would not direct you to him or anyone unless you came to notice and admire him on your own,” Elizabeth explained.

“Do you believe he is too old for me then, Lizzy? Would you object if I decided I liked him?” Kitty asked nervously.

“I would not object, Kitty, as long as I believed it was the deepest and most desperate desire of your heart. Others have found great happiness in such marriages before. Some may find him dull in the same manner as Will used to be considered dull, but

they are truly only reserved and serious men who could not be more dependable, honourable, or respectable. I am sure the right lady would expose the joyful nature of Colonel Brandon's character. You see how Will has changed since our marriage. He is quite relaxed and charming when he is with those he is comfortable. Every lady is different in her preferences, but I find that such men make superior husbands. I prefer a stoic gentleman to a dandy, or a rattle. You must determine what sort of gentleman you prefer. It does not hurt his chances that like Darcy, the colonel is uncommonly well favoured," Elizabeth assured her.

"But while it is true that the colonel likes you," she continued, "sadly not all admiration must be returned in full measure. As tragic as it would be for Colonel Brandon's affection to go unrequited, it would be an even greater crime for you to persuade yourself in love with him just because he likes you, and no one has sincerely ever done so before. That sort of affection never lasts. If you believe you are interested in him, you must take it upon yourself to get to know him well, and to know your own heart before you encourage him to declare himself. You should keep in mind that you have two years to decide. If you attempt to marry before your majority, I am certain my father will interfere in an effort to force me or your suitor to pay him to allow you to make your own choice. He seems content to allow you to enjoy society, but he has expressly forbidden me to allow you to wed, which makes no sense unless he is planning perfidy. If he thought you were being courted, he might take you away to barter with me for the dowry he still believes that I owe him. I would not recommend that, it would be an extremely unpleasant experience."

"But we are to London in two weeks!" cried Kitty.

"That is true, dear, but we will return in little more than a month. I believe that if you gave the colonel the appropriate encouragement to approach you, that he might spend a great deal of time visiting Pemberley before you leave, and may even follow us to London in the spring. He is known to spend a short time there every year during the season," Elizabeth replied.

That day, Colonel Brandon found himself at Pemberley again. As if he could not stay away, he turned up to see if Darcy was inclined to go for a ride, but Darcy was out managing a far off location of the estate. Upon leaving, the colonel had the good fortune of coming across Kitty sketching a scene of the park. An hour later, the two had strolled the gardens extensively, and Georgiana and Mrs Annesley had unobtrusively found locations where they could chaperone the pair without disturbing them, or themselves being observed. Before leaving the estate, the colonel requested permission to take Kitty for a drive in his phaeton the following afternoon. Permission was granted, and Kitty spent the remainder of her day in her apartment with Georgiana, attempting to select a gown for the engagement.

Later that evening, Darcy mentioned to Elizabeth that on his ride about the estate he checked on a hunting cabin that had obviously been used. “There was a china tea service in it, of all things, if you can believe it. A quality one, that I could not identify, for it is not from Pemberley, and has no crest. It does not appear that the bed has been slept in, or that anyone has stayed in it for any length of time, but the cabin and the fireplace have certainly been used, and some tea and dry goods were also left behind.” What a strange item to be found in a hunting cabin! Darcy also mentioned that a small pocket-sized volume of Shakespeare had also been found.

Elizabeth asked Marianne if the volume was hers after dinner, to which she replied, “Of course not! Why would you think so?”

Elizabeth explained that given Marianne’s long walking expeditions, and great love for Shakespeare, Elizabeth had just wondered if she had rested in the cabin and forgotten her book. Marianne denied all knowledge of the cabin or the book, and Elizabeth let the matter rest.

Colonel Brandon presented himself the next day with a lovely bouquet of hothouse

roses, and ignored Darcy's grin as he and Kitty blushed at one another. The pair went off for their drive, and when Marianne and Aunt Josephine began to speculate about the attachment between the two, Elizabeth firmly stopped the exchange by insisting that "Family does not gossip about family at Pemberley. I am sure, Marianne, that when a gentleman calls upon you, that you will not appreciate your relations speculating in such an inconsiderate manner."

Although Marianne thought that if a particular gentleman, or, indeed, when a particular gentleman called on her, she would not give two figs for what anyone had to say about it, she thought it best to keep her thoughts to herself and went to her room.

Nearly two weeks later, one evening after dinner the family was sitting in the drawing room when the mystery of the cabin and the tea service was solved. Darcy and Elizabeth were playing chess, Margaret was reading a periodical, and Georgiana and Kitty were discussing a novel they were reading together. Mrs Dashwood, Charlotte, Mrs Annesley, and Granny Rose were playing cards. Not caring for any of these activities, Marianne decided to begin teasing Kitty about her attentions from Colonel Brandon, which had continued apace.

Marianne had just insulted Kitty about only being able to attract an old man in flannel waistcoats, when Kitty responded coolly, "I would rather be courted by an older, more constant gentleman, than one who never turns up at all. At least he is more constant than your capricious Willoughby, who never returned for either of us."

At this Margaret leapt from her chair and shouted, "Yes he has! He has returned for her! They meet nearly every day at the cabin. I have seen him. Sometimes Marianne allows me to come along. You are just jealous. Willoughby said so. He said he cannot court Marianne here because Kitty will be jealous that Marianne is to be a duchess, and Elizabeth might expect him to court her hopeless sister instead!"

Every person in the room was silent as the grave at this revelation until Marianne shrieked, "How dare you share something so private!" And slapped her younger sister hard across the face. Pandemonium broke out as Marianne screamed at her sister about her betrayal, and attempted to beat the young girl about the head before Darcy pulled her away and restrained her. Charlotte and Mrs Annesley rescued Margaret, Aunt Josephine wailed, and Kitty sat back, smiled, and enjoyed her cousin's well-earned downfall.

The next day, Darcy rode to Maplewood, the viscount's estate. He was refused an audience with the younger nobleman. The Butler was unprofessional and slovenly, and made no effort to hide that his master was at home, but not to Darcy. Darcy left a letter and a small crate with the tea service and book, then returned to Pemberley.

Pemberley,

Derbyshire

St Claire,

I have returned your volume of Shakespeare, and your lovely tea service. As much as I appreciate the thoughtful gesture, Pemberley's hunting cabins need no such adornment. Perhaps the items might better grace a building upon your own property.

As you have already seen fit to sample Pemberley's hospitality, perhaps you would also see fit to call upon me at Pemberley at your earliest convenience for a direct conversation. We remain in the country for one more week. I look forward to making your acquaintance before I depart for London.

Darcy

Marianne was confined to her room, and Margaret was distracted with lessons and maps, and would have to remain out of public sight for a number of weeks, for she was sporting a dreadful black eye from her sister's slap. Elizabeth sent a carriage to the parsonage at Delaford, requesting that Mr and Mrs Ferrars wait upon them as soon as possible.

The Darcys discussed the matter at length with the Ferrars and Aunt Josephine. Elizabeth explained to the latter that while she had no desire to withdraw her hospitality to her family, the situation with Marianne had become quite intolerable. The girl had grown quite wild. Marianne resisted all efforts to chaperone her walks, had taken to meeting with a man in secret, and had steadfastly refused to stop being cruel to Kitty for months. Moreover, the situation was only becoming intolerably more difficult, even violent. Elizabeth refused to have cruelty or violence in her home any longer, and the vicious way Marianne had beaten her younger sister had been quite beyond the pale. Darcy would of course make every effort to meet with Viscount St Claire, and encourage him to do the right thing by Marianne, but in the meantime, some other arrangement must be made.

Elizabeth proposed that she would hire a strict and no-nonsense companion, and that Marianne and the companion would go to live with her sister for a time, in the hopes that in such a small household, Mrs Ferrars might have greater and stricter influence upon her sister. Marianne would still be welcome at Pemberley later on, and might even return to live there again one day if Willoughby did not do the honourable thing. For now, it might do everyone, including Marianne, some good to have a bit of distance, to gain perspective. Keeping her in close company with Kitty was of benefit to neither of them. Or to anyone else for that matter. Indeed, Kitty's company seemed to bring out the worst in Marianne's impulsive and competitive nature. Elizabeth might still allow Marianne to come to town with the family in the spring if nothing came from Willoughby's quarter, but first she would need to be carefully watched by her sister for a few months to discern whether there would be consequences from the secret meetings. The girl insisted no such behaviour had occurred, and was incredibly

offended by such a suggestion, but the possibility had to be considered, considering the circumstances. Marianne must also eventually make a full apology for her terrible outburst and show every possible sign of remorse and repentance before she could return to Pemberley, or accompany the family to London.

The Ferrars were amenable to the idea of Marianne coming to the parsonage, and so the question turned to who to hire for a companion. Elizabeth proposed that they send a message to a genteel spinster who lived in the village of Kympton, that was known to be very rigid and stern in her manners and comportment, and so might be helpful in curbing Marianne's more impulsive tendencies. She was also known to be an extremely energetic lady, always industrious with her time, had been a nurse during the wars, and was known for taking long marches across the countryside each day. She had already begun volunteering to help at the nursing school. She would have no trouble keeping up with Marianne, and her energy and industrious nature would be a help to the parish, considering she would be living in the rectory, and was always heavily involved with church activities. The woman was applied to, accepted the position, and by the end of the week, Marianne left with Miss Crane and her older sister to reside at Delaford.

Viscount St Claire never materialised, and the family removed to London as they had planned. Before the family left, Darcy wrote to him, informing him that he was not welcome to trespass upon Pemberley lands for any reason whatsoever. Letters were also sent to the local magistrate informing him of the trespass notice, as well as to Willoughby's father, the Duke of Leeds. The magistrate's letter contained very little information. The letter to the duke contained only slightly more. Darcy requested that the duke take his heir to a brothel rather than allow him to trifle with the young gentlewomen under the care of his neighbours, and informed him that his son was unwelcome at all of Darcy's houses, and among all of his family, and that if his heir was found trespassing at Pemberley again, there would be consequences, title and rank be damned.

Darcy entered his wife's chambers one day during their brief stop at Netherfield. "Did I see a cart and a trunk heading to Longbourn?" he asked as his wife made herself comfortable for her afternoon rest.

"I am afraid Lydia made an impassioned and persuasive case for Kitty to remain at Longbourn for a few weeks to assist with Mrs Bennet and her sprained ankle," answered Elizabeth. "Mrs Bennet has by all accounts become hysterical and fretful, due to Mr Bennet's continued ribbing about Jane having fled the country to escape her mother, and possibly not to be seen again for years. According to Lydia, each time Mrs Bennet begins to settle down, Mr Bennet says something to upset her again, and Lydia fears her mother might be going mad."

Darcy refused to allow Elizabeth to go to Longbourn in her condition. He had not liked her even making the trip to London since her girth had expanded so dramatically. His wife was swiftly beginning to look as though she had been pregnant for years rather than months. Darcy had little respect for Bennet, and had no desire for his wife to become upset by the business of Bennet's house.

Elizabeth did not argue with Darcy on the matter. The further her condition progressed, the more worried and protective he became, and she did not wish to alarm him after having heard of his mother's experiences. She extracted a promise that even in London, he would accompany her for a walk in the garden each day, no matter how unseemly he considered it, and in return agreed that she would otherwise not go out, or place herself in any unpleasant situations if she could avoid it.

Elizabeth was adamant that she must take vigorous exercise each day. She insisted that the poor farm women who worked all day and had no servants were stronger and better equipped to give birth than pampered ladies. She walked every day, found something to help with in the kitchens several times a week, and sometimes Darcy

had even on occasion found her climbing up and down the stairs for no reason, although she had not engaged in that activity since her fall. She drank no wine or spirits, and insisted on a plain but wholesome diet, claiming that wine and rich food only gave her indigestion when she was expecting, and that she was certain wine and ale could not be good for the child.

The neighbourhood was understanding that Lord and Lady Darcy accepted no invitations nor entertained in the evenings during their brief stay in Meryton, considering Elizabeth's condition, but Meryton was always where Elizabeth felt most comfortable among society, and so she did accept morning calls from the ladies of her childhood neighbourhood before departing for London. All of the ladies of the area gave their very best wishes for her confinement.

And so it was that Kitty remained behind at Longbourn, with Elizabeth's promise to send a carriage and maid for her in three weeks so that she might have her dress fittings and attend the theatre before the family returned to Pemberley. Kitty knew that the family would not be socialising due to Elizabeth's condition, indeed, even the modiste was engaged to visit the ladies at Pemberley House so that Elizabeth would not need to go out. Aunt Madeleine and Aunt Matlock would take the other ladies to the warehouses for fabrics.

Kitty did not mind staying at Longbourn for a visit, for she had missed Lydia. Mary and Richard would travel to London from Windmere, where they had been overseeing the work at Rosings, and would return with the Darcys to Pemberley, for Mary must be with her sister during her time, and for the festive season. She had confided to Elizabeth in her letters that when they had briefly stayed in London after leaving Pemberley, that she had been all nerves when accepting calls from the ladies of the ton before they departed. Even knowing the women who called were nearly all her friends, Mary was quite nervous to be entertaining her own callers in her own London home for the first time.

At White's Club in London, an elderly nobleman sat and waited in a private room for the one who had summoned him. He would wait some time, he knew. The other, higher-ranking nobleman would turn up when it suited him. He had spent weeks in London, trying to untangle the mess his son had gotten himself into. The man's son, who was middle aged, had bored of waiting for his father to die, and attempted to improve his already immensely comfortable fortune by gambling.

How his yet untitled son with acceptable yet unremarkable wealth had found himself at the same gaming table, let alone the same room, as the incredibly powerful man he now waited for, he would probably never know. Why he had done so, the elderly man would also never know, because he himself would have provided his son with funds or his granddaughters with dowries if necessary, though the terms of his son's marriage settlement had already ensured such provisions. But when he had finally lost his own minor estate, the cowardly son had put a pistol in his mouth rather than face his father.

Now, bones aching to return home to his own estate, the man waited, and waited until eventually, the door to the private room he had requested opened, and a powerful looking nobleman stepped in and poured himself a brandy without extending any greeting while the other stood. When the two had settled into their chairs, they began discussing the debt, the older man not wishing his son's estate to pass this way, for he had daughters to inherit it, and the property was unentailed. Not only that, but though the dowries were safe, his son's wife stood to lose a great deal of her widow's portion.

Eventually, the nobleman cut the man off and said, "We can make this go away. If you are willing to assist me with a private matter, perhaps we might come to an agreement."

Desperate enough to grasp at anything, the man agreed. The two spoke of details for a half hour, then the nobleman left, leaving the elderly man to wonder how the young lady whose life he had just agreed to destroy had offended the great man. It mattered little, once he left London, he would be leaving England altogether, and never planned to return again in this life. He left the club, and made arrangements to journey to Liverpool and wait, as he had been instructed.

A week later, an unmarked carriage arrived at a rented house in Liverpool. A burly nurse bundled a young woman who was heavily sedated out of the carriage, and into the house. The young lady was locked in a room, then continued to be dosed with laudanum until she was led up the gang plank of a small passenger ship three days later. A week after that, the young woman was married to the elderly gentleman under mild sedation in a small chapel, and then travelled to the estate at which she would remain for more than two years.

Pemberley House was mostly quiet. Unlike in Hertfordshire, Elizabeth did not accept many callers in her condition. Only her family, and the very closest of her friends, mostly dowagers and mothers with several children, were allowed admittance. Elizabeth was nearly certain that she was carrying twins, and upon being examined by a midwife from the London convent and Mr Roberts, was even more convinced, although she still said nothing that would worry Will, and encouraged Mr Roberts to keep silent on the matter for the time being.

Charlotte could have completely weaned young William by now, but she waited to do so in case anything terrible happened or Elizabeth needed help with feedings. Elizabeth understood that infants needed to eat, but she did not hold with hiring unknown wet nurses who had been nursing for many years. Elizabeth worried that nursing continuously for so long must affect the quality of the milk, and her matron friends complained that it was often difficult to control the nurses' habits. Many were

found to be too fond of the bottle, or unhygienic, and Elizabeth was convinced their charges suffered from such behaviour.

Elizabeth often noted that infants born to the lower genteel rungs of society, who did not usually hire wetnurses but had well fed and healthy mothers, were often stronger. Charlotte had promised that she would not allow Elizabeth's child to be nursed by a strange woman if she could help, which brought great comfort to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth hosted their families for two or three small dinners. Georgiana, Charlotte and Mrs Annesley were able to attend the theatre and the opera with Mary, Richard, and the Matlocks. Darcy took the opportunity to stay home and spend time alone with Elizabeth before their child came.

Once the necessary dress fittings for Georgiana and Charlotte had been accomplished, Elizabeth worked many hours a day, constantly in communication with her Uncle Gardiner and Mr Montague. Uncle Gardiner, who was Elizabeth's partner in several schemes, was to take over much of the more urgent correspondence and duties regarding Elizabeth's business. She continued to require a nap each afternoon before dressing for dinner, but she worked tirelessly to close several deals before they left town, selling some of her holdings that were onerous to manage or becoming less profitable, and pursuing fewer new ones that were expected to have larger, long term returns with little oversight, making it easier for her uncle and stewards, as well as Darcy, to take over the day to day oversight of her business for at least a few months.

Elizabeth also endeavoured to spend as much time with Diane as she could before the birth, in case she was unable to for some time afterward. One never knew how a birth might go. Diane broke her fast in Elizabeth and Darcy's sitting room each morning, played in Elizabeth's office each day while she worked, and accompanied Elizabeth with Darcy and Beau when Elizabeth took her exercise in the garden each day.

Aunt Gardiner invited Diane to Gracechurch Street to play with her cousins often.

Georgiana had taken up Diane's education in Mary's absence, and at the age of six the girl was able to read in English and count, as well as basic sums. She had been fluent in English and Italian since she was very small, and was making great progress in French for a child so young. Although she had not learned to read or write in French or Italian yet, she could speak them. Most girls her age would not begin learning the language for a few more years.

If Diane mastered French as well as writing and translating both languages completely within the next few years, Elizabeth would consider teaching her German and later Latin, depending on the girl's aptitudes. Elizabeth spoke French, Italian, German, and Latin, and believed that anyone who spent any time at all at Buckingham House or at court ought to learn German. Often tidbits of interesting or useful information would drop by relatives or servants of the royal family, believing the English around them did not speak German.

Georgiana felt confident that she and Mrs Annesley would be able to manage Diane's education with help from Mr Mason for some time before a formal governess need be engaged, and eventually Mrs Annesley might take over as governess permanently if she chose, when the young ladies had all married. Elizabeth indeed had no objection to her daughter being taught academics by a male tutor when she had a mother and no lack of aunts to assist in the matter of her feminine accomplishments.

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Just under a week before they were to send the carriage to Longbourn for Kitty, Elizabeth was working in her study just after luncheon when the butler knocked and announced that a Miss Lydia Bennet had arrived with a maid in one of Elizabeth's carriages from Netherfield, and was claiming to be Elizabeth's sister. Lydia had not been to visit Elizabeth in London yet, so she was not yet known by the butler and housekeeper, only the staff who had worked at Netherfield or had gone with the family to Brighton the previous summer. Elizabeth sent for Darcy and proceeded to the drawing room where Lydia waited.

As Elizabeth entered the room, Lydia jumped up from the chaise and threw herself into Elizabeth's arms. "Lizzy, she's been gone for nearly a week! I could not get here, Papa's horrid new footman watches the household like a falcon, and we have all been confined to the house, even Mrs Hill! If Papa had not gone to St Albans to see about a new horse and Cook had not left a bottle of port where that Cuthbert could find it, I would never have got away! She has been gone for so many days, how could we possibly find her now!"

"Lyddie, you must calm yourself and explained what has happened," cried Elizabeth. Darcy entered the room and insisted Elizabeth sit upon the chaise, and for Lydia to calm herself.

"Mrs Hill has sent a letter for you, ma'am, and Mrs Nichols has bade me tell you that she is preparing the house as we speak for you," ventured the maid, holding out a missive to Elizabeth. Elizabeth dismissed the maid to the kitchens, and opened the letter as Lydia continued to weep and Darcy poured the girl a glass of wine.

Miss Lizzy,

I cannot apologise enough for my inability to protect the young ladies after the promise I made to you. Three days ago, while Miss Lydia was visiting the tenants, a very fine, intimidating gentleman arrived in the finest carriage and four ever seen, ma'am. He spent an hour in Mr Bennet's study, and when he came out, he went straight to his carriage and waited. Mr Bennet sent Betsy to pack for Miss Kitty, then went to the drawing room, and I am told, informed the ladies that the man was a powerful duke, and had come to escort Miss Kitty to her new husband. Miss Kitty was in right distress, ma'am. She seemed to know of the man, and declared that she was not being courted by the gentleman's son, but rather he was courting her cousin Miss Dashwood, and that Miss Kitty preferred the attentions of another gentleman. Mr Bennet would brook no argument, and insisted that she was not to be permitted to squander such an opportunity, and he allowed two footmen to enter and remove Miss Kitty to the carriage.

Mrs Bennet was in hysterics and fainted dead away when Miss Kitty was removed quite against her will and it was all very dreadful, ma'am. A new arrived the next morning, sent from St Albans I am told, and Mr Bennet instructed us that the man was in charge of the household and in enforcing his orders, and we were to follow all of his instructions. No one, including myself, was to be allowed to leave the house, nor even to send a note to the butcher. We are making do with what we can use from the home farm and the larder, though Mr Bennet must allow us to order supplies soon. The new footman Cuthbert watches all, and none of us can escape his watch. I fear that were I to escape or send a message, I might be turned out, and my mistress needs me, ma'am. You must understand I cannot leave her in her state.

Miss Lydia has been rightfully outraged, but that foul Cuthbert has prevented her from disturbing her father and the peace of the house. In the hopes of preventing her from being locked in her room, I have persuaded her to keep quiet and not to make any trouble until one of us can get away, when I will finish this letter.

Two days later:

Mr Bennet left at dawn this morning to St Albans to purchase a new horse. Cook and I have conspired to leave a bottle out where Cuthbert can find it. It is barely breakfast, and thankfully the man is already too drunk to stand upright. Lydia is to cut across the fields to Netherfield and seek Mrs Nichols' aid, and I know my dear friend Mrs Nichols will send her to you immediately. Cuthbert ought to sleep for hours after what he has drunk, and Mr Bennet ought not be home until late tonight, for he said he is meeting some friends from Oxford at a friend's estate for luncheon and dinner before he returns to Longbourn. Please come to us with all haste, Miss Lizzy. That Cuthbert has tried to have his way with Betsy, though I got in his way, and I do not like the manner in which he looks at Miss Lydia. Godspeed ma'am.

Hill

Elizabeth said to Darcy sharply, "What in God's name did you say to that duke in your letter?"

"Very little of course," answered Darcy defensively. "I could not be explicit or use any names, of course, to protect the reputations of the young women in the household. I only requested that he take his heir in hand, rather than allow him to trifle with the young gentlewomen under the protection of his neighbours. I mentioned nothing of Catherine of course, or the name of Bennet, considering it was not even she that St Claire was currently trifling with. I cannot imagine what might have led him to go to Longbourn rather than discussing it with me."

"What will he do with Kitty?" Elizabeth demanded.

"Do not entertain hopes that he will force her into a marriage with his heir, little though we would wish it, it is the least likely path he would take. No matter how large her dowry, Leeds would never allow the connection. None of the other possibilities are anything that I would discuss in front of Lydia."

Lydia began weeping hysterically while Georgiana and Charlotte entered the room. Georgiana went to Lydia to attempt to comfort her, and inquired of her brother what the trouble was. The two ladies added their tears to Lydia's when Darcy explained the matter to them. Elizabeth rang the bell and sent for Banks and Wilson. Elizabeth sent Wilson to Darcy House with the letter from Mrs Hill and a note beseeching the Fitzwilliams to come to Longbourn with them to lend their aid to Elizabeth and Will, then called the housekeeper to have the carriages ready, and to have Sarah and Watson ready their trunks for a journey to Hertfordshire to leave within the hour.

Lydia fought against her sister forcefully to accompany them, but Elizabeth would not argue with her. She would not take the chance of being required by law to leave Lydia behind at Longbourn again. She sent Banks to escort Lydia in a carriage to Matlock House with Georgiana for company, bearing a note to Lord Matlock to please offer his protection to Lydia while Elizabeth and Darcy located their other sister. Elizabeth would never let Bennet see Lydia again after this. If he wished to exert his rights over his youngest, he would have to find her first.

Mary and Richard arrived, Mary in tears, and Richard bearing the society pages from that morning's newspaper, which Elizabeth and Darcy had been too busy to read yet. They took very little interest in the society pages, only reading the announcements regarding weddings, deaths, and births, and ignoring the gossip and fashion columns. One interesting announcement read:

His Grace the Duke of Leeds announces the marriage of his heir Lord Jonathan Benedict Albert Willoughby, the Viscount St Claire, to Lady Rose Eleanor Marie Francis, eldest daughter of the Marquess of Beaumont, on 11 November, in His Grace's private chapel at Stoneacre.

"Well, that answers whether he forced Kitty to marry Willoughby, not that there was much chance of it, I am afraid. Willoughby's wedding took place days ago," said Elizabeth fretfully as she handed the paper to Will. "The carriage must be nearly

ready. We should prepare to leave; I wish to enter Longbourn before my father returns.” Darcy exchanged a look with Richard and then glanced back at Elizabeth, who continued. “Do not attempt to talk me out of going. My sister and my stepmother need me, and I will go! I understand your fears, Will, but I promise you I shall make every attempt to keep my composure, and not allow myself to become excessively distressed.”

“There is also the question of whether hieing to Longbourn first is the correct course of action,” pointed out Richard. When Elizabeth inquired as to his meaning he explained. “Of course, your stepmother needs you, but we are already aware that Miss Kitty is certainly not at Longbourn, and it is unlikely that your father knows her true location now. It may be better to pay a call on his grace’s townhouse, not that he would admit us, or even tell us anything, assuming he is even there.”

Elizabeth rang the bell, and Banks entered immediately, having just returned from Matlock House, where he assured her that Lord and Lady Matlock had taken the girls in without a qualm, and that Mrs Hopkins, Mrs Annesley, and a bag with a few days of clothing would follow them. Elizabeth instructed him to go to Mr Montague immediately, and to contact all of the finest investigators they had at their disposal to learn anything they could about the duke’s current location and most recent activities. Elizabeth wanted to know about anyone he may have done any business deals with or paid money to, and to do everything in their power to determine what may have been done with Kitty. She informed him that they would return to London by the next day at luncheon, and she expected as much information as possible in that time.

Banks was authorised to promise enormously large rewards or ransom to aid in the location of Kitty, and instructed that no expense or resource must be spared. Elizabeth’s funds were to be prepared for immediate withdrawal from her bank. Elizabeth demanded to know of all of the duke’s properties, both on English soil and abroad, as well as any known contacts he might have that could have assisted him in disposing of Kitty. Mr Banks knew a number of men of all sorts of backgrounds that

he could send into any sort of establishment looking for information and be trusted. Men were to be sent to the docks to ask questions as well as to start combing the brothels where wealthy men went to look for virginal girls, and begin searching for Kitty in some of the more desperately dangerous places as quickly as possible.

With that accomplished, Elizabeth felt she could journey to Meryton that day knowing that all of the information that could help was being prepared in her absence, and hoping that when she returned the next day that enough information would have been found to lead them to Kitty. Charlotte would remain at Pemberley House with Diane and young William. Elizabeth and Mary went upstairs to refresh themselves before their journey and then, with a large basket of cider and refreshments from the cook, the two couples embarked for Hertfordshire, followed by a carriage with their servants, as well as Miss Carmichael, and a great number of armed footmen and grooms on horseback.

When they entered Meryton, the second carriage went onto Netherfield with instructions to leave the trunks and servants at Netherfield, and then follow them to Longbourn along with a cart immediately for Mrs Bennet and her trunks, while Elizabeth and Darcy's carriage continued to Longbourn. When they arrived, Longbourn appeared quiet, being only just dinnertime, and Mr Bennet was, according to Mrs Hill's letter, not expected for some hours yet. Darcy and Fitzwilliam insisted that Elizabeth and Mary wait in the carriage until they had secured their entrance to the house. Elizabeth began to object, but Mary convinced her that in her condition, she must stay back and leave the more dangerous and distressing tasks to the men for once. Darcy pounded upon the door and after a few moments it opened a few inches to reveal an unfamiliar looking footman. "Lord Darcy and The Honourable Colonel Fitzwilliam to see Mrs Bennet," Darcy said firmly.

"The master is not at home, and no one is to be admitted, sir." stated the footman

shortly, and then attempted to slam the door until Colonel Fitzwilliam shoved his boot and arm through it and grasped the man roughly by the throat, propelling him backwards into the hall where Mrs Hill was cowering in a doorway. “Is this him, Hill? This is Cuthbert?” At Mrs Hill’s nod, Fitzwilliam continued, “Are there any more of him about?” When Mrs Hill shook her head, Richard dragged the man out of doors, and around the back of the house, away from the view of the ladies.

Darcy continued into the house and asked Hill, “Where is your mistress?” Hill led him upstairs to where Mrs Bennet sat in a chair by the window with her foot propped upon a cushion, fretfully fidgeting with a handkerchief, looking desperately troubled. “Oh Lord Darcy! My Lydia found you! I knew she would find you and her sister! Is Lady Darcy well? Have you found my dear Kitty?” the woman burst into tears.

Darcy replied, “We have not found her yet, Mother Bennet, although we are doing everything in our power. We have many skilled investigators in London learning all they can so that we know where to begin when we return there tomorrow. Right now, I am come with your daughters, Elizabeth and Mrs Fitzwilliam, to remove you and your female servants to safety until this matter is resolved.”

Mrs Bennet allowed Darcy to lift her into his arms and carry her down the stairs, carefully minding her wrapped ankle, and out of the house. Darcy had a footman hand Mary out of the carriage and then lifted Mrs Bennet in with Elizabeth, who did her best to attend to her ankle, so Mrs Bennet was able to ride as comfortably as could be expected for the short trip with many cushions holding her foot in a safe position.

Darcy addressed Elizabeth, “Darling, as we expected, your father is not here. Please return with your stepmother to Netherfield, and make her comfortable while Mary and the servants assist us in packing your mother’s trunks and their own as quickly as possible.”

Elizabeth agreed, and was followed to Netherfield by Miss Carmichael and more than half of the outriders leaving the rest surrounding the house. They passed the other carriage and cart on the road, returning to bring Darcy and the others back to Netherfield when they had finished what they must do.

Richard returned as Darcy and Mary entered the house, wiping the footman's blood off of his knuckles with a handkerchief. He shushed his wife as she became distressed by the bruising on his hands, assuring her gently that it was nothing at all, and then agreeing to Darcy's plan that Mary would go upstairs to pack her mother's belongings, giving Mrs Hill and Betsy time to pack their own possessions. Mary went upstairs to her mother's rooms, and began packing madly, while Richard shared with Darcy that he had beaten the offensive footman soundly. The stableboy had happily locked the man in the root cellar, but the man had no information.

Darcy and Richard entered Bennet's study, and as much as Darcy felt uncomfortable entering another man's office, and rifling through someone's private documents felt appalling to him, any information they could find about Miss Catherine was essential to their search. They found no documents pertaining to any sort of marriage settlement, but they did find an entry in Mr Bennet's ledgers for an addition of thirty thousand pounds.

Mary packed Mrs Bennet's belongings as quickly as she could with the help of a maid who had come from Netherfield to assist. Mrs Hill and Betsy appeared with their belongings, the footmen carried the trunks down to the carriage, and the party returned to Netherfield. Mrs Hill went immediately to assist Mrs Bennet, and Elizabeth was filled with grief and self-recrimination when she learned about the entry in the ledger. "If only I had just let him have it!" she cried. "All this time, the money meant nothing to me and now Kitty might be lost forever to us because I had to win his game! How difficult could it have been to just be generous with my own father? All my life, I have been generous with those I care about, but stingy with my own father, and it has brought my family to this! Selfish, selfish woman!"

Mary and Darcy were quick to disagree with her, and Darcy insisted that Elizabeth eat and retire, because they would set out at dawn for London. Elizabeth and Darcy would leave at dawn with Mrs Bennet, Mary and Fitzwilliam would go to Longbourn a few hours later to interrogate Mr Bennet and be sure he knew nothing of Kitty's whereabouts. Richard was certain Mr Bennet would know nothing. "If the duke wished to remove Miss Kitty from his son's interest enough to pay your father such a sum, he would ensure no one in her family, nor his son, could ever find her. Often such girls are sold to brothels or ships leaving port. Or he might marry her to a tenant on one of his many properties, but it would certainly be one far away. Whatever he does, it will be designed to make her unmarriageable to his son. I am of the opinion he will marry her to someone immediately, or remove her from England, or both. Those are the most permanent alternatives."

Elizabeth was extremely distressed by this revelation. Darcy insisted that she retire, and he went with her to their apartments to make sure she at least attempted to rest. Before he went up, he sent an express to their housekeeper in London, to ensure she had a midwife and Mr Roberts available to examine Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet's ankle, which really ought not to have been moved, when they arrived in London, in order to put his worries to rest.

The following morning, Darcy and Elizabeth left on schedule, with Mrs Bennet and Mrs Hill. Betsy would be given work at Netherfield, and Hill would stay with her mistress for she had always doubled as Mrs Bennet's lady's maid. The cook had no fear of Cuthbert or Mr Bennet, and opted to stay at Longbourn, for her family were tenants on the estate. Mrs Bennet's wrapped ankle was stretched out across the seat, and held in place with many cushions. She had taken a tiny amount of laudanum to ease her discomfort on the journey, so she slept heavily much of the way. She was awake enough to be agog at the imposing size and elegance of Pemberley House when they arrived. Mrs Bennet was speechless with nerves at how to behave in such a

fine house, and so conducted herself much better than anyone might have hoped.

Mary and Fitzwilliam boarded their carriage at eight in the morning, and headed to Longbourn. It was too early, but this was not a social call, and Mr Bennet was known to be an early riser, so since he had been expected sometime in the late evening after they had departed Longbourn, Mary deemed it safe to presume he would be at Longbourn and awake by this time.

They did not go far before Mr Bennet was found at the end of Netherfield's drive, arguing with the armed footmen that had been posted at the gate with strict instructions not to allow him or anyone up Netherfield's lane. When the carriage had passed through the gates, Richard stepped down and looked hard at his father-in-law, who had dismounted from his fine new horse to continue his verbal abuse of the footmen who had denied him entry. "Mr Bennet," said Richard as a footman held the carriage door open, "You will board the carriage, and we will return you to Longbourn, sir. One of the grooms will lead your horse." Mr Bennet looked as though he might disagree, but there was a dangerous glint in Richard's eye, and the footmen all appeared to mean business, so Thomas Bennet boarded the carriage, followed by his son-in-law.

As he sat across from his daughter, she said nothing to him, and made no eye contact for several moments while she determined what to say until eventually, she fixed him with a hateful stare quite unlike anything Richard had ever seen upon his wife's usually gentle countenance.

"How could you?" she spat. When Bennet said nothing, she continued, "You sold her? You sold my sister, your own daughter, to a complete stranger. HOW COULD YOU SELL KITTY?" she shrieked, tears streaming down her face. Thomas Bennet said absolutely nothing, just looked at her impassively as the carriage continued on. Richard put his arm around his wife with a dark glare at Bennet.

When the carriage arrived at Longbourn, Mary had composed herself, but refused to leave the carriage. Richard raised an eyebrow at her, questioning that his wife was truly declining to be a part of the discussion with her father. Mary sniffed and turned her face away from her father, raising her nose in the air and Thomas Bennet knew that, one, he was dead to his third eldest daughter, and that, two, she had quite obviously elected not to protect him from her very dangerous looking husband with her presence. Mr Bennet was increasingly nervous as the two men entered Longbourn, and Richard followed him menacingly to his study.

As the door closed behind them, Bennet abandoned whatever plan had taken him to Netherfield to interfere with his wife, and stated, "I would offer you tea or coffee, but the servants have gone along with my wife, and the cook claims she is too unwell to attend her duties today. Feel free to help yourself to the port," he offered, waving his hand at the decanter. Richard ignored this as he sat across from Bennet and fixed him with his menacing gaze. "You must know that I have no idea where she is. He would have never paid me so much to allow me to know her destination. It was for that reason I was able to demand so much for her. At first, he thought I would accept ten thousand. It took nearly an hour to convince him that I would protect her relentlessly, and was perfectly willing to let his heir elope with her, before he would give me what I wanted."

"Just like that," Richard said, disbelievingly. When Bennet raised an eyebrow, Richard continued, "You sold your own daughter to a perfect stranger who will certainly destroy her life without a second thought? Do you care nothing for any member of your own family?"

"No," answered Bennet, perplexed. The man seemed sincerely bewildered by such a question. Richard stared at him, the inclination to beat the older man as soundly as he had the footman last night was quite strong. What was the point? He looked at the ageing man who regarded him dispassionately from the other side of the desk, and couldn't bring himself to waste the effort upon someone so inhumane, so lacking in

basic empathy and compassion. Standing, he comforted himself by yanking the man out of his chair by his collar and rendering him unconscious with one blow to Mr Bennet's jaw. It was far better than such a person deserved, he thought as he stalked out of the house and boarded the carriage where his wife waited.

Mary was disinterested in Mr Bennet's fate, and only concerned about news of Kitty. When he had none to give her, she buried her face in her husband's chest and wept bitterly all the way to London for her lost sister.

When the first party returned to Pemberley House, Elizabeth was examined by the doctor and the midwife, and then finally allowed back downstairs to speak with Banks and Mr Montague. There was, simply, very little to go on. Montague had contacts in every bank and man of business in the city, and had learned that the only significant or atypical transaction the duke had done recently was with Elizabeth's father. There were no other payments to or from his accounts that might indicate what had been done with Kitty. A list had been compiled by Montague of all of the duke's known properties, and investigators were to be sent to investigate each to search for Kitty. The docks in London had been searched throughout the night. Many people were questioned, and a start was being made in the brothels, but so far, no clue had turned up.

Information had been found that Viscount St Claire had left for the continent with his wife on their wedding trip immediately after their nuptials. If Kitty was not found soon, someone would be sent to find and question the young man, but he was the last person they expected to have information. After they had exhausted every direction of thought, Elizabeth rose and called for her carriage. When Darcy asked where she was going, and realised Elizabeth planned to visit the duke's townhouse, he nearly suffered an apoplexy. Everyone felt it was a terrible idea, and that the heavily pregnant Elizabeth should send Darcy and Richard to do the questioning with Mr

Montague. Elizabeth would not hear of it, and disregarding all arguments, boarded her carriage with Darcy and Richard.

It was a fruitless endeavour; after Banks had knocked for many minutes, Elizabeth had lost her patience, pushed the man and her husband aside, and had beaten upon the door relentlessly with her parasol, insensible to the damage she caused to the wood or the scene she caused, until eventually an exhausted looking butler had answered with an army of armed footmen behind him. Elizabeth might have liked to have forced entry into the house, but Leeds clearly put as much effort into the protection of his house as Elizabeth did hers, and she knew they would not be successful. The tired looking butler refused to admit them, denied any knowledge of Kitty, and insisted his grace was not at home.

They returned dejectedly to Pemberley House, but Elizabeth returned daily to pound on the door, uncaring of the spectacle she made. The investigators searched for weeks without a single clue. Eventually, Elizabeth grew irate at the duke's ability to sequester himself within his house, and wrote to Her Majesty for intervention. Elizabeth begged The Queen to demand that his grace reveal what had been done with her sister.

The Queen was outraged at the news of what had befallen Elizabeth's sister, and true to Elizabeth's request, sent a letter to Leeds House, demanding that the man wait upon her at Buckingham House to explain himself. Her Majesty was even more outraged when no answer arrived to that or several other consecutive messages.

Eventually a Royal Messenger came to Elizabeth stating that Leeds' butler had eventually sent a reply to Buckingham House, apologising because of course he could not open his master's correspondence from The Queen, and that it grieved him to inform Her Majesty that two days after returning to town after his son's wedding, his grace had suffered from an apoplexy, and was unable to speak or rise from his bed. Her Majesty assured Elizabeth that upon receiving this news she had sent her own

physician and private secretary to confirm the matter. The secretary had searched Leeds' study extensively for information regarding her sister to no avail. Another Royal Secretary, accompanied by the Royal Guard, had been dispatched to Stoneacre to search the duke's study there as well.

Elizabeth and Lydia had nearly fallen to pieces by this point, and Darcy began to fear for his wife and unborn child in earnest. Elizabeth had steadfastly refused to return to Pemberley for the birth unless Kitty had been found, and had no other interest in anything other than the investigation. She ate little, slept less, and spent hours closeted with detectives and investigators. Darcy relayed his worries to Mr Roberts, who recommended that he send to Derbyshire for Sister Augustine. "She hasn't thought of it yet, for her only concern now is Miss Catherine, but when her time comes, she will want Sister Augustine, who brought her safely through her last birth. Of course, any of the midwives from the London convent would be acceptable, but if anyone can make Elizabeth eat properly and take rest, it will be Sister Augustine."

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Darcy sent an express to Derbyshire, and soon after, Sister Augustine and Evie arrived in one of Darcy's coaches, escorted by a footman. As Roberts predicted, the nun took Elizabeth's obstinate behaviour in hand, and insisted that she at least eat well and take some rest regularly. Evie spent much of her time sitting quietly with Elizabeth while she worked, or with Mrs Bennet who had taken an interest in the girl, and had begun advising her on improving her stitching.

Georgiana spent time with Evie as well, assisting her with the lessons assigned to her by Sister Augustine, and giving her lessons in pianoforte and French. Her East End accent was rapidly disappearing. Like Wilson, she spoke with a light East End lilt, but she made an effort to suppress it and speak "The Queen's English" as much as possible. Elizabeth, Richard, and everyone who remembered the girl from the situation with Wickham were amazed by her progress.

Richard and Darcy went with Mr Gardiner to Longbourn, and forced Mr Bennet to sign over irrevocable guardianship of Lydia to Gardiner and Darcy, to set Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet's minds at ease regarding the girl's safety. Mr Bennet offered no objection. He had what he wanted. The only thing the gentleman had desired was the thirty thousand pounds he felt that he was owed by his eldest daughter, and he had been willing to do anything to obtain such a large sum. Now that he had it, he had absolutely no interest in his family, nor even his estate.

When the gentlemen had left Longbourn, Bennet boarded his own carriage and left his estate to visit friends in Oxford without any indication of when or if he would return. Bennet had never wanted Longbourn, nor had he been raised with any expectation of inheriting. His father had been generous, and had allowed him to pursue a scholar's education rather than expecting him to join the military or clergy,

and had even paid a man to serve in Bennet's place, but the loss of his father and elder brother to the same epidemic of influenza had necessitated the abandonment of his life as a scholar. If he had sired an heir, he might have attended his duties better, but since his heir had never appeared he rarely felt obligated to attend to his duties. Now that he had ample funds, he could disregard the responsibilities of Longbourn, and live comfortably among his friends in Oxford. He took up temporary residence with a friend there, and began living the life he had always desired.

When news of Kitty's fate reached Derbyshire, Aunt Josephine took to her rooms and did not come out for days, such was her grief for her young niece. Of course it could not be Marianne's fault specifically. However, Mrs Dashwood could not help but feel that if her daughter had not met that young gentleman in secrecy, her niece would never have been endangered to such a degree. Marianne of course cared nothing for Kitty's fate, and did not even respond on the matter when it was related to her by Mrs Ferrars. Marianne's only concern was that Willoughby had married, and it was not to herself. She refused to believe the news or the announcement in the paper.

Determined to learn the truth herself, Marianne ran away from Miss Crane and the parsonage, and walked the many miles to Maplewood. She was turned away at the door, told that the viscount and viscountess were away on their wedding trip, and the house was closed. She wandered for two days after that, through rain and freezing cold. Colonel Brandon and Mr Ferrars, along with a Maplewood gamekeeper, found her on the third day, soaked from rain and quite nearly dead with fever, in a hunting cabin on Maplewood lands. Upon her return to the parsonage, Miss Crane declared that Miss Marianne was wild, and beyond all redemption. The no-nonsense woman resigned her post, and returned to her little cottage in Kympton. Elizabeth paid little attention to the letters from Delaford and Pemberley. As disinterested in Marianne's fate as Marianne was in Kitty's, Elizabeth's only concern was to find her sister.

As anyone could have predicted, Elizabeth's time came early. Sister Augustine announced that even if the shock of Kitty's kidnapping had not upset her and caused

great strain, she was certain Elizabeth was carrying twins, and twins would come early. This was the first Darcy had heard about the possibility of twins, and the poor man nearly fainted at the news. Mr Roberts was sent for, and young William Collins, Diane, Georgiana, and Lydia were bundled into a carriage, and sent to the Gardiners with their nurses. Charlotte and Evie assisted Sister Augustine in the birthing room, while Mrs Bennet, who still needed to rest her ankle, waited with Mary and Richard for news.

Surprising no one other than the nun, Elizabeth demanded Darcy's presence in the birthing chamber, and would not let him leave her sight. "Now, Lady Darcy, it was one thing last time when your husband was a physician, but this one has no business in the room!" Sister Augustine insisted, scandalised by Elizabeth's demands.

"I thank you for your concern, Sister, but he has brought me to this, and he will very well lend me his strength rather than get drunk with his cousin!" Elizabeth retorted stubbornly. She could not be brought to rest in bed through her pains, and when Will had produced a birthing chair from the attic at Darcy House the week before, Elizabeth had demanded that he have the cursed thing burnt immediately, so that neither she nor some poor unsuspecting future Darcy wife could ever be tortured by it.

Instead of retiring to the bed in the birthing room, Elizabeth would insist on walking up and down the portrait gallery for hours, holding onto Will for strength, her cries echoing through the house. The midwife assured Darcy that though it seemed extreme, Sir Christopher had always insisted that women who walked through their pains usually gave birth much faster and easier and she had seen enough evidence to agree.

After some hours, Elizabeth told Sister Augustine of the intense pressure she suddenly felt down below and after an examination, the sister declared the time to push had arrived. Mr Roberts waited nearby with Mrs Bennet and Richard for another

hour and a half, until finally, the first cry was heard. Richard patted Mrs Bennet's hand, and topped up her glass of canary as she wept with joy upon hearing the infant cry. Some minutes later, Darcy came out of the chamber beaming. "It is a boy! And Elizabeth is well!" he exclaimed joyfully, embracing everyone in the room including a bemused Mr Roberts.

Mr Roberts was called in a while later to examine the young chap and came out again rather quickly when Elizabeth's pains began again, and she began to cry out in earnest. "There is definitely another one coming, old boy. You want to get back in there before you find yourself out of favour," he said to Darcy as Elizabeth's cries rang out into the hall. Mrs Bennet was near hysteria with nerves as Elizabeth's cries began again. After the ordeal of the first delivery, she had no strength left for walking through the pains, and it was some hours before another wail was heard. This cry was much louder, much more insistent than the one before it and refused to be comforted for some time. Moments later, Darcy emerged to say with a wide grin, "My daughter makes her sentiments known much more forcefully than her brother." Cries of congratulations and happiness rang out as Richard pressed a well-earned glass of brandy into his cousin's hand.

Darcy, who could not believe his good fortune, drank deeply, and then slightly inebriated after imbibing on an empty stomach, sent messages to Matlock House, the Hexhams, the Gardiners, Netherfield, Windmere, and Pemberley. Wine was dispersed amongst the servants to toast the new additions to the family, and once Elizabeth and the babes were cleaned up and tended to, he led the Fitzwilliams and Mrs Bennet into the room for a short visit. Mrs Bennet wept again with happiness, and Richard declared the new boy and girl fine specimens of Darcy lineage, and then he and his wife took their leave, and returned to their home to catch up with the Darcys. Mary was quite impressed by her husband's dedication to matching his cousin, and told him that if they did not have two babes of their own by the end of the following year, she would be all astonishment.

Very early the next morning, before London was awake, Darcy visited the churchyard where Sir Christopher Astley was interred. He stood before the grave, gazing furtively about the misty dawn to ensure he was alone before he spoke. "I want to thank you for everything you taught her," he said, haltingly. "Her ideas about everything are so different from what most of society believes is right. Through most of her pregnancy, I thought she was mad, taking so much exercise, declining all wine, making the cook boil water. She made me burn the family birthing chair." he shook his head and laughed abruptly. "Dozens of Darcys born from it, myself included, and we burned it in the garden last week. The day I found her climbing the stairs for exercise, I nearly went mad myself, particularly after having watched my mother lose so many babes.

"Last night when she finished her labours, she told me she would always be grateful to you for everything you taught her about being strong and clean and healthy, for she believes the knowledge has brought her safely through the birth of three children, and I agree. Your name was spoken many times last night as she laboured, by herself, by the midwife, by your friend Mr Roberts, of your medical genius and all of your good advice.

"She was lucky to have had you for a husband, and I am sorry for you that you had so little time with her. But I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for everything she learned from you that has helped her, and has made our family strong and healthy. This day, the day after the birth of my own two children, I vow to you that I will raise your daughter with all the love and care that I will give my own, and that she will know of you, and be proud of your legacy." After the most sentimental speech Darcy had ever made to anyone save his wife, and to a dead man no less, Darcy turned awkwardly away and returned home to his family.

Elizabeth would not adhere to the Darcy tradition of naming the eldest son after his

mother's family. She insisted her father deserved no such notice, so the twins were named Richard Fitzwilliam Christopher Darcy and Anne Louise Catherine Darcy. Darcy had insisted when questioned why he would give the name of his wife's late husband to his son, that he owed the man a debt, and would not comment further. Elizabeth was the only person he shared his reasons with. She was incredibly touched by his sentiments, and agreed wholeheartedly. Richard and one of Elizabeth's Hexham cousins were asked to stand as godparents to Baby Richard, and Elizabeth's Uncle Gardiner and Mary were asked to stand as godparents for Baby Anne. Both babes were a contrast to Diane's pale blonde curls, having a shocking amount of dark hair. The shape of both babes' eyes was Elizabeth's, yet they remained a piercing blue, like their father's.

Christmas came and nearly went unacknowledged, shortly after the birth of the twins. If it had not been for Georgiana and Lydia's efforts, one might not have known it was Christmas at all. When Georgiana realised Elizabeth was not thinking of the festive season, the young ladies began planning the holidays and decorating the house in earnest, Georgiana introducing Lydia to Elizabeth's household journals, and such was their commitment to being as helpful as they could, that one might never have known that Elizabeth herself had not planned it all, or that it had been done in haste.

Lydia only participated for Diane's sake, for she cared nothing for the season in Kitty's absence. Georgiana had kept in touch with Mrs Hayes and Granny Rose at Pemberley, and ensured that the holidays would be properly observed at Pemberley, and the boxes for the servants and tenants were prepared and sufficiently grand. Gifts were sent for the family at home, and everything would be done according to Elizabeth's exacting standards, even if Pemberley's mistress had no heart for it just then.

Elizabeth could not bear the happy celebration on Christmas Day. Everything was wonderful, and she did her best to make the morning happy for Diane and the young ladies, but after the feast, when the Gardiners and the Hexhams and Matlocks and

Fitzwilliams were all making merry in the drawing room, she crept away and returned to her study to review all of her notes again, searching for some clue she might have missed.

After a time, she looked up as someone laid a cup of tea beside her on the desk. She started, not having noticed that anyone had entered the room, and looked up to find her stepmother, who was finally able to walk again with the help of a stick, looking down at her with misty eyes. "I cannot bear it either, Lizzy. The merrymaking," Mrs Bennet confided. "How can we celebrate Christmas when we do not know where she is?"

Elizabeth broke down and wept, and as she and Mrs Bennet embraced each other, Lydia and Mary crept into the room and joined them. Darcy looked in a while later. When he found them together, he withdrew, leaving the ladies to comfort each other. When he returned to the drawing room, Lord Hexham and Richard inquired as to Elizabeth's and Mary's whereabouts, and Darcy told them that the celebratory atmosphere was too much for Elizabeth and her family, who were still in fear for Kitty.

Charlotte made sure to send a tray of biscuits, chocolate, and other festive treats to the ladies, and Elizabeth spent the rest of the evening studying all of the information she had compiled while Mary, Lydia, and Mrs Bennet sat vigil with her, thinking about Kitty and praying that she was safe, that she knew her family loved and missed her, and that she knew they were searching for her.

Far away, a young lady sat listlessly in a comfortable chair in a lovely apartment of rooms. The nurse who had been charged with her care had been dismissed, and she was now in the sole charge of a previous young upstairs maid who had been rapidly promoted far above her skills and expectations, to a sort of combined lady's maid and

jailer. The maid had been told that her new mistress was impulsive and had a nervous condition, and must take a tonic for her nerves or she might accidentally cause harm to herself. She was weaned off of the laudanum, and put on a new tonic from the apothecary that made her very serene and docile, but not significantly intoxicated like the laudanum had. The maid was assured by the master that it was not addictive as laudanum was, though the maid had no notion of its contents.

The maid felt pity for the young woman, who did not even seem to know or care that it was Christmas, and she wondered about the cause of her nervous complaint, but she was too afraid to lower the dose of the tonic. His lordship's new wife, who never spoke her first name, or of her previous life, if at all, was an extremely quiet young woman with an air of sadness about her, and scarcely ever spoke. She did not seem to have a nervous condition that the maid could discern, but that might only be the tonic doing its work, the maid reckoned. Still, she was lucky for this promotion. It would help her family, and the maid would not see the young lady endangered in any way, and so followed her master's instructions implicitly.

The elderly husband said that his new wife would be safest if she did not have the run of the house, or the ability to leave the manor alone. Socialising was out of the question, so the entire second floor of the house was being refurnished, to provide her ladyship with an entire floor of rooms in which to live safely. Two rooms on opposite sides of the house were outfitted as a small dining room and breakfast parlour. There was a music room and a sitting room, and a number of other rooms on that floor would wait until the lady's husband learned more about her interests. The estate boasted a rare delight, a walled butterfly garden, with a hidden locked gate. This would be the area in which her ladyship would be allowed to exercise out of doors.

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London

January 1850

Searching for Kitty while nursing and managing two babes at once was massively difficult for Elizabeth. Thankfully she was able to produce enough milk after a few weeks of nursing, so her babes were well fed, and Charlotte moved ahead with weaning young William. Elizabeth felt fortunate, because many women struggled to feed their babes even when they were singletons. Luckily, the birth announcement had been placed in the papers, so society did not expect her to entertain or attend events. Her Uncle Gardiner was managing her business affairs with the assistance of Darcy, Banks, and Wilson.

Darcy was beginning to truly understand how taxing Elizabeth's work could be. It was truly as difficult as when he had taken over Pemberley upon his father's passing. Elizabeth worked daily, but not on her business. She had cancelled her planned recuperation in favour of the investigation for Kitty, and she spent hours each day in her study, with the twins often sleeping nearby in their baskets and Diane playing quietly with Beau in the corner when she was not having lessons with her aunts. Charlotte had mostly taken over the running of the house, quietly making decisions together with the housekeeper, and including Georgiana and Lydia in the management of the house, so that the girls would learn, and Elizabeth was not taxed by the additional duties.

Mr Mason sent lesson instructions each month for Georgiana to use for Diane. Georgiana and Lydia themselves managed her lessons in French and feminine comportment. Darcy had bought the girl a pony, and when the family returned to

Pemberley, he would begin teaching her to ride. Currently, she was learning to read a clock, and also was spending time in the kitchens with her aunts and the cook, learning to make biscuits and bread. One day, Diane would be a great heiress, with a shockingly large dowry and an estate, but Elizabeth insisted she would also be a practical, useful sort of woman who would be no wilting violet.

Often there were leads for Kitty, and Elizabeth frequently boarded her carriage without warning and travelled for hours, occasionally even taking the infants and their nurse with her, if she felt confident that their destination was safe, and they would need feeding. Darcy was beside himself with worry when she did this, but Elizabeth would not be moved, she would do whatever she thought was necessary. She spent hundreds upon hundreds of pounds paying for information and investigators, eventually reaching thousands of pounds. No amount was too much, and she sent Banks and Wilson out on new leads constantly.

Wilson escorted Sister Augustine and Evie back to Derbyshire, and Elizabeth often had him carrying messages to Pemberley as well. She felt sorry that he was being kept away from his son, and she wanted him to have the opportunity to see the boy. She offered to have the boy brought to London, but Wilson felt that Edmund had settled in well at Pemberley and at the estate school with the tenant children, so he did not wish to disrupt the boy's life and education again after they had made such efforts to fill any insufficiencies in his learning from before he came. Wilson was able to see him almost monthly, corresponded every week, and in the meantime, the boy was happy at Pemberley and his school. Mrs Hayes and Mrs Pottinger watched over him very maternally.

Mrs Hayes reported to Elizabeth that the boy was very willing and respectful, did his few hours a week of chores and all of his lessons without complaint, and got along well in the household. The other hall boys watched over him as if he were a younger brother, and ensured he stayed out of mischief, and he had made friends at the estate school.

Eventually an investigator was sent to the continent to track down Viscount St Claire and question him regarding Kitty's possible whereabouts. Every other avenue had been exhausted, investigators had been sent to all of the duke's known properties, even the ones in Scotland and France. Vicars had been questioned regarding recent marriages and new arrivals in the areas, parish records were searched, stewards and housekeepers, footmen, maids, and cooks, local gossips, anyone who might know what had happened to a young girl who was missing were interrogated, servants were bribed heavily, and no one knew what may have happened to Kitty.

Much like Elizabeth's staff, Leeds's servants at his London mansion and Stoneacre were above being bribed, which Elizabeth regretted, because she was certain that those were the ones who could answer her questions. The only other business of note that the duke had conducted recently had been the calling in of the debts of a gambler who had later killed himself. There was no record that the debt had been repaid, presumably the duke had suffered his apoplexy before he could pursue the man's family, but Brandon had travelled to question the man's wife, turning up nothing.

It had taken Colonel Brandon some time to determine that Kitty was actually missing, due to the family in Derbyshire being very tight lipped about the subject. He was aware of Willoughby's marriage and Marianne's subsequent illness, but it was not until he and Mr Ferrars had returned Marianne to the parsonage that he became aware of what had befallen Kitty. He made for London with all haste, and was one of Elizabeth's most trusted men in the investigation. He spent all of his time sequestered with Banks, Wilson, Richard, and the Darcys. He rode from one end of the kingdom to another investigating tips, and like Elizabeth, he was becoming more and more reclusive and disinterested in society and essentially everything. It was clear the man was grieving, just as Elizabeth and her sisters were.

Marianne was ill for many weeks, the fever she had caught during her wanderings

had turned to pneumonia, and for some weeks Elinor and Edward feared they might lose her. Elizabeth ensured that Mr Clarke and Mr Lloyd travelled to Delaford regularly to ensure Marianne was receiving the best of care, and a nurse was sent from the school to help in her recovery. Elizabeth sent no messages to the Dashwoods or the Ferrars. She knew in her heart that what had happened to Kitty was the fault of evil men and not Marianne, but she still could not suppress a deep anger for the girl, her behaviour, and her impulsiveness. She rarely corresponded with anyone in a private capacity. She spent all of her time writing to people all over the country about clues and questions, but she never replied to her friends or family anymore.

Elizabeth and Darcy did not inform the Bingleys of what had befallen Kitty. Darcy thought it might be best to write to Charles and allow him to decide whether it was best to inform Jane, but Elizabeth insisted that if Jane knew, she would want to return home, and there was nothing the Bingleys could do about the matter. Elizabeth preferred to hope that Kitty would eventually be found, and that they could instead write to the Bingleys with distressing news, but a happy ending. Or even save the tale for their return entirely. Mrs Bennet badgered Darcy endlessly to call Jane and Charles home, but Darcy decided to wait, as Elizabeth asked. After all, she was correct. Nothing would be served by calling the Bingleys home.

Jane and Bingley wrote monthly, and Darcy had so far only replied once, because the Bingleys kept moving, and it was difficult for post to follow them. Mrs Bennet was desperate for Jane to return home, and made quite a nuisance of herself, to the point where Darcy and Elizabeth locked the Bingleys' correspondence in their strongbox to ensure the couple's privacy. The Bingleys had been in Paris, and were travelling about France. Bingley was considering taking a short lease on a very rural Chateau in the countryside for a rest and a period of romantic private isolation.

Eventually word got out in society about Kitty's fate. The entire debacle was featured

in the gossip rags, and this brought other difficulties with it. First, there was now a line of unsavoury characters stretched down the street, all waiting to present imposters as Kitty, and collect a reward. A footman and maid who knew Kitty well spent days together inspecting and rejecting every young woman who was presented, and several times the constable had to be called to remove people who were very insistent on collecting a reward and refused to leave. One might have thought Kitty's own family ought not be expected to know her, the women and their associates were so insistent. One woman would not vacate the premises at all, and when Elizabeth finally came out to identify the person herself, the young woman argued with her for nearly a quarter hour.

Second, now that word had reached the gossip rags, there were a few in society who felt their family must be shunned due to the scandal. Elizabeth hated the idea that because one woman had fallen the rest of her sisters and family must be shunned, particularly considering that she had never treated any lady thus before. But in this case, it was even worse, considering that no one even knew Kitty's whereabouts, and the only information that was known was that her father had sent her away to be married, which ought not be inherently scandalous by itself.

There was no evidence Kitty had fallen, but there was also no evidence that she had not. Because Elizabeth could not specify who her sister had married or where she lived, rumours abounded. Elizabeth's real friends in the ton, of which she had many, were of course as supportive as they could be, but every matron or debutante or young widow who had wanted Darcy for herself or her daughter were all too ready to be unkind. Some of the Darcy's oldest connections were quite rude indeed.

Elizabeth was outraged the day that Will's own godmother, Lady Bristol, had snubbed Georgiana and Mrs Annesley in the park, and ranted, "How can they be so cruel? We do not even know what has befallen her! How do they know she has fallen? She is very likely married. She might even be dead, and all they care about is whether this has affected Georgiana's prospects!" She felt terribly guilty that

Georgiana might suffer from rumour and innuendo when she made her debut, but Elizabeth could do nothing to still the tongues of society. She did vow that when the matter with Kitty was over, and she reentered society, Lady Bristol would be sorry indeed for her treatment of Georgiana.

Georgiana and Will assured Elizabeth that neither of them wished for connections who might shun them because of Kitty's fate, and eventually The Queen helped by inviting Elizabeth and Georgiana to tea, and then speaking of Georgie's virtues and accomplishments to several in her circle who of course repeated her words back to society. Lydia attended the tea as well, and she and the Monarch discussed embroidery and stitches for some time. When they left, Her Majesty told all that she spoke to that Elizabeth's sisters were perfectly lovely and charming young ladies, and that although it was cruel, there was nothing socially wrong with a father arranging his daughter's marriage without consulting the rest of his family.

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One day, Will entered his wife's study and sat in the chair near her desk that he always occupied when he visited her there. Elizabeth finished what she was writing and looked up warmly. Happily, although everything else was topsy turvy, Elizabeth and Will were very much all right. Will had been Georgiana's guardian for long enough to know what Elizabeth was suffering, and bore her moods with infinite patience and love.

Darcy remembered all too well his constant fear since his father died and left Georgie in his charge. The fear that he would do it all wrong, or that something dreadful would befall her that did not ease until he married his wife, who gave him confidence in his sister and his care of her. He remembered too well the incident with Wickham, how easily it could all have gone wrong, and the nightmares that had plagued him for many months after. He knew the clawing terror that Elizabeth and her stepmother and sisters felt at all times. He also knew that they were all too aware that the more time passed, the less likely it was that Kitty would ever be found.

As his wife greeted him lovingly, and asked if he needed something in particular, he drew her to sit with him on a sofa and said, "Mrs Dashwood has written to me asking if she and Margaret should go to the Delaford parsonage with the Ferrars. She says she has written to you several times, and you have not responded. She fears their presence might make us feel awkward at Pemberley now. She wishes you to know that she loves you, and is very grateful for all you have done for her and your cousins, but she does not wish their presence to cause you pain. I am not sure that would be how you feel, however, for I know you have understandably abandoned much of your correspondence. How would you like me to reply to her?"

Elizabeth sighed and her lip trembled. "I cannot make myself do it. I cannot put the

pen to the paper and write to our friends and family that she is still missing. I cannot bring myself to write to them that she is not found.” She cried in her husband’s arms for a time, and when she had done and they had talked more, Darcy wrote a reply to Mrs Dashwood:

Pemberley House,

Mayfair, London

My Dear Aunt Dashwood,

Please do not alarm yourself at the lack of communications from my wife, your niece Elizabeth, at this time. As you can imagine, Elizabeth and her family suffer greatly from many fears for Catherine’s welfare and their grief is profound.

Lady Darcy has currently abandoned all of her personal correspondence, for she finds it too painful to write to her friends and relations that Catherine is still lost. She spends all of her time directing the investigation, and taking care of the twins, who are doing very well and growing quickly.

Lady Darcy wishes you to know that she holds no resentment towards you or Margaret, and it is her greatest wish that you will both remain at Pemberley, as we all agreed last summer in Brighton.

We have no immediate plans to return to Derbyshire at present. Georgiana will make her debut soon, and though Elizabeth will not attend many events, we will remain in town long enough for my Aunt Matlock and Mrs Fitzwilliam to help Georgiana make a good show of it. Elizabeth will not presently entertain the idea of returning to the country before Kitty is found, so our plans remain unfixed.

I enclose a newly drawn set of maps of a region of The Orange River in Africa that I

know Cousin Margaret had been studying before we left Pemberley. The explorer, Mr Livingstone recently returned from his expedition, and I made certain to request a copy of the maps as soon as his return was announced in London. I attended his recent lecture with Georgiana, which was vastly interesting, and I believe these maps will answer Cousin Margaret's uncertainties about landmarks that were previously questionable.

Please do not hesitate to write to me if there is anything that I can do for your comfort or happiness at Pemberley. We are glad to know you are there. Please extend our fond regards to the Ferrars, and all of our family and friends that reside at Pemberley and Delaford Parsonage.

Your Servant,

Darcy

Many weeks passed and in late April the time for the Debutante Ball arrived. Elizabeth was so filled with grief for Kitty she could not bear to look upon her ballgown when it arrived. Elizabeth cried all afternoon when the delivery was made, and later that day, Darcy ordered the gown locked away where Elizabeth could not see it. She tried her best to be supportive to Georgie, feeling that the young girl must find it very hard to have her debut overshadowed by such events.

Georgiana insisted that Elizabeth's feelings were entirely to be expected, and that Elizabeth should not feel guilty. Indeed, she felt that attending the season was entirely ridiculous when her family was going through so much hardship. Her brother and Aunt Matlock had convinced her that it was best to get it over with and be done with it, and she would do so for their sake. Much time and expense had been made to prepare for Georgiana's debut, and she could not imagine expecting Elizabeth, her brother, and her aunt to go through it all again next year because she had wasted their efforts by crying off.

Granny Rose turned up unexpectedly in London shortly before Georgie's presentation, and insisted that the family ought not be surprised that she would be present to sit with her friends and watch over events carefully as her only granddaughter took on the ton. Darcy teased his grandmother that she had only come to town to show off her pearl tiara, and his grandmother had laughed and pretended to swat him with her fan.

Elizabeth and Granny Rose would not see The Queen during the presentation, because since they were not presenting Kitty, they would not go through to the Throne Room when Lady Matlock went in with Georgiana. But they waited in the ballroom, and congratulated Georgiana when her curtsy had been made. Her Majesty, ever a friend to Elizabeth, had spoken to Georgiana and Lady Matlock for far longer than any Queen had ever been known to do during a presentation.

When Georgiana's debut ball was held at Matlock House, Georgiana's acceptance by society was sealed when His Royal Highness' brother, who was well known to Elizabeth, and was in London visiting his family, attended a few moments of the ball with some of his friends from court. He distinguished Georgiana by asking to open the ball with her, and after such a display of approval by The Royal Family, there was no question about Georgiana's acceptance by society.

Word came from the cook at Longbourn through Mrs Nichols that Mr Bennet had abandoned the place entirely some time ago. The household funds had depleted, and wages had not been paid to the cook or the stableboy who had left behind. Sufficient household funds had not been left to feed these servants, and there were beginning to be problems caused by tenant and farm neglect. Richard and Mr Banks went to Oxford accompanied by Mr Phillips, who they stopped to pick up in Meryton. There they learned that Thomas Bennet had been welcomed back as an Oxford Don, had been provided a handsome house by the university, and had no plans to return to Longbourn during his lifetime. He had no plans to direct the tenants to plant or harvest the fields, order seed, or maintain the property in any way. He had his new

horse and his income from the thirty thousand in the percents, and now that he was back at Oxford, he had all he had ever desired.

Significant coercion was used, but Richard and Mr Banks were able to pressure Mr Bennet into giving up his rights to Longbourn, placing the property irrevocably in trust for his heir presumptive, under the condition that it would be managed by the Darcys until the boy reached his majority, enabling Will and Elizabeth to make improvements to the property in preparation for the boy to take over management once his education was complete.

Bennet was certain his life was better now that he was away from Longbourn with his money. His new horse had gone lame, and he was certain his new housekeeper was cheating the accounts, but at last he had peace and quiet, and when he did want company, there was never any lack of intelligent conversation to be had in the neighbourhood or at the university.

Without overtly making any announcements, once the papers had been signed, Elizabeth and Darcy began improving Longbourn. A new housekeeper was installed. Mrs Bennet was consulted, and she swore she could never live in the house or the village without her husband and maintain her reputation in the neighbourhood. She could visit without her husband without too many questions one day perhaps, but if she returned there to live as a separated woman, she could not face her friends, so she would not return to live there.

Work began on the house. A spacious new wing was built, adding five more bedrooms, a small ballroom, a new drawing room, and a proper library separate from the master's study. A new roof was installed, the interior was completely repainted, elegant yet simplistic new mouldings and wall coverings were installed. Longbourn was still a modest estate, so Elizabeth did not go mad with numerous bathing rooms, but three bathing chambers were installed in the manor, one for the family to share, one for the guest wing, one for the servants, and one small water closet on the ground

floor for visitors.

Most of the furniture was kept, but refreshed with new fabrics. New draperies were ordered, and even a modern new kitchen, a proper summer kitchen, and new bedroom furnishings for Cook in thanks for her assistance with the terrible footman Cuthbert. There was quite a bit of land for sale in Hertfordshire, some of which even bordered Longbourn. One piece was a large section of land, about a hundred and fifty fertile acres, being sold off from their property by a neighbouring estate in financial difficulties. The other was a large and prosperous farm, with seventy-five acres, and a very genteel and handsome farmhouse. In all, once the new purchases were officially made part of the Longbourn parcel, the acreage of Longbourn had grown from four hundred acres, to six hundred and twenty-five.

A young man had purchased the seventy-five acres and built the farmhouse two decades ago, hoping to add to his land later, take on tenants, and become a proper gentleman in time, but then experienced several family tragedies, losing his wife and children to epidemics, and sadly, when the nearby land became available, he had to admit he would likely never be able to afford it and what was the point, with no children? When the Darcys enquired about his property, he sold his farm and farmhouse to them with alacrity, and moved to Yorkshire to help his sister, who had just lost her husband, with her tenancy.

Elizabeth was very happy with the new addition of the farmhouse to the property. Not to be confused with a mere farmer's cottage, this genteel early Victorian farmhouse was a newer construction, under twenty years old, and a very attractive structure. Boasting a welcoming drawing room with space for a handsome pianoforte, a private family parlour, a small book room, and a dining room that could comfortably seat sixteen on the ground floor, five bedrooms, another small parlour and master's study on the first floor, as well as ample space above for attics and a small servants quarters, Elizabeth deemed the place perfect to serve as a dower house for Longbourn in the future. She had never liked to see Mrs Bennet's frustration and worry, and

whoever her godson's progeny turned out to be, Elizabeth never wanted another Longbourn wife to fear the hedgerows.

Future dowagers would have a respectable home in which to entertain in a genteel manner, ample rooms for unmarried children or family visitors, and a household that ought easily to be managed with only a cook, two maids, and a manservant under a modest budget. She held no reservations about spending money on an entailed property. She told Will that if the estate was improved, then the future security and welfare of everyone who lived there in the future would be improved, and it was her family's responsibility to contribute to the estate's future prosperity, no matter who inherited it, as a matter of honour and pride.

Mr Bennet could have easily provided for his wife and children while contributing to the future prosperity of Longbourn, but he had been too indolent. Elizabeth would rectify the matter. The Darcys ensured the farmhouse and extra land became an irrevocable part of the Longbourn entail, and added a clause to the entail that all widows and unmarried daughters of Longbourn must be allowed to live in the farmhouse for their lifetimes. As per her habit, Elizabeth had the house painted, fabrics and upholstery refreshed, and installed a bathing chamber, a water closet for guests, and boilers.

Richard was appealed to in the search for a steward for Longbourn from amongst his educated officer friends, and an untypically educated tenant farmer had taken oversight of the estate in the meantime. Not only were all of the modern farming techniques that Bennet had known of for years and refused to employ put into practice, but the tenant cottages were also improved and enlarged, just as at Pemberley and Netherfield. Darcy expected that Longbourn's income would grow from just under two thousand a year, to thirty-five hundred or four thousand, within the next three or four years. If more land that bordered the estate became available in the next few years, the Darcys would acquire that as well. It was Darcy and Elizabeth's hope that when young William Collins took over his inheritance, he

would have a smoothly running estate of perhaps five or so thousand a year, and would be able to provide for his mother and any wife or children he might have admirably.

Charlotte knew, of course, that the Darcys were up to something at Longbourn. She knew of the trust, and she knew from her parents and brother that much work was being done to the house and the property around Longbourn, but she could not say anything to Elizabeth about spending too much money on her son's future estate, because the estate still officially belonged to the Bennets, and was under the Darcys' guardianship. Since it did not yet belong to William, it would be presumptuous of Charlotte for her to suggest that they should not do whatever they wished with it. She only hoped Elizabeth would not go too mad and that her son would grow up to be a dependable and worthy caretaker of the estate one day.

The investigator eventually returned from the continent, having found the viscount and his wife. The viscount submitted to the interview most willingly. He stated that when his father presented his marriage as a *fait accompli*, he informed him that Kitty was married and out of the country already but never said to whom or where she was going. He tried to explain that his father had the wrong lady, but that he would give Miss Dashwood up entirely, he did not wish for her to be in such danger from his own father which was why he had hidden his liaison with her in the first place. He always planned to marry her, but he had avoided Darcy, because he knew his father would never allow it and that he would have to elope with the girl, and so he had been attempting to court Marianne without attracting attention to his activities. He never dreamt his father would react in this way. He promised to do whatever his father required of him before anyone else was harmed, but his father insisted Kitty was already married and gone, and hopefully had set an example for whatever other young lady at Pemberley had unacceptable aspirations. The son had immediately capitulated to his father's demands for his marriage, not wishing for anything

untoward to happen to Marianne if he resisted.

It had been when Willoughby sent his father an express after his wedding night, informing him that he had saddled his son with a young woman who was already visibly pregnant with another man's illegitimate child, and was due to deliver in only a few short months, that the duke himself had suffered an apoplexy.

Willoughby, having returned all correspondence with his father's seal or from his father's household since, was unaware of the apoplexy, but did not concern himself with rushing back to manage his father's affairs. He had decided to punish his father for having interfered in his affairs so cruelly. He would exact revenge against the duke by keeping his wife and claiming her child, who may even inherit someday. Willoughby could not care less about the bloodlines or the dynasty. The investigator confessed to Montague that from hearing the viscount speak of Miss Dashwood, he believed the man was actually in love with her, and might have married her if he could have. The pertinent information from the interview was that still, no one knew where to find Kitty.

Elizabeth received a letter from Mrs Ferrars at Delaford Cottage, revealing that Marianne had lied, and the consequences of her secret meetings were now making themselves known. At first the symptoms had not been apparent due to her illness. Now they must decide what to do with her, and while Elinor and her husband thought it may be best for Marianne to go away and give her child away to be adopted, Marianne swore that no one would take Willoughby's child from her, and she demanded that someone be found that she could marry and be allowed to keep the babe.

Such gentlemen did not grow upon trees, but they could often be found in the army. There were always second sons and impoverished men in the regulars and the militia looking for wealthy wives to support their need to sell their commissions and live in relative comfort and safety. Some of them were willing to overlook much

unpleasantness. Elizabeth and Will asked Richard to make inquiries. Elizabeth offered a dowry of twenty thousand, twice what she had settled on Elinor, in order to compensate for the inconvenience of another man's child, and ensure there was something in trust for Marianne. Richard returned with information on an officer that he knew who was retiring his commission as Captain after an injury that would not leave him visibly maimed or crippled, but the doctors did not think he would be able to father children.

Captain Miles Spencer was an inoffensive looking man. Not fatally handsome, but the sort of everyday looking gentleman that many females would not find accepting to be a hardship. His teeth were good, as was his breath, body odour, and hygiene. His manners were open and friendly, and there was nothing whatsoever objectionable about his person. When asked why he would consider such an arrangement, he confided, "I did not expect to inherit, Lady Darcy. I am a younger son, and my elder brother died in a hunting accident this year. I am the last male member of my immediate family, with a mother and two younger sisters, a modest estate of three thousand a year with no dower house, entailed onto an American slave owner who is a third cousin that no one knows or has ever met. And I am told now that I myself will likely never father a child.

"If this child that the lady in question has is a boy, I will raise him as my own, and he will be born in wedlock and I will be sure to name him in my will as my son and heir, which is all that is required to satisfy the law. This would give my mother and sisters a measure of security, as my father left them very little. If it is a girl child, I will still raise her as my own, and I am told that a portion of the young lady's dowry will be kept in trust for them. So, this solution, Lady Darcy, would make the young woman and her child respectable, her fortune will provide her with her own security, and my share of her dowry can be used to improve the security of my mother and sisters, who will love her, I assure you. My mother is so afraid of penury that she will not care a whit where the child comes from, he will be her grandchild who will save her from being homeless. She will love and accept Marianne and the child no matter the

gender, because at least we will have tried all we could. I have spoken to my mother, and she agrees, it is providence that Marianne and I were sent to help one another.”

Elizabeth did not disagree with his reasoning, for he seemed a kind man. She showed him the settlement, which was different from the others she had managed. She and Darcy had discussed it at length, as well as by express with Mr and Mrs Ferrars. Marianne was different from Elizabeth and her sisters. She was reasonably well educated, but she was also impulsive, selfish, and wild. The sort of wife who could destroy a family if she had too many freedoms and no one to check her. In the last few months alone, she had risked her family and extended family’s reputations, caused her cousin to be sold away into marriage, violently assaulted her younger sister, and fallen pregnant out of wedlock. Elizabeth thought Marianne had enjoyed rather too much independence, and could now do with a measure of stability.

Marianne desperately needed someone who could deny her the opportunity to run mad and ruin her whole family. So, the settlement ensured that five thousand each would remain in trust for Marianne and her daughter, if it were a girl, and the remaining ten thousand would go to her husband. If the child was a boy, however, the portion of the dowry that remained would revert back to Marianne upon her husband’s death, because the boy would inherit Spencer’s estate.

It was also agreed that Spencer would use a portion of his share of the dowry to build a comfortable dower house on his estate and the rest would go into the percents. The interest of Marianne’s share would provide her pin money, and the rest would go into trust for her future. The Darcys or the Ferrars, however, would have the right to remove Marianne and her child from Spencer’s house if he prevented her from communicating with her family, or if they suspected she was being mistreated.

Elizabeth told him that the decision would ultimately be Marianne’s, but that he had the Darcys’ blessing to travel to Derbyshire with his mother to meet Marianne and obtain her agreement to his proposal. Darcy went with him to the archbishop to

obtain a special licence so that the two could be married immediately if Marianne agreed. If nothing else, Captain Spencer's estate was near Plymouth, which was nearly as far away from Maplewood or any of the viscount or duke's properties as it was possible to be without actually leaving the country.

The journey was made, and the proposal rendered and accepted. An express arrived from Mr Ferrars that Marianne and Captain Spencer had married within a week, and had left with his mother to travel to Marianne's new home. The party stopped a week later in London, and visited Pemberley House before travelling on. The new Mrs Spencer did not meet Elizabeth's eye, and so softly did she speak while taking tea at Pemberley House that she could barely be heard. Elizabeth thought it had been rather past time that the girl had been humbled, and hoped it would be long lasting, but she rather doubted it.

Mrs Spencer's new mother-in-law was extremely helpful and grateful to her new daughter-in-law for the chance to save her home, and Elizabeth worried she might rather spoil the girl even more, or worse, turn on her and become her enemy if the babe turned out to be a girl. Elizabeth insisted that a nurse from the order in London would be sent out monthly to check on Marianne, and would remain a month before the child was expected to assist with the birth and the selection of a nurse maid for the family. The new couple and mother-in-law continued their journey to Plymouth the following day, and Elizabeth hoped that her young cousin would make an effort to find happiness with her new husband.

The maid in charge of the new ladyship, whose name was Nancy, and among the household now went by the surname of Corrigan, spent all of her days caring for the new mistress and bearing her companionship, not that the girl seemed to require any. Corrigan had never seen any evidence of the supposed nervous condition, but continued to dispense her ladyship's tonic as directed by the master. His lordship

never visited his young wife's rooms at night, as far as the maid could tell. He did, however, join her in her breakfast room or her dining room for meals perhaps once or twice a week, so that he might learn more about her, and do what he could to improve her spirits. The man felt terribly guilty about this young lady's fate, but he would not have left it past the duke to drown the girl in a sack like a litter of unwanted kittens if he had declined to take her to wife.

He had no desire to spend time with the girl, or to live with her as his wife, despite her youth and beauty, but he did wish her to be as comfortable as possible in his house. He had agreed to keep her away from society, but he had never agreed to neglect or abuse her in any way. His new wife rarely spoke to him or to anyone, and it was some weeks before he was able to determine that she enjoyed listening to the pianoforte but not playing, and that she had some very small proficiency at the harp. She enjoyed drawing and painting above all, and she was bored and unhappy at the disruption to her studies. His lordship was chagrined to know he had wed a girl who despite her age, had not completed her education, or even made her debut. Never even had a proper season in London, the poor girl. And she said she was the wrong girl; her cousin was the one the duke had wanted. He was horrified to learn that this had happened to her because the duke's heir was courting her cousin, and the man had ruined the wrong girl. It was a shame.

Her elderly husband then furnished one sunny corner room having many windows on the floor on which the young lady lived as an art studio, with everything that could possibly be needed for an artist to draw or paint to their heart's desire. The view of the park and the countryside from this room was unrivalled, and should give his young bride a great deal to look at and draw inspiration from for some time. After a great deal of questioning regarding the lady's literary interests and academic pursuits, another room was outfitted as a small library, filled with books on all of the subjects she claimed to have been studying as well as novels, classics, and poetry, with a promise to refresh the volumes and add new ones as often as she wished. The maid, Corrigan, was to visit the local music master twice a week to receive pianoforte

lessons so that she might learn to play for her mistress, since the lady herself did not enjoy playing the instrument. The music master was under the impression that the young maid was learning in order to entertain her reclusive employer.

His young wife asked once, if now that she was married, and no longer an impediment to the powerful duke's wishes, if she might be allowed to write to her sisters to assure them of her well-being. The gentleman could not bear to tell her no, so he took her letters, which of course were never sent. As the weeks passed, and she was assured no response had come from her family, the young mistress fell into despair, frightening the elderly man and her maid. The only bright spot in her life was being allowed into the walled garden to sketch and draw. She did not like the footman who escorted and watched her and her maid to the garden, and tried to explain to Corrigan that the man frightened her for some reason she could not explain, and asked if there might not be another footman who could be assigned to the task.

The maid had to inform her mistress that since her husband's first wife had died, and his son had caused him so many troubles, his Lordship had let go of nearly all of the house staff. Only the cook, two maids besides herself, and one footman, who was also the man of all work, were retained. His lordship kept one gardener, who did not live on the estate, but came daily to maintain the gardens, and a gamekeeper. Otherwise, most of the rooms in the manor had been closed up, and the footman in question was responsible for all of the indoor work usually expected of the male servants, as well as the care and feeding of his Lordship's last two horses, and driving his carriage. Sadly, there was no one else to accompany them. The young lady did not like the way the servant watched her, and avoided any interaction with the man as much as she could, which was easy, considering she spent her days alone with Corrigan.

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Many young gentlemen came to Pemberley House during the season to call upon Georgiana, but she firmly made it clear very quickly to all that she was not even slightly interested in being courted by anyone. All romantic gestures were firmly rebuffed and gifts other than flowers were refused. She spent her season making friends (and rivals) among the people her age, and the matrons of society. Mary took to guiding Georgiana through the ton easily, warning her which young ladies would turn on her just as quickly as they would smile in her face, which matrons were only interested in making her look bad in order to promote their own daughters, which of the young bucks were often drunk and too forward with their hands during the dances, which of the married noblemen were lechers.

Lady Matlock and the Fitzwilliams took it upon themselves to accompany Georgiana to all events, though Darcy frequently attended as often as he was able, to lend his sister his protection and support. Granny Rose did not attend all of the events, but she went to as many as she had the strength for, and watched over her granddaughter carefully. Georgiana was grateful for Granny Rose's presence in the ballrooms. She knew her grandmother's friends watched over her as well, and that she could count any of them as an honorary grandmother in any moment of need, but Georgiana took great comfort in knowing her grandmother sat with the dragons and watched her benevolently. Georgiana did create a circle of close friends her age or a little older, both male and female, whom she trusted, and whose company she enjoyed. Elizabeth assured her this was the whole point of a season at her age and in her position, not to find romance, and so Georgiana considered her first season a success.

She had, like any stunningly beautiful debutante worth her salt, gained a number of devoted young male followers, but only a select few were deemed interesting, witty, and trustworthy enough to stand as her friends. Darcy confided in Elizabeth that he

highly approved of her choices, and Elizabeth encouraged him to share his feelings with Georgiana, who had always lacked faith in her own judgement since Wickham.

The company of one of her favourites, The Honourable Mr Vivian Radcliffe, age four and twenty, and younger brother to Darcy's school friend Lord Berkeley, was essential to her enjoyment of society. She would always remember the first time she saw him. He had thrown back his head, and laughed heartily at something his friend had said. Not one of society's polite laughs, dripping with ennui, but a full-throated laugh, filled with genuine humour. Georgiana had never before seen such an absurdly handsome gentleman. This man made George Wickham look plain, but she quickly tempered her reaction to him, for she had no plans to create any attachments or fall into any infatuations. She did, however, feel quite at ease when Mr Radcliffe was by her side. He had the strangest mixture of qualities that Georgiana admired in her brother and Elizabeth.

Mr Radcliffe was at ease in society, had the skill to draw people out into conversation, and make them comfortable. He possessed the wit to keep them laughing and happy, while also being a very steady, reliable gentleman, always the sort to intervene when other gentlemen or young people were getting too excitable. She had seen him quietly put an end to many scenes that could have ended badly, before they even began, at several balls, late in the evenings, when the young people had drunk too much champagne. He was fiercely loyal to all he considered his friends, and was selective to whom he admitted to his circle, avoiding the worst of the hellions and rakes his age.

On one occasion, he had quite impressed Georgiana and her brother, when he had escorted Georgiana and Lady Annesley in Hyde Park on horseback. Two gentlemen racing carriages had knocked over a nurse escorting her charges on their daily walk. The woman was injured, and the young men had nearly carried on unheeding of her need for assistance, and the frightened cries of the children in her care. Radcliffe had taken control of the situation immediately, following the young men a short distance

and overtaking them easily. The two young men just down from Cambridge were made to return to the scene of their inconsiderate act and offer assistance to the injured party.

Upon his return, he had assisted Georgiana down from her horse and set her to comforting the children, while he assessed the nurse's injuries. Darcy arrived soon after, having been fetched by one of Georgie's escorts, but by the time he arrived, Radcliffe had the matter in hand. The young gentlemen who had caused the trouble had been made to hand the nurse and children up into their carriages. Radcliffe led them to the home of the woman's employer, after having sent his servant to fetch a doctor to meet them there. The only thing left for Darcy to do was to escort Georgiana home. Radcliffe ensured the young men made an apology to the horrified mother of the children, and also insisted that the young men pay for the cost of the doctor, the nurse's wages for the duration of her injury, as well as the family's costs of hiring a temporary nurse. After a stern lecture, the young men were allowed to depart, chastened, and vowing not to race where others could be harmed in the future.

The season came to a close and the family moved to Netherfield, because Elizabeth still refused to return to Pemberley while Kitty was missing. This created the first true fight of the Darcy's marriage. Darcy insisted that the world must eventually go on, and they must continue to manage their business affairs and their estates responsibly. He could not just abandon his duties, nor could she hers, and he could not continue to manage her business affairs indefinitely with her uncle. He must devote some time to his estates. Elizabeth, enraged by his insensitivity, removed Darcy immediately from the management of all her business, and took over her work again, in addition to nursing the twins, and all she was already doing in the search for Kitty. This resulted in her withdrawing from society entirely, not that she had been attending many events, but as the season drew to a close, she began refusing every invitation, even from family, and invited Darcy to go ahead and return to Pemberley and attend his

duties on his own.

This is not at all what Darcy had in mind, but for a week Elizabeth ignored him studiously, having locked the door that connected their studies during the day, and stayed up late in her study working each night, until far past the time Darcy retired. Each time he approached her, she reminded him that he had duties to attend to, and he had better go and address them. In her heart she knew he was not wrong, and that Pemberley did need tending, not to mention Windmere, and Netherfield, and her stables, and all of Darcy's other properties. It was perhaps unfair of her, but she was incensed that he would expect her to abandon the search for Kitty so soon. Information could possibly take days to reach Derbyshire if it were not sent properly somehow, rendering it possibly useless by the time it reached her. Being so far from London was out of the question, and Elizabeth was as irritated as one could possibly be with her husband for not seeing that.

After over a week of Elizabeth pretending her husband did not exist, Darcy finally went away, just as Elizabeth had told him to do many times. After he left to escort Granny Rose back to Pemberley, Elizabeth moved the household to Netherfield in order to avoid the stench and heat of the city, and to keep Diane and the babes in good health. Netherfield was only four hours removed from London, so Elizabeth felt that she could send and receive information regarding the search for Kitty reasonably quickly from that distance. Georgiana was invited to spend the summer at Windmere with Richard and Mary, and in order to avoid returning to Meryton with Elizabeth, Mrs Bennet went with them, still embarrassed about her separation from her husband, which would be remarked upon by every matron in Meryton if she dared show her face so soon.

Charlotte was aghast at all of the work Elizabeth and Will had done to Longbourn. Elizabeth rationalised to her friend that most of it was work that ought to have been done anyway. Mr Bennet had received fifteen thousand pounds of her mother's dowry, and it was a crime that he had neglected to improve the estate and its income

or to build or acquire a dower house.

Instead, all that had been accomplished was that he had acquired scores of books, and Mrs Bennet had redecorated the public rooms and the mistresses' apartments four times, and not even very well. Elizabeth had put out discreet inquiries and had received a letter from a family who was interested in leasing the house at Longbourn but not the estate, which was perfect for Elizabeth's preferences. The house could be let to a genteel family, and Elizabeth and a steward could work upon the improvements of the farming for the future without interference from the new tenants of the house. With the expansion, renovations, and new bathing chambers, a lease on Longbourn Manor could command a handsome sum indeed.

A steward had finally been found when they learned that Charlotte's brother John Lucas wished to marry Miss Long's younger sister, Miss Edwina Long, but was hesitant to propose due to the lack of space and funds at Lucas Lodge. As the eldest son and heir, he ought to be able to marry and bring his bride home to live with his family, but with two younger brothers and a sister still at home, and space being limited at Lucas Lodge, it was not an ideal situation.

John Lucas was not an experienced steward, but he had lived and farmed in Meryton much of his life, and Elizabeth felt that if he worked with the Netherfield steward and corresponded regularly with the stewards at Windmere and Pemberley, and studied the new farming methods they were employing, that he could learn quickly. He would be able to help his father improve the fields and farming techniques at Lucas Lodge as well, and all of this would help him prepare to be an estate owner in his own right one day. John Lucas was offered the position of steward of Longbourn, and the use of the new dower house to start a family. The proposal to Miss Edwina was made and accepted, and Lady Lucas set to work planning her son's wedding.

Miss Edwina's older sister Miss Long related to Elizabeth that she felt that with Miss Lydia now living away from Meryton, and the fact that Miss Maria Lucas had

obtained from her all of the education that she seemed to have an aptitude for, that she might now look for a more permanent governess position. Maria Lucas had not taken to academic learning, although she did learn enough figuring to run a household. Miss Long had focused instead upon comportment and feminine accomplishments. Maria had learned enough of the pianoforte to distinguish herself, and could continue to improve on her own with diligent practice. She could sing, draw, and embroider reasonably well, and would conduct herself with a degree of credit when she went to London eventually.

Elizabeth told Miss Long that as agreed, she would be glad to provide a positively wonderful reference, but not until Miss Long had spent at least six months, if not longer, as a guest of first Windmere and then later another extended stay at Pemberley if she remained unwed. When Miss Long protested, Elizabeth informed her that she could not in good conscience send a woman of her own home village whom she considered a friend out to take a position, and lose her status as a gentlewoman. Not after all she had done to help Elizabeth's and Charlotte's sisters, without first giving her an opportunity to travel and meet new people, and possibly find a husband.

Elizabeth had already discussed such an idea with her sister Mary, who agreed wholeheartedly. Elizabeth was not planning to visit Pemberley for some time if Kitty was not found, so it was agreed by all that when the Fitzwilliams returned to Windmere after John Lucas's wedding, that Miss Long would accompany them back to Kent for a long visit with an extensive new wardrobe from Elizabeth as a parting gift. Also, in thanks for everything she had done to help Elizabeth's and Charlotte's families, Elizabeth had invested half of her two-thousand-pound dowry to make it grow, making it much more likely a man might be able to afford to propose to her.

Miss Long protested such charity, to which Elizabeth and Mary insisted that there was no such thing as charity amongst friends. The young woman's aunt, Mrs Long, finally shushed her into submission, telling her this was likely the most wonderful

opportunity she was to have in her life, and not to squander it out of pride. Her kindness to the Bennet sisters in their need was being repaid, and there was little point objecting to the matter.

Darcy was away for nearly a month, and when he returned to his family, he nearly wept, he had missed the children and his wife so terribly. Elizabeth had also been missing Will, and had been feeling dreadfully guilty about her harsh words and behaviour toward her husband. They had begun corresponding soon after he had left, and their reunion was tender and joyful.

Darcy spent many hours with Elizabeth and the children to make up for his absence. There had been much work to be done at Pemberley, and he would need to return for the harvest. There had been much disappointment among the staff that Elizabeth and the twins had not accompanied Darcy, for the new heir and his sister had yet to be seen at Pemberley. Elizabeth made no promises, but said she might consider visiting Pemberley briefly for the harvest if Kitty had not been found by then, but that was a possibility she did not even wish to consider just now.

Aunt Josephine had moved permanently with Margaret to Delaford parsonage. Elizabeth objected strenuously, but Darcy reminded her that they had only planned to stay until the two elder girls had married, and now Mrs Dashwood felt that she ought to go live with one of her daughters. The proximity to Pemberley meant that Mr Mason could visit the parsonage at Delaford each week to oversee Margaret's studies.

Darcy had promised them that the following year, Margaret would be invited to visit the family wherever they went for the summer, and for an occasional trip to London, and assured Aunt Josephine that the Darcys would continue to take responsibility for Margaret's education, and later her debut and sponsorship in town. Elizabeth vowed that she would ensure that whenever she was at Pemberley she would be sure to treat

Margaret to a trip to the dressmaker, in order to prevent her mother or new brother from bearing the expense of her wardrobe.

Mrs Spencer had written to Pemberley, inviting Margaret to visit her at the Spencer estate near Plymouth, but Darcy, the Ferrars, and Mrs Dashwood had all agreed that such a proposal was quite out of the question. Marianne had come nowhere close to proving herself mature or responsible enough to ensure her younger sister's safety or reputation. Margaret herself had no desire to go, remembering all too well the long weeks spent waiting for her black eye to subside so she could be seen outside her rooms without engaging the staff in talk.

Darcy said that the Ferrars had shared with him that the letters from Marianne to Elinor were full of complaints. Her new mother-in-law seemed all that was gracious and kind, grateful that this girl provided an opportunity for the family to save their home for herself and her daughters, but the daughters were not fools. They knew that the expected child was not their brother's, and whether it could save them or not, they had no good opinion of Marianne.

Marianne did not help the situation, with her impulsive, childish, and easily offended nature. She objected that Captain Spencer did not wish her to take over as mistress of the estate in her condition, that her mother-in-law continued to run the house, and Marianne felt slighted. For that, Elizabeth could not blame her, even if Marianne were with child, it was still disrespectful in her opinion, but according to the letters that Spencer sent to Darcy and Ferrars, Marianne had so far displayed few endearing qualities that would lead the family or staff to respect her as mistress. He claimed she treated them all as if they ought to be grateful that she was willing to grace them with her presence, and the relation to her child, and his sisters had understandably taken offence to her address.

After John Lucas's wedding, Colonel Brandon visited Netherfield. He had only planned to stop for a day on his return to London after going to Liverpool to follow a lead about Kitty. There was a dock worker there who had heard of the missing girl from his mother who lived in London, and had said that the sketch of the missing girl greatly resembled his own sister. Funny enough, the young gentleman had seen a young woman in Liverpool just about the same time that Kitty had gone missing. He had been shocked, because for a moment he thought he was seeing his own sister, but when he spoke to her the girl made no response, almost as if she were in a daydream. He had then been roughly cuffed on the ear by the Irish manservant of the elderly nobleman accompanying the young woman, and the young lady was accompanied by another who looked like a nurse or companion. The party had boarded a ship, but he could not say or remember where it had been bound.

Colonel Brandon had worn himself down to nothing in the search for Kitty. He looked a shadow of his former self. When he arrived at Netherfield, Elizabeth took one look at him, and immediately declared his horse to be locked away where he could not ride away on it, and for him to go to his apartment and rest immediately. She would not hear of his leaving Netherfield for some weeks, regardless of his objections. There were others who could make the trips for a time at least. Montague had taken up the investigation of noblemen who may have travelled through Liverpool at the time of Kitty's disappearance, but there was no end of houses for lease in Liverpool, and if the party in question had let a house instead of staying in a hotel, it would make the matter a great deal more difficult.

The birth of the heir of Viscount St Claire was announced in the papers, accompanied by the announcement of the death of Viscountess of St Claire in childbirth. The man was still abroad, and Elizabeth certainly hoped that anyone paying attention to the number of months after their weddings that the viscountess or Mrs Spencer's children were born could not count. A week after the announcements in the papers, another appeared announcing the death of the Duke of Leeds. The man had gone to his end never having answered in this life for whatever he had done to Kitty. A letter came

from Plymouth a month later, announcing the birth of Master Andrew Miles Spencer, and the safe delivery of his mother from childbirth. Ground had broken on a modest but genteel dower house, and improvements had been made to increase the income of the Spencer estate.

Darcy and Elizabeth spent as much of their time in the country with their children as they could before leaving Hertfordshire. Diane was now nearly seven years of age, and the twins were over six months. Darcy was never too proper to push his children in their pram in the gardens, or bounce them on his knee, and was a frequent visitor to the nursery, occasionally stealing one of the children away to his study to play or keep him company at his work, much as Elizabeth did. He and Elizabeth both took their children on long hikes in the countryside with the dog, and picnics in the garden, together and occasionally alone with one child singled out for special adventures.

The summer eventually drew to a close, and in September of 1850, the Darcys went to Windmere to see the work on the house at Rosings. They spent the month in Kent, and the work on the manor house was coming along splendidly. Building such a large home often took many years, but the work was being completed very quickly, mostly because unlike many other gentlemen, Richard paid fairly and on time, always, even if he had to make a special trip from London to do so. The house should be ready for the Fitzwilliams to take up residence in a year, perhaps even less, and whenever Mary was in London, she visited her uncle's warehouses for fabrics, wall coverings, and treasures for their new home.

Lady Matlock had made several trips to Matlock, Snowhaven, one of her family estates that had passed to her elder son, and to the Matlock seat in Scotland to search the attics for family heirlooms and portraits to grace her son's new house, considering that all of the heirlooms of Rosings had been lost. Anne had sent a number of pieces and portraits that were heirlooms of the de Bourgh family that she did not wish to

keep in her London or Bath houses, so that there would also be history and relics of the de Bourgh family in the new manor, as was well and proper.

Soon a trip to Chippendales must be made to order furniture. Mary had asked Elizabeth to come with her when she went, quite nervous to furnish such a large house and make such an enormous expenditure all at once. Elizabeth, who was no stranger to spending money, had promised her support and encouragement. The architect's assistant had provided them with sketches and measurements of each room, and they had also compiled sketches and measurements of pieces they already had, and wished to use to compare to new items as they browsed and made their plans.

Miss Long was enjoying her visit to Kent immensely, though she had met no likely suitors. Mary had ensured that the household attended the public assemblies. Sir Jasper had ensured that the shunning of the residents of Windmere Manor ended, and that the Fitzwilliams, the son and daughter of his oldest and dearest friend, were included in the invitations of all the local families.

In October, the Darcy family returned to London, and Georgiana came with them, although she admitted that she thought she might spend more time with the Fitzwilliams in the near future, because she dearly loved the country, as well as the company of Mary and Richard. She found the building and decorating of the new manor quite exciting. Mary mentioned quietly to Elizabeth that there was a handsome young architect's assistant that Georgiana seemed to find quite exciting as well, but that aside from an occasional blush, the girl had kept her head.

Shocking Elizabeth, Mary had invited Mrs Bennet to make her permanent home in the new dower house at Rosings once it was completed and the Fitzwilliams had moved into the manor, and to stay with them in the meantime. Mrs Bennet had enjoyed her time in the city as much as she had been able, considering her worry for Kitty, but she was always happy in a country society, and the matrons of Hunsford

and Kent had been kind and welcoming. Elizabeth gifted her with a small carriage that was kept at Windmere for her convenience when paying calls.

Lydia remained with Elizabeth, having taken charge of Diane's education again, and spent nearly all of her time with the children. Georgiana tried desperately to interest Lydia in anything, museums, musicales, the theatre, shopping, but like Elizabeth, Lydia could enjoy nothing while Kitty's fate was unknown. She did attend to her studies, having begun to learn Italian, but she did so soberly and quietly. The house ought to have been filled with giggles with Lydia in residence, but instead the halls around her rooms were largely quiet. She had fiercely refused to prepare to come out in the upcoming season, saying that she did not feel ready at only eighteen, and that next year was time enough.

Elizabeth, however, felt guilty because she had made promises to Maria to come out with Lydia, and felt it was unfair to make her wait. Charlotte had told Elizabeth not to worry over it, but Mary had the solution. Maria was invited to stay with the Fitzwilliams at Darcy House when the couple came to town before the holidays. A wardrobe would be ordered at Elizabeth's expense, as promised.

Lady Lucas would present Maria and then return to Hertfordshire, leaving Mary and Richard to escort her and Georgiana to as many events as they were able, making it possible for the girl to enjoy her debut without waiting until she was nineteen. Lady Matlock had offered to escort the girls as well, and Charlotte would, of course, accompany her sister to whatever events she attended. Miss Long's invitation to stay with the Fitzwilliams was extended until the Darcys returned to Pemberley, and though Miss Long objected at first, at length she agreed to accompany the family to London.

Charlotte was as happy as one could be in a house where everyone had been worrying

about Kitty for months. Elizabeth had always been her dearest friend, and now that they were cousins, she felt blessed to spend so much time in the company of her dear friend and to accept her support, while offering whatever support she could provide to Elizabeth in return. Charlotte had enjoyed the previous season in London tremendously, as well as spending time in society with Elizabeth's family and friends, who had quickly become Charlotte's friends as well.

A number of mature gentlemen had called upon her in London, looking to see to their comfort in their advancing years, and also a few gentlemen in their mid to late thirties and forties, mostly widowers looking for someone to mother their children, but she gave encouragement to none of them. Charlotte did not think she would ever remarry. Her experience with Mr Collins had not been pleasant, despite her best efforts. The man had, from the moment they wed, done his best to please her and gain her approbation, but even with tactful instruction, his hygiene, manners, and intimate advances had nearly been too much for her to bear.

Charlotte would not, could never, be grateful for his demise, he had done his best, had tried to be a good husband, and deserved better than that. But being good at anything other than grovelling to the wrong people had been quite beyond Mr Collins' abilities. Elizabeth had been quite right as her oldest friend to caution her and to try to make her reconsider before her marriage. Elizabeth had been married, and though both of her experiences had been pleasant, she was all too aware of everything that could go wrong, and what was at stake. She had known before Charlotte learned, to her great chagrin, that the cost of her security had been too high.

Now Charlotte was secure, very comfortably so. It had been highly practical of Elizabeth to invite Charlotte to live with her. They were close in age, the dearest of friends, both with small children and in need of support and friendship. Charlotte had gained safety and comfort in which to raise her son among superior society, while Elizabeth had the company and encouragement of her oldest friend, as well as assistance with certain aspects of household management and the young ladies, while

she was attending her business and the search for Kitty.

Charlotte's family was benefiting from the arrangement as well. Maria was no longer silly and wild, but a refined and respectable girl who would benefit from the Darcy's and Fitzwilliam's sponsorship in London. Her brother John had been able to marry for love, and live in his own neighbourhood, while learning estate management. He was making plans to improve Lucas Lodge's crops as well as Longbourn's, making things easier financially for Sir and Lady Lucas. Sir William had approached Elizabeth immediately after Mr Collins' death with a request, and she had assisted him in investing Maria's dowry, and a sum of money to provide for the education and advancement of the younger Lucas sons, since she was already investing the funds that had been settled upon Charlotte.

Maria's portion had grown from seven hundred pounds to just over two thousand. The boys' portion had grown from one thousand pounds to twenty-five hundred each, and Charlotte's nine thousand pounds had grown to thirteen thousand, five hundred. John had assured Charlotte that Elizabeth had promised him that he and his wife could remain at the dower house at Longbourn until Charlotte's son took over the place and married, when she expected Charlotte would then want it. He invited his sister to come with her boy and live with he and Edwina anytime, and for as long as she wished, because as he said, "If he's going to inherit Longbourn, the boy ought to grow up here. He ought to learn his land from boyhood, living in his uncle, the steward's house."

Charlotte agreed with him, but since the child was only a year old, she felt they had a number of years before she might consider settling down in Meryton. Not before William was five or six, in any case.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:14 pm

Eventually the trip to Pemberley was made for the harvest. Colonel Brandon volunteered to stay in London for the duration in order to pursue any likely leads as quickly as possible. Darcy and Mr Ferrars had promised to be of assistance to his steward if help was required with Delaford's harvest. Elizabeth for once had little to do. Mrs Hayes had the household well in hand, and Darcy encouraged Elizabeth to leave it at that for now, and finally get a rest rather than attempt to resume too many of her duties. She visited the tenants, and spent time in her stables, which were thriving in spite of her neglect. Many foals had been born, and training had begun on the older colts. There had been a number of applications from noblemen and men of importance who wished to buy horses from her. She corresponded with several who sounded likely, and sent a groom who understood her standards to tour the stables of the applicants before she made the decision to sell any of her mounts.

The Merriweather sisters had been hard at work on her quilts, and had sent enough to gift each servant and tenant box of Netherfield a quilt for their bed at Christmas. Elizabeth had placed another large order of quilts for Windmere and the servants at Pemberley House and Darcy House in London. Mrs Pottinger had related to Elizabeth that the extra work had allowed the ladies to put something by for emergencies and the like, and that their comfort of living had been much improved. Not only that, but they had been able to hire two girls to help them with the housework and the quilting, helping them and their mother who was a widow with many children who lived in the village.

Elizabeth had arranged the previous year with Mr Ripley, the steward at Pemberley, that enough firewood and coal for the winter would be delivered to the sisters each year, and that a manservant from Pemberley looked in once a week to ensure they needed no help in the way of masculine assistance around their house. This year,

Elizabeth requested that Mr Ripley do so with the widow in the village as well, and that she be added to those to whom a basket was delivered from Pemberley each month.

Elizabeth had no excuse not to socialise in Derbyshire. Her work was minimal at this time, having left much in Montague's hands for the duration of their trip north, and the same went for the search for Kitty. As time passed, tips and leads were coming fewer and farther between, and they had begun to run out of places to look. But while Elizabeth was at Pemberley, she had little to do, and so for once, Elizabeth finally rested. She accepted calls from the ladies nearby, spent time with Granny Rose, whom they had all missed, hosted The Ferrars and Dashwoods for dinner, nursed her babes, and she planned a modest harvest festival for the tenants. Apart from that, Elizabeth did little but ride her horses, and sleep. She was exhausted. Exhausted from nursing, exhausted from working, searching, worrying. Exhausted from too many late nights and early mornings.

During one of her visits to the tenants, Elizabeth was enjoying tea with Mrs Vaughan when her eleven-year-old son Freddie came into the kitchen with a sheet of paper and said, "Mama, might I give my drawing to Lady Darcy?"

"Now Freddie, you know what your Pa said! Enough with this nonsense and be away with you! It's indecent, it is!" answered Mrs Vaughan quickly, seeming embarrassed.

"Now I simply must know what the drawing is," interrupted Elizabeth curiously. "I shall lose sleep wondering about it otherwise. Surely, Mrs Vaughan, there is nothing your fine boy could draw that might upset me so. May I see it?"

"It's just a bit of nonsense, it is, your ladyship," the boy's mother said nervously. "The boy took an eye to the lovely colour of your gown the last time you was here,

and he drew a picture of another gown he had an idea about. His father is in a right state about it. He'll be in a right state all over again, when he knows Freddie has disobeyed him."

Elizabeth took the drawing kindly, and was impressed by what she saw. It was a picture of herself, in black and white, as she presumed the boy would have no way to colour in his drawings with watercolours and pastels. In it she was wearing an everyday afternoon dress, appropriate for visiting or even acceptable for an afternoon being seen shopping in London. But the style of the gown, the cut and fall of the cloth were something completely new, and, she had to admit to herself, quite attractive. "Did you see a gown like this on another lady, Freddie? It is quite an attractive garment."

"No, your ladyship. It was when you came last time in your pretty blue gown that I thought of something like this. I do not have the colours to finish it, but I imagined it a lovely light green, ma'am. I thought it might look very nice on you ma'am, and I just had to draw it and show it to you," the boy answered as his mother's cheeks flamed in embarrassment at her son's untraditional exchange with the mistress of the estate.

Elizabeth contemplated for a moment what she might say to the boy. "Well, Freddie, I must encourage you to heed and honour your parents whenever possible, but I have enjoyed seeing this very much. Do you have any others?" Elizabeth chatted with Mrs Vaughan and did her best to put the mother at ease while Freddie left the room and returned with two more drawings of Elizabeth, both in stunningly creative and attractive gowns, and two each of his mother, and his older and younger sisters, each in far simpler gowns, more in line with the family's standing, but in an obviously fashionable and sophisticated cut. The dresses and trimmings were very pretty, and Elizabeth complimented Freddie on his talent and imagination.

"Well, me mum and me sisters Ester and Nellie are the prettiest ladies in Derbyshire,

besides yourself that is, ma'am. I wish I could make 'em all a dress, the prettiest dresses you ever saw, but I do not know how or how to afford the fabric, your ladyship. But I can draw 'em something real nice and they can imagine 'emselves in it," Freddie confided to Elizabeth.

"Oooh Freddie, Pa is going to thrash you silly when he finds out you disobeyed him!" cried fifteen-year-old Ester who had just entered the house. "You won't be able to sit for a week, you won't!"

"I hope Mr Vaughan will not find that necessary when Mrs Vaughan tells him how delighted I am with the drawings and that I hope dear young Freddie will not be punished. Freddie, may I borrow these? Including the ones of your mother and sisters? I realise that they must be treasured keepsakes for your mother and sisters, but I promise you will get them back."

"You may keep 'em, your ladyship," answered Freddie eagerly. "I drew many of those." Elizabeth took her leave of the family and Mrs Vaughan assured her that Mr Vaughan would be angry with Freddie, but that she could fend off any thrashings.

The very next afternoon, however, Elizabeth received a summons to Darcy's study, where he was waiting with Mr and Mrs Vaughan. "My darling, I have just been speaking to Mr and Mrs Vaughan and I thought perhaps you could ease any concerns Mr Vaughan has about the drawings you lately accepted from his son Freddie."

"Begging your pardon, your ladyship, but I wanted to take the drawings back if I may," began Mr Vaughan. "The last thing I need is the story making its way about the county, that my boy is... Well, that he's drawing pictures of dresses. We have the family name to consider."

"Unfortunately, I cannot return the drawings to you, Mr Vaughan, because I no longer have them. I sent them to my modiste in London by express this morning."

When the gentleman began to look panicked, Elizabeth spoke again. “My London modiste is a designer of the highest calibre, producing gowns of elegance and importance to be worn only to the most sought-after events in London. It is only I and a select few of my family for whom she will make entire wardrobes, because I am the one who put her into business.

“Although she does not have the time or ability to cater to ladies for everyday wear, she believes in well made, fashionable garments for ladies of all stations, from daily wear to evening attire. To this end, she had me put her into contact with a publisher last year, who produces her designs of everyday wear for ladies of all stations into fashion plates that have become wildly popular with all ranks of society and have garnered her quite a bit of wealth. Mr and Mrs Vaughan, the few drawings that I have seen of your son’s talent are remarkable. I have sent the ones he made of me to her in the hopes that she can create the gowns he imagined, as I thought it would be a treat for him to see me wearing them, and I sent the ones he drew of your wife and daughters, to learn if she is interested in publishing them as part of her collection. If she does, there may be some money for Freddie.”

“But a boy, your ladyship! Our family will be a laughingstock!” exclaimed Mr Vaughan. “It is all well and good for there to be a bit of money for Freddie, but what about the family’s reputation?”

“Your reputation will be perfectly safe,” Elizabeth assured them. “Freddie’s identity will be protected, of course. If Madame Clarisse publishes the drawings, then they will be credited as Madame Clarisse’s Collection, featuring F. Vaughan. No one in the world would expect F. Vaughan to be an eleven-year-old son of a tenant farmer from Derbyshire, even if someone from the village gets hold of one, as long as Freddie and your family are discreet. And if she asks for more, it could be a very good way for Freddie to earn something, help his family, and set aside something for his own future. You have three sons, and Freddie is your youngest boy. Your farm cannot provide for all of them and their families when you pass on. Some of them

must make their own way, and it will be to all of their best interests if they may pursue trades that they are passionate about.”

“But is it not it unseemly, Lady Darcy? Shouldn’t we be concerned he might develop unnatural urges if he were to do something like this? We thought he would go into service,” said Mrs Vaughan in a near whisper.

“Mrs Vaughan, I can assure you that if Freddie were to have the urges you describe, that it would not matter what activities or trades you might forbid him from. He is going to be who he is no matter what he draws or does not draw; whether he designs clothes or works in the stables. But to put your mind at ease, may I ask, have you heard of Charles Frederick Worth?” When the couple shook their heads, Elizabeth continued. “The man was born in Lincolnshire, and has opened a design house in Paris. English ladies travel to the continent to purchase his designs. Imagine that! An Englishman, a world-famous designer, so famous that ladies travel from all over Europe to visit his design house, House of Worth [?] .

“To my knowledge, Mr Worth is happily married, and has two sons. I hope that answers your questions about whether your son can follow his interests, and still be a respectable Englishman in the eyes of society. I spoke to the school master on my way home yesterday, and he says that Freddie is intelligent, can read and write, and has a firm grasp of mathematics. He is obviously an intelligent boy. It would be a shame to force him into service if he has an aptitude for something better. There are going to be fewer opportunities in service as he gets older. With so many new industries taking hold in England just now, the boy ought to learn a proper trade and skill.”

Mr Vaughan fidgeted nervously. “I will take your word, Lady Darcy, that you will protect Freddie’s identity in the village. I will not force him into service against your advice, if anything comes of this. Everyone on the estate says you are very wise, and that you are an intelligent businesswoman, and that your advice is always good. It

must be, or the master would never have married you otherwise. But what must he do next?"

"Not very much, until we hear from my modiste, although I would like to send you home with some colouring pastels," replied Elizabeth easily, glad that Mr Vaughan had not been difficult to convince. "I visited Lady Georgiana's art room yesterday, and she donated a set of pastels she doesn't enjoy working with as well as some supplies for water colouring and drawing materials. I was planning to bring them and visit you again very soon. You should allow him to colour in the existing drawings he has, and draw new ones as much as he likes for now. Perhaps my modiste will wish to make him an offer, and so he should have something else ready to send. I shall also send a quantity of paper. Perhaps we might find him an apprenticeship in textiles in a year or two. Perhaps he will lose interest in drawing and begin to admire horses, or blacksmithing, or candle making. He is still a young boy. Do not worry too much about his future yet."

The Vaughans agreed to wait and see what would happen. They told Freddie nothing other than to colour in some of his other drawings, and to draw as many new ones as he liked. His parents also passed on Georgiana's warning to him that he ought to practise with the pastels and watercolours, before attempting to use them on any drawings he prized. Elizabeth was planning a special surprise for Freddie and his family. In addition to stopping at the schoolhouse the day before, she had also stopped at the cottage of Mrs Fletcher, an older widow who was talented with a needle, and supplemented her income assisting the estate wives with their dresses.

Most farm wives could make their own everyday garments, but not every family could afford finer Sunday wear from the dressmaker or tailor in Lambton. Mrs Fletcher and several housewives on Pemberley's estate had arrangements that suited everyone. She was often paid in eggs, chickens, vegetables, or honey, but she had attired enough of the tenants and their wives to be well looked after by her neighbours. Elizabeth informed Mrs Fletcher that she was attempting a surprise for

Mrs Vaughan and her daughters and wondered if Mrs Fletcher could provide the Vaughan ladies' measurements. Elizabeth paid her handsomely for the information, and then to soothe the woman's ruffled feathers over not being selected for the job, Elizabeth asked her to make new Sunday attire for all of the men in the Vaughan family, in just slightly better quality than they might normally afford, and then send it up to the manor. Elizabeth had then included the Vaughan ladies' measurements with the drawings, and sent them to Madame Clarisse first thing in the morning.

Lydia had been kind enough to exercise Artemis often in London, claiming it gave her the opportunity to improve her seat and riding skills. Elizabeth rode as often as she could, but she found herself distracted by a missive on the hall table as often as she actually made it out and onto her horse. She felt guilty, because Artemis needed exercise. While in Derbyshire, Elizabeth strove to wake early each day, when her nighttime activities with Will did not make it impossible, and to ride the estate extensively, still followed by Miss Carmichael and a groom. Sometimes Will was able to join her, but more often he was obliged to see to the harvest. Otherwise, when Elizabeth was not riding or taking calls from the ladies of the neighbourhood, she was often sleeping, for she was still melancholy about Kitty's situation.

At first Will and also Charlotte and Granny Rose thought she might be with child again, but Elizabeth assured them this was not the case. She was, simply put. So, so, tired. She slept for hours in the middle of the day sometimes, and Will was astounded at how much his wife had been carrying, and the toll it had taken upon her. Elizabeth had begun slowly weaning the twins, and it would be a few more months before they were completely weaned, but she felt that she would have more energy when the nursing was done. The twins were healthy, and adored by their parents, and all at Pemberley. Richard was much like his father, stoic and observant. Anne was much more vocal about her preferences, making her demands known and charming the servants and all about her with her winning smile and bright new tooth. Both had the

shape of their mother's eyes, and the piercing blue of their father's along with a mop of thick, dark curls. When she was resting, Elizabeth kept them with her in the afternoons, while her mornings were often spent with Diane and Beau.

Mr Mason had quizzed Diane's knowledge when they had arrived. He assured Elizabeth that Lydia and Georgiana were doing a marvellous job with the lesson plans he sent for the girl, and that her education was surprisingly advanced for a girl child, and one so young at that. Darcy had begun riding lessons on her new pony, who had been named Her Royal Highness, Princess Buttercup.

A trunk arrived three weeks after her express to Madame Clarisse. Elizabeth had no idea how she had done it so quickly, but all of the gowns were finished. The lovely light green one and the two others Freddie had drawn for her, and two extremely pretty frocks each for his mother and his two sisters, as well as proofs for fashion plates for the new styles. Elizabeth sent a note to Mrs Fletcher inquiring about the attire for the men, and the footman returned with the packages in hand, stating that the widow had just completed the last set of clothes. Elizabeth sent another note asking Mr and Mrs Vaughan and Freddie to be available for a visit the following afternoon. Elizabeth, in her new green gown, climbed into her buggy, with the trunk tied to the back, and with Darcy and Wilson escorting her on horseback, travelled to the Vaughans' tenant cottage.

The Vaughans' two elder sons were working the farm when they arrived, but Freddie Vaughan capered about and clapped his hands with glee when Darcy handed Elizabeth down in her stylish new green dress. As Darcy and Wilson took the trunk down from the carriage, Elizabeth followed the family into the house. Freddie's sisters were inside. "Now, Freddie. Seeing myself in the wonderful gown you designed was a surprise for you, but I also have a surprise for the rest of your family. Freddie told me that he believes his mother and sisters to be the prettiest ladies in the county—" at which point Freddie quite improperly interrupted to say, "ceptin' you, Lady Darcy!" –which drew a smile from the mistress who continued, "and he would

make them the loveliest dresses if only he knew how, but he did not, nor could he afford the fabric. But in gratitude for the lovely designs you created for me, Freddie, I have had the dresses for your mother and sisters made up as well.”

A noise such as had never been heard in the cottage went up as the Vaughan females opened the trunk and exclaimed over the lovely gowns. Eight-year-old Nellie was quite overcome by the ruffles on her new pink frock and threw her arms about her brother, sobbing. “But Lady Darcy, however did you get our measurements?” asked Mrs Vaughan, smiling beautifully as her two daughters ran up the stairs to try them on.

“I had to bribe Mrs Fletcher for them, and getting them from her without telling her why was difficult, let me tell you.” Smiled Elizabeth back. She then handed over four packages wrapped in brown paper, “Now three such well-dressed ladies cannot be escorted to church by just anyone tomorrow, so these garments for the gentlemen were made by Mrs Fletcher, as a way of soothing her feathers over not being commissioned for the dresses.”

“Mrs Darcy, we cannot accept such a gift,” objected Mr Fletcher.

“It is not a gift from me. It is a gift from dear Freddie. The ladies’ dresses were a gift from me to Freddie in thanks for designing my three favourite new gowns. He may give them to his mother and sisters as he pleases. The gentlemen’s garments were paid for from the money Freddie earned from Madame Clarisse, for I knew he would not wish to forget any of his family.”

“He’s been paid money?” exclaimed his mother in surprise as Elizabeth laid the funds on the table. “But there is nearly two pounds here!”

“That is nearly half of what Freddie earned from his drawings,” she explained, showing them some fashion plates. “Madame Clarisse has published them as part of

her fashion plate collection. If they sell very well, he will earn a little more from them later. I must say that Madame Clarisse had not before made fashion plates for children. She asks that Freddie send as many as he can, and she has sent a trunk full of fashion plates for him to peruse for inspiration. I have placed half of what he earned into an account for Freddie, and will continue to do so with half of what he earns in the future. That will give him something to start a business or begin a career when he is ready. The rest is for your family to use now. Freddie, please put together all of the drawings that you have that you deem good enough to send, and I will arrange for Wilson here to take them into London on his next journey. He will be coming to collect whatever you have to send, and bringing you your payments when Madame Clarisse sends them. You can rely upon his discretion. I trust Mr Wilson with my business affairs.”

“Mr Vaughan, look at this fashion plate! How sophisticated! The Madame Clarisse Everyday Lady Collection, featuring the designs of F. Vaughan! How well that looks!” Mrs Vaughan crowed, unable to help herself in her delight.

“It’ll look even better locked away in a drawer somewhere that your gossip friends won’t see fashion plates by F. Vaughan all about the house, Wife! Go put the things away somewhere!” Mr Vaughan chuckled as his wife scooped up the papers in her arms and rushed up the stairs after her daughters. “I thank you, Lord and Lady Darcy. To be honest, I did not know what to do about the boy and his strange interests. Frightened me, it did. Glad I am to have such advice as yours. The older boys will be right grateful for the new clothes, ma’am. Twas time we all had summat new made up. The boy was right. My Peg and the girls deserved something new and fine. We had summat put by for new clothes, but now we can go into the village and have good boots made for the family. Perhaps even some dancing slippers for Peg and Ester, for when we go to the assembly. Does me good to see ‘em so happy, and puts my mind at rest that you’ve taken an interest in Freddie, and will help to see his ideas land him in the right place. Cannot thank you enough, sir, ma’am.” The Darcys said their goodbyes and promised to see the family the following day at church.

See them the next day at church they did, and Freddie stood much taller than usual next to his father, and when he escorted his younger sister Nellie out of the church, taking her arm as she picked her way home, taking care not to soil the precious new dress with the ruffles she prized. Later in the week a locked box of more than twenty-five drawings was delivered at the back door to Wilson. Elizabeth looked through them, and thought that Freddie Vaughan had a very good chance indeed at having quite a few of them published. She wrote a note to Madame Clarisse to make up two more of the gowns for her.

Eventually the visit to Pemberley came to an end. Elizabeth and Darcy had argued bitterly about it, but to London they returned. Darcy wished to stay in Derbyshire for the holidays, but Elizabeth insisted that had not been their agreement, he had promised it was only for the harvest. She insisted that it was unfair to agree to a visit of a certain length, and then try to change it once they had arrived. Elizabeth had rested as much as she could, attended her duties at Pemberley with Charlotte's and Granny's help, and had even planned a modest harvest festival. She had made an effort, for him and for Pemberley, but she had reached her limit for now. Now she wished to return to town to continue the search for Kitty.

When Will argued with her, she burst into tears, and declared that she was sure Kitty would dearly love to spend the holidays at Pemberley as well, and it was a shame no one could find her to make it possible, and that Elizabeth would not give up on her! She pointed out that if it had been Georgiana who had disappeared, that she doubted Darcy would be so sanguine about returning to everyday life. She had then stormed out of the room and Darcy's valet, Mr Watson, had discreetly informed Darcy the next morning that his wife was proceeding with the arrangements to return to London as planned.

Darcy had to acknowledge that Elizabeth was correct. If Georgiana had disappeared,

there would be no Christmas, there would be no travel or socialising, or harvest festivals. Nothing would interest him until he found her. Elizabeth had been remarkably considerate, considering the circumstances. It had been a year, but he knew it was too soon to expect Elizabeth to give up. He apologised tenderly to his wife, and resigned himself to returning to town with her.

Their return south followed its usual pattern. They spent some time at Netherfield, and then returned to London. They stayed slightly longer at Netherfield than their usual visit at this time of year, because they had promised to return to Windmere with the Fitzwilliams for Christmas once the ladies had ordered their wardrobes. The twins' first birthday was celebrated in London, and Elizabeth had a lovely luncheon for all of their family. With the trouble with Kitty, Elizabeth had fallen sadly out of communication with her aunts, uncles and cousins, and it was pleasant to spend the day with her relations and Will's. The twins were the centre of the occasion as they ought to be, and their family rejoiced in having something happy to celebrate.

Maria and Georgiana got on very well, and Charlotte's younger sister was invited to go with the family to visit Windmere for the festive season. Mary had done a lovely job decorating the house for Christmastide, and Mrs Bennet was immensely pleased to see them all and hear their news. Elizabeth had taken a mountain of work and investigative material with her to Windmere, and did her best to behave cheerfully during the festivities. Mrs Bennet, elated at the presence of the twins and the children, was much gayer than the year before. Lydia was still a quiet shadow of her former self, and devoted her time to keeping the children amused and happy. She spent much time in the corner of Elizabeth's study, quietly reading or studying French, Italian, history, or books on fashion and home decorating while Elizabeth worked on her business and the investigation for Kitty.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:14 pm

For Nancy Corrigan and her mistress, weeks and months passed quietly without anything worth remarking about. Corrigan continued lessons on the piano and harp, only learning a few light tunes so far, but slowly increasing a small, peaceful repertoire she could play for her mistress as she worked in her art room. Her ladyship did little besides draw and read. Without a master to instruct her, there was no point in practicing the harp. The scenery beyond the windows tempted her only occasionally, when the colours were too vivid and arresting to resist. Mostly she sketched and drew her family. She would not voice names to the people in the portraits, but she drew the same faces over and over, nearly all very beautiful ladies, and a few children. Nancy questioned her about it once, and the young woman only said that she feared that she might forget them as they had her, and so she drew them over and over, that their faces might be etched upon her memory forever.

One subject was drawn far more than all the others combined. A handsome gentleman, far over a decade older than her ladyship if a day, with dark and handsome, brooding, yet compassionate eyes. Somehow, Corrigan knew this was no mere brother or cousin. When his lordship set eyes upon a series of sketches of the man displayed about the room, his lips had thinned unhappily. It was obvious to him what he had helped to steal from this girl, and he disliked the reminder. After this, he visited the art room much less frequently, preferring to dine with his young wife twice a week instead.

Her ladyship continued to take her exercise in the walled butterfly garden when the weather permitted. She turned her interest to gardening, for lack of any other outdoor employment, and often worked in the soil and transplanted flowers, the gardener patiently advising her, and producing seeds or flowering plants that her husband had provided upon her request. Upon learning that her husband had built the garden to

lure butterflies in for a collection he had pinned upon a wall, she had become quite inconsolable, and had refused to return to the garden again until he visited her rooms and swore to leave them in peace. The young lady spent hours in the walled garden whenever she was able, sketching butterflies or flowers, and pacing briskly up and down the paths.

These few pleasures were her only amusement, but she had accepted her lot and had ceased writing to her sisters. Instead, she had begun to write fairy stories, and stories for children. She confided to Corrigan that she had been quite the favourite with her younger cousins and niece when visiting Derbyshire and London, for her talent for telling riveting stories. She wrote all sorts, pirate sword fights, expeditions to Africa, cowboys and indians in America, princesses, fairies, dragons, and magic cities. She said that she had to make up all kinds of adventures, in order to be fair to the interests of each of her young cousins and her niece. She wrote and illustrated many stories, then patiently sewed the pages together to make little books, which his lordship found charming, and later he had them professionally bound as a gift to her.

When the Darcy family removed to London, life continued on much as it had the previous year. Mary brought out Maria Lucas and escorted Miss Long in London, as planned. There were only a few events to note that year, the first of which concerned the trouble with Marianne. The Ferrars and Mrs Dashwood had visited Marianne at Rushworth, the Spencer estate near Plymouth. Margaret had steadfastly refused to attend the visit, and had subsequently gone to Pemberley to visit Granny Rose. Upon their return, the party detoured to London, where they stayed at Pemberley House, and Elinor and Edward confided in Elizabeth.

“The situation at Rushworth is quite unhappy indeed. Everyone in the situation got what they wanted out of the arrangement, and yet the entire household is miserable except for Mr Spencer and his mother. Spencer’s sisters treat Marianne like a fallen

woman. Marianne snubs all of the Spencer women and acts like they ought to be grateful to her for providing them a measure of security. She is not allowed to walk alone, thank heavens, but she is quite angry about the fact. She is accompanied by a hearty and energetic maid who has seven brothers, and followed by two grooms on horseback, which makes it impossible to outrun her escorts, and this causes her to behave atrociously,” related Elinor.

“Spencer doesn’t help the matter either. I admit she gives him no reason for confidence, but that is no reason not to give the girl a chance to be mistress of her own home,” continued Edward. “Before, he claimed he did not wish her to tax herself while pregnant, but her child is several months old, and the elder Mrs Spencer is still running the household. Spencer claims she lost the respect of the servants before she had it, but I believe that if she had more responsibility, it would force her to mature. If her servants will not learn to respect her as she learns her duties, then they should be replaced. I saw nothing to suggest that he ever had any intention of setting Marianne up as the proper mistress of his estate. It appears he plans to allow his mother to continue indefinitely as lady of the manor, and, in addition, he appears to have little interest in the child he claimed he would raise as his own. Even when the child was in the drawing room with our entire party, Spencer barely spared the boy a glance.”

“Not that the elder Mrs Spencer seems any way unkind,” Elinor rushed to add. “Indeed, it seems that she is the one who is most kind to Marianne, not that my sister receives it well. But when Marianne gives an order, the servants ignore her. It is worse than if she was just not the mistress of the house. It is as if she does not exist at all. Marianne ordered tea for us one afternoon when we were conversing in a private parlour, and it never came. Eventually Marianne had to go to Mrs Spencer and ask her to order it. I realise Marianne’s behaviour has been beyond the pale, but my poor sister was quite mortified. I could not discern if the servants ignore her out of disrespect, or by Mrs Spencer’s design.”

Elizabeth and Darcy were both troubled by this news, and when the Ferrars had returned to Derbyshire, Elizabeth asked Richard to write to Captain Spencer. Darcy would have done it, but Richard knew Spencer well, and might be a better choice for a direct conversation.

Darcy House,

Mayfair, London

Spencer,

What the devil is going on there at Rushworth? Lord and Lady Darcy expect me to sort this out, considering it was I who promoted you for this arrangement.

I understand the girl is impulsive and often uncivil, but you knew this from the very beginning, and from my own lips. We would never have allowed you to wed her if we knew your family meant to use her child to your benefit, and then treat her as a fallen woman. Lady Darcy wishes me to inform you that she does not consider your disrespect in allowing your mother precedence over your wife to be cruelty as per the terms of the settlement, but she does consider it to be inconsiderate, disrespectful, and believes it will never encourage your household to respect the new Mrs Spencer.

Lady Darcy suggests that if Mrs Spencer began slowly learning the household and taking it over as is appropriate, she would have some useful employment, and might hopefully settle into her new position. You cannot expect a woman to settle into a position another woman is still occupying. Any servants who cannot learn to respect their new mistress ought to be replaced. You selected Mrs Spencer for your bride. It is unfair of you to allow your family to treat her as a fallen woman now. My wife's cousin reports that your servants ignore your wife entirely, even refusing to bring their party tea in the drawing room until Mrs Spencer asked your mother's permission for it. What disrespect is this, man? How can you allow this in your house?

Please take your household in hand, if only to spare Darcy and I the recriminations of our wives, who are concerned for their cousin.

Respectfully,

Fitzwilliam

As summer approached in May of 1851, Elizabeth and Darcy were invited to Caroline Bingley's wedding. Darcy was rather alarmed, because he had been left the management of Miss Bingley's dowry and he had not been applied to in order to approve the marriage settlement. Darcy and Elizabeth visited Mr and Mr Hurst's townhouse, and learned that Miss Bingley had met the Earl Whitman in Bath, and that the nobleman seemed extremely taken with Caroline.

Elizabeth ordered a report from Montague on the man, but Darcy already knew that he had a terrible reputation for gambling away shockingly large sums in mere moments, and that he was in deep trouble financially. Darcy spent an hour closeted with Hurst discussing the matter, and then Darcy and Hurst made an attempt to show Caroline the evidence that her betrothed was not only a fortune hunter, but also an absolutely appallingly bad gambler who could and likely would lose her entire fortune in less than a night. He was known to already owe more than her dowry already. They tried everything they could think of. Darcy even promising to ask his aunt to sponsor her for a season in London. He made it clear that someone had to release her dowry, and that Darcy was the only one here to do it and he did not approve. He had attempted to call upon Whitman himself only to be turned away at the door.

Caroline insisted that she would marry Lord Whitman, and that surely when he returned, her brother would turn over her dowry when he saw she was happy. She steadfastly refused to listen to all of Darcy's and the Hurst's pleas. Darcy, who had not heard from Charles for some time, sent an express to Italy, where they had last

been known to be, telling him that there was no point hurrying home, the letter would not reach them in time, but he was just informing Bingley that his sister was heedlessly marrying a fortune hunter, and Darcy could do nothing but withhold her dowry until Charles returned and decided how he wanted to manage it.

The Darcys attended Caroline's wedding, and the bride was wearing an appalling gown in a putrid shade of orange that Elizabeth had never seen before on a piece of fabric. The groom's terms had been no fuss and no wedding breakfast. For Caroline, who was becoming a countess, and a June bride in Mayfair, a large, elaborate affair was something she was willing to compromise on. She did want a large wedding, but she wanted to be a countess more. As Caroline was being handed up into the carriage immediately following the ceremony, Lord Whitman said to Darcy, "I shall call upon you tomorrow to discuss the dowry, Darcy."

Shortly after, Darcy said to Elizabeth in their own carriage, "I do not know what it is that he believes he's calling about. If he had taken my calls before the wedding, he would know that due to his refusal to sign a marriage settlement before the ceremony, I have to withhold the dowry. I must so do now, until Charles returns and decides what to do about his sister's decision. She has made a very unhappy bed for herself, I think it would be safe to wager, although I take no satisfaction in saying so."

Lord Whitman called the next day and was incredibly irate when he learned that Caroline's dowry was not freely hers, but in trust, and that by marrying her with no settlement meant he had forfeited it unless the trustee approved it. Usually, things went the other way when there was no settlement, but Bingley had protected his sister's interests well. Darcy could have made the funds available to Whitman if he had signed the proper marriage settlement laid down by Charles and Caroline's father, but only if he had done so before the wedding. Because he had refused to sign it before the marriage, he had to wait for the trustee to make himself available to approve it. The last they had heard, Charles had been in Italy, and pondering his next destination. The Bingleys were certainly not on their way home anytime soon.

When Lord Whitman realised that Darcy could not change the outcome of the situation even if he wished to, he stormed out of the house, telling Darcy that he could inform Lady Whitman's family that they could see and hear from her again once he was paid. The Whitmans left London and rented out their house. No one noticed them go, indeed they seemed to disappear into the night. The Darcys had Mr Montague send someone to find out where they were going, and keep an eye on the area they were staying in. Montague's men sent word that the couple had gone to the country estate of a friend of Whitman's.

The friend was Viscount Compton, who kept an estate not far from Hempstead and was rumoured to hold nearly forty thousand in Whitman's vowels. As was typical, the very servants that needed to be bribed, would not be bribed, though the investigator suggested these servants seemed more afraid than loyal. Viscount Compton had a terrible reputation in the ton, and lived a scandalous, debauched life. The only information that could be obtained was that Lord and Lady Whitman were in residence, and the master was not entertaining. The servants would not reveal more. Elizabeth and Darcy kept men in the village near Compton's estate, who would send information as it became available.

Louisa Hurst took to calling on the Darcys to find out if more was known daily, though they promised to inform her and Mr Hurst the moment anything was learned. Word had come a week or so after they had left town that Lord Whitman and Viscount Compton had left the country, and were back in the clubs and gaming hells of London. Intelligence from the investigators indicated that Caroline had not accompanied them. Louisa was distressed indeed, for weeks passed without word from her sister, and she pleaded with Hurst to travel to Hempstead. However, Viscount Compton's ruthless reputation was well known, and Hurst was loath to present himself on the man's doorstep without invitation and make matters worse. The Darcys had planned to go to Netherfield for the summer, but they waited in town

with the Hursts this year instead, as they waited for news of Caroline.

Some weeks later, a hysterical letter from Charles arrived from Italy explaining that Jane was with child, and that it would be some months before they began the journey home, but that he was quite concerned regarding the content of some letters he had received all in a packet with Darcy's from the last hotel they had stayed in. Lord Whitman and Viscount Compton had sent letters that had been forwarded by Charles's attorney, and threatened any number of terrible fates would befall Caroline if Bingley did not pay Compton the forty thousand pounds that was owed by her husband immediately. A letter from Caroline was included with their missives, begging her brother's forgiveness for marrying such a man in her ignorance, but claiming that her situation was dire, and begging him to come and save her.

Upon Darcy reading this missive to her, Elizabeth immediately got up and rang for Banks and instructed him to send Wilson out to the hells and locate Lord Whitman and Viscount Compton. They were to be instructed to wait upon her at Pemberley House to collect their payment, but that Lady Whitman must be with them in order to collect the funds. Word was sent to instruct Montague to get her funds in order to be withdrawn by bank draft. When Banks left Elizabeth's study, she rang for a footman, and asked him to deliver messages to the Hursts and Fitzwilliams, asking them to come to Pemberley House. Darcy asked her what her intentions were, and Elizabeth replied, "Precisely what I said. I am paying the men their money, and ensuring the safety of Lady Whitman."

"You are just going to hand the money over?" inquired Darcy, completely shocked. "Forty thousand pounds, just like that, without a second thought?"

"After what happened to Kitty over my refusal to be generous with my own father, I have learned not to trifle with the safety of sisters. She is Charles and Jane's sister and I believe that it is the very least I could do. The money is not important," Elizabeth answered.

“And Caroline Bingley is that important to you?” Darcy asked, amazed.

“Yes, Will, somehow I find that indeed she is. She is a woman, and a relation to our family. I would pay it even if she was of the barest acquaintance.” Elizabeth’s husband made no more argument. He knew how she felt about not having given Mr Bennet the money he wanted. She had agonised many times that if she had only offered the man what he wanted years ago, he would have given over her sisters easily, and they would have been quite safe. Darcy had pointed out that he could also have used the girls to extort Elizabeth many times over, but she would not hear him. She blamed herself entirely for what had happened to Kitty, and swore she would never forgive herself.

The Hursts arrived in record time, and an hour and a half later, the butler announced Banks and Mr Montague. Montague had come himself, being an attorney in addition to an investment banker, thinking he might be able to draw up any legal documents that Lady Darcy required in case it proved necessary. He came bearing news. “Lady Darcy, while I am surprised at your desire to pay the full sum to this man, I must say it may have come at not a moment too soon for Lady Whitman. I received intelligence this evening that Lord Whitman purchased life insurance policies for himself and his wife three days ago.”

Elizabeth gasped and Darcy swore out loud as he paced the room agitatedly. “Damn and blast! I should have locked Caroline Bingley up rather than allow her to marry that swine! I ought to have done more than just attempt to convince her. I ought to have stopped her! How will Bingley ever forgive me?”

Mrs Hurst began to cry, “What if it is too late? We do not know what has happened, they could already have harmed her!”

“That is unlikely, madam,” interrupted Montague. “Although Lady Whitman has not been seen outside of Compton’s estate, we do know she did not come to London with

the men. My intelligence is that the men were in town as of yesterday, and have been for some weeks. They could have had time to travel to Hempstead by now, but I doubt they would be foolish enough to harm her so soon after opening the insurance policy. They would be hanged for certain in such a circumstance, but it is imperative that we locate Lady Whitman and ensure her safety as quickly as possible, and to this end I have sent three of my men to assist Wilson in searching the clubs. I have men watching them, but I do not expect a report from them before tomorrow morning, so I do not know their current location.”

Elizabeth poured tea and served cakes, and the party waited. The guests sat with them through tea and then dinner and still, they waited. By late at night Mr Montague had left to send out more men. Darcy and Fitzwilliam went out as well, assuring their wives there was to be no trouble. They were only going out to help locate the men, and invite them back to Pemberley House as Elizabeth had requested.

Mrs Fitzwilliam and the Hursts stayed the night, and all three women waited with Charlotte late in Elizabeth’s private sitting room for their husbands to return while Hurst waited downstairs. It was a few hours before morning when the men came in, having given up. They had searched every club and gaming hell in the city, and had given up when they were told that Whitman and Compton had spoken of attending a house party in the country. No one knew the host or location of said entertainment, but word was the men had left London.

Elizabeth suggested that the party get a few hours of sleep, and then they should leave at dawn for Hempstead. They might not know where the men were, but Elizabeth would feel better being closer to where Caroline was being held. The family was ready to depart the following morning when Mr Montague himself arrived upon the doorstep. “The men have been found, your ladyship! Let us go inside, and I will tell you what I know.”

The party reentered the house, and went into the drawing room. “I already had two

men following Lord Whitman and Viscount Compton, madam, and it took some time for them to follow them last night and return with information. My men just arrived at my home an hour ago to tell me of an exclusive soiree at the home of Lady Amherst in Richmond,” he paused meaningfully. Lady Amherst was notorious. A famous courtesan of the demimonde, she had married and been widowed by an ageing earl who had left her very well off. A very merry widow, her gatherings were as notorious as her name. “It appears that Lady Amherst is the paramour of Viscount Compton, and he has been attempting to win her hand, but she will not marry again. The intelligence that I have received is that five hours ago, during a card game at Lady Amherst’s home, Lord Whitman won five hundred pounds. Viscount Compton proceeded to humiliate Whitman by snatching the funds from his hand and telling him before all that Compton owned Whitman, and that he wouldn’t be allowed two shillings or even access to his wife until his debt was paid.

“Those present began to laugh at, and disparage Lord Whitman, and in his mortification and rage, the report is that he produced a pistol, one of those new Colt Baby Dragoon revolvers that are so popular, and told Compton that he could never murder Lady Whitman for her life insurance, nor collect any debt if he was dead, and the five hundred pounds was the last of the debt he would ever collect. Then he shot Compton in the face and then himself in the head, right in the middle of the room in front of nearly fifteen witnesses.”

“We must leave for Hempstead at once!” Elizabeth exclaimed. Montague had one more piece of information for Elizabeth. “Lady Elizabeth, before you depart, there is one unrelated, yet possibly important, piece of intelligence that found me before I left my house this morning. I have kept two men on the new Duke of Leeds, and it is my understanding that he has returned to England and has quietly let an estate in Plymouth that is very close to Rushworth

Darcy and Richard began swearing unlike anything the ladies had ever heard, and ordered an express be sent with the message to Captain Spencer in all haste. Montague took his leave, and the party took to the carriages. They travelled with an enormous party of armed footmen and grooms, led by Mr Banks, Mr Wilson, and Miss Carmichael. Baskets of food and cider had been provided for breakfast and lunch. Darcy had sent a letter ahead by rider asking an old school friend with an enormous manor house in the area if they could beg rooms for the night. They had no idea what state they would find Lady Whitman in, and he wished for privacy wherever they stayed. He knew he could trust his friend Thomas Franklin.

Their party stopped at Franklin's Well before continuing on, to refresh themselves briefly, and leave Mary and Mrs Hurst behind. Mrs Hurst did not like it, but she was with child again, early days yet, and her husband would not allow her to go. Elizabeth refused to stay behind, but Mary agreed to wait at Franklin's Well and sit with Mrs Hurst. Darcy agreed that Caroline may have need of feminine comfort when they arrived, and did not disagree with Elizabeth when she followed them back into the carriage.

The party arrived at the estate of Viscount Compton and were greeted by a very young butler. This was typical for men who engaged in debauched behaviour in their own home. Most mature butlers expected respectable behaviour from their employers. This man would not give them entrance, regardless of what they told him about the death of his master. He admitted Lady Whitman was in residence, but on orders from his master, was not permitted to release her, nor was he allowed to admit her family to the house. It was clear he did not believe that his master was dead.

Fitzwilliam toyed with the idea of storming the house, they appeared to have enough men, but Elizabeth preferred to follow the law when at all possible and did not wish for anyone to be hurt. After the scene in Richmond, this was going to be a scandal no matter what, and Lord Whitman had already publicly brought his wife's name into it. There would be no hiding the debacle. Elizabeth sent for the local magistrate, and the

party waited in front of the manor patiently for an hour for the man to arrive.

Darcy then took charge, his rank and commanding presence cowing the magistrate into submission. The man pounded on the door and questioned the butler when it was opened. “You mean to tell me that your master has instructed you to keep a woman who is not his wife prisoner? Do you wish to be hanged, man? What do you mean the woman’s husband was here? Is he here now, man? Then for heaven’s sake, if her husband is not here to enforce it, Compton’s orders matter not. He is not her husband! No, now, that is enough, young man, step aside. The county has had enough of your master and his scandalous shenanigans, and his father’s before his! If it is true that he has been killed, good riddance I say, and praise God there are no direct heirs. Now if there is a woman in this house who is not his wife, and may be here against her will, I demand to see her at once!”

The butler led them through the house, which was decadently furnished and decorated. Elizabeth thought it looked like he had let his friend Lady Amherst decorate the place. She, of course, had never seen the countess’s house, but it was rumoured to look more like a bordello than a proper home. As the butler led them up the stairs, he said to them, “I am sure she’ll look a right state. She brought no luggage at all, was not wearing much in the way of clothes, and she hasn’t been allowed out of the room since they locked her in. She screamed blue murder for days, but eventually she stopped. She has no maid, and I am not permitted to open the door, sir. Do not even have a key. You’ll have to break it down.”

“Then how do you feed her and provide for her needs?” The magistrate demanded.

The butler gestured to a door that they were approaching at the end of a second-floor hallway. The door had been cut off across the bottom, perhaps twelve inches up, and reattached with hinges. There was a bolt holding the lower part of the door in place, and it was easy to see that when the bolt was pulled, the bottom of the door swung up so that a tray could be slid under the door. “Twice a day, we slide food and water

under the door, and she slides the trays back. She throws her used water and waste from the chamber pot out the window herself.”

“So, you are telling me you have not laid eyes on this woman since she was placed in this room?” demanded the magistrate, outraged.

“Her husband was here and made no complaint when the order was given. He had the right to lock her up. I have to follow my master’s orders, sir, or I’ll lose my place!” the butler tried to explain.

The magistrate shook his head in disgust when a familiar, though cracked and hoarse voice came from the other side of the door. “Hello? Is someone there? Please, can you help me?”

“Lady Whitman!” shouted Darcy, “Lady Whitman, are you alright?”

“Mr Darcy! Lord Darcy, please, please help me! There is nothing dangerous behind the door, please open it! Please, please, help me, please let me out!” Caroline sobbed pitifully, pounding desperately on the other side. Richard barked an order for Caroline to stand back, then he and Darcy simultaneously rammed the door with their brawny shoulders. The wood casing cracked and split upon the first try, then on the second, the door fell open, and when it had done so, Caroline Whitman came tumbling out into Elizabeth’s arms in a rough looking shift, an article of clothing Elizabeth would be mortified to know was owned by any of her staff, even the lowliest scullery or laundry maid. She stank, her hair was matted and filthy, her face was sunken and pale, and streaked with tears.

Elizabeth looked over the woman and when she exclaimed, “In God’s name, where the hell are her clothes!” Caroline burst into tears, sagged into Elizabeth’s arms, and fainted. Overwhelmed, Elizabeth sank to her knees holding Caroline while Darcy and the magistrate looked into the room. Darcy swore words Elizabeth would have

believed only Richard, or a sailor might know. He slammed the broken door savagely as the magistrate lurched across the hall and vomited into a vase on a side table. Darcy grasped the butler by his collar and shook him savagely. “That is the most barbaric thing I have seen in my entire life! The worst cells in Bedlam and Newgate Prison are more humane!”

The butler raised his hands, “I swear, I have never been in there, sir. Never even seen the room! His lordship locked her in and then he went away! The door has been like this long before I came, my master made it obvious that Lady Whitman is not the first person the family has locked away in there, but the room has been locked long before she arrived!”

“Obviously! Were you not aware that the body of the previous occupant is still present in the damned room? Who the hell is that person!” Darcy roared in a more terrible rage than anyone in his entire life had ever seen before. Elizabeth, understanding the ramifications of what her husband had just said, that Caroline had been locked in a room in a thin and rough shift, not even a proper robe or shawl, with a corpse for nearly two months, for the first and only time in her life, fainted dead away.

Later that evening, Elizabeth sat in a comfortable chair next to Caroline’s bed. Since the terrible scene earlier that day, neither of the women would part from the other. Caroline became hysterical if Elizabeth moved away, and Elizabeth was fiercely protective of her and refused to leave her side. Once Caroline had been bathed and Sarah had done as much as she could with her hair, although much of it had to be cut, Hurst had begged Caroline not to share the details of her confinement with her sister, as he feared the shock of such frightening news might make Louisa lose her child.

Caroline had nothing to say, in any case. She refused to speak of her experience, not

to give an account to the magistrate, nor to unburden herself to Elizabeth or anyone else. She had been fed, but did not eat much. She seemed to be afraid to fall asleep, but Mr Franklin had been exceedingly kind and had brought a daybed and a very comfortable chaise into the room. Elizabeth was eventually able to reassure Caroline that she and Mrs Hurst would remain close by and that her safety was certain. Eventually Caroline fell into a deep sleep, and did not fully awaken for two days entire.

Elizabeth was not concerned about the length of Caroline's slumber. Sometimes she was fitful, occasionally she sat up straight in bed and looked about wildly. When she spied Elizabeth and her sister close by, she quickly fell asleep again. Many times, she had awoken screaming, only to slip into unconsciousness again immediately after Elizabeth and Louisa woke and comforted her. Once or twice, she had slid out of bed to use the chamber pot from under the bed late in the night when she thought Elizabeth and Louisa were asleep. Caroline was exhausted from terror, and now that she was safe, her mind needed to repair itself with rest. Elizabeth did not bother to send for a doctor. There were none nearby that she trusted, and they would be back in London soon enough. It was obvious that Caroline's health did not seem immediately dire.

On the third morning, Caroline had not even gotten up to relieve herself in some time, nor did Elizabeth believe she was truly asleep any longer. It looked more to her like Caroline was afraid to wake up and face whatever came next. She sent for a tub to be filled with hot water, and a hearty breakfast for the three women. When it was delivered, the smell of every possible delicious breakfast dish filled the room. There were kippers, sausages, and kedgerree, rashers of bacon, eggs, toast, lovely soft rolls, generous quantities of jam and preserves, and honey. The rich smells of chocolate and tea filled the room, every good thing that Mr Franklin could think of for their comfort and pleasure had been provided. As Elizabeth and Louisa exclaimed over the appetising breakfast, Caroline finally could resist the tantalising scents no longer, and when she sat up in bed and looked nervously about, the two ladies bid her a very

good morning and to join them for breakfast.

Having been sleeping in Caroline's room for two days, taking turns on the comfortable chaise by the bed and the daybed, Elizabeth and Louisa were also in their nightwear with their hair plaited, and the scene felt quite sisterly as the ladies sat down about the little round table together. There was a great deal more food than they could eat, but each of them did great justice to the cook, including Louisa, who found that unlike during her last pregnancy, she was not ill in the mornings this time. By unspoken agreement, Louisa and Elizabeth made no reference to Caroline's ordeal, waiting for her to be ready to address it herself. The ladies chattered over the breakfast and other innocuous topics as they ate, and when they could hold no more, Sarah arrived to assist Caroline in the bath.

Elizabeth looked at her. "Caroline, Louisa and I will withdraw for a short time. We all have baths waiting for us, and Sarah has a gown of mine ready for you." As Caroline looked momentarily panicked, Elizabeth reassured her, "Caroline, I am leaving you with my very own maid. We shall return presently, I promise you. But let us all enjoy long baths after such a lovely breakfast?" Caroline agreed, and the ladies parted temporarily. In the absence of Sarah, and having missed her company the last days, Darcy was all too eager to act as her lady's maid and assist her in the bath. Elizabeth was amused because she never wanted Sarah's help while bathing, but her husband was so determined to serve her that she could not send him away. He filled her in on the events of the last days. The local clergy and doctors were brought in, the church records and graves of all the late wives of the previous viscounts were accounted for, and no one knew who the body in the locked room might have belonged to. All that was known was that it was a woman, and that she had been dead and partially mummified for what appeared to be decades.

An hour later, Elizabeth returned to Caroline's room and said, "Caroline, I know you likely do not feel ready to travel yet, but the gentlemen have arranged for us to journey to London today. Mr Franklin, who owns this house, is preparing for a

journey himself, and we do not wish to delay him. I hope you will return to Pemberley House with us, and I invite you to stay as my guest for as long as you like.”

Caroline was indeed not ready for a journey, but she still felt afraid to leave Lady Darcy’s protection. She stayed as close to Elizabeth as she could as they went downstairs, and curtsied silently to Mr Franklin as Darcy handed her into a carriage, quite forgetting her new title and rank after all that had befallen her.

The magistrate had agreed to make the journey to London to interview Caroline when she felt ready to speak of her experience, although there was little point. He did not believe a charge against the butler would hold up in court, and there was no one else left to charge with a crime. In the carriage the gentlemen attempted to explain to her gently what had transpired with her husband, what was known of Viscount Compton, and what would happen now.

Elizabeth had spoken to Darcy that morning about her wishes and Darcy relayed them kindly to Caroline. “Lady Whitman, we know that you will need a significant period of rest after your experiences, and Lady Darcy and I wish you to know that in the absence of your brother, you are welcome to stay with us at Netherfield, London, Pemberley, or wherever our family happens to be until Bingley and Jane return to our shores. Mr and Mrs Hurst say you are welcome with them as well. Take some time to think about what makes you feel safe and protected for now, and then tell us what you have decided. Thankfully, the only positive thing to come from all of this is that the man never obtained your dowry, and so therefore, you have not lost possession of your fortune.”

Earl Whitman’s new heir had already evicted the tenants from Whitman House in town, and taken possession. Banks had inquired, but the staff at Whitman house stated that Caroline’s trunks had left with the party when it left London, and the viscount’s butler insisted that it had not arrived with her. Caroline remembered how

the men had forced her to change into the rough shift, and informed her that she ought to feel grateful they had allowed her to keep a pair of her house slippers. She recalled the humiliation of boarding the carriage in front of the servants without so much as a shawl, and how the men had stopped in London and sold her possessions before they had even left the city, but she said nothing. When tears began rolling down her face, Elizabeth and Louisa did their best to comfort her, but eventually she turned her face to the window and was silent.

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Banks had Mr Roberts at Pemberley House ready to examine Caroline, but the physician claimed there was little wrong with her besides malnutrition and anxiety, other than a pressing need for sunshine and fresh air. He suggested that Lady Whitman may suffer from nervous or depressive complaints in the future, but that the family should avoid tonics that contained laudanum or opium, and that excessive consumption of spirits should be discouraged. Montague was contacted, and set to investigate the viscount's family tree and the identity of the body in the locked room.

The day after the family arrived back in London, they were visited by Captain Spencer and his mother, bringing with them an infant child. As they sat down to tea in the drawing room with Will, Elizabeth opened the conversation. "Captain Spencer, Mrs Spencer, I am sure you must be here regarding the news we sent you of the new residence of the Duke of Leeds. It is kind of you to bring Master Andrew. He seems a sturdy little one, and we are happy to meet my cousin's boy, but I find it curious that my cousin does not accompany you. Do you keep her confined to the house now, as well as obliging her to play second to your mother in the household?"

Captain Spencer coughed in embarrassment. "I wish I had kept her confined to the house, your ladyship. I wish fervently that I had posted guards at her door and window. As bonny as this young chap is, he is not Master Andrew. This is not my son."

"Well, we knew he was not your son, Spencer, that was the whole point of all this," observed Darcy. "Please inform us of your purpose here today, sir."

"She's gone," Spencer replied. "Your cousin is up and gone, taking my son and leaving this changeling in his place." Spencer went on to explain that they had woken

the morning that Darcy's express had arrived, to find Marianne and young Andrew gone, and this new child in the nursery with a strange nurse. The nurse carried a letter from the duke. All the time that Spencer thought Marianne had been unable to communicate with the new Duke of Leeds, she had been passing letters through the wet nurse that Spencer had hired. As it turned out, the young duke had been having Marianne and her household watched just as closely as Elizabeth had him watched. When Spencer advertised for a nurse, Leeds had sent several who had agreed to his scheme, and by luck, one of them had been chosen.

Upon taking up residence in the house, the nurse had delivered a letter to Marianne from Leeds. A correspondence was thus opened, and when the two baby boys had been born, and the duchess lost her life, a scheme was hatched. Marianne stayed in Spencer's home, biding her time and recovering from delivery. When she decided she and her son were both strong enough for a long journey, she sent word to Leeds, who came for her. The night before Darcy's warning arrived, sometime after midnight, Marianne left her apartment, went downstairs, and let a nurse maid with the late Duchess of Leeds' baby son into the house. She led them up to the nursery, then departed with her own son and the nurse who had facilitated the plan, and a small valise of clothes.

By some small miracle, they had managed to keep the situation quiet. Spencer's mother had taken a fancy to the babe, and for all her veneer of kindness to Marianne, went out of her way to keep the child in her company for much of each day. Marianne would otherwise keep the boy with her most of the day, and Mrs Spencer sought to prevent such behaviour, for everyone in the household disapproved of everything Marianne did on principle. The senior Mrs Spencer had gone to the nursery early in the morning, and found the terrified and trembling strange nurse, who possessed a letter she was to put into no other hand but Captain Spencer's.

Spencer,

I have come for what is mine. Since you have chosen not to treat your wife with respect, I have come for her as well. Do not think I am unsympathetic to your plight, and to that end, I am leaving this boy. He is not mine, and I have decided to claim my own son, rather than to allow my title to fall to my late wife's bastard. Take your family for a very long holiday, and when you return, the boy will be enough changed that your servants will never know the difference. A boy is a boy, as far as you are concerned. You did not even seem to care for having a wife, so considering you are only concerned with having an heir for the security of your mother, I have left you with one, and have taken the wife you care so little for, away.

Treat the boy well, or I will come and take him away again, and as you see, I am more than capable of it. Bastard parentage aside, he is of noble blood on both sides. Raise him with the dignity he deserves, and be sure to see to his education properly. I shall send a bank draft to pay for Eton and university when the time arrives, to ensure this edict is followed, and I expect you to expend the funds from your marriage settlement to ensure your estate's improvement for his future.

My son will be raised as my heir, and there is no point coming after us, we are leaving these shores and to follow is futile. I will never let them go, and if you make the attempt, I will destroy you. Marianne will be known on the continent as my duchess. Foreigners are much less likely to question or quibble about these matters.

Marianne and I care not what you tell others about her absence. Tell society that she is dead, or tell them she has gone away for her health, it matters not to us.

L

Elizabeth read the letter in resignation and passed it to her husband. "I know not what to say, Captain Spencer. What do you expect us to do about it?"

"Lady Darcy, it is my hope that you will send your investigators after them. The duke

has stolen my wife and my boy, and I hope I can count upon your support to see them returned to me. If only Lord Darcy's express had reached me sooner, this could have been prevented."

"As my husband has pointed out, he is hardly your boy, Captain Spencer," Elizabeth replied. She sighed in resignation. "I know not what to do with this appalling situation, but my first instinct is to do nothing. Yes, Captain Spencer, nothing! You could have avoided all of this very easily by simply shewing kindness to your wife. Do not tell me you were kind! I have heard the reports of my cousins and aunt! Marianne could not even order tea in her own home without your mother's permission! Is this kindness? Is mortifying her in front of her mother and sister and brother kind? Mrs Ferrars reports that you barely spoke to them or Marianne the entire two weeks they were in your home. Was that kindness, sir?"

"Given your cousin's behaviour, both before our marriage and after, Lady Darcy, I hardly think--"

"Do not use her behaviour as an excuse. You knew of her disposition and her behaviour before you married her. I consider this debacle to be mostly your fault, Captain Spencer! My cousin is a young and impulsive girl! You could have easily won her over if you had made even the smallest attempt! It was my understanding that you wished to take the broken pieces of your own life and my cousin's, and create a family, Captain Spencer. That was the picture you painted for me when we met. If you had made even the slightest effort to win my cousin's heart, she would have been yours after the shock of Willoughby's defection! I have heard the accounts of the hopelessness present in her letters to her sister. You did not even try. You may lay the blame at your own door. If you had even tried to win her affection, Marianne surely would have consigned the duke's very first letter to the fire, and instructed you to replace the wet nurse."

Captain Spencer objected, "Lord Darcy, surely, sir, you can see that--"

“No, indeed, Spencer. My wife is correct,” interrupted Darcy. “The solution you offered to my wife and Marianne was much different than the reports we received from our aunt and cousins. You did not treat Marianne with the respect due to the wife and mistress of your house. If we had known how you intended to treat our cousin, we would have refused you permission to approach her. There were other men interested who I am sure could have managed affairs much better than you have. With even a small measure of kindness, you might have earned your young wife’s devotion, and saved yourself these troubles. I cannot see what you expect us to do about the matter now.”

“Lady Darcy, surely you cannot condone the behaviour of your cousin,” ventured Mrs Spencer. “Shouldn’t you wish to return her to her place and protect your family name?”

“Condone? Indeed, I do not condone any of this behaviour. Not Marianne’s, nor Captain Spencer’s, nor yours, madam,” Elizabeth retorted. “My disinclination to act stems not from an approval of my cousin’s conduct, but rather from a weariness of spirit derived from an excess of time, effort, money, and worry spent on the welfare and future of a stupid, selfish girl, and the family that was supposed to have taken her in and treated her as one of their own. I find I am no longer willing to involve myself in such sordid matters as these. My cousin has chosen her fate, and I refuse to involve myself further in her affairs. I am sure that once you leave here today, that I shall never wish to hear about any of you ever again. And as far as the family name is concerned, Marianne is two names removed from my maiden name of Bennet and I have been married twice since I carried it myself. I am certain the connection would not be remarked upon in society, even if events were known.”

“So, what are you suggesting I do, Lord Darcy?” asked Captain Spencer grudgingly.

“Unless you have another highly ranking and powerful nobleman at your disposal to negotiate with Leeds, I suggest you take his advice. Embark on a long journey,

perhaps put it about that it was taken to improve Mrs Spencer's health. When you return without her some months from now, you may put it about that she has been sent to a facility in Switzerland or Vienna for her health by the generosity of her family. Not that you will have many questions. It is my understanding that your wife has not been at home to receive the ladies of your county thus far. This should help your story."

"What about the boy?" Spencer demanded indignantly.

"You needed a boy. You have one. The other boy was not yours in the first place, and you cannot convince me that you are personally attached to the child. My cousin Ferrars indicated that you barely glanced at the infant the entire time they were visiting. I could possibly be persuaded that your mother might have some affection for the child, but your mother's feelings are not my concern. This entire exercise on your part, Spencer, has been to provide your mother and sisters with security should something befall you. They have it, and now you have money, from my wife's purse to add to their security as well. You have a boy, money, and you no longer must suffer an unwanted and disrespected wife as well. It sounds to me like matters have worked out rather well for you, unless you actually wanted a young woman whom you could keep prisoner and treat poorly in your house," Darcy said firmly as he stood and rang for the butler. "Captain and Mrs Spencer are leaving," he said cordially as the senior servant entered the room.

There was grumbling and the sounds of dissent as Captain Spencer and his mother collected their ward and bustled out of the house. Elizabeth instructed the butler not to admit them again, then sat down to write some letters. The first was written to Montague, with instructions to find and deliver a packet of correspondence and a proposed settlement to Leeds and Marianne. She then wrote to the two latter parties in question.

Pemberley House,

Mayfair, London

Leeds,

You sir have been a pox, a blight against my family, and I assure you that were I a man, I would find you and call you out myself. I do not promise that I will not do it if you ever appear openly in England again. Nothing, and I do indeed mean nothing, would give me greater pleasure than to see you dragged out into the dawn to suffer the public humiliation of being shot by a woman.

Spencer has been here, and due to his treatment of my cousin, and her repeated casting off the mores of good society, I have washed my hands of all of you. Despite the unknown fate of my poor, dear sister, I did my best to ensure Marianne's welfare, and allowed her to be the architect of her fate, at great expense no less, only to have my consideration flung back at me. Marianne has repeatedly made her opinion of propriety known, and I refuse to involve myself in her affairs again, after this one last effort to ensure her future welfare and that of her son.

By throwing herself upon your mercy, Marianne has forfeited access to her dowry funds without going through her husband or his estate, which is no longer possible due to her actions. The funds will also be insufficient, after some time of her being provided for as your 'duchess', to support her in the manner in which I am sure she will become accustomed. Not being your legal wife, she will have no protection if you should perish. I will not leave the possibility of her being taken care of by your son and estate to chance, nor do I wish to entertain the possibility of her turning upon my doorstep in penury.

You claim to care for Marianne. The investigator whom we sent to question you seemed to apprehend this as well. If this be the case, then I demand that in good faith, you provide Marianne with a house in her name, and a settlement of fifty thousand pounds upon your death. This is considerably less than a duke would have settled

upon a true wife, and so should not be a problem for you. Use some of the funds provided by your first wife, if necessary. Please ensure that the house is somewhere outside of our soil, sir. Vienna perhaps, or Italy. Her mother and sisters need no more fear of ruination at the hands of your “duchess”.

If you do not agree to these terms immediately, I will expose the whole of your matter, including the exchange of heirs. I am sure that your late wife’s family would be enraged at this news, regardless of her child’s origins, since I am certain they counted upon their daughter’s son being raised the child of a duke. Unlike Captain Spencer, I have no fear of you, and you stand no chance at ruining me. You are a brand-new puppy in society, in Parliament, and in your title. I have in my possession your letter to Captain Spencer, who left it behind in my drawing room, and do not think I will hesitate to publish it in *The Times*. Your line of heirs will be thrown into endless speculation, rumour, and litigation. I am certain you do not wish to visit this fate upon your progeny.

The documents enclosed will require your signature immediately. There are five copies. One each for you and Marianne, one each for our solicitors, and a copy for myself. I hope for your sake that you give them the immediate attention they require.

I take no leave of you,

Lady D

Postscript: If I ever find out that you knew anything of the fate of my poor sister Kitty, and did or said nothing, the above-mentioned ruination and duel will be an absolute certainty, and I will find you no matter where you hide.

PSS: I wish with all my soul that your new ‘Duchess’ may plague your heart out.

ED

Her letter to Marianne was brief.

Pemberley House,

Mayfair, London

You stupid, selfish girl. How I rue the day I took you into my home and my family. My sister is lost forever, because of you, and now you continue to flout propriety and risk ruin again and again. After what happened to Kitty, did you not finally understand the danger when young ladies flout the protection of their family? Did you not, even for a moment, consider that if this becomes known, your sister Margaret might never be married? That your brother Ferrars might be reviled from his living? That your mother will certainly be devastated and prostrate with grief when she hears of this? When, Marianne, was the last time you thought of the welfare or future of anyone besides yourself or your ridiculous and dishonourable 'Willoughby'?

Do not think me insensitive to your situation in Plymouth. A letter had already been dispatched to Spencer from Colonel Fitzwilliam regarding the matter, and further steps might have been taken to improve your lot, had you only been patient. Had you only asked for help. You deserved it not, but still, it would have been given. No one forced you to marry him. YOU demanded a husband, and we bought him for you, AND even allowed YOU to choose. Or, consider this, you might have elected NOT TO FALL WITH CHILD OUTSIDE OF WEDLOCK IN THE FIRST PLACE.

Another thing you deserve not, is for me to refuse to help Spencer reclaim you. I ought to have you kidnapped and forced to sleep in the bed you made, but be assured, I refuse, not to help you, but because I am disgusted with your repeated displays of selfishness, and wish never to be involved in your sordid affairs in any way again.

I have done what I can (AGAIN) to ensure your security. For GOD'S SAKE,

Marianne, do not return to England. Your poor mother and sisters deserve better than all you put them through. Pray, do not ruin their reputations as well.

E.

Elizabeth had never written such poison-filled missives in all her life, not even when she was attempting to contact the duke who had actually kidnapped Kitty. She understood of course, she truly understood how wretched Marianne must have been, but she had made each of her choices with her eyes open, and if she had possessed even a modicum of decency or honour, she would have endeavoured to make the best of her situation, or asked for help, knowing how much pressure Elizabeth and Darcy could bear upon her husband if only she had asked for their assistance or advice. Elizabeth might have forgiven the girl much if it even appeared as if she had tried.

Exhausted after writing these missives and sending them with instructions to Montague, who would draw up the documents and would send an investigative clerk to find Leeds and get them signed, Elizabeth could not bear the thought of writing the details of this sordid affair to her poor cousin Elinor and her household. The idea of the grief such news would bring her aunt and cousins was enough to bring her to tears. Darcy, ever loving and considerate, was always prepared to step in whenever Elizabeth needed support, and he undertook to write to Mr Ferrars.

Things became quite solemn after this visit. The Fitzwilliam household returned to Kent, and Maria Lucas returned to Hertfordshire after a successful season. Georgiana accompanied the Fitzwilliams, and Lydia was invited also, but she elected to stay with Elizabeth. Miss Long removed to Pemberley House in anticipation of the Darcy's upcoming trip to Pemberley for the harvest.

The Hursts gladly accepted their invitation to accompany the family north, and to

bring their son and put him in the Darcy nursery for the duration of their visit. While Elizabeth prepared her business for her absence from town, Caroline spent many of her days sitting quietly in Elizabeth's study watching the children play while Elizabeth worked, or occasionally looking at a book of poetry. Lydia had managed to interest her in embroidery with the other young ladies, for Caroline had a deft hand with a needle. Occasionally, she closed herself alone in the music room and played the instrument divinely for hours, but she spoke little, and made little intrusion upon the household.

Society had deduced from the presence of the Hursts that Lady Whitman must be residing at Pemberley House, and so there were occasionally callers, mostly cruel women who had pretended to be Caroline's friends in the past, and now were looking for gossip to circulate. Caroline refused all callers, and of course never left the house, even for church. Louisa had sent to the Hursts home for a trunk of gowns Caroline had left behind when she married, which coincidentally included several black dresses from when she had mourned an uncle a few years ago, but Caroline refused to wear mourning for her husband. Elizabeth, unable to bear the sight of one more orange gown, interrupted Caroline's practice one morning in the music room to inform her that she had an important visitor. "Elizabeth, please, I simply cannot bear to be a spectacle! Whoever it is, please, send them away!"

"I assure you, Caroline. This is a visit you want to accept," promised a very pleased with herself Elizabeth with a smile. The ladies had agreed to use each other's Christian names when they returned to London, and Caroline had been surprisingly friendly and unsurprisingly humbled since their arrival in town. When Caroline swore there was no one she wished to see, Elizabeth smiled and asked, "Are you sure? Dear me, I hate to have wasted Madame Clarisse's time. She cleared her entire afternoon for you, and is waiting upstairs in your sitting room with all of her fabrics."

Caroline's mouth opened in an O of surprise, and suddenly she began to giggle. A mania took hold of her, and she began to laugh and laugh quite uncontrollably, tears

streaming down her face. After a moment or two, she caught her breath and said, “You found her Elizabeth! The one woman in the world I would give anything for an appointment with! But Madame Clarisse only makes ball gowns. I have no intention of reentering society, probably ever. What should I need with a ball gown?”

Elizabeth smiled, “I have a present for you. Madame makes my entire wardrobe, not only for me, but for all of the ladies in my family. I am giving you a brand-new wardrobe as a gift, to replace the one you lost, but there is one condition...” When Caroline inquired, Elizabeth replied, “You must allow me and Madame Clarisse to approve all the colours... Pardon me for saying, but you must promise me never to order another orange gown ever again, my friend.”

Caroline burst into giggles again, and argued that the gift was too dear, too generous, and she could never accept. “I am afraid you must, my friend, or I shall be offended, and the Caroline I know would never dream of displeasing a countess!”

The two made their way to Caroline’s sitting room and spent an enjoyable afternoon with Elizabeth, Louisa, and Lydia, who loved fashion and was skilled indeed at selecting the perfect colours and styles. Madame remarked to Elizabeth that if Lydia were not a gentleman’s daughter, she would hire her. Caroline was helped to see that it was better to order gowns in colours that suited her rather than take advice on fashion from the cats of society who gave poor advice on purpose. Elizabeth ordered Caroline an enormous wardrobe, suitable both for London and the harsh Derbyshire winters, not entirely certain when the Bingleys would return and wanting to be sure that Caroline had suitable attire if she spent any time in the north later in the winter, considering her brother had an estate there and that Caroline might return to his protection when he returned, or if the Darcys spent time at Pemberley this winter.

Darcy was pushing with all of his powers of persuasion to spend the holidays at Pemberley. Elizabeth was hesitant, but Kitty had been gone for nearly two years, and come November it would be two years since their father had sold her. Leads and

clues were few and far between, and usually contrived by opportunists looking for money. There was simply not enough left to go on, and though Elizabeth still expended considerable time, effort, and expense on the investigation, she could no longer justify staying in town indefinitely. She made no promises, but before they left town, Elizabeth arranged for the ladies to be fitted for wardrobes for next year, in case nothing of note turned up in the search for Kitty and the family stayed in Derbyshire for the winter. Lydia allowed herself to be fitted for some new gowns, but she stubbornly refused to be brought out again for the upcoming season, claiming that Mary had not been brought out until she was twenty, and that there was plenty of time.

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Georgiana returned from Rosings to join the Darcys, and the family stayed at Netherfield for three weeks before continuing on, but as Elizabeth learned to accept that Kitty was unlikely to be found this late in the endeavour, she also slowly began to turn her attention toward her responsibility toward the neighbourhoods in which she kept her properties. Time had been spent at Netherfield over the last two years, but due to circumstances being what they were, Elizabeth had done no entertaining of note in Hertfordshire or London. Feeling that she had neglected the village of Meryton and her friends there, Elizabeth invited Georgie's friend Mr Vivian Radcliffe, a few of his friends, and two or three young ladies who were also friends of Georgiana's, to stay at Netherfield for two weeks. A modest ball was planned for the end of their stay, to bring trade and entertainment to the neighbourhood. Mary and Richard also came to visit, and Richard invited two youngish colonels from the regulars, a major, and a few captains as well, to add to the party. Elizabeth put all the bachelors in Lilac Cottage, as was her habit. Mrs Bennet still felt unequal to a visit to Meryton, and so she remained at Windmere where she could call upon and receive visits from her friends in Hunsford.

Lydia was utterly incensed with Elizabeth for throwing a ball or even a small house party, which she took as a sign that Elizabeth had given up on finding Kitty. She took her meals in her room, ignored everyone but Diane and Miss Long, and went about with a scowl for over a week. One day, Elizabeth came upon Lydia during one of her walks to Oakham Mount. Usually when Elizabeth walked, she took the children, but while in Meryton, she regularly made the trip to Oakham Mount alone out of nostalgia. Lydia immediately jumped up from the large rock upon which she sat and made to leave. "Lydia, stay a moment. We need to talk," Elizabeth said.

"There is little to speak of, Lizzy," Lydia snapped. "You do not have time in any

case. I am sure you are too busy planning your ball to worry about your sisters.”

Elizabeth caught her by the hand as Lydia started to flounce away. “Lydia. Me? Not worry about my sisters?” She laughed at the absurdity. “I worry about all of you, every minute of every day. I worry that you are not being brought out into society as you deserve, and the fact that you are a shadow of yourself. I worry about Jane delivering a babe far away from her home and her family. Thank heavens Mary has not needed much worrying lately, but she had her turn. And Kitty... I believe it goes without saying that not a moment has passed in almost two years that I am not in agony over Kitty. But Lyddie, we must accept that there have been no new leads for months. Of course I will never abandon the search. But I have been neglecting my other duties for so long. I have obligations to the neighbourhood, and I must meet them.”

“Obligations? Your duty to throw parties, Lizzy?” bit back Lydia.

“Lydia, do you not yet understand the responsibility of great wealth? Is that how you see me? An indolent great lady with no interest in anything but parties or entertaining?” Lydia huffed and turned away, crossing her arms over her chest as Elizabeth continued. “Sister, the point to great wealth is not to create comfort for yourself, but to use it for the betterment of your neighbourhood and community. The point of great houses such as Pemberley and Netherfield, is not to distinguish families of rank, but to provide living accommodations for many branches of large families, and to be a major employer and source of trade for the neighbourhood. If you own a great house and you do not use it to provide employment to the local village, and to throw house parties, where you bring visitors from other counties to meet the local residents, there is no point to any of it! Netherfield and Longbourn provide employment to the tenant families and neighbourhood, trade to the local merchants, entertainment for the neighbours, and the friends that come occasionally to visit give the locals a chance to meet new people, create new friendships and connections, and hopefully opportunities for courtship and marriage for the local young people. I have

neglected these duties at my properties because I had more important tasks, but there is little to go on regarding the search for Kitty and it has been that way for some time. It would be irresponsible of me to continue to neglect my obligations indefinitely.”

“You mean like Julia Prentiss,” Lydia observed darkly, referring to the younger sister of Mrs Harriet Forster, who had recently married a visiting friend of the Acton family, who were leasing the manor at Longbourn.

“Precisely like Julia Prentiss, my dear,” Elizabeth agreed. “By inviting a cousin to stay, and planning entertainment for the area, Mrs Acton has done her duty, to the village, to her neighbours and family, and to the local tradesmen, who will benefit from the money spent in their shops. It sounds frivolous on the surface, but the butcher benefits, the candlemaker, even the local dressmaker receives income, every time a landowner plans a party. The local young men and women are introduced to new people every time visitors come. How many ribbons and shoe roses have you purchased from the haberdasher in anticipation of a ball? Whenever there is a house party, the tenant families benefit from the temporary hires of extra footmen and maids from the estate and village. You and Georgiana benefit from the experience assisting me, so you will know what to do when you have your own establishments. Lydia, I do not come to Meryton to throw parties. I throw parties when I am here, because it is the right thing to do for the neighbourhood, and is a kindness to my friends here. It would be unfair of me to hoard my wealth and keep my houses closed, while unmarried friends such as Maria Lucas and Loretta Long languish in Meryton with no opportunity to meet new people.”

Lydia huffed and crossed her arms even tighter over her chest, but Elizabeth could see her heart was no longer in it. “Do not hold a grudge, Lydia. I cannot bear to be at odds with any of my sisters now. If this terrible tragedy has taught us anything, it should be how precious we all are to one another. Kitty would not wish us to fight amongst ourselves. Sometimes I feel as though you are the only one who still knows how I feel. Do not be angry with me, dearest.” Lydia embraced her sister and assured

her of her affection, and the two returned to Netherfield together arm in arm.

Lydia, hopeful that the activity would help take her mind off of Kitty, threw herself into helping Elizabeth plan the ball. True to Elizabeth's word, a Mr Benedict Pembroke, friend of Mr Radcliffe, was instantly smitten with a certain Miss Ella Goulding, and Elizabeth, ever the helpful neighbour, encouraged Sir William Lucas to extend an invitation to the man to visit Lucas Lodge when the Netherfield house party dispersed, that he might remain in the neighbourhood to get to know the lady after the Darcys left Netherfield.

There was a bit of drama at the ball. Mr Herring had been obsessively fixated with courting Georgiana since arriving in Meryton. The gentleman tried everything. He invited her and Elizabeth, or any escort she chose for a walk, a ride, a drive in his phaeton, or a picnic and spoke at length of introducing her to his mother when she was next in town. Georgiana told him each time he asked, that she was not interested in courting at this time, and felt uncomfortable accompanying him for drives or picnics. Georgiana observed to Mr Radcliffe that she regretted having agreed to dance the first with the man, feeling that it had given him false encouragement, but there was no withdrawing without sitting out the entire night.

Darcy had taken the young man aside before the ball and sternly instructed him that he was welcome to dance with his sister and offer her friendship, but that the young lady was not considering marriage yet, and that he should not continue to pursue her. Mr Herring had been all that was polite, but disregarded the instructions entirely, and barely let Georgiana out of his sight for the first half of the night.

The gentleman was nearly as irritating as Mr Collins, so persistently did he follow Georgiana all evening. At the conclusion of the first dance, he had asked for the supper set as well, which Georgiana could truthfully say was already taken. Mr

Herring proceeded to pout and act churlish each time another gentleman approached Georgiana, to the point where she stayed quite close to Mr Radcliffe, who was becoming more and more annoyed with his friend as the evening went on.

So closely did Mr Herring follow Georgiana, that after her supper set with Mr Radcliffe, the gentleman dragged his partner, poor Miss Butterworth from London, along close behind Georgiana and Mr Radcliffe and when the gentleman had seated Georgie at the table, Mr Herring quickly claimed the two seats on her other side for himself and his dinner partner.

Mr Herring proceeded to ignore poor Miss Butterworth, who spent the meal chatting amicably with Mrs Annesley, who had taken a seat as close to Georgiana as she could manage, once the seat beside Georgie she ought to have rightfully occupied was claimed. He spent the entire meal attempting to monopolise Georgie's conversation until eventually, Mr Radcliffe cleared his throat and said loudly "I say, Herring, why do not you pay some attention to your own dinner partner, instead of monopolising mine?"

Miss Butterworth turned pink while Mr Herring took immediate umbrage and made a remark about friends getting in the way of another's courtship and how it was a rude way to behave, when one knows his friend is taken with a lady. "For God's sake man, you aren't courting. Her brother instructed you this very morning to stop pursuing her! Lady Georgiana is my friend, I am not standing in your way, and I would appreciate it if you would cease disturbing our meal."

Georgiana's confidence was faltering by this point, and she turned pink as she looked about to see who had noticed the exchange. She turned beet red when she realised that Mrs Phillips and Lady Lucas were observing the conversation with interest and whispering amongst themselves. "Mr Herring, you have caught the attention of the local matrons. I do not appreciate being made the subject of gossip."

“All is fair in love and war, do you not agree, my dear?” Mr Herring said good naturedly, now that he had Georgiana’s attention again.

“No, Mr Herring, I really do not agree, and I am not your dear,” retorted Georgiana, who pointedly turned away and gave him no more of her attention. The gentleman began to pout and act churlish again, and Miss Butterworth was so alarmed by his demeanour that she turned to Miss Annesley and ignored him for the rest of the meal as well. When supper had finished, Mr Herring asked for the final set. “I am sorry Mr Herring, that set has already been reserved.” said Georgiana, thankful for the reprieve.

“Miss Darcy, I find it disturbing that you would give away the important sets, considering our understanding.” Mr Herring said pompously.

“Mr Herring, you have been told by my brother, myself, and Mr Radcliffe, that I am not considering marriage at this time. We have no understanding. I do not welcome your attentions. Please do not suggest such a connection again.” Georgiana answered firmly as she accepted Radcliffe’s arm to return to the ballroom. Herring was left humiliated as his dinner companion Miss Butterworth flounced away in a huff. Georgiana felt guilty that her friend had not enjoyed her meal, and endeavoured to make sure Mr Radcliffe had one of his handsome and more amiable friends ask her for the last set, which was to be a waltz.

The Darcys spent the ball as the hosts should, by spending the evening talking and circulating among their guests, making introductions and facilitating conversations between acquaintances they knew would enjoy each other’s company. Elizabeth was exceedingly pleased by the attention paid to Miss Goulding by Mr Benedict Pembroke, and exchanged a wink with Lydia, who had noticed the attraction as well. Lydia was proud of her sister, and grateful that she had someone to teach her about the responsibilities of wealth and running of great houses. She had been told about her enormous dowry, and the idea of the responsibilities that must come with such an

enormous sum of money daunted her.

Lydia had observed, once she began paying attention, that her sister was right. The shopkeepers and tradesmen in the village were elated by the income generated by the ball. Only the day before, she had heard the wife of the haberdasher talking to the dressmaker that the income generated from the ball had given their family the rest of what was needed to send their son to Merchant Taylor's school. The boy was nearing the age to go, and the family had been saving since his birth, but it had not been certain that he would go, because his father would not send him unless he was certain he could pay the full amount. He had no wish to put the boy in school and then take him out again due to an inability to pay.

Elizabeth had been correct. Even the candlemaker had been whistling a jaunty tune when he made his delivery to the back door with crates upon crates of beeswax candles. As Lydia had been making biscuits with Diane, she had heard him telling Mrs Nichols that the order would allow him to send something to his daughter who had just had a child, and whose husband was injured and could not work. He had been afraid the family might end up in the workhouse, but the income from the ball had been enough that they would be cared for until the husband was well, as long as they were prudent. As Lydia watched Ella Goulding bask in the adoration of Mr Radcliffe's friend Mr Pembroke, she admitted to herself that it may have seemed frivolous, but the ball had been a boon to all who resided in Meryton, gentlefolk and tradesmen alike.

Georgiana was not the only one showered with unwanted attention at the ball. Lady Lucas, with her typical indiscretion, had made Mr Connolly aware of her daughter's fortune which was invested by Elizabeth. Mr Connolly was an older gentleman farmer from the next village over, about fifty-five years of age, who had buried three young, beautiful wives. The first from childbirth, the second from an epidemic which

had swept the village some fifteen years ago, and the third again in childbirth. There was nothing sordid about the deaths, but the man had always desired pretty young girls for wives, and Charlotte in her youth, had not been handsome enough for him. She was certainly handsome enough now, with her fine gowns and her fortune exceeding ten thousand pounds, and he was certain that he could turn her son's eventual inheritance of Longbourn to his advantage, at least while the boy was underage.

Charlotte, on the other hand, had not the slightest interest, and refused to encourage the gentleman. Lady Lucas seemed to have forgotten that her daughter was of age, had been married and widowed, and lived quite independently from her parents and family. The lady seemed to believe that as Charlotte's mother, she could direct and expect Charlotte to obey. It was all well and fine for Maria to visit Lord and Lady Darcy, but it was obvious to her that Charlotte had no prospects in London. Charlotte had not confided the attentions she had been paid in town to her mother, because she did not wish to be pressured into encouraging the gentlemen. If Lady Lucas knew her daughter had any admirer at all, Lady Lucas expected her to encourage the attentions without question or delay.

The woman seemed to believe that Charlotte's continuing widowhood was an embarrassment to the family. Of course, society would not care, being rather apt to be more unreasonably discontented when a woman did marry again, than when she did not. Lady Lucas could not be more contrary. It had been bad enough that the girl had not been married until she was seven and twenty, but then she had disobliged her mother by remaining so for barely seven months. Certainly, she had obtained a comfortable fortune, and a son with a future inheritance in the bargain, but Lady Lucas had decided it was long past time for Charlotte to find a father for her son and be respectable again. Needless to say, Charlotte had no intention of humouring her mother, or encouraging a man whom she had not been good enough for, for ten years of her adult life. The gentleman followed her persistently all evening, and her mother denied her the ability to sit with the matrons for protection from his attentions. Poor

Charlotte, in consequence, received little pleasure from the ball, which was a shame.

When Mr Connolly could not gain Charlotte's attention, he turned to Miss Long. That lady's aunt had not been able to keep quiet about Elizabeth's generosity to her niece, so the neighbourhood was aware of Miss Long's invested dowry, and the lady herself was looking quite fine in a lovely gown by Madame Clarisse. She danced once with Mr Connolly, and Charlotte took her by the elbow and said, "Loretta, it is not my place to advise you, but I cannot allow you to accept that man's attentions. I assure you, I will lock you in your room before I allow it!"

When Miss Long objected, Charlotte, who was no longer enjoying the ball any longer due to Mr Connolly and her mother's behaviour, dragged Miss Long upstairs to her bedroom. Once the ladies were alone, she shared the story of Elizabeth having warned her not to take Mr Collins. Their friend had done her best to warn her, but she had plunged ahead heedlessly, in her quest to gain her own establishment. She described with some embarrassment her subsequent realisation of her folly.

"Elizabeth knew and I did not." Charlotte warned her "I did not understand what she was trying to tell me, Loretta, but I learned very quickly what she had meant. The price is too high, my friend. Connolly is nearly as unpleasant as my late husband; God forgive me for speaking ill of the dead. Not to mention, it is ill luck to be that man's wife. I do not like his history as a widower. It does not seem to be his fault, but I have no desire to see either of us become his next dead wife.

"Elizabeth will never allow you to live in poverty. She would never allow it for any of her friends. That is why you are with us, because she cares about you. If you do not meet someone immediately in Derbyshire, do not be surprised if Elizabeth begins making excuses to keep you at Pemberley. Before you realise it, six months will become eight, and eight will become twelve. Then at least two or three opportunities to visit new friends in Bath or Brighton might be contrived before she finally gave in. And if you do not marry eventually, then I am sure she will employ you as a

governess herself, but I can assure you, whatever your fate, it will be better than being married to someone you cannot at least respect or esteem. We are not romantic, Loretta. I understand you. I too only wanted my own home. But if you cannot like or respect the man, please, you cannot marry him, my friend.”

Miss Long thanked Charlotte for her candour. She understood what it had taken for Charlotte to break down and confess the unhappiness she had faced in her marriage, to speak ill of her dead husband, and to give advice. Indeed, Loretta did not like Mr Connolly and never had. When she was young, she had been glad his eye had never turned to her. Now, though at five and twenty, she might have accepted him in a moment of weakness, if not for Charlotte. She took a moment and said a prayer of thanks that she had such good friends. The two ladies went next door to see Caroline, who had refused to come down for the ball, and feeling scandalous, the three of them sent for a bottle of champagne, and talked and laughed late into the night. Miss Bingley had been completely humbled, and was much better company than she had been the last time she was at Netherfield. Loretta Long looked forward to staying at Pemberley with such good friends.

An hour after the supper set, a footman spoke quietly behind Elizabeth and Will as they surveyed the crowd in their ballroom. “Lord and Lady Darcy, I apologise for my interruption and my forwardness, but I must speak with you privately in your study without delay.” When Elizabeth and Darcy had slipped away and met the footman in the study, the man pulled a ten-pound note from his pocket, and explained that it had been given to him by Mr Herring, who had instructed him to tell Georgiana that Elizabeth wished to speak to her in the library during the last set. Then he was to go to Mrs Phillips and tell her that one of her nieces needed her help with their gown in the same room, in order to compromise poor Georgiana.

Elizabeth and Darcy met Richard on their way back to the ballroom and were quietly

deliberating in the hall. Elizabeth was of the opinion that Banks and Wilson ought to take care of the manner discreetly while Darcy and Elizabeth remained in the ballroom to maintain appearances, while Richard was arguing that Elizabeth never allowed the men to have any fun, and that Georgie was his and Will's ward. They ought to be able to handle the matter personally. Darcy, not as bloodthirsty as Richard, wanted only to deal with the matter immediately and expediently, and he cared not how.

They were observed by Mr Radcliffe, who was returning from the water closet, and said, "I say, Lord and Lady Darcy, is everything alright? It's not my business of course, but you all seem rather distressed. Is there a problem? Can I help with anything?"

"You can help by not bringing villains to my family's home, Radcliffe!" Richard snapped irritably. Elizabeth insisted that since Mr Radcliffe had brought Mr Herring to Netherfield, he ought to know what his friend was capable of.

When the affair was revealed to him, the young man blanched and turned white at the thought of Miss Darcy being compromised, then his countenance hardened with anger. "Lord and Lady Darcy, Mr Fitzwilliam, please accept my apologies for bringing such a person to your home. I had kept his company because he's always seemed decent, and he is not a rattle or a gamester, but I had no idea he was capable of this. This has taught me that you can never really know a person, for I have known Herring since Eton, and never suspected such a disposition lurking beneath his countenance. Please, worry not, I shall deal with the matter directly!"

"You will not, insolent pup! Georgiana is our ward, and we shall deal with him ourselves!" Richard snarled.

Radcliffe put his hand on Richard's shoulder. "I understand, sir, and you are correct. It is your place to protect her, not mine. But she is my friend, and so is he. I trusted

him, and brought him amongst my friends and acquaintance. He repays me by plotting to harm them? It cannot go unanswered, sir, and all our set that came along with us will agree. He is our friend, he arrived with us, his actions reflect upon the honour of us all, and it will not stand! We must and will ensure he knows what befalls him who betrays his friend's trust!" With that, the young man spun away hotly on his heel, and as the Darcys and Richard returned to the ballroom, they observed him going about to all of his friends and speaking discreetly.

The faces upon each young man hardened angrily as they heard what Radcliffe had to say. Darcy warned Miss Annesley to stay as close to Georgie as possible for the rest of the night, and then continued to stay close to his sister himself as well. Elizabeth and Richard watched as Radcliffe's friends went about the room and made their apologies to the ladies to whom they were promised for the last set, claiming an emergency called them to help a friend in the village.

Radcliffe sent a message to the stables to have Herring's horse ready, and when the final set began, Mr Herring entered the library to find his three friends awaiting him angrily. Richard followed and watched as the man was dragged from the house and beaten soundly behind the stables, then tied to his horse, which was led to the inn by Wilson, who arranged a room with the innkeeper. Herring's trunk would be sent at first light, and he was instructed to return to his estate because his friends would no longer suffer his company in town.

Richard was grouchy when he returned about not being allowed to protect his women again, but he had to admit, the young bucks had taken care of the matter discreetly and thoroughly. Perhaps the younger generation of gentlemen were not quite as useless as he always claimed. He still would have liked to have beaten the worthless idiot to a pulp himself, but he understood Radcliffe's need to defend the honour of his own good name. God knew that if Richard had ever brought a friend to a party and they had acted in such a manner, he would have done the same.

When the ball ended, Elizabeth thanked Mr Radcliffe for his protection of Georgiana and his display of honour. “Please, it was nothing, Lady Darcy. I could do no less for Miss Darcy. She deserves all the friendship and protection her friends can muster. I swear to you, whether in town, or in the country, I shall always be ready to defend my dear friend.” Darcy groaned as Mr Radcliffe gazed across the room, looking at Georgiana as if she were as precious as the sun.

“It’s him. He’s the one. Mark my words, he is the one who will take her from us,” Darcy growled to Richard as the young man made his way across the room to where Georgiana was surrounded by his and her friends from town.

“I suppose we cannot complain,” grumbled Richard. “She could do worse, Darcy. At least we know he is honourable. And I assure you, he is not taking her anywhere yet. I may not agree with your wife about everything, but I’ll be damned if I approve our girl’s marriage before her majority.” Darcy and Elizabeth bade Richard and Mary goodnight as the guests took their leave and those who were staying made their way upstairs and to the dower house. Elizabeth found the footman who had alerted them, and gave him back the ten pound note, plus twenty pounds from her strongbox and recommended that he solicit Banks to have most of the money placed into his retirement account.

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A week after the ball, all the guests had returned to town and the Darcys and their friends began their journey to Pemberley, where an express from Charles was waiting, having been delivered the day before they arrived.

Darcy,

I swear, (blot) wife has (blot) mad. (Blot blot blot) on returning (blot blot) in order (blot blot blot) Lady Darcy and (blot) midwives. We (blot) in (blot) yesterday, and (blot blot blot) the (blot blot) tomorrow.

Forgive me for (blot blot blot) especially after (blot blot blot blotblot) but Jane insists that Lady (blot blot blot blot) her.

We (blot) immediately (blot blot) last letter, so if you (blot blot blotblot) Caroline, (blot blot blot) missed us. I pray (blot) matter has (blot blot blot) but, if necessary, I (blot) travel to (blotblot) and withdraw the funds for (blot) villains (blot blot blot).

Again, forgive (blot blot blot blotblot) I can deny my (blot blot blot) in (blot) condition, and I trust (blot) Jane's confidence that (blot) Darcy will (blotblot) her (blot) open (blot).

(Blot blot),

Bingley

Darcy was bemused as he attempted to read the letter and went upstairs to find his wife, who was settling the children into the nursery with Mrs Hurst while Charlotte

was ensuring that Miss Long found her room comfortable.

Darcy shared the letter with Elizabeth and the Hursts, and Elizabeth said, “It sounds like they might be coming here. Do you think they are coming here?”

“The express was sent from Liverpool, according to the messenger,” answered Darcy. “It is difficult to be sure, but yes, I believe the Bingleys may be en route to Pemberley.”

The renovations for Tatton Hall had been completed, including surprise plumbing and bathing chambers, which were a gift from Elizabeth, but the manor only had a skeleton staff. The Darcys had been planning to hire more people when they had word that the Bingleys were returning, and they had thought there would be more time. The Bingleys would need to stay at Pemberley until their house was ready to receive them. Elizabeth went immediately to Mrs Hayes and had the extra master suite of rooms, and the lying in chamber and nursery opened at the far end of the guest wing, so the Bingleys could have quiet and privacy. She then sent word to the convent, requesting assistance with hiring a wetnurse who was knowledgeable and competent in the practices encouraged by the midwives. Elizabeth also had the guest nursery that she and Charlotte used when they arrived at Pemberley opened and prepared for use, glad that she had decided to keep the rooms that they had used during that time exactly as they were when Charlotte had moved William into the family nursery, so the house was well prepared for Mrs Bingley’s needs.

Late the following afternoon, twenty minutes after a shot had been fired from the gatehouse to alert the house, a carriage and four pulled up the drive to Pemberley. Elizabeth, Darcy, and the Hursts were waiting as Charles Bingley stepped down from the carriage and handed out an enormously pregnant and radiant Jane Bingley. Charles exclaimed in delight to see his sister and her family, and Jane threw herself into her sister’s arms.

“Forgive us for arriving with so little warning. You did get my express, did you not? No sooner did we receive your last express, than Jane suddenly decided that she could not possibly survive childbirth without Lady Darcy and her midwives, and nothing I said would deter her. We must make haste for home! Jane wanted to be with her sister, and she said I must come home to assist mine, and we could stay away no longer. I was terrified the entire journey that she might deliver the babe on board a ship. The child is due any day.”

“Of course, Jane is correct. I would never dream of turning you away at any time, and yes Jane, I quite agree that here at Pemberley with a trusted midwife and doctor is the best possible place to bear a child. I am so glad you’ve come home! We only arrived yesterday, and it is a shame we did not know earlier that you were coming, because Mama would have wanted to be here. She has talked of little but calling you home for months and months,” Elizabeth answered as Bingley greeted his sister and her husband and son joyfully. She turned and asked Mrs Hayes to send a message to Mr Lloyd and also the convent asking Sister Augustine to come the next morning to examine Jane.

Elizabeth told Jane all about the arrangements that had been made so far to make the Bingleys comfortable, and assured her that a nursemaid would be hired forthwith, and a wet nurse too if Jane wanted one. “Of course, you will want to open your own house, but since we knew not that you were coming, Jane, we had not the time to hire servants. There is still only a skeleton staff in place. But I do hope that you will stay here as long as you like. You simply cannot consider opening your new home when you are so close to your confinement. Please consider staying here at Pemberley for some time.”

“Lizzy, I cannot say how relieved I am at your invitation,” breathed Jane, as the party entered the hall. “That is just what I was hoping for. I know that all I have wanted since marrying is a child, but as my time draws closer, I find that I begin to doubt my abilities and I become desperately afraid. I came because suddenly I realised that I

needed you, Lizzy. You and your midwives. Nothing would make me feel safer than consigning myself and my child to your care. I fear that running such a household as Tatton Hall would be quite beyond my abilities just now.”

“Do not fear Jane, you are quite welcome here. You and Charles must consider Pemberley your own home for some months before considering another move. You shall all be quite well looked after at Pemberley, and you can hire the best servants that can be found at your leisure, instead of troublesome ones all in a hurry.” Elizabeth comforted her sister.

As the party entered the hall, Charlotte and Lydia came forward to greet them. Considering how much bad news and ill tidings there was to discuss, the rest of the household had stayed away until Darcy and Elizabeth had a chance to speak with the Bingleys privately, but Charlotte and Lydia had wished to greet the arrivals briefly. It was a mistake. After imparting to Jane how glad she was to see her looking so well, Charlotte took the Hursts’ boy upstairs to the nursery as Jane looked at Lydia and said, “You are a woman grown, Lyddie. I see the young girl I knew in the lovely woman before me. Is Kitty at Longbourn with Mama and Papa, or has she married?”

Suddenly the group went silent, and the mood turned as if a bucket of ice cold water had been thrown upon them. Lydia burst into tears and fled up the stairs, where Georgiana was peering nervously down, and the two disappeared at the top. Jane suddenly looked terrified and clutched her husband and said, “Lizzy...”

“Let us all go into the drawing room, there is tea and refreshments waiting,” Darcy said quietly, as the party soberly turned in the direction he suggested. “There is much to discuss about events which occurred in your absence.”

Louisa whispered in Elizabeth’s ear as they entered the room, and Hurst went and sat

quietly while his wife went and began pouring the tea for everyone to assist Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Louisa had become quite close, considering all the worry about their sisters they had each endured. The Hursts were trusted members of the family now, after all they had gone through with poor Caroline. And since his son had been born, and Caroline had become bearable, Mr Hurst had begun to sleep and drink less, and exert himself intelligently much more. The man spent hours closeted with Darcy discussing estate management and how to improve his lot once he inherited. Jane sat with her husband on a chaise and took a deep breath and said in a trembling voice. "Please, do not keep us in suspense any longer. Is poor Kitty ill?"

"No," whispered Elizabeth.

"Is she...dead?" demanded Jane.

"No," whispered Elizabeth again.

"Not that we are aware of," amended Darcy, earning him an angry glare from his wife for such a suggestion.

"Did she run away?" cried Jane.

Elizabeth looked to Will as tears spilled down her cheeks, helpless, and unable to speak the words to describe what their father had done. Darcy understood and began to speak. "As you remember, we agreed that we would not inform you of matters you could do nothing about. Indeed, Elizabeth chastised me soundly for having written to you about Lady Whitman."

"Yes, yes, Darcy. We forgive you for whatever you withheld. We knew that tragedies might occur while we were away and that you would not wish to upset Jane, considering the circumstances. What is it, man?" demanded Charles insistently.

“A few weeks after you left for the continent, the family went to Netherfield, and later London, as planned. Mrs Bennet sprained her ankle, and Lydia requested that Catherine stay to assist with their mother, so we left her at Longbourn and continued on to London. Before we had left, there had been a drama with Miss Marianne. She had been meeting Viscount St Claire in secret.”

“Yes. We saw the announcements in the papers when he married and later became a duke, and she married some other fellow. I was fortunate to be able to have access to the English papers while we were travelling,” Charles said, encouraging Darcy to go on.

“I had written to his father, requesting that he control his heir and informing him that the young man was no longer permitted on my property. The duke apparently made inquiries, obtained the wrong information, and mistakenly determined that his son was courting Kitty. The duke travelled to Longbourn while we were in London, suspecting nothing. He made a bargain with Bennet, and purchased Catherine for the price of thirty thousand pounds.”

“He WHAT?” cried Jane, clutching her husband even tighter.

Darcy met Jane’s eyes sadly, “Your father sold Catherine to the duke, who hid her away somewhere to ensure his son could never marry her, and then the man died. Elizabeth has spent two years and over seven thousand pounds searching. This is only the second time she has consented to return to Pemberley since Catherine has been taken. We were here only briefly for the harvest last year, but otherwise, Elizabeth has preferred to remain in London where she can send and receive information quickly.”

Bingley sat in stunned silence, and Jane was ashen. “My... My father.... My mother? Where... where is my mother?”

“We travelled to Hertfordshire with all haste, and removed Mrs Bennet and all of the female servants except the cook, who had no wish to leave, within hours of learning of the matter. Mr Bennet took his money and abandoned Longbourn, which we eventually made him sign away his rights to in favour of his heir. The property is currently in trust for the boy. Mr Bennet is now an Oxford Don, and Mrs Bennet has been invited by the Fitzwilliams to make her home with them in Kent.”

“What could possibly have been done with her?” demanded Jane as she began to cry.

“There are a number of possibilities, but we are reasonably certain that if she is actually still in England, that she must be in a private house, for we hope that we have searched every establishment where she might possibly have been held. We believe that the duke would have forced her to marry another, and likely removed her from the country entirely. It was also possible that she might have been married to a tenant farmer on one of his estates, but each parish at all of his properties has been searched thoroughly. Rectors have been questioned; church records searched. Servants and tenants and local gossips have been bribed, dozens of investigators have been searching every corner of the country and even the continent.”

“What about that Willoughby? Surely, he must know something. What about the brothels? The outgoing ships? The asylums? Surely there must be some clue!” exclaimed Bingley.

“An investigator was sent to the continent to question him, and we are reasonably certain he knows nothing. The duke would have wanted her hidden from him, and he covered his tracks well. St Claire, now Leeds, eventually returned to England briefly recently, before he ran away to the continent again with Marianne and their child, who had been born in wedlock as another man’s son. That is entirely another matter, not pertinent to this discussion. Her Majesty even sent her physician and secretary to the duke’s London home to ensure he was actually ill, which he was, and unable to speak or write after an apoplexy. The Royal Secretary searched his office, and a

Royal servant was sent to search his office and documents at Stoneacre. Nothing was found. The only suspicious business transaction that he had done was with Bennet. The other possibilities,” Darcy’s eyes flicked to Jane and back to Bingley, “Are nothing I would discuss in front of Mrs Bingley, considering her condition, but be assured, all avenues have been considered and investigated exhaustively.”

Jane closed her eyes and shook her head. “I cannot take it in. Are you still looking, Lizzy?”

“Jane, I swear I will keep looking as long as I am alive. The only reason I even consented to leave the vicinity of London was because after two years, it has been some time since we had any promising leads, and I could no longer justify neglecting Pemberley and our other estates. By this point my man of business understands most clearly that if any clue, no matter how unlikely turns up, he is to follow it, no matter the cost, and I assure you he does so most aggressively.” Elizabeth replied sadly.

The party sat quietly as Louisa offered to send the cakes and sandwiches around, but no one wished to eat. “What about Caroline?” Jane asked. “Has any progress been made in negotiating with that dreadful husband?”

“Indeed, at first, I was quite alarmed by his letters, and what is the story with this Compton fellow? What is he to do with it? But after some thought, I realised this is likely just a bid for a higher dowry than had been planned. Caroline may even have concocted the scheme herself,” commiserated Bingley.

“She’s upstairs,” Louisa answered gravely.

“Do you mean she’s here? She’s safe? Why did she not come downstairs to greet us? I suppose Caroline will never change. After all that worry...” said Charles bitterly.

“Please do not say such things,” Elizabeth interrupted quickly. “Caroline has

changed. She is entirely altered, and she has been through a harrowing experience, but she is here and safe now. She stayed in her room because she is still unsure of herself, and she is rather reclusive now. Knowing how much unpleasantness must be related to you upon your arrival, she remains in her rooms until you are ready to see her. She did not wish to overwhelm you all at once.”

“How did she get here?” inquired Charles. “Did her husband finally pay us to take her back?”

Elizabeth glared at him as Hurst cleared his throat and began, “You make light of a frightening and dangerous situation, brother. When Darcy received word from you about the demand for forty thousand pounds, Lady Darcy sent for us, and for Whitman and Compton, intending to pay the men immediately from her own funds to secure Caroline’s safety. Then when her man of business arrived, he informed us that Whitman had taken a life insurance policy on Caroline and himself. It was fortunate Elizabeth had the men watched and their affairs, or we would never have known.

“We searched for the two men all night, in every gaming hell and brothel in London, and the following morning learned that the two men were dead,” Hurst continued. “We all travelled together to Hempstead post haste, and were obliged to appeal to the magistrate to secure Caroline’s freedom from Compton’s estate. She was locked up, wearing and possessing naught but a shimmy unfit for a maid when we found her weeks after the wedding, in unimaginable conditions that I have still to this day forbidden to be discussed in front of my wife and positively refuse to discuss in front of yours,” he continued, holding up a finger forbiddingly when Jane and Bingley both made to object to not knowing. “They sold all of her clothes and possessions, and locked her up alone in worse conditions than an animal for two months.”

As understanding of the seriousness of the situation finally sank in, Bingley inquired of Elizabeth, “Lady Darcy, why would you pay such a sum for Caroline? Especially after-”

“Heaven and earth, Charles, stop calling me Lady Darcy, and start calling me Elizabeth, or I shall scream,” Elizabeth interrupted. “I hope that you do not believe that I would allow anyone in this family to lose another sister after what has happened to Kitty, over something as insignificant as money. I would pay thrice such a sum, more even, and thrice even that, to bring my sister home. I did not even need to do so for Caroline in any case, so it hardly signifies.”

Jane and Charles both thought it signified a great deal, and said so, as Charles soberly looked at Darcy and said, “I believe it is time for my wife to retire upstairs, I am sure you need to rest darling, and you have been looking forward to a Pemberley bath since we docked in Liverpool. I must speak with Darcy and Hurst in private, and learn everything that has happened.”

Jane agreed, and so Elizabeth and Louisa led Jane upstairs while Charles went to the study with Darcy and Hurst. He emerged white faced and sober an hour later, and asked for a footman to lead him to his sister’s room. When she called for him to enter at his knock he went in and did not emerge for nearly another hour. Caroline apologised to Bingley for all of her cruelty and manipulations of the past, and all transgressions were put behind them. Bingley had invited Caroline to live with them at Tatton Hall, and brother and sister parted with more goodwill than they had in many years.

The next morning, Elizabeth led Mr Lloyd and the midwife to Jane’s bedchamber. The doctor and the midwife both declared Jane to be in excellent health, and instructed her to take her sister’s advice and to exercise her body daily, to keep up her strength for the delivery, which was certain to be any time in the next two or three weeks. Elizabeth invited the doctor to take tea with the family, and a pleasant half hour was spent making introductions between the doctor and Miss Long and engaging in pleasant conversation.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:14 pm

It did not end up being anywhere near that long before one evening a week later at dinner Jane gasped and dropped her spoon into her soup. She looked down into her lap and flushed beet red. “Lizzy,” she whispered to her sister. “I am so sorry. Your chair.”

Elizabeth looked down around the corner of the table to realise Jane was wet. “Do not concern yourself with the chair, sister, we have more important considerations tonight!” She helped Jane up as the gentlemen realised what was happening, and Charles turned white with sudden fear. “Fear not, Charles, all will be well. Please assist Jane to the birthing chamber we have prepared, while I send a carriage for the midwife and a rider for the doctor.

Not an hour later, Elizabeth and Charlotte had Jane changed into a loose and comfortable nightgown, with her hair plaited neatly, and a window cracked to let cool air into the birthing room, which was likely to get very warm over the course of the evening. Jane’s hands were shaking as she tried to sip her tea when the midwife entered the room with Evie. Her pains were coming every thirty minutes, and she was beginning to be desperately afraid. “Lizzy, I was mad to think I could do this; I should have adopted an orphan!”

“Do not fret yourself, Mrs Bingley. That is just your fear speaking,” Sister Augustine reassured her. “Your sister and Mrs Collins have you well looked after, just do what we tell you and all will be well.”

“Jane, I have learned from experience, that you must do whatever your body tells you,” Elizabeth paused as Jane cried out in pain and gripped her hands tightly. “Listen to your body, Jane. If your body tells you to get up, then get up and walk. If

you feel compelled to lie down, you must do so. Your body knows the way. You must listen to it.”

“WALK! Oh heavens, I could not possibly! Oh Lizzy, I do not think I can do this!” Jane cried, as tears began to roll down her face.

“Now listen to me, Mrs Bingley, and take hold of yourself! You must not panic, or this shall go very bad for you! You must remain calm! No one shall make you walk if you do not wish to, but your sister has given you sound advice. Your body knows the way. Your sister walked through her pains with both of her deliveries, and her late husband always claimed it made the birth go faster. I must admit that I am inclined to agree. If you do not have the strength, we will not compel you, but whatever you feel, you must remain calm!” Sister Augustine admonished Jane before she could begin to really panic. “I just hope that you will not be stubborn like your sister, and insist on having your husband of all people present when you deliver.”

“Oh! I cannot let Charles see me in such a state! Lizzy, promise me you will not let him in!” Jane cried.

“Of course not, Jane. No one is going to make you do anything that makes you unhappy. But I assure you that if you change your mind, I will drag the man in here myself if you want him.”

“Lady Darcy!” Sister Augustine, shrieked, scandalised.

Mr Lloyd came in and gave Jane a brief examination, agreed with Sister Augustine that all was well, and returned to Jane’s sitting room to wait with the others. Miss Long kept the company in tea and refreshments, and Darcy kept adding small amounts of brandy to his terrified friend’s teacup. Georgiana and Lydia stayed in the family wing with the children. After another hour and two more terrible pains, Jane asked, “Lizzy, does the walking truly make it faster?”

“It is what I did with both of my births, Jane, so I have no other experience for comparison,” replied Elizabeth. “But I believe it did. I will not lie. I walked the portrait gallery for hours with the twins. It got to the point when I nearly entered into a conversation with an old crone who may well have been Darcy’s great aunt. But my body wanted to get up and move, and so I did.”

“I did not walk through mine, Jane, and I must say that Lizzy birthed two babes in half as much time as it took me to deliver one.” Charlotte added, as she held Jane’s other hand.

“It is not a race, Charlotte. All women are different, and all births are different. Mama birthed all of her children almost effortlessly until Lydia came, and then with that delivery her pains lasted nearly two days,” Elizabeth said.

“TWO DAYS!” Jane’s eyes widened. “Oh, I cannot. Lizzy, I think I want to get up!” Jane said.

Elizabeth called for Charles to come in and assist his wife. The midwife and the ladies took chairs in the hall while Jane held onto Charles’ arm and walked up and down the hall for hours. Each time Jane had a pain, her husband stood in front of her and held her up as she wrapped her arms about his neck and cried out in anguish. After three hours, Jane returned to her bed to rest. The pains were sapping her strength, for she had not exercised her body as much as Elizabeth had, and so her stamina was not as strong as her sister’s. She rested for an hour, and had a few sips of well-sugared tea.

After an hour of rest, Jane wished to move again, and she walked the halls with her husband for two more hours before the pains were finally coming one after another, practically on top of one another. She was quite overcome, and could stand no longer. Her husband swept her off her feet, and carried her to her bed, and though Sister Augustine objected strenuously, when the time came for Charles to join Darcy in the

sitting room, Jane became quite frantic and sobbed, clutching Charles's hand and begging him not to leave her.

Elizabeth, though she had the highest respect and esteem for the nun, encouraged Charles to disregard her outrage and stay to comfort his wife if she wanted him. "I do want him, I do! Charles, please do not leave me!" Jane begged.

"Mrs Bingley, if you want him to stay then you must calm yourself and concentrate! I will not allow him to remain if he continues to be a distraction, so you must do your duty now!" Sister Augustine declared. Charles held Jane's hand, while Lizzy took the other. The two of them encouraged her and wiped her brow as she laboured and pushed. After an hour of pushing, Jane cried out, "I have to get up!" The midwife objected, saying that the time for walking had passed, Jane must keep pushing, for the head was near. "I cannot, I must get up! I can feel that it will not come out this way, I must stand up!"

Elizabeth encouraged Charles to assist Jane to stand, and he stood by in case she fell as she held the bedpost and cried out with each new pain. The midwife stood by with a blanket ready and after some time, Jane got down upon her knees and laboured and screamed until eventually a beautiful babe slid into the towel waiting in Sister Augustine's hands. "I shall have to remember that trick of getting on your knees, Jane. It looked as if it helped tremendously," Elizabeth told her sister as the midwife attended the babe, who was a lovely, but outraged young lady. As Charles and Elizabeth helped Jane back into bed, the maid and Evie helped to clean Jane up while the doctor was called in to look over the babe. Shortly after the afterbirth was delivered, Elizabeth was standing near the dressing room door and heard Jane's lady's maid speaking to a wide-eyed Evie.

"And now I am meant to go back in there and serve her, after she's degraded herself in such an unseemly fashion! Down on her knees, like an animal in the field! And now I am supposed to treat her like a lady! If she were a real lady, she would have

stayed in bed, no matter how she felt. Or better, the birthing chair. I was shocked there was no birthing chair! I thought these Pemberley folk were quality, but what can you expect, I suppose, from the sister of a woman who births her child on all fours like a beast in the field! If my mother knew what I had seen this night she would-”

“Indeed, Mrs Harris, it would indeed be unacceptable to expect you to stay in a position where you must work for my sister, and I certainly do not expect you to spend a single night more under my roof under such circumstances,” Elizabeth interrupted, as she stepped into the dressing room.

The servant gasped, “Your ladyship, I was only saying-”

“I heard what you were saying, Mrs Harris. You no longer work for my sister,” Elizabeth replied coldly.

“You cannot sack me! I work for Mrs Bingley and-”

“Watch me,” said Elizabeth with a smile. She went to the door that led to the hall and found a footman and Wilson, who had been waiting to be sure that the family did not need anything. It was now very early morning. The servants were about the house, although all but Wilson and a footman were avoiding this hall of the guest wing, in order not to disturb the lady in labour or the family. “Wilson, Mrs Harris no longer works for Mrs Bingley. Please escort her to pack her belongings, and then see her to Mrs Hayes. Ask her to pay the maid whatever she is owed, as well as six months wages. You will escort her by cart to the inn, where you will give her money for the post to whatever destination she prefers, as well as money for up to four weeks at an inn, provided she leaves the neighbourhood tomorrow.”

“But my reference!” the maid cried.

Elizabeth turned on her. "If you believe, after what I have just heard you speaking about my sister, that you deserve a reference, then you are more delusional than I first believed. You will leave, Mrs Harris, and you will leave immediately and without a reference. Furthermore," she continued, "I will be having you watched, Mrs Harris, and wherever you go next, if you have been found to have begun even one scandalous rumour about my sister or my house, I shall write to your new employers. And the ones after that if necessary. I can ensure you that you shall never find work again in this country. So, unless you wish to find yourself sailing away to new shores in search of work, you will learn to hold your tongue!"

Elizabeth again turned on the woman and walked away, as Evie looked on in awe. Elizabeth took Charles aside and explained the matter and then sent for Sarah. She, Sarah, and Charles moved Jane back to her bedroom and her own bed. Jane was able to attempt a feeding successfully before the babe was turned over to the nurse, and she fell soundly asleep. Jane said she wished to try feeding the babe herself like her sister and Charlotte had, and so a wet nurse was on hand, but would not be called for unless Jane encountered difficulties.

Mr Lloyd joined the family for breakfast, and when he took his leave, Elizabeth saw him speak quietly to Miss Long for a moment. When he was gone, Loretta saw Elizabeth looking at her and smiled. "He seems like a nice man. We talked for hours last night. He has asked to call on me, and I have given him permission to do so."

"Oh Loretta, that is wonderful. He is indeed a very nice man. He knew Sir Christopher well, you know." Elizabeth clasped her friend's hands in encouragement. "A physician! Now, will that not be better than being my governess?" Miss Long agreed, and the family all went upstairs to take naps. It had been a very long night, and they were all exhausted. The baby girl had been named Catherine Elizabeth Bingley, and while Darcy agreed to stand as godfather, Elizabeth had only agreed to stand in for Kitty. "As we all know, godparents ought not be married to each other. I shall stand in for Kitty, until she returns, of course."

Pemberley,

Derbyshire,

Dear Mama,

Finally, I can write with some good news. Jane and Charles have returned home! They arrived at Pemberley last week, and last night, Jane was delivered of a lovely baby girl, Catherine Elizabeth. Jane and Charles are filled with joy at their wonderful good fortune, and wished you to know of their good news as soon as possible.

Please share this news with Mary and Richard as soon as you can. Jane wishes to have a short period of rest before she entertains visitors, so you are all to come to Pemberley for Christmas. Please say a prayer that this means that our family's luck has turned and that there will be some new and useful information about Kitty soon.

Your Daughter,

Elizabeth

As Christmas approached, Charles oversaw the estate at Tatton Hall, and with Elizabeth's help, Jane began to interview servants. Mrs Hayes had been able to recommend a friend for the post of housekeeper. The house had a butler already, whom the Bingleys had agreed to keep on when they bought the place. Lydia and Georgie sat in on these interviews in order to learn for their own future households, and Jane was able to put many young people that lived on her estate to work in her new house.

Aunt Gardiner sent wallcovering and fabric samples from their uncle's warehouses,

and Elizabeth helped Jane select her colours and the last of the furnishings and upholstery that was required before the Bingley family moved. The couple were overwhelmed by Elizabeth's gift of the plumbing. They had enjoyed the convenience while at Pemberley very much, but after the expense of the estate purchase and the repairs, they had initially elected to add new plumbing some years later.

Instead of hiring a new nurse, under Sister Augustine's advice an experienced nursemaid from Elizabeth's nursery was hired and promoted by the Bingleys, and Elizabeth promoted a housemaid who had eleven younger siblings at home to take her place in the nursery. Jane continued to nurse little Catherine herself, and found she had no need of a wet nurse. Elizabeth also had a housemaid that had been training as a lady's maid at Pemberley, and so Lucy Grimes was hired to replace Mrs Harris, and Lucy's younger sister came to Pemberley to take her place.

The Fitzwilliams arrived with Mrs Bennet a week before Christmas, and before she was allowed to go into the drawing room, Mrs Bennet was escorted to the study where she had a private conversation with Charles. No one knew precisely what Bingley said to his mother-in-law, but it was obvious that Mrs Bennet had learned her lesson, because she focused on her joy of being with her daughter the entire visit, and said not a word about sons. Nor did she instruct Jane that she must get pregnant again immediately and bear a boy. She was prodigiously proud of all of her grandchildren, and spent much time in the nursery, but gave no advice, nor did she make a nuisance of herself in any way.

Fanny Bennet had learned much since leaving Hertfordshire. She had learned that the very elite did not approve of loud voices, talk of money, nor did they speak aloud of marriages for their children or expectations in public. The few times she had done so, she had not liked the way the other ladies had looked down upon her. By watching and emulating her daughters, she had improved her behaviour by leaps and bounds. In any situation, no matter how a piece of news excited her, she looked to see how her daughters reacted and behaved, and then followed their lead.

She observed that the goal of high society seemed to be who could show the least interest or reaction to anything, and so she learned to feign a vague disinterest in everything, leaving behind her old nerves. Elizabeth had given her a fine wardrobe from Madame Clarisse, and Mrs Bennet gave a good account of herself while staying at Pemberley. She spent days touring the house in detail with Mrs Hayes, learning the history of Pemberley, and about the fine pieces of art on display.

Mrs Bennet had discovered in her wandering the grand halls of Elizabeth's estates a great interest in art. Elizabeth walked into the library one day to find Mrs Bennet sitting quietly and reading. "Mama, what on earth are you doing?" asked Elizabeth, sounding alarmed, having never in her life seen her stepmother with a book. Indeed, if she had ever picked up a tome, even a novel, she might have gained a small amount of attention and respect from her husband. Attention and respect that she ought to have had anyway. But Mrs Bennet had never before been seen looking at anything but fashion plates.

"I have learned since staying in your houses that I like art, Lizzy." Mrs Bennet smiled. "At Windmere, Mrs George only knows so much about the pieces there. The housekeeper and butler in London have little time for such things, but Mrs Hayes takes her responsibility to give tours of Pemberley very seriously. Mr Mason has been helping her learn the history of all of your art. I have learned so much from them. This is a book Mr Mason found that he thought might interest me about Leonardo DaVinci. What an interesting man he was, do you not agree? I would quite like to see some of his work."

Elizabeth could not have been more astonished if Mrs Bennet had suggested running away with the Rom, but maintained her composure and answered, "Indeed he was, Mama, and a man of many interests and talents as well. If you wish to spend some time at Pemberley House when you next travel south, I will ensure you have an escort to visit the museums, and you could even attend some art lectures, if you like. The younger ladies enjoy such activities with Mrs Annesley when we are in town. It has

been far too long since I had time to visit the museums, myself. Perhaps the family might make a day of it.”

“That sounds wonderful Lizzy, I should quite like that,” said Mrs Bennet, looking back at her book. “I wish I had learned to paint and draw. My family had no time for such activities.”

“Mama, it is never too late to learn a new skill. You can still learn to draw if you wish. You are skilled at embroidery, and it was you who taught Lydia many of her skills with a needle. That suggests some artistic talent,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Lizzy, how ridiculous, a woman my age learning to draw.” Mrs Bennet scoffed.

Elizabeth laughed, “You are never too old to learn. Or to become proficient. Indeed, no person ought ever to consider their education complete. There is always room for new information, and I have always maintained that everything is interesting if you give it enough consideration. Everyone should spend at least five hours a week learning or reading something new, no matter their age. I may be lacking in feminine accomplishment, but I spend several hours each week reading industry books and periodicals, or sometimes even books about new agricultural methods. It is good to have new knowledge and skills. You would not even need to hire masters. There are people in the house already with such skills. Ask Georgiana to teach you a few things. I am certain she would be glad to share her watercolours or her pencils. Why not learn a genteel activity to keep your mind and time engaged if you have found something that interests you?”

Mrs Bennet said she would think about it and went back to her book. Elizabeth could not wait to find Mr Mason in the hall and give him a hug. The man dropped what he was carrying, pencils scattered about the floor, and the man flushed red to the top of his balding pate when she threw her arms about him. Elizabeth moved on as quickly as she had come, saying nothing as she continued about her business. “Whatever do

you think that was for?" Mr Mason asked Mr Wilson who had been nearby.

"I am sure I do not know, but whatever it is that you've been up to, you ought to keep doing it then," Wilson replied and the two men had a laugh together as they went about their business.

Christmas passed, and then the New Year. Pemberley's Servants' Ball was held, but Elizabeth had not the heart yet for a Twelfth Night ball. Instead, there was a wedding on Twelfth Night! Elizabeth had been slyly hosting small dinners, including the local vicars and their wives, the Ferrars household, a few of the minor gentry, and... The local doctors. Mr Lloyd had been calling upon Miss Long since little Catherine was born, and Elizabeth made sure he was invited to dine once a week at the least. There were invitations to many events in the county, though with many houseguests and a new mother in the house, the neighbourhood understood if Elizabeth and Darcy themselves did not accept many invitations and only hosted small gatherings.

Charlotte, however, was just as popular and well respected among the local gentry as she had been in Meryton. She went to dinners and card parties in the village at least twice a week, often more, and always took Miss Long with her. As the widow of a parson, the daughter of a knight who had once been a tradesman, and the cousin of a countess, Charlotte was welcome and comfortable in nearly any sphere, and was a welcome guest at every table in the county. Mr Lloyd was a popular and social gentleman, so Miss Long had many opportunities to meet with him in society. He called upon her and walked with her in the gardens at Pemberley when the weather permitted it, and in the portrait and art galleries when it did not. He proposed in early December, and Miss Long accepted with great joy. Elizabeth, Charlotte, and all of the other ladies who had known her from life in Meryton were overjoyed to see her so happy, and marrying for love. Loretta Long was grateful she had taken Charlotte's advice and avoided Mr Connolly when in Meryton. She could have been miserable

now, or worse, buried next to the man's previous wives.

Elizabeth had invested half of her dowry, which had now grown to over thirty-five hundred pounds, and remained in trust to provide her a small income if she became widowed. Mr Lloyd had some money of his own, and ensured that Loretta would inherit whatever he had. Elizabeth promised them that if Lloyd were to stay permanently on the estate under their current agreement, that they could expect a genteel cottage to retire in. Loretta Long had done well for herself, and would never have to take a position, nor know poverty or spinsterhood. Elizabeth sent Wilson and two large carriages for Mrs Long, Mr & Mrs Phillips, as well as Sir and Lady Lucas, and Maria, who arrived a few days before her wedding. Mrs Long cried tears of joy at the wedding, and then returned to Meryton full of the wonders of Pemberley and the good fortune of her niece. Every unmarried girl left in Meryton hoped for an invitation to visit Derbyshire or anywhere, the next time Lady Darcy was in Meryton.

The household was filled with people and emotions, both happy and morose. Elizabeth and her sisters and stepmother would alternately find joy in small things and then become depressed or self-recriminating when they caught themselves being too happy while Kitty was still gone. The Fitzwilliams had decided to stay for some months. The Bennet women were still learning to move on in a world where Kitty was missing, and they found comfort in being together as they grieved. Jane's return had opened up the wounds all over again. First, they had grieved for her disappearance. Now they grieved because they had to accept that Kitty may never be found.

Jane and Louisa Hurst spent a great deal of time together with their children, as Jane recovered, and Louisa prepared for her new babe, which was due in late March or early April. Charlotte and Granny Rose made calls upon and accepted calls from the ladies in the village and Mary often accompanied them or spent the day with

Elizabeth or Diane.

Georgiana and Lydia studied and practised their languages and accomplishments with Mrs Annesley, and continued Diane's lessons. Caroline spent much time with Elizabeth, Louisa, and Jane, but rarely dined with the family, and never came downstairs if there were guests. Bingley and Hurst went out riding the estate with Darcy and Richard every day, even in the foulest weather (as long as it sufficiently safe for their beasts) and went to Tatton Hall regularly to ensure the last of the work was coming along, and that the servants were preparing the house, which they planned to move into before Louisa's lying in.

Georgiana and Mrs Annesley had begun quietly teaching Mrs Bennet to draw and use paints and charcoal and pastels, and the lady was enjoying the new activity immensely, which made her only hungrier for learning about art. She read voraciously about the artists whose work was displayed in the house. Elizabeth requested a list of all of her art pieces from her other properties, and ordered any books that had been written about those pieces and the artists who created them, to ensure that Mrs Bennet would have new material to read, no matter which of her properties she visited.

Elizabeth attended to her duties to the estate, and began to involve herself more in her business affairs again. Uncle Gardiner had been carrying much of it since Kitty had been taken, and Elizabeth had started no new ventures since then, which was unlike her. Usually, she had two or three new investments in negotiation at any given time, but she could not add to the burden while searching for her sister. Now that new information came but rarely, and always proved false, there seemed to be little reason not to explore a few new companies.

There was hope that the soap tax might be repealed, and if it were, it would make soap much easier for the common man to afford, resulting in not only an improvement in the public health, but also a tremendous surge in profits for

companies that produced soap. There was an earl who was in favour of the repeal, and the man was also an uncanny investor, much like Elizabeth. His father-in-law was a soap manufacturer from New York and Elizabeth was keen to invest in the factory they would build in Bristol.

Lord W_____ also invested heavily in locomotives. Elizabeth invested in the railroad as well, but in a much smaller way, and most of her funds were in shipyards. There were railroads across England moving goods, but they did not go everywhere yet, and although she had ridden on a train a few times, it was not yet a convenient method of travel in her opinion. She found it quite uncomfortable, even in first class. It was fine if you were going between your own properties and London, but Elizabeth found it inconvenient to arrive and not have her carriage or her servants there on the other side. Perhaps one day, when the railroads were more comfortable, and went everywhere, as Elizabeth was sure they would, it would become a more convenient method of travel.

This earl in particular had a good friend and business partner in engineering and locomotives, and they were making impossible amounts of money. Elizabeth had reached out to the man. His father-in-law was due to be in England for the summer, and Elizabeth was hoping for an invitation to one of the nobleman's famously well hosted house parties in Hampshire.

In January, there was an announcement in the obituaries that Captain Miles Spencer had died of a fever that he had caught while in Bath. In February there was an announcement that the Duke of Leeds had married Marianne Spencer nee Dashwood on St Valentine's Day, in Vienna. Elizabeth did not know why she was so shocked by their audacity at marrying so quickly. Several weeks after they had left the country, the clerk they had sent behind the pair had returned with the settlement papers that Leeds had signed at Elizabeth's demand, and assured them that the funds for

Marianne had been placed in trust. In fact, the duke had doubled the amount Elizabeth had demanded that he settle on Marianne, and had deeded to her a large estate in Scotland, a chateau in France, and their vast property in Vienna, proving his devotion to her, and his commitment to providing for her as his duchess.

Leeds had also made provision for his wife's mother and sisters. A letter had reached Delaford Parsonage from Marianne, informing them that Maplewood was now reserved for Mrs Dashwood and Margaret to reside in, at least until the young viscount took it over when he was grown. A dowry of ten thousand pounds had been created for Margaret, and an account created that had quadrupled the amount of Mrs Dashwood's funds, increasing her income. The amount was still a pittance in Elizabeth's opinion, she would have given her mother and sister far more in Marianne's position. In fact, the dowry provided to Marianne by Elizabeth had been twice what Marianne gave Margaret, but nothing Marianne did surprised Elizabeth.

An offer had also been made to Mr Ferrars, offering him the next available living in Leeds' gift which was splendid. Mrs Dashwood and the Ferrars had no idea how to receive these gifts. By doing so, they felt they would be accepting Marianne's behaviour, and though Mrs Dashwood wished to reconcile with her second daughter, she still had concerns for how it might affect poor Margaret and Mr Ferrar's situation, if the truth of Marianne's behaviour became widely known. Elizabeth had advised them not to rush over any decisions, and to think matters over carefully, before accepting anything or offending Marianne or the duke by refusing.

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Pemberley

March 1852

And so, life in Derbyshire continued on until March, when suddenly a battered express letter arrived. The entire household was in the drawing room before dinner. As a rare occurrence, Colonel Brandon was in attendance, looking like a shade of himself as usual. Timothy brought the letter to Elizabeth. It was written in an unfamiliar female hand. "It is an express posted from Ireland," Elizabeth announced, as she opened the letter. After she reviewed its contents, she began to read aloud in a shaking voice.

Wicklow Edge,

County Wicklow, Ireland

Dear Lady Darcy,

The Earl of Clive has died, and there is a lady here, his wife, and I believe she belongs to you. I know not her maiden name, not even her Christian name, she has never spoken it, she is only known in the house as "her ladyship" and she isn't allowed to leave the second floor unaccompanied.

I have encouraged her to write to you, she says you are her sister, but after the letters she wrote when she first came went unanswered, she fell into despair, and believes you have forgotten her. She refuses to try again fearing pain and disappointment. I remembered your direction from seeing it on a letter she wrote when she came. I hope

it is correct. She's been treated well, but she hasn't been allowed to see a soul since she arrived, and he made me give her nerve tonics every day that I do not believe she needs. His lordship's manner was funny when he took the letters from her. I am certain he never meant them to be sent.

She is a kind lady, she taught me to read and write proper and fine like a real lady's maid, and encouraged his lordship to pay me a proper wage so I might help my family survive the famine. I am sure I do not know what will happen to them now. I am using everything I have to send this express, and I will have nothing to give them now to buy food, but the footman Conor has taken over the house, and he has informed no one of his lordship's passing. Just locked the door to the master's apartments, and set himself up as the new master. I know not how long he plans to continue this folly.

I do not believe her ladyship ought to stay here. Conor is a drunkard, and I know not what he plans to do with her, but if she is your sister, you ought to come get her as soon as you can. Eventually he will run through the wine cellar, and the brandy, and then Lord knows what he will do next. She's a right nice lady. I hope you come help her. She has been desperately unhappy since she came, and she says all the time how she misses her sisters.

Your Servant,

Nancy Corrigan

Elizabeth looked up in shock. "Clive," she said to Colonel Brandon in a shaking voice.

"The gambler," he said, staring at the letter as if it would suddenly burst into flames.

Will spoke up. "Is that name familiar, Elizabeth? Is that something important you've

recognized?”

Bingley interjected, “But surely you have received similar letters, hundreds of them, perhaps! What is different about this one?”

Elizabeth took a shaking breath. “When the Queen’s secretary went through the duke’s papers, he found vowels and evidence of calling in a massive debt from a gambler who then killed himself. The gambler was the Earl of Clive’s son.”

“I questioned the son’s wife, his steward, and his parish vicars.” Brandon said, disbelieving. “Even the local priest. I spoke to the mayor, the local spinsters even! His wife insisted that after her husband’s death, the bailiffs never came for them. The family presumed Leeds had his apoplexy before he was able to arrange it. I went to the father’s house in County Wicklow. I was not permitted entrance, but was assured by all who lived nearby that the elderly man was in extremely poor health, and unable to see me. I questioned his parish curate and local priest as well. I searched all the church records! No one knew anything about a new lady who seemed out of place or arrived suddenly! More than half of Ireland is starving to death, half a loaf of bread would be more than enough to compel anyone to turn over their own mother to the devil himself!”

“Clive has property in County Kildare as well, I believe, as well as other locations in England and Ireland.” Darcy informed them. “One is close to the Darcy estate in Ireland. It is possible he married her there, or at one of his other properties.”

Now that the moment had come the entire household was silent in shock. Suddenly Colonel Brandon let out a scream of anguish and frustration, then lifted a small table and hurled it into a mirror hanging upon the wall, destroying the small but priceless trinkets on the shelf before it, and making most of the ladies cry out in alarm.

Elizabeth gave no reaction to this. She fervently wished she could break something as

well. “We have to leave,” she said suddenly. “We have to leave at first light. Will, we must prepare to leave immediately! Richard, will you come? I must speak to Banks and Wilson.”

“I have to leave NOW!” Colonel Brandon rasped. “There is not a moment to be lost! My horse! My horse, immediately man!” He went to the door and called out to the footman in the hall.

“Brandon, be reasonable, it is not even close to the full moon, you must wait until morning,” Richard attempted to reason with his longtime friend, but Brandon was already going to pace in the great hall.

Elizabeth followed and said, “Colonel, let us all go, together! We shall leave at first light! Let us all go to her together!”

“No, no, NO! I must leave this very moment! I need not clothes, nor anything! I have money, I can buy what I need. There is not a moment to lose! I must go now!” Brandon was nearly incoherent as he paced the hall. “My horse!” he bellowed. “Where in the bloody hell is my damned horse!”

Elizabeth turned to another footman, “Run and have them saddle Wilson’s horse as well, and tell them to bring them out at the same time,” she instructed the man. She then ran to her study, opened her strongbox, and removed a purse full of money. She returned to the hall where servants were starting to gather, drawn by the noise and bellowing, and approached Wilson.

“I am sorry that you have no time to pack or prepare. Go with him, Wilson, make sure he is alright, and make the journey as easy and safe as you can. Make sure he does not get himself hurt or killed, and leave messages and horses for us when you can. We shall follow at first light.”

Wilson assured her that it was quite alright, and that he would go unprepared and gladly if it would bring Miss Bennet home. Kitty was the only Miss Bennet in the house. Another servant had made the mistake of calling Lydia Miss Bennet once when she first arrived, and had received the tongue lashing of the century. Lydia refused to step into her sister's name in her absence. When Elizabeth pointed out to Lydia that she had been unfair to the maid because technically, if Kitty was absent, it was natural for society to refer to her as Miss Bennet, Lydia had shrieked that she would not have it, and word had spread among the household quickly.

The horses were brought round, and Elizabeth had also run into the dining room, tied rolls and meat into napkins, and brought them out for the men to carry with them, thankful that the courses had been brought up, as they had had no dinner. Brandon leapt onto his horse without a word of farewell, and tore off into the darkness, Wilson close on his heels.

The family returned indoors, and pandemonium reigned as everyone began talking at once in the great hall. Elizabeth asked the head footman to have the courses and decanters left on the sideboard, and to dismiss the footmen until she rang for them. She then herded the family into the dining room. Banks began directing Sarah and Watson to begin packing for Elizabeth and Darcy, and began arranging for grooms and carriages to be prepared for a journey as he waited for more specific instructions.

The family served themselves, and talked amongst each other and over each other in excitement and apprehension. This was not the first time a line of information had seemed certain. They had been bitterly disappointed many times over, to Elizabeth's despair. When they were all seated, Elizabeth managed to quiet everyone and spoke. "Darcy and I will leave at first light. Richard, Mary, will you accompany us?"

As Mary and Richard agreed immediately, Mrs Bennet spoke up quietly. "I beg your pardon, but I will accompany you."

When Elizabeth argued that Mrs Bennet was a notoriously uncomfortable traveller, the lady shouted her down, for once resembling the shrill woman she had once been. Next Lydia began loudly declaring that she would not be left behind, and that she would go. As Elizabeth, Darcy, and Richard began to explain that if too many came, it would slow the journey, which none of them would wish, Jane began to insist that they must all go together to fetch Kitty home, and that she and Charles were certainly coming too, even if she had to nurse little Catherine in the carriage the entire way.

It was declared by Elizabeth's stepmother and sisters that the decision had been made. They all decided that no one would pack a trunk. They would each pack a small valise with only a few days of travelling clothes, and they would all leave their maids and valets at home, helping each other as they had done at Longbourn. That would make the journey much lighter, leaving the luggage and personal servants behind. Only Jane's nursemaid, Sarah, and Hill would go to help Elizabeth and the ladies care for Kitty, if she needed it. It sounded like a maid was caring for her, but they wanted to bring a few servants from home that Kitty knew well. The maid who had served Kitty when she lived at Pemberley briefly had married a man from her home village, who had been finally given a living.

The men's horses would travel with the outriders, and they would ride with them most of the way, lightening the load on the carriages, and giving Jane privacy for nursing. Elizabeth knew not how they would find accommodations on the road for eight travellers, three personal servants, a dozen outriders and grooms, and one tiny infant.

The next morning arrived, and the family was in the carriages before the dawn. They did not even break their fast, baskets of food and cider having been provided by the kitchens for breakfast and lunch. Georgiana, Charlotte, and Granny had all been there to wave them off, sending all manner of messages for Kitty, and assuring Elizabeth and Darcy of the children's well-being in their absence. The journey took three days, and each night the family had to split up among the available inns in each village due

to them having not sent word ahead. Horses were also a problem. Changes of four horses per carriage at each stop proved nearly impossible, even though Wilson and Brandon had left their horses behind for them at the first stop, and Wilson had reserved as many horses as they could in advance of the party along the road. Elizabeth still purchased several horses from local farmers at more than twice their value in order to obtain what they needed at different stops along the way, and lose no time in their travels.

A few days later, at an estate called Wicklow Edge, in County Wicklow, Ireland, a young lady sat in a chair and looked out of the window over what her husband had proudly called “The Garden of Ireland.” He had been very proud of the lovely scenery, and that at the very least, he could provide a stunning vista for his wife’s artistic enjoyment. Her art studio had been moved from one corner to another of the second floor twice, so that she always had new views to sketch and paint. He had been a kind man, the young lady mused as she sat quietly and contemplated what might happen to her now.

She ought to feel sad about her husband’s demise, but though he had not been cruel, she could not but hope that her freedom might now somehow be secured, though she knew not where she would go. Corrigan kept badgering her to write to her sister, but the young woman had written dozens of letters that had all gone unanswered. Corrigan had sworn she did not believe that the letters had ever been sent, but the young lady could not bear to try again and be disappointed. Her heart could bear no more. If she wrote again and her sisters ignored her, it would be more than she could stand. She knew not what would happen to her next, but anything was better than another bitter disappointment.

One morning, Nancy had come to tell her that her husband had died in his sleep. Later, instead of contacting his solicitors or family, the footman Conor had locked the

doors to the master's suite, and set himself to drinking his way through the wine cellar.

Nancy only left the young woman's rooms when she was sure he was unconscious, to obtain food from the kitchens. She had been terrified to go out and leave the estate to send the express, but she felt she must, before something happened to her ladyship. She had managed to go and return before anything happened; indeed, Conor had been exactly where she left him when she returned. She shuddered to think what might have happened if he had awoken and chosen to go upstairs while she was gone.

Nancy Corrigan hated Conor. There was good reason for her ladyship to feel uncomfortable when he looked at her. Corrigan had physically disabused him of the idea of attempting to harm her or her ladyship on several occasions long before his lordship died. Thankfully, the knowledge she had gained fighting with her brothers when she had been young had served her well. It had been some time since Conor had attempted to put his hands upon her, and she made certain he understood that she would protect her mistress as well. The evil man drank his wages each quarter, and his parents had starved in the famine some time ago, due to his disinterest in helping them.

Corrigan was certain her family would starve as well, and that she would eventually starve with them. They were tenants of the estate, and his lordship had not been a hard master, he had waived the rents since the famine had taken hold. However, he did nothing else to assist his tenants since the worst of the famine had taken hold of the country. The wages of Nancy Corrigan and her two older brothers had been little enough, but they had helped. Now she would have no wages, she had used the last of her funds to send the express, and she was sure that once her ladyship had moved on or been claimed by her family, that she would be unable to find work. With the cost of food being so high, many wealthy families had learned to do for themselves rather than use precious funds to pay or feed servants, and so there was very little work to be had. Often what work there was, was unpaid, for employers considered you to be

fortunate to have the job if they could feed you.

The young lady continued to sit quietly by the window. A horse and a rider, two of them in fact, were coming from very far down the lane, she saw through the looking glass her husband had given her. The riders would take more than another quarter hour to reach the house, even at a gallop. She wondered if they were indeed coming here, and what would happen when they arrived if they were.

Suddenly a pounding began upon her chamber door. She jumped, startled, but it was not the first time it had happened. The footman had pounded upon the door many times over the last days, but usually was too drunk to break it down, and would give up after a few minutes. She knew eventually he would enter the room, and she was terrified of the idea. She knew what he wanted.

This was it. As the footman bellowed angrily and attempted to batter the door down, she knew that he would soon enter the room. She reached under the cushion and found a knife she had taken from a tray and hidden in the cushions. There were many about the apartment. She was even reasonably certain that Nancy had noticed she had taken them on many occasions, and Lord knew what the maid thought she might do with them, but she had said nothing. She was alone in the chamber. Corrigan had left some time ago for food and water, and had yet to return. She was alone. And that horrid man was outside the door.

Eventually after several minutes of the man bellowing and abusing the door, the casing cracked, and the door burst open. She knew not how he even stood up; he was so drunk. She could smell the sour wine and spirits from across the room, and as he made his way across the room towards her, she slid the knife up her sleeve and began to back away, as he came forward, giggling and muttering about how long he had wished to take her. After a moment of circling each other, the drunken footman roared and charged at her.

She thought she might faint from fear, but suddenly she remembered all she had been taught by Miss Carmichael. Her body remembered how to defend itself, and suddenly she was fighting as she never had before. Her hair fell down about her face as she struggled for her life. Conor slammed her into a wall, choking in rage as she punched him hard in the throat, and he gagged, but it had not been hard enough to properly choke him.

Her hand reached out, and she felt the large and heavy oriental vase upon the nearby shelf. She used all of her strength, and brought the vase crashing down upon his head. He staggered away. She knew not how he was still conscious after the blow she had caused to his head, but somehow, he was still upon his feet, though bleeding profusely. She had lost the knife. It had been idiotic of her to believe she was skilled enough to use it to defend herself. She was not Lizzy!

As she cursed her own stupidity, she looked about desperately, searching for something else to use to defend herself when suddenly there was a shockingly loud bang, and there was Corrigan, standing in the doorway, holding a smoking pistol.

The women stood for a moment in shock, watching blood pool about the man on the floor. Suddenly she could taste bile, and felt as if she might lose the contents of her stomach. She stumbled toward the window. The riders. Where were they? Were they coming here? She no longer needed the looking glass to see them. They appeared to be coming toward the manor at a gallop. Suddenly she thought for a moment that one, no both of them, seemed vaguely familiar, but they were not close enough to see their faces under their hats, even with the looking glass. Suddenly another wave of nausea washed over her, and she retched, trying desperately to gain control of her stomach.

Desperate suddenly to feel fresh air and sun upon her face, she pushed past Corrigan, who made no effort to stop her. She knew not where to go, following her instincts as

she fled down the stairs, and pushed her way out of the front door into the sunlight. Corrigan followed. As she stumbled into the park, she fell to her hands and knees, gasping as if she had never tasted air before. Corrigan was sobbing as she fell to her knees as well, and put her arms about the woman she had served for more than two years. “Your ladyship... It will be alright... It will be alright...”

“Do not call me that anymore, Corrigan,” The young woman breathed as she tasted the air of freedom for the first time in far too long. “It is not my name.”

“But you’ve never told me your name, ma’am,” Corrigan hiccupped.

She stood and turned around as hoofbeats thundered up the drive, and there he was. With her sister’s servant following close on his heels. It was him. For hundreds of nights, when she had dreamed of being rescued, it was always him. She had somehow known that if she was ever saved, he would be there. And here he was. He leapt off his horse and raced to her. “Catherine!” As he cupped her face the two fell to their knees, and tears rolled down his face and hers as he said, “Catherine. I am sorry. I was here a year and a half ago. I questioned everyone. The vicar, the priest. The footman. Did he hurt you? You look like you’ve been hurt. Catherine... Darling Kitty, please, tell me... Are you hurt?”

“Catherine! Your name is Catherine!” Corrigan cried, and suddenly the two women were hugging and sobbing, and Nancy Corrigan was begging her forgiveness for her part in the matter, and Kitty was shushing her and thanking her for all of her kindness, when she could have been quite cruel if she had wished to be.

“Your name is Catherine!” Corrigan laughed and cried all at once. Kitty stood and held out her hand to help the maid up.

“Call me Kitty, Corrigan,” she replied. “My name is Kitty Bennet.” And suddenly she felt it all wash away. No longer was she ‘the young lady’ or ‘her ladyship’ or ‘the

mistress.' Finally, she could once again be Kitty Bennet. She turned back to Colonel Brandon, "How?" she asked hoarsely. She had barely used her voice for years, as she had sat quietly in her chair by the window, there had rarely been reason to talk. Already in just a few moments, she had spoken more than she had all month.

"Your maid," Brandon gestured to the girl. "Your sister received an express at Pemberley from your maid, she used all her funds to send it, believing Clive had never sent the others you wrote."

Again, Kitty and Corrigan were laughing, crying, and hugging one another. Even Wilson received a well-deserved hug for all the miles he had spent on the road for two years in search of her, and the servant struggled to maintain a dry eye. After a few moments, when the ladies had begun to collect themselves, Brandon inquired about the cause of the bruises and injuries to Kitty's face, and the ladies related the events of the last several days, particularly the last half hour, to the men.

Brandon decided not to enter the house without the magistrate. He did not wish to be accused of tampering. Nancy assured him that there were no servants left, there had only been a cook and two other maids. They all left except herself and Conor when Clive had died. They had stolen all the food they could carry, but Nancy had managed to steal the cook's keys to the larder, and hid them the moment she heard of his lordship's death, and that is what had saved them from starvation. She already had the housekeeper's keys in her possession since the woman had been sent away some time ago.

Conor had stayed so drunk, Nancy had found she could keep him from forcing entry to the larder simply by leaving the wine cellar open and leaving a reasonable amount of food out on a table in the kitchens each day. As long as the man had ample wine and enough to eat when he remembered to do so, he did not care. He spent his days and nights drinking as much as he possibly could, and packing his Lordship's treasures in chests that he dragged downstairs from the attics, to be loaded onto the

master's carriage, and taken with him when the brandy and food ran out and he made his escape. Nancy had no idea what horses he planned to take, if it were not for her going out each day to feed and water the poor beasts, they would be dead by the time Conor remembered them, and because she could not take them out or exercise them, she was certain they were in a lamentable state, but she had done what she could to keep them from starving in their stalls due to Conor's drunkenness.

There was no one to refer to on the estate, no steward, no butler, not even a hall boy. Nancy decided the best way forward would be to lead Wilson to her father's house, which was a few miles away. Her father sent the likeliest pair of her younger brothers running to the magistrate's estate. Wilson was quite appalled by the state of Nancy's family, but at the same time, he had been horrified ever since he had entered Ireland. The famine had raged for four years, and the sight of so many starving people was worse than appalling. There were no words for it.

Thankfully Nancy's family were in somewhat better shape than those they had previously seen. He and Brandon had not eaten a bite since leaving the ship a day ago. How could you put food to your mouth, a well fed, healthy man, while making eye contact with someone who was near death? Surrounded by dying children? The ship captain had insisted upon them each taking a large sack of food with them. They had both given it all away on the journey, Brandon holding back a small portion in case Kitty was starving also when she was found.

Nancy's father returned with them to the manor, where Brandon and Catherine were patiently waiting and talking in the gardens like they might never have another opportunity. Eventually the boys returned hanging from the back of the magistrate's carriage. The man stepped down, and Brandon introduced himself, then gave a brief explanation of events, minus the bit about Kitty being sold to the earl or having been missing for two years.

The magistrate questioned the maid, who affirmed that his lordship had died, the only

footman had locked his body in his chamber, and set to drinking and taking over the house. The only other servants had fled in fear, and Nancy had written to her ladyship's family, and later shot the footman in defence of her mistress, with his lordship's pistol.

After seeing poor Kitty's bruises, tumbled hair, and battered gown, the magistrate seemed to accept this story, and entered the house with the gentlemen, while Kitty and Nancy waited with Mr Corrigan in the garden. Kitty had no desire to return to the house ever again. The gentlemen were gone for some time, but when they finally returned, they agreed that everything they had observed corroborated with the story that had been given. The magistrate said there would be no inquest, and invited them to stay at his home for the night. Thankfully, Kitty would not need to return to the house, and Elizabeth's party was invited to stay as well when they arrived.

The magistrate seemed delighted to host an earl and countess, but was slightly concerned that they might find the hospitality lacking, because like most households, they had dismissed many of their servants, and meals were heavily rationed for all. Kitty assured him that her sister, while not being mean in any way, was quite practical, and that anyone travelling with her would know their way around making their own bed, and would find whatever fare that was available, acceptable. Indeed, she also had been accustomed to plain and simple fare at the manor.

Kitty knew of the famine, though she had seen none of it, never leaving the estate. The earl had not helped his tenants other than waiving the rents, but neither did he even attempt to waste funds eating decadently during the crisis. She did not remember the journey here, but Nancy had told her much about the blight. Kitty was still shocked at the sight of Nancy's father and little brothers. The magistrate instructed Nancy's father to empty the larder and distribute the food to as many families on the estate as it would stretch.

When the Darcys and their family arrived in Liverpool, Elizabeth learned that Wilson

had the presence of mind to drag Brandon to her shipyard and obtain passage on one of her own ships. A captain was waiting for her party and once he received word from the boys he had watching the roads for them, he presented himself at the inn and assured Elizabeth that he had one of her fastest ships waiting to conduct her party personally to Dublin. Captain Eugene Harrison had not anticipated such a large party to be travelling, but once he had obtained all of the particulars, he returned to the shipyard, assuring Elizabeth that all was well in hand to depart on the very next tide. Darcy and Richard had to admit that being married to an industry and shipping tycoon had its merits.

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While onboard the ship, the ladies were encouraged to stay in their cabins for safety, but Elizabeth insisted on staying above decks and staring out from the railing. Eventually, Will came to her and inquired if anything was the matter. “You would think I would be overjoyed to be going to Kitty. But... though it is probably only right that I go see what has been done, I find that I am apprehensive about seeing what has been wrought by us in Ireland.”

“Elizabeth, what on earth do you mean?” Darcy asked, feeling alarmed.

“You have seen the newspapers. How the army is going to end the famine by ceasing to remove foodstuffs and crops from Ireland, Will.” At his nod, she continued, “Have you not asked yourself what they were doing removing crops and food from a nation that has been starving to death for four years?” Her husband began to look shocked as she went on. “Well, the question did occur to me, and so I wrote to Her Majesty about it when I read it in The Times. Her reply came a few days before the express. She ended it, Will, when it was brought to her attention. Everyone knew that there was a terrible crop failure, an infection of the potato. It was apparently an open secret that the government was using the crop failures as an excuse for the regiments to take the healthy crops from the very people that were starving to death while growing them, never leaving them enough to keep themselves fed. They saw it as a solution to the overpopulation in Ireland, and the deaths could be blamed on the famine. One politician actually argued that they could not cease yet, that enough Irish had not yet died to solve the overpopulation crisis. Our army has been taking all the foodstuffs from Ireland for years, and watching them die in the streets, all the while calling them lazy. And taking the spoils home on ships that I built, or refurbished.”

Darcy gasped as Elizabeth continued. “Do you know how much money we have

made from those ships, Will?" Her husband nodded, turning green. He kept abreast of all his wife's business, just as she did with all the business of Pemberley.

"You do not only build those ships, Elizabeth. You build and repair ships all over England. For the navy, for importers, and merchants. They go all over the world. You did not do this, Elizabeth. You did not set out to build ships that would go out pirating," Darcy attempted to reason.

"I still profited, Will. We became millionaires nearly overnight when I signed that contract with the navy, and have only made more and more since. It makes me wish to sell the shipyards entirely! I have no wish to be associated with them anymore. I can make more with locomotives."

"I thought you wished to do both," Darcy said.

"I did, but now I am less sure," Elizabeth answered, not meeting his eye.

"And when some government elsewhere begins to use railroads to commit a terrible crime, as will surely happen one day, will you turn away from locomotives as well?" Will asked, turning her chin toward him. "You did not do this, Elizabeth. Perhaps we owe some restitution. We can still attempt to help now. And when we go, we will learn what is needed. You will have firsthand knowledge of how to help."

Elizabeth calmed a bit, knowing he was correct. She might as well have blamed the horses for killing Christopher, if she was going to blame her shipyards for the famine. But Will was correct. She must do something to help now. She was ready to learn what she must do.

The voyage took more than twelve hours, and poor Mrs Bennet was quite green and

weak with sickness by the end of it. She would not, however, hear of being left at the hotel with Mrs Hill. She would go and be with her family when her daughter was found. She travelled the rest of the way holding a bucket in her lap in the carriage. She ate and drank nothing, as it would only come back up again. But she made nary a complaint, because she was going to her dear Kitty.

Elizabeth cringed each time they passed through a town. She could not bear to see the starving people in the streets. She cringed at how afraid the people were of the officers, who seemed to be everywhere. After a day and a half on the roads, where few of the travellers could bear to eat while watching what was happening around them, they finally arrived at Wicklow Edge. Elizabeth and Darcy were both ill from all they had seen. There were two grooms on horses waiting when they arrived. One bade them follow him to Glenholme, the home of the magistrate, while the other took off ahead at a gallop to alert the house.

Every heart was in every throat as they made their way to Glenholme. Absolutely everyone was apprehensive. They were all raging to see Kitty, but would it truly be her, or would it be another contrivance? Or, almost as bad, what if she were profoundly altered, or hurt, or had been abused? What if she had been starved along with most of this poor country? Fears abounded inside the carriage with the women, but Elizabeth reminded them, the letter said she had been treated kindly. What was kindly? Mrs Bennet wanted to know. Kind would have been to leave her at home with her mother, she sniffed.

And then suddenly they were there, and Kitty was there, looking rather bruised, but smiling radiantly and holding hands with Colonel Brandon! Kitty positively howled with tears as she realised every one of her sisters and mother had rushed across England and the icy waters to fetch her. And Jane! Jane and Charles were here! Kitty had often wondered if Jane had ever returned to England, or if their travels would be successful, and here was little Catherine Elizabeth! Kitty held the little one and sobbed over her, hardly believing her family was here, and she was going home.

Even Mrs Hill had come!

The moment between Mrs Bennet and Kitty was the most poignant. Only they had been there that terrible day. Hill might have been in the house, but only Mrs Bennet and Kitty had been in the drawing room with the terrible man who spoke in her father's voice and wore her father's clothes, yet seemed to have become the very devil himself. Only they remembered that terrifying moment when Kitty had been dragged from the drawing room screaming for her mother. Mrs Bennet heard it play over and over every night in her nightmares and was certain she would never recover.

The party was finally introduced to their host and his family, and Elizabeth put her hostess at ease as they entered the house. The magistrate and his wife were generosity itself for taking them in under the circumstances. Elizabeth assured the woman that any accommodations whatsoever would be eminently acceptable and appreciated. The party sat, and Brandon and Kitty made everyone aware of the events that occurred since the death of the Earl of Clive.

The ladies exclaimed over the frightening parts, and the gentlemen marvelled over the courage of the maid. Kitty informed Elizabeth that Corrigan must return to England as her maid, and Brandon had gone over with Wilson to look over Mr Corrigan's farm. The man was obviously a hard worker, though he had little to work with due to his circumstances, and Brandon had offered the man a tenancy on his estate as well as passage to England. Charles had promised work for his older sons at Tatton Hall, if they cared to leave their current employment to follow their family. Circumstances in Ireland being what they were, there was little chance that they would not accept.

The magistrate then turned the matter to business. The bodies of the dead had been removed from Wicklow Edge. The footman had been buried, and the earl's body was in the rectory, there being no family or servants to sit with it at Wicklow Edge. The earl was attended by the curates. The magistrate had alerted the earl's daughter-in-

law, and had arranged for the local solicitor to visit the following day, after the earl's funeral. The daughter-in-law was not expected to attend, travel was difficult and dangerous in Ireland now. The solicitor would send a clerk to visit her to inform her of any mention in the earl's will.

The following day, the men attended the funeral. Later, Elizabeth and Darcy sat with Kitty, who the solicitor had insisted be present, and Brandon, whom Kitty insisted be present, as the will was read. The Earl of Clive's line had ended. He had no other sons, and there were no nephews or male cousins, so the title would revert to the crown. None of his properties were entailed, and so the will was set forth as such. The earl owned three decent sized estates in Ireland, in counties Wicklow, Kildare, and Limerick, one estate in England, houses in London and Dublin, and there was a fortune of just over two hundred thousand pounds. His daughter-in-law had already inherited the estate she lived on from her husband, and her portion was now secure. Each of his three granddaughters were left an estate in Ireland, and fifty thousand pounds. Kitty was left the English estate of six thousand a year, Shannon View, near a sea town called Sanditon, his house in London, and fifty thousand pounds. There was also a small bequest for Conor; Nancy received one hundred pounds, and other small amounts and trinkets were left to old friends, neighbours, and assorted retainers. Kitty was aghast that he had left her anything at all. "Why would he leave me anything? I do not understand."

The solicitor pulled off his spectacles and polished them with his handkerchief, considering what he was about to say carefully and took a breath. "Lady Clive, his lordship was not only my client, he was also my oldest friend, and we shared a tutor as boys. I have known him as long as anyone. A few months ago, when he updated his will was when I learned of your existence, he hid you exceedingly well. I have been in this house a hundred times since you arrived, and never suspected your presence. Even the magistrate did not know of your existence, and feared you were an imposter until I assured him that I knew of you.

“Clive shared with me that he had no desire to marry you. His first union was not a love match at first, but soon became one. His wife, a wonderful and kind woman, was irreplaceable. But his daughter-in-law stood to lose nearly everything. He could have just sent his son’s family to another of his estates, and given his daughter-in-law an income, and might have done, but the Duke of Leeds was a ruthless man. Clive did not put it past him to drown you somewhere if he refused him. He knew that if he took you, he could at the very least ensure your safety and comfort.

“I asked him then, why did he not return you to your family when he knew the duke was dead, but he was ashamed and embarrassed to have been part of the affair, and feared your sister might ruin him somehow. He had been through much since he lost his wife. All he wished for was peace, and not to be disturbed until he joined her. It was selfish, but that is why he never sent you home or sent your letters. He did not wish his last years to be a torment or an embarrassment. He had not believed he would live so long, in any case. But he left you this legacy in acknowledgement of his debt. He wished to know you would live in comfort, regardless of your family’s wealth. He told me he hoped you would accept the legacy, for he had stolen a piece of your youth, and he felt he owed it to you, even though he had tried to treat you with kindness and respect.”

“And he did. I cannot deny it,” Kitty bowed her head, in tears for the man she had barely even spoken to. “I never wanted to marry him, and every moment I was in his house, all I wanted was to go home. But he was always kind. Never imposed himself upon me in any way. He was generous with books and art supplies and anything he thought might bring me comfort. He even educated my maid so that she might play the instrument for my amusement. I was rather unkind to him. I believe I barely spoke a hundred words to him in all of two years.”

Later that day, Elizabeth walked with Kitty in the garden. Kitty informed Elizabeth that she intended to marry Colonel Brandon. “You have a dowry for me, do you not? Perhaps it is no longer necessary, Lizzy, considering my new fortune. You should

keep it for your own children. How much can one woman spend?" Elizabeth had advised her to keep the properties, and Kitty had decided she would, and for now the properties would be managed by Montague.

"Will Colonel Brandon not have anything to say about that?" Elizabeth asked.

Kitty smiled. Two days before, while they had waited for Nancy and Wilson to return with her father and the magistrate, she and Colonel Brandon had much to speak of in the gardens at Wicklow Edge. After listening intently to Brandon as he poured out the story of her family's search for her, Kitty had taken his hand and asked, "Christopher, will you marry me?"

When he had gaped at her in shock, she squeezed his hand and said, "I know we have barely courted, but I felt something when I was with you before I went away. Every time I have dreamed of being rescued, I was saved by you. And now you are here. I thought perhaps you felt it too. I thought it might be why you came. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you are only being a good friend to my sister and brother."

"How can you say that?" Brandon gasped. "Of course. Of course I feel it. Of course I save you every night in my dreams. But are you sure? It is too soon. You should wait a while. You were supposed to have your season. I was prepared to wait. Your sister-

"

"Will not be happy, I know," Kitty chuckled. "We shall have to have a long engagement to soothe her. Six months will need to be enough, though. It would be lovely indeed to be an autumn bride at Pemberley, do you not agree?"

Brandon agreed wholeheartedly, and Kitty assured him that she had no desire for something as silly as a season now. Who has a season after being married for two years? It was too ridiculous for words. She was now twenty-one, she could marry as she liked.

Kitty related the content of their conversation to Elizabeth and assured her, she had already spoken to Brandon, and he was not expecting her to come with one hundred thousand pounds. Brandon was wealthy in his own right. Delaford was an estate of eight thousand a year, and there was also a house in town, and two smaller estates for younger sons. He also had a generous fortune in the percents, and Kitty would come with an enormous dowry. They had agreed the London house left by Clive would be leased and might one day be given to a younger son. For now, Shannon View in Sanditon would be kept vacant for their use, and the Brandons would now have a seaside retreat as well as a country one.

After hearing Kitty's rationalisations carefully, Elizabeth assured her that she had no intention of keeping her dowry. "How could that possibly be fair, Kitty? I shall treat you as I have each of my sisters, and of course you should not forfeit your dowry just because you inherited something."

Elizabeth met the next morning with the local vicar, the Catholic priest, the magistrate, and his wife, regarding what was needed most, and how the people of Ireland could be helped. She was obliged to chastise the vicar when he was less than gracious about the priest's attendance, and then threw him out altogether when she learned he was using food as a way to make Catholics convert their faith. She railed at the man, and vowed to write to his bishop. She made lists of the needs of the people and began planning what she would do when she returned to England.

She was grateful that Captain Harrison had insisted that they take two covered wagons full of food with them. A portion of the first wagon had been distributed to people along their journey. Elizabeth was grateful now that she could replace what their party was consuming, because she knew their hosts had been unprepared for such a large party of visitors. What remained in the second wagon was distributed to their hosts as well as the tenants upon their property, and the tenants at Wicklow Edge, in the hopes of sustaining them until the earl's granddaughter or her guardian took charge of the estate. The housekeeper at Glenholme had taken Mrs Bennet's

travelling sickness in hand, giving her a tonic that helped tremendously. The kind woman had given them more than enough for the journey home, and the receipt for future travels. Mrs Bennet felt much better by the time they left Glenholme, and suffered very little on the return journey. She was excited that she now would be much more inclined to travel extensively, and Elizabeth and Jane promised to provide the means for her to do so. Elizabeth had already gifted her a carriage, and she was still using the horses in Elizabeth's stables, but Charles and Jane promised her a handsome matched pair of her own, and the funds to maintain them and employ her own groom.

Darcy had informed Elizabeth that since they were already in Ireland, he wished to visit his estate there. Elizabeth agreed wholeheartedly. If there were people they were responsible for in this accursed country, they must be sure they had what they needed with their own eyes. Darcy had known about the famine since the beginning, of course, and had been sending funds to his Irish steward to ensure his tenants were fed.

What they found when they arrived at Hazeldene in County Kildare was not an estate provided for by its master. Hazeldene was supposed to be a thriving and extensive horse breeding estate, whose steeds were under contract to be purchased by the militia, yet there was not a single horse to be found. There was supposed to be a fully staffed manor, yet all they found at the house was one elderly housekeeper whom Darcy had pensioned off years ago. The loyal retainer had returned to the manor from her little cottage when the current housekeeper and servants had abandoned the place.

Darcy, his face forbidding, mounted his horse with his rifle and went with Richard, Brandon, and several outriders to the steward's house. The man was found in a house full of food, with a trunk full of money for the horses he had illegally sold, and the sale of so many had lined his pockets handsomely. He had kept all of the money

meant to purchase hay and oats for the horses, all the wages meant to pay the stable hands and house staff, all the money for food for the tenants. The horses were long gone. The steward had been planning to load his carriage with trunks of food and money and flee, and Darcy had come just in time to catch him.

They went to the farm of a longtime trusted tenant, hoping for an account of what had happened and when. What they found was a man half out of his mind with starvation, whose wife and two of his children were dead, and who lunged at Darcy, raving and understandably murderous. The man had been subdued, and word was sent back to the house to send for food to be distributed to the tenants. Elizabeth had realised before their arrival that what they had brought would not be enough, and had sent a man and some outriders back to Dublin when the family was on their way to Hazeldene, with a request that Captain Harrison procure whatever was available in the way of foodstuffs and send it back to them. Elizabeth sent what they had, with a message that more would arrive hopefully very soon.

Darcy had to send for the militia, because the majority of the horses that had been stolen had already been paid for by the army. That meant the steward had stolen the army's horses, not Darcy's. Stealing a private horse would get you hung. Stealing dozens of steeds from the army would get you hung twice over. The colonel did not even hesitate. There was no hearing, no trial, no tribunal. The steward was hung forthwith, and the militia began to be very intimidating. Darcy owed the army horses, and horses, the army would have immediately, or there would be consequences. The colonel refused to accept the money in the trunks as payment, claiming that it was "evidence" and confiscating it. The colonel was emboldened by having been among the Irish for so long, that he forgot he was attempting to intimidate an English peer, not an Irish one.

Darcy was ready to write a bank draft for the amount the militia was owed, but the regiment did not need money, they needed horses. Eventually, after the colonel had attempted to extort Darcy for five times the amount the army had paid, and even

began to suggest Darcy might be hung along with his steward, the two colonels with Darcy had put on their booming military voices and began to intimidate the colonel in return, promising to contact General Bradley, and that Her Majesty would hear of this. For a moment Darcy thought the over puffed young colonel would hang the lot of them, but eventually the colonel realised he could not summarily hang an earl and his friends, and then expect the war office to believe they had been stealing horses on their own land. He left Hazeldene, making threats and promising to return with a battalion of soldiers to imprison the Darcys for their crimes.

When Elizabeth learned of this, she immediately insisted that the entire family board their carriages and leave immediately. Darcy had balked, insisting he must stay to help his tenants, but Elizabeth promised him that their servants were returning with wagons of food and that they could send more help when they returned to English soil, but she felt unsafe in a country full of soldiers that felt empowered to take people and hang them, or shoot them in the street and ask questions later, if they even asked questions at all. If the colonel's regiment returned seeking excessive reparations, Elizabeth had no intention of her family being anywhere near Ireland. Richard advised Darcy to listen to her. He and Brandon had sold their commissions. Their voices boomed like the colonels they had been, and they retained their titles out of respect for their service, but they had no more military power. Richard confided in Darcy that he was troubled by the accounts of the lawlessness and unaccountability of the regiments here. "It makes me quite grateful to have sold my commission."

The family immediately boarded their carriages. Poor Jane and Mrs Bennet were overcome with exhaustion, but the family headed back to Dublin. They met their servant on the road early on the second day, and instructed him to take some more of the outriders with him to distribute the food to the tenants, and gave him funds for passage home. The Darcys were returning forthwith to England and Elizabeth would not delay. After two days on the road, the Darcys arrived in Dublin and presented themselves to Captain Harrison. Elizabeth thanked the Lord, she had pushed the grooms and horses relentlessly, but she was determined to get away from this place

before something dreadful happened to her family.

The family made themselves comfortable in their cabins as they awaited the tide. Shortly before they were to sail, there was a knock upon the door of Elizabeth and Darcy's cabin. As she opened the door, Captain Harrison was there, looking apologetic and afraid, with two armed soldiers behind him. He coughed, "Lady Darcy, I beg your pardon, but there is a regiment here that says that Lord Darcy is a fugitive from justice, ma'am."

"Do they have a warrant, then?" Elizabeth challenged.

"They do not need warrants here, ma'am. The citizens of Ireland are beneath such concerns. The army does what it wants here, with very little oversight or consequences. They have boarded the ship, and I have no means to prevent them," the captain said, his voice shaking.

Elizabeth screamed as the officers pushed her and the captain aside and entered the cabin in search of Darcy. More soldiers filled the ship, pushing into cabins, shoving the terrified Bennet ladies aside roughly with their rifles. Richard and Colonel Brandon were quickly subdued by the officers and their rifles. Darcy came forward and said, "Hiding is beneath me. Do what you must, gentlemen."

Darcy was dragged from the ship and put in irons. Elizabeth pushed forward and demanded to speak with the colonel, then demanded to know by what right he took custody of a peer.

"Peer or no Peer, he is a fugitive from justice. He and his steward stole fifty horses that the army paid for, and stealing horses is a hanging offence. Then to make matters worse, he fled." The colonel said pompously.

"The horses were stolen by the steward. You knew that. We were the ones who

reported the crime. He stole from us as well, and our tenants, and you were more than repaid when you seized and kept the trunks of money and food from his house. We were returning to London to discuss the matter with the war office. Our contract is with them, not your regiment. You have not the authority to decide such matters, nor to determine the amount of repayment. My husband attempted to pay you, even after you seized the money, and you decided you must extort him. Five times what had been originally paid!" Elizabeth raged.

"And he will wish for the rest of his short life that he had paid it, instead of fleeing the country," the colonel retorted arrogantly.

"You wanted the money. I will pay it." Elizabeth announced. As she wrote the bank draft she muttered and swore angrily, and then handed it to the colonel. "Thank you, Lady Darcy," the colonel said cordially. "Take him away!" He shouted to his men.

"I've just paid you! You are holding a bank draft for over nineteen thousand pounds! You have what you wanted!" Elizabeth screamed hysterically, fighting and shoving to reach her husband.

"There is no fine or forgiveness for running from justice, Lady Darcy. Lord Darcy must face a trial," the young colonel smirked. Richard and Brandon swore and cursed the officer as they were held down by his men.

"Then I will go with him," Elizabeth insisted, pushing herself forward.

"No, you will NOT!" Darcy screamed, fighting and struggling against his bonds. "Elizabeth, get back on the ship! Elizabeth, I ABSOLUTELY INSIST!"

"I will not permit him to go without me. If he is guilty of a crime, then so am I," Elizabeth insisted, her voice trembling.

“I care not. Take her then. We will charge her as well. Horse Stealing, Obstruction of Justice, and Bribing an Official! Take her with him!” Colonel Davis barked with a laugh. Brandon and Richard fought savagely, along with the captain, and the ladies shrieked and cried on the deck.

“Captain! Get them home and return for us!” Elizabeth cried. “Richard! Get to the general!”

Darcy raged and scolded Elizabeth as they were dragged away. They were taken to the military barracks, and put into a stone cell. A room the likes of which Elizabeth had never seen in her life, but she sat down quietly on a wooden bench, grateful it was only the two of them in the cell, as her husband spun about and turned on her.

“How could you!” Darcy shouted. “How could you do this!” he paced back and forth across the room rapidly, his head in his hands. “I have stood quietly for years, and never once imposed my will upon you, Elizabeth, but the one time! The one time I made a demand! How could you? What will you do if they decide to hang us? The chances of us being allowed to go free now are non-existent, that colonel knows we will ruin him if we return home! Who will raise our children?” he bellowed in a justifiably terrible rage.

“Mary and Richard, of course. As we put in our wills,” Elizabeth whispered. She believed her husband was correct, and she might have gone too far this time. She could not get him out if she were in here with him, though she trusted Richard’s and her captain’s connections. Banks knew who to speak to in Liverpool as well. Her shipyards were always crawling with officers, naval men, admirals, generals, and men from the government, many of whom lived or worked in Liverpool. Her shipyard and Banks would know who was nearby, and could be contacted. It might not help, however, if the ship had to first cross the channel and come back. They might be hanged before help arrived.

But she could not bear to have Will pulled away from her. She must go where he went, even to the noose. She sat quietly and shivered on the bench. Darcy stood as close as possible to the small slit in the wall that provided some light and air, arms crossed, and ignored her for some time before he gave up. He came over and put his coat around her shoulders, then sat next to her on the bench and held her. They did not speak, just sat together quietly, attempting to bring one another comfort, for several hours. After nearly twelve hours, an officer brought them some bread and water, and left again without speaking to them. They slept upright upon the bench, leaning upon each other. Elizabeth refused to lay upon the straw in the corner, fearing rats.

Nearly twenty-seven hours after they had been taken, in an office in another part of the barracks, a judge was pacing back and forth in front of Colonel Davis. “You cannot mean to tell me that you have Lord and Lady Darcy of all people in a cell here? What are the charges? Are you crazy, man? Of course, the other judges refused. You are ruined, boy! Have you any idea who the woman is? I cannot bring a charge against her. Where is she? Consider the charges dropped, you idiot. Apologise and let her go, and pray she doesn’t destroy you. You are finished, boy. In fact, I have no wish to be ruined with you. Where are they? Do you realise we have no ships to sail upon without this woman? She’s built or refitted the entire damned naval fleet!”

Ten minutes later, the door to the cell opened and the judge came in. “Lord and Lady Darcy. I beg your pardon. I have no idea how you came to be here, but allow me to have you conducted to my home. You may rest safely there until you obtain passage back to England.”

Elizabeth and Darcy followed the man gratefully as he ranted about the colonel’s idiocy. “Whatever will his general say, that’s what I want to know. Of course it’s impossible, everything he said. No one would believe it in a thousand years. What do you mean you paid him? You paid an exorbitant sum that he demanded, and then he arrested you anyway? Heaven and earth. That boy is finished. What are these

regiments coming to? This is what comes from promoting these young bucks too high!”

The judge put Elizabeth and Darcy in his own carriage, accompanied by his servant, and sent them to his home with a letter for his wife. Then he called for a pair of guards to apprehend the colonel. His general would have questions about the money, and there might be charges. The man was taken into custody before leaving the barracks, and placed in the same cell Elizabeth and Darcy had been held in.

Elizabeth and Darcy spoke little as they were plunged into baths, fed, and put to bed. The events of the last days had been beyond shocking, and the fear of hanging, combined with their conditions, had exhausted them. Having eaten little since entering the country had not helped their strength. When Elizabeth eventually woke twelve hours later, Will was sitting next to her bed, as he had been so many times since they wed. He was impeccably shaved, dressed, and waiting. Wilson was downstairs, he related, and Richard and Banks had returned with an admiral and a major general.

Colonel Davis had been arrested. Finally, had the reports of him burning manor houses and estates to the ground and then claiming the executed owners had obstructed justice and prevented him from carrying out his duties been investigated. Upon learning that Elizabeth’s bank draft had been deposited in the colonel’s bank, they investigated further and learned that he had extorted large sums of money from those other landowners as well. There would be a military hearing, and the colonel would hang.

When Elizabeth finally boarded her ship again, Captain Harrison told her, “Sadly, it will change nothing. He is not the first, nor will he be the last. The army abuses their position relentlessly in Ireland. He will be made an example of because he was exposed. Then they will continue to look the other way. If the judge had listened to him, you might have been hanged before we could return for you, but fortunately, he

feared your title, and the anger of Her Majesty. There are many such as the colonel here.”

Elizabeth and Darcy’s family had waited for them in Liverpool, and Elizabeth insisted upon starting for home immediately. They had been gone long enough, and Elizabeth wanted to see her children. Jane had been travelling with her infant for too long, and Elizabeth could not wait to bring Kitty home to Pemberley.

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Elizabeth and Darcy spent one week at Pemberley, and then set out on the roads again with the Fitzwilliams and their children. Elizabeth, to go to London and Buckingham House to speak with Her Majesty about what she had observed, as well as discuss with Montague and her uncle about what she could do for the people in Ireland. Darcy, to speak to the other men in Parliament about what had nearly befallen him, and to put pressure on the war office (along with Richard) to hold the army accountable for their crimes in Ireland.

Darcy and Richard were ignored on both counts. Men in parliament cared nothing for the Irish, nor did the war office care what crimes their officers committed there. They refused to accept that there was a larger issue, insisting that the matter with Colonel Davis was an isolated incident. Elizabeth had not been able to recover her nineteen thousand pounds, not that it concerned her overly, and the war office still expected Darcy to repay their money for the stolen horses, even though Lord and Lady Darcy had already paid Colonel Davis, who was the army's acting agent at the time of the theft.

Elizabeth was disgusted and gave them what they wanted, and then began to seriously consider the sale of her shipyards again. She was beginning to get a sour taste from doing business with the war office. Eventually, Her Majesty convinced her not to do so, but Elizabeth did not like it. She and Darcy had received an invitation from Lord W_____, to attend the house party Elizabeth had been hoping to attend. After her negotiations there, she would reconsider the matter.

What did ease her mind was her efforts to send aid to Ireland. She made arrangements with her uncle to import enormous amounts of rice, macaroni, oats, corn, and grain to be delivered to Ireland and distributed in each county. It would be done on a quarterly

basis, in the amount of one hundred thousand pounds per year, for three years. She learned nearly immediately that this was not going to work. Lord and Lady Darcy learned to their chagrin almost immediately that the law against the army removing foodstuffs and crops from Ireland did not prevent the redistribution of such goods. The army could not take the food off the island, but they could still take it from the people who grew it, forbid them from selling it at a profit, or even just confiscating it entirely and sending the goods to any other location within the country they chose.

Worse, Ireland's own wealthy businessmen and educated men were often corrupt, taking from their own poor, and redistributing food or any other goods they chose with impunity. After two quarters, Elizabeth learned that most of what she was sending was being confiscated by both the army and privateers. She and Darcy were obliged to contact wealthy Irish noblemen to their cause. Each shipment of food had to be guaranteed safe conduct by Her Majesty, and Her Majesty had to send her own guard to escort the goods to the noblemen, who would distribute the food around their counties. If the food entered the country without The Queen's Guard, her own army would confiscate it on the roads no matter what paperwork signed by which generals accompanied it. On a few occasions, the men who escorted it had disappeared entirely, and they were thought to have been murdered.

Hazeldene's breeding program was closed until Ireland had recovered from the famine. It could not be reopened for horse breeding without Darcy's oversight, and Elizabeth would not hear of him returning to the island after their experiences. The tenants remained, free of rent, and a new steward was sent. Seed and everything required to farm would be provided for three years, the same amount of time Elizabeth had promised food aid for the country. Darcy had warned the tenants to farm and work as hard as they were able, because at the end of the three years, they would be expected to have recovered, be thriving and to pay rent again as long as the crops had been sound.

Eventually, Richard and Mary returned to Kent. There was word that the building

was nearly complete. The only thing left was to finish and decorate the manor, and Mary was keen to get started. Darcy and Elizabeth remained in London with the children for a time, but they both agreed they had little interest in the season this year. Too much had happened over the last two years, and they were ready to return to Pemberley. Georgiana and Charlotte had been invited to stay with Lady Matlock for the season, and Maria would come from Meryton and participate as well. Elizabeth ensured that the ladies' wardrobes were refreshed, then she and Will took to the road north again with their family.

They brought a surprise for Mrs Bennet with them, a famous art master. Mr Bertelli was a renowned master and portrait artist. Darcy had lured him away from town by engaging him to paint the family's portrait as well as teach Mrs Bennet, and also Kitty if she wished, which she did, fervently. Mrs Bennet was showing promise in painting with oils, and also landscape sketches and drawings. The twins were nearly two years old, and so it was a good time to take their likeness. Elizabeth's and Diane's likenesses had been taken not long after they came to Pemberley, and the paintings hung in Darcy's study at Pemberley House in London, and an enormous life size painting of Elizabeth hung in the great hall at Pemberley.

They had brought a chest of finished fashion plates and another pile of money, nearly seven pounds for young Freddie Vaughan, who had been hard at work drawing gowns. This was half of his earnings; the rest having been set aside in trust for his future. They met with Mr and Mrs Vaughan, and informed them that Madame Clarisse had recommended that Freddie come to London in order to see a wider variety of gowns and fashion, to better stimulate his imagination. Elizabeth had arranged for an apprenticeship in textiles. He would live above the warehouses with her uncle's clerks, working in the warehouses with the fabrics, learning the textile importing industry from the ground up, and spend time at Madame's shop, visiting Hyde Park on his day off to watch the people in their fashionable attire, and draw new ideas. His mother wept a bit, but his father was relieved that Freddie was going off to learn a trade, even if it was one he would never understand. Freddie would send

home a quarter of his earnings from his fashion plates to help his family, keep another quarter for himself and his needs, and the other half would be deposited into an account for his future. Uncle Gardiner would manage it. Elizabeth made the steward aware that this was not a privilege reserved only for the Vaughans, and that if there were families who had offspring with specific interests, that apprenticeships would be found for them, with their parent's approval.

Mrs Bennet was thrilled by her new art instructor, and when she was not planning Kitty's wedding, she was in the art room, learning new techniques and practising, or watching the man work on the family portrait, which he very graciously allowed. He was a marvellous painter, and a view he had painted of the scenery of the London skyline had very recently become famous. Elizabeth and Kitty had put their mother in charge of the wedding, and bade her to be as lavish as she liked. Elizabeth declared that Kitty deserved the finest and grandest wedding they could manage, which was considerably grand indeed. Unlike Caroline, Kitty had spent enough time in isolation, and had no desire to hide herself away. Gossip and rumour be damned, she had been away and married to an earl for two years, she had nothing to be ashamed of, regardless of how it came about.

Unlike Caroline, who eschewed her title, Kitty learned that as much as she preferred being Kitty Bennet, until she became Kitty Brandon, the name Lady Clive provided her with more respect and less intimidation, and she had no shame in using it to cow others who might have been unkind when necessary. Caroline, inspired by Kitty's refusal to be cowed, began to come into society a bit more in Derbyshire, and began testing how she felt being known by her title in public.

Kitty, Jane, and Mrs Bennet spent much time at Delaford looking at colour samples and fabrics. Colonel Brandon insisted that the house had not been updated since he was a boy, and begged Kitty to make all the changes she wished before the wedding

that she desired. The house was not in disrepair, but it was in need of being refreshed, and Kitty even arranged for water closets and bathing chambers. She had missed them terribly in Ireland. It was official. Elizabeth's sisters were all spoiled from staying at her houses. They all required modern chamber pots, and tubs with water piped in, and boilers and proper drains and their husbands were indulgent and had to admit, they enjoyed the luxuries and convenience as well.

Mrs Hurst gave birth to her child, a girl, at Pemberley, due to the delay caused by the trip to Ireland. Elizabeth and Darcy were still in London, but she was well looked after by Sister Bethany, Charlotte, and Jane. Louisa came through without too much fuss and Mr Hurst never even considered attempting to enter the room during the birth, nor did it ever occur to his wife that his presence might be desirable.

The move to Tatton Hall was finally made two months later. Jane gave an enormous ball, to celebrate the opening of the house, and also Kitty's betrothal, which by Elizabeth's edict, had not been officially announced until they had been returned for three months. The wedding was set for October. Kitty and Mrs Bennet had many ideas for using autumn colours, and the lovely backdrop of the foliage to their advantage. They spent much time with Mrs Hayes, Mrs Pottinger, and Hazel.

Mr Farinacci had taught the cooks at Pemberley all he could, and had moved on to teaching the cooks at Netherfield and Pemberley House. Hazel and Mrs Pottinger also had a reasonably firm grasp on the basics of the Italian language. While their accents would never be perfect, they could grasp most of what was being said, even when Mr Farinacci was in a fiery temper and his curses fired at rapid speed. They could also articulate whatever they needed to. They could both read any Italian receipt without consulting a book for translation. Mr Farinacci had finally learned to be a good and patient teacher, and had become rather more dependable, which had been part of Elizabeth's intention all along. Elizabeth had Montague searching for a suitable building in London, or even perhaps an empty lot, which could be made into a fine hotel and cooking school. When it opened, Elizabeth would place the Italian chef in

charge of the place, and they would be business partners.

Mrs Pottinger and Hazel were shocked indeed when Elizabeth gave them both handsome raises. She had to point out to both of them when they said that she was too generous, that their talents had developed considerably, and based on their improved experience, their skills were now more valuable. It mattered not that Elizabeth had provided the education. They had learned it, and now they deserved higher pay, because Elizabeth would not need to hire outside expertise for special occasions, as so many other ladies did, unless the amount of food called for it. They discussed bringing a French chef in later in the year, or possibly the following year. Hazel was excited to continue to learn new skills in the kitchen, and Mrs Pottinger was resigned to being swept along. She certainly did not object to the higher salary.

Loretta Lloyd had quickly fallen with child after her marriage, and Elizabeth gave her most sincere congratulations when she paid a call upon her friend. Lady Lucas continued to send letters to London to plague Charlotte to come home and accept Mr Connolly's attentions, but Charlotte ignored her mother. Lady Lucas seemed to think she had the authority to declare that Charlotte was wasting her time in London, and demand that she return to her parents' house. Charlotte remarked that Lady Lucas had begun to behave more like Mrs Bennet than Mrs Bennet had ever done.

Lady Lucas had even suggested that Charlotte's presence in London was a detriment to Maria's chances. Charlotte had no plans to remarry just because her mother was embarrassed by her widowhood. She had the security she required, and even had a gentleman that she liked come along, which he had not, Charlotte was not interested. Her life was busy and happy. She was safe, and had family that she cared for. Her security and that of her son was entirely assured. She had no need to marry again, and the more her mother plagued her, the more determined she became to maintain her status.

Lydia could have gone with Charlotte and Georgiana to London, but she had little

interest in being presented this year. She preferred to stay with Kitty and Mrs Bennet in the country. Elizabeth had talked to her about going the following year, but Lydia demurred. “Lizzy, it is all so nonsensical. Think of those idiots that came to the Netherfield ball that flock around Georgiana. Can you imagine me relating to those dandies in any way?”

Elizabeth could indeed have imagined such a thing three years ago, but Lydia had matured, and learned that there were more important things in life than men. She preferred to stay at Pemberley, and continue teaching Diane, and spend as much time with Kitty as possible before her wedding.

In July, Elizabeth and Darcy spent a month at Stony Crest Park in Hampshire at the house party hosted by Lord and Lady W_____. The lavish hospitality provided by the earl was beyond compare. Elizabeth had been a guest at some of the wealthiest homes in the kingdom, and never had she seen such a display of tasteful elegance. Once she had negotiated a deal with Lord W_____ and his business partner Mr H___ for an enormous investment in their locomotive foundry, and another deal with his American father-in-law for an investment in a new soap factory in Bristol, Elizabeth jested to Lady W_____ that her next negotiation would be for the earl’s household and party journals. On their return journey to Pemberley, Will and Elizabeth promised each other that they would throw an enormous house party of their own one day, every bit as decadent and lavish as the one they had just attended. Perhaps to celebrate Georgiana’s wedding when the time came.

Georgiana had attended the house party with them, and once she convinced the other young ladies attending that she truly had no interest in being courted until her majority, she made friends quickly with those she did not know, and was happy to enjoy the company again of those she did. Mr Vivian Radcliffe and his brother Lord Berkeley were guests as well, and Darcy noted that the young man was absorbed by

watching or entertaining his sister far more often than engaged in the amusements preferred by the other men. When in the ballroom, Radcliffe did his duty and danced with the ladies, but Darcy saw that the young man's eyes rarely left Georgiana, and that his sister always seemed to gravitate towards the young man like a magnet.

Darcy was grateful that Georgiana had taken Elizabeth's advice to enjoy the pleasures of her youth rather than rush into marriage. Indeed, when Darcy and Elizabeth had wed, Georgie had still been so timid and afraid of being presented and married, that she had grasped onto Elizabeth's advice rather desperately. But as she had matured and gained confidence, Georgiana had seen the sense of her new sister's counsel, and had taken it closely to heart. For all of her glances across the room at her friend Radcliffe, she was determined to rebuff all romantic advances until she felt ready, even from him.

When the Darcys returned to Pemberley in August, the wedding plans were all the ladies of the house spoke of. A dozen temporary kitchen and house maids would be hired and at least a dozen footmen as well for the big event. Mr Farinacci and his assistant from Netherfield were to return to assist Mrs Pottinger and Hazel with the enormous menu that Mrs Bennet had planned. All of Derbyshire was invited, and Elizabeth had made as many carriages as she could available to deliver those guests from Meryton that had no comfortable travelling conveyance of their own. Lord and Lady Lucas would attend with Maria, Uncle and Aunt Phillips, Mrs Long, the Gouldings, and several other families of good standing were making the trip. The Fitzwilliams were travelling from Kent, and the Matlocks, Gardiners, and Elizabeth's Uncle Hexham and his family would also make the journey, along with numerous officers and friends from town of Brandon and Richard.

And so, the talk of the house was lace. The talk of the house was lace, ribbon, bonnets, flowers, white soup, and which pheasant dishes ought to be served. Kitty had refused to go to London for her wedding gown and trousseau. Elizabeth had tried to insist, considering that Kitty had not had a proper wardrobe in some time, but Kitty

had stopped her. “I am not afraid to go to town, Lizzy, but I have no wish to go just now. We shall spend time in Sanditon after the wedding, and then return to Delaford for some months after that. Next season will be soon enough to enter society. I shall need some good furs, but Brandon has obtained my measurements, and sent an order to town. He assures me they shall be lovely. The dressmaker in Lambton is more than sufficient to make what I need for now. You always use her when you are in Derbyshire, do you not?” Elizabeth finally agreed, and let the matter rest.

Lydia was to travel to Shannon View with her sister for her wedding trip. It would hardly be the time of year to visit the seaside, and of course the couple would wish to spend some time alone. So, Elizabeth sent a letter to the wife of a developer she knew of in Sanditon. Mr Tom Parker had invited Elizabeth and Will several times to visit and see the delights of the new seaside town for themselves. However owning seaside cottages of their own in both Brighton and Ramsgate, they had seen little point.

Elizabeth knew Parker wished for her to become an investor in his property, but to be truthful, the investment was very small potatoes compared to most of her other dealings, and there was far more risk involved. If Parker could not attract enough interest in the place, it would founder. Elizabeth would consider it to be more of a charitable endeavour to keep a respected developer afloat rather than a true attempt to make any real profit. It was also true, however, that a sizeable investment would give him some freedom from his primary investor, Lady Denham, who owned a large house and estate in the vicinity, and controlled all that went on with an iron fist. Parker’s problem was that no one would take interest in the town while there were no gentlemen’s clubs and few entertainments, and no businessmen would open such establishments without proof that the town had some interest from society. Lady Denham would never fund such establishments, and so the town continued to struggle.

Elizabeth knew his wife, Mrs Mary Parker, well. They had worked together on several charities in town, and Elizabeth knew she could be trusted with Lydia’s

safety, so she wrote to Mrs Parker. She soon received the reply that the Parkers were delighted that Lady Darcy's sisters and brother would be taking up residence close by, and would be glad to include Lydia in their party often for entertainments. Elizabeth's arrangement ensured that Lydia would have some amusement, without requiring Mr and Mrs Brandon to venture into society more than they would prefer on their wedding trip. Mrs Parker also volunteered to look in on Shannon View with her husband, and return a report on its condition before the wedding. Being familiar with the area, she could recommend servants to the housekeeper, and ensure the house was opened comfortably for the Brandons' arrival. Elizabeth promised Mrs Parker that she and Lord Darcy, and possibly many others from her family would be visiting her sister and brother at Shannon View the following summer, and that she was looking forward to experiencing Sanditon after hearing so much of it from Mr Parker while in town.

Elizabeth and Will had discussed the marriage settlement with Kitty and Colonel Brandon extensively. He had attempted to refuse to take any part of Kitty's fortune, but eventually was persuaded, particularly by Darcy, who had done the same, that considering the vast fortune his wife brought to the marriage, it was proper to use some of that wealth to improve Delaford for their heirs. Darcy mused to Elizabeth later that he had been silly to refuse it, looking back now. She had ensured the money had improved Pemberley anyway, and his heirs would be hers as well, refusing to allow her to improve their lot was foolish and prideful.

Brandon agreed to the same as Richard. Twenty thousand of the dowry from Elizabeth would go to him. Twenty thousand would go into the percents for Kitty, to provide her pin money and her widow's portion. Ten thousand from the dowry would be invested by Montague and they would meet with him or Elizabeth regularly to manage the investments, and decide between themselves whether to use the funds to improve Delaford, or to provide for daughters and younger sons. Brandon would not accept any portion of the inheritance from Lord Clive for Delaford, although Kitty directed ten thousand from those funds to be added to their investments. Shannon

View and Clive House in town would be Kitty's to lease, use, and pass on in her will as she chose. Elizabeth had discussed the state of the town in development nearby, and Kitty vowed to invest in it, but not all right away. She would live nearby for a time, and invest the money where she thought it was most needed.

Elizabeth decided that if her sister was going to make an investment, that she would as well, in order to help ensure that Kitty's thrived. She wrote to Montague, and had him and the managers of Whites and Gentleman Jack's plan to open new gentleman's clubs in Sanditon, and offer membership as an addition to their existing memberships in those clubs, for an additional fee. Additional seaside services and activities would be offered to their members. She also instructed Montague to investigate the greatest needs of the town to help it achieve success, and began to plan an enormous investment of her own.

When Montague responded, he indicated that what the town needed most, was what the primary investor Lady Denham would hate the most. It needed the most sophisticated of hotels, with a famous chef, and, as Elizabeth already knew, it needed entertainment for gentlemen. Families wanted to lease houses. Couples without children, young and old alike, often preferred the modern amenities offered by luxurious hotels, particularly those who had travelled to the continent. Elizabeth was helping with the gentlemen's clubs. But still, there were only two small pubs in Sanditon. It was not remotely tempting to young men unless it had more pubs. Lady Denham hated the idea of hotels, though she had only ever been in one, and she loathed the idea of gentlemen's clubs and pubs, though she had never seen the inside of one of those. She wanted only entertainments that interested her, and being nearly seventy, there was little that interested her other than being difficult for sport.

Elizabeth instructed Montague to send the very best architect, who designed some of the most impressive hotels in London and Paris, to select a site and begin negotiations for the build. The establishment must be of the highest calibre, and offer the most modern and desirable accommodations. Elizabeth then wrote to Mr Farinacci,

offering him the place of running the hotel and including a cooking school. They had planned for London, but Mr Farinacci's already famous reputation as former head chef to The Queen would tempt noblemen and their wives to come to Sanditon to enjoy the cuisine and fine amenities. This would lend much weight to the standing of the up-and-coming little town. There would be an impressive ballroom in the hotel, and local hostesses would also be able to reserve his and his assistant chef's time to coordinate large dinner parties and events, both hosted at the hotel, or in their homes.

Farinacci shamelessly wrote to Hazel and attempted to poach Pemberley's assistant cook, insisting he must have a proper assistant, but Hazel was adamant about staying at Pemberley. Instead, he enlisted a young footman from Netherfield who had shown tremendous interest and promise in the kitchens. Montague was enlisted to find a business manager for the hotel, so that Farinacci would be able to focus on the kitchens and the cooking school.

Elizabeth then instructed Tom Parker to open at least four more pubs or taverns of the type that would be attractive to young, wealthy gentlemen, and advised him that once the gentlemen arrived, the young ladies would follow. There ought to be extensive botanical gardens, butterfly and pollinator gardens for the academics, and regular community seashell hunts and sporting events. Gentlemen loved to bowl and play cricket. Young ladies loved to watch and cheer them on, so there must be sporting event weekly. There must be weekly assemblies in the summer, a small theatre and opera house, fireworks, regattas, as well as concerts, bonfires, and masquerades on the beach. There were already houses and cottages, both enormous and opulent, as well as modest and practical, for families travelling together. Elizabeth instructed Tom Parker to stake out locations for all of these activities, so that plans might be prepared, should investors show interest. Montague was instructed to reach out to businessmen who might wish to open or finance such opportunities. Wealthy widows were also approached, for there were several who might wish to sponsor the gardens.

As much as Kitty did not wish to go to London to be fitted for clothes, she was obliged to go for a much different reason. The second week of August, Elizabeth received a letter from a publisher in whose publishing house she had an investment. The publisher was offering to publish all of Kitty's children's stories, which Corrigan had rescued along with Kitty's artwork, illustrations and all. Children's picture and story books were becoming very popular, and Kitty needed to go to London, sign the contracts, and approve the proofs and the covers. She also added dedications in each book, to either Diane or the cousin or sister the story had been written for. It was discussed whether the books ought to be published anonymously or under a pseudonym, to which Colonel Brandon, in a fit of pride for his betrothed's accomplishment, insisted they must all be credited to her upcoming married name.

It was a bold move. Only a few ladies had written openly as females, most of whom had at least begun anonymously or with pseudonyms that either portrayed them as men, or baffled their readers with odd, gender-less sounding names. While certain types of writing by a woman, such as gothic novels, would in some circles be frowned upon, the creation of children's stories was considered feminine and genteel, for it implied the lady doing the storytelling must potentially be a wonderful mother, an accomplishment of which society highly approved. Brandon insisted he was proud of her work, and would never allow any naysayers to snub her in society. It was also true that her connection to and acceptance by Elizabeth and her friends would be immensely helpful.

Mrs Bennet and Mr Bertelli accompanied them to London, because Mr Bertelli's painting of the London skyline had been offered a place in the museum and Fanny Bennet and Kitty were keen to view the opening. Fanny Bennet glowed at the idea of finally being able to travel whenever she wished, and actually enjoying it. Mr Bertelli was nearly of an age with Mrs Bennet, a handsome man, and Elizabeth could tell that he held her stepmother in high regard. His interest seemed respectful, but very direct. Fanny Bennet had no idea how to receive such sincere attention, but mostly ignored it. She was still a handsome woman, but she was still married, and had no interest in

affairs. Still, she preened a bit under Mr Bertelli's attentions.

Elizabeth and Darcy accompanied the party, which consisted of Kitty and Colonel Brandon, Lydia, Mrs Bennet, and Mr Bertelli, to the museum for the grand unveiling. A curator of the museum introduced Mr Bertelli, who made a small speech about his inspiration for the painting, and his humble gratitude for its inclusion in the museum. Mrs Bennet was enraptured by the spectacle, just as she had been at an art lecture at the Royal Academy the day before. Near the end of the speech, Darcy nudged Elizabeth and nodded to a man some feet away, who was watching her stepmother intently. Elizabeth glared at the man, who appeared both shocked and captivated by Mrs Bennet's enchantment with the lecture. She could believe that he found her delight interesting, considering that Mr Bennet had never seen his wife display such qualities before.

Elizabeth prayed the man would know he was not wanted, but it was not to be. As they appreciated the painting with the other onlookers, a voice interrupted their conversation, "Fanny?" the gentleman ventured uncertainly behind the object of his interest. Elizabeth observed her stepmother tense, felt her husband do the same next to her, and saw Kitty turn completely white with terror and clutch Colonel Brandon's arm. Mrs Bennet turned and then looked at Elizabeth, who lifted her nose in the air in encouragement, and Fanny did the same.

"Thomas," Mrs Bennet responded without emotion, looking upon Mr Bennet, who had aged significantly over the last two and a half years. Too much brandy and port, too many hours and late nights in his book room, too few proper meals for lack of a wife to manage his life, too few hours in the sun and fresh air, had not been kind. He seemed to have aged over a decade.

"Are you well?" Mr Bennet inquired.

"ARE YOU JOKING!?" Lydia screeched.

Elizabeth attempted to intervene before Lydia created too much of a scene. “Lydia, dear, let us not-”

“How dare you approach my mother!” Lydia demanded.

“Still an immature child, I see,” Bennet observed offensively. His reception had not been what he hoped. He did not know what he expected, all he knew was that he had never seen such a light in his wife’s eyes, and he had to learn what put it there.

Sadly, for Bennet, his family had no intention of letting him near his wife, and they began to move away from him. Angry and mortified, Bennet lashed out at Kitty. “I see you found your way home like the proverbial bad penny. A lot of fuss over nothing, then, as usual with your mother and her daughters?”

As Kitty gasped and recoiled away from him, Colonel Brandon made as if to grab for Bennet’s collar, but Mrs Bennet’s voice stopped him as she turned back and stared straight into her husband’s empty eyes. “How dare you. How dare you address her? Two years. Two long years of torment for her and this whole family, by your deeds, and you make light of it. I still hear her screaming every night in my sleep, Thomas. If you ever address her, or any of my family, ever again, I will gouge your eyes out with my own hands. Miss Carmichael taught me how, such a dear girl. Go back to Oxford, Thomas. You have no more wife. You have no family. You not only sold Kitty. You sold us all. You have nothing and no one but your books and your filthy money.”

“Fanny? Are you well, bella ragazza?”

“Who is this?” Bennet inquired of his wife.

“He is none of your business,” Mrs Bennet replied.

“And... You are?” inquired Mr Bertelli disdainfully.

“I am her husband!” exclaimed Bennet, aggressively.

“Are you?” asked Fanny Bennet. She then addressed Darcy, “Please escort me away, my son, before my husband ties a ribbon round my neck and auctions me away [?] at the market.” She then lifted her nose and turned away, taking Darcy’s free arm and beginning to walk away.

Thomas Bennet slunk away as Darcy, Brandon and Mr Bertelli glared at him menacingly, and Kitty began to regain her colour. Mrs Bennet grasped Elizabeth’s hand tightly and said, “I need to leave, Lizzy.” The gentlemen hurried the ladies outside, where their carriage was waiting. Mr Bertelli must remain at the museum for some hours, but he would later follow them to Pemberley House. Fanny Bennet held her composure until she was in the carriage, and the moment the door closed, she threw her arms about Kitty and began to sob in distress. Finally, finally, had the dragon been slain for Fanny Bennet. She had spoken her piece, and seen with her own eyes that there was nothing left to be feared by her husband. The gentlemen valiantly averted their eyes, and Elizabeth clucked and made comforting comments as they returned to Bruton Street. By the time they arrived, Mrs Bennet had regained her composure, though she spent the rest of the evening alone in her rooms. That night was the first night since Kitty had been taken away that Fanny Bennet did not have nightmares.

Not long after this event, the books were approved, the contracts signed, and when Kitty heard of the improvements and plans Elizabeth was suggesting for Sanditon, Kitty decided that she wished to open England’s first children’s playhouse. There would be a play each week based upon Kitty’s stories, and others by authors of children’s books and fairy tales that she admired. Perhaps children’s authors might be invited to visit and sign books in the summer. At least two other days a week, there would be princess teas and pirate or cowboy adventures for boys and girls. It was a

completely new idea, and Elizabeth knew it would make Sanditon highly attractive to families with young children.

Eventually, once some plans had been put together and presented to Elizabeth, she committed to building the hotel, which would be run by Mr Farinacci, who was to be her partner. She purchased the land entirely, rather than lease it from Parker. She preferred to own the properties her businesses were on. If she leased the land from Parker and he went bankrupt, she would lose her investment as well. This would protect her interests and the future of the establishment, while also infusing Parker with some much-needed capital. Instructions were given to break ground; Farinacci travelled to the seaside town to oversee the work and lend his opinions on the plans for the kitchens.

Later, Elizabeth received a letter from Mary Parker, concerned about a situation in Sanditon. There had been an influenza epidemic among the cottages in which the labourer population and local cottagers lived, and one man had organised the others to refuse to work until their cottages were improved, stating their poor conditions as the cause of the sickness, and Mr Parker was displeased at the idea of giving in just because they had threatened his investments, fearing they might repeat the action whenever they wanted something. But it could not be denied, the cottages desperately needed improvement. Elizabeth managed the situation by writing to Tom Parker.

Pemberley,

Derbyshire

Mr Parker,

Progress is what you desire for Sanditon. To progressively improve the place until it

reaches pinnacles of excellence. This is a worthy goal, as long as you remember that progress must improve life for everyone. When it begins to benefit only one fortunate group, and not others, particularly the people who lived there first, it becomes oppression. You need the goodwill of your labourers to thrive, or your investment will rot from within, along with your mortal soul, if you do not diligently attend to those who depend upon you.

It has come to my attention that the labourers of Sanditon and their families are becoming oppressed by being forced to work while living in unacceptable conditions which threaten their health and that of their families. I do not do business with men who treat their labourers and tenants so infamously, and as such, I expect to hear that this matter is resolved forthwith.

Do oblige me by announcing to your labourers and poor population living in the tenements in question that before ground breaks on the hotel, new cottages must be built for those living there. Please select a location that is healthful, and that you will not feel tempted to build something more profitable on in the future.

Each cottage will have two rooms upstairs and two downstairs, a water closet, as well as running water, drains, and tubs in the kitchen. Please also provide them with adequate lumber to build acceptable furniture. I assure you, the health and strength of your labourers and their families will improve tenfold when these measures have been taken. You can easily afford the expense after your sale of land for the hotel, and I will have it in writing from you that this small village will not be displaced again for at least thirty years, and that when such does occur, that similarly acceptable housing will be provided by you or your heirs in a new location.

Respectfully,

Lady Darcy

Tom Parker was so elated by the idea of new investors and future progress that he capitulated immediately to Elizabeth's demand. He was delighted to inform her that locations had been staked out for the botanical gardens and pollinator gardens, and famous gardeners had been employed to design them. Lady Denham had agreed to cover the investment of those attractions because she highly approved of refined activities such as strolling in gardens. She had not been informed of the new taverns. Tom had found tradesmen who were willing to lease property to open such establishments, and Montague had found a patron of the arts who wished to bring culture to a new community such as Sanditon and had committed to building a theatre and opera house. And so, the progress of Sanditon was accelerated. Advertisements had even been taken in *The Times* to make society aware of the delights being prepared for their amusement.

The man who held two of the livings in Darcy's gift, Kympton and another neighbouring village, had received an inheritance and given up the livings. Darcy awarded them to Edward Ferrars, and upon learning that Lord Matlock had a living available, encouraged that living be given to the man as well. Ferrars was eminently grateful. Now he had an extremely handsome income, would easily be able to provide for sons and daughters, and when or if the Duke of Leeds offered any living within his gift, Ferrars could thank him for the consideration, then decline by honestly stating that he already had as many as he could manage. Aunt Josephine would demur about living at Maplewood, expressing a preference for the protection of her son-in-law's house, which was exceedingly comfortable and generous for a parsonage, to living alone with Margaret at the estate.

They each loved Marianne, but she had behaved infamously, and contrary to the views expressed in her letters, her mother and sisters did not agree that the ends justified her means, or hope that her rank as a duchess would protect them or Edward's reputation as a clergyman from society's tongues if her deeds became widely known. Fearing that her elevated rank might make her descend into even more unacceptably wild behaviour, they missed her, but could not help but pray that the

Leeds would never return to England. To date so far, Marianne was enchanted with her new life in Vienna, and never mentioned missing home. Montague reported that Leeds' affairs were still entrusted to his lawyers and stewards, and that nothing indicated that the duke might have any reason to return to England anytime soon.

Pemberley

October 1852

October turned out in its finest for Kitty and Colonel Brandon. Guests began arriving two weeks before the wedding, and Elizabeth and Darcy had planned a lavish house party with all of her friends from London in attendance. Dinners with the local gentry and noblemen were held, shooting and fishing parties and also a proper hunt were enjoyed by the gentlemen, while the ladies enjoyed lovely garden parties, lawn games, phaeton and carriage rides, and trips to the local peaks and vistas. As always, Elizabeth housed the bachelors in the dower house, making it possible for Brandon to be appropriately close to Kitty. A fair had come to Lambton, and the guests, residents, and even the servants had enjoyed an agreeable time in the village. A ball was held one week before the wedding, and there was no question that Kitty had recovered from her trials and was ready to be married as she waltzed, dreamy eyed, in her betrothed's arms.

The morning after the ball, Darcy took the stairs two at a time in his haste to reach his wife's apartments. She was, as usual, breaking her fast in her sitting room with the children, when Darcy entered with a copy of *The Times* in his hand, and laid the folded paper by her cup of chocolate. Elizabeth's eyebrows raised nearly to her hairline as she read the obituary. "Could you send someone to find my mother and sisters and their husbands, and also Charlotte?" she asked Will as she began to hurry the children along from the table and returned them to their nursemaid.

Finding all of the Bennets and their respective spouses was not always a simple task, but thankfully at this time, most of them could be found at breakfast, and the rest

could be found in their rooms, except for Fitzwilliam and Brandon, who were, as usual, in the stables. Granny Rose and Lady Matlock were asked to look after the guests for a short time, and when the entire family, including Charlotte, was assembled in Elizabeth and Will's private parlour, Elizabeth read the obituary aloud.

“On Friday the 8th, in Oxford, Mr Thomas Bennet, Esq, age 55, owner of Longbourn Estate in Hertfordshire, son of the late Nathaniel Bennet of the same county, died of a fever. One of the great uncelebrated minds of our time, it was considered a tremendous loss to scholars everywhere when he was ripped from the world of academia in his thirties, and thrust into that estate business which was not in his nature. It was with great honour and respect that he was finally welcomed back to Oxford in 1850, and his students could once again find enlightenment in his lecture halls. Too soon was he pulled from our halls and taken from us again, and remembered with great admiration he will be, by all who walk the hallowed halls of Oxford. The funeral will be held on Wednesday the 13th.”

“Not a word of his family, what a disgrace!” exclaimed Aunt Phillips. Uncle Phillips began to speculate the contents of the new will Bennet had created with a different lawyer after he and Darcy had coerced Bennet into signing away Longbourn to William. Jane, Mary, and Lydia were chattering like magpies, Charlotte was wondering what this would mean for her son, and Mrs Bennet and Kitty were silent when Elizabeth suddenly called them all to order.

“Regardless of whatever he has done with his will, Uncle Phillips, it is not worth speculating about, for I am sure none of us will feature a mention in its contents,” Elizabeth said firmly. “The funeral was this morning, so presumably Mr Bennet had designated a person to execute his final wishes. There seems to be nothing for us to do at this time. The transfer of Longbourn to William has already taken place, and will remain in trust until his majority. We can discuss the immediate future of the estate privately with Charlotte at a more fitting moment. The only question we have now is whether this should interfere with the wedding in any way.”

Mrs Bennet's head snapped up. "Over my dead body!" she challenged.

"There's the Fanny we all know and love. Never allow anything to stand in the way of your daughters being wed, Sister," chuckled Uncle Gardiner.

"I do not believe you should change a thing. Even if it is spoken of, most will expect a wedding that is only five days away, and that the guests have already arrived for, to proceed, even after the death of a close relative. Few would expect you to cancel your wedding so soon before the nuptials. But it is Kitty's wedding and reputation. It is her decision. Even if your choice is only made to appease society's expectations, it is still your choice to make, Kitty," Elizabeth said to her sister.

"I will not change my plans. Too much work and money has been expended, and I have waited far too long. I am sure society will believe that my father would not wish it," Kitty answered.

"Just so. Now our next question is, how do we present ourselves to our guests, who will surely know soon, if they do not already. None of us should like to go into mourning for Mr Bennet, particularly immediately before Kitty's wedding, but society will expect some acknowledgement from us," Elizabeth ventured, looking at Mrs Bennet, who was responsible for such decisions for the family.

"We shall go into a short period of half-mourning. All of us. It is more than he deserves, but just because he was reprehensible does not mean we shall cast off our respectability. You, Kitty, you shall not. I shall make it clear to all that my husband would never wish his daughter to wear mourning garb the week before her wedding. The rest of us can wear lavender until the wedding guests leave. The gentlemen can manage a little more than a week with armbands for the sake of the family name," announced Mrs Bennet decidedly. Jane agreed with her mother, and all of the Bennet ladies and their respective partners assented.

Suddenly the door burst open, and Lady Lucas flew into the room followed by Sir William and the distressed footman who had been on duty in the hall close behind them. Lady Lucas was frantically waving the paper over her head as she made her way excitedly to her daughter. “He’s dead! Charlotte, it’s yours, Longbourn is yours! You can remove to Meryton right away, how clever of you not to accept Mr Connolly, now that you are mistress of your own estate you can do so much better! You’ve spent enough time in London. A wealthy gentleman will surely come to propose now that you have an estate!”

“Lady Lucas, compose yourself!” Darcy snapped as he rose to his feet with a glare at Sir William for not controlling his wife. “Charlotte does not have her own estate. Her son has inherited an estate that is already in trust, and is managed by myself and another trustee until he reaches his majority. It does not belong to Charlotte, nor will any potential husband of hers have any ability to interfere with it in any way! Lady Lucas, you should learn to hold your tongue. Your behaviour is abominable, and you shame your daughter in polite company. Now, if you do not mind, my wife’s family has just suffered a loss, and they will wish for privacy today. Please go and enjoy all that Pemberley has to offer, but do not spread your gossip among our other guests. Sir William, control your wife. My patience has its limits.”

Sir William was apologetic as he herded his wife out the door, followed by the footman William. “I beg your pardon, sir. I never saw a lady move so fast. I did not have a prayer of stopping her.”

“It is nothing, William. Now you understand the tremendous power of gossip in the clutches of the everyday English matron,” Will reassured the footman as he closed the door. Most of the Bennet ladies decided that they wished to spend the day alone quietly with their mother. Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, and Mrs Phillips would spend the day with Mrs Bennet in Elizabeth and Will’s private parlour. They were not grieving for the man, yet his death still felt like a shock, and they felt unequal to much company while they came to terms with the idea. Elizabeth had letters to write, both

regarding Mr Bennet's demise, and also for business. The other ladies would work on their wardrobes, and set themselves to trimming a few lavender gowns to wear until the wedding guests departed, instructing their ladies' maids to assist in the endeavour.

Lydia and Kitty would go downstairs, for they had much to do before the wedding, but agreed to spend the day in each other's company, in order to present a united front in case any of the guests had comments about their loss or related gossip. Brandon would spend the entire day in their company as well. Charlotte and Georgiana agreed to go down and help Granny Rose and Lady Matlock with the duties of hostess, and attempt to control Lady Lucas, if Sir William failed. Darcy would oversee all, and Elizabeth was grateful.

Fortunately, Elizabeth's connections were all practical, reasonable people. All of them agreed unanimously that no father would wish his sudden death to cast a pall on his daughter's wedding, and they found Elizabeth and the other ladies' withdrawal from company for the day eminently appropriate. All of her friends and relations knew of Mr Bennet's perfidy, of course, but by unspoken agreement, everyone abstained from mentioning anything about it, and turned cold and dismissive toward anyone who attempted to bring up the subject. Only a few visitors from Meryton had attempted it, and learned immediately that such tattle had no audience among the other guests.

All of the Bennet ladies felt better the next morning for having spent the previous day quietly. The rest of the week flew by mostly without further incident. Charlotte was studiously avoiding and pointedly ignoring her mother at all costs, and Sir William had strictly forbidden his wife from disturbing Charlotte, Elizabeth, Mrs Bennet, or discussing the matter of Mr Bennet or Longbourn in any way while they remained at Pemberley.

The only other event of note was that Mr Bennet's attorney arrived two days after the Bennets learned of the man's death. He had no idea he was walking into the

preparations for an enormous wedding. Elizabeth had Darcy question the man, learned that Kitty was not mentioned in the will, and therefore had no need to be present for the reading. The only person he needed to see was Mrs Bennet and anyone representing or advising her, and the guardian of Longbourn's heir presumptive. Darcy put the man up with the bachelors in the dower house, and insisted that he remain there so as not to cast a pall over the wedding or the guests in the main house. He and Elizabeth did not want the family thinking any more about Mr Bennet over the next few days than they had to. The attorney, a Mr Knightley, a busy but kind man, agreed to wait until the wedding guests had departed to have his meeting. He had no wish to cast a shadow over the family at such a time. In appreciation, Darcy assigned a man to accompany Knightley to quiet and undisturbed areas of the estate, and provided him with tackle, so he might enjoy some unplanned but welcome fishing during his visit. Darcy also ensured the attorney had a fine decanter of brandy to enjoy at the dower house.

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Finally, the day of the wedding arrived, and it was quite the loveliest autumn day Darcy had seen in many years. The sort of perfect autumn day that every man, woman, and child born in Derbyshire lived for. It is not within the skill of this author to detail the perfection of the sky, the foliage, nor even the nuptials of our beloved couple. Would it improve the story to know the bride wore pale yellow? Could our happiness for the beloved couple be increased by the knowledge that the head gardener had declared he had never seen such elegant flower arrangements in all of his time at Pemberley? Perhaps it would interest the reader to know that the cake was lemon, and that it was quite the tallest and most elegant cake that anyone had ever seen.

What about the jewels? The ladies might object to not knowing that the bride wore her sister's famous citrine parure and tiara, and that it paired with her gown in a most becoming way. Do not forget to note that the groom wore his blue coat, because his bride had told him many times how becoming it was, and that he changed his waistcoat four times that morning and that his final selection was not flannel. No... These are just details. Let it only be said that the day Mr Gardiner led his fourth niece down the aisle to her sweetheart was the happiest day that anyone in the family could remember. Happier even than their own nuptials, if at all possible. It was a day of laughter. The bride laughed and smiled all day until her jaw ached, and her stoic husband smiled so beautifully that the ladies attending agreed that he was nearly too painfully handsome to gaze upon.

When the couple left in the lovely white carriage with Elizabeth's stunning Palomino horses, they travelled alone to Delaford, where they would remain for three days. Then they would come for Lydia, and travel to Shannon View where they would remain until Christmastide, when they all would visit Matlock with the Darcy

household for the festive season. But first. The wedding night must happen. The groom left his wife at her bedroom door, suddenly shy and unsure of himself. Kitty smiled up at him and entered her chamber. After she shed her gown, and donned something positively scandalous that her sister promised was necessary, Corrigan took her hair down and let it fall over her shoulders, then left her for the evening. Taking a deep breath, the new bride had no fear of opening the door to her husband's room and inviting him in for the first night of the rest of their lives.

The End.

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Opened two days after the wedding:

Pemberley,

Derbyshire

Dear Mama,

I am writing this on the eve of my wedding, and I did not believe it possible, but if you are reading this, it is because Mr Bennet has left you the money he received from the duke when I was taken. Lizzy and I hardly believed he might do such a thing in the end, but if he has, do not turn it away, for my sake. I know that you believe it is evil money, and perhaps it is, but take it anyway, and by your deeds may it come clean. There is no one more qualified than I to decide what ought to be done with it now, and I have decided that I earned that money, and in my heart, I wish you to have it. The best revenge we can have is to live well, Mama... So do it. Live well, with my blessing.

With All My Love,

Kitty

One week after the wedding:

Pemberley,

Derbyshire

Dear Kitty,

It was as we suspected. None of us could have predicted it, but Mr Bennet actually left Mama his entire fortune, thirty-five thousand pounds! The attorney Mr Knightley said that it was written differently until late August. He previously planned to leave the money to the university, and according to Mr Knightley, Mr Bennet's friends are outraged, but it seems that in late August, presumably after seeing us in town, Mr Bennet suffered a change of heart and changed his will.

As you can imagine, Mama was vocal indeed about not accepting the legacy, but we gave her your letter, and after that she was contemplative. Mr Knightley and Uncle Phillips will deposit the funds into the five percents. Just imagine, our mother, with forty thousand pounds to her name! Imagine how she might have reacted years ago, had the money come to her differently.

She hasn't discussed it since the reading of the will. Darcy, Jane, and I have agreed not to mention it for a while, and allow her to think on it. Even if she never touches a penny, she is welcome here at Pemberley, and all of my houses, always, and I know all of my sisters feel the same.

He remembered none other in his will except young William Collins. Our father left all of his books to him, to be preserved in Longbourn's library, and Mr Knightley is arranging their transport. They shall be stored in Netherfield's library until Charlotte takes up Longbourn, to ensure proper storage.

I shan't expect you to write on your wedding trip, but I do hope Lydia will drop a line to let me know, did Mrs Parker have the house and staff well prepared for you? From the letters she and Mr Parker sent in September, it sounds as if Shannon View is comfortable and well appointed, if not rather faded and in need of refreshment. I do hope your expectations for the estate and town have been met. Give my regards to dear Brandon.

Your Most Devoted Sister,

Lizzy

Three weeks after the wedding:

Shannon View

Sanditon

Dearest Lizzy,

We have been at Sanditon for nearly three weeks, and I will admit that it has been tedious and enjoyable in equal measure. Your remarks that the town and community need progress are certainly very apt. Mr and Mrs Parker are properly welcoming and motivated, but you were correct that the town has too few residents and entertainments for a seaside destination, unless one's intention is a very quiet holiday.

Still, what entertainments and neighbours there are, have been mostly pleasant and enjoyable. Sadly, any visit with Lady Denham becomes tedious very quickly. It was immediately after I arrived that she informed me that she knew I would receive a handsome dowry from you. She then instructed me to form an attachment to her nephew, who is heir to her husband's title but not necessarily her fortune, which is hers from a previous marriage.

Lady Denham is an unapologetically mean woman, who openly uses her fortune to manipulate those about her in what I consider to be an infamous manner. She did not take well to hearing that not only have I no present interest in either marriage or her nephew, but that you will not approve my marriage, nor release my dowry until my majority. I wonder if you might not even receive an angry letter from the woman. She was quite vexed.

So vexed, as a matter of fact, that she has continued to make unseemly comments whenever we meet at events, quite publicly. One might think I had stolen my own dowry from her very coffers, so proprietary is hers and her nephew's behaviour. Her chief complaint of Sanditon is its scarcity of heiresses. She quite chided Kitty for having brought a husband with her, rather than seeking one in her new neighbourhood, and the news that I am not to be courted has made her quite openly and amusingly piqued.

Do not be alarmed. A fortune hunter Sir Edward Denham may be, but he is also spoiled, selfish, and appallingly stupid. I would sooner have married Mr Collins. At least our cousin had no malice in him. I am not certain I could say that I sense no cunning in Sir Edward Denham. His stepsister, Miss Denham, seems a nice enough girl, but I avoid her company because it always includes her brother's.

This is in contrast to Miss Clara Brereton, a distant cousin who is dependent upon Lady Denham's charity. Her demeanour is all that is sweet and pious. Sir Edward seems improperly interested in her, and she protects herself by spouting religious tracts, rather like Mary used to do, but Miss Brereton manages to do it in a manner that people do not take offence to, because she is so sweet and not at all self-righteous or pedantic. I have to admit, it is clear that she is sincerely devout. Perhaps it is her unsettled state. Perhaps if her cousin were to find her a husband she could depend on and she did not need to fear the workhouse, she might be less prone to obsession with showing her goodness.

From what I can tell, her cousin is not generous with pin money, nor clothes, and she frequently makes remarks to frighten Clara about her situation and poverty. It is quite cruel. I am still trying to think of an elegant way to put the old bat in her place. She quite reminds me of the stories of Will's horrid aunt. As you see, my powers of discernment and sketching of characters grow apace. One day I will have your talent for snubbing while making it sound a compliment. Meanwhile, I spend these visits daydreaming of you being here to give her one of your set downs.

Mr Parker's next younger brother, Sidney Parker, is here to visit, and has brought a party of friends. They are drunken idiots, most of them, although a few are alright. Lady Denham watches me like a hawk to ensure that I do not favour one of them and not her nephew. It seems she claimed my dowry before I even arrived at Shannon View. Mr Parker the younger is devilishly handsome. If I did not know better than to become attached so young, I might be in some danger.

Thankfully, due to you encouraging me to wait to become attached to anyone, until I am old enough to read people, I have apprehended that though he presents a smiling face, he has a cutting, sarcastic sense of humour, finding amusement in the follies and foibles of his relatives too enjoyable for my taste, reminding me of another gentleman we thought we once knew. I wonder if there is not a bit of cruelty to his nature.

Several times I have observed him making fun of his own sisters, who had not the wit to understand his insults. It is not that I dislike the man. I do not even know him well enough. Only that I am glad not to be meeting him at the tender age of sixteen, when I might have been wild about him in a ballroom and all too willing to be cruel about his relations with him. It matters little, for the gentleman is very shortly to be married to a young lady from London with a vast fortune and no brothers. He is to join her father in his trade, which I am uncertain what sort it is, only that the family is genteel, like Aunt and Uncle Gardiner.

There are not many shops here. Most of the town buys their gloves and parasols at the library, though I must say it is well stocked with unique items. I have completed my gift shopping for the festive season, and found a most interesting periodical about decorating. I know my usual interests lean toward clothes, but since assisting Kitty at Delaford, and our discussions for Shannon View, I find I am becoming even more interested in decorating. They had six months complete of the periodical, *Mesdames élégante Maison*, and I am quite addicted to studying every page. I recall a book I saw at Uncle's warehouse; I shall write to Aunt Madeleine and ask if one can be procured for me to peruse. I shall write to you again, before we come away. Is Diane attending the lessons I left for her?

Your Favourite Sister,

Lydia

Eight weeks after the wedding:

Shannon View

Sanditon

Lizzy,

I am such an idiot. I suppose this is what I deserve for my pride in my last letter, boasting of my growing discernment. He is not truly cruel or mocking like Papa, only misunderstood. And contrary to my belief in my control of my sensibilities, I have fallen in love with him in a most unseemly fashion.

I can hear you already, Lizzy, asking what am I thinking, falling in love with a man about to be married? I can well believe your incredulity, and worse, it is impossible for him to be married now, and my heart breaks for him.

I can quite imagine your interest in knowing how I managed to get into such a scrape. Mr Parker and I danced once at the assembly the night before his betrothed, Miss Matilda Honeybourne, arrived in Sanditon. Only once have I ever experienced such an enchanting moment, and then I was just a girl. That chance slipped away from me, and I have always vowed to find a man who could make me feel such enchantment again. I believed perhaps with Wickham, that the sentiment would grow, but I have since vowed to hold fast until I find it again. Lizzy, in an instant I felt I had found my best friend, the person I wanted to share everything with. Nothing was said between us, but I felt he stared into my eyes more intensely than any other man I had ever met.

The next day Miss Honeybourne descended from her carriage, announced that she

felt unwell, and promptly fell ill with scarlet fever and was gone before three more days had passed. Kitty and I endeavoured to visit Trafalgar House to help with the children while Mary Parker was absent from the house to assist with the poor lady. It was then that I chanced to meet Mr Parker in the upstairs hall, having been dragged home by his brother for some forced rest. Moments later a messenger arrived. Miss Honeybourne had died just after he had left her side.

Mr Parker's grief was so profound and sincere, Lizzy. And watching him over the next day, being comforted by his siblings, I saw the strong bond their family has, and I realise now that I judged him too quickly. He is obviously a man of some sense and great sensibility, and capable of the deepest affection. I could not help falling in love with him. But it matters not...

He has left Sanditon to bring Miss Honeybourne home to her family, and Mr and Mrs Tom Parker are at their wits end with worry. Their youngest brother, a Mr Arthur Parker, has followed him to London, and though no one thinks much of his abilities, he is a bit of a worry pot, I believe his capabilities are underestimated. It is hoped he can bring some comfort to his brother and help him find a new direction for his future.

I shall not be in any further danger, however, as it seems clear he does not plan to return to Sanditon for some time and instead will continue his plan of taking up the business of Miss Honeybourne's father, who has no other close family to assist him. He is so good; I can scarcely think of him without pain in my chest.

We return to Derbyshire next week. Please tell Georgiana that I long to join her at Matlock, I have missed you all, and look forward to returning to Pemberley, and Diane and the children. I have decided to let you give me a season this year if you still wish it. I still do not believe it important, but Kitty will be entering society as Mrs Brandon this year and she wishes us to take on London together, so I shall endeavour to endure it. Is it too late to order clothes? Kitty has measured me, and my size remains the same. Perhaps Madame Clarisse can throw a few gowns together?

She knows my tastes so well.

Your Most Exasperating Sister,

Lydia

Nearly three months after the wedding:

Matlock,

Derbyshire

Dearest Sister,

You shall never guess in a million years what I am to tell you. It is almost too embarrassing to write it down. I, Fanny Bennet, widowed at forty-six, am to be married! I still cannot take it in. Mr Bertelli was invited to accompany the family to Matlock, as he is still progressing on the family portrait commissioned by my son Will.

I knew that I fancied him, but truly Sister, it was only girlish foolishness! I never dreamed he would look my way, although it seemed he did, and often. And at Lady Matlock's ball, he asked for my hand! It was so romantic I thought I might die from the emotion he evoked in me. Feelings that I never thought to feel again, scratch that, feelings that I am not sure I ever had for Thomas.

Donato likes children well enough, but has no pressing desire to be a father, and so my years are not an obstacle for him. Imagine, sister, me! Fanny Bennet. Marrying a man three years my junior for love, at the advanced age of forty-seven! It is too mortifying for words!

We are to be married in June when the family gathers at Shannon View in Sanditon,

and Kitty and Brandon wish us to make our permanent home in the very large and comfortable dower house. We shall manage their estate for them, and keep it in good operation for when the family visits in the summer.

Lizzy believes Donato will be highly welcomed as a portrait artist in Sanditon. He is looking forward to painting the landscapes and shoreline. He loves to paint the sea. Do not tell, but he wishes to draw me on the beach like one of those French girls! What a scandalous life I am coming to lead! Lizzy is to send a carriage for you and my brother Phillips in May. Say you will come...

Your Scandalous Sister,

Fanny

Four months after the wedding:

Piccadilly,

London

Lady Darcy,

Finally, there is an answer to the mystery in Hempstead.

Viscount Compton's heir took some time to track down, but he was finally located in America. He is the nephew of Viscount Compton, and when he visited my office, we learned that the viscount's aunt disappeared from society many years ago. It was said that she eloped and ran away with a man, yet the man she was reportedly in love with, and wanted to marry, had been left behind.

The viscount's father had maintained that his sister had run away with a footman and had never been heard from again. It is believed by the new viscount, as it was also

believed by his father, that she was locked away so her dowry would never have to be paid as it was laid out in their father's will.

The local doctor who examined the body believes that the times could be correct, and says that he believes the woman was locked up for many years before she died. A funeral will be held next week, and the body will finally be laid to rest in the family churchyard.

Montague

Seventeen Months after the wedding. (March 1954).

Shannon View,

Sanditon

Dear Aunt Madeleine,

She's done it! She's finally done it! My dearest stepmama, Mrs Fanny Bertelli, at the advanced age of eight and forty, has presented her husband with a son. Master Michael Antony Bertelli was born last night, a strong and hearty boy, whose father says has the lungs of a great singer.

Mama came through the birth far easier than we all feared. All of us girls, and Aunt Phillips too, were here, so afraid were we that something unfortunate might happen, and we would not be here with her. Mama says not to worry overly much over Uncle's business preventing your attendance. She was quite well looked after, and in the end, she had no trouble at all. Sister Augustine said that if all births were so easy, that even the gentlemen would do it.

We have all agreed we might need to have our festive seasons at our own homes this year. It seems that with the exception of Lydia of course, all of the Bennet daughters

are expecting children before the end of this year. Perhaps you might come to Pemberley? Or perchance you might prefer to travel to Sanditon, and meet your long overdue nephew. Do tell me when you decide. Give my love to my cousins, and my uncle.

I Remain, As Always,

Your Lizzy