



# Shadows beneath Rosings (A Darcy and Elizabeth Quick Read Interlude #5)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Elizabeth Bennet has vanished... and only Fitzwilliam Darcy dares to ask why.

Elizabeth never expected tea at Rosings Park to end in danger, deception... and a locked cellar. But when a polite invitation takes a sinister turn, she must rely on her courage—and her sharp mind—to survive.

Meanwhile, Fitzwilliam Darcy is growing increasingly alarmed. When Elizabeth disappears without explanation, he suspects more than a misunderstanding. With the help of his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mrs. Charlotte Collins, Darcy begins to uncover secrets someone at Rosings would rather keep buried.

As the search intensifies, hearts are tested, alliances shift, and one determined gentleman must face the truth of his own feelings—before it's too late.

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

The teacups were very fine and delicate.

But they were far too small. Afternoon tea at Rosings was bad enough without being thirsty.

Elizabeth knew from her previous visits that she would not be offered a second cup, and this time had made sure to drink two glasses of water before leaving the parsonage.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to keep her composure, and dragged her longing gaze away from the teapot.

She steeled herself and raised the empty cup to her lips, pretending to take another sip. Then she put her cup down slowly, determined not to let her lips twitch. If the teacups were ridiculously small, they looked even more absurd in the large hands of both Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Unfortunately, she realised too late that Mr. Darcy was looking at her and she turned her gaze away fast, lighting eventually upon Lady Catherine, who was still holding forth to her nephews about the damage done to one of the tenant farms when the river had had the effrontery to flood. At Rosings, no less!

Elizabeth concentrated on looking both concerned and attentive, her eyes wide in pretended admiration.

A slight choking noise from the corner where Mr. Darcy was sitting almost caused her to look away from his aunt. Was he amused?

She kept her face as impassive as his always seemed to be, whilst inwardly, she seethed.

She did not want to be an object of amusement, neither did she want to attract unwanted attention from Lady Catherine.

That lady had been quite officious enough on the previous occasions she had summoned them to dine, or for tea, and Elizabeth was heartily sick of it, as well as Mr. Collins' excessive servility and gratitude.

The sooner she was back in town, the better.

But Lady Catherine was distracted for a moment. "Darcy, do you not think Anne is looking very well this spring? I have a new physician from London who calls each week, and I believe she is looking much the better for it."

Mr. Darcy turned to his cousin, who was, as usual, swathed in several shawls covering her thin body. Her sullen expression seemed more pronounced than usual, and Elizabeth wondered why it was so.

"Indeed, cousin. I hope you are enjoying the spring weather." Mr. Darcy's voice was polite, but unemotional.

Miss de Bourgh did not answer —if she had, she would not have been heard — as her mother sailed on. "Of course not. It is still far too early in the year for the weather to be suitable for one of Anne's delicate sensibilities to risk her health by going out."

Elizabeth felt the gaze of both Mr. Darcy and the colonel on her.

She hoped very much that neither of them would comment on the fact they had often seen her out on her walks, often without her pelisse.

Indeed, Mr. Darcy seemed to have ignored her pointed comments about her favourite rambles, which she had hoped would cause him to absent himself; he still often interrupted her solitude to walk silently alongside her.

Why did he not stay away from her? He must realise how much she despised him.

Mr. Collins leapt into the silence with a rapturous comment about Miss de Bourgh's most elegant frail health, and Charlotte met Elizabeth's incredulous gaze with a warning glance.

As Elizabeth glanced away, she caught Mr. Darcy staring at her again. What did he mean by it?

Back at the parsonage, Elizabeth managed to keep her amusement under wraps until Mr. Collins had bustled off to his book-room to prepare his sermon for Sunday, and Charlotte turned to her.

"You may tell me now, Eliza. What was so amusing at Rosings that you nearly lost your countenance?"

It was too much. Elizabeth raised her hands to her mouth, quite failing to prevent her gales of laughter. "Oh, Charlotte, my dear. Could you not guess?"

Her friend was chuckling, too. "No, I know not; only that your laugh is so infectious, we would soon have offended Lady Catherine."

Elizabeth bit her lip, trying to force herself to solemnity, although little hiccups of glee still interrupted her occasionally.

"It was those teacups again." She shook her head.

“They look ridiculous in our hands, but did you not think the sight was much more so for Lady Catherine’s nephews?”

They are large men, and their hands dwarfed such elegant porcelain.

” She snorted. “They could not even attempt to use the handles as they were intended, the gap is too small even for their littlest fingers.”

Charlotte took a deep breath and sighed. “You are right, my friend, but I am happy you could contain your amusement until we were well away from Lady Catherine — and Mr. Collins.”

“I would not discompose your husband for the world, dearest. I know he would be deeply offended.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows rose. “Both the gentlemen noticed. I expect them to ask you what was so amusing when they see you next.”

“I thank you for the warning,” Elizabeth grinned at her friend. “Before then, I will think of something innocuous to have been amused about.” She jumped to her feet. “Will you join me to take a turn in the garden? I must walk off the itch in my feet.”

Charlotte shook her head. “Take Maria with you, if you would, Eliza. I have to speak to Cook, and Maria is in dire need of fresh air.”

“Of course. I am glad her health will not be at risk outdoors due to any delicate sensibilities .”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, and Elizabeth departed the room to look for her friend’s young sister.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Darcy flung himself in the leather wingback chair in his guest chamber after pouring a glass of water from the carafe in his room.

He stared at the drink in his hand. Even the water here didn't quench his thirst in the same way that Pemberley's did.

There, where he most loved to be, water was drawn fresh from the spring that bubbled to the surface not one hundred paces from the house.

That spring rose directly from the peaks, the harsh, jagged rocks seeming to imbue the water with their own strength.

Here, the water was chalky, drawn from the streams that rose in the North Downs. Healthy enough, he knew, but it gave the water a cloudiness and grittiness he could not like; although he acknowledged it was much better than London water.

He shuddered at that thought. Darcy House paid for water to be brought in from the upper reaches of the Thames where the river was cleaner.

But even so, all drinking water as well as that for cooking, was boiled for safety and it had a soapy, unsatisfying taste.

At least he could afford silver carafes, and the metal kept the water safer than it would otherwise be.

It was no wonder that so many drank ales and spirits when water was so often tasteless and unsafe in towns and cities. But that way could lead to drunkenness and

all the sins that followed from it. He would not risk more than was wise.

He smiled at the glass. Which was why he was here, contemplating the differences in a glass of water. He shook his head, wondering if Miss Elizabeth Bennet would like the hard, unforgiving landscape of Derbyshire and the strength of the water that rose from it.

He closed his eyes. He must stop thinking about her; must stop imagining — all sorts of things.

Even now, he was hiding away, thinking of her, when he ought to be visiting the tenants to the west of the house, checking nothing was amiss, before finalising the account books with the steward.

Then he and Richard would be free of this obligation for another year.

He frowned a little; his cousin Anne was difficult to understand, especially as he dared not engage her in more than the briefest of communications, but today, her expression had been easy to read. Her resentful expression, especially when she looked at Miss Bennet, had been impossible to miss.

Was she jealous of the freedoms that the other girl had; perhaps envious of the healthy glow of her skin and her laughing eyes and happy countenance?

His frown deepened. Perhaps someone should attempt to find out if Anne was content to be coddled and restricted by her mother, or if she wished the family to intervene in gaining her more freedom.

He shuddered. It would not be him. His aunt would undoubtedly draw the net closer around him and he might find himself obliged somehow. And he would not marry Anne. Ever.

His inner mind drew in the image of himself standing at an altar, watching his Elizabeth, in an enchanting wedding gown, walk down the aisle towards him.

With an exclamation, he jumped to his feet, drops of water from the glass splashing down his waistcoat.

“Well, that was sudden.” Richard was in the chair opposite, looking startled.

Darcy scowled at him, brushing at his clothes. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“Long enough to begin to wonder what was taking your thoughts in such a sombre direction.” Richard’s eyebrow was raised.

Darcy shrugged and turned to the window. “If you must know, I was thinking I should return to Pemberley and get a proper glass of water that quenches thirst properly.” He scowled at the carafe, the cloudy chalk in the water visible through the glass.

“And that was — unexpected.” His cousin looked suspiciously at him. “I had thought you were pondering in quite another direction.”

Darcy shrugged. “That, as well. I was wondering if your parents ought to attempt to see if Anne is really satisfied staying here with the limited life she has.”

“Well, I suppose they ought.” Richard dismissed the subject. “No, I was thinking of the delightful young lady who is staying at the parsonage.”

“Miss Bennet?” Darcy frowned. “What about her?” Dear God, let Richard not have divined my feelings for her!



“Undoubtedly what you were thinking.” The other’s grin was knowing. “I was wondering what was so droll that she nearly laughed to our dear aunt’s face.”

Darcy smiled wryly. Thank goodness that was something he could admit to. “Yes. I nearly exposed my amusement, too.”

“What do you think was causing her such entertainment?”

Darcy shrugged. “I know not the fancies of the female mind, but I wondered if it was that she was doing as we did, sipping from an empty cup and wishing they were very much larger.”

“True. At least four times the size, and then they would be barely adequate.” Richard chuckled. “One day I shall bring my army issue tin mug downstairs. That at least has a handle a man can grasp properly!”

“Yes.” Darcy was not really listening. “What do you think annoyed our cousin so today? I have rarely seen her looking so sullen and angry.”

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “She does not like how much you watch Miss Bennet. I can’t say I blame her, if she thinks you really are betrothed to her .”

Darcy spun round to glare at him. “I am not and have never been, betrothed to Anne! If I had been, we would have been married by now. Surely she has heard me deny the betrothal to her mother? I have said so at almost every meal for the last five years we have been calling here at Easter — and I know my father used to say the same on his Easter visits before that!”

Richard shrugged. “Well, her anger seemed to be aimed at Miss Bennet’s back today, which is why I thought she might be jealous of your lack of attention to her.”

Darcy swung round to the window. "I never pay any regard to her, anyway. But perhaps it would be as well if the Hunsford party were not invited so often to Rosings." He could always see Miss Elizabeth early each morning when she walked out through the grove.

She looked especially lovely in the morning sunlight.

"Hmmp!" Richard's grumpy exclamation drew Darcy's notice back to the room.

How long had he been dreaming of tomorrow's walk?

He felt the heat of his flush at the back of his neck, and he turned and resumed his seat.

He must take the conversation to a safer subject.

"How many more tenants have we to see before we can return to London?" He ignored the twist of his heart at the thought of leaving Miss Bennet.

But he could not remain here long. The temptation to declare himself was increasing; soon he might be foolish enough to speak out.

It was an enticing dream; but something that could never be.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Beatrice Jenkinson set her jaw firmly. Miss de Bourgh had made this plan and she was never wrong. It was now her task to ensure that her young mistress' wishes were carried out so the plan would work.

Yesterday's tea with the party from the parsonage had been the final debacle and Miss de Bourgh was determined to put a stop to Mr. Darcy's constant gaze on Miss Bennet. That common girl was nothing to Miss de Bourgh, nothing at all.

She shuffled to the closet in her chamber and checked that the spare bottle of laudanum was where she had placed it a few weeks before. She would need it tomorrow.

She smiled to herself. Tomorrow was the day. Lady Catherine was calling on an acquaintance in Chartwell, and there would be plenty of time to carry out Miss de Bourgh's wishes.

She glanced over at the mantel clock. It was time to go and awaken the young lady from her nap.

They would go for a drive in the phaeton, and Miss de Bourgh, that exceptional young lady, would be able to stare her nemesis in the eye while delivering the invitation.

That impertinent country miss would not suspect a thing.

Then Beatrice could threaten the footmen further. She did so enjoy seeing their nervous attitude around her. She smiled to herself as she locked her door and went to

wake her young mistress.

“Yes, yes, Mr. Collins.” Miss de Bourgh waved her hand dismissively. “Miss Bennet will return to the parsonage when we have had tea. You are not required to remain here.”

Beatrice was very proud of her charge. Miss de Bourgh was more awake and determined today than she had been for many days. A decision to rid herself of her rival; and that today was their best chance, had made the young lady stronger in her indomitable will.

Beatrice pulled her mind to her duties, as the maids brought in the tea trays, which were placed, as had been planned, on the table at the side of the room.

Miss de Bourgh had arranged for the older tea service to be used.

The cups were bigger, and Beatrice hoped the bitter taste of laudanum would not be too obvious in the larger quantity of tea.

She stood at the tea tray, hiding her actions from the visitor.

Would that amount of laudanum be enough?

Miss Bennet was taller and more hale than Miss de Bourgh, who was, of course, the epitome of high born delicacy.

Beatrice poked a tiny hole in one of the pastries and dribbled a few more drops of the sedative into it, placing it on a plate and carrying it over, with the teacup, to Miss Bennet.

That young woman was trying to engage Miss de Bourgh in conversation. “I see you

are using a larger tea service today, Miss de Bourgh. Do you find you enjoy the tea more from it?"

Miss de Bourgh sniffed disdainfully. "I thought you might, Miss Bennet."

Beatrice carried over a cup of tea to her charge and gave her a warning look, hoping that she would be able to carry off the subterfuge by at least attempting to look as if she wanted to have this visitor for tea.

She watched unobtrusively as Miss Bennet took a few sips and then replaced the cup on the saucer as she turned to Miss de Bourgh, a slight line between her brows indicating some disquiet.

But she was fairly ladylike — Beatrice had to admit as much — and made another attempt to engage Miss de Bourgh in conversation.

"I understand you enjoy driving your phaeton, Miss de Bourgh. Do you explore much of the countryside?"

Beatrice gave her charge another look, which Miss de Bourgh obviously understood, because she did make an effort to appear pleased with her company.

"Not a great deal, Miss Bennet. I find I use it more to go to the village when I wish to choose a book for myself, or other errands like that."

"Oh, I also enjoy selecting my own books. What is your preference in reading currently, Miss de Bourgh?"

Beatrice watched as her charge cleverly took a sip of tea, causing Miss Bennet to raise her own cup, from which she took a cautious sip.

Perhaps if Miss Bennet didn't lose consciousness completely — she was obviously able to taste the drug — then Beatrice would be able to get the footmen to hold her while she forced more down her. She smiled grimly; she would enjoy that. This low-born country miss would not usurp Miss de Bourgh.

It was fortunate, she mused, that these two footmen were well in her debt.

Over the years, she had made sure that she had found something on many of them that meant she could threaten them with dismissal, or worse, if she reported what she knew.

It was always as well to have a hold over people who might be useful.

And it had proved necessary. Miss Bennet was not only impertinent and common, but she was far too astute. Those few sips hadn't been nearly enough, but they had certainly made her appear rather uncertain — she was blinking, and occasionally shaking her head. Beatrice got to her feet.

“You do not look well, Miss Bennet. Is something the matter?”

“I ... I feel a trifle dizzy. I am sorry, Miss de Bourgh, but I fear I must ask to conclude my visit.”

But she was too late to escape the trap. Beatrice had signalled to the footmen. One of them held her in the chair and the other held her head while Beatrice forced another few drops of laudanum into her mouth. It was only a few minutes more before the young woman lost consciousness.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

It was very cold. And why was she lying on the cold floor?

Elizabeth shook her head muzzily. It was very cold.

No, I just thought that . She must not keep repeating her thoughts.

It was dank and dark and cold, and she was on a hard — a very hard — floor.

And her head ached. She had a bitter taste in her mouth. Laudanam!

She jerked up to sitting, and stared round wildly as flashes of memory returned. But she could see nothing. The inky blackness pressed in on her, not the slightest light, and she raised her hand to her eyes. There was no blindfold, so where was she?

She had been having tea with a sullen Miss de Bourgh, and the few sips of tea she took tasted vile. Then the memory returned of a footman holding her onto her chair while Mrs. Jenkinson dripped more of the bitter liquid into her mouth.

Elizabeth was a fool. Why hadn't she said sooner that she was ill, walked away from those people, before she had started feeling too disoriented to do anything? And now ...

She took a few deep breaths. It was important not to sit and feel sorry for herself.

They wouldn't just leave her here to be found; she knew too much.

But the silence pressed in on her, and the mustiness of the air told her that whatever

cellar or storeroom she was in, it had not been used or visited for a very long time.

But she doubted they — whoever they were — would bring her water and a meal, and she stifled a rather hysterical laugh. She shook her head again. Why was she stifling all noise? Perhaps someone might hear her.

“Hello? Hello!” But the tremble in her voice and lack of any echo frightened her, and her voice petered out.

There was an echoing dampness muffling her call.

And the silence beyond the cellar was eerily too silent.

Tentatively, she reached out, feeling all around her for anything to touch, anything that would make this whole thing seem real.

The floor was bare, and rocky. And cold. She must be a long way under the main house, if she was even still at Rosings. Then her hand touched something. It felt like an old bent nail. Rough to the touch. Rusty, perhaps.

Elizabeth clutched at it. It was the only thing she might be able to use.

Perhaps she would find that the door was rotten and she could use the nail to damage it further and attempt to break a corner of it away.

She held onto the nail, and crawled a few feet further.

Her head made contact with the wall and she muttered a word that Jane would never dream she knew.

Jane. Would she ever see her sister again?



Elizabeth shook her head. Worrying about it would not get her out of here.

She crawled along the edge of the wall. Her gown was unlikely to survive intact, she thought.

Lady Catherine would be disgusted. That lightened her mood, and she was pleased to discover a door quite soon.

But, as she settled down to try to scratch away at the planks that formed it, she began to feel discouraged. The door was very solid, and the wood was very hard.

How long had she been here, scraping the nail down the plank? It seemed like hours, although in the utter darkness and the cold, Elizabeth could not tell if it was night or day, or the passing of time.

What she would give for a cup of tea — or even just the mouthful from one of Lady Catherine's oh-so-elegant porcelain cups!

She was very thirsty; but not so thirsty as to draw her fingers down the damp wall and suck the moisture from them. She must escape before she was reduced to that.

She was tired, though. Maybe it was the effects of the laudanum still.

She ran her fingers through the long scratch she had made in the door.

Many of her attempts had missed the main damage she had tried to do to the door, and she knew, dismally, that she might not manage to make a large enough gap to escape through.

So tired. She was so tired. But she must explore a little further. Why had she not checked more carefully before expending her strength where it might do no good?

Clutching the nail tightly, she crawled to the other side of the doorway. Perhaps that side would have a rotten plank. That would be easier to dig through. No, it was as strong as the other side. Dismayed, she turned and sat back, leaning against the door.

What would Charlotte think when Elizabeth didn't return?

What would Mr. Darcy think? Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears.

She would die here, and no one would ever know what had happened to her.

She rubbed her hand across her face. Why was she concerned with what Mr. Darcy thought?

Surely she should be more concerned with Jane's feelings of loss, should she not?

A sudden yawn surprised her, and she realised she had been asleep. But she must not; she must escape this prison. Then she smiled. It was more like a dungeon. She blinked hard, opening her eyes widely between each blink; it would help her feel more awake.

Then she noticed it. A sliver of light, almost too dim to notice. And yes, a slight feeling of cooler air moving against her hand.

Before she could stop herself, she was crawling right across the cavernous space, towards the promise of hope the pinprick of light and the draught offered. She barely noticed when she collided with a corner, but realised that was what had stopped her noticing it sooner.

It was another door. This one led to the outside world, Elizabeth was convinced of it.

Perhaps it was a delivery door for supplies, or something of the sort.

Elizabeth bent her head closer to the tiny light.

She could smell the fresh air, she was sure.

She must be able to escape this way. Then Miss de Bourgh would not find her.

But she was somehow sure that Mr. Darcy would.

She took no time to wonder why she was thinking of him, except for the fact that he was strong and could carry her to safety and away from those at Rosings who would wish her harm.

Her hands explored the door. Yes! This one was warped and some of the timber was spongy under her fingers.

The weather must have affected it over the years and this would benefit her.

Her precious nail helped, and she began to think that soon she would be free. She was very thirsty. Outside she would find water to drink. Perhaps it would rain, and she pictured herself with her head back, allowing the water to wash away her fear and anger while she drank.

But it was going to take a long time, she knew.

And she was so tired; still, even after just waking.

Her head was aching, and even the hard floor would not stop her from resting.

Perhaps she could close her eyes again for a little while — still making sure she could smell the little draught of fresh air close beside her.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Darcy sipped at that ridiculous teacup and narrowed his eyes as he looked at his cousin Anne.

Something was far wrong. He and Richard were both ignoring Lady Catherine as she droned on about her call on her friend, and Anne was different somehow.

Self-satisfied, that was it. She looked like a cat who had trapped a particularly plump mouse, and was enjoying itself rather too much.

Incongruously, he felt rather sorry for whichever mouse she had in her sights. Anne was an unpleasant person, and he would never marry her, or anyone like her, whatever happened.

There was a knock at the door, and the butler entered, waiting for Lady Catherine to acknowledge him.

“Mr. and Mrs. Collins, my lady. They are here to escort Miss Bennet home.”

Darcy jerked to attention. She had been here? How was that possible?

“Why on earth do they think Miss Bennet has been here?” Lady Catherine was in a disagreeable mood. “Have you told them that I have been out today? I would not have invited that girl here!”

The butler cast an anxious glance at Darcy’s cousin. “Miss Bennet came to take tea with Miss de Bourgh, my lady.”

“Ridiculous!” cried Lady Catherine. “Anne does not have guests when I am not here.”

Darcy looked narrowly at Anne. Her lips were pressed together. She would not break the impasse.

He rose to his feet. “Perhaps I can speak to Mr. and Mrs. Collins, Aunt. I can find out what has occurred.” He looked at Richard.

“Come. We will endeavour to solve this.” What had happened to Miss Elizabeth? He still liked to think of her in that way; her given name giving her more intimacy in his mind.

Mrs. Collins looked far more concerned than her husband, and Darcy felt dread growing within him.

“Mrs. Collins,” Darcy bowed. “Lady Catherine was out today, calling on a friend. She says that Miss Eliz... Miss Bennet could not have come here.”

Mrs. Collins looked puzzled. “We know that Lady Catherine was out, sir. Miss de Bourgh drove to the parsonage yesterday afternoon and delivered an invitation for tea to my friend.” She extended a small piece of notepaper. “And Mr. Collins escorted her here at eleven o’clock.”

Mr. Collins broke in. “It was very good of Miss de Bourgh to be so condescending to my cousin, Mr. Darcy. To take the time to offer to have tea with her!”

“Of course.” Darcy frowned at the note. “I will enquire of Miss de Bourgh what time Miss Bennet left here.” He glanced at Mrs. Collins. “Did you not worry about your friend when she did not return for luncheon?”

“I did, sir. But she may have walked in the grove after she left here and forgotten the time. Mr. Collins did not think we should come and enquire here until now.” Her irritation showed in her voice.

Darcy turned to the butler. “Arrange for our horses, we must conduct a search while there is still light.” He turned to Richard, who was looking thoughtfully at the footmen standing outside the door to the drawing room.

Come, Richard, we will speak to cousin Anne, and then begin our search.”

He turned back. “Mrs. Collins, on your way back to the parsonage, might you look out for any clue as to whether Miss Bennet may have passed that way?”

“I will, sir. But I looked carefully on the way here, and there was nothing to be seen.”

Darcy nodded, his lips tight. What was Anne up to? Why hadn’t she volunteered any information when the butler first said that the Collins’ were here?

Richard’s face was serious, and he followed Darcy back into the drawing room.

Darcy waved the note. “You invited Miss Bennet to take tea with you this morning, cousin Anne. Why did you not tell us that when your mother said that Miss Bennet could not have come here?”

Lady Catherine turned an incredulous gaze on her daughter. “Why would you possibly want to invite such a low-born guest here while I was not able to protect you from any attempts to ingratiate herself to you?”

Anne looked sullen. “I wished to warn her away from Darcy. She is trying to get her claws into him, and he is mine.”

“What?” Darcy stared at her. His voice was louder and less in control than he wished.

“I am not yours, Anne. I have told you and your mother repeatedly that I will not marry you. I am here each Easter at the request of our uncle that I check the books for him. Nothing more! Now what did you do to Miss Bennet?”

“Nothing,” Anne said resentfully. “She went home after half an hour, after I wouldn’t make friendly conversation with her.”

“And who did you ask to escort her home?”

“She walks miles on her own, Darcy! You could not expect me to offer her escort to cross the lane!” Her voice was shrill and angry. “And we are betrothed. You will marry me!”

Darcy looked at her thoughtfully. “I will not.”

He spun round to Richard. “Come. There is only an hour or so of light left. We must conduct as much of a search as we can.”

“You cannot, Darcy! Dinner is about to be called.” Lady Catherine finally managed to break into the conversation.

Darcy threw her a disgusted look. “Have plates saved for us. We will return when we have found her.”

“I don’t think she is in the grounds, Darcy.” Richard’s voice was serious as they rode towards the grove, Darcy’s gaze ceaselessly searching the paths for any indication of his Miss Elizabeth.

“We must search while there is light, Richard. Just in case she is here, and injured.

But why do you think she is not here?"

"I was watching the footmen in the hall and then Mrs. Jenkinson while Anne was talking." He looked grave. "I think they have plotted something."

Darcy pulled up and turned to him, his heart pounding in a chest suddenly too tight to contain it. "Have they killed her?"

"Do not jump to any conclusions, Darcy. But I think we cannot put off anything until tomorrow. I think while there is daylight, as you say, we should search bushes and possible places where she may be concealed close to the house. We will do what we can now, then we can search the house when we return."

Darcy turned his horse back. "She might be in the house and in danger from them!"

"No, let's search outside as arranged, Darcy. I have tasked my batman with watching Mrs. Jenkinson, to observe her closely. I think she is the important figure. He will get your valet to watch the footmen if Mrs. Jenkinson seems to be sending them anywhere."

He reached over and clapped Darcy on the back. "Try not to worry too much, Darce. They are amateurs, and we will find her."

"We must, Richard. We must."



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Darcy didn't bother to remove hat or gloves as he stormed through the hall and into the room where the three ladies sat after dining. They must sit like this, in silence, nearly every day of the year, he thought inconsequentially. He knew Richard was right behind him, observant as always.

"Where is Miss Bennet?" His tone was icy, and all three flinched at the venom in his voice. He took three more steps towards them, glad his height allowed him to tower over them.

Lady Catherine looked haughtily down her nose at him.

"I was not here, Darcy, and Anne has already said that the girl left after half an hour. There is nothing more to say, and you should not act in such an ungentlemanly manner." She sniffed disdainfully.

"I suppose it to be the influence of that girl. I will have her sent home as soon as she turns up."

"Anne?" Darcy turned a glare on his cousin. "I do not believe that she left after half an hour. What did you do? Where is she?" He could hardly get any closer, and his heart turned over. What if I cannot break her? What if I never find Elizabeth?

Anne scowled. "Nothing! I told you. She left here after half an hour. She would not listen to me and she was just pretending friendship to get closer to you!"

Close behind him, there was a disbelieving snort from Richard, and Darcy was coldly amused.

He stepped back slightly, so he had both mother and daughter in his glare.

“I am telling you now, ladies , that if anything, anything at all, has happened to Miss Bennet, I shall ensure that the story of your perfidy and crimes against her are punished to the fullest degree of the law — and the whole of society will hear about it.”

They were strong, the de Bourgh ladies, he had to give them that. If he hadn't been watching so closely, he might not have noticed Anne's sudden pallor, and her brief glance at Mrs. Jenkinson. But Lady Catherine interrupted the moment.

“Darcy! Attend to me. I will have you marry Anne. It will take your mind from this common little miss, and everything will be much improved.”

“I will not,” he said coldly. And turned to Richard, eyebrows raised.

His cousin nodded; he had noted it, too, and they both turned and left the room without excusing themselves.

“Anne definitely knows, Richard. Did you see her reaction to my threat?”

Twenty minutes later, Darcy knocked at the door of the parsonage. “I am sorry to intrude so late, but may I speak to you, Mrs. Collins?” He knew he would have to endure the presence of her husband as well, but he knew he was concerned enough to shut the man down if he wasted too much time.

He had to endure a few minutes waiting for tea to be brought in, but while they were waiting he quickly explained what he and Richard had discovered so far.

“One thing I would ask you, Mrs. Collins, as you know her so well. Might there be any credence to her ladyship's assertion that Miss Bennet might have gone home if

she was distressed?”

The woman shook her head, her features tight and anxious.

“No, sir. There is not the slightest possibility of it. Elizabeth is far too generous and kind to even think of allowing me to be worried for her. She would have told me if it was even remotely likely. But it is not.” She rubbed at her forehead as if she had an incipient headache before continuing.

“She would not travel alone and risk her reputation bringing down disgrace on her sisters, Mr. Darcy. She would not.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you ever truly come to know her heart, you would know she is no coward, but no fool either.”

Mr. Collins blundered in. “I am sure Miss Elizabeth grew tired of her humble situation on seeing the rank and superiority of Miss de Bourgh. Perhaps she needed a break from Rosings’ — ahem, pressures.”

Darcy stared at him. “I doubt, Mr. Collins, that Miss Bennet’s courage would ever desert her for that foolish reason.”

The man spluttered into silence, and Darcy looked away from him in disgust. Something caught his eye. Behind the leg of the sofa where Miss Bennet often sat, was Elizabeth’s reticule. He knew she often went on her walks without it.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Collins, but is that Elizab... your friend’s reticule, there? Would you be able to tell if she has taken her purse, if she has any money with her?”

He waited impatiently while Mrs Collins carefully pulled the drawstring and opened the bag.

What if I have lost her forever? If I had followed my heart last year when I was at

Netherfield, this would never have happened. She would be under my protection and I'd never have allowed this to happen.

"Mr. Darcy." Mrs. Collins voice was hushed. "Elizabeth's purse is in here. She has no money with her. Even her last letter from Jane — she'd never leave that behind."

Darcy stared at her. Proof. Elizabeth was still here. At Rosings. Somewhere. He could only pray she hadn't been harmed. He rose to his feet. "I must find her."

He strode back to the manor. The only ones who must know where she was? Anne — and Mrs. Jenkinson. He clenched his jaw.

He strode through the hall. Halfway through, he glanced at a footman and nearly missed a step; the man had been looking at him before dropping this gaze hurriedly. Darcy fixed the man's features in his mind. I will remember you.

And Mrs. Jenkinson was shuffling through the hall, too, holding one of his cousin's shawls over her arm. He frowned slightly. Anne had already been wearing a shawl earlier. He suddenly wondered who was really in charge in this house. Perhaps Richard was right and it wasn't his aunt.

He barged into the library. "Richard! What news?"

His cousin looked up soberly. "Well, she is not in any of the rooms above stairs. I have searched them all with my man, apart from the ladies' chambers, but I had a very young maid check those. A maid who is far too young to be in league with anyone." He looked sympathetically at Darcy.

"And the housekeeper has searched the cellars, too."

Darcy nodded dispiritedly. Where was Elizabeth? When would he find her? And

would he be too late?

“The footman outside had a guilty expression. And Mrs. Jenkinson was dawdling through the hall, too, bringing yet another shawl for Anne.”

Richard nodded. “Yes. I have observed her. I find her the most likely person to know much of what is going on in this establishment. The footmen aren’t talking — not while she is there. She has some hold over them.”

Darcy knew what he would do — must do.

I will find her. I will. If I have to tear Rosings apart, I will find her.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Elizabeth stirred and groaned, pushing herself to sit up. Where was she? Cold. Dark. Damp.

Memory returned slowly, muzzily. She was in a cellar below Rosings, she must be. Long unused, she thought, coughing in the dust she had just stirred into the air. Somehow, she sensed that she was very deep underground; perhaps there were several levels of cellars here.

And she also knew she had not slept long. The hard, uneven floor had seen to that. But she was awake enough, perhaps, to work on the door.

It was some minutes later that she noticed she hadn't moved, but was leaning back against the door, remembering Papa's voice long ago in her childhood. "One day, Lizzy, you're going to get stuck in a tree if you keep trying to go higher."

"If only you knew, Papa," she whispered. "I could dream of being stuck in a tree outdoors again." She sighed. Instead, she was trapped deep in an unused cellar. Her head throbbed, and the bitter laudanum taste was still on her tongue. Water would wash it away, as well as quench her thirst. Water.

But she wouldn't get a drink down here. She must escape. Today. Surely she wouldn't live long without water. She jerked to attention; she wasn't holding the nail! Had she dropped it while she slept, and now lost it when she moved to lean against the door?

Her heart raced within her as she felt all round her, and extended her arm as far as she could.

The faint light from the bottom of the door was now barely there, cold and blue.

It must be night. Thank goodness there was some moonlight.

It might not be bright enough to let her see the nail, but it was enough to orient herself.

Her hand closed gratefully around the nail, ignoring the scratch down her palm as she grasped it, and she resolutely turned back towards the light.

Closer to the door, she could smell the freshness of the night air, the gentle movement of the air from outside. Outside! She longed to be the other side of this door. Nothing could be worse than being in here.

She set her jaw, and began to feel the corner of the door where the light was.

It was spongy to the touch and she thought it was where the wood was rotting.

Pushing away her disgust at the fungus that was probably growing on it, she continued to feel the planks, trying to find where she had been working before she slept.

She must not waste her energy again by failing to capitalise on what she had achieved yesterday.

“Ouch!” She snatched back her hand, her eyes filling with tears. It was too much. How could she do this?

She felt her finger cautiously, gently. The splinter was embedded deeply, and it hurt.

Oh, how it did. “Jane,” she whispered. “I wish you were here to soothe me and

comfort me.” An almost hysterical giggle.

“No. I wouldn’t wish you here, my dearest sister.

But I must work on. I will see you again, I will. ”

She could feel the end of the splinter sticking above the skin and with her left hand, she tried, by feel, to grasp it and pull it out, hoping she could extract it cleanly. Perhaps she did, but the pain of any pressure on the place made her wonder.

She took a deep breath. If this was the worst that would happen, then it wasn’t so very bad. She felt for the nail beside her and turned back to the door.

After an endless time pulling away small fragments of wood and piling them up in a little heap, she thought she might be able to get her hand underneath the plank and perhaps pull away larger chunks.

The moonlight was slightly brighter - or was it that more was visible through the enlarged gap? She turned and could glimpse the pile of wood chips she had collected. It was not much, but it showed what she had achieved.

It was a silly thing to look at it proudly and another hysterical half-sob, half-giggle escaped her. “There you are, Mr. Darcy. I am accomplished — at destroying rotten doors.”

But she still had much to do. Her amusement deserted her as she looked at the door. So much to do. Perhaps she could rest for a few moments.

It felt like no time at all when she stirred again, groaning at the stiffness and pain right through to her very bones. If only her captors would have been so thoughtful as to supply a mattress, she might be able to sleep a little longer.



But she must work. Perhaps it was because her eyes had been closed, but it seemed as if the moonlight was a little brighter.

Energised a little, Elizabeth crawled closer to the door. It might soon be dawn, and she must escape. She would refuse to die — especially if Miss Anne de Bourgh had decreed it!

She gritted her teeth and wriggled her hands into the gap she'd made under the door. A thousand — well, at least several dozen — little splinters made her regret it, but she tried to ignore them and pulled up towards her as much as she could. It moved a little, she was sure of it!

Afraid to move her hands, she pushed and then pulled again. Still it didn't break. But it must, surely it must if she kept moving it. And it would be much more effective than scaling away tiny fragments.

Her mind wandered as she pushed and pulled, pushed and pulled, until she could no longer recall why it was so necessary.

Mr. Darcy would be strong enough to break this.

No! Why was she thinking of him? Especially now?

She had to get herself free; no one was coming to rescue her in time.

Anyway, she didn't need him. Obnoxious man.

He knew her favourite walks and kept disturbing her in her solitude.

She pulled on the door viciously. Don't think about proud, disdainful characters now.

That would mean you're weak and feeble, Elizabeth Bennet.

Suddenly, there was a loud rending noise, and the planks fractured, and Elizabeth fell backwards to the floor.

Light flooded in, seeming brilliant after the endless darkness, and Elizabeth moaned at the pain in her back after falling so hard. But she crawled towards the door, wondering if the gap would be big enough to get through without more hours of effort.

She peered out. It wasn't a path. It was a vertical shaft and her heart sank. She looked down. The dust was not just dust, it was coal dust. She had broken her way out into a coal chute.

Before she could quite give way to despair, she looked through the gap, and around. Steps! Steps cut into the side of the shaft. Roughly hewn and cut unevenly into the rock and shining with dampness, she would have to be careful not to slip. But hope rose wildly within her.

She was weak and thirsty; trembling with hunger and exertion. Her dress was wet from the dampness of the cellar, and torn to shreds; her hands were gashed and bleeding from a plethora of splinters, her fingernails ripped and bloody.

Fingernails. Nails. The nail! She looked round, seeing it discarded on the floor. She reached over and picked it up, tucking it securely in her pocket. She would keep it forever, and her eyes were suspiciously damp. She had triumphed! Well, nearly.

The gap she had made in the door was not big enough.

Her shoulders got stuck and for a few minutes she could not move either way, until, suddenly, a wave of fury went through her.

She would not give up, and she forced her way through, twisting and turning, grasping a tree root and using strength she didn't know she possessed.

And then she was free. At the bottom of the shaft, the space where she crouched was quite small, but she could stretch out once she had climbed a few of the steps, she could see. Being in light was the greatest gift she could imagine, after so long surrounded by oppressive, unremitting darkness.

Before she could rest, she must reach level ground. Her feet were slipping on the wet rock forming the uneven steps, and if she did not reach the top before her strength quite gave out, she might not be able to climb them again.

At last, at long last, she was able to pull herself from the last step and crawl a yard further along the overgrown and narrow track.

It was dawn. As she brushed against the weeds and shrubs, the dew brushed against her, wetting her gown.

Elizabeth sighed happily, and turned her face up, brushing the branches with her hand.

As the dew dripped into her mouth, she was able to swallow some, and lick her dry and cracked lips.

She would always remember the joy of this exquisite and simple pleasure.

Then she heard a noise. The sound of a voice, although the hollow sound made the words incomprehensible. But it was echoing up the shaft! And the voice sounded angry.

Had her captors found she had gone? They would know where to find her.

She must move. But she was so worn out. The broken edge of the door had scraped down her body as she had struggled through the gap, and she could see blood seeping through the remains of her dress.

Her legs were sore from the scratches, and so were her arms and her body.

She tried to crawl, but she was so tired.

Finally, she rolled off the track and under a fairly thick bush, hoping it would hide her if there was a search.

Later, perhaps, she might be able to go further.

She waited as patiently as she could. Was she safe?

Perhaps she would be able to reach the parsonage tonight, if she could find the strength.

But she must rest now. Further on, the next bush still held dew on its leaves.

She would crawl there after she had rested.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Darcy stared, stupefied, at the broken corner of the door. There was enough light from the broken part not to need the lamp which was held by the shaking housekeeper. She had only now recalled there were a deeper level of cellars that she had not searched.

He could see the blood smeared across the floor, could see the scrap of fabric caught on the jagged edge of the hole. As he turned back to his cousin, he could see the marks in the dust where Elizabeth must have crawled across the cellar in the darkness, and rage rose within him.

“Richard, with me.”

And he turned to the housekeeper. “Sunlight. This opens to the east side of the house, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” she quavered, her horrified gaze unable to look away from the hole where Elizabeth must have forced her way through.

We ought to ensure this place was searched sooner. His bitter self-castigation echoed in his head. What must she have felt as she struggled to free herself in the cold darkness?

But he burst up the stairs, and out through the servant’s door at the rear of the house, ignoring the startled servants in the hall. Richard was only a step or two behind him as he ran round to the east side of the house.

Elizabeth hadn’t deserved this — this pain, this terror, this effort to free herself. He

would make sure she never felt so alone again. He must protect her and he would.

He stood with his cousin as they surveyed the side of the house, overgrown bushes shielding the view of the lower levels. Then they strode along the path.

“It was a coal cellar, Darcy. There must be a wide track for the cart leading to the chute. Though I cannot imagine why it is empty.”

Darcy nodded at Richard. He agreed, which was why they were hurrying. It would be easy to see.

Five minutes later, they stood at the far end of the house. Richard scratched his head. “I don’t understand it. Where’s the path?”

Darcy shivered. When had Elizabeth escaped? Had she been out of doors in the cold all night? Surely she must have come to harm; there was no sign of her having crawled far. But the cellar had been very cold, too. How much she must have suffered — was still suffering.

“I will begin to search more closely,” he said abruptly. “You go and ask the housekeeper exactly where the cellar door opens out to, Richard.”

Darcy pushed his way through the tangled bushes to the outside wall of the house, and began to wade through them, looking for any clue where Elizabeth might be. Lady Catherine must never look outside this part of the house, or she would be furious that the gardeners have not cut the bushes back.

“Elizabeth!” He called softly. He didn’t want to frighten her, but he hoped that she might take comfort from his voice if she could hear him.

He hurried with his task, he could not wait to find her. She must be well, she must .

His calls went unanswered, mocking him.

But he persisted; she was here, surely she was? Then — finally , a weak sound, merely a moan. He fought his way through towards Elizabeth, knowing the sound was her, although how he knew, he would never be able to say.

“Elizabeth!” He dropped to his knees beside her. “Thank God I have found you.” His hand was no longer under his iron control and he gently pushed back the tangle of hair obscuring her face. “Elizabeth.”

She seemed barely conscious. Her lips were dry and cracked, smears of blood on her face and her gown, competing with streaks of coal dust. She was filthy, feverish, but even so, utterly beautiful.

He stood and stripped off his jacket. He’d been in too much of a hurry when he ran out to don his greatcoat. But his jacket would be better than nothing, and he draped it gently over her, seeing her flinch as it touched the long deep scratches on her arms.

“Mr. ... Mr. Dar...” Her murmur was barely a sound, and he took her hand.

“Rest, dearest Elizabeth. I will take you to Hunsford. You are safe now. I’ve got you.” Slowly, with infinite care, he lifted her into his arms, allowing her head to rest against his shoulder. She felt frighteningly light, perhaps she was thirsty.

“It was Miss de...” she could barely speak. “And Mrs. Jen...”

“Hush, now. You are safe. I will keep you safe and you can tell me later what you need to.”

Running steps behind him. “Darcy! You’ve found her.” Richard’s voice was sharp with relief, and he slowed to walk beside him.

“How is she?” He glanced at Elizabeth’s huddled form.

“We will need the apothecary, Richard. Urgently. Can you go on to Hunsford and warn Mrs. Collins, and get him sent for?”

Richard nodded. “That coal cellar is disused, Darcy. That’s why the path is overgrown.

One of the servants broke his leg on the steps of the shaft a few years ago, shovelling coal, and the housekeeper stopped using it, since they rarely empty the other cellar.

” He gave Darcy a look which said they would talk later, and hurried off towards the parsonage.

As he reached the front gate of the parsonage, Mrs. Collins was waiting for him, wringing her hands.

“You found her, Mr. Darcy! Praise be, you found her.” She looked anxiously at her friend.

“The Colonel has sent the gig for the apothecary, with instructions that he is to drop everything and return with it.” She hesitated.

“Should Mr. Collins carry her to her bedchamber?”

“I will do it.” Darcy was resolute. Even if he had admired Mr. Collins, he would not release Elizabeth until he could place her safely onto her bed himself.

Slowly and infinitely gently, he climbed the stairs. He would not cause her any further pain by jolting her.



Mrs. Collins eased his jacket from around Elizabeth, and he carefully lowered her onto the bed where the sheets had been folded back. Her lavender scent rose up around him and his eyes stung. How nearly he had lost her; how nearly he would never have experienced her scent again.

Elizabeth's murmur was barely a whisper, and he lowered his head closer to hear her.

"Water," she whispered. "Please." He looked up just as a maid hurried in with a jug and glass on a tray.

Darcy eased his arm behind Elizabeth and lifted her slightly as Mrs. Collins brought the glass over to him and he held it while Elizabeth drank.

Mrs. Collins was wringing her hands again, glancing at the door. "Mr. Darcy, I think Mr. Collins will be unhappy you are here in Elizabeth's bedchamber. Perhaps you would wait downstairs. I need to assist Elizabeth to refresh herself."

A glance at Elizabeth evinced a flush, and he thought perhaps he was embarrassing her. "Very well, Mrs. Collins. But I wish to be kept informed of everything ." He turned to Elizabeth, and lifted her hand to his lips, seeing the myriad of cuts and splinters. "You are the bravest lady I know."

"You saved her life, Mr. Darcy." Mrs. Collins' voice was low. "I can never thank you enough."

He shook his head. "No. She saved herself. I merely found her."

He looked at Elizabeth from the door before he went downstairs. She was looking at him, a sense of bewilderment, as if nothing could ever be the same between them again.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Elizabeth stirred, the light bright against her eyelids. But the cellar was dark. She shivered; and it had been cold. But now it was not; she was warm, and lying on a soft bed.

A hand took hers. "You're safe, Eliza. Back at the parsonage with me, and safe."

Charlotte. It was Charlotte speaking to her, with tearfulness in her voice. Elizabeth squeezed her hand.

"I'm well, Charlotte, I think." She frowned, and opened her eyes. "How did I get here?"

Her friend's face showed evidence that she had been weeping, but a sly little smile showed through. "Mr. Darcy found you and carried you here. Don't you remember?"

Elizabeth felt herself blush. "I thought I had dreamed it. I dreamed a lot in the cellar that I had got out, and then I never had."

A few more tears trailed down Charlotte's face. "I thought I'd lost you forever, Eliza. But why were you dreaming about Mr. Darcy carrying you?" Her grin still wavered; her emotions seemed not quite fully under control. "Have you something to admit to me, finally?"

"Of course not!" Elizabeth was vexed. "You know how I despise him." But her voice was less certain. She remembered the feel of his arms around her and the feeling of being protected when she was so weak.

Charlotte stood up, her brisk and efficient friend back.

“Let me plump up your pillows, my friend. The apothecary says you must drink a great deal of water as you recover.” She frowned slightly.

“He also cleaned your scratches and removed what splinters he could. Some were very deep and I am not sure he found all of them.” She chewed on her lip.

“He told Mr. Darcy that he hoped they might not cause an infection, but if you developed a fever, he would be concerned for your recovery.”

Elizabeth squeezed her friend’s hand again. “You know I always heal quickly. I have been through many bumps and scrapes and always stayed well.” She hesitated. “Why would the apothecary tell Mr. Darcy about me?”

Charlotte looked rather embarrassed. “Mr. Darcy is downstairs, Eliza. He has led the search for you — been beside himself with anxiety. I think he didn’t even sleep, and hardly ate. He is furious with the de Bourgh ladies.” She hesitated, before speaking again.

“I don’t believe he is the man you thought him to be. He seems to care very deeply for you. Perhaps you don’t remember how carefully and gently he carried you up to bed. ”

He had been here , in this very room? Elizabeth blushed again. But Charlotte was still speaking, and she must listen.

“Miss de Bourgh has refused to admit what happened, but Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam have got the story from one of the footmen that Mrs. Jenkinson was blackmailing, and they assisted her to drug you and dispose of you in one of the deepest unused cellars. Everyone is in awe of how you escaped.” Her grin was

stronger now, less emotional.

“And Mr. Darcy has sent for his London physician, just in case his skills are needed. I hope you will be kind to him.” She withdrew her hand from Elizabeth’s, and patted it.

“I think I must leave you to rest now. I will go down and reassure Mr. Darcy that you seem to be much better.” She leaned closer. “Let me say this again. When you see him, you must be kind to him.”

Alone, Elizabeth lay back and stared at the ceiling.

What Charlotte had shared with her was overwhelming; she had so much to sort out in her mind, Mr. Darcy’s actions being foremost among them.

Why would he do so much? Charlotte says he cares for me.

I never saw that in him. But it seems his actions have proved her right, and me wrong.

Tears started to her eyes. Not only was she alive, but he had searched for her without ceasing, he had found her and carried her here; he had sent for his physician, and he had found the evidence he needed to make her safe.

She curled up on her side, and wept at how mistaken she had been about him. Was it too late for her?

After a while, the emotional storm of weeping having cleared her mind and given her clarity, she rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed.

Mr. Darcy could not come up here to see her; Charlotte would make sure of that. If she wanted to see Mr. Darcy for herself, and she did, then she must dress and go downstairs. And she would not allow herself to ponder why she would want to see

him.

Fortunately she had a day dress with her that buttoned down the front so that she could creep out for an early walk without disturbing the servants.

If Elizabeth rang for the maid, Charlotte would appear too, and then Elizabeth might never make it downstairs.

And she did not wish to be an invalid, not at all.

Her hands and fingers were heavily bandaged, and she growled to herself as she struggled to fasten the buttons. She did not wish to interfere with the bandages, admitting to herself that her hands were rather sore.

But eventually, she was ready, her hair pinned up in a semblance of normality, although she knew it was more wishful thinking and a hasty prayer that would keep her hair up, not the pins.

She grinned to herself at the thought of Mr. Darcy's embarrassment and Charlotte's mortification if her hair loosed while she was downstairs.

But she was ready, and she moved carefully along the landing until she came to the stairs.

It was more tiring than she thought, and she leaned against the door frame of the sitting room and looked at the two people who were sitting there in an awkward silence.

She smiled to herself. It must be difficult for Charlotte to have to entertain such a taciturn man for so long, and she wondered how they had evaded the garrulous company of Mr. Collins.

Then Mr. Darcy saw her and leapt to his feet. “Miss Bennet!”

Charlotte also rose and drew Elizabeth to a chair beside the fire. “Eliza, you didn’t dress entirely by yourself, did you? Your poor hands!”

Elizabeth smiled wearily at her. “Charlotte, dearest. Please remember I do not like being fussed over.”

Her friend shook her head and glanced between her and Mr. Darcy. “Very well, I will go and arrange for tea.” She quietly left the room, leaving the door open for propriety.

“It is good to see you downstairs, Miss Bennet.” His voice was quiet, and Elizabeth smiled uneasily.

“I could not delay in wishing to thank you, Mr. Darcy. I understand that you searched and found me. I owe you a great deal.”

“You owe me nothing, madam. I am deeply sorry that I did not know what my cousin was plotting and that I could not protect you from her twisted jealousy.”

“Of me?” Elizabeth was astonished.

He looked rather embarrassed. “I was obviously not as discreet as I thought I was being — as I watched you with admiration, Miss Bennet.”

“Oh,” she blushed. “I had no idea.”

His smile changed all his features. “No, I don’t suppose you did.

But I must tell you how much I admire you, your cheerful happiness and refusal to allow my aunt to intimidate you — and your bravery in escaping that cellar — have

made me understand I could never forget you as I tried to when I had left Netherfield.  
”

He frowned anxiously. “I hope you can forgive me the words and actions of my relations. When I think of the fear and anguish they caused you, you must wish never to see any of my family, or me, again.”

“That is not true, Mr. Darcy. You are not responsible for their actions, and I am more than grateful you found and assisted me.”

“As I said, you owe me nothing.” He shifted uneasily in his chair. “I pray you have a swift recovery and that none of your injuries result in any infection.” He met her eyes. “I hope that if you feel at all unwell you will inform us before anything is too late.”

“Worry not, Mr. Darcy. I will take care, and not accept any invitation to tea alone again.” She gave him a teasing smile, and his anxious expression became a beaming smile. Elizabeth’s heart stuttered within her and she smiled tremulously back.

He rose to his feet, and came closer to her. “You must rest; you are looking wearier already.” His eyes met hers, dark and passionate. “May I call on you tomorrow?”

Elizabeth swallowed. Her time in the cellar had changed everything. Now she was in the light, and it seemed that her life might take a different path. “I would like that, Mr. Darcy.”

And she watched as he bowed over her hand, gave her a gentle smile and left the room.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

A week had passed, and Elizabeth sat in the cottage garden at the parsonage; the traditional blooms all around her, as was the soothing sound of bees busily exploring the flowers.

Dearest Aunt Gardiner,

What a lot I have to say, and I cannot wait until I see you to tell you in more detail all that has happened here. It is quite exciting, but you can see that I am well and writing this letter, so you will not need to be too worried about me while I tell you.

This morning, Mr. Darcy's physician has pronounced my hands are recovered enough to be without bandages and I am much happier that I can now write to you myself.

I have repaired to the garden here at Hunsford, and the maid has carried down my portable writing desk for me.

I am sure your imagination is running wild with what could have happened, so I will tell you at once.

Elizabeth wrote fast, attempting to downplay as much as she could what had actually occurred; she knew Aunt would share the letter with Jane, and her sister's tender heart would be bruised, thinking of the evil that had revealed itself in Anne de Bourgh.

At least Lady Catherine had been shocked at what she had done.

Being at Hunsford is very much better than the cold hard floor of the cellar beneath



Rosings. It makes me shiver to remember it. But now, the sunshine and being out of doors is reviving my spirits, and knowing that I am due to be with you in another week completes my happiness.

You will laugh when I tell you that during the first few days, the greatest luxury and pleasure for me was being able to drink a glass of water whenever I wished.

Being thirsty and not knowing when or if I would ever have that pleasure again was unimaginably painful.

Mr. Darcy laughed and told me to wait until I could taste the water from the spring at Pemberley, because the water here is insipid by comparison. But I digress.

He has proved himself an implacable defender of justice, but he did propose that Miss de Bourgh should be sent away to an enclosed strict convent in Ireland to prevent the scandal that a trial would cause.

Her mother objected, and Mr. Darcy told her that otherwise her daughter would certainly hang for attempted murder, and that as she was the heiress to Rosings, the estate would be forfeit to the crown.

I think Lady Catherine, for the first time in her life, saw sense, for she changed her Will to give Rosings to Mr. Darcy's cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Then she ordered Miss de Bourgh to enter the convent at Loughrea in County Galway, which she will never be able to leave.

Mr. Darcy apologised to me as he was concerned that I may not feel a sense that Miss de Bourgh has been brought to proper justice for what she wanted to do to me, but I told him that a life of prayer and coming to terms with what she did might well be seen as a more fitting justice.

He smiled then, and I must confess his smile has been part of what has changed my mind about him. But that is too soon, for there is much else to tell you about before I mention Mr. Darcy.

Mrs. Jenkinson was dealt with by way of a closed trial arranged, conveniently enough, by the Earl of Matlock, and is in a convict ship on her way to Australia as I write, because it was considered that to hang when the principal criminal has not also been hanged, was not justice.

Lady Catherine did not know or approve of what her daughter attempted to do, and I am glad about that, although her disdain for my low-born position in society remains, and I cannot like her for it.

But she has asked the colonel to manage Rosings Park now for a peppercorn lease until he inherits and she has decided to retire to a house in Malvern to take the waters and establish herself into a different society where she will be far distant from the rumours that are swirling here in Kent.

Malvern has less of the first circles visiting than Bath and Lady Catherine was concerned that the rumours might emerge there before too long.

The two footmen that Mrs. Jenkinson was blackmailing are being retained at Rosings.

The colonel will be able to keep a better eye on them and all the servants in future, and although what they did was of a criminal nature, they were being blackmailed.

Now all is in the open, they cannot be imposed on in that way again, and, as I said, the colonel will be observant.

I think Mr. Darcy and his cousin are relieved that their aunt will be too far away to interfere as the colonel establishes himself as the new master of Rosings, and Mr.

Darcy has confided in me that he is happy the colonel is resigning his commission and will be safe from the war.

They are as close as brothers, and if it makes Mr. Darcy happy, then I am happy too.

But again, I am talking about him too soon and I must tell you about Charlotte.

She is quite insufferably smug when she finds me annoying, for she bears the distinction of having been completely right about almost everything.

Mr. Collins is exceedingly put out, for when he realised his patron was now Colonel Fitzwilliam, he began to fawn over him and was told very firmly to busy himself with his parishioners, and to seek the advice of Mrs. Collins over the content of his sermons.

Elizabeth laughed to herself as she took a third sheet of paper. She was enjoying herself far too much to stop writing now, and she knew her last bit of news would be well worth the extra cost to her Aunt — and Jane, as well.

Now, I will relieve your impatience and talk about Mr. Darcy. Or, should I?

Yes, perhaps I will. As for him — I no longer find him intolerable. Indeed, I find him rather essential to my happiness. He is such a gentleman, and his determination to find me and bring me to safety has quite convinced me of his goodness and devotion.

He has visited me often during my convalescence, even reading a novel aloud while I was unable to hold the book and turn the pages myself.

That feat of gentlemanly behaviour was even greater because he made no objection to the story, though he must have wished to, for I am afraid that in a state of whimsy, I chose a rather silly book.

Afterwards, I apologised to him for my choice, and he took my hand and kissed it, saying that it was his pleasure and joy to accommodate all my wishes, silly or otherwise.

My heart rather took off with that, and I am afraid I cried, whereupon he took his handkerchief and dabbed away my tears.

You have divined what I am going to say next, I am sure, and so I can tell you that, yes, we are engaged, and as I write this, Mr. Darcy is riding to Longbourn to gain the consent and blessing of Papa.

My dear aunt, please reassure Jane, and tell her that he carries a note from me to Papa, telling him not to toy with Mr. Darcy, or he will suffer my wrath when I get home.

Society is outraged, I am afraid. Word of our engagement has spread like scandal at Almacks, and accuracy does not appear to be part of it. One report had him wading through a rough tide to rescue me from a cave in the cliffs — there are no such caves in Kent, I believe.

Over the next weeks, I fully expect to have been rescued from a pirate ship or other such nonsense! Mr. Darcy laughed at me when I began to make notes and told him I would keep the stories to tell our children.

I expect you will meet him soon. I think you will approve. He does not fish, but he has already promised to get the rods and tackle at Pemberley refreshed and checked, and to learn so that he may fish with Uncle when you visit us.

I must finish now, or I will have to take a fourth sheet of paper, which is quite unreasonable when I will see you again so soon.

Much love to you all in Gracechurch Street, and until I can embrace you in person,

A very happy and joyous Lizzy.

Elizabeth sat back on the bench, sighing contentedly as she thought with what delight her letter would be received and read.

How odd it was, given her happiness, that little more than a week had passed since she had believed she might die in that cellar, might die and never be found.

The pain her relations would have suffered could hardly be imagined, and yet, what had occurred might have been essential for this felicity to have come to her.

Mr. Darcy might still have thought he ought to forget her. And, worse, she might have persisted in her dislike of him and never believed they could make their lives together.

This happiness might never have been hers. She looked up at the sky; Mr. Darcy would be at Longbourn by now, and she almost wished she could be with him, to protect him from Mama's effusions. But he had smoothed back a loose tendril of her hair this morning.

"Do not worry, my love. I can endure anything, anything at all, knowing you are safe and soon will be beside me forever."

Her legs went weak at the memory and she was glad there was no-one to see how odiously missish she had become.

She shook her head and rose to her feet. If she was going to behave like this, she ought to go indoors and talk to Charlotte.

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Darcy stood with his wife — his wife! — beside the coach which had stopped so he could show her the view of Pemberley, the view he always anticipated whenever coming home.

He bent his head to murmur in her ear. “Well, Elizabeth? Of all this you are now mistress. I hope it meets with your approval.”

She leaned back against him. “It does,” she said simply. “I think there would be few who would disapprove.”

His answering chuckle reverberated through her. “Shall we walk together the rest of the way, or would you rather be at the house sooner? I know you are anticipating a cup of tea — and I can assure you that the tea service here has good-sized cups.”

Elizabeth turned her head and kissed his chin, which was about all she could reach. “I am glad to hear it. But let us walk together. Just us.”

His response was merely a whisper. “Just us, and our future here.”

She stood straighter. “And I suppose an army of servants once we arrive at the house. So we will enjoy our time alone while we walk.”

The housekeeper curtsied as she supervised the maids placing down the trays of tea and pastries, the enticing smells rising with the steam of the hot treats. “Will that be all, Mrs. Darcy?”

Elizabeth smiled up at her husband before turning back to the woman. “It looks

wonderful, thank you, Mrs. Reynolds. Might I just trouble you for a glass of your freshest spring water, please? Mr. Darcy has enticed me here by telling me it is the best-tasting water in the world.”

“Of, course, Mrs. Darcy. I will send a footman at once to the spring. You will certainly not be disappointed!”

Elizabeth was not disappointed. “Even Longbourn water will never taste right again, William. This tastes of the peaks and the air and the wild winds. And it’s so beautifully cold, even in this weather.”

They sat close together on the sofa. “We will walk out the the spring tomorrow when I am showing you the gardens, my love.” He leaned closer to her.

“But today, as soon as you have finished your tea, I wish to show you our apartments. We have had too little time alone together where I can properly show you how much I love and adore you, my dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth.”