



The House in Audley Street

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Category: Historical

Description: Their life together stretches before them . . .

Happily engaged, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy await the next formality, the preparation and signing of their marriage articles.

But on the eve of Darcys arrival at Longbourn with the contract, Elizabeth disappears on a Sunday walk. It is as though the earth itself had opened and swallowed her up.

It takes only a short time for the frantic Darcy to realize that she is caught in a web of evil that extends the length and breadth of England and that she may not be the only young woman to be trapped. The search in Hertfordshire and London grows more frantic as time grows short.

Will Darcy find his beloved Elizabeth before she is caught forever or found lifeless in the waters of the Thames? The answer lies in a mysterious House on Audley Street.

Please note that this book contains allusions to violence and to human trafficking.

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She stood in the center hallway of the parsonage carefully dusting and re-dusting the small table and mirror, running a rag over the moldings and baseboards, and listening.

Dressed in a simple round gown of brown calico, her figure was hidden by her voluminous white apron.

Her guinea-gold curls were pulled back under a starched white mob cap.

“You have said quite enough, Madam.” Ruth heard Mr. Darcy’s voice and crept closer to the door.

“I perfectly comprehend your feelings and now have only to be ashamed of what my own have been.” She whisked herself away, down the back hall towards the basement stairs, not waiting to hear the end of the conversation.

Within moments, the parlor door opened, Mr. Darcy’s footsteps sounded in the hallway, and she heard him let himself out.

She picked up her basket of rags and dust cloths and made her way down to the kitchen.

With the family dining at Rosings, she knew her supper would be ready and that she would have the rest of the evening off.

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“You are certain that this is what you heard.” Her eyes made Ruth think of a serpent’s

eyes, and they were at present drilling into her. “There can be no mistake.”

“Yes milady,” replied the maid with a curtsy. “Mr. Darcy made the offer of marriage. Miss Bennet refused him, and they quarreled. It went on for some time—something about Miss Bennet’s sister, and something else about someone named Wickham. Mr. Darcy left shortly after that.”

“And you are certain the name you heard was Wickham.” The cold eyes grew harder and colder.

“Yes ma’am. I am certain of it. The name was mentioned by both.”

“Very well.” Lady Catherine turned to a ledger which lay open on the desk before her. Ruth stood quietly. At length, Lady Catherine looked up. “It seems that your mother has not yet paid this quarter’s rent on the cottage. I will see that her debt is discharged before the bailiff gets to her.”

“Thank you, milady.” Ruth dropped another curtsy .

“You may go.”

A footman was waiting to conduct Ruth down the darkened stairs, and she was soon on her way back to the parsonage.

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Lady Catherine de Bourgh closed the ledger, laid it aside, and took up her pen. How convenient that the _shire Militia were quartered at Meryton.

Once she had finished her letter, her thoughts turned to the maid. The chit’s mother was becoming troublesome. It was time the two of them were sent to London where

they could make themselves useful. She sipped her wine and began another letter.

Rosings, Kent - Thursday, June 11, 18__

She poured herself a glass of Madeira and smiled.

All was going smoothly, as planned, and by the end of the day another girl would be on her way to Mrs. Younge's gentlemen's establishment in London.

She had understood from her sources that, despite the fact that her father had made his fortune in trade, this chit was a tall, willowy, aristocratic-looking brunette.

Rumor had it that she was quite accomplished.

There were many gentlemen who preferred such a girl, particularly if she could be trained in certain exotic arts and allurements of a more aggressive nature.

She proposed a silent toast to her plans and finished her wine before pouring a second glass.

According to the London papers, her quarry was staying with an uncle in Bath.

She would await word of the results with great satisfaction.

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Caroline Bingley, dressed in the first stare of fashion, grimaced slightly as she finished her glass of water.

She looked around the Pump Room, then smiled as she caught sight of her new friend, Julia Montgomery.

“Caroline, you look ravishing. Is that the new bonnet? Very becoming. My brother Frank is sure to love it. And what are you wearing to the assembly?” The two young ladies linked arms and began their leisurely stroll around the room.

There may have been some people there for the medicinal quality of the waters, but everyone else was out to see and be seen.

Caroline smiled. “I have a brand-new gown in Pomona green, which I plan to wear with my coral parure. I will finish it off with a plumed bandeau in shades of dark green velvet wound with light green silk.”

“Frank will adore that! Green is so becoming on you.” Julia lowered her voice. “I will be certain to tell him what sort of flowers to send.”

“You know my tastes very well, dear Julia. And now, I think we had best say goodbye. I feel certain our plans are the same--a lovely beauty nap before preparing for the ball, yes?”

Caroline congratulated herself as she parted from her friend.

Mr. Frank Montgomery was only one of several eligible gentlemen she could regard

as conquests during her time at Bath.

Since Mr. Darcy was being uncommonly slow, Caroline had wisely decided that the time had come to shake off all sloth.

She had been amply rewarded for her efforts.

Mr. Montgomery was in his early thirties, tall and handsome, cultured enough to appreciate an accomplished lady.

He was certainly well-off financially. She felt that, properly nurtured, a mutual attachment might grow.

Caroline located the footman who had attended her and began the agreeable walk back to her uncle and aunt's house in Laura Place.

She always made a point of walking across the Parade Gardens with their splendid views of the river and pleasant garden paths.

She lost herself in a pleasant reverie, envisioning herself at the ball in the new Pomona green gown and wondering what flowers Frank Montgomery would send for her to wear with it.

She was startled to hear a low grunt and a dreadful thud, and she whirled around to see her footman sprawled on the path, wig askew.

A quick glance revealed a wound to his temple with a slight, but ominous, trickle of blood.

She gathered her forces and screamed "Help! Murder!"

A man's hand was clamped over her mouth, a man's voice close to her ear said, "Don't make a sound, miss and you'll be all right."

She bit down on the rude hand as hard as she could, heard a muffled curse, and then knew no more.

Caroline regained consciousness to find herself lying on the grass, head pillowed on the lap of a young lady she did not know.

There were voices all around her, and her face was being bathed with lavender water.

Her head ached unspeakably, and her ankle throbbed.

She heard the young lady say, "She is coming around, Robert. There appears to be some blood on the bodice of her gown."

"What has happened, ma'am?" exclaimed a cultivated gentleman's voice.

Caroline tried but failed to turn her head. "My footman! Please see to him."

The gentleman approached and knelt on the ground. "Madam, I am afraid there is bad news. Your footman has not survived the attack."

The lady took Caroline's hand. "Help has been summoned, and others are searching for the attackers. Please allow me to make us known to you. I am Miss Maria Carter, and this is my brother, Sir Robert Carter. We are just arrived in Bath to stay with our cousins."

Caroline could not manage a smile. "And I am Miss Caroline Bingley. I am here with my sister Mrs. Hurst to visit our aunt and uncle."

“This has been an unspeakable ordeal for you, Miss Bingley. I see you are still in possession of your reticule. Were they robbers?”

“I cannot think what else they can have wanted.”

A few moments later, two constables, a surgeon, and several other men arrived.

The men went immediately to the footman, and the surgeon began to examine the corpse.

He began his report to the constables after a brief examination.

“The cause of death was a forceful blow to the right temple by a blunt object. In that region of the skull and brain, death would have been almost immediate. Help me turn him over, please.” One of the constables stepped forward, and they laid the man out on his back.

The surgeon untied the cravat, loosened the shirt, and looked quickly at the man’s chest. “The death occurred no more than fifteen or twenty minutes ago. There has not yet been time for the blood to pool in the lower-lying areas of the body, and the skin is still quite warm.” He began to compose the body into a decent attitude, straightening the man’s legs, closing his eyes, and crossing his hands over his breast. “I will examine him in my chambers, but there will not be much more to tell than that. Does anyone know his name?”

Caroline’s voice was weak. “Foster. Second footman to my uncle Mr. Bingley of Laura Place. I do not know his Christian name.”

The surgeon approached and knelt by Caroline, introducing himself as Mr. Fielding.

“We must remove your bonnet, Madam.” Miss Carter untied it gently and took it off

for Caroline, handing it silently to the surgeon.

It was woven of a light summer straw with elegant trim, and the back had been entirely crushed.

The surgeon began exploring the back of Caroline's head until he touched a place that caused her to cry out.

"You have received a blow to the back of your head, Madam, probably from the same object used to assault your footman. Fortunately, it was somewhat deflected by your bonnet, although it was strong enough to crush the straw." He examined her eyes, asked her to follow various movements of his hands, and questioned her regarding the date, day of the week, and other details.

After moving on to her ankle, he sat back.

"The injury to your head is not serious, Madam, and there is every indication you will make a full recovery. However, complete bed rest will be necessary for several days at least. Such injuries can have unforeseen consequences. I will wait upon you at your uncle's home in Laura Place this afternoon to examine you further.

Your ankle is sprained and will benefit from cold compresses.

I will bandage it this afternoon. Now, as to the blood on the bodice of your gown. "

"It is not mine. It belongs to one of the attackers. I bit him."

The senior of the two constables approached her and knelt. "Miss Bingley, this has been a terrible experience, and I am sorry to trouble you."

"But not so terrible for me as it has been for poor Foster."

“Yes, ma’am. We will need to call in the magistrate, and there may be a coroner’s inquest. I expect the magistrate will wish to wait upon you in a day or two, when you have recovered sufficiently to speak to him.”

“He is most welcome.”

“I will not detain you much longer. Can you tell us anything at all about the men who attacked you?”

“They came from behind. Obviously one of them dealt the blow to Foster. The other put his hand over my mouth and told me no harm would come to me if I kept quiet. I did not see either of them very well. Their hats were pulled down over their eyes. All I can tell you is that I believe I did serious harm to the one who held his hand over my mouth. I bit his left hand so hard that he was compelled to release me. And apparently I drew blood.” Caroline lay back, feeling decidedly unwell.

“It also seemed to me that he was missing part of his index finger on that hand. I did not bite it off—it was already gone.”

Sir Robert spoke up. “Miss Bingley, my sister and I would be honored to escort you home. Our carriage is just over there.” Caroline nodded, and he picked her up effortlessly and carried her to the waiting carriage. His sister followed close behind carrying Caroline’s reticule and the ruined bonnet.

The small party was received with consternation by the residents of the house in Laura Place. Caroline was transported upstairs by a stout footman, followed anxiously by her aunt, her sister Louisa, and Miss Carter.

Upstairs, Caroline allowed herself to be being undressed and put to bed.

She heard Miss Carter acquainting Louisa Hurst and the elder Mrs. Bingley with the

surgeon's name, the details of his examination, his recommendations for complete rest, and his intention of calling on the patient later in the afternoon.

“Mr. Fielding is well known to us,” said Mrs. Bingley. “I will see that his instructions are carried out with respect to the bed rest and cold compresses, and we will await his visit this afternoon.”

Miss Carter approached the bed. “Dear Miss Bingley, I am so very sorry this has happened to you. I will call on you in a day or two to see how you are progressing.”

Caroline managed a weak “Thank you,” and Miss Carter took her leave of the other two ladies and left to go downstairs and find her brother.

After the ladies had gone upstairs, Sir Robert asked to speak to the elder Mr. Bingley privately and was ushered into his library, where he quickly acquainted Caroline's uncle with the known facts concerning the assault, the death of the footman, and the actions of the constables.

“We are most sincerely grateful to you for escorting my niece to us, Sir Robert, and for the kindness of yourself and your sister towards her.” Mr. Bingley was clearly experiencing both shock and perplexity.

“Foster was a good man who supported his widowed mother. I shall have to arrange to visit her and bring this dreadful news, as well as making arrangements for her care and future maintenance.”

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“My sister and I are at your service in this, Mr. Bingley. With your permission, I should like to wait upon you in a day or two to inquire after Miss Bingley.” He extracted a card from his case and a lead-pencil from his pocket and wrote out a direction in the Royal Crescent.

“Here is the direction of our cousins, who are also named Carter. We anticipate staying with them for several weeks.”

As the brother and sister prepared to enter their carriage, they were approached by one of the two constables who had attended the scene of the crime. “Begging your pardon sir, but we would like to know the direction of the house where you are staying while you are in Bath.”

Sir Robert extracted a card and pencil and again wrote down the direction in the Royal Crescent. “I will be happy to be of service in any way I can, although my sister and I did not witness the attack. We arrived only in time to witness the fleeing attackers. Has any progress been made?”

“Not as of yet, sir. But Miss Bingley’s description of the man who assaulted her is very helpful. She is an observant lady. We are scouring the countryside with the descriptions we have.”

“I saw one tall, stout man about my height but much heavier, and one man of average height. They were plainly dressed in dark clothing and wore old felt hats. Do you have anything to add, Maria?”

“No, that corresponds to my own observations. I was much more concerned with the

lady and her footman.”

“Thank you, sir. Madam.” The constable touched his hat. “Someone may wait upon you with further questions. We are deeply grateful.”

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The surgeon’s visit to Caroline that afternoon was discouraging.

“We are fortunate that your head injury does not appear to be serious. You must have absolute rest and quiet for the next three days. Unfortunately, you may not have anything to relieve the inevitable headache--no composers, no laudanum. Confine your nourishment to clear broths and weak tea. I am more concerned about your ankle. It is badly sprained, and it will take a long time to heal. I am optimistic that it will heal completely, but you must keep it closely bound, and you must avoid walking on it for several days.” He bound up the ankle with great efficiency and turned to Mrs. Bingley.

“I will return tomorrow to look in on the patient, ma’am. ”

Caroline sighed and resigned herself to a long, tedious recovery.

The Carters had been very kind to her, and she hoped to see them again—for different reasons.

Her spirits were improved greatly when notes and flowers began arriving about an hour later.

Still, when she closed her eyes, she saw the vision of the lifeless Foster stretched out upon the ground.

And although she confided in no one, she could not help being afraid that someone else might come after her.

When her headache eased, Caroline insisted upon being carried each morning to a sitting room downstairs where she could recline on a recamier sofa and close her eyes whenever she felt she needed to.

She felt herself prone to unexpected fits of weeping.

Being in the presence of others seemed to help her distract her mind with bustle and gossip that had nothing to do with the murder.

She did not wish to be alone. Among the many other visits, she received regular calls from Sir Robert and his sister as well as from Julia and Frank Montgomery.

The steady flow of cards and notes did not abate.

Her brother Charles arrived a few days after the incident, having abandoned his business in London.

Caroline was grateful for his presence. His care and concern, coupled with his innately optimistic outlook, were far more comforting to her than Louisa's flurries.

They were talking together one morning when Sir Robert Carter sent in his card.

After Charles had been presented to him, he turned to Caroline.

"Try not to be too distressed, Miss Bingley. I was informed by the local constables just now that it is feared the two criminals have left the vicinity of Bath." He pulled a chair over and seated himself near her couch.

“Everything is being done to apprehend them. It is thought that they may have been bound for London, and towns along the route have been notified to watch for them. Of course, the authorities in the metropolis have been alerted. No stone is being left unturned. And your description should prove invaluable.”

Charles stood nearby with a troubled look.

“No incident like this has ever occurred among my acquaintance. I wonder if I should consider engaging the Bow Street Runners. My understanding is that they are often more trouble than they are worth, bringing in the wrong man and demanding their reward while the real culprit goes free.”

“It is entirely up to you, Mr. Bingley. Like you, I have never experienced such an occurrence. But what I have heard essentially reinforces your own observations on the subject. Since these two miscreants have left Bath, you may wish simply to await further developments.”

“You make a good point, sir. And I believe I will be of more use to my sister and to the family by returning to London. Caroline, dear, will it distress you too greatly if I leave?”

“I will miss you, Charles. But I believe you are right. Return to London, but please make yourself available if these two criminals are apprehended and brought to trial. I fear I shall be required to give testimony. And keep Uncle apprised of developments.” She took his hand and managed a somewhat mischievous smile.

“And while I know how you are about writing, do write to me.”

“I shall arrange to return there tomorrow.” Bingley pressed his sister’s hand. “And I will do my best about the writing.”

Sir Robert stood. "I will leave you now, Miss Bingley. Try not to be too discouraged. I also wish to inform you that Maria and I are extending our visit to our cousins until these two malefactors are brought to justice." He turned and shook hands with Charles.

"It has been a pleasure to meet you, sir."

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She sat drumming her fingers on the polished surface of her desk.

She was angry that the exercise in Bath had ended in failure, but she was rational enough to realize that her man could not be held completely accountable, for it had been necessary for him to coordinate the whole from his remote posting in Meryton.

She was satisfied that the murder could not be linked back to her, and even if the two hired men were apprehended, Wickham could make another attempt on Miss Bingley in London or even at her brother's home near Meryton.

There was plenty of time. Wickham was now with his regiment in Brighton, and it was time to activate plans that would bring complete and final disgrace down upon the family of Elizabeth Bennet, thus ensuring that Darcy would never wish to have anything to do with her.

She took a sip of Madeira, seized her pen, and began to write.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, having dismissed his manservant, stood in his shirtsleeves looking out of the window in his bedchamber at Pemberley.

He never tired of the prospect of the wide lawns, the stream, and the grove of trees in the background.

However, this morning he was all but blind to the natural beauty before him.

All he could see was the face of Elizabeth Bennet.

Their sudden, startling meeting at Pemberley had unsettled them both.

Darcy's careful efforts to get on with his life had been undone in a moment, and it was evident to him that her perceptions had been altered as well.

But how much? It was instantly clear to him that her unexpected appearance was a Heaven-sent opportunity to convince her that he had understood her reproofs and that he had made sincere efforts to address them.

But was it enough? Her uncle and aunt were delightful people and welcoming them to his home had been a genuine pleasure.

He had liked both on sight, and he shuddered at the recollection of his disparaging speech at the Hunsford parsonage.

Then there was Elizabeth herself. It was apparent that she, too, was making efforts towards cordiality—or that she felt sufficiently comfortable to allow the natural ease and friendliness of her manners to shine forth.

He had been deeply touched by her warmth to his sister.

Elizabeth had soon put the shy young Georgiana at her ease, and the pair of them had cemented their friendship over music.

Elizabeth Bennet had inflamed his senses once again, and he had slept very little the previous night.

He could call to memory the sweetness of her voice as she sang, the warmth of her gaze on him as she stood turning the pages for Georgiana, the smile that had seemed to be just for him as she looked at him from across the room.

Did he dare to hope? He saw the view from his window with sudden clarity, imagined driving with her through the woods, down the hill, and up to the house.

He imagined welcoming her as his wife, bringing her in, making her feel at home.

He imagined his days brightened by her lively humor, her intelligence, her kindness.

He imagined her with him in the wide bed that stood in this very room.

He imagined what his life might be if she loved him as he loved her.

Darcy struck the windowsill with his fist, and his decision was made in that moment. He rang for his valet, who appeared with a selection of waistcoats and coats, and almost before he knew what was happening, he found himself riding up the hill and taking the road to Lambton.

Elizabeth was alone in the parlor when he arrived at the inn. She stood and curtsied with a warm smile of welcome and gestured to a seat at the table. "Please, do sit down, sir. Aunt and Uncle have gone to visit the church, and I was just writing to my sisters. "

"I fear I am interrupting you." Darcy continued to stand, but he placed his hat on the table.

"Oh, no. I keep a sort of running letter open and write a little each day. When I have enough to be of interest, I will close the letter and send it off to them. It is something like a journal."

Pulling the last shreds of his courage together, Darcy looked at her.

"I was wondering, Miss Bennet." This was followed by an awkward pause until he

realized she was smiling encouragement.

“Would you care to take a walk? There are some excellent views from the outskirts of the village, and it is a fine day.”

“I would enjoy that very much, Mr. Darcy.” He could drown himself in those dark eyes. “I will just run up and get my bonnet and pelisse, shall I? And ask Hannah to tell my aunt and uncle.”

He smiled at her and moved to open the door to the parlor. In what seemed like moments, they were strolling down Lambton’s charming main street. Elizabeth looked about her with interest. “Is that the famous horse chestnut tree on the green, by the smithy?”

“That is the very tree. Prized by generations of children for miles around.”

“And are we walking towards Pemberley?”

“No. Away from it. There are some good views in this direction of the Peaks and the moorlands in the distance.” The road eventually narrowed to a country lane, overhung on both sides in places by trees, and bordered by fences and hedgerows.

Darcy continued, accommodating his long stride to her shorter one, until they reached a fence with a stile.

“There.” He raised his arm to point out the distant view of rugged peaks and high moorlands.

“Breathtaking.”

He looked down at her with a smile. “I am glad it pleases you. It is one of my favorite

prospects, and I often pause here to admire it on my way home.”

“I should like to walk on the moors someday. Though I understand it is important to have a guide who is familiar with them.”

“Perhaps one day we shall. I would be honored to serve as your guide. Miss Bennet . . .” Darcy looked at Elizabeth earnestly, and his carefully worded speech was forgotten, leaving his mind momentarily blank.

“Miss Bennet,” he began again. “I have not forgotten your words on the occasion of our last conversation at Hunsford.” He looked at her, and while she remained silent, he noted that a blush had colored her cheeks.

He went on, “I remember the turn of your countenance, your exact turn of phrase: Had I behaved in a more gentleman-like manner. All of that has stayed with me.” He drew in a breath and plunged ahead.

“I was given good principles as a child, but I was left to follow them in pride and conceit. I learned to think meanly of everyone in the world outside my own family and friends. Such I might have remained but for you. But by you I was properly humbled! I owe you everything.” He looked at her again, searching her face for any signs of anger or disdain, and when he did not find them, he went on.

“Attending to your reproofs will be the work of a lifetime, but in good conscience, I have made a beginning. Each morning I resolve to take more notice of the world and of my place in it--not above it. Miss Bennet, my affections and wishes are unchanged since April, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever. Can you, will you, do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Elizabeth stood very straight and still, just as he remembered her standing on that day in April.

Her face was devoid of expression. She seemed to be looking inward.

Darcy saw her swallow hard, watched her eyes fill with tears.

And then she smiled and held out her hand to him, and he realized that they were tears of happiness. “Yes!” she said. “Oh, yes!”

He covered the distance between them in a single stride, taking that small hand and covering it with kisses before folding her in his arms. Despite her bonnet, he managed to cradle her face in his two hands, kissing her gently at first, then more ardently, until she yielded her mouth to him.

It was gentle, pleading kiss, and her response gladdened his heart.

She leaned on his chest, and he whispered, “I love you, Elizabeth. I will love you forever. I promise you will never be sorry.”

They remained in this attitude, saying nothing, until the sound of cart wheels in the distance forced them to separate.

Darcy seated Elizabeth on the nearby stile, moving to stand near her, but not touching her.

The farmer, recognizing him, touched his cap as he drove by, soon disappearing in the direction of Lambton.

“What made you change your mind?” Darcy asked when they were alone again.

“It was a gradual thing. But it began almost as soon as I had read the letter you handed me at Rosings.” She paused and looked off into the distance.

“After I had read that letter several times, I began to think that I had never known myself until you showed me how stupidly I had allowed myself to be deceived by Wickham. My father had the right of him. He said, ‘With such stories of woe as these, who would read novels?’ I had allowed my annoyance with you after the assembly at Meryton to grow into real prejudice.”

“And what of your sister Jane?”

“I think Jane is as fond of Mr. Bingley as ever.” Elizabeth looked at Darcy and extended her hand, which he took.

“It is my hope that he will learn that she was in Town for those three months. Other than that, I can ask only that you look at them with fresh eyes when next you see them together. They deserve the opportunity to work out their own happiness. I believe you will do that.”

“You have my word that I will. And I will acquaint Bingley with the knowledge of your sister’s visit to town at the first opportunity. He is with his sister Caroline in Bath at present. She was injured in an attack by robbers a few weeks ago.”

“How dreadful. I had not heard. Are her injuries serious?”

“She is expected to make a complete recovery.”

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They spent a good while talking, gazing at the view, and gazing into each other's eyes until Elizabeth finally said, "We ought to get back. My aunt and uncle will wonder what became of us." She walked into his arms, pulled his face down to hers, and whispered into his ear, "Just one more kiss?" He loved her for her boldness, and it was a request he was happy to comply with, and then they turned and walked back to Lambton side by side.

"Mr. Darcy. Lizzy?" Mrs. Gardiner's voice sounded puzzled and a little shocked as they entered the parlor, as if she knew that until moments ago, they had been in each other's arms. Mr. Gardiner stood beside and a little behind her, smiling.

"We were beginning to wonder if you had gotten lost." There was a small, but awkward pause .

Elizabeth looked at Darcy, caught his slight nod, and stepped forward. "Aunt. Uncle. Mr. Darcy has made me an offer of marriage, and this offer I have accepted."

Darcy returned to her side and folded her arm over his.

"I will go into Hertfordshire without delay to wait upon Mr. Bennet and secure his permission for the marriage. Of course, we will make no public announcement until after that time. But you mean a great deal to Miss Bennet, therefore you should be among the first to know."

Astonished as they both were, the Gardiners wasted no time in congratulating the couple, embracing their niece and shaking hands with Darcy. "But how has this happened?" asked Mrs. Gardiner when the four of them were finally seated around

the table. “How long have you known?”

Elizabeth smiled over at Darcy. “I believe it has been coming on since the three weeks Mr. Darcy spent in Kent when I was there last spring. Though I was embarrassed to meet him at Pemberley the other day, it has turned out to be a fortunate event. It gave us the opportunity to better understand and express our true feelings.”

The four were soon occupied with happy plans for the remaining time to be spent in Derbyshire and for the journey back to Longbourn. The maid, Hannah, appeared at the door. “The post just come, Ma’am. Here are two letters for Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth took the letters and laid them face down on the table.

“Read your letters, Lizzy!” said her aunt. “You are certainly among friends here. Go and sit by the fireplace, and I will ring for some refreshments.”

With a smile for Darcy, Elizabeth left the table and was soon breaking the seal on the first letter. The others, wishing to afford her a semblance of privacy, ignored her politely and busied themselves about the refreshments.

“Lydia! Poor stupid girl!” cried Elizabeth.

Darcy was by her side in an instant, clasping her hand and looking anxiously into her face.

“Dear God, what is the matter, Elizabeth?” He turned to Mr. Gardiner.

“Please pour her a glass of wine. Truly she looks very ill!” He held the glass of wine for her until she had taken several sips.

“What can we do for your present relief? Do you wish to go up to your room? Shall your uncle and I assist you?”

Elizabeth shook her head and began. “There is dreadful news from Longbourn.” She held up her hand.

“No, no, they are all well. My sister Lydia has left all her friends; has eloped; has thrown herself into the power of . . . of Mr. Wickham.” Darcy clasped her hand more tightly.

“They are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest.”

“I am grieved indeed. Grieved, shocked. But is it absolutely certain?”

“They left Brighton together on Sunday and were traced almost to London; they are certainly not gone to Scotland.”

Mr. Gardiner broke in. “And what has been attempted to recover her?”

“My father is gone to London with Colonel Forster, and Jane writes to beg your immediate assistance, Uncle. We must leave without delay.”

“You will certainly not make any progress if you leave this afternoon,” said Darcy. “It is almost five. By the time you have packed and readied the carriage, it will be near dark.”

“Mr. Darcy is right,” added Mr. Gardiner. “It will be much better if we leave at first light tomorrow.”

“Now, will you not go upstairs and rest for an hour, dearest Elizabeth? I will be here

when you come down. I would welcome some private speech with your uncle concerning how I may be of service in this matter.” Darcy stood and gently drew Elizabeth to her feet.

“Aunt? Uncle? Would you give us a moment, please?” Elizabeth’s eyes were full.

“Of course, my dear,” replied her aunt. “I will go upstairs and begin to arrange for the packing, and your uncle will want to go out and speak to the coachman, I am sure.”

As soon as they had gone, Elizabeth stood. “Mr. Darcy,” she began.

“Could you not call me by my name? ”

She smiled sadly but kept her eyes lowered. “Very well, Fitzwilliam. It seems my sister is lost to us—irretrievably lost, and at the hands of the man you despise most in the world. Our whole family must partake of her ruin and disgrace.”

“Elizabeth . . .”

“No, you must allow me to finish. Please. I cannot ask you to be part of that ruin. You are honorable in all your dealings. Your servants and tenants call you the best landlord and the best master that ever lived. You have a young sister who depends upon you. I cannot in good conscience drag you into this sad, sordid business!”

Darcy’s heart sank to his shoes with a feeling compounded of sorrow and dread.

“No, Elizabeth,” he finally said. “It will not do. You cannot ask me to ignore or forget what passed between us today.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her, and all of his love and longing were in that kiss.

He was heartened by her response, which seemed to show an equal fervor.

“Hear this and remember it. My affections and wishes are unchanged. They will remain unchanged until I draw my last breath.”

Elizabeth wiped away the tears that had been falling since she had announced the news. Then she looked up at him. “I don’t deserve you.”

He placed his finger against her lips. “Let’s hear no more of that.

I am yours, utterly and completely. Besides .

. .” He turned away from her and drew a long, shuddering breath before he could continue.

“If I had been less guilty of pride, less concerned with my own privacy and more concerned for the common good, I would never have left him at large to prey upon an unsuspecting world. Your sister is an innocent girl. That she has been abducted by this monster is my fault. Your lessons in humility were well received, but they came too late to prevent this. The fault is mine. Not yours, not your family’s, not even your sister’s.

You would be quite right if you never wanted to see me again. ”

Elizabeth placed her hands on his shoulders and tried to compel him to turn around to face her, but he would not.

So instead, she walked around until she was facing him.

Darcy kept his eyes downcast. She stood on tiptoe and took his face into her hands despite his resistance, and she began to kiss him, tiny kisses as gentle and as pleading as his own had been.

Before long he shuddered, relaxed, and his arms went around her as they both surrendered to the kiss.

Eventually, she twined her fingers in the tresses of his hair so that he was compelled to look at her.

She smiled shakily at first, but the smile soon took on her usual impish look.

“It would seem we belong to each other, Fitzwilliam, even if each of us cannot possibly deserve the other. I cannot get on without you. Perhaps we should simply make the best of it.”

He smiled back. “I believe you are right, Elizabeth. It would enable us to get on with the task of finding your sister. Our sister. Now, go to your aunt and then rest. I will see that you are called in an hour. I want to talk with your uncle. There are ways I can be of use in this. I know Wickham, and I know of his friends and his haunts. If he has taken your sister to London, they can be found.” They walked out of the parlor arm in arm, and he watched her as she went upstairs.

Then he turned and went out of the inn in search of Mr. Gardiner.

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A footman brought the post. She slit open the seal on the letter and read with satisfaction.

“Written from Brighton last Sunday a week ago,” she mused.

“Very good. Very good indeed, and well worth the wait. He will never wish to return to her now.” She glanced at the clock.

Too early for a celebratory glass, she thought.

She penned a quick note and rang for the footman.

“Have this taken to the parsonage immediately.” A good dinner, a few well-placed words, and that ridiculous parson would have the news spread all over Hertfordshire. The Lucases loved to talk.

Elizabeth leaned back against the carriage cushions.

The carriage was hot and airless, the road was rough, and she felt lightheaded from worry and lack of sleep.

Her emotions during the trip had given her the feeling that she was a child’s kite set adrift to soar, then plummet, on a capricious wind.

Her feelings for Darcy had astonished her as she explored their depth and breadth.

She had spent only a few minutes, at most, in his arms—yet her whole being longed

to feel the strength and tenderness of those arms around her again.

She could summon up his quiet voice, his dark eyes, the excitement of his kisses.

She wanted no one but him, and there was a sense of elation as she reflected that he had professed the same feelings for her.

Then, as soon as she allowed herself the peace and comfort of these convictions, Lydia's actions would intrude, clamoring for her attention, convincing her that despite Darcy's assurances, she would never be worthy of him.

She had disturbing visions of sending him away.

It would be for his own good, and she would long for him forever.

She occupied as much of the trip as she could chatting with her aunt and uncle or trying to read, but her thoughts always seemed to intrude. Her rest at the inns where they stopped was fitful and disturbed, and her dreams had taken on a dark cast.

Darcy and her Uncle Gardiner had proven themselves well up to the task of organizing the journey and the search.

Each was supplied with the London direction of the other as well as a rough itinerary.

Mr. Gardiner would escort the ladies, then leave for London, sending word to Mr. Darcy as soon as he reached his home in Gracechurch Street.

An express had been dispatched to Jane informing her of when to expect them.

Elizabeth and Aunt Gardiner would go directly to Longbourn to support Jane and Mrs. Bennet as they awaited further developments.

Darcy had arrived shortly after dawn on the morning of the departure, and while the farewells had been public, he had managed to reassure Elizabeth, once again, of his love and regard.

She carried in her reticule his card with the direction of his house in London and instructions to get word to him--and hang the propriety--if she felt she needed him.

He planned to leave for London that very morning.

From time to time, she would touch the card as if seeking reassurance from it.

She began to muse on the hour or the minute when she had first come to love Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Was it after receiving his letter at Hunsford?

That had convinced her that he was a man of integrity.

Was it during the months that followed while she had ample time to ruminate on her stinging rejection of that first proposal?

Or was it as recent as the tour of Pemberley when the housekeeper had spoken of him with such fondness and respect?

Elizabeth concluded that it must have been a continuing process involving all three of those milestones.

She and Jane had often wondered how they would decide that a man was “The One,” the one they could marry for love.

She confessed to herself that while she could not account for why she was certain of

Darcy, she was sure of her certainty.

That line of reasoning threatened to give her a headache, and she gratefully began another conversation with her aunt.

Their arrival at Longbourn, a little before midday on their third day of travel, was chaotic. Elizabeth had to be restrained from jumping from the carriage before it stopped, and she rushed to embrace Jane as the Gardiner children gathered around their parents.

As the adults stood in the front hall, Jane said, "Mother has been asking for you, Lizzy. But before we go up, a most unexpected express has been delivered this morning. It was directed to my father but, Uncle, the gentleman who wrote it claims an acquaintance with you." She produced the letter from the book she was carrying.

"It is from a Mr. Evan Caldwell, and from the manner of his address, I believe he must be a Quaker." She handed the letter to her uncle.

"If what he says is true, then it is very good news. I have said nothing about it to my mother. In fact, let us go into my father's library to read and discuss this. I should like for Mama not to hear it."

"Evan Caldwell is very well known to me," said her uncle. "In fact, he and his wife, Anna, are our nearest neighbors in Gracechurch Street, and we have known the family for years. And yes, Jane, they are Quakers." He opened the letter and read it hastily.

"Evan and Anna have Lydia! She arrived at our house last Monday evening in a hackney and was in great distress when she found the house closed, the knocker off the door, and all the servants gone. She was in strong hysterics when Evan found her and brought her to Anna." Mr. Gardiner looked up from the letter.

“Evan says she would neither eat nor speak for several days, and they have only just persuaded her to tell them who her father is and how she came to be in Gracechurch Street. He believes she was abducted or lured to London under false pretenses and used the last of her money to take the hackney to our house in an effort to preserve her virtue. He commends her for being a good, strong girl.”

“Well, we can always hope,” said Elizabeth.

“No, Lizzy. What Mr. Caldwell says aligns perfectly with what Lydia said in this note she left for Mrs. Forster.” Jane brought out a second folded letter from her book. “She sincerely believed she was going to Gretna Green to be married.”

Elizabeth scanned the letter. “What a letter to be written at such a time!” she exclaimed. “But you are right, Jane. There was no wrong intention on her side.”

“I believe I should leave for London after dinner,” said Mr. Gardiner with a look at his wife. “Our horses cannot travel another step, but I should be able to hire a chaise at the inn at Meryton.”

“Oh, yes,” said Elizabeth. “Let us send one of the men over to arrange for it now.”

“Dinner is almost ready,” added Jane. “We should go up to Mother.”

The visit with Mrs. Bennet was intense but of mercifully short duration.

They greeted Kitty and Mary, who were sitting with her, before turning to a recital of her various tremblings and flutterings followed by an hysterical plea to her brother to stop Mr. Bennet from becoming embroiled in a duel with Wickham.

Everyone listened sympathetically, Elizabeth kissed her mother, Mr. Gardiner reassured her that he would take care of them all, and they were blessedly interrupted

by Hill announcing that dinner was on the table.

Much of dinner was spent listening to Mary's platitudes on the subject of feminine virtue and sisterly consolation with an additional catalogue of complaints from Kitty about how mean everyone was being to her.

The elders had agreed that nothing would be said to the younger girls, or to their mother, until Lydia was safe with her father.

Aunt Gardiner and the children were to stay at Longbourn for a few more days.

Shortly after dinner, the chaise was at the door. Uncle Gardiner embraced his wife and children and kissed his nieces, and when it was Lizzy's turn, he said quietly, "Do not worry, my dear. I will get a message to Mr. Darcy immediately." Then he was into the carriage and gone.

That night, when the house had finally become quiet, Elizabeth opened her heart to Jane, who was incredulous. "Mr. Darcy! You are joking, Lizzy! This cannot be! I know how much you dislike him."

"In such cases as this, a good memory is unpardonable. The time we spent at Pemberley last week gave us the time we needed to understand our true feelings. You must believe me. He is coming here to wait on Papa, and we shall be married."

"Be serious, Lizzy! When did you first know you loved him?"

Elizabeth smiled mischievously. "I believe it must have been the first time I saw his beautiful grounds at Pemberley."

Jane pushed her away.

“No, I will be serious. He has grown so very dear to me that I cannot imagine going through life without him.”

Jane, now convinced, had no choice but to embrace her sister, wishing her every happiness.

Elizabeth, for her part, enjoyed a night of restful and restorative sleep.

London, Tuesday, July 21, 18__

Mr. Gardiner, arriving in London somewhat late, and knowing that his house in Gracechurch Street would be closed, and the servants on holiday, went directly to the hotel where his brother-in-law was staying.

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “I have no news for you. They were traced as far as Clapham, but no further. They changed to a hackney coach at that point, and I have been unable to locate it. Colonel Forster had pressing duties, and he has left to rejoin his regiment in Brighton.”

Mr. Gardiner settled into an armchair. “I have good news, Brother. Lydia is found. She is found, and as far as we know, she is unhurt.”

“I have not the pleasure of understanding you.”

“We arrived at Longbourn just before dinnertime today. An express had arrived this very morning, directed to you, which Jane quite properly opened.”

“Yes, yes, those were my instructions.”

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“Lydia arrived at my house in Gracechurch Street early last Monday evening, alone.” Mr. Gardiner imparted the details of Lydia’s escape from Wickham. He omitted nothing, including Evan and Anna Caldwell’s opinion that Lydia had done all she could to preserve her virtue.

“Lydia. The baby. The most foolish and headstrong of the lot of them.” Mr. Bennet shook his head. “Let us hope she was headstrong enough to resist Wickham’s advances.”

“So it would seem.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

Mr. Gardiner looked at his watch. “It is nearly nine, and they will be abed. They are early risers. My plan is to seek a bed here, since my house is closed. And I must send word to Mr. Darcy. We can be abroad early in the morning and go to Lydia.”

“Mr. Darcy? What does he know of our troubles?”

“He was visiting us at the inn at Lambton when Jane’s letters reached Lizzy. He has been of great service already. He knows of Wickham and his evil habits, knows of his associates in London, and came here immediately to begin a search.”

“I see,” said Mr. Bennet, though he appeared perplexed. “And will he not be carrying the tale to every corner of fashionable London?”

“No, Brother. Depend upon him. We may rely on his discretion and his secrecy. He is

a better friend than you know.”

The note was quickly dispatched, and Mr. Gardiner had barely bespoken his room and his supper when Darcy himself arrived.

He shook hands with both men and accepted a glass of wine.

“I am enormously relieved to hear that Miss Lydia is safe,” he began.

“I have not succeeded in locating Wickham. We found the hovel where he fled with her, but he has abandoned it.”

“You wasted no time,” commented Mr. Gardiner.

“It is a very dangerous neighborhood. Miss Lydia would not have been safe there for very long. There remains one question, Mr. Bennet. What do you want to do with him if my men succeed in finding him?”

“I should like to see him transported or hanged. Or shot down in the street like a mad cur. How many other young girls has he treated in this infamous manner?”

“Probably more than we should care to count, sir. However, we need to bear in mind that too often the innocent female suffers if these matters are brought to court, while the truly guilty person is free to go about his business as though nothing had happened.”

“Unfortunately true,” added Mr. Gardiner. “Lydia’s reputation and credit must be our first concern.”

Mr. Bennet sighed. “He is finished as far as the _shire Militia are concerned. His debts of honor and tradesmen’s debts in Brighton alone would have assured that. But

Lydia was under Colonel Forster's protection. That will not be forgotten, and he may be finished in the Army as a whole. ”

“And there are doubtless extensive debts in Meryton. My expectation is that he will shortly end up in prison if he does not turn something else up to keep himself out of it.” Darcy stood.

“If you are agreeable, Mr. Bennet, I will call for you and Mr. Gardiner tomorrow at nine in my carriage and convey you to Gracechurch Street.”

Mr. Bennet extended his hand. “You will be very welcome, Mr. Darcy.”

After shaking hands with Mr. Gardiner, Darcy bowed and left the room.

“I wonder what that was all about,” said Mr. Bennet.

“He really is a very fine young man, Brother. And his family has been grievously wronged by George Wickham.”

“I am very sorry to hear that, but not surprised. Wickham took great delight in abusing Darcy to us.” He sat down and took up a pen. “I must send an express to Jane before retiring.”

London, Gracechurch Street, Wednesday, July 22, 18__

Lydia, when called downstairs to the Caldwells' drawing room next morning, threw herself into her father's arms weeping noisily but not hysterically.

“There now, child. There now, Lydia.” Her father patted her awkwardly. “No need for tears. You are safe, and I am here to take you home to your mother. He cannot harm you now.”

Evan Caldwell, a tall, white-haired man, stood by, as did his wife, Anna. He tactfully ushered Darcy and Mr. Gardiner into his book room so that father and daughter might have some privacy for their reunion.

“Dry your eyes, Lydia. And try to tell me what happened.” Mr. Bennet extended his handkerchief and led his daughter to the sofa.

Lydia began her story. “He promised me we would be married. He courted me for weeks, dancing with no one but me, taking me for drives and walks, avoiding all the other girls. Then, finally, he proposed on bended knee. It was very romantic, Papa.”

“I am sure it was,” said Mr. Bennet drily.

“He told me we would go to Scotland to be married, that being the most romantic place. It took him quite some time to get the arrangements in place, but then last Sunday after church, he told me to be ready and to meet him at midnight. I was to carry only one bandbox, and we would travel north in a hired chaise.”

“Go on, Lydia.”

“We came as far as Clapham which took until morning--oh, a long time, and then Wickham said we were to change to a hackney. I wondered about that, but he said it would be easier to get through London that way.” Lydia paused as though searching her memory.

“We stopped in London, in a very bad part of London. The streets were filthy, and there were poor people and half-naked children everywhere you looked. People were lying in doorways.” She shuddered.

“We went into a filthy rooming-house of some sort, and Wickham gave his name, and the landlady conducted us to a front room upstairs.” She stopped again, embarrassed

to the point of blushing.

“It’s all right, child. You are not in any trouble.” Mr. Bennet was beginning to feel distinctly out of his depth.

“It was a nasty, dirty room.” Her nose wrinkled. “And there was only one place for us to sleep. Wickham said we should lie down there, but I refused, Papa.”

“Turned him down, did you?”

“I know you think I’m one of the silliest girls in England, Papa. But I did listen to what Mama told us. I paid attention to every word. I know that’s the way you get babies. And I know what happens to girls who get babies before they are married.” She wrinkled her nose. “It’s not very romantic.”

“You are a good girl and a good daughter, Lydia. Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“Well, we’ve got over the most embarrassing part, Papa.

Wickham told me we would be married the next day, but I would not listen to him.

You cannot be married without permission if you are only sixteen unless you are in Scotland.

He got very angry, and he went out and slammed the door.

He locked me in. I could not get out, and I knocked and shouted, but no one would come.

He came back in about an hour,” she dropped her voice.

“And I could tell he had been drinking. He had a bottle of something, but I don’t think it was wine.

In fact, I know it wasn’t. He poured me a big glassful and said, ‘Have some of this Blue Ruin. It will make you feel much better.’ I took the glass, but it smelled awful. ”

“Blue Ruin,” echoed Mr. Bennet faintly.

“Yes. He had a great deal of it, but I poured little bits of mine into the water pitcher. I know I should have choked if I had taken any of it. He fell asleep in the chair by the window, and I got my hat and took my reticule and ran out of there as fast as I could. He had forgotten to lock the door. I ran to the corner and found a hack, and the jarvey drove me to Uncle’s house in Gracechurch Street.

That’s where Evan Caldwell found me, and he brought me here, and Anna took such good care of me.

And there really isn’t any more to tell. ”

“Well, the Caldwells certainly have been good to you.”

“I shall write Anna a long letter of thanks when I get home. I have been here more than a week. Oh, when will we go home, Papa?”

“Too late to leave today.” Mr. Bennet stood and looked at his watch. “We will leave tomorrow and be home tomorrow evening. Now, go and make your goodbyes to the Caldwells.”

Darcy conducted the family back to their hotel in his carriage, and as the three men were shaking hands, said “I should like to wait upon you at Longbourn in a week’s time, Sir. I can inform you of any news I have at that time.”

Although Mr. Bennet thought that a letter might do as well, he said nothing. “You will be very welcome at Longbourn at any time, Mr. Darcy.”

Longbourn, Hertfordshire - Thursday, July 23, 18__

The family at Longbourn was delighted to receive Mr. Bennet’s express. Not only was Lydia quite safe, but she would be with them that very day. Mrs. Bennet, when told, decided to rest in her room until mid-afternoon, dressing and coming downstairs in time for tea, when the travelers were expected.

At about noon, they were surprised by a visit from The Reverend William Collins. Kitty fled unobserved into the recesses of the garden with her aunt and the children, leaving her three sisters to receive him.

“I had hoped to condole with your father and mother,” said he, “On the grievous affliction you are now suffering under.”

“Our father is still in London, sir, and our mother has not yet left her room,” replied Jane quietly.

“Nevertheless, having received word from Hertfordshire, I feel called upon by my situation in life and my position as a clergyman--”

“Who, I wonder, could have written to you from Hertfordshire?” Elizabeth interrupted shamelessly. “Our situation is not known outside the immediate family. The Lucases most certainly have not been informed.”

“Be that as it may, whether your sister is naturally bad, as I am inclined to believe, or whether this has resulted from a faulty degree of indulgence, her death would have been a blessing in comparison. This false step will be injurious to you all. For, as Lady Catherine has said, who will want to connect themselves with such a family?”

“Who, indeed?” cried Elizabeth, standing.

“Your Hertfordshire correspondent is missing the greater portion of the story, Mr. Collins. Our sister was lured away from her protectors by a false offer of marriage. When she understood the iniquitous intentions of her captor, she fled from him into one of the worst, most dangerous quarters of London with no thought other than to preserve her virtue. She used her last farthing to pay for a hackney to Gracechurch Street, and when she found her uncle and aunt were from home, she placed herself under the protection of Evan Caldwell, one of the most respected merchants of the City, known to all for his sterling character and his God-fearing ways. The Caldwells have cared for her under their own roof until our father could reach her. No, Mr. Collins, we are not injured by her behavior. Our sister Lydia is a shining example of a young woman willing to risk death to preserve her honor.”

Elizabeth paused for breath, overcome by the brilliance of her own oratory and its effect on their visitor. Mary astonished everyone by standing and declaring, “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.”

Jane moved swiftly to fill the breach, also standing.

“Our father is escorting Lydia home even now, and they are expected by tea-time. I feel sure you will respect our need to receive our sister into the arms of her immediate family after this terrible ordeal.” She looked at Elizabeth.

“Our own dear Dr. Price will, I am sure, provide her with all spiritual comfort, just as he has since her infancy and baptism.”

Mr. Collins was, for once, stunned into silence. At length he bowed and said, “Please convey my compliments to your honored parents.” He then turned and left the room, and they soon heard the sound of his departing carriage.

“I don’t know when I have had a more rewarding conversation,” said Elizabeth, laughing. “We must remember every particular to relate to our father. And Mary, your Scriptural reference was the crowning touch.”

“At one point, I admired him,” admitted Mary. “But he is an odious man. And I wonder who wrote to him from Hertfordshire.”

“That bears some thinking about,” replied Elizabeth.

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The days after Lydia's return were surprisingly peaceful ones at Longbourn.

Although everyone agreed she had behaved with strength and maturity in effecting her own rescue, it took only a few days for her to return to her foolish, headstrong ways.

Still, it was generally conceded in the neighborhood that she should serve as an example to other young girls of how important it was to safeguard one's honor and virtue.

Aunt and Uncle Gardiner stayed for only a few days before leaving with the children for London, but there were several opportunities for quiet conversations with Elizabeth as they watched the children play in the garden.

"Are you still committed to this engagement, Lizzy?" began her uncle one day.

"Oh, yes. Having learned of his efforts to assist the family makes me all the more certain," replied she. "I do love him."

"He is a very fine young man," added her aunt. "And he is certainly devoted to you. You must write to me immediately when you have news."

After the Gardiners' departure there was nothing for Elizabeth to do but watch and wait and plan.

The following Monday, the family heard carriage wheels on the drive.

Kitty, as was her custom, ran to peer out of the window.

“It is a fine curricule. But who is the driver? I believe it is that disagreeable Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth willed herself to sit still over her embroidery, though Jane caught her eye and smiled. Darcy followed Hill into the room, greeted Mrs. Bennet formally, acknowledged the sisters, and sat in a straight chair, his hat in his hand.

“Are you come to stay at Netherfield, Mr. Darcy?” inquired Mrs. Bennet.

“No, Madam. I am staying for a few nights in the inn at Meryton.”

“I thought you might have come down with Mr. Bingley. We are all wondering if he plans another visit.”

“I believe you may see him around Michaelmas, Madam. He is planning to come down for a few weeks of shooting.”

“Ah. We thought he might quit the place at Michaelmas.”

“I do not believe he plans to give it up at all. In fact, it is possible he may spend more time here.” Darcy looked over at Elizabeth and Jane .

“Well, let us hope so.”

“Mama, Mr. Darcy informed us at Pemberley of his keen interest in gardening.” Darcy raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“I thought I might show him about some of the walks you have created here.” She turned to Darcy.

“Mama planned and directed all of the installations herself, Mr. Darcy. I am sure you will admire her advantageous use of small spaces.”

“By all means, Lizzy. Remember to show him the wilderness.” Mrs. Bennet did not like Mr. Darcy and was delighted to have him off her hands if only for a few minutes. Jane remained resolutely seated while Darcy stood obligingly.

After a sedate walk across the lawn, during which they chatted about London, Elizabeth led Darcy up the step and into the little walled garden of the wilderness. “Everyone’s favorite refuge.”

“Elizabeth.” He took possession of both her hands and covered them with kisses before sweeping her into his arms. “Do you still love me?”

She took his face into her hands and stood on tiptoe so that she could kiss him. “How could I not? I love you more now! I cannot bear to be apart from you.” He returned the kiss ardently, and when she felt she must breathe or die, she clung to his neck, laying her head on his shoulder.

“My heart belongs to you,” he murmured, stroking her lips with his fingers. And after a long moment, he added, “I must speak with your father.”

She kissed him gently and whispered against his mouth, “And are you ready?”

“One more kiss,” he replied, suiting his actions to his words. Then he retrieved his hat, which had fallen nearby, smoothed a lock of hair away from Elizabeth’s face, and offered her his arm with a smile. “Lead on. I am ready.”

Elizabeth hung back. “I believe I will wait here for you, dearest. I am not quite ready to face my mother.”

“A wise choice. I will come for you here when it is all over.” And with that he placed his hat on his head and strode across the lawn.

Elizabeth spent an uncomfortable twenty minutes in the wilderness awaiting Darcy’s return. When he did come back, he was smiling. “All is well. Go to your father in his library. He wants to see you. I will rejoin your mother and sisters.”

“Are you out of your senses to be accepting this man?” Mr. Bennet’s opening words did not sound encouraging.

But Elizabeth had an answer for every argument, and by the end of their brief conversation, she had convinced her father of Darcy’s worth and of their sincere attachment.

Only then did he inform her that he had already given his consent.

As expected, Elizabeth’s sisters gathered around to exclaim over her and embrace her before the younger ones began to talk of being bridesmaids.

Mrs. Bennet was silenced for a full half-minute before she began to wonder and bless herself, to question Mr. Darcy concerning his favorite dishes, and to consider who in the neighborhood should be first to receive the great news.

Mr. Bennet arrived on the scene to extend an invitation to him to remove from the inn and spend the rest of his stay at Longbourn.

“After all,” he said. “You can do so now with complete propriety. And this house is more comfortable than the inn. If anyone wants me, I will be in my library.”

Darcy’s things were brought in from the curricule, as he had not yet bespoken his room in Meryton, and Mrs. Bennet hurried away to dress, having decided that Lady Lucas

would be the first recipient of her news.

The sisters scattered to their own apartments and occupations, and Darcy and Elizabeth were left standing by the fireplace in the drawing room.

After he kissed her with great discretion and one eye on the door, Elizabeth put her hands on his chest. “Sir, we have not yet finished our tour of the garden. My mother will be disappointed if I do not show you the hermitage.”

“And is it a very private hermitage?” He stole another kiss.

“Yes, very private. The hermit will not mind us at all. ”

Indeed, so secluded was the hermitage that Elizabeth permitted Darcy to leave his exploration of her lips in favor of kisses along her jawline and neck, straying occasionally back to her lips and eyes, encouraged by the soft sounds she made.

She was tenderly grateful afterward that he managed to accomplish all this while leaving some appropriate distance between the two of them, and when she dropped her arms and took hold of the lapels of his jacket, he stopped.

Her voice was soft and husky. “I fear my knees have forgotten how to hold me up.”

He guided her to a bench and seated them both. “Soon, dearest Lizzy. Very soon we will be together always.”

She burrowed into his side. “Mmm. I can hear your heart.”

“That is good, since it belongs to you.”

The next three days were idyllic. The perfect late-summer weather invited long

country walks and shared confidences.

She was afraid of horses because the girls' single riding-horse had once bitten her.

He preferred London hours to country hours and needed an ironclad self-discipline to rise at a decent hour when at Pemberley.

She detested stitchery of any kind but smuggled candles upstairs in order to read novels.

He avoided Shakespeare's comedies in favor of the tragedies and histories.

She longed to read all of Shakespeare in its original, unexpurgated version.

He promised that she should, for he would not permit the bowdlerized versions in his library.

Both were happiest in the country. And both envisioned a nursery full of beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed children who looked like the other parent.

"We must have horrid little boys," said Elizabeth. "And dear little girls."

"And they must all resemble their mother."

"Except those that look like their handsome papa," she finished for him.

Darcy spent a couple of hours closeted with Mr. Bennet in the library working out the financial settlements. They were necessarily one-sided, but Darcy had taken great pains to ensure that Elizabeth and her children would be provided for under any circumstance.

They took a final walk in the garden on the morning of Darcy's departure. "I do not know how I shall go on without you," sighed Elizabeth. "When will you return?"

"Soon, my dearest. I must see my solicitor about the settlement and return here to review it with your father. You and our children will always be provided for, and your father and I have already discussed that. He is satisfied with the arrangements."

Their plans for the wedding had been easily settled.

Mrs. Bennet's arguments in favor of St. George's Hanover Square and a special license had been overcome in favor of Elizabeth's wish that the wedding take place at their familiar parish in Longbourn, presided over by their dear Dr. Price, with her sisters surrounding her, and in the presence of their families and their dearest friends.

Michaelmas had been tentatively fixed as the time, and one of Darcy's tasks would be to acquaint Mr. Bingley with the plans in the hope that Netherfield could be counted on to entertain some of their guests.

Darcy expressed his certainty that his friend would oblige them, and he confessed privately to Elizabeth his hopes for a wedding between Bingley and Jane.

Elizabeth and her mother would make at least one journey to London in search of the all-important wedding clothes.

They stood in the little wilderness saying their goodbyes. "Write to me, Elizabeth. Now that we are engaged, we can write as often as we please."

"I have not forgotten." Elizabeth drew a sealed letter from her pocket and placed it in his. "And here is a letter you may read this evening when you get home."

Darcy seized her hands and kissed them over and over, as he loved to do, before

drawing her into an embrace.

Elizabeth stood with her parents and sisters on the sweep, waving farewell, determined that he should not see her cry. After he had driven away, her sister Jane threw her arm about Elizabeth's shoulders. "Dearest Lizzy," she said in her quiet voice. "You will not have too many more farewells."

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The basilisk eyes grew steadily colder and angrier as she read through the letter from Hertfordshire, and by the time she had finished it, her anger was terrible indeed.

“This is not to be borne,” she said between clenched teeth.

She rang for the footman. “Have the coachman prepare the barouche for a journey to London,” she said. “I leave at noon.”

The following morning, she sat at the escritoire in the small back parlor of her London house drumming her sharp nails on the bare, polished wood.

A closed ledger sat on the desk; an inkstand and writing materials were the only other furnishings.

The disheveled young man was forced to stand before her like a troublesome schoolboy, an insult which he bore with his customary wide eyed, obsequious, half smile.

“This is intolerable.” She picked up a letter and shook it under his nose.

“You have allowed Caroline Bingley to escape, and your bungling fools have killed some hapless footman. You have permitted that chit Lydia Bennet to slip through your fingers. And now, my nephew is engaged to the older girl, just as I had feared. The settlement is being drafted as we speak. This is the outside of enough! And what do you propose to do about it? Pray, what did you have in mind, sir?” Her voice dripped venom.

“Well, ma’am . . .”

She opened a drawer and removed several sheets of paper.

“This,” she spat, shaking one sheaf, “is a list of your creditors in Meryton. And this is a list of your creditors in Brighton.” Her eyes narrowed.

“You are nearly rolled up, Wickham. In the basket, as they say. The vultures are gathering, and they will be merciless. And if you fail again, you may expect no help from me. In fact, I will be leading the vultures. You have but one hope.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I want her destroyed. Not killed. I want her ruined, and I want her to live with the certainty of that ruin for the rest of her life. I want her entire family brought down by the enormity of her disgrace. My nephew is to be made to understand that he crosses me at his peril. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She drew out a bank draft and handed it to him.

“Spend this wisely, Wickham. Use it to hire whomever you need and to pay off our mutual acquaintance. I shall expect to be closely informed of your progress. And for God’s sake, bespeak yourself some decent shirts and have someone do something about those disgraceful boots.

You might consider availing yourself of the services of a laundress along with all the other women you pay for. ”

“Thank you, ma’am. I am most exceedingly grateful.” He pocketed the draft, bowed,

and left the house.

Longbourn, Hertfordshire - Sunday, August 2, 18__

Elizabeth had observed and admitted to herself that her sleep was troubled.

Apart from the few chaste kisses and embraces she had shared with Darcy, she knew little about the ways of men and women with each other.

In his absence, she found herself awakening from dreams that were both inexpressibly sweet and deeply disturbing.

She was intelligent enough to conclude that this had somehow been caused by her love for him, and his for her, and that it would all turn out right in the end.

After all, she did not notice other women dragging perpetually through their days half-asleep.

Her efforts to fall asleep by extensive reading with her smuggled candles were unavailing.

What did help, she noticed, was exercise.

Always a notable walker, Elizabeth was now out of the house every chance she could get.

Careful to wear a bonnet to preserve her complexion from ruin before her wedding day, she walked and ran up hills and down them, across meadows, down country lanes.

She begged Hill for errands that would take her into Meryton and returned with

baskets of marketing or with the post. Her mother, anxious to talk of laces and worked muslins, despaired of her.

Still, Mrs. Bennet was forced to declare that she had never seen her second daughter in greater beauty.

And Elizabeth's sisters certainly agreed.

Longbourn was sufficiently distant from the main roads, and the girls had always been allowed to wander freely.

Strangers were seldom observed, and the neighborhood had always been entirely safe.

The arrival of August signaled the time for haymaking and for the harvest of wheat, oats, and barley, and farm workers would soon dot the adjoining fields.

After sitting through church and dinner with her family, Elizabeth felt anxious for some exercise and decided to walk to nearby Oakham Mount.

As she passed through the front hall, she encountered Hill and took the time to inform the housekeeper of her destination and to promise faithfully to return in two hours' time.

"I have a great deal to do today to get ready for Mr. Darcy's visit tomorrow," she said with a smile.

Then she was outside in the brilliant summer sunshine. Elizabeth hugged herself with excitement, for a letter had arrived the day before informing her that Darcy would be with her the next day. She had only this one day to get through, and then she would see him.

The turnoff for Oakham Mount led off the same lane that eventually led into Meryton, and Elizabeth was somewhat surprised to see a horse drawn cart and two men on a Sunday afternoon.

They were obviously farm workers, undoubtedly desirous of hiring themselves out to help with the local harvest which most farmers would begin the next day.

Elizabeth ignored them and turned up the path that led up the mountain.

The dappled shade was cool and welcoming, and Elizabeth breathed deeply as she quickened her steps. She intended to walk up the hill as fast as she could so that she could take some time to enjoy the view.

An arm snaked around her neck from behind. “Not a sound, my fine lady-bird. You keep mum, and no harm will come to ye.”

The accent Elizabeth heard was not Hertfordshire but pure urban London. The words were the last she would hear for quite some time.

“I beg your pardon, sir.” Hill bobbed a curtsy, entered the library, and closed the door. “I do not mean to disturb you, but I am concerned.”

“What is it, Mrs. Hill?” The housekeeper was one of the few sensible women in his household, and Mr. Bennet appreciated that. He was normally inclined to listen to her, and she did not bother him often.

“It is Miss Elizabeth, sir. She has not returned from her walk.”

“And were we expecting her?” Mr. Bennet knew that his favorite daughter preferred

long, solitary walks.

“Yes, sir. She particularly wanted to be home in two hours so that she could make ready for Mr. Darcy’s visit tomorrow. It has been four hours.”

“And did she say where she was going?” The wood-cased clock showed that it wanted only ten minutes of five.

“Yes, sir. A walk up Oakham Mount. “The path is steep, sir. I thought she might have turned an ankle or had a fall.”

“That makes sense, Mrs. Hill. Send two of the boys up there to get her.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And do not say anything to the rest of the family.”

Mr. Bennet knew that his housekeeper would be as good as her word. Her two sons, James and Timothy, were well-grown, sensible lads who knew the surrounding area and had been familiar since childhood with the odd habits of his daughter, Elizabeth.

The weather had been particularly fine, to the benefit of the harvest, and while there was no mud, the Hills did find quite a muddle of footprints in the dust at the turnoff to the path. “What d’you make of it, Tim?”

“Here’s Miss Elizabeth’s little boot, coming in from home.

” Tim pointed. “But there’s been at least two men in rough boots here with a horse and cart, and they came from the direction of the village.

” He frowned. “And here they turned and went back where they came from.” Both knew that the lane, having passed the village, wound eventually to the high road that ran southward to London.

“Aye, you’ve got the right of it.” Jem wiped his forehead and stood up. “Well, let’s see what’s up the path.”

They did not like what they saw. Keeping to the weed-grown sides of the path, they noted that Elizabeth’s small, light footprints made their way up the hill, and so did those of the two men.

But there were only two sets of prints leading back down.

The glove, when they saw it, seemed to mark an area where the footprints were jumbled together.

It was a lady’s glove of sensible York tan, slightly worn, very small, unmistakably Miss Elizabeth’s.

The pair divided their forces, searching the wooded area to either side of the path, up to the top of the hill and then turning to search all the way back down.

When they reached the bottom, the brothers regarded each other hopelessly. “Best run for the constable, Tim. I’ll get back to Longbourn. Make sure you show Constable these tracks and marks on your way back. They’ll not last long in this dry weather.”

The men from Longbourn were the first to be called out, but by supper time, the entire district had joined the search.

Dinners prepared for the harvest next day were instead laid out on trestles for men who paused only long enough to keep hunger and thirst at bay.

Hunting dogs belonging to the gentry and working dogs from the farms were pressed into service, and the moonlit countryside, dotted with lantern and torchlight, resounded all night with the baying of the dogs and the cries of the men calling, “Elizabeth!”

Longbourn, Hertfordshire, Monday, August 3, 18__

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Darcy drove up in his curricule shortly after ten the next morning and found Mary Bennet seated at a table placed on the carriage sweep at Longbourn.

Barrels of water and homebrewed ale stood next to her, and tired men rode or walked up the drive to refresh themselves as she wrote down what they were reporting to her before consulting a list and sending them back out.

“Assisting with the harvest, Miss Mary?” His greeting was cheerful.

One of the men set down his cup of ale, came to the leaders’ heads, and led the curricule to the stable after Darcy jumped down.

Mary stood, and he noted that her face was pinched and white, the usual dark circles under her eyes contrasting alarmingly with her pale skin.

“Miss Mary, are you well? What is the matter? Shall I call one of your sisters?” He strode to her side and offered her his arm, noting that she leaned on it as an old woman might.

Mary beckoned to one of the men standing nearby. “Take over here, please, Jem. Mr. Darcy, let us walk over to the wilderness.”

Once they had gained the cover of the trees she turned to him, a look of helplessness in her dark eyes.

“It is Elizabeth. She has disappeared. We fear she may have been abducted. Those men and many more have been out searching for her all night.” She quickly provided

the details of Jem and Tim's investigation, the footprints and tracks leading towards the London road, and the recovery of Elizabeth's glove.

Darcy was silent for many long minutes, staggered by what Mary Bennet had just told him.

His mind strayed first to Wickham. Was he holding Elizabeth somewhere to extract a ransom from Darcy?

Were his plans directed more towards revenge?

Was it someone else, some random evildoer passing through the neighborhood?

He cursed his failure to protect her. His mind rebelled at the very thought that this was happening, and his deepest inclination was to seek refuge in denial.

Then he looked again at Elizabeth's sister.

Mary had dried her eyes and resumed her work of coordinating the search.

She must be overcome by grief, anxiety, and fear—yet she labored on.

Could he do any less? Rather than wasting time cursing his utter ignorance of the surrounding terrain, he would find a way to make himself most useful.

Darcy spent some time walking around the garden and house observing the recovery efforts to determine what he could do to be of most assistance.

He learned that Mr. Bennet had been out searching all night.

Mrs. Bennet had uncharacteristically laid aside her histrionics and was deeply asleep,

thanks largely to a composer mixed for her by Jane, who was supervising her care.

He found the two younger girls, scared and silent, working under Mrs. Hill's direction in the large kitchen, for there were many mouths to feed.

Mary had dried her eyes and resumed her work of coordinating the search.

At one time she caught Darcy's eye and shook her head hopelessly.

They were running out of places to look.

The mill pond had been dragged, as had the marshy area between Netherfield and Longbourn.

Women began to lay out food on trestles set up on the lawn beside the house.

Mr. Bennet rode up shortly before noon and slid from his horse with an exhausted grunt.

He had not slept, and he was pale, filthy, and unshaven.

He swallowed a cup of ale as he spoke in a bleak voice that could scarcely be heard.

"It begins to look as though Lizzy has been carried off. It is as though the earth had opened and swallowed her up."

Darcy, despairing himself, tried to summon up words that might be of comfort. "She is somewhere, sir, and we will find her."

As men began gathering on the lawn to eat, Darcy and Mr. Bennet were approached by a plump, comfortable woman of middle age who was dragging a young boy by his

elbow. She bobbed a curtsey and shook the little boy gently. "Go on, tell these gentlemen what you told me." The child ducked his head.

Darcy folded his height down to the child's eye level. "What's your name, lad?"

"Ezra, sir."

"Well, Ezra, you're not in any trouble. Why don't you tell us what you told your mother? You might help us."

"I run off after dinner yesterday."

"And what happened?"

"I saw two men with a horse and cart. I never did see those men before. They were strangers. And it was Sunday. And something was in the cart. I thought it was some kind of animal like a dog, maybe, or a litter of kittens. It was under some blankets or rags or such. It was moving."

"What time of day was this, Ezra?"

"A little after dinner, sir. We eats dinner right after church."

"And which way was the cart going?"

The child pointed. "Towards the road to Lunnon, sir."

"Very good, Ezra. Just one more thing. What did the men look like?"

"Well, sir, I couldn't see their faces. They had their hats pulled down. They was wearing smock-frocks like we wears, but I couldn't see much of the rest of them for

the cart.” He paused and knit his brows. “Nice horse, though. Good worker. Big gray gelding.”

“Like a farm horse?”

“No, sir. Not a cob, neither. Like a gentry horse. Too big and stout for a hunter. Mebbe a carriage horse.”

Darcy stood. “Ezra, you’ve helped us a great deal. It’s a good thing you told your mother.” A coin of unspecified value changed hands, and Ezra’s eyes lit up. “Ask your mother or father to tell Mr. Bennet if you think of anything else.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Ezra’s mother made another curtsey and the pair walked down the drive and out of sight.

“We checked with the tollgates for miles in both directions, but we had no description other than that of two men in a farm cart. We learned nothing in either direction.”

“At least now we know what the horse looks like. It is entirely possible they changed to some other conveyance.” Darcy turned to Mr. Bennet. “Sir, will you accompany me indoors?”

“I must ride out to the search again.”

“You are of necessity commanding the search in this area. I can be of little help. My ignorance of the district, its terrain, and its inhabitants renders me all but useless. But you cannot continue without proper food and rest. You owe it to your daughter to sustain yourself now.”

The two men turned toward the house and entered the library. Darcy requested that a cold luncheon be brought for Mr. Bennet, and the two settled in comfortable chairs.

“My purpose in coming here was originally much happier.” Darcy reached into his breast pocket. “I have the settlement we agreed to, prepared for your signature.” He opened the sheaf of papers and placed it on the desk. “I have already signed it. I would like for you to add your signature.”

“But why?” asked Mr. Bennet. “Something may change.”

“Nothing can change. I believe she is alive, and I will spend the rest of my life searching for her if need be. This marriage settlement has become an act of faith.”

For that reason, the imposing document ultimately bore the name and signature of “Mrs. Anne Hill, Housekeeper” in the space marked out for the witness to Mr. Bennet’s signature.

After he had satisfied himself that Mr. Bennet had eaten and drunk, Darcy stood and extended his hand. “Now, sir, I will return to London.”

“But. . .”

“I believe I may be of more use there, sir. The search here, while it is far from over, has not yielded any fruit aside from the single glove. The boy Ezra’s description of the cart horse was singularly helpful: Not a cob nor a draft horse but a gentry horse.

Two men in farmers’ smocks with a simple cart and a fine carriage horse. ”

“Any boy growing up in this district would know his horses, but young Ezra showed a depth of knowledge far beyond his years.”

“I believe we must expand our search to include London, and I am the man to do that.”

“Mr. Darcy, you are right.” Mr. Bennet shook the outstretched hand. “Let us correspond frequently by means of the express.”

As Darcy left the house and asked one of the men to see about his curricule, Mary stood up with a weary smile. “Could I trouble you to take one more stroll over to the wilderness?”

Darcy offered her his arm. “Of course.”

She did not speak until they had entered the seclusion of the small space.

She sat on one of the benches and said, “I can make no logical sense of what I am about to tell you, but sometimes logical inconsistencies are a signal that something is amiss. I had put this out of my mind after it occurred, but the loss of Lizzy has made me recall it. Please bear with me.” She began folding and refolding her handkerchief into small pleats.

“On the day that our father brought Lydia home, we received a morning call from Mr. Collins.”

“The parson from Hunsford?”

“The very same. He came to condole with us on Lydia’s reputed fall from grace.

He said. . .he said that he had been prompted to make the visit after receiving word from Hertfordshire.

Those were his words: Word from Hertfordshire.

” She paused and looked directly at Darcy.

“Mr. Darcy, I do not see how that can be true.”

“The Lucases?”

“That would be the most logical solution, and it may yet turn out to be true. But Lydia left Brighton on Sunday at midnight. We received word twenty-four hours later on Monday at midnight. Hill was with us, and my mother cried a great deal, but nothing much was said about the situation. It pays to bear in mind that our servants do not get along with those at Lucas Lodge. There is a feeling below stairs that the servants at Lucas Lodge are high-and-mighty for no particular reason. And on the other hand, the servants at Lucas Lodge are envious because my father pays our people better wages. The gossip does not flow.” She paused for breath.

“The days of the week are all wrong for marketing, which would have been done on Saturday. And we did not see my Aunt Philips until toward the end of that week, so there was not enough time for her to make a hue and cry. Gossip as a source of their news is possible, but it is not likely. There was not time.”

“Well done, Miss Mary. You have been an astute observer.”

“I should also tell you, sir, that Lizzy felt the same way. In fact, she interrupted Mr. Collins to ask him who his correspondent was.”

“And what did he say?”

“He passed over it—ignored it. We did not discuss it afterward. Her remarks signaled the beginning of a general uprising among Jane, Lizzy, and myself in which Mr. Collins was made so uncomfortable that he left the house rather abruptly.”

Darcy could not forbear to smile. “I should like to have seen that. I will be maintaining a frequent correspondence with your father. Send me word through him

if anything else occurs to you. And I implore you, take food and get some rest. You must keep up your strength in order to help the family. This is the same request I made of your father.”

“I will.” Mary extended her hand, which he shook. “Thank you, Mr. Darcy, on behalf of my family. You have given me faith that Lizzy will be found and restored to us. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye for now, Sister Mary.”

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Elizabeth's head ached abominably, not only from the blow she had been dealt but from whatever drug they added to the water they had given her to drink.

She had determined to take only enough water to keep dire thirst at bay, and she attempted to hold it in her mouth and spit it out rather than swallowing it.

Her gown, shoes, and spencer had been removed while she was unconscious, and she seemed to be wearing nothing but her chemise.

She knew that she was in a cellar; it was icy-cold and damp, and it smelled of mold.

Her thoughts turned to Darcy and her family, but something within her knew that if she allowed herself to give in to the despair that threatened her, she might never see any of them again.

She gritted her teeth with determination and forced herself to open her eyes and look about.

Dim light filtering in through a filthy window high in the wall in an adjoining room seemed to indicate that it was daytime.

With some difficulty she raised her head.

To her horror another mattress lay near hers, and there was a body on it—whether alive or dead Elizabeth could not tell.

She could make out a slight form huddled beneath a blanket and blonde hair spread

out on the mattress.

The girl—if it was a girl—lay on her side.

As Elizabeth watched in shock, the girl shifted slightly and moaned.

Elizabeth could clearly recall her capture and her concealment, blindfolded, beneath the pile of ragged, filthy blankets in the back of the cart.

She had dropped one of her gloves along the path and had managed, with considerable effort, to remove the second glove in spite of the cords that bound her wrists behind her back.

The lout who had blindfolded her had torn off her bonnet impatiently, and she had no idea of what had become of it.

As she lay on her pallet, she tried to recall all the details—as many as she possibly could—of her abduction and capture.

She blessed her father for having made her commit to memory long passages from Shakespeare, mathematical rules, Latin declensions, French verbs.

Once she had collected the details of her own situation, she could call them to mind and examine them at leisure.

She instinctively realized that some means of escape might be found in the most trivial details of her misadventure thus far.

She recalled that they had jounced for what seemed like hours along the lane, and when her two captors finally called a halt, Elizabeth had pleaded the call of Nature.

She was led to a break in the hedgerow beside the lane and required to close her eyes while her blindfold was removed, and the bonds were loosened.

A quick and frantic sweep with her eyes revealed that they were nearly to the turnoff for London.

The gray horse that had pulled the farm cart was being removed from the traces and led up the hill and between the trees to a carriage where another gray was already in place.

A third man, also clad in a smock, seemed to be overseeing the change.

His face was hidden by his hat and a kerchief, but to Elizabeth he looked familiar.

He was wearing Hessian boots, incongruous with his farmer's garb, and she began to think he resembled George Wickham.

Elizabeth continued to squat low so that she could take in as much as possible.

When the horses were ready, one of her captors came for her, wordlessly grasped her by the arm, hauled her up, and re-tied her blindfold.

She managed to drop the other glove in the middle of the lane before being dragged up the hill and through the trees, and unceremoniously bundled into the carriage.

She thought she could hear the cart being pushed out of the way, and in a few moments, one of her captors entered the carriage, sat on the opposite seat, and the carriage moved off, presumably on the road to London.

The other occupant never spoke, and Elizabeth was left to wonder who he was.

Elizabeth shook herself back to the present and swallowed her horror as the other girl in the cellar stirred and moaned again.

She was clearly in dreadful straits, and Elizabeth had no way to help or comfort her without making their situation worse.

Nevertheless, she tried, vainly, to overcome the nausea and headache so that she could rise.

She had made it to her hands and knees when her bladder signaled its urgent need for relief.

As she gathered her forces and looked around her for a bucket or chamber pot, a bright light suddenly appeared and approached.

It took several moments for Elizabeth's eyes to adjust, and she could see that the light was from a lantern in the hands of a woman who was also carrying a basket.

She set the basket down, hung the lantern from a peg on the wall, and spoke.

“Good morning, ladies! Arise, shine, for thy light is come! I have brought you this delicious breakfast. Ah, Miss Bennet. I see that you are awake. You may relieve yourself in the bucket over there by the window.”

Elizabeth managed to rise, realizing that she was barefoot, and she made grateful use of the bucket before staggering back to her mattress.

To her utter shock, her companion had been laid out flat on her stomach, and their captor was bathing the girl's bare back with a cloth and some water.

It was a nightmare of crisscrossed welts and sores, half-healed and raw looking.

Elizabeth fought back another wave of nausea and sat on her mattress.

“These are healing, my dear, dear Miss Grant,” said the woman.

“But you will have scars. No more comfortable house for you. There will be plenty of men eager to pay a shilling for you at Covent Garden, especially as your pretty face has been spared. You are indeed fortunate. We will let you stay here until your wounds have healed.” She turned to Elizabeth.

“The lesson for you, dear Miss Bennet, is that obedient girls fare much better in this establishment than do disobedient girls. Follow the rules and you will live a life of luxury and comfort. Ignore them, and this—or worse—may be your fate.” She went to the tray and brought back two bowls and two spoons as well as flasks of water.

“Now, ladies, eat this porridge. You would be well advised to eat every bite so as to keep up your strength.”

Elizabeth ate the thin porridge, drank all of her water, and watched her captor as much as she could.

The woman’s tall, thin form was clothed in a shapeless gray cotton garment, little better than a chemise, and a white apron—none too clean—was tied about her waist. Wisps of faded blonde, graying hair escaped from a white mob cap, also none too clean.

She sat back and folded her hands to signal that she had finished the meal, looking steadily at her captor .

“What are you looking at? Has my face turned green?”

“No, ma’am. I am trying to place your accent. You do not sound as though you are

from London.”

“In such places as these, it is better not to ask. But since you have, I’ll tell you. I’m as much a gentleman’s daughter as you are, Miss Bennet. My father was a clergyman, rector of a fine, wealthy parish in—well it does not matter where.”

Her captor picked up the lantern and the basket and departed, leaving Elizabeth and her companion in the dim cellar.

Elizabeth slept for some unknown interval. She was awakened by the sound of weeping from the girl on the other mattress. The dirty window still admitted plenty of light, and she surmised that it was afternoon.

“Miss—Miss Grant, may I be of some assistance?” Elizabeth rose, finding that her headache had eased enough to allow her to sit on the edge of the girl’s mattress. “May I help you into the other room or do something to make you more comfortable? I have no water or cloth to ease your pain.”

Miss Grant turned over with difficulty, and Elizabeth took her hand, which was hot and dry. “Please call me Arabella,” she said.

“My name is Elizabeth. What has happened to you that they have beaten you so? ”

“A client paid to do this. There are men who derive great satisfaction from inflicting injuries of this nature, and from the pain they cause.” She winced and changed position.

“In my case, I displeased Madame Charpentier, the proprietress, by protesting a bill that she said I owed. This was my reward. Of course, I will be too disfigured to please the exacting clientele of this fine club. How did you come to be here? You seem to have only just arrived. It is a dreadful shock, I know.”

Elizabeth sighed and laid her chin on her hand.

“Yesterday I was in my father’s home, Longbourn, in Hertfordshire, happy with my parents and sisters.

I . . .” Something told Elizabeth to pass over the subject of her betrothal and of Darcy in general.

“I went out for a Sunday afternoon walk, and two men came up behind me and hit my head. I was rendered unconscious, placed in a carriage, and brought here. Am I right in my understanding that this is a place of low morals? That my virtue is in danger?”

“Dear Elizabeth, it is a place of no morals at all. And no virtue.”

“How did you come to be here?”

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“I have been at this for what seems to me to be forever. I am—or was—the youngest daughter of Mr. Howard Grant, who resides with my mother and the rest of my family on his estate, Hollymead, in Shropshire. Six years ago, when I was but seventeen, I was brought to London for my first Season. I was abducted from the park near my father’s town house by a man I knew slightly, a man named George Wickham.

He abused me violently, at knifepoint, and when he had done with ruining me, he took me to Mrs. Younge, or Madame Charpentier as she calls herself now.

My family found me, but they preferred to disown me, saying that I had been killed in a hunting accident at a neighbor’s estate in Shropshire.

And so, I worked for Mrs. Younge, entertaining what she refers to as ‘gentlemen,’ until this house opened, when she brought me here. ”

“I know not what to say!” Elizabeth took the other girl’s hand and held it. Her own hands had begun shaking at the mention of George Wickham.

“There is no need to say anything at all.” Arabella lowered her eyes, and her voice was barely audible.

“I have a kind of hope, and if you can believe it, my current situation may advance my plans. During my first Season I fell in love with a young gentleman, and he with me. He was--is--a second son, and it was necessary for him to find a profession. He worked as private secretary to the Duke of ___ and was generally thought to have a fine future in the diplomatic service. When I was—when I was captured, it was he

who found me. It was he who made every attempt to rescue me, even after my parents disowned me. His own parents forbade him to continue, but he persevered, even to the point where his employer discharged him. He works now as a clerk in a counting-house with many clerks, saving every shilling of his pay to buy my freedom. He purchases an hour of my time each month, and he never puts a hand on me. Rather we sit together and talk of our future. My hope and his has been that when my appearance begins to fade, I can escape to him.” She paused.

“Well, I should say that these injuries have quite stolen any beauty I might have had in the eyes of the clientele here. And if they put me in Covent Garden, I can try to make my way to him.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were wet. “What is his name?”

“His name is Robert Mason. He works for the firm of Conklin and Pierce, a counting-house.”

“Arabella, if I survive this place, I will do everything in my power to get you out of here. And if I do not find you here, I will see to it that Covent Garden is searched until you are found. Upon my honor, I will.”

“Let us hope that comes to pass.”

The two young women lay down on their mattresses and tried to compose themselves for sleep, but it took Elizabeth many long minutes to drop off.

Darcy’s beloved, now-familiar face continually rose up behind her closed eyes, and she was hard pressed not to weep bitterly.

It seemed she had just dozed off when the woman and her lantern invaded them once more.

She hung the lantern on its peg, saying nothing to Elizabeth, and proceeded to bathe Arabella's wounds, which looked worse to Elizabeth.

"Ah, I detect a slight fever. That is not good, Miss Grant. Drink this water, and I shall leave you with a flagon of water to finish off tonight. If you have fever, I shall not feed you."

She turned to Elizabeth. "As for you, Miss Bennet, stand up." Elizabeth obeyed, and the woman tied a blindfold around her eyes. "Now, say farewell to Miss Grant."

"Arabella! Arabella, God keep you! Have courage. I will do what I can for you."

"Which is precisely nothing, Miss Bennet. Now, come with me."

She led Elizabeth up a flight of stairs and out a door.

"Here are four broad steps down," she said, taking Elizabeth by the arm.

They walked along a gravel path for a few yards, which was unpleasant to Elizabeth's unshod feet, though she relished the fresh, cool air.

Clearly, she was in London. Traffic noises from the street were everywhere. "Go up four broad steps."

Elizabeth complied and found herself within doors again.

The feel of the floor under her bare feet told her that she was standing on a wooden floor.

It was much quieter here; in fact, there was no noise at all.

She could detect scents of beeswax, floor polish, lavender, and cut flowers; in fact, all of the scents associated with a well-managed home.

She resolutely suppressed a pang of homesickness and awaited her captor.

As she did so, she breathed in again, detecting the odor of fresh paint.

“You may reach behind you and remove your blindfold.” Elizabeth complied, feeling a nervous flutter.

She found herself standing in a wide hallway looking forward at what appeared to be a front door.

“That door, and the door to the rear, remain locked and guarded at all times. You are not to approach them unaccompanied. Aside from that, you may move freely about this, the ground floor, and the rooms of the first floor. Do not enter a closed door without knocking and identifying yourself. Your room, and those of the other young ladies who share this house, are on the two upper floors. Now I will take you to your room.”

They ascended two pairs of stairs. It is like being in a school, thought Elizabeth.

Of course, her reason told her that this could not be true.

She knew perfectly well what sort of establishment this was.

For now, she thought she was safe. She would learn what she could, and hopefully that would be sufficient to enable her to effect an escape.

She had no idea how long her safety would last, but it would surely extend to a bath and some clean clothes.

When they arrived upstairs, her captor opened one of the doors, stepping aside and gesturing for her to enter.

The room was dark, much as the rest of the house was dark, because the window was obscured by heavy velvet curtains.

Candles burned on the mantelpiece in an effort to ward off the gloom.

It would have been impossible to see without them. A fire burned in the grate.

A young blonde girl in a simple but attractive gown, apron, and cap was supervising two footmen who were filling a copper bathtub set down in front of the fire.

The water steamed invitingly and smelled divine to Elizabeth.

She barely looked at the young maid, so anxious was she to get into the bath.

The girl spoke tenderly to the older woman. “Mama, you look tired. Do sit down for a few minutes and rest yourself. You may keep watch—eh, keep Miss Bennet company while I go and fetch clean towels.” She dismissed the footmen and whisked out the door and down the hallway.

The woman Elizabeth mentally referred to as her captor pulled the door almost closed and seated herself in the chair.

There did not appear to be a screen to place around the bathtub nor any sort of shift for Elizabeth to put on after removing her clothing.

“Do go ahead and remove your clothes, Miss Bennet.” The woman sounded weary.

“There is no false modesty here. Just leave them in a pile over there. They will be

discarded and burned.”

So great was Elizabeth’s desire for a bath that she complied without demur, turning her back to the woman and seating herself gratefully in the tub of warm water.

A cake of deliciously scented soap, quite different from what they used at Longbourn, was already in the bath, and she began to lather herself all over.

The girl reappeared and handed her a flannel cloth for washing, and Elizabeth began to scrub every inch of herself that she could reach.

When the time came to wash her hair, the girl was ready with warm, herb-scented water to rinse it, and when Elizabeth stood, she was first handed a warm towel, then assisted into a plain linen nightgown and a dressing gown.

Not wishing to dislodge her captor from the room’s only chair, she pulled the bench from the dressing-table over to the fire.

“Is there a comb?” she managed. One was instantly placed in her hand together with a dry towel, and she sat for many minutes, saying nothing, engaged in the familiar, comfortable task of drying her hair by the fire.

Her heart turned over as she remembered cozy times spent with Jane and her other sisters, seated by the fire, combing and drying their hair together.

Shaking off her despair, Elizabeth examined her surroundings.

The room was small but well-furnished and clean.

It boasted a closet, a fireplace, a bureau, a wardrobe, a dressing-table, a single bed and candle stand, and the modest but comfortable chair occupied by her captor.

There were looking glasses wherever she turned .

Her captor spoke from the chair. “You are free to treat this room as your own while you are here. However, you must never, under any circumstances, approach the window or attempt to open the curtains. The window has been nailed shut, and there is a heavy blanket nailed to the frame behind these draperies. Stay away if you know what is good for you.”

Elizabeth nodded and continued to dry her hair.

Anxiety thrummed in her veins like a second pulse as she looked over her surroundings again.

While Ruth and her captor were present, she would be unable to examine the room carefully, but there was no way to determine how long she would be here or whether she would ever be left alone.

In a few minutes, the young maid left, only to return moments later with a tray, which she set on the dressing-table.

The aromas were so savory that Elizabeth could hear her stomach growl.

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“I have brought your supper, Miss Bennet. Best come and eat it before it grows cold.” Elizabeth glanced at the small ormolu clock on the mantelpiece and saw that it was six o’clock.

She heard feminine voices and footsteps in the hallway, descending the stairs.

Presumably these were other inmates of the house going down for dinner.

She wasted no time in seating herself before the tray.

She found all of it delicious and by the time she had finished and folded her napkin, she felt sleepy .

The older woman, her captor, had left the room. The young girl was still present, hovering nearby. “What should I call you?” asked Elizabeth.

The girl sketched a curtsy. “My name is Ruth, Miss Bennet. I am your maid.” Once again, Elizabeth willed herself into silence as she recognized the maid from the parsonage at Hunsford.

Recalling the admonition of the older woman, Elizabeth said nothing and did not betray any sign of recognition.

“The older lady who brought you here is my mother. She is Mrs. Oliver.”

“And how long have I been here? Am I in London?”

“You came to us late last evening, and yes, you are in London. And that is all I can tell you.” The girl turned to the bed, pulling down the covers invitingly and plumping the pillows.

“May I suggest you get some sleep, Miss Bennet? I feel sure the events of the last day have been fatiguing, and you have a full day tomorrow. You will have visits from the modiste and possibly the hairdresser.”

Elizabeth, worn out and sorrowing, got into bed. Her last waking thoughts were of Darcy and her family, and she resolved not to waste her strength by weeping. She eventually fell into an uneasy slumber, but her sleep was restless and full of nightmares.

Brook Street, London - Monday, August 3, 18__

Upon his return from Longbourn, Darcy strode into his house on Brook Street.

His cousin Fitzwilliam was on leave, taking his ease at his family home at Matlock in Derbyshire.

Darcy intended to interrupt him, for he needed as many reinforcements as he could pull together in London.

He finished that letter, penned a shorter note, ordered that supper be brought to him in his book room, and summoned a footman.

The letter to Fitzwilliam would be sent by the Royal Mail and would reach Matlock in one and one-half days.

The footman would take a carriage to hand-deliver the short note. Sergeant Benjamin Parker, the recipient, was one of Darcy’s most valuable employees, son of a

longstanding Pemberley family. He had served ably on the Peninsula under Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Darcy was just finishing his supper when the door opened and the butler announced, "Sergeant Parker, sir." Parker, a tall, fit, plainly dressed man of about Darcy's age with a pronounced limp, strode into the room with a crisp, "Good evening, sir" and was invited by Darcy to sit down.

"My betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, has been abducted." Darcy spoke without preamble, handing Parker a glass of port and pouring another for himself.

Parker stared at him incredulously. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Sister of Miss Lydia Bennet? Of Hertfordshire?"

"The very same."

"If you'll pardon my saying so, sir, the first question that comes to mind is what anyone could have against a set of genteel young ladies from Hertfordshire."

Darcy scowled as his feelings grew darker.

"I cannot imagine, Parker. There are five Bennet sisters, and they live quietly with their father and mother on a small but comfortable estate near the town of Meryton. Perhaps someone has some grudge against their father. The estate is entailed on a distant cousin. Perhaps he is a little too anxious to move in."

Parker sipped his port with an air of appreciation. "I see. Do you happen to know who that cousin is?" He regarded Darcy from beneath lowered brows.

"The heir to Longbourn is the Reverend William Collins, who is at present the rector of the church at Hunsford in Kent. It is a living in the gift of my aunt, Lady

Catherine.” Darcy then proceeded to place all the information he had concerning Elizabeth’s disappearance at Parker’s disposal.

He did not neglect to include Mary Bennet’s observations about the visit from Mr. Collins.

The two men talked far into the night, and the level of port in the bottle decreased markedly.

Darcy waited silently as Parker made a number of careful notes in a leatherbound notebook. The sergeant lifted an inquiring eyebrow, and at Darcy’s nod, took out his pipe, lit it carefully, and puffed meditatively.

At length, Parker spoke. He first consulted the notebook in which he had been writing.

“This warrants a great deal more careful planning, sir. But for now, I shall increase the number of men searching for George Wickham. As you know, he disappeared after Miss Lydia Bennet’s recovery, and nothing has been seen or heard of him since.

There is a great deal more we can be doing, and it is obvious that we need to find him. ”

After a time, he went on. “Does it not seem to you, sir, that there is at least one similarity between Miss Bennet’s abduction and the attempted abduction some weeks ago of Miss Caroline Bingley that resulted in the murder of her footman? I believe you are acquainted with Miss Bingley’s family.”

“I am. And you are right. Both ladies were set upon by two men. Miss Bingley’s footman bore the brunt of the attack on her, essentially dying in her stead. Miss Bennet had no footman accompanying her. The two men who attempted to abduct

Miss Bingley have not as yet been apprehended.”

“And how would you characterize the relationship between yourself and Miss Bingley, sir?”

“Cordial, Parker. It is cordial.” Darcy’s tone was abrupt.

He felt his face redden and stopped himself.

“No, that is inaccurate. Miss Bingley has long cherished the wish that her brother, who is my friend, would marry my sister Georgiana. At the same time, she has come to regard me as a potential marriage partner for herself. I do not regard her in the same light. And Bingley does not regard my sister as a marriage prospect.”

“Pardon me for just a moment, sir.” Parker made several quick notations.

After a time, he spoke again. “We must write to Mr. Bennet to inquire if anything has been seen of that farm cart. The use of a carriage horse suggests that the cart was abandoned in favor of a carriage or other fast conveyance with additional horses at some point near the London road. That should be checked carefully, especially with respect to evidence of other horses kept waiting while the abduction took place. You said there was an eyewitness, a young boy.”

“Correct. He is about seven, and his observations were astute for one so young. He took careful note of the horse’s coloring and conformation.”

“He must be questioned again.” Parker stopped, frowned, and lit his pipe again. “Was there not something unusual about one of the men who murdered the footman?”

“His left hand. Miss Bingley bit his left hand to the point where he shed blood. She noticed that he was missing the first joint of his index finger on that same hand.”

“Because the boy is young, his questioning must be carried out with great care. We do not want to frighten him into lying, nor do we wish for him to stretch the truth because he thinks it will please us.”

“I believe Mr. Bennet is capable of doing that. He has a quiet voice and manner.”

Parker stretched his leg out toward the fire.

“I will dispatch two men to Bath to keep a discreet watch over Miss Bingley until the murderers are apprehended. These are but the preliminaries. Based upon what we learn from Mr. Bennet concerning the cart and horses, we will need to begin detailed inquiries at every tollgate and posting inn between there and London. Fortunately, the distance is not too great--less than thirty miles. I will supervise that questioning with the help of two reliable men.” Parker seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of reliable men, most of them, like himself, veterans of the war in Spain.

“As far as the child is concerned, our ability to connect the crimes in Bath and in Meryton would advance our investigations considerably. Meanwhile, if I may suggest, sir, your time will be most efficiently employed by initiating inquiries with respect to Mrs. Younge.”

“I can have my solicitors begin tomorrow. I understand she has made some investments recently, but I know little aside from that. I will ask Miss Bennet’s uncle, Mr. Gardiner, to begin discreet inquiries as well.

He has colleagues in the City who include bankers, prosperous merchants, and others with deep connections into business and commerce.

I will also prepare a letter to Mr. Bennet with your instructions, to be sent express.

And I will speak to the head groom about arranging to place any necessary horses at

your disposal.

” Darcy stood, and the two men shook hands.

“Is there anything else you require immediately?”

“No, sir. I will wait on you with a report, and we can discuss further plans then.”

After Parker left, Darcy prepared the express for Mr. Bennet as well as a detailed letter of instructions for his solicitor.

He wrote to Mrs. Annesley at Pemberley directing that Georgiana stay there until further notice.

His final letter was to his steward at Pemberley describing Elizabeth’s abduction as well as the assault on Miss Bingley and directing that a discreet but careful watch be kept over his sister and that a watch be kept for two strangers, one with an injured left hand.

When he had prepared all his letters, he sat at his desk, deep in thought.

He would wait upon Charles Bingley, who had returned to London, to inform him that two men would be dispatched to watch over Caroline and to ask him to open the house at Netherfield.

The additional men, horses, and conveyances would be of benefit to the search in Hertfordshire.

He had one additional call that must be paid, and he dreaded it, for it was a visit to his friends in Gracechurch Street.

He sought his bed, praying that sleep would come, knowing that it would not.

As he put out the candle, he reflected that he would not have a peaceful night's sleep until Elizabeth Bennet lay in this house beside him, his ring on her finger.

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Morning found Darcy up early and at the stables, conferring with his head groom about Sergeant Parker's requirements.

He then breakfasted and left the house to go to Gracechurch Street, where he knew the family would not yet have started breakfast, which they regularly ate at ten.

He sent in his card and asked particularly to speak to Mr. Gardiner, who soon emerged to greet him.

Mr. Gardiner's smile grew serious as he took note of the look on Darcy's face.

He showed his unexpected visitor directly into the small, crowded room he used as an office.

Darcy began without ceremony. "Everyone is in good health, but I bring you bad news." He squared his shoulders and went on resolutely.

"Elizabeth disappeared while out walking day before yesterday. An extensive search is being carried out in the neighborhood surrounding Longbourn, but thus far it has been unavailing. There is some evidence she may have been brought here to London."

Mr. Gardiner stared at him, speechless. "You are saying that Elizabeth is lost?" he finally managed.

"Precisely. I cannot tell you how deeply I regret being the bearer of such news, sir. Everything possible is being done to find and recover her, both here and in

Hertfordshire. We are in daily communication between here and Longbourn.” As he had with Benjamin Parker, Darcy put Mr. Gardiner in possession of all the facts that had been gathered so far.

He ended by saying, “I hope to hear from Mr. Bennet tomorrow, and of course I will keep you apprised.” He passed one hand over his eyes.

“My next question is an obvious one. How may I be of service in this?”

“There is a woman, a Mrs. Younge, and I believe she has had a hand in this as well as George Wickham. She has a rooming-house in Edward Street. It may well be that with your connections in commerce and the City, you would have access to news that I might not hear. Acquisitions of property would be interesting.”

“I will listen for news and talk concerning any enterprises involving the acquisition of new property. And I will do so with the utmost discretion.”

“Would you do me the honor of calling on me at home at about one this afternoon? Parker will be there, and we can take counsel together.” The two men shook hands, and Darcy took his leave.

His next call was on Bingley at the house in Grosvenor Street.

He was shown into the breakfast parlor where Bingley and Mr. Hurst had just begun to eat.

“Darcy!” cried Bingley, getting to his feet. “Have you breakfasted? How do you get on with the plans for the wedding?” His open face took on an expression of deep shock as Darcy gave him the news about the loss of Elizabeth.

Surprisingly, it was Hurst who spoke up first. “Damned savages whoever they are,”

he observed with considerable asperity.

He set down his coffee cup with a sharp clatter before continuing.

“I barely know Bennet. Only met the man two or three times. But, by God, he has the right to enjoy his own manor without having his children carried off one by one from beneath his nose. I don’t know who’s doing it, but they should be found and shot. ”

Bingley, much more quietly, asked Darcy how he could best be of service.

He listened carefully as Darcy outlined his request that he return to Netherfield.

“Mr. Bennet is a capable man, and well known in the district,” Darcy concluded.

“But there is no one else of his standing who may be relied on. The Lucases should be kept at arm’s length in this, and Mrs. Bennet’s relations are incurable gossips. ”

“I shall give the orders immediately. Stay where you are, Darcy. I will be back directly.”

He was as good as his word, returning to Darcy within fifteen minutes. “A man is leaving as we speak to alert the housekeeper, and I leave this afternoon at three. I shall wait on Mr. Bennet without delay.”

“I want to reassure you about your own sister, Bingley. Two of my men are leaving for Bath today. Their orders are to keep a discreet, watchful eye on her for her own protection.”

Bingley’s face took on an expression of deep concern as he and Darcy shook hands. “I am grateful for that, Darcy. Do not worry. Miss Elizabeth will be found. She must be found.”

Longbourn, Hertfordshire - Tuesday, August 4, 18__

Darcy's express arrived at Longbourn as Mr. Bennet was preparing to ride out to search. "He confirms what we are already doing," he informed Jane and Hill, who stood with him in the front hallway.

"We will continue to search for the cart and any signs of a carriage. Mr. Darcy has men ready to act on any information we gather. He has told your Uncle Gardiner," he shook his head sadly at Jane.

"And Wickham will be watched without interruption, twenty-four hours a day, when he is finally apprehended." He turned to Hill.

"Please let them know to be ready in the stables for men and horses at any time." Hill bobbed a curtsey and left.

He took Jane by the hand. "Now, Jane, how is your mother faring? And how are you?"

"I am fine, Papa. The other girls are helping a great deal, and we have managed so that one of us is always with her. Mary is continuing to record the areas searched, though she is running out of places to send people. She is now doing that work from a corner of the kitchen." Jane sighed.

"I only wish I had better news about Mama."

"I do not hear any hysterics from upstairs."

"There are none, Papa. The doctor was here again yesterday. He now believes Mama has suffered an apoplexy of sorts—a slight stroke from which she may recover with care. Her powers of speech are affected, but there is no paralysis. Mama was

shocked—truly shocked—by all of this. In fact,” here Jane put her hand over her eyes, unable for a moment to continue.

“In fact, last night she awoke from a dreadful nightmare. All she could say was, ‘My babies!’ It was pitiful to see and hear. During the day, she mostly sleeps or turns her head to the window and weeps silently. I am not to give her any more laudanum, and we are trying to soothe her with warm milk and chamomile tea. Her appetite will not be tempted.”

Mr. Bennet placed his hands on his daughter’s shoulders and kissed her forehead. “And I have neglected her shamefully,” he said quietly. “I will come and sit with her this evening and try to calm her fears. These events would be trying to any mother.”

“Or any father, Papa.” Jane squeezed his hand. “I am going upstairs to rest now so that I can be ready for the night watch.”

Mr. Bennet stared unseeingly out of the window in his study. He was startled to see a rider coming up the drive and recognized the man as owner of a neighboring farm. Moments later, Mrs. Hill was showing the man into the study.

“Sir, they have found something important,” the man began. “Tis a cart, abandoned in a ditch on William Archer’s property, just behind the hedgerow. They are waiting for you before they proceed to inspect it.”

Bennet clapped the man on the shoulder and shouted for his horse.

The pair were soon on the way to Archer’s farm.

Archer was waiting for them when they arrived, together with a small group of neighboring farmers and gentry.

Bennet noticed, and nodded to, Jem and Tim Hill, who seemed to be playing a leading role in any neighborhood investigations.

“I was out in my fields at daybreak,” Archer began as Bennet dismounted. “I found the cart just where it is now, behind the hedgerow, down low in the ditch.”

“Good work, Mr. Archer.”

“I also found this, sir.” Archer held up a small lady’s glove in York tan. “It was near the edge of the road. I have marked the location with a large stone, and I have prevented folk from meddling in the area. I thought it might be the mate to the other glove that was found.”

“Thank you.” Mr. Bennet turned to the Hills. “The first order of business is to send for young Ezra Croft and his father.”

When Ezra arrived, proudly seated on his father’s saddlebow, his shrill voice piped up immediately. “That’s the cart, sir. That’s the one, and with the rags that was in it.”

Mr. Bennet dismounted and lifted the boy down from his father’s horse. “Good boy, Ezra. Now, do you think you can walk over there with me without disturbing any of the dust or dirt?”

“Yes, sir!” The boy reached out his hand, and Mr. Bennet somewhat awkwardly took it. The pair walked over to the cart where Jem and Tim awaited them. “These are the same rags, sir. All brown, like. You should look at what’s underneath because that’s where she was.”

The Hills had already begun examining the cloth. “This is a horse blanket, sir.” began Jem. “And it’s covered with gray hairs, so it might have belonged to the horse that Ezra saw.” He removed the blanket and spread it carefully on the grass by the hedge.

Mr. Bennet uttered a strangled oath at what was revealed.

A lady's bonnet, straw, embellished with sea-green ribbons, lay crushed on the bed of the cart.

He looked more closely and saw strands of silky dark hair entangled in the rough wooden boards.

Wordlessly he pulled as many of the strands as he could find, wound them carefully into a tiny skein around his fingers, and placed them in his pocket with the glove.

He held the bonnet in his hand. It was a few moments before he could speak.

“Mr. Archer? Do you have a shed or outbuilding where this cart could be kept undisturbed?”

The farmer's voice was subdued. “Yes, sir. I have a shed where it can be kept under lock and key. Tell me when you are ready for us to move it, and you shall have the key to keep, sir, and welcome.”

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Once the Hills had folded the blanket and laid it carefully back in the cart, Mr. Bennet accompanied them for a careful look at the surrounding area.

The lane ascended a knoll, curved at the top of it, and joined the road to London a few yards further on.

The intersection was nearby, but it was screened from the view of anyone who had not ascended the knoll.

Archer's land, separated from the lane by the hedgerow, also ran uphill.

The flat, low-lying area was under cultivation and ready for harvest. The hillside was a waste area of grasses and wildflowers.

The land was screened from the London road by a strip of open woodland about twenty yards wide at the top of the knoll.

Tim was first to scramble up, and he gave a shout when he reached the top. "Here! Here's where they were!"

The open area under the trees was covered with forest litter and old leaves, damp from past rain, and semi-secluded both from the London road and the lane and farmland.

It was clear that horses had spent some time there both from the number of hoofprints and the quantity of dung that littered the area.

There were human footprints as well. Although most of these were blurred and muddled, it was possible, with care, to make out the presence of a third pair of men's boots.

"These are much finer than the other pairs of boots," said Jem.

"No hobnails." This led to a short debate about whether they belonged to Elizabeth, but they were much too large.

She had either been carried or she was too small and light to have disturbed the leaves and mud.

Mr. Bennet could clearly make out the narrow ruts where the carriage or other conveyance had rested, and closer scrutiny yielded shallower ruts curving out of the woods only to be lost in the grassy verge of the turnpike that led south to London.

The ruts led to the south. "See what else you can uncover," he ordered the Hills before scrambling back down the hill, through the hedgerow, and back to his waiting horse.

He turned to the small knot of farmers waiting there.

"Someone needs to ride to the first tollgate and inquire if two or three men, and possibly a woman, were seen driving south in a carriage drawn by two horses, at least one of which was a gray."

Ezra's father, a man named Croft, stepped forward. "M'wife has come for the boy, sir, and I've got a good horse. I'll go."

"Mr. Croft, would you do me the favor of bringing Ezra to see me at Longbourn this afternoon when you return? We would like to ask him a few more questions. I will

talk with him. He seems to like me.”

“Indeed, he does, sir. I will bring him to you later this afternoon.” Croft was away as soon as Mr. Bennet nodded.

Meanwhile, the Hills supervised the storage of the farm cart in Mr. Archer’s shed as Mr. Bennet turned towards home. He would need to answer Mr. Darcy’s letter as quickly as possible.

Mr. Bennet, whose headquarters were his library, finished his note to Darcy before ringing for a cold luncheon.

Mrs. Hill brought it to him, and he detained her for a few moments, informing her of the progress they had made that morning.

“I feel I should tell you, Mrs. Hill, that your sons do you great credit. I have found them not lacking in intelligence, they are resourceful, and their powers of reasoning are above the common way. When Lizzy is found, as I believe she will be, we must all have a conversation about their futures.”

Hill smiled and curtsied. “Thank you, sir. Their father and I have tried to bring them up to be good men. We are happy to know that they are able to assist you in this terrible business.”

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Bennet found time to take a brief turn around the garden. He no longer enjoyed this activity; his eyes were now alert for signs of danger. He encountered Ezra’s father with the boy walking up the drive.

“Sir, I rode south to the first tollgate. The gatekeeper had no recollection of any such carriage, but he suggested that I wait for his wife, who often keeps an eye on the gate if he must be away. It took an hour, but when she finally returned, she was helpful.

She recalls a closed carriage with a man seated next to the driver on the box and drawn by matched grays. Both men were wearing smock-frocks. The curtains were pulled over the windows, and she could not see who was within. Her only other recollection was that the men were in a hurry and were rude and unmannerly.”

“And when was this?”

“Day before yesterday, sir. Mid-afternoon.” He reached into a pocket and extracted a large, somewhat rusty, key. “This is from Mr. Archer, sir. It’s the key to his shed where the cart is stored. ”

“Thank you, Mr. Croft.” Mr. Bennet turned to Ezra, greeted him, and shook his hand gravely. “Will you take a short walk with me?” Ezra, as he had before, took Mr. Bennet by the hand, and they started off. “I thought I might show you my favorite hiding place.”

“You have a hiding place, sir?”

“Certainly. If you had that many girls in your family, would you not want a hiding place?”

They strolled to the edge of the lawn, where a large tree stood.

Beneath its branches, half hidden from view, was a comfortable bench.

Mr. Bennet held up the branches with a theatrical gesture.

“Come in! Welcome to my hiding place. Ezra, you have been such a helpful boy. Those things you told us about the two men and the cart will help us find Miss Elizabeth, I am sure.”

“I hope so, sir!”

“And I know she will want to thank you herself when she is found. What I want to talk to you about is this. If you think very hard, can you remember anything else about those two men? It’s very important for you not to tell me anything that is not true, just because you want to help or because you think I might like to hear it.

But if you sit and think quietly, can you remember anything at all? ”

“Can you tell me what sorts of things, sir?”

“Were they tall or short, thin or fat? Did they have beards? What color was their hair? Or their hats? Anything odd about their appearance like a crooked nose?”

With the help of Mr. Bennet’s secret supply of peppermints, which he kept in a tin in his pocket, Ezra was able to recall several helpful facts.

Both men wore dilapidated felt hats rather than the straw hats favored by the area’s farmers.

One was tall and stout, about the height of Ezra’s own father, but stouter.

The other was about Mr. Bennet’s size and was not fat.

Neither man wore a beard, but both men looked as if they needed to shave.

Their smocks were clean, and their boots were new.

Ezra thought, but was not completely sure, that one of them, the tall one, had a missing finger on his left hand.

It might have been the pointer finger, and only half of it was gone. He was not driving the cart.

When the boy said, “Those are all the things I truly remember, sir,” Mr. Bennet stood up and shook his hand, now sticky with peppermint.

“You have helped a great deal, Ezra, and I will tell your father he can be proud of you.” A second coin of unspecified value changed hands, and Mr. Bennet also handed over his treasure trove of peppermints. The boy took his hand, and the two strolled back across the lawn to Ezra’s father.

Shortly after their departure, Mr. Bennet sat in his library writing another express to Darcy in London.

He reported on the discovery of the cart, its contents, and the footprints, and he carefully described his conversation with Ezra, his efforts to win the boy’s trust, and all of Ezra’s recollections.

It seemed apparent that both crimes had been carried out by the same two men.

He wondered where they were at this moment.

He sat back and rubbed his eyes, which smarted with fatigue and lack of sleep.

He had found that in the strange unreality of a world where his beloved Lizzy had vanished, he could keep his fears at bay so long as he kept himself occupied during the day with efforts to find her and apprehend her captors.

However, any moments of relaxation, any rest at night, invited worry and despair to creep into his mind unbidden.

His battles with anxiety and hopelessness were just as fatiguing as his efforts to find his child.

He shook himself resolutely and went to prepare for dinner.

True to his word, Mr. Bennet visited his wife after dinner.

He found her abed, propped up on pillows, staring out at the rapidly gathering darkness.

He seated himself in the bedside chair. "Draw those curtains if you please, Jane. And why don't you go down and have tea with your sisters? I will stay here with your mother."

As Jane slipped from the room, he entwined his fingers with his wife's in the same way he had done when they were courting and brought her hand to his lips for a kiss.

"Now, Fanny," he said quietly. "I have been neglecting you terribly, and I want to apologize for that." Her eyes searched his face anxiously as he continued.

"We have every reason in the world to believe that Lizzy is still alive and that she will be found. Mr. Darcy and your brother Edward are searching in London, and Mr. Darcy has good men, well-trained men, in his employ." He noticed with a pang that tears were rolling silently down her cheeks, and he wiped them tenderly away with his handkerchief.

"Your job, Fanny, is to rest, eat, and recover. Elizabeth will want her mother when we get her home. You must be ready. Now, I'll just sit here with you until you fall asleep, shall I? "

His wife squeezed his hand and favored him with a sad, watery smile before

obediently closing her eyes. It was not long before her regular breathing told him that she was sleeping, but it was many minutes before her hand relaxed and let go of his.

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She opened the letter and read it with some satisfaction.

Country bumpkins and other riffraff were swarming about Hertfordshire like ants, while the object of their search languished in a dark cellar in London.

She reflected that Elizabeth Bennet had already been compromised in the strict sense of the word, and the occupation she was soon to take up would complete the task as efficiently and quickly as fashionable London could get the word out.

She had recently been toying with the idea of offering the jade to her nephew as his mistress.

It would be most gratifying and would doubtless save her own precious daughter from many of his distasteful importunities.

She shuddered slightly at the thought of what her delicate girl would be forced to endure.

Resolutely, she laid the thought aside. The final victory was almost achieved.

Any frills and embellishments could be added later.

Yet another encouraging letter had arrived by express from London. This one was definitely a cause for celebration, and she poured herself a glass of port from the decanter at her elbow. Such a shame the Madeira was gone. It was far more delicate than the port. But the port had its own appeal.

Wickham had recalled the same two men and sent them to Bath, and he had conceived a brilliant plan. Indeed, it was difficult to see how it could fail. She tapped the letter with a fingernail and finished her port. According to this letter, today would see victory in Bath.

Bath - Tuesday, August 4, 18__

Sir Robert Carter carefully escorted his betrothed, Miss Caroline Bingley, out of the Pump Room.

Although she had largely recovered from the attack, her ankle was not yet strong.

Sir Robert, who had been in the midst of a promising Army career when his elder brother died, had one of Mr. Manton's finest pistols in his pocket.

He had been experiencing the uneasy feeling of their being watched for the past few days, and he was taking no chances with Caroline.

The Bingleys' first footman was just behind them, and he was also armed.

As they waited for Sir Robert's carriage, some sort of altercation or scuffle began nearby.

The constables soon arrived, and Sir Robert sent the footman over to inquire.

The man returned in only a few moments. "Sir, please allow me to stay here and watch over Miss Bingley while you go and speak to the constables."

One of the constables spoke without relaxing his hold on his prisoner.

"Sir Robert. It is fortunate you happened by. We have apprehended the two criminals

who attacked Miss Bingley and murdered her footman.” He shook the man he was holding.

“You can see there, sir. Missing the first joint of his index finger and got scars on the side of his hand where Miss Bingley injured him.” He pointed to the other man, in the custody of the other constable.

“And that one was carryin’ a cudgel, sir.

No telling what possessed them to come back to the scene of their crimes.

” The constable pointed out two neatly dressed men standing nearby.

“Those two men apprehended them and called us. Seems the criminals are wanted in Hertfordshire for the same sort of trick—abductin’ a young lady. ”

Sir Robert looked over at the two men who were standing quietly on the sidewalk. “I don’t know who you are, but well done. ”

One of the men spoke quietly. “Sir, it is important that we speak to you today. Perhaps we could meet you after you have escorted Miss Bingley home.”

Sir Robert consulted his watch and looked sharply at the men standing quietly in front of him. “Very well. Do you know the White Hart? I will meet you there in one hour’s time.” He turned and went back to Caroline, finding that the footman had wisely seated her in the carriage.

“Oh, Robert. Do you think they had come to town to finish me off?”

“Do not worry, dearest. They will be behind bars now. They are also wanted for a similar crime in Hertfordshire.”

“Hertfordshire! But that is where my brother’s estate is located.”

“I know little more about it than that, dearest. Do not let it trouble you too greatly. I will take you home now, and I hope you will rest.”

Sir Robert arrived at the White Hart a few minutes early, sat where he could see the door, and ordered himself a pint of the homebrewed.

The two strangers joined him about five minutes before the appointed time, reinforcing his hunch that they were ex-troopers.

After signaling for another two pints, he got down to business.

“Who are you two, what were you doing here, and who sent you?”

The elder of the two sipped his pint. “Our names are Jones and Harrison, we were sent here to keep a discreet watch over Miss Bingley, and we are in the employ of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of London and Pemberley in Derbyshire.” He took another sip before continuing.

“Mr. Darcy is a friend of Miss Bingley’s brother, Mr. Charles Bingley.

His own betrothed, Miss Bennet, was abducted in Hertfordshire under similar circumstances, circumstances too similar to make it a coincidence.

Mr. Darcy believed that there would be another attempt on Miss Bingley.

He sent us to watch over her without alarming her or her family. ”

“Well, you have certainly been successful. Do you have Darcy’s direction in London? I presume that is where he is at present.”

“Yes, sir.” The man took out a notebook and a lead-pencil and wrote the direction.
“Sir, it would be of great help to Mr. Darcy’s investigation if we could question those two men. Can you assist us with arranging for that?”

“I can, and I will. Meet me at the gaol at four o’clock. I will arrange it with the constables.”

“Thank you, sir.” Both men stood and shook Sir Robert’s offered hand.

“You’re troopers, aren’t you? Both of you.”

“Yes, sir. Until four o’clock, sir.” The man who had been speaking saluted, and the two men left to return to their own inn.

London, Unknown Location - Tuesday, August 4, 18__

Elizabeth awoke with a violent start in the pre-dawn darkness a few minutes past four o’clock.

She had always boasted that her courage rose with every attempt to intimidate her, but during those hours of darkness, she had to admit that her boast had not extended to her present dire circumstances.

As she lay in the dark, hoping vainly for sleep, anxieties seemed to press on her from every side.

Would she ever see her beloved Fitzwilliam again?

How did her family get on, and were they being threatened by the same wicked men who had brought her to this prison?

And would she find a way to avoid the wretched fate of Arabella Grant?

She turned and pummeled her heated pillow, beating it into a more comfortable position and resolutely closing her eyes.

These actions only brought on a fresh spate of worries.

She had failed miserably to find any means of escaping her prison.

Indeed, the only thing of significance she had gleaned was that Ruth was the same maid who had been employed at the parsonage in Hunsford.

Did that mean that Mr. Collins was involved in this?

God forbid, was Charlotte? Lady Catherine.

Her only certainty was that Wickham had aided in her capture and was probably the leader of the two other men .

“Good morning, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth woke hours later with another violent start, not knowing where she was. It only took a few seconds for her to realize that she was still in captivity in London. Ruth held out a steaming cup of coffee. Elizabeth smothered her despair and sipped it gratefully.

“You have a full day today, Miss Bennet. At noon you will be fitted with a selection of gowns which have been cut to measure from the gown you were wearing when you—when you came to us. That will take much of the afternoon. Dinner is at six, and you may choose to dine here in your room or to go downstairs and meet the other young ladies. You will not have any other duties tonight. Tomorrow morning you

will meet with Madame Charpentier at eleven. She is the directress.”

She gave Elizabeth a chemise, stockings, and a silk wrapper to dress in, then left for a few minutes and brought breakfast. By the time Elizabeth had finished, it was a little after ten.

Ruth pointed to the dressing-table. “I will dress your hair first, Miss Bennet.” As she worked to brush out and dress Elizabeth’s hair, Ruth said, “Your hair is quite lovely—it is a very fashionable shade. But it is too long to be really fashionable. Madame Charpentier may wish to have you confer with the hairdresser. It will be her decision.” Elizabeth’s heart sank at this, for she knew that Darcy loved her hair.

She swallowed her despair and tried to focus on possible means of escape.

Her hair was brushed into a stylish knot at the top of her head with a few ringlets falling to either side of her face.

Next, Ruth opened the center drawer of the table and pointed out cosmetics—boxes of powder, pots of rouge, phials of scent, and an array of puffs, brushes, and rabbits-feet with which to apply it.

Elizabeth inspected it all and colored. “I . . . I have never used cosmetics. I have no idea at all of how to apply them.”

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Ruth stood back and eyed her critically.

“You do not need much, that is certain.” She went to work with the rouge, and Elizabeth soon had a faint blush overspreading her cheeks, and her lips were several shades darker.

Ruth considered and rejected the powder.

She indicated the perfumes and allowed Elizabeth to select one that appealed to her.

Elizabeth found a light, floral scent that included the familiar odor of lavender.

This was soon dabbed all over, including places that caused Elizabeth great mortification.

She bit her tongue and said nothing, and it was soon over.

Ruth left the room with a promise to return with the modiste when she arrived.

Elizabeth stood in the center of the room and turned slowly.

She resolved that her search must be methodical and that she must conduct it in short bursts of activity lest someone enter without warning.

She was very much aware that she did not know precisely what she was searching for; perhaps it would be a means of escape, perhaps something that could be fashioned into a weapon for her defense.

The room did not have a closet, but the wardrobe seemed as good a place as any for her to begin.

She went to the wardrobe and checked it thoroughly, running her hands over the top as far as she could reach and pressing carefully along the back.

Finally, she held up the candle in an effort to see if there was anything behind the piece, but she found only a smooth wall.

The empty bureau received equally close attention, but when Elizabeth heard footsteps in the hall, she quickly seated herself in the chair by the fireplace.

The door opened to reveal a small, stylishly dressed woman.

She was followed by a more plainly dressed woman, obviously her assistant, and two footmen carrying a large number of boxes and parcels. "Miss Bennet, I am the modiste."

Elizabeth stood and murmured "How do you do" but did not offer her hand.

The woman turned to Ruth. "Another branch of candles, please. There is not enough light here to work properly."

Ruth returned with the candles, and fittings began.

"You are very fortunate, Miss Bennet," said the modiste.

Her speech was slightly accented, but Elizabeth could not place it.

"You have a light, graceful figure, a generous bosom, slender limbs, and a good complexion. The style of your hair is quite naive, but I do not recommend cutting it."

She paused and frowned before going on.

“All of these attributes will be very pleasing to the gentlemen. When properly gowned, you will do quite well.”

Elizabeth blanked her expression. There existed only one gentleman on earth she cared about pleasing, and she suspected that it would be unwise to allow that fact to become known here.

“Now we begin. Remove your dressing gown, please, Miss Bennet.” Elizabeth was fitted with a variety of day dresses in sophisticated colors, all of which left too much of her bosom showing.

When she tried to make adjustments, she was prevented from doing so.

Next, she was laced into a corset, and the assistant brought out three evening gowns.

At the moment she tried on the first ensemble—rustling silk the color of rubies with a net overskirt spangled with paillettes—Elizabeth was struck by the enormous finality of her situation.

She knew without looking in the mirror that no decent woman, single or married, would be seen wearing the gown, which left her shoulders virtually bare while plunging to a deep décolletage.

A futile and instinctive effort to adjust the bodice over her bosom was thwarted again by the modiste, and she allowed the assistant to pull the gloves on for her.

She could not and would not look in the mirror .

“A pity,” said the modiste. “You should be wearing rubies with this. Ah, I should not

worry. Some gentleman will have you dripping in rubies the second time you wear it.” Elizabeth, horrified, struggled to keep her expression neutral as the second two dresses were fitted—one in royal blue, the other in a startling emerald green.

Meanwhile, Ruth had been busily emptying other bandboxes, storing away chemises, stockings, handkerchiefs, and what appeared to Elizabeth to be plain linen nightdresses.

“You have three silk peignoirs for entertaining,” said the modiste.

“But I believe every woman is entitled to comfortable nightdresses for the times she spends alone.” Elizabeth nodded and watched silently as Ruth put away gloves, fans, reticules, and hair ornaments.

“That will be all for now, Miss Bennet,” said the modiste. “The gowns requiring alterations will be delivered shortly after noon tomorrow. Goodbye for now.”

When the modiste was gone, Elizabeth did her best to sound calm as she spoke.

“Ruth, I make it out to be almost three. Please leave me until it is time to dress for dinner. I will probably decide to eat in my room, but I will make my decision at that time. And please assist me in removing this corset. I should like to dress in one of the simple nightgowns for now.”

“Yes, Miss Bennet.” Ruth unlaced the corset for her, gathered up the discarded chemise and stockings, and handed Elizabeth a long-sleeved nightgown of soft linen.

After Ruth had gone, Elizabeth looked through the bureau until she found the handkerchiefs. She took one, laid down on the bed, covered her face with it, and wept silently and bitterly until sleep came.

Ruth awakened her with a cheerful, “Good afternoon, Miss Bennet. Have you slept well? It is five o’clock.”

Elizabeth’s eyes felt heavy, and she had a headache.

She reminded herself sharply that a headache was all she was likely to get if she allowed herself to give in.

“Yes, thank you Ruth.” Elizabeth breathed deeply and threw off the covers.

Ruth was laying out one of the simple day dresses, much to Elizabeth’s relief.

“I have decided to dine here this evening, Ruth.”

Elizabeth was soon dressed, and Ruth whisked out of the room again with her apparently boundless energy, returning in a few minutes with a well-laden supper tray.

Elizabeth admitted to herself that whatever her other complaints and concerns were, the food was good.

Ruth had turned away to make up the bed, and Elizabeth hid her table knife in the pocket of her gown.

It was, regrettably, not sharp, but it was soft pewter, and she reasoned she might be able to work on it.

She held her breath as Ruth took the dinner tray away, but the girl did not notice.

Brook Street, London - Tuesday, August 4, 18_

Darcy spent Tuesday working tirelessly with his solicitor, with Sergeant Parker, and with Mr. Gardiner on the question of Mrs. Younge's activities. At one o'clock, Parker and Mr. Gardiner arrived in the house on Brook Street to compare notes and to make further plans.

They began with a report from Parker. "First and foremost," he began.

"We have enjoyed success with the conveyance to London, thanks largely to those two lads who work for Mr. Bennet as well as a couple of local farmers. The conveyance was an ordinary chaise-and-pair, drawn by two matched grays. It was first seen at the first tollgate south of Meryton by the wife of the gatekeeper at mid-afternoon on the day of Miss Bennet's abduction.

It was driven by two men in smock-frocks, one in farmer's gaiters and heavy boots, the other in Hessians.

The woman reports that they were abrupt and rude.

She was unable to make out the passengers because the curtains were drawn. "

He consulted his notes before continuing.

"I had men out as soon as we had gotten word, and the sightings continued, virtually unchanged, at the first three tollgates. We therefore have three persons who will testify that the passenger they saw on the box was tall and slender. Each and every person interviewed noted the incongruity between the shirt and the boots. At the fourth tollgate, the man in Hessians had been replaced by a stout man wearing heavy boots." Parker settled back in his chair and looked at Darcy.

"Wickham," said Darcy.

“Wickham. At least there’s a good possibility it was Wickham.

After the first few tollgates he changed places with the man who had been riding inside.

As I said last night, he has disappeared from view.

We did not begin to search for him in earnest until Monday evening, so it is entirely possible he went into Hertfordshire to oversee the abduction. ”

“And what of Mrs. Younge?”

“I will have more to say about her later, sir. She has not been seen in the rooming-house for several weeks now. The servants will not talk, but neighbors say she left at around the time of Miss Lydia’s abduction. No one has seen her.”

“Yet my solicitors can find no record of any lawful business--acquisitions of property or other transactions.”

“I conducted my investigations in a different fashion,” added Mr. Gardiner. “I have been listening for talk or gossip regarding places of a low moral character. Gambling hells, for example. Or houses of ill fame. My investigations have borne some interesting fruit.”

Darcy leaned forward in his chair, chin on hand, regarding Mr. Gardiner intently .

“About three months ago, two adjoining houses were purchased just steps from here in Audley Street. They were extensively remodeled. It is possible to find merchants and tradesmen who provided furnishings both new and second-hand. Painters, glaziers, carpenters—all were employed on the project. Since then, the houses have been supplied with meats, wines, spirits, groceries--all things necessary to the

maintenance of an extensive household—or of a private club. Purchases of wine and spirits have been substantial, and the meats and groceries have all been of the best quality.”

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“Sir,” interrupted Parker. “Are you gentlemen aware of the nature of those houses?” Both men shook their heads. “The presumption in the City is that they constitute a house of ill fame,” said Mr. Gardiner.

Parker continued. “The plainer house serves as a residence for young women who are employed by the proprietor. The more elegantly appointed of the two is, at first glance, a discreet gaming-club. Admission is by invitation only, and it is frequented by the usual assortment of gentlemen and hangers-on who fancy themselves proficient at deep play. And deep play is what they get.” He paused and lit his pipe without requesting permission.

“The first two floors are dedicated to gaming. The upper floors—it is said that any vice that can be devised by the depraved mind of man is available. For a price, of course.” He squared his shoulders.

“I have not succeeded in infiltrating either house as yet. I have both places under constant watch. I have also not been successful in catching glimpses of Madame Charpentier or any of the girls. We believe they traverse adjoining back gardens to go from one house to the other without being seen from the street.”

Darcy’s eyes burned. “I, too, have encountered the name of Madame Charpentier during my work this morning. She has purchased several properties in various districts around London, though her name did not arise in conjunction with Audley Street.” He turned to his desk, scribbled a note, and rang for the footman.

“Deliver this, wait for an answer, and bring it directly back to me,” he said.

And turning back to the other two men, “My solicitors will know.”

The conversation turned to Longbourn. “I have had a letter from my brother this morning,” said Mr. Gardiner.

“The news is not good. My sister has had a slight stroke. Although there is no paralysis, she has for the most part lost her ability to speak. They are doing everything in their power to keep her spirits up, and her physician believes she may yet recover.”

“I am grieved to hear it,” replied Darcy. “Taken individually, either of these abductions would be a terrible burden for any mother. Taken together, they must be overpowering indeed. I can scarcely imagine what she is going through.”

“Or what you are going through, my friend.”

Darcy struggled to conceal his tortured feelings. “Where there is life, there is hope. My connection with Elizabeth is such that I honestly believe she is still alive. Were it otherwise, I believe that I would somehow know of the loss.”

Wordlessly, Mr. Gardiner poured two glasses of wine from the decanter and handed one to Darcy. When he had seated himself, he replied quietly. “I feel exactly the same connection to my own wife.”

Darcy sipped his wine and observed, “Bingley will arrive at Netherfield late today. He will wait upon Mr. Bennet at the earliest opportunity to offer his services with these efforts. Now that the bulk of the search has shifted to London, Mr. Bennet will no doubt wish to come here. However, I feel he could be of most help in the neighborhood of Longbourn. There are several investigations yet to close. On the other hand, she is his child.”

“Let me see what I can do,” replied Mr. Gardiner.

He was prevented from saying any more by the arrival of the butler. “Mr. Winters, sir.”

Darcy stood to greet the soberly dressed elderly man. “I did not expect you to come in person, sir.” He turned and introduced Mr. Winters to Mr. Gardiner as his family’s solicitor.

“Mr. Darcy,” began Winters. “I wonder if I might have a word with you privately.”

“Is it regarding our present investigation? If so, Mr. Gardiner is Miss Bennet’s maternal uncle and has my complete confidence in this matter. Sergeant Parker is already known to you.”

“Certainly.” Winters sat and accepted a glass of wine from Darcy.

“The information you requested concerning the ownership of the recently sold properties in Audley Street was readily available,” Winters began again.

“However, the information is profoundly disturbing, and you should be prepared for a shock, my dear boy. The properties were acquired by, and are presently owned by, your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.” Dismay and concern mingled on Winters’ face as he leaned forward.

He had been looking after the affairs of the Darcys for many years.

The blood left Darcy’s face, and he sat immobile for many long minutes. It was Parker who finally broke the silence. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Winters. Is there any other information we need to be acquainted with?”

“No,” replied Winters. “That was all we could develop at such short notice. We will, of course, continue our discreet inquiries. I will wait upon Mr. Darcy in person rather than sending one of the younger partners.” Winters stood and laid a hand as frail as parchment on Darcy’s shoulder—a liberty he took because he had dandled the infant Fitzwilliam Darcy on his knee many times—and said, “I know this has been an unimaginable shock, especially coming on the heels of the abduction. But do not give up hope. Continue to fight the good fight. It is my belief that the victory will be yours.” Darcy briefly laid his young hand on the old man’s, and Mr. Winters bowed silently to the other two men, turned, and left the room.

“He and my father were schoolboys together,” said Darcy thoughtfully.

Then he squared his shoulders, set down his glass, and sat up straight.

“My aunt has a brilliant fortune, wisely invested. It unites her husband’s considerable holdings with her own.

I have long suspected her of designs on my fortune, or simply of a desire to unite the two families more closely.

But I never regarded her as openly malevolent.

My suspicions in that direction have tended more towards George Wickham, whose desire for revenge is well known to me.

” He paused for a moment. “It certainly bears out the observations of Miss Mary Bennet. Collins is my aunt’s dupe. ”

Parker raised his eyebrows, and at Darcy’s nod, proceeded with the careful ritual of lighting his pipe. Mr. Gardiner poured wine for himself and Parker, made certain Darcy’s brandy was topped-off, and settled back in his chair. Only when the pipe was

lit and drawing did the sergeant continue.

“Sir, how long has your aunt been promoting the purported engagement between yourself and her daughter Anne?”

“As you know, my mother died when I was just ten years old. My father died five years ago. Nothing was said during either of their lifetimes. I never heard of the idea until shortly after my father’s death when I was twenty-three.

My aunt has made it up out of whole cloth, conjured it out of thin air.

When she first advanced it, it astonished everyone including my uncles on both sides of the family and my cousins. ”

“When you came down from Cambridge, you were introduced to London society?”

“Yes. My father was in the beginning stages of his final illness and remained at Pemberley. I was taken under the wing of my uncle, the Earl of Matlock.”

“I take it you became acquainted with several young ladies of good family?” “Of excellent family, Sergeant Parker. Considering the size of my fortune, this can come as no surprise.” Darcy felt the impatience of his speech, remembered Elizabeth’s reproofs, and resolved to be more forthcoming.

“I received many invitations, most of which I accepted. I made many social calls and danced with a steady stream of young ladies at private balls and parties and of course at Almack’s.

In this I did not differ from most young men blessed with fortunes. ”

“And thinking back to that first London Season, do you recall what became of any of those young ladies?”

Darcy thought carefully for a moment. “A number of them made good matches and are presumably happily married. I have remained good friends with one of those ladies and her husband, who is an old schoolfellow. We dine together occasionally when I am in town. One died tragically in a horseback riding accident at a house party at someone’s estate in in the country.

One developed a debilitating illness, and as far as I know returned with her father and half-siblings to their home in Martinique. Of the rest, I have no idea.”

“What about more recently, sir?”

“The only young lady to show a sincere interest recently, aside from Miss Bennet, is Miss Caroline Bingley of whom we have spoken at length.”

Parker refilled his pipe. Mr. Gardiner, noticing that glasses were empty, quietly replenished them and took his seat.

“Sir, I have observed you and Lady Catherine since first entering your employ three years ago. She has but one idea in mind. That is the enhancement of her daughter’s fortune by the acquisition and addition of yours, including Pemberley.

The fact that you are a near relation is naught but a piece of good luck that she believes will save her a great deal of work.

Miss Anne de Bourgh is to be the wealthiest, most dazzling young woman in all of England. ”

Parker stood and took a turn about the room as he continued talking.

“This is not a frivolous or baseless assertion, Mr. Darcy. She is a cold-hearted and single-minded woman, impatient with anyone who gets in her way for any reason. It

is my belief she has absolutely no sense of the humanity of others. If you look around Covent Garden or walk down Drury Lane and converse with the unfortunate young women there, you will find a handful of girls who have somehow incurred her wrath and who are now being punished. They are for the most part country girls, girls who took posts at Rosings as maids and were too pretty or too bright. However, at least one is a gentleman's daughter. ”

“I cannot believe what you are saying,” said Darcy. “Yet it is all too plausible. Aside from seduction, or blatant abduction, how does one ruin a gentleman's daughter? It cannot be easy.”

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“The first method is somewhat complex but very subtle. You ruin her father. Or kill him off. It becomes easier when you have a Wickham at your disposal. Once the male protector is dealt with, you have a vulnerable young lady who must make her way in the world. She will become a governess or teacher, most likely. She may go to work as a seamstress or seek some other genteel occupation such as that of companion to another lady. At that point, you are ready to strike. Some article is stolen and placed in her possession. Some accident befalls one of the children in her charge. An employer’s husband or adolescent son becomes too enamored.

The young lady is turned away without a recommendation, and she is at that point easy prey. ”

“And what about the second method?”

“Much simpler but less subtle. Snatch her away from the protection of her family. Abduct her, promise to marry her and elope with her, commit violence upon her person. Ruin her. At that point, you may use her as you please, and her family will partake of her ruin and disgrace. Unless, of course, they disown her.”

“Unspeakable. Yet so very plausible.”

“It is my belief that Wickham first attracted Lady Catherine’s notice when you compensated him for the living he refused.

Of course, she was aware of him before that time because of his position in the family.

But it was at that juncture she realized he might be of use to her.

I have not fathomed the relationship between Wickham and Mrs. Younge, but that must have appeared useful to Lady Catherine when it became known to her.

As with other girls, those singled out by Lady Catherine will first go via Wickham to Mrs. Younge.

Eventually they will find themselves on the streets.

Such would have been the fate of Miss Lydia Bennet.

It is also very probable that it was planned for Miss Bingley and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. ”

“Why have you not spoken of this before? ”

“Many of my assertions would have been speculation. Some were confirmed after Miss Lydia Bennet’s misadventure.

Most have been confirmed by the fact that Lady Catherine is the owner of that .

. . that den of iniquity. She has taken little or no trouble to cover her tracks, and I cannot account for that at this juncture.

The abduction of Miss Elizabeth and the attempted abduction of Miss Bingley have confirmed most of my suspicions.

I had wished to gather more facts before coming to you.

However, you need as much information as possible at your disposal. ”

“Thank you, Parker.” Darcy stood abruptly and paced about the room, eventually coming to lean on the mantelpiece.

“It would appear that according to my aunt’s wishes, any young woman who attracts my notice must be eliminated as a threat whether she is an eligible young lady or a comely housemaid.

It is outrageous.” He threw himself back into his chair.

“I am correct in assuming that you have dispatched men to continue to watch over Miss Bingley?”

“Yes, sir. They are in Bath now and are communicating by express. Thus far they have seen nothing suspicious, but I have not heard from them since yesterday. Sir Robert Carter, who is now her betrothed, is a former Army officer. He guards her well.”

Darcy paused to consider before speaking again.

He realized that there was a strong possibility Elizabeth was being held in one of the houses, it was difficult to come to terms with the idea.

At length, he continued. “The second problem will be more difficult. Though it is tempting to consider storming the houses in an attempt to locate and extract Miss Bennet, that is manifestly unwise. I must find a friend who can gain entrance by invitation, and I must do it discreetly without asking too many people. Can you record who is entering and leaving?”

“I will attend to that myself and will brief you each morning.” Parker took the extraordinary step of lighting his pipe for a third time.

“I fear I am about to say things that you will find disturbing, sir. However, they are intended to be reassuring. A young woman who finds herself in one of these establishments is not immediately ready to make an appearance. She must be suitably gowned and have her hair done, which requires visits from dressmakers and so on. She must be induced to fear the proprietors who wish to compel her obedience. And--” Parker stopped and regarded Darcy with troubled eyes, unable for the moment to continue.

“Go on, Parker. It’s for my own good,” said Darcy steadily.

“They will doubtless wish to consider several patrons to decide which will be the most generous, therefore the most lucrative for themselves. I believe we have at least one more day, possibly two, before her danger becomes imminent. The dressmaker was observed visiting today. We shall watch for her tomorrow. And nothing and no one will enter those houses without our observing it, sir. I have located a vacant property several doors down and am insinuating men into an area where they can view the back garden.”

Darcy smothered his rising sense of dread, telling himself that he would find her.

The three men stood and shook hands. Darcy summoned a carriage for Mr. Gardiner, as the dinner hour was approaching and he wished to be at home with his family. But Parker declined. “I will be in the neighborhood for quite some time, sir,” he said as they took their leave.

Darcy ate a solitary dinner before returning to work.

Struggling to keep his fears under good regulation, he disposed of several letters and bills, and then sat staring at the fire, sunk deep in thought.

His aunt had always been an annoying woman, meddlesome and officious in the

extreme.

But it appeared to him now that she was lacking something deep within.

Perhaps it was what people called the “soul.” Parker’s assertions resonated in his mind.

She saw other human beings, whether great or humble, as not being possessed of humanity, as pieces on a great game board that only she could see.

Her reality was the only reality. The world needed to be protected from her.

He would have to consider all of this, but his first task was to recover Elizabeth.

The sound of a log falling in the grate called him to himself.

He took up a candlestick and went to his rooms, fully expecting that sleep would be elusive.

Eventually, he called to his mind’s eye those images of Elizabeth at Pemberley.

Reaching out his arm as though to grasp her hand, he fell asleep.

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Sergeant Parker and Mr. Gardiner arrived at Darcy's at the same time the following morning.

"I have good news this morning, sir." Parker removed a letter from his pocket.

"The two men who attacked Miss Bingley and her footman have been apprehended in Bath. As we suspected, they were going for another attempt on Miss Bingley. Our men were able to detain them until the constables arrived. Furthermore, they are the same two men who abducted Miss Bennet. The taller of the two bears the mark described by Miss Bingley and by the boy in Hertfordshire—a missing joint on the left index finger. He also bears the scars of Miss Bingley's prior injury to him.

Our men had the opportunity to question the two men, and they have implicated Wickham in the attacks.

As the evidence suggested, he was physically present for Miss Bennet's abduction. "

"And what of Miss Bingley? Was she at all injured? "

"No, sir. They were approaching her, but they were as yet some distance away. She is well guarded by her betrothed, Sir Robert Carter."

"I must wait on Hurst immediately to inform him of all this, and I must write to Bingley as well. But it is imperative that I find a way to get a reliable friend into that club." Parker had provided him with a comprehensive list of names from the previous evening, and Darcy had recognized many of them.

Several caused him serious concern. However, since his choice of friends did not run to libertines and rakehells, there was not a single name on the list that would be of use to him in gaining entrance.

Parker's watchmen had seen the young women moving from the residence to the club across the back garden, but while there were several brunettes, it was impossible to determine if Elizabeth was one of them.

Mr. Gardiner consulted his watch. "I will write to Mr. Bingley on your behalf if that will free you to make haste to Mr. Hurst. What do you wish me to tell him?"

"That his sister's attackers have been apprehended, and that he might wish to provide her with support as they are brought to justice. He may wish to travel to Bath immediately, or he may wish to wait until a date has been fixed for the trial. That should be sufficient, and I thank you."

The three men agreed to dine together that evening and parted company. Darcy went immediately to the home in Grosvenor Square and sent in his card. Mr. Hurst was ensconced in the book room with the daily papers.

"Darcy. A bit early to offer you a glass of wine. Care for a cup of coffee?" He indicated a service with cups set up on a side table. "Help yourself. I can't get on without the stuff."

"Thank you." When both men were seated again, Darcy began. "Hurst, for once I have good news."

"Miss Bennet!"

"No. The good news is about Miss Bingley. The two attackers went back to make another attempt. I know it is unaccountable, but that is what they did. They were

apprehended by the local authorities with the help of her betrothed and two of my Sergeant Parker's men.

I am writing to Charles in the event that he would want to travel immediately to Bath to be with his sister.

He should at least make himself available to her during the trial.

I thought you might wish to do the same, as I understand Mrs. Hurst is already in Bath. ”

“And how did you learn of this second attempt?”

“We had reason to suspect she might be in some degree of danger, and we dispatched two of Sergeant Parker's most reliable men to watch over her.

Her betrothed is also keeping close watch over her.

They participated in the arrest and have informed us that these are unquestionably the same two men who abducted Miss Bennet. ”

“Why did you suspect Caroline was still in danger?”

Darcy compressed his lips into a thin line.

“There have simply been too many abductions or attempted abductions of young ladies in recent weeks, and all of them are in some way connected to me.

First, we have Miss Bingley. It is commonly known that our two families are on terms of some intimacy.

Miss Bingley has visited at Pemberley with her brother and with you and Mrs. Hurst, and I have visited her brother at Netherfield.

Next, we have Miss Lydia Bennet, who was supposed to be seduced and abandoned in London.

She managed to thwart her tormentor until her father, uncle, and I could recover her; otherwise, her family would have been disgraced.

Most recently, we have Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Although our engagement was not yet announced in the papers, the marriage contract was drawn up, and the date had been fixed for Michaelmas.

“There were too many similarities between the attempted abduction of Miss Bingley and the successful abduction of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. My man also informs me that several young maidservants who worked at Rosings may also have been taken and forced into lives of degradation here in questionable areas of London. Miss Bingley simply had the misfortune to be the only single young lady in a family with whom I am on terms of some intimacy. We could not take the chance that someone might try again.”

“Who is doing it? I must say, Darcy, this hits a little too close to home for my taste.”

“We believe we know the identity of the guilty person.” Darcy swallowed, recalling that the guilty person was his aunt.

“We need to accomplish several things before they can be brought to book. First and foremost, Elizabeth Bennet must be found and rescued before any harm comes to her. We appear to have succeeded in tying the two abductions together. We have Miss Bingley’s testimony as well as that of an eyewitness in Hertfordshire.

The murder of the footman will also be a compelling piece of evidence.

I remain hopeful that this matter will be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. ”

“I shall write to Louisa’s uncle today, but I can tell you right now he will not want me to travel there.

He’s always maintained that his daughter could have done much better.

” He refilled his cup and turned to Darcy.

“How may I be of service to you in all this? It’s the most damnable thing I’ve ever heard of. ”

Darcy was about to let the subject drop with his thanks when something caused him to stop. “I know you enjoy a good game of whist or piquet, Hurst. Do you ever frequent gaming establishments here in London?”

“Not often. A man can lose his fortune in less than an hour in one of those places. But I do enjoy an evening of what you might term deep play from time to time. The secret is to know one’s limit and to abide by it.”

“Do you know of a new private club . . .”

“Madame Charpentier’s in Audley Street? Right around the corner from your house, Darcy. Been there once.”

“And what was your impression?”

“I did not care for it.” Hurst lit a cigarillo, something Darcy had never seen him do before.

“Oh, the play seems honest enough of its kind. The wine and spirits are first rate, and the girls are pretty. But it does not take one long to discover that the upstairs are a scene of unspeakable vices. Opium and other drugs of course. Women, men, whatever’s wanted, they will procure it for you for a price.

London teems with innocents who can be bought and sold or simply snatched away, and they are said to be available upon request.” He smoked for a moment before continuing.

“I am a simple man. I enjoy good food and wine, I like to hunt and shoot, I enjoy playing cards. As for women, Louisa is a cozy enough armful, and I see no need for looking elsewhere. I suppose I must be fundamentally decent, because that sort of vice, true wickedness that harms the innocent, turns my stomach. It makes me angry. I had resolved never to return to that place.”

Darcy leaned forward in his chair, hands folded loosely on his knees. “What if I told you that we believe Elizabeth Bennet is in that house?”

Hurst’s eyes widened. He tossed the stub of his cigarillo into the fire before speaking. “Well, then we must get her out, and quickly. If Miss Bennet is in that house, more than her virtue is at stake. Her life is in danger. I am at your service, sir.”

Darcy smothered a curse. “So, you would consider returning there.”

“To assist in the rescue? By all means.”

“I am in your debt, Hurst. Would you do me the honor of dining with me this evening? It will be an informal dinner at about six o’clock. Miss Bennet’s uncle will be present, as will one of my men of business. We will use the time to discuss a strategic approach.” He stood and held out his hand.

Hurst stood and shook it. "I will be there, sir. But I shall be in my evening clothes in case we decide I should go in there tonight. And if Eliza Bennet is in that house, we should decide exactly that. You must believe me."

The two men parted, and Darcy returned home.

He found a note on his desk from Mr. Gardiner indicating that he had written to Bingley and promising to return for dinner.

Darcy ordered a light luncheon to be brought, and as he ate, he stared into the fire, considering.

Matters were proceeding quickly, and although this brought a great measure of relief, it also opened up a new and exceedingly serious problem.

His aunt might or might not be brought down with the capture of the two murderers in Bath.

In his inmost thoughts, he hoped she would be.

The scandal could be outlived. It would be worth it.

In the event her age or sex or standing in the world prevented the law from operating, the family would need to put a stop to her.

Her victims must be provided for, and her ability to cause any more harm must be stripped from her.

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It was a little after nine by the ormolu clock when Elizabeth awoke that same morning.

Ruth arrived with coffee and hot water for washing, and Elizabeth was soon attired in one of her simpler day gowns, hair done, and cosmetics applied.

“I would like to have breakfast in my room, if possible, Ruth,” said Elizabeth, and the young maid left to bring back a tray.

As Elizabeth ate, and Ruth busied herself about the room, Elizabeth decided it was time to bring up Hunsford.

“I remember you, Ruth. You were the parlor maid at the parsonage in Hunsford. I remember seeing you while I was visiting this past spring.”

“Yes, Miss Bennet. So I was. ”

“What has brought you to London to this establishment?”

“Lady Catherine decided I should come here to look after my mother, who was also being sent here.”

“Your mother was sent here from Hunsford?”

“Yes,” said a third voice from the doorway. Ruth’s mother, Elizabeth’s captor, entered the room, closed the door, and took the seat by the fireplace. Elizabeth turned to face her.

“I shall finish what you have so unwisely started, Ruth,” said the woman. Ruth hung her head. “It may be that our story will serve as an example to Elizabeth of why it will be to her advantage to stay in this house.”

“Pray, go on, Mrs. Oliver,” said Elizabeth. “Ruth, find a place to sit.” Ruth sat on the hearth rug near her mother’s feet.

“First, I’ll have that knife you took from your dinner tray yesterday. That was very unwise, Miss Bennet. Very unwise indeed. You have no idea of the danger you may yet face. Believe me, you want to stay in this house. It is in your best interest.”

Elizabeth handed over the knife without a word of apology.

“Thank you.” The woman closed her eyes for a long moment before she began her story.

“My father, the Reverend Doctor Charles Oliver, was the rector of Hunsford Parish, a preferment he owed to the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh. I was the younger of two sisters, and our mother died in my infancy. My father served Hunsford for many years, and there are still people who remember him fondly for his devotion to God, and his dedication to the poor and needy. Sir Lewis was considerably older than his wife, and he died when their only child, Anne, was about four years old.”

Mrs. Oliver glanced at the clock. “I must try to make a long story short.

Let us say that Lady Catherine and my father disagreed substantially concerning the treatment of the poor of the parish.

His wish was always to lend them a helping hand.

Hers was always to browbeat and punish them.

My father said she liked to scold people back into peace and plenty.

My elder sister married, and when I was about fifteen years of age, the disagreements between my father and Lady Catherine became so pronounced that it was clear something needed to be done.

“Rather than work out the differences, Lady Catherine accused my father of misappropriation of parish moneys intended for the relief of the poor. She suborned both churchwardens and several church members, and she took her story to the bishop’s court.

Despite the number of people willing to swear to my father’s inviolate honor and devotion, she won her case.

After a trial, my father found he was no longer the rector at Hunsford, nor could he function as a priest anywhere in England .

“It broke him,” she said simply. “Lady Catherine ‘generously’ gave him a cottage on the outskirts of the village at what she called a greatly reduced rent.

There we lived as he watched a new man, a far more complaisant man, take over his work.

I cared for my father for nearly two years, but it became obvious that our small income needed to be increased.

I hired a woman to come in and look after him, and I took a post in London as a governess, sending the bulk of my earnings home for his maintenance.

“The usual difficulties with an adolescent son in the family occurred. His interest was unseemly, I resisted, he complained to his mother anyway, and I found myself turned

off without a reference. It is so common as to be laughable, except to the unfortunate young women who fall victim.

“I took a cheap room, searched for work sewing or cleaning, could find none, and succumbed to the blandishments of my landlady to take up a far worse profession. Within a few months, I was with child. I also fell ill with a weakness in my lungs. I gave up and returned home to my father, who received me as though I had been the prodigal son. We lived on my small savings, and when I had recovered from Ruth’s birth, I found work in the village as a daily servant for some of the more well-to-do families.

Everyone sympathized with our plight, and no one criticized me or gossiped about me.

Even Lady Catherine seemed to take an interest and often exhorted me to work harder in order to improve our situation.

So, we continued until my father’s death two years ago.

Ruth was employed at the parsonage, and when the incumbent died and Mr. Collins took over, she stayed on, having achieved the position of parlor maid.

“We continued to live in the cottage at the edge of the village until three months ago, when under pretext of our having fallen behind with our rent, Lady Catherine sent us to this establishment to work, I as maid-of-all-work, Ruth as lady’s maid.

Lady Catherine gave me to understand that she is a silent partner in this enterprise and that she expects an abundant return on her investment. ”

“And who is the other partner?” Elizabeth managed when she was finally able to speak.

“You will meet the other partner soon enough,” said Mrs. Oliver glancing at the clock, which showed ten minutes until eleven.

“I might as well tell you. The other partner goes by the name of Madame Charpentier. She is, in reality, a Mrs. Younge, the same woman who was my landlady seventeen years ago.” Elizabeth’s eyes had widened. “You recognize the name, Miss Bennet?”

“It . . . it sounds familiar to me.”

Elizabeth was accompanied to the ground floor by Ruth and admitted to a pleasant parlor there.

The first thing she noticed was that the draperies were open, admitting bright sunlight.

An attractive middle-aged woman with dark hair was seated in a small wing chair on the other side of the window.

Standing behind the chair was George Wickham.

Elizabeth heard his voice as if from a great distance. “Good morning, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth clenched her fists at her sides, willing herself to present a calm aspect. She said nothing and stood her ground.

“Don’t just stand there like a fool, Miss Bennet. Approach.” The woman’s voice was low and slightly rough.

Elizabeth approached, keeping her eyes on the woman’s face, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and ignoring Wickham. The woman spoke again. “Now, turn around. No, turn around slowly.”

Elizabeth complied, keeping her eyes lowered.

“Good. Take down your hair. Do it now, Miss Bennet, or I will have Mr. Wickham do it for you.”

Once again, Elizabeth complied, eyes lowered. She allowed her hair to fall of its own weight without touching it or shaking her head.

“The modiste is wrong about your hair. It should be cut into classical, boyish curls, very short. We will summon the hairdresser tomorrow. I am Madame Charpentier. I believe Mr. Wickham is already known to you. Now, Miss Bennet, what are we to do with you? You certainly have incurred the wrath of our patroness, Lady Catherine. She would have you cast out into the streets. Fortunately for you, I do not see eye to eye with her on this subject. I believe you will fetch us a very tidy profit. And of course, that will be to your advantage as well. Gentlemen will pay, and pay handsomely, for your companionship. In return, you will do whatever they ask. And you will do it with a smile and with every appearance of enjoyment. Who knows? You may even come to enjoy it.” She turned to Wickham.

“I can see what you meant about her, George. She has a certain enticing, almost exotic quality. I think we know several gentlemen who will be interested in her, provided she is still virginal. Am I correct in assuming that you are still untouched, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth said nothing.

Madame Charpentier dealt her a stinging slap on the cheek. “You will answer any question that is put to you.”

“I am not married. I am as yet a maid.”

“The treasured betrothed of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.” Wickham’s tone was insinuating, the weak smile on his face insufferable. “Of course, she’s slightly damaged by her afternoon carriage ride the other day.”

“You will be silent, George. Or you will leave.”

Elizabeth said nothing, merely allowing her nostrils to dilate and contract slightly in a way that could only betoken distaste.

“And you, my fine young lady, will mind your manners. If you cannot control your expressions, you will never turn a profit. I am sorry you find Mr. Wickham distasteful.” Another slap on the cheek.

“Understand this and understand it well, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Your maidenhead is, as of now, on offer to the highest bidder.”

Elizabeth had been expecting something of this nature, and she continued to school her reactions and expressions rigorously.

“I beg your pardon. I did not hear you. Did you say ‘Yes, ma’am’ as you should have?”

Elizabeth said nothing and was dealt another slap. “Yes, ma’am.”

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“There is something else you should understand, Miss Bennet, and it may astonish you. These motherly little slaps I am dealing out to you are nothing. You are now my property to dispose of as I wish. You are to obey me and to obey my clients regardless of the request, and you are to do so with a smile and, as I have said, every appearance of enjoyment. If you do so, I will try to eliminate the less genteel men who partake of our services, the ones who like to include a bit of violence as part of their pleasure. But make no mistake. Just imagine your lovely, fair skin being torn apart by an implement usually reserved for carriage horses. I’m sure you remember sharing your quarters with Miss Arabella Grant.

Such has been her fate. She is far, far too disfigured now to be of interest to any gentleman.

We had hoped that she could earn a living working around Covent Garden.

But she has developed a fever.” The woman shook her head sadly.

“Girls who attract that sort of attention often end up in the Thames. That could be your fate as well, and nothing would please Lady Catherine more.”

Elizabeth looked up in time to see Wickham lick his lips. A wave of nausea threatened to overcome her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, let us talk of business. There will be a lucrative fee for that precious virginity we were discussing earlier. That will be divided between us. We will retain seventy percent for our efforts in facilitating the introduction, while you will receive thirty percent. Hopefully you will cement a long-term friendship with the gentleman,

whoever he may be, for which he will pay handsomely. The same arrangement will be in effect—seventy for us, thirty for you. Any gifts of jewels, furs, or other similar articles are yours to keep, and you are well advised to do so. You will be paying us for room, board, maid service, and so on, and those fees will be deducted from your percentage.” She consulted a sheet of paper.

“At present you owe us a total of eight hundred pounds. That includes your transportation to London, your room and board, your maid service, and the gowns that were procured for you yesterday. You will not begin to see your percentage until that debt has been paid in full.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The only thing left to cover is what you may expect tonight. You are to be completely ready at seven o’clock.

Wear the red gown this evening. Have your maid do something about those pale cheeks.

You look like a ghost.” She reached over to the table next to her and picked up a box.

“These are pearls--earrings and necklace. You are to wear them this evening. Do not attempt to run away and try to sell or pawn them. They are glass. Very good glass, but glass, nevertheless. Here, take them. Your trumpery topaz cross is being held as surety.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You will be assigned to one of the other girls who will look after you. You are not to speak unless spoken to. You are not to become involved in any conversations with any of the gentlemen in the club with the exception of common civilities such as

‘Good evening, sir.’ Do not go upstairs. Do not allow anyone to touch you. At least four gentlemen will be watching you with an eye to purchasing your services. If one of them is the successful bidder tonight, you will be prepared. Otherwise, you will return to your room when you are told to do so. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Elizabeth’s heart was beating so loudly in her chest that she was certain it was audible. She prayed for the interview to be over.

“You may go. Remember each and every thing I have told you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Elizabeth turned.

“Miss Bennet! Do you not curtsy when you leave a room?”

Elizabeth turned again, curtsied, said “Yes, ma’am,” turned again, and walked out. She could feel Wickham’s eyes on her, and it made her feel unclean.

The little ormolu clock in her room said one when Elizabeth reached the relative sanctuary of her room.

She was in a state of near-exhaustion and numbing fear.

Ruth, perhaps anticipating this, had turned down the covers of her bed and laid out a comfortable nightgown.

Wordlessly, she helped Elizabeth undress and change, then led her to the dressing-table where she had laid out a tray with hot consommé, a savory turnover, and—a thing that tore at Elizabeth’s heart—a glass of milk.

“Eat a little, Miss Bennet, and then sleep. I will make sure you are awake in plenty of time.”

Elizabeth complied, and when she had finished the last of her milk, Ruth moved the tray aside, took the pins from Elizabeth's hair, and gently brushed it out. "Now rest," she said, taking the tray and closing the door behind her.

Elizabeth got into bed, ignoring the dull ache in her temples.

Coming as it had on the heels of Mrs. Oliver's horrifying story, and her startling announcement about the ownership of this place, the interview with Madame Charpentier had been a genuine ordeal.

She longed for her sisters, her parents.

She longed for Darcy's strong arms. She reminded herself that she was probably safe for this evening as her fee was being negotiated.

She considered trying to find a way to put a period to her existence but decided against it for the time being.

Where there is life, there is hope, she reminded herself, and that option could always be considered later.

She committed her family, herself, and her beloved Fitzwilliam to the protection of the Almighty, and with that prayer she fell asleep.

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The news from London was heartening indeed, and she poured herself a celebratory glass of port.

By tomorrow, Elizabeth Bennet's name would be on everyone's lips as the mistress of one of the most notorious libertines in England.

She shuddered delicately at the thought of the viscount, with whom she was slightly acquainted.

He was known to change his mistresses as quickly as they lost their initial bloom.

She wondered how soon the upstart would find herself in a shabby room in Drury Lane.

She scribbled a note and rang for the footman.

It was time to activate Collins again, always easier after a good dinner.

She would urge him to get an early start for Longbourn on the morrow.

Morning prayers were at seven, and if he left immediately afterward in one of her carriages, he could be there by mid-afternoon.

It would be most gratifying indeed to have him deliver to the Bennets the news of their downfall and the loss of their daughter—and then to spread the news through half of Hertfordshire.

As she had said before, who indeed would connect themselves to such a family.

The difficulty in Bath would have to be watched carefully and reckoned with.

Since there were, as far as she knew, no eyewitnesses to the Bennet abduction, it would be impossible to tie the two crimes together.

It was tempting just to allow them to be caught and let them hang for the murder.

She laid the thought aside as requiring more consideration.

For now, she would celebrate. By next week she would be welcoming her poor nephew to the autumnal consolations and beauty of Rosings Park.

Fitzwilliam Darcy found himself pacing his library like a tiger.

The temptation to walk down the street and around the corner of Audley Street was almost overwhelming.

Of course, to do so would be foolhardy in view of the fact that there were no plans in place as yet.

His job this afternoon consisted of patient waiting, something he had never had a talent for.

His mind conjured up visions of Elizabeth cold or hungry or frightened—or worse, in the power of someone incredibly vicious.

He regarded himself as a rational man, but these imaginings were beyond the scope of mere reason.

He threw himself back into his chair and took from his pocket the letter Elizabeth had given him on their last morning together, the only letter he had ever received from her.

It was a simple note, containing a shy declaration of her love for him, her bright hopes for the future, her happiness that he could love her.

He had memorized it, but the feel of it in his hands was comforting to him.

He looked at the fire and conjured up visions of her face.

He told himself that they might be together again very soon.

The thought comforted him, and he fell into an exhausted slumber.

He was awakened at five o'clock by Sergeant Parker, and Mr. Gardiner arrived a few minutes later.

As the three men settled in, he made his announcement.

“Bingley’s brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst, has entrance to the club in Audley Street.

He enjoys cards, and he told me today that he indulges occasionally in an evening of deep play, subject to the limits of his purse.

Parker, he shares your impression and opinion of the other activities available at the establishment, but he has placed himself entirely at our service.

He will be dining with us at six, and he is ready to go into the club this evening, should we arrive at that decision. ”

“Excellent,” said Mr. Gardiner. “I was beginning to wonder how we would ever get in there without involving the authorities and risking Elizabeth’s good name.”

“I am assuming that Miss Bennet and Mr. Hurst are known to each other,” said Parker .

“They are well known to each other, having been guests in the same household and having attended a number of balls, dinners, assemblies, and the like.”

“Wickham turned up at the club at mid-morning today and departed for a rooming-house at noon. He has now left the rooming-house and returned to the club.” Parker scowled. “It is good we may be able to move on this tonight.”

At that moment, they were joined by Mr. Hurst himself, in evening dress as promised. Darcy thought he looked more alert than usual—his eyes were not puffy, and he was certainly showing no signs of his usual indolence. After introductions, the four men went to dinner—and to get down to business.

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Elizabeth was awakened at five by Ruth, who had arrived with a tray. “This is a light, nourishing supper, Miss Bennet. You should do your best to finish it. You may be expected to consume a glass of wine, and you will be sorry if you have not eaten something.”

Elizabeth did her best with her supper while trying to keep her hands from shaking. She could not recall ever having been so terrified in her life. It was like being awakened on the morning of one’s execution. Her stomach churned, and she felt dizzy and lightheaded.

After her supper, she abandoned her soft nightgown in favor of a silk chemise, silk

stockings, and fine French kid slippers.

Ruth laced her into the corset and seated her at the dressing-table.

Many candles were lit, and Ruth dressed her hair in the simple topknot and curls she had devised the day before.

The rouge-pots came out, and her lips and cheeks were stained a much deeper color than they had been the day before.

Ruth chose a sophisticated scent and applied it carefully, and to finish, she dusted Elizabeth's bosom and neck very lightly with pearl powder.

"It may be warm," she said by way of explanation.

Ruth drew a deep breath and squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "It's time to put on your gown."

Elizabeth's heart sank when Ruth brought out the ruby silk. "I was dreading that one," she said quietly.

"I knew that, but it was ordered that you wear it." Ruth helped Elizabeth to fasten the pearls around her neck.

She next drew the gown carefully over Elizabeth's head without disturbing her coiffure and settled it on her form before beginning to fasten it.

Elizabeth noted, but did not mention, that the gown fastened quite easily.

She refrained from attempting to adjust it over her bosom and stood quietly as Ruth helped her put on the long gloves.

They had begun to hear murmuring, feminine voices in the hall, and light footfalls.

Ruth handed her a lace fan and a handkerchief.

“It is time. I will walk down with you. I want to say—I want to say, God bless you, and I will be here when you return to tend to you.” She pulled Elizabeth’s arm through her own, and the two young women took their place in the group of young women walking downstairs.

Elizabeth was surprised to find only ten or twelve girls waiting near the back door.

Most were lovely, and all were beautifully gowned.

Many girls had beautiful jewels—necklaces, bracelets, pendants, earrings, and hair ornaments—all were in evidence.

Ruth squeezed Elizabeth’s hand and melted away, leaving Elizabeth feeling numb and lightheaded with fear.

She pulled herself together with a desperate effort.

The girls divided into two lines against the walls of the back hall, and Madame Charpentier, also beautifully gowned, swept between them.

She cast a sharp eye on each girl, nodded her approval, and led the way to the rear door.

Two burly footmen awaited them, and the back garden was illuminated by lanterns which made it possible to see the path.

Each girl linked arms with the one next to her, and they swept through the garden, up

the back steps of the neighboring house, and into the small vestibule at the back.

Madame Charpentier detained Elizabeth and the girl she had walked over with.

“Sophie,” she began. “This is Elizabeth. You are to keep an eye on her, take her around the gaming tables, and ensure that she behaves properly. She is not to engage in private conversation with any of the gentlemen. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Madame,” replied Sophie. She beckoned to Elizabeth, and the two walked down the hallway and entered the main salon much as two debutantes might have entered a ballroom.

Elizabeth was conscious of tasteful candlelight, odors of wine, tobacco, and sweat, the gleam of gold coins on polished wood, and the sound of masculine voices which stilled momentarily when she entered but which soon regained their original intensity.

Sophie gestured to the table at their right.

“The gentlemen there are playing Hazard. It is a game of dice. While here on my left, they are playing Macau. Both games are played for very high stakes. It is important not to speak to any of the gentlemen who are playing here unless they greet you first.” They moved slowly through the room, Sophie occasionally exchanging a greeting with someone, and when they reached the double doors at the back, a footman offered them flutes of champagne.

Sophie gestured for Elizabeth to take one.

“Nurse it,” she said quietly. Do not drink too much. ”

The second room was much more dimly lit, and several of the young women were seated either next to gentlemen or in some cases on their laps.

Some gentlemen seemed to have two girls fawning over them while in other cases, two gentlemen vied for the attentions of the same girl.

The conversation was loud and raucous, punctuated by the frequent laughter of the girls.

Elizabeth held her champagne and willed herself to look neither to the right nor to the left, and Sophie led the way through the room.

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They entered the back room, where smaller tables entertained gentlemen playing games more familiar to Elizabeth including whist and piquet. She received more than one admiring glance, and more than one murmured greeting, but she did not recognize anyone she saw.

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“There she is,” said Wickham in his most ingratiating tones.

“Is she not lovely? Truly, my lord, a diamond of the first water.” His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

“And I’ll vouch that she’s as pure as the driven snow.

The chosen betrothed of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy until the unfortunate news about her sister became known.

” Viscount ___ sat with his eye glued to the strategic gap in the velvet draperies.

Wickham sat beside and a little behind him in the hidden alcove, speaking quietly but persuasively .

Wickham felt he should be earning hazardous duty pay.

The viscount was truly odious. Well past middle age, he attempted to display his form to best advantage by means of a corset which creaked ominously.

His hair was dyed black and pomaded, his wrinkles were concealed by a careful maquillage, and his thin legs were carefully padded.

The combined efforts of his barber, his tailor, and his valet had fallen flat before the multiple failures of his dentist. His breath was worse than that of a street dog, and in combination with the man's reek of sour sweat, it was giving Wickham a headache.

The only attractive part about him was his fortune, and he could not give that away.

There was no mama in England who would see her precious daughter allied with such a monster.

It was quietly whispered that he suffered from the French disease.

"Refresh my memory again on the figure," said the Viscount without removing his eye from the curtain.

Wickham murmured a truly staggering sum.

"Don't yet know if she's worth it," replied the old man. "But I'll give it my careful consideration. That little blonde she's with is quite an armful."

"Yes, she is lovely. But with her you would not enjoy the experience of being her first lover, of introducing her to all the pleasures Cupid has in store for her—and for you. With the brunette, all that would be yours. And you must admit, she is incomparable."

"Her, ah, pristine condition is a strong inducement. I see they are gone back into the front room. I'd best change seats with you."

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Sophie had stopped to chat with a gentleman she obviously knew well, and Elizabeth carefully sauntered back into the front room, surveying it from the door before she entered with an eye to possible escape routes.

To her astonishment, she spied Mr. Hurst playing Macau.

He already had a small stack of gold in front of him.

As she stood wondering what to do, he turned around and saw her.

He stood immediately as if encountering her in a drawing room.

“Miss Eliza!” Hurst’s voice was loud enough to carry.

“Well met!” As she approached him, his eyes, often so puffy and sleepy, looked into hers intently.

As she watched, they seemed to shift quickly towards the front door before resting on her again.

Elizabeth approached him and curtsied before offering her hand, and he squeezed it tightly as he shook it.

His eyes caught and held hers again. “What brings you here, Miss Eliza?” The room fell silent.

It was a wager more desperate than any ever made in that room, and Elizabeth staked her life on it.

“How do you do, Mr. Hurst? I was abducted from my father’s estate this past Sunday, and I am being held here against my will,” she replied in a light, clear voice which

also carried to the edges of the room.

“Are you indeed?” He picked up and pocketed his winnings and offered her his arm. “Then permit me the honor of restoring you to your family. Everyone in the county, and half of London, is searching for you following your abduction from your father’s lands.”

At this juncture, gaming had come to a standstill in the three salons on the ground floor of the house. Gentlemen crowded into the front room to get a better look at the fracas, and the murmur of their voices grew louder.

Elizabeth quickly removed the necklace and earrings and dropped them on the table with disdain. Then she took Mr. Hurst’s arm so that he might escort her from the room.

When they were halfway to the door, Hurst turned to face the crowd of gentlemen.

“I would like to leave a thought or two with you gentlemen,” he began.

His voice was again perfectly pitched to carry.

“Before I escort this lady to her anxious family, you should all know that she is a gentleman’s daughter of impeccable lineage, gently reared on her father’s country estate.

She was abducted by agents of this establishment while on a Sunday walk after church services.

After church services, no less. And I tell you this: She is not the first, nor will she be the last. Ask yourselves, gentlemen, how becoming it will be to your good names to be associated with persons soon to be known as criminals of the lowest sort?

And while you are pondering that, ask yourselves if your family—your sister, your daughter, your wife—could be next.

Is your home safe so long as these criminals may come and go as they please? Is your home truly your castle?”

The wealthy patrons began to leave, by twos and threes at first, but the trickle soon became a flood.

Hurst kept a close hold on Elizabeth’s arm, placing them in the middle of the crowd and managing to get them out without encountering the doorman.

They walked down the steps, making their way through the throng, and Mr. Hurst got them on to the brick walkway.

“Miss Eliza, there is no need to tremble so.” Mr. Hurst spoke calmly and quietly as they made their way carefully through the milling crowd of gentlemen.

“You are safe. I am taking you to Mr. Darcy, and there are men all around you ready to come to your defense. They are capable of easily fighting off anyone who would recapture you. Hold your head high and keep walking as if I were escorting you home from Grosvenor Street. Do not look back.”

Elizabeth murmured her thanks, and when they had at last reached the corner they were joined by another man. Elizabeth noted that he was tall, plainly dressed, and walked with a pronounced limp.

“Permit me to present Sergeant Parker. He is one of Darcy’s men of business, and he has been leading the efforts to find you.”

Elizabeth nodded, took the sergeant’s offered arm and continued walking between the

two men.

She spoke without slowing their pace. “Sergeant Parker, a young woman lies gravely ill and injured in the cellar beneath the club. It is filthy, and her wounds have given her a fever. She must be attended to immediately. There is no time to lose; in fact, it may already be too late.”

Parker stopped and let go of her arm. “Thank you for informing me. I shall attend to her immediately. Mr. Hurst and my men will see you to Mr. Darcy’s house.”

She noticed that several other men had fallen in before and behind them. The walk seemed endless. She had never seen Darcy’s town house before and was unsure of how far away it was.

Then, suddenly, they were stopped in front of an imposing home with lights blazing from every window. The door opened, a tall figure rushed down the front steps, and she was in his arms. He swept her up and carried her inside, and someone shut the door, and she was safe.

“I never gave up hope. I was ready to go to the ends of the earth for you,” he murmured between their kisses.

Elizabeth said nothing, but she tangled her fingers in his hair.

The safety of his arms made her feel faint, as though they were the only reality.

She breathed in his scent of clean linen, and spice, realizing that it had become familiar and dear to her.

She felt she could rest for the first time in days.

“I knew you were searching for me. I could feel it somehow. I tried so hard to discover a way to escape.” And after another kiss, “Fitzwilliam, they did not hurt me. They did not dishonor me.”

“I would have killed them if they had.” Finally, he tore himself away from her and said, “Your Uncle Gardiner is here.”

Elizabeth stood on tiptoe and whispered, “Your coat. May I have it?” When he looked at her in some confusion, she added, “This gown. It . . . was made to shame me.”

He removed his coat immediately and helped her into it, buttoning it tenderly and rolling up the sleeves until she could find her hands.

“There you are, my dearest. I will get you something better as soon as I can.” The coat carried his warmth and his scent, and Elizabeth felt shielded from the world.

They turned together and walked into the book room, where Elizabeth found herself in the embrace of her Uncle Gardiner.

“My dear little Lizzy, I am so glad to have seen this day.” Uncle Gardiner’s voice shook with emotion.

“Your father and mother, your sisters, all of us. Thank God you are returned to us.” Elizabeth wept in his arms, unable to speak.

When she had composed herself, she turned to Mr. Hurst, embracing him and kissing his cheek. “I know not what to say, sir, or how to thank you,” she began. “I feel as though you have rescued me from death and hell.”

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“Think nothing of it, Miss Bennet.” Hurst patted her hand awkwardly.

“Any gentleman would have done the same thing. I shall continue to be of whatever service I can be. But I must say, it gave me the greatest pleasure to escort you out of there right under their very noses. They are despicable, and I am glad my little speech reached the better natures of the patrons.” Hurst seemed to have forgotten his usual sloth and indolence.

He shook her hand again before turning to Darcy.

“If you’ve no more need of me tonight, Darcy, I would like to get home to my bed.

I will wait on you tomorrow at—let us say noon? ”

“Allow me to send you home in my carriage, with one of Parker’s men.

We have no way of knowing how this will end.

You must be cautious.” Darcy stepped briefly into the front hall and ordered a carriage.

Parker came in by the front door and disappeared down the hall for a few moments.

When Darcy returned, he turned to Hurst. “I have no way to thank you sufficiently, Hurst. You have restored Elizabeth to us. I thank Heaven I mentioned it to you this morning.” The two men shook hands .

Parker returned. "Mr. Hurst is on his way home, and a guard will be in place at his house tonight. I have also dispatched a rider to Longbourn to let them know the good news. I suspect they may receive a visit from Mr. Collins tomorrow, and I had some suggestions for Mr. Bennet as to what to do. I am certain you will want to write at more length later, sir. Oh. And I ordered tea and sandwiches."

Elizabeth was soon ensconced on a sofa by the fire in the book room, comforted by Darcy's solid form just beside her. Someone gave her a cup of tea, and someone else loaded a plate with sandwiches and fruit. She ate hungrily and finally managed to ask, "What time is it?"

"A little before ten, dearest. Are you tired?"

"No. Not at all. I slept for several hours this afternoon. For these past two days, as I realized my situation, I believe sleep became a means of escape. I do not like to interrupt your conversation, Mr. Darcy, but there are one or two things of great importance. I would like to relate them while they are still fresh in my memory."

"This is the ideal opportunity," he replied. "Sergeant Parker enjoys my complete confidence as well as that of your uncle and father. You may speak freely." He poured her another cup of tea and sat beside her again.

"First there is the question of the Olivers, Mrs. Oliver and her daughter, Ruth. They are from Hunsford, and Ruth was the parlor maid in the parsonage while we were all there last spring." The three men listened intently as she related her story of the Olivers, beginning with the first encounter in what she called her "dungeon." She continued with Mrs. Oliver's history and finished with Ruth's promise to await her return that same evening.

"I am somewhat concerned for several reasons. I wonder if they are in that establishment of their own free will. However, Mrs. Oliver seems to have fallen in

with the will of her captors. Ruth was kind to me.”

Darcy took her hand and held it without saying anything.

“I know that eventually you will want the entire story of the abduction.

But for now, let me relate just one or two points.

She related the details of her capture and travel to London, her time in the cellar, and her interactions with Mrs. Younge.

“I learned today that the person in the chaise with me was George Wickham. He took part in my interview with Mrs. Young, and he may well have been in the club this evening.”

“Everything you have said bears out the observations of others, Miss Bennet,” replied Parker. “Right down to the boots, which left plenty of prints by the London road.”

“If Lady Catherine is in the habit of getting rid of people she does not like, then she is somehow making use of Mrs. Younge and of Wickham.” Elizabeth began to shiver, and Darcy put an arm around her shoulder. “My escape was fortunate indeed.”

Parker stood. “Miss Bennet, your observations are of invaluable assistance, and I hope we may speak further after you have rested. May I put just one more question to you and then I will importune you no more this evening.”

“Of course.”

“Can you recall anything of your two abductors, the two men who actually took you away?”

“Let me think. One was tall and somewhat stout. The other was shorter and had a more average physique.”

“What of their hands? Was there anything unusual about their hands?”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Yes. The taller man, the one who spoke and who placed his hand over my mouth was missing a part of his index finger. Let me think. He was missing a part of the index finger on his left hand.”

“We have them,” murmured Parker. “Thank you, Miss Bennet. And please be assured that a physician and a decent woman are attending to Miss Grant as we speak. We were just in time.” Turning to Darcy, he continued.

“I must go out to check on the guards and to see what is occurring in Audley Street. I shall return in a half-hour or so. At that time, you might wish to take Miss Bennet to her uncle’s home, where I presume she will be staying tonight. ”

He turned and left. Darcy’s arm tightened around Elizabeth as he sat looking at Mr. Gardiner. “Propriety demands that Elizabeth come to you and Mrs. Gardiner,” he said. “Yet I cannot give her up. I cannot allow her to leave, yet she cannot stay. I would marry her tomorrow if I could.”

“Mr. Darcy,” replied Gardiner in a voice filled with compassion.

“Any man would feel exactly as you do. I would feel the same way about my own wife and daughters.” He stopped and thought for a moment.

“I have a proposal. Come and stay with us in Gracechurch Street, at least for tonight. The brigands will not look for you there, as I doubt they know anything about my home or its location.” He smiled at Elizabeth, and she returned the smile.

“We have plenty of spare rooms, and with four children running about the house, you will be perfectly well chaperoned. As for marrying my niece tomorrow, the idea has merit, Mr. Darcy. What about the next day?” Elizabeth smiled up at Darcy, who said, “I would not wish to inconvenience Mrs. Gardiner too much by being an unexpected guest.”

“You need not worry. She will be so happy to see our Lizzy restored to us that she will not mind at all.”

“On the subject of marrying your niece day after tomorrow, I am for it. Let us discuss it tomorrow.” He smiled down at Elizabeth. “It would also make me happy if I could be just plain ‘Darcy.’ We do not need to be so formal. I hope by now we are good friends.”

“Agreed. If you will do the same for me.” Mr. Gardiner extended his hand, and the two men shook hands warmly.

Sergeant Parker returned, and Darcy stepped out to order his carriage and to have a bag packed for himself and one for Elizabeth.

They would have to concern themselves with Elizabeth’s clothing on the morrow.

As they prepared to leave, the housekeeper, Mrs. Peterson, appeared with a small bag which she handed to Elizabeth.

“A fresh gown for tomorrow and a few things of Miss Georgiana’s you might need. ” Elizabeth pressed her hand.

When all was ready, two footmen led the small procession out to the waiting carriage. Darcy assisted Elizabeth to enter and stood back to allow Mr. Gardiner to go next.

In a few minutes, the carriage arrived at the house in Gracechurch Street, and Elizabeth was in the arms of her delighted aunt. She enjoyed a night of deep, peaceful slumber in the certainty that Darcy was nearby.

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She stifled a yawn as she sat down to a late breakfast in the small breakfast parlor.

At least the stupid man was on his way to Hertfordshire.

She had made sure of that, though sitting through any service he read was becoming a genuine ordeal.

He had the most obnoxious, obsequious voice, and it carried over into his readings of Morning Prayer and the scriptures.

And his sermons were a disgrace. She wondered if she might find a way to be rid of him.

No, no, that would be premature. His very stupidity made him one of her strongest allies.

The footmen had served the breakfast, and she looked around to see that the door was closed.

A decanter of brandy sat on a small side table.

She got up, sniffed it, found it good, and added a generous portion to her coffee.

Then she proceeded to enjoy her well-earned and substantial breakfast.

Mr. Bennet was drinking coffee in his study early the following morning when the messenger arrived with the news of Elizabeth's safe return.

Realizing that everyone had been awakened by the messenger's arrival, he gathered the girls and Hill in Mrs. Bennet's room.

They were sworn to secrecy, and he told them that Elizabeth was by now safe with her aunt and uncle.

Many happy tears were shed, but Mrs. Bennet had the most gratifying reaction of all.

After so many days of silence following her stroke, she said, very distinctly, "My dear Lizzy."

The hand-carried message from Sergeant Parker had not only conveyed the good news about Elizabeth, but it also provided some salient details regarding the involvement of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

She was responsible for Elizabeth's abduction and was also behind everything else that had happened, including Lydia's near abduction, the attack on Miss Bingley and the murder of her footman, as well as other crimes too numerous to mention.

Sergeant Parker urged that the Bennet daughters remain at home and not be permitted to go out without a male escort to watch over them until he could send hand-picked guards.

He included the gardens and grounds in that restriction.

He closed by reiterating that Elizabeth was safe and urging Mr. Bennet not to be taken in by any assertions to the contrary.

In light of Mr. Collins' appearance after Lydia had disappeared, Mr. Bennet was warned that a visit of condolence from Mr. Collins was probably imminent and could prove useful in their pursuit of Lady Catherine.

The sergeant strongly suggested that this visit take place in the presence of a witness, and that the witness not be a member of the family or a dependent or servant.

He cautioned—somewhat needlessly—against involving any of the Lucases.

Hill left and returned with a tray of coffee, announcing that, as everyone was up, an early breakfast was being prepared.

Mr. Bennet sat for a few moments lost in thought.

Bingley, who was singularly helpful, was certainly a good candidate.

But Bingley was a young man, always affable and pleasant.

Mr. Bennet felt he needed someone older, sharper.

He settled on Sir Henry Martin, whose estate was situated on the other side of Meryton.

Sir Henry was a baronet, and he and Mr. Bennet had been acquainted since their boyhoods.

He served as one of the two local magistrates, and his reputation and his familiarity with the law were above reproach.

Most importantly, he had been very forthcoming with assistance to the Bennets during the desperate search for Elizabeth.

Mr. Bennet wrote him a detailed note asking him to call at Longbourn that very day, and it was soon dispatched.

A glance at the clock told him that it was half past seven, and the aromas from the dining room signaled that their very early breakfast was ready.

He went to the dining room where he found Jane and Mary.

As he served himself, Jane regarded him with a tired smile.

“Kitty and Lydia are with Mama. Mama has signaled that she wishes to have her hair dressed and to sit in her chair for a time this morning.”

“Excellent. I shall go upstairs for the unveiling.”

“And she ate, Papa,” added Mary. “She distinctly said ‘scones,’ and Hill brought her tea and scones, and she ate one with butter and jam, and drank her tea. They are her favorites, though we never have them for breakfast.”

“That is good news indeed. I expect we shall soon find her as talkative as ever.” Mr. Bennet laid down his knife and fork.

“Jane, Mary, I have something very serious to discuss with you, and you must tell your sisters. For the time being, none of you is to go outside without a male escort. Not even to the garden, not even to cut flowers. I am sorry for the restriction, but it is for your own safety. I will have Hill ask Jem and Tim to be available to you whenever possible. You must be certain your sisters understand the importance of this.”

Jane looked troubled. “There is still danger, Papa?”

“There is still danger.” Mr. Bennet did not tell his daughters that the danger might be worse than ever. “I hope it will not be for too long.”

When he had finished his breakfast, he returned to his library and began a letter to Darcy.

He had just completed it when Sir Henry was announced and strode into the room.

“Very happy to hear your good news, Bennet,” said Sir Henry, clapping him on the shoulder as they shook hands.

“But what is all this about the gossiping clergyman? Help me to understand better so that I may be of service to you and your family.”

Mr. Bennet explained that in the case of Lydia, Collins had been a bit too premature with his condolences.

“He had ridden all the way from Hunsford to condole on Lydia’s downfall when, in actual fact, Lydia had already been restored to our family completely unharmed.

It was very odd; Collins knew about Lydia before the news of her disappearance could have possibly reached him in Kent.

If Collins does appear again to condole with us prematurely, we must persuade him to own up to the source of his information.

We might be able to confirm our suspicions about his patroness, Darcy’s own aunt. ”

Sir Henry smiled. “And you expect him to make a similar call of condolence for Elizabeth’s downfall this afternoon.”

“I do. As Mr. Darcy has pointed out, his aunt has deep pockets and many people in her employ. But she frequently fails to think things through. My own opinion is that she is unable to delay her own gratification when she believes her plans have

succeeded. It is a grievous failing in one who is bent on doing evil. ”

Hill interrupted them with a large tray on which were set bread, butter, cold beef, cheese, and a pitcher of homebrewed ale, which she knew to be Sir Henry’s favorite.

The two men busied themselves with this satisfying luncheon while Mr. Bennet brought up their failure to locate the owner of the cart.

Sir Henry chewed meditatively. “Mmm.” He took a swallow of ale before continuing. “I am looking forward to meeting your Mr. Collins.”

“You may live to regret those words, Martin.”

As they finished their luncheon, the deep rumble of carriage wheels was heard from the sweep, and both men’s eyes turned to the window.

“A large equipage for a parson,” observed Sir Henry.

Indeed, a barouche drawn by four matched bays and complete with liveried coachman and footmen had stopped in front of the house.

“It must belong to Lady Catherine. Ah, yes, look who is getting out.”

A footman let down the steps and stood at attention as the Reverend William Collins, armed with his black thorn walking stick and his large prayer book, descended regally to the gravel sweep.

One of the maids rushed into the library to remove the luncheon tray, and within moments, Hill knocked to announce Mr. Collins.

“Sir Henry Martin, may I present my cousin, the Reverend William Collins,” intoned

Mr. Bennet. After they had shaken hands and taken their seats, he went on. "What brings you to us in such a fine carriage, Mr. Collins?"

"I have been sent by my gracious patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself, to condole with you on the tragedy which has now befallen you." The parson looked around uncomfortably. "I had hoped to condole with Mrs. Bennet also."

"Mrs. Bennet is ill and does not leave her room at present. But Sir Henry and I are old friends. You may condole with us as much as you please." An awkward pause ensued. "Pray, what news do you have that has prompted you to come all this way to condole with us?"

"Well, that your second-eldest daughter Elizabeth has become . . ." Here he paused, lowered his eyes, blushed, and covered his mouth before continuing.

"That she has left her friends and her family, that she has forsaken her betrothed, one of the finest men in all England, in favor of the, ah, protection of Viscount ___, one of the most notorious rakehells in London."

Mr. Bennet lowered his eyes and covered his mouth with his handkerchief, unable to look up. "Yes," he murmured. "These are heavy misfortunes indeed."

"I am directed by Lady Catherine to convey her deepest sympathy. Your second daughter's immoral actions have ruined your family.

Of course, no respectable man will wish to marry your daughters.

If you will forgive me for saying so, I count myself indeed fortunate in my choice of wife last November.

And Lady Catherine believes that positions as governesses or teachers are unsuited to

those with such a tendency to moral turpitude within the family.

But after a suitable interval to allow the scandal to die down, Lady Catherine will make every effort to find posts as housemaids for your other daughters. ”

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“Lady Catherine is very kind.” Mr. Bennet continued to cover his mouth with his handkerchief.

“And now, let us pray,” replied Mr. Collins, brandishing his prayer book.

Sir Henry held up his hand. “Before we get to that, I am curious as to where Lady Catherine de Bourgh receives her information. She is always so well-informed.”

Collins, ever ready to accommodate those of higher rank, was ready with his reply. “Much of it comes from the Lucases here in Hertfordshire. They are the family of my dear wife, the former Miss Charlotte Lucas.”

“Yes, I do know the Lucases very well. But, unless they have military couriers and an unlimited number of fast horses, it is difficult to understand how the Lucases can always be ‘au fait’ with what is happening here or in London before their neighbors here know anything about it—and then send word into Kent. This seems to have been the case with Miss Lydia Bennet, and it is now the case with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” He held up an autocratic hand when he perceived that Collins was about to interrupt.

“Forgive me, sir, but you seem either unwilling or unable to relate plainly the source of your information.”

“I am told, sir, that it is common knowledge in London. That alone would be injurious to the credit of any young lady.”

“I cannot argue with you there,” returned Sir Henry.

“Indeed, it would be injurious were it common knowledge. However, I cannot imagine that you were willing to drive fifty miles to act upon common knowledge. You must have a better source than that. Come now, Mr. Collins, you have not answered my question. How exactly did you obtain this information? Who told you? Common knowledge is not an argument which would be acceptable in, for example, hearings or inquiries I might be conducting.”

Mr. Collins drew himself up. “My information, Sir Henry, comes from the most unimpeachable source possible, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She told me the news of Miss Elizabeth’s downfall herself just last evening and encouraged me to attend my cousins at once to support them in their time of great need.

Lady Catherine is of such exalted rank, of such great distinction, of such Christian virtue and condescension, that her information must be of the highest quality.

It is not for me to question her. And I would suggest that you should refrain from doing so as well.”

Sir Henry sat back in his chair, looked over at Mr. Bennet, raised an eyebrow, lit a match, and proceeded to ignite a cigar of such prodigious dimensions, and such commanding odor, that it could compel grown men to weep.

Indeed, Mr. Collins employed his handkerchief and coughed several times before managing, “Shall we pray, Mr. Bennet?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Collins. I do not wish to trouble you since you are already so deeply affected,” replied Mr. Bennet.

He stood and extended his hand, as did Sir Henry.

“Dr. Price is always at our service. I must caution you, Mr. Collins, not to spread idle

gossip concerning my family or any of my daughters, especially Elizabeth. You will regret it if you do.”

“I had hoped to pass the night here at Longbourn before undertaking the journey back into Kent tomorrow.”

“It is unfortunate that Mrs. Bennet’s illness prevents our entertaining you, Mr. Collins.

She becomes anxious when there are strangers in the house.

Besides, I feel certain you will not wish to break bread with my daughters, tainted as they are by—what was it—ah, yes, tainted as they are by moral turpitude and destined for jobs as housemaids.

I feel certain you can bespeak a bed in Meryton or ask your relatives to put you up for a night.

Now, let me see you safely into your carriage lest you encounter any corrupting influences between here and the door.

I will be certain to convey your regards to Mrs. Bennet. ”

With that, he opened the door to his library and led the way outside. He and Sir Henry stood near the door and waved as the carriage bowled majestically back down the drive, presumably on its way back to Hunsford.

Sir Henry ordered his own more modest carriage brought around, and he and Mr. Bennet sat on a bench to wait for it.

“The man is an ass, Bennet,” he said flatly.

“He is saying and doing whatever she orders him to say and do. The most damning statement was his repetition of her offer to turn the girls into housemaids. It would then be easy enough for her to send housemaids off to an abbess in London. In fact, according to your Mr. Parker, she has already done so with more than one of her own housemaids. The second most damning was his assertion that Elizabeth now enjoys the protection of the Viscount. Since we know that she is safe under her uncle’s protection and guarded by Mr. Darcy’s men, this must have been her plan for Elizabeth that somehow went awry.

I will be pleased to swear to any or all of this in any court in the land, and when I return home this afternoon, I will write out careful notes of all that I saw and heard.

I will also get an express off to the magistrates in Bath detailing the information given by the Croft boy and by Elizabeth to Sergeant Parker about her abductors. And especially the missing finger. ”

The two men stood and shook hands as the carriage came around. “I do not know how to thank you, Martin,” said Mr. Bennet.

“Believe me, it has been a pleasure. By the way, how is Fanny?”

“She is greatly improved. She ate a good breakfast for the first time and sat up for a while.”

“Give her my compliments, and Betsy sends her love as well. She will be overjoyed to hear the good news.”

The two men parted, and Mr. Bennet returned to the house to finish his letter and send it off to London. Once that was done, he straightened his neckcloth and went upstairs to see his wife and daughters.

With that attended to, Mr. Bennet turned his attention to his final task of the day, one that would give him great pleasure. He felt the need to write to Lady Catherine de Bourgh. After careful consideration, he wrote his letter as follows:

I wish to thank your ladyship for your kind and Christian concern for my daughter, Elizabeth, lately abducted from my home.

Our latest information is that she is safe in London, having been snatched from the brink of ruin and disgrace by a gentleman of our acquaintance who happened to encounter her and who knew that she was being held against her will.

While it is most kind of your ladyship to send Mr. Collins to condole with us whenever one of my daughters is abducted, he seems to have a regrettable tendency towards acting on information of doubtful veracity.

The Reverend Doctor Hugh Price, Vicar of the parish at Longbourn, is a godly, righteous, and sober man of sound learning and unquestionable probity.

He officiated at the wedding of Mrs. Bennet and myself and baptized each of our five daughters.

A truly saintly man, he is ready at all times to provide spiritual consolation and wise counsel.

I therefore venture to suggest to your ladyship that you keep Mr. Collins by your side in Kent, where he is less likely to get into trouble. I have no need of him here at Longbourn.

London, Gracechurch Street - Thursday, August 6, 18__

By some unspoken agreement, everyone, including Sergeant Parker, decided to allow

the lovers some quiet time together on the day after Elizabeth's rescue.

Darcy was awakened by the voices of the children, and he decided to take advantage of the early hour to send instructions to Mr. Winters regarding the license and the church.

He had other instructions as well, and he sent those to his own house.

The air was cool, and even in London, the skies were an unbroken blue.

The house boasted a large garden, hemmed in on three sides by the walls of neighboring houses and shielded from the street by a wall of brick and wrought iron.

A cherry tree there was beginning to bend down with ripe fruit, and Mrs. Gardiner chased the pair out after breakfast with a basket and instructions to fill it.

Elizabeth, gowned in soft, deep blue, and wearing an ordinary apron from the kitchen, was at first overjoyed to be outdoors.

She laughed up at Darcy and, taking him by the hand, led him to a comfortable bench hidden from the house.

"This has been my favorite spot in this garden since I was a little girl." They sat together on the bench, and he took her hand.

"I once climbed that tree over there and had to be rescued by my uncle. I remember being very angry that he would not let me go higher."

"So, you were as bold a little girl as you are now, my Elizabeth."

Elizabeth sat very still for a long moment before continuing.

“That little girl seems lost in the past. I do not believe I shall ever be bold again. I—”
She broke off, unable to speak, and her eyes filled with tears.

Darcy silently gathered her into his arms as he would a small child, patting her back as though she were an infant in need of soothing.

He thought her heart might break with weeping and break his own along with it.

Finally, when it seemed she had exhausted herself, she hid her face in his shoulder and the tears subsided with a gasp.

“You are my brave Elizabeth,” said Darcy softly, “And you always will be. You said it yourself last night. You have avoided death itself.” Elizabeth wept again, more bitterly, and he began to rock her back and forth, whispering, “You are safe. I am here. I will always be here, and I will always keep you safe.”

When next she raised her head, she stood up quickly, and Darcy thought she seemed angry. She dried her tears on a corner of her apron, drew a breath, and began. “We can never marry, Mr. Darcy.”

Wisely, he said nothing.

“I must face the facts. I am ruined. I was found in a—in a—”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Darcy's heart turned over. In her innocence, she had no words for the place where she had been held prisoner. "In a house of ill repute, Elizabeth," he said quietly.

"In a house of ill repute. I was there for three days. I was found and rescued, taken out of there, in a gown that barely covered me. They were planning to sell me to the man who would pay the best price for me. And I did ride for three hours in a closed carriage with some man or other. Oh, let us face it. I rode for three hours in a closed carriage with that insect, Wickham. The fact that I was blindfolded and tied hand and foot will be ignored by most people. Lady Catherine was right. What decent man would want to connect himself with such a family or with such a girl?"

"I would," he said. "And I believe myself to be a decent man. No man worthy of the name would abandon you after such an ordeal. The empty-headed will wag their tongues as much as they wish. The decent, thoughtful, honorable people will understand what happened. And believe me, Elizabeth. When the woman who said those words is brought to book for her crimes, any credit you have lost in the eyes of the world will be fully restored. You are not among the guilty here. Far from it. You are among those who have been wronged. And let us not forget that murder has been committed. An innocent man has lost his life."

At that, he found he could no longer remain seated.

He stood and gathered her into his arms. He could feel himself beginning to tremble with a physical reaction to the horror they had just lived through.

"My God, Elizabeth. I feared I had lost you. I would awaken at night, suddenly imagining you cold, lost, injured, abandoned." He turned up her chin so that he could

look into her eyes.

“Through it all, I felt some connection between us, between our spirits or our souls. It told me you were alive. It told me to continue without losing hope.”

“What have I done to deserve such a man?” she whispered.

“You do not have to deserve me, Elizabeth. I am yours without conditions or reservations. I hope equally that I do not have to deserve you, for no one could.”

This time her tears fell more softly. “I was so afraid I would end up by not being yours,” she said simply.

“That was the worst of it. At first, they gave me laudanum, and I awoke in a dark cellar with another girl.

Her back was covered with dreadful wounds and scars.

She had been beaten by one of those men in the club with a carriage whip!

That strange woman, Mrs. Oliver came, and I tried to get her to talk, but she would not.

When she took me to the other house, I began to be sure of what sort of place I was in.

They let me have a bath, and they took away my clothes.

And they brought gown after gown and fitted them to me.

And they were all perfectly useless to any decent woman.

“But it was not until the next day, when I had my interview with Mrs. Younge, that I began to feel despair.” She shuddered.

“She slapped me whenever I failed to show proper respect for her. Several times, in fact. She told me then that several gentlemen would be watching me with an eye toward a dishonorable relationship. She told me that this would be to my advantage. And then she told me that I would be charged for my room, board, clothes, maid, and transportation to London.” Here Elizabeth laughed, but it was a laugh bordering on hysteria.

“Imagine, I already owed her eight hundred pounds!” She drew in a breath on a great, gasping sob before continuing, and when she spoke, she whispered into his shirtfront.

“But, oh, that was not the worst of it. She told me that if I did not do exactly what I was told, my skin would be torn apart with coach whips like the girl in the cellar, and that I would be forced to earn my living at Covent Garden or even end up in the Thames. There are men who like to do that. They enjoy it!” Elizabeth looked up at him.

“She told me that I was now her property. I did not know such evil existed, Fitzwilliam! And she laughed as she told me. When I began to dress last night, I felt it was the day of my execution.”

“Of course, you did not know, my dearest, sweetest girl. You should not have to know those things.” Darcy seated them again, laid her head on his shoulder, and held her as she wept yet again.

This time, the tears began to ebb naturally.

While they might return, for now the quiet but sure presence of her natural optimism had returned.

The two sat without moving for many minutes as Elizabeth was soothed by the sounds of Darcy's breathing and his heartbeat.

"Elizabeth, do you remember a conversation we had at Netherfield while your sister Jane was ill? You asserted that poetry was highly efficacious at driving away love. I argued that poetry was the food of love. You advanced the idea that it would nourish only a fine, stout, healthy love." He looked down at her.

"Elizabeth, we have a fine, stout, healthy love, and everything will nourish it. It will not be starved by idle gossip."

She leaned over and kissed him shyly, and he said, "Marry me tomorrow, dearest. Let me have you safe in my house and in my arms. I never want to be parted from you again. And I want God and the world to know it."

"I will marry you tomorrow or any day you choose," replied Elizabeth. She took his hand and kissed it, and he smiled down at her. "Now, we should see to our task before my aunt comes out to pick the cherries herself."

The lower branches of the tree were filled with luscious, perfectly ripe fruits, and they had filled the basket before they knew it.

"We should take this to your aunt," said Darcy, hoisting it to his shoulder.

"I cannot bring myself to go in just yet," replied Elizabeth. "The kitchen steps are there, at the back corner of the house. Go down two steps, and there will be someone in the kitchen to take the basket. I will be able to see you almost the whole time."

"You will feel safe? There are two men outside the wall, and one at the gate. I will be back immediately. "

“Perfectly safe.” Elizabeth stood waiting beside the tree.

Her eye was attracted to a stout limb extending from the trunk just above her head, well concealed by other limbs.

She tested it carefully and was seated upon it mere moments later.

She used her time to fill her apron pocket with unripe fruit.

Then she began sampling the ripe fruit, which was delicious.

In short order, juice covered her lips, ran down her chin, and made her hands sticky.

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Darcy emerged from the kitchen, carrying the empty basket and showing all the satisfaction of a job well done.

A small green missile flew past his ear.

The next found its mark, dealing a stinging slap to his cheek, while a third went wide.

“Death from above,” he mused just loudly enough to be heard.

But he had been watching carefully. He strolled innocently through the garden, being struck several times, and stood just beyond the offending limb.

A hail of unripe cherries rained around him, most simply dropped, some aimed and thrown with varying degrees of accuracy.

A few hit home and stung like tiny wasps.

Alas, she had reckoned without his speed, developed through years of fencing practice.

Before she was aware he had been looking at her, a hand flicked out and seized her wrist, and she was suddenly in his arms. “There is just one difficulty, Elizabeth,” he said in a low voice against her ear.

“You throw underhanded. Practice your overhand shot, and you will improve your aim.” He moved quickly back into the concealing depths of the tree as she shook with laughter and imprisoned her body between his own and the strong trunk.

He could feel the sticky fruit juice on her hands, and he licked them clean, leaving kisses in his wake and taking each finger into his mouth, one by one.

Her laughter died away as he moved on to her face, lapping at the sweetness until his mouth found hers.

Elizabeth astonished him by jumping up into his arms, not even waiting to be sure he would catch her.

As his arms went around her, she took his face in her hands and began to kiss him, pressing her soft lips gently against his at first, then becoming fiercely demanding as she felt him respond.

She tasted of sweet cherries, and he wanted the kiss to go on forever, but when he felt her gasp and press herself more closely against him, he knew that he must put an end to it.

He set her down gently and smoothed the hair away from her face.

“Tomorrow, dearest Elizabeth, there will be no more barriers between us.” He placed

her arm in his, and they walked slowly back to sit on the bench.

“I am very glad to see that my bold Elizabeth has returned,” he said with a smile .

“You may live to regret those words. My young life was a continuous crisis of skinned knees, bruises, muddy boots, and dirty hems. On one occasion at home, I did fall from a tree, and I had the wind quite knocked out of me. My mother said that she hoped and prayed I would grow up and have a little girl just like myself.”

“I quite agree with her. It is my hope as well.” Darcy, remembering her bright eyes and dirty petticoats on the morning of her arrival at Netherfield, could not help but remember also that those eyes had placed him utterly in her power, a place where he still resided quite happily.

He pulled her into his arms and began to kiss her, again, gently at first and then with increasing hunger.

She threw her arms around him to pull him closer, and so they remained until Darcy came to himself and laid his cheek on her soft hair. “We must go in.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

They stood together and went into the house. When they entered, they found Mrs. Gardiner inspecting a pile of bandboxes. “These just arrived for you, dearest,” she said to Elizabeth. “I will ask the servants to take them up to your room.”

“I am mystified, Aunt. I brought nothing with me but what Mrs. Peterson packed.”

“I will own up to it, Elizabeth,” added Darcy.

“I realized your predicament and wrote to Mrs. Peterson early this morning. She has been to the dressmaker favored by Georgiana, and together they have selected articles of clothing and necessities for you, and she has chosen gowns from Georgiana’s closet.

The only articles we were not able to purchase were a bonnet and shoes. ”

“I know not how to thank you, Fitzwilliam,” said Elizabeth with a smile. “You have seen to every detail of my comfort.”

“Lizzy,” said her aunt. “After you have unpacked, let us select a bonnet from among my own. I will make my sewing-basket available to you, and you may trim it as you please. Surely you have some of Lydia’s talent for renewing bonnets.”

“I am afraid she got the lion’s share, Aunt. But that is very kind, and I will work on it as soon as I have unpacked. I shall be quite respectable.”

As the footman began carrying the boxes upstairs, Mrs. Gardiner continued. “There are a number of other letters and parcels here for both of you,” she said. “Mr. Darcy,

this parcel and these notes were delivered for you. And, Lizzy, this parcel came for you.”

Darcy pocketed his parcel, but Lizzy tore into hers with great interest. “It includes a note from Sergeant Parker,” she began.

“He writes, ‘This was recovered today from the house in Audley Street. I have been told that it is yours.’” She opened the small box to reveal a simple cross pendant set with topazes.

“I never thought I would see it again,” she went on quietly, fastening it about her neck.

“I wonder who gave it to him. Ruth knew about it.”

Darcy had been scanning his letters, one of which was also from Parker.

“Sergeant Parker writes that the club in Audley Street is closed, Mrs. Younge has fled, and fifteen young women, together with the servants, remain in the residence.” His face darkened into a scowl.

“Five young children, not yet in their teens, were rescued and placed in the care of the parish. They appear to have been untouched and uninjured. Parker has enlisted the aid of Mrs. Oliver to supervise the young women in the house, and he has told them that they are free to leave at any time but that the house will henceforth be a decent, orderly place. None of them has elected to go. The windows are unsealed, and he writes that there is an abundant supply of food and other necessities. Some decisions will have to be made.”

Elizabeth grew silent. Mrs. Gardiner took a moment and swallowed hard and said, “Sergeant Parker was here himself a short time ago,” she finally managed.

“I invited him to dine with us. My husband suggested inviting Mr. Hurst as well. He felt you might all have need of an opportunity for discussion.”

“Thank you. Would you ladies do me the honor of joining me in the sitting room for a few minutes before you go upstairs? There are some items that require our attention.” When they were all seated, he took out one of his letters.

“This is from Mr. Winters, my attorney. He has forwarded the license secured for us this morning. And he has been in touch with the church. The marriage can take place tomorrow morning at eleven.” He paused and looked intently at Elizabeth.

“That is, if you wish it, Elizabeth. All must be arranged according to your wishes.”

She smiled at him, looking very much like the familiar, happy Elizabeth. “I do wish it, Fitzwilliam. I wish it with all my heart.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled her sweet smile and took each of them by the hand. “I will confess I had my suspicions, my dears. My husband told me this morning we might expect this news. Whom will you invite?”

Darcy and Elizabeth looked at one another. “I have to say, Aunt, that my guest list will consist of you and my uncle, and the children. I hope that Uncle will give me in marriage and that you will be my witness. Perhaps the girls will be bridesmaids.”

Darcy smiled. “I am in much the same situation. None of my family is in town at the moment. I shall invite Hurst and Parker, and Mr. Winters has agreed to attend. He and my father were at school together, and he is an old friend. We will have a wedding breakfast after the ceremony at my house—our house, if that suits you, Elizabeth.”

“I think it will be lovely. And now I have further incentive to trim a bonnet.”

Darcy turned to Mrs. Gardiner. "I must write several letters, Mrs. Gardiner. Is there a convenient place for me to do that?"

"My writing-desk is in the corner. Please make use of it at any time while you are with us. You should find everything you require in terms of paper, ink, seals, and the like."

"I thank you." He raised Elizabeth's chin and kissed her gently. Then he turned to his letters while Elizabeth and her aunt went upstairs to unpack.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Elizabeth was awakened very early by two laughing little girls still clad in their white nightgowns.

They were followed by their mother, who carried a cup of chocolate and greeted her with a smile and the words, “Happy is the bride the sun shines on, Lizzy.” She opened the curtains and chased the girls back to their room to get dressed before seating herself in a chair beside the bed.

“Dearest Lizzy, I know how difficult it will be not to have your parents and sisters with you on the happiest day of your life. I do believe this arrangement will be for the best. Mr. Darcy will keep you safe, and that will ensure a happy outcome for you both.”

She took Elizabeth’s hand in hers. “Do not allow anything you have heard or seen, especially this week, to make you fearful of marriage. What happens in those places has nothing to do with love. Within your own marriage, you will love and be loved. I believe you were born to be happy, Lizzy, and I also believe that Mr. Darcy wants nothing more than to make you happy. Talk with him, confide in him, trust in him, and that will ensure you are both happy. If you need me, I am always here.” She stood and embraced Elizabeth and kissed the top of her head.

“Now, throw on your old gown and hurry downstairs. We want to gather flowers for your nosegays while it is still cool and fresh in the garden!”

“Thank you, Aunt. No one could have a better aunt or a better friend. You have been so kind.”

“Make haste.”

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A short time later, Darcy, dressing himself without the assistance of his valet, looked down from his window into the garden, where he saw Elizabeth and her cousins.

Her hair was down, and the little girls had made her a crown of Michaelmas daisies, and he knew he had never seen anything more beautiful.

Breakfast, served early due to the occasion, was a noisy and chaotic affair.

Such cheerful chaos was normal in the Gardiner family, where adults and children sat down together for the first meal of the day.

Elizabeth, still in her crown of daisies, was in earnest but smiling conversation with the two little girls about their duties as bridesmaids.

Darcy could suddenly picture her as a mother in her own right—the mother of their children—and thought family breakfasts might be a fine idea.

She favored him with such a radiant smile that he lost his breath.

The children were soon taken off by their nurse, leaving the adults a few quiet minutes to linger over their coffee and discuss the day.

“Sergeant Parker will be here at a quarter past ten, and he will bring two men with him to serve as your footmen,” said Darcy to Mr. Gardiner.

“You and your family and Elizabeth will ride in your carriage as we agreed. I see no reason why you should not have it open. One of my carriages will stop for Mr. Hurst

and bring him here, and he will arrive at about the same time. I will ride with him, and Mr. Winters will come directly from his office.” He paused.

“All of this does not begin to express my gratitude for your assistance and your support during this—this nightmare. It has extended even to your opening your home to me. I will never be able to thank you, but I am fortunate indeed to be regarded as a part of your family.”

Mr. Gardiner smiled with true affection. “Darcy, how could we do otherwise for the man who loves our Lizzy so dearly? Let us make this a day of joy and celebration!”

He stood, and the two men shook hands, and Mrs. Gardiner said, “Fifteen minutes and then come upstairs, Lizzy. That should allow you ample time to dress.”

Left alone, Elizabeth and Darcy clasped hands and walked together out to the garden. When they reached Elizabeth’s favorite bench, he wrapped his hands in the tresses of her hair and kissed her. “It is so beautiful,” he murmured. “Can you not wear it this way to the wedding?”

Elizabeth returned his kiss and smiled up at him with her impish smile. “It might cause a few tongues to wag, Mr. Darcy. But I will make a bargain with you. I will wear it this way when we are alone. Will that do?”

“It will be better.” He kissed her again.

Then he began searching his pockets until he drew out a small, wrapped parcel, which he handed her.

“I know you treasure your confirmation cross, Elizabeth. But would you do me the honor of wearing this today? Most of my mother’s jewelry is Georgiana’s, but some pieces were bequeathed to me, to give to my bride.

This was always one of my favorites, and it is simple enough for the daytime. ”

Elizabeth gasped as she untied the parcel and opened it.

The leather box held a gold heart-shaped pendant with inset amethyst, surrounded by an intricate design of leaves, flowers, and vines.

“So beautiful. I will treasure it always, until the day when God willing, our son will give it to his bride. Thank you for entrusting it to me.” She hugged him briefly, then went on, “Please, help me to put it on.”

In moments it was securely clasped about her neck. Darcy kissed her, offered her his arm, and walked back with her to the house. When they reached the side door, he kissed her again and smiled down at her. “Well, Miss Bennet, shall I see you at church?”

“I will meet you at the altar, Mr. Darcy.”

“I will be waiting for you.”

London, Brook Street - Friday, August 7, 18__

The church was cool and dim as Elizabeth and Darcy repeated their wedding vows.

They kept their eyes fixed on each other as Elizabeth approached on her uncle’s arm, and they kept their hands clasped for the duration of the service, repeating the words and gestures assigned to them by the priest. There was a flurry of good wishes as the newly married couple signed the register, and the sunlight from a window in the vestry glinted off the gold ring that symbolized their union.

The entire party made its way back to Brook Street, and Elizabeth found herself

suddenly lifted into her husband's arms and carried inside, lest she trip over the threshold.

The house was graced by a walled garden, and the doors leading to it from the ground floor sitting room had been thrown open.

The household staff had lined up in the center hallway ready to greet Mr. Darcy and his bride.

The couple stood and received the congratulations of each one.

A celebration, including punch, awaited the staff in their dining room later in the evening.

The dining room had been set up so that the new Mr. and Mrs. Darcy sat at the center of one side of the table surrounded by their friends and family.

Although they knew that there were still troubles to address, all thought of care was laid aside.

Sergeant Parker had tales to relate of the illustrious and dashing Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Mr. Winters had a fund of stories to relate about the young Darcy and promised Mrs. Darcy that, should she ever need to blackmail her husband, Mr. Winters would be ready with the evidence.

Even Mr. Hurst rose to the occasion when the champagne was poured, with an elegant toast to the new bride and groom.

Darcy was well known in town for the excellence of his table and his cellar, but his French cook had kept this meal somewhat simpler until he had a better understanding

of the new Mrs. Darcy's tastes.

After their meal, everyone sought the garden, where cake and fruits were laid out.

Mrs. Peterson delighted the two small bridesmaids with elegant little boxes, each with a slice of wedding cake to be taken home and slipped under their pillows, bringing dreams of their future bridegrooms. There were sweetmeats and comfits for all of the children.

The talk turned to what life would be like when the miscreants had finally been brought to justice .

"We must all celebrate at Pemberley," said Darcy. "It seems only fitting. Once this is behind us, we should gather our families there and enjoy one another's company."

"How wonderful that will be," added Elizabeth. "Though this is wonderful enough."

A wail from the youngest Gardiner boy brought Mrs. Gardiner to her feet, and it was soon apparent that children's naps did not wait even for special occasions.

Sergeant Parker stood, too, in order to arrange for the carriages, and with kisses for the bride and handshakes for the groom, the guests were soon on their way.

When they were alone, Darcy smiled down at his bride and said, "Well, Mrs. Darcy?"

"Yes, Mr. Darcy?"

"It is only half past three. If we send the servants away now, it will cause talk."

"Heaven knows, the last thing we wish to do is to cause talk. Especially now that we are married, Mr. Darcy."

“I suggest a brief tour of your home, Mrs. Darcy. I will acquaint you with the most important rooms. Certainly, Mrs. Peterson will wish to show you around later. She knows what is in all the closets. And you need to become better acquainted with Thompson, the butler, who knows everything else.”

“It is a fine idea, Mr. Darcy. Perhaps when we have completed our tour, we might repair to the garden for some—for some conversation.” Elizabeth could no longer hide her smile.

“Conversation on refined subjects is always of benefit to those participating.” He drew her arm through his.

In fact, he did manage to show her several rooms on the ground and first floors including the music-room and a beautifully proportioned little sitting room that opened to the garden.

“I have pictured you in this room. If it is to your liking, it might be your own sitting room. You will need a place to write your letters and so forth. Of course, we would redecorate it to your taste.”

“It is a beautiful room, Fitzwilliam. I love the light, and I especially like that it opens to the garden.”

“The library where I work also opens to the garden. It is separated from this room by the large sitting room where we were today.”

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The first floor consisted of a succession of drawing rooms, saloons, and parlors.

The aesthetic tastes of the person who had decorated them were evident in each room; the rooms were elegant and refined without being ostentatious.

They crossed the wide center hall, passed down another hall, and Darcy stopped before a group of doors.

“My parents, who first built and decorated this house, never liked to be parted from each other. What was my father’s chamber is now mine, and I have had your things placed in my mother’s former room, which adjoins it.

It has been redecorated since her death, but of course you will want to decorate it to your own liking. ”

He opened a door and showed Elizabeth into a large, airy room decorated simply with hangings of sea-green silk.

Two windows looked down into an extension of the garden on the other side of the house.

She exclaimed over the cushioned window seat before turning to a comfortable sitting area in front of the fireplace.

“A beautiful room, Fitzwilliam! I can imagine myself being quite comfortable here. And of course, I love the window seat!”

Darcy opened a door. “And here is your dressing room. I remember sitting here often with my mother as a child.” The room was large, comfortable, and convenient. Elizabeth’s bonnet and gloves were already waiting to be stored in the wardrobe with its many drawers.

Darcy extended his hand. “Come this way.” They passed back through the bedchamber, and he opened a door near the fireplace. “This is my room.”

The two bedchambers mirrored each other in size and in the arrangement of their furniture.

The hangings in Darcy’s room were of a deep red, and the furniture was dark, but the somber colors were relieved by simple white paint on the walls.

Two comfortable wing chairs were drawn up before the fireplace, one of which showed more signs of wear and use than the other.

Darcy pointed to a door at the other side. “My dressing room is in there.”

Elizabeth smiled shyly. A blush stole up her cheeks, a fact that was not lost on Darcy. “I like that we shall be neighbors,” she said. “I will not be afraid with you nearby. My parents’ rooms are as far apart as they can be and remain in the same house.”

“My parents slept together in this room when they were here, or in my father’s room at Pemberley. They did not like to be apart.” He folded her into his arms. “We can do that as well, dearest. If that is what you wish to do.”

“I would like that very much,” she replied. “Because it is not my parents’ habit, I did not think of it, though Aunt and Uncle share their room. I will like being with you, and I will be safe.”

“Elizabeth,” he began. “You have been through an ordeal. Your shock and terror have been unimaginable. You have wept in my arms until I feared both our hearts would break. If you would rather wait, I will wait for you as long as is necessary. I would cut my arm off rather than cause you any more fear or shock or pain. You must believe me.”

Elizabeth rested her head on his chest, listening for his heartbeat.

“Dearest Fitzwilliam, it was dreadful, but the worst is over. Our love is about mutual joy and comfort and life itself. I am not afraid of you. I want this, and I want to be yours. I have an optimistic turn of mind, and my dearest wish has just been granted. I will be able to settle down with you and we can make a home and a family.” She sighed, making a contented little sound.

“Now, you must help me take off this precious necklace and put it somewhere safe.” He saw her smile return and was satisfied.

Darcy folded her in his arms and bent down to kiss her, but after a moment, she placed her finger across his lips.

“Wait! I am forgetting our bargain. A promise is a promise after all.” She stood by the table next to his wing chair and began removing the pins from her hair, placing them carefully on the table.

“I need to save these until I can get more.” When the last pin was out, she shook her head, and the whole length of her hair tumbled down about her shoulders and down her back. “Is that better?”

“It is much better,” he whispered. Seating himself in the armchair, he pulled her onto his lap and said, “Now, come and kiss me,” rejoicing in her growing passion as they both lay hidden beneath the silken curtain of her hair.

A few short moments later, the clock on the mantelpiece chimed six.

Darcy stood them both up, smoothed her hair back and kissed her feverish cheek.

“Madam, I must say that we are both overdressed for this occasion. However, we are faced with a choice.” He held up his first finger, which she immediately kissed and tried to take into her mouth.

“Do not interrupt me while I am enumerating our choices, or we will find ourselves left with only one choice. I shall continue. Firstly, we may straighten our clothes, effect repairs to our, ah, our hair and go down to the dining room for supper. After supper, we may return here, enter our respective dressing rooms, ring for maid and valet, and prepare for bed. This would be the course pursued by civilized men and women.”

“I can only conjecture that your second choice would be pursued by uncivilized men and women.” Elizabeth’s dimples showed. “I should like to hear it nevertheless.”

“Well then. The second course of action would be simply to stay here without benefit of maid or valet and see what happens.” He smiled a rare, happy smile.

“Were we to find ourselves in danger of starvation later, we would be forced to put on night clothes and steal down to the kitchen under cover of darkness, there to forage for our food like savages. I will say, in favor of this second choice, that there is little danger of discovery. The staff will have enjoyed enough good rum punch to put them all into a stupor.”

“The second course of action has much in its favor. I find the part about foraging for our food like savages to be especially appealing. Are you an experienced forager, sir?”

“I’ve had my moments.”

“Very well then.” She turned and walked into his arms, brazenly taking hold of the end of his neckcloth and tugging. “I would like to know how to get rid of this without turning it into a hangman’s noose.”

“My information is always available to you.” He took her hand. “Simply take it here and pull gently.” The knot disintegrated. “As you see, it is not difficult.”

She unbuttoned his shirt, kissing that part of his neck that was exposed to her view.

“You can have no idea of the effect you have on young ladies when you suddenly appear before them in your shirtsleeves after having gone for a swim, Mr. Darcy. I am not certain that I have ever completely recovered.” She began to kiss that part of his neck that she could reach and to caress that part which she could not reach.

“And are you never seen without your coat and waistcoat?” she finally said.

The offending garments were gone in a moment, and she unfastened the buttons of his shirt.

Darcy looked down at her and said quietly, “One of us is wearing too many clothes.” He reached behind her and unfastened her gown, which slipped to the floor, leaving her in nothing but a soft chemise.

Then he carried her back to the chair. There he began a slow, gentle seduction of his bride which delighted them both.

Elizabeth awoke at some time after midnight.

For just a moment, she wondered where she was.

Then she felt Fitzwilliam's lean body curled around hers and felt his warm breath on her shoulder.

She lay still, remembering the astonishing pleasures they had experienced only a few hours before.

She had not had any idea that such feelings were possible, and her husband's attentions and his obvious delight in her had left her completely fearless and feeling very much cherished.

She closed her eyes as a delicious shiver ran through her.

Then her stomach gave a distinct and most unladylike grumble.

Her face grew warm with embarrassment, and she felt his body shake with laughter against hers.

"I suppose I had best take you away and feed you," he said against her ear. "Are you ready to learn to forage for your food like a savage?"

"I am ready. But if you continue to tickle my ear like that, we may yet starve, Mr. Darcy."

"There is no rest for the weary," he replied, getting out of bed and lighting the bedside candle.

Darcy walked across the room to his dressing room, lighting another candle or two.

Elizabeth, who had no idea of where her nightgowns or wrappers had been stored,

looked vainly through her pile of clothes for her chemise.

Not finding it, she settled on his shirt, which was still thrown across the arm of the chair.

It hung to just above her knees, and she knew that the fine cambric would be quite revealing. Then she found her shoes.

Darcy, returning in his dressing gown, gave her a look of frank appreciation.

Then, finger to his lips, he led her down the hall to a back stairway and down two pairs of stairs to the vast kitchen.

He smiled when he caught sight of the kitchen table.

“The cook has taken good care of us.” He pointed to two fine plates, two sets of silverware, and two linen napkins.

A bottle of wine and two glasses stood nearby, and a snowy cloth covered a platter of small savory tarts, a loaf of new bread, cheese, and cold beef.

A plate of fresh fruit stood nearby with another plate of small cakes.

Elizabeth nibbled a couple of grapes. “This is savage indeed. And the foraging has been quite taxing. I believe I could force myself to eat something.”

They fed each other bites of savory tart and sips of wine, licking the crumbs from each other’s fingers.

Then Darcy stood and carved slices of beef with great expertise and a flourish, and Elizabeth made sandwiches.

She presented her husband his sandwich with a flourish of her own, and after taking a bite, he pronounced it the best sandwich he had ever eaten and proceeded to devour it, washing it down with sips of wine.

“If this were Pemberley,” he observed, “we would have good homebrewed English ale. I keep a French cook here to impress my friends, but at Pemberley we employ a proper Englishwoman.”

“That is a good thing, because I know a great deal more about plain cooking than I do about the more elegant dishes.” Elizabeth had also finished her sandwich. In fact, they had eaten up the entire meal.

“Our work here is at an end,” said Darcy.

“I suggest we return to our bed.” They turned to the stairway.

Ordinarily, a gentleman preceded a lady up the stairs, both to light the way, if necessary, and to avoid any embarrassing glimpses of petticoats or ankles.

Darcy stopped and handed Elizabeth the candle.

“After you. Since you are wearing my shirt, I feel I should be allowed to develop a proper appreciation of the sight.”

Laughing the entire way, Elizabeth ran up the stairs. Darcy followed at a much slower pace.

“And did I give you enough of a view to justify my theft of your shirt, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth laughed down at him as he climbed the last few stairs.

“Well, let me see. Slender, well-turned ankles, beautiful legs, and . . . and other

beauties. I believe I have been well compensated for the use of my shirt, Mrs. Darcy.”

When they were back in their room, he took the candle from his wife and set it on the stand before discarding his dressing gown. Then he turned to her, pulled the shirt off over her head, carried her to the bed, and pleased her until she cried out in bliss.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Saturday started well enough for Lady Catherine. Mr. Collins waited on her immediately after Morning Prayer. She received him in the small summer breakfast parlor, although she did not offer him any breakfast.

“Were the Bennets surprised by the news?”

“I saw only Mr. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet is ill and does not leave her room. I did meet Sir Henry Martin, Baronet, who is the local magistrate. He, too, was condoling with Mr. Bennet.”

“And what of Bennet’s reaction?”

“He was grieved—shocked—he hid his face in his handkerchief and wept. I impressed both Mr. Bennet and Sir Henry with your ladyship’s true Christian virtue, gracious condescension, and high moral character in sending me to attend the Bennets in your own carriage.

I also acquainted Mr. Bennet with your ladyship’s offer to find posts as maids for the other daughters.

Such Christian charity caused Mr. Bennet to employ his handkerchief again. ”

“And the information that Elizabeth Bennet had thrown herself into the arms of Viscount ___?” By now, thought Lady Catherine, she should be infected with the pox.

“A complete shock, I assure you. He wished to know the sources of your information, and I assured him that they were of the very highest calibre.”

Lady Catherine poured herself a cup of coffee as she silently congratulated herself on her success. “Good day, Mr. Collins. I feel sure you will wish to set about tending your gardens again.”

Her satisfaction was short-lived, for the afternoon post brought not one, but two express letters.

The first, from Longbourn, had been written the evening before.

Under the guise of extending his thanks, the upstart Bennet had the temerity to criticize Collins--and through Collins, herself—for spreading untimely gossip.

According to his information, Elizabeth Bennet had walked out of the club on the arm of a family friend who knew she was being held there against her will.

Worse, Bennet had the unmitigated gall to hint that his country bumpkin of a parson was a better man than hers.

She clenched her fist in blind fury and brought it down on the desk.

Then, reason took over. Although he must and would be made to pay, she decided that Bennet was harmless for the moment.

She had more important business to attend to, and he could wait his turn.

She next turned her thoughts to that idiot Collins.

Should he be called in to account for his words?

Was he telling her the truth? Should she give herself the pleasure of interrogating him until he squirmed?

She decided that there was no good in crying over spilt milk.

Collins, the pompous ass, obviously had his own rosy view of the world in which she was queen and he her devoted and godly subject.

She could save the satisfaction of dealing with him for later.

She poured herself a glass of port and turned her attention to the next letter.

The contents were shocking. It was from Mrs. Younge, and it confirmed every representation made by Bennet regarding his second daughter.

Elizabeth Bennet had simply walked out of the club on the arm of a gentleman who was not well known to them, a Mr. Hurst, after announcing at the top of her voice that she was being held there against her will.

They had made their escape during the melee following his ill-advised speech, and Hurst had escorted her around the corner and up Brook Street to Darcy's home.

The viscount, having been cheated of his prize, had taken his money and gone elsewhere.

Mrs. Younge had little information about the club other than that it was closed, and the authorities were investigating.

There had been five children upstairs, mostly kidnapped, who had been placed in the hands of the parish.

There had also been a young woman, grievously wounded by a client, who had been rescued from the cellar.

Mrs. Younge and Wickham were in hiding in Wickham's filthy rooms, and she was understandably reluctant to go out. They talked of fleeing the country.

Lady Catherine's anger was violent. She crumpled the letters and threw them across the room, then thought the better of it and retrieved them.

She was disturbed by a soft knock at the door.

It was opened by her daughter Anne followed by Mrs. Jenkinson and a maid with the tea tray.

"I thought you might like your tea, Mama."

At those words, Lady Catherine's anger became terrible to behold.

As her daughter stood by, she hurled the heavy silver standish into the opposite wall, splattering black ink on the elaborate gilded woodwork and the silk wallpaper.

When this did nothing to assuage her fury, she overturned and shattered first one, then the other, of her pair of priceless Chinese urns, scattering their contents of garden flowers and water on the Aubusson carpet and the brocade upholstery of the sofa that sat between them.

The rotting stems emitted a stench of decay, and a corner of her mind made her think to dismiss the slattern responsible for cleaning the room.

When Lady Catherine had done with wrecking the room, she snatched the pot of hot, steeping tea from the tray held by the cowering maid and hurled its contents at Anne, who threw up her arm to protect her face.

The young woman turned white as she saw the scarlet burn on her arm and the

blisters that began to form there. She bit her lip and did not cry out.

“It is no more than you deserve! Go to your room, and do not expect any dinner tonight. When you have decided to listen to reason and consent to marry your cousin Darcy, then I may relent.” She seized Anne by the lace at her throat. “Until then, my dear, I intend to make your life a living hell.”

Anne stood, pale and silent, as Lady Catherine’s attention turned to Mrs. Jenkinson.

“And as for you, you simpering, sidling widgeon. One more wrong step and you will be turned off without a reference. You are on very thin ice, and you had best wipe that smirk from your face before I do it for you.” Mrs. Jenkinson turned and fled, leaving Anne behind.

Finally, Lady Catherine’s eye fell on the maid. “And you, girl, get down on your knees and clean this mess up. Use your petticoats if you have to, I do not care.” She seized the girl by the arm and dragged her into the room, pushing her to her knees.

“You may go, Anne. In fact, you will go if you know what is good for you.”

She poured herself another glass of port and drank it off in several swallows.

For the first time ever, small tendrils of fear curled around her insides like icy fingers.

Even the port could not warm her. When she returned to refill her glass and found the decanter empty, she hurled it at the window, smashing two panes of glass.

The housekeeper did not put in an appearance, and Lady Catherine suspected it was because the slattern was giving aid and comfort to Anne. She would dismiss the woman at the first opportunity— without a reference.

Longbourn, Hertfordshire - Saturday, August 8, 18__

Elizabeth's family at Longbourn was awake early the day after her wedding.

Mr. Bennet had received her hastily written letter the evening before, and while everyone understood the need for the early marriage, they naturally regretted their inability to share in her joy.

Mary had been inspired to suggest that they prepare a joint letter, with each family member adding a line or two, which their father would send by express.

They could then write their own personal sentiments at their leisure.

This idea met with universal approbation, and they gathered in the parlor after breakfast to create the missive.

Even Mrs. Bennet, when the paper was carried upstairs to her, was able to write MY DEAR LIZZY in a firm hand.

Once they had given their letter into their father's keeping, Mary began to feel the need for a walk. "I do wish we could go outside," she said privately to Jane. "It is a lovely day."

"There is no reason why we should not go," replied Jane.

"Bring your book if you have one, or cut flowers with me, or take a turn about the lawn. We must all stay where Tim can see us. I will send for him now. Jem is also hedging nearby. Get what you need and come back here. We will stay about an hour."

Fifteen minutes later, Mary had fetched her book from upstairs and joined her sisters in the front hall.

Jane had a basket and cutting shears and the two younger girls had decided to play quoits.

They followed Tim outside, and he took up a post where he could see them all.

Mary retired to a shady tree near where the younger girls played their game.

Jane began to fill her basket with flowers taken from the beds in the middle of the yard.

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Wickham had not shaved for days. His hair was shaggy and unkempt, his fine boots were filthy, and his body exuded the sour sweat of too much strong drink.

He was in his shirtsleeves, having abandoned his coat at some undetermined moment in the past. His hands, with their dirty nails, shook as he grasped the knife.

He looked out of his hiding place as the sisters gathered on the lawn under the watchful eye of one of the young country lads.

He cursed his luck. As matters stood, the closest girl was the bookish sister—what was her name—the unattractive one with the spectacles and the flat bosom.

Mary? That was it. Well, she ought to be grateful for his attentions.

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The scene was peaceful as he watched for his opportunity.

The quoits rang out, his prey attended to her book, and the eldest sister, Jane, continued to snip flowers.

Still, he watched and waited. The two younger girls left off their game of quoits and went to the swing.

Mary attended to her book. Such a shame he could not lure the eldest over.

She was almost as voluptuous as Elizabeth, and she was a blonde.

However, he knew from the past that she was not spirited at all.

In fact, she was rather bland in his opinion.

Forcing himself on Elizabeth would have been much more fun.

Idly he wondered if his chosen prey would be a spirited fighter.

It would certainly add something to an otherwise dull encounter.

He had become so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed his opportunity.

Jane called to the young man to come and assist her with some heavy branches.

When the lad responded, Wickham moved quickly from his hiding place, put the

knife to Mary's throat, and pulled her back into the thick brush adjoining the wilderness.

"Don't say a word. Don't scream. I might even try to make this enjoyable for you," he said, caressing her throat with the blade.

"At least you won't have to die an old maid.

" Mary's eyes were wide as she stayed as still as death beneath the knife.

Moments later, Wickham attempted to tear the cloth of her gown.

The sturdy gingham did not yield, and with a curse, he tried to use both hands while retaining possession of the knife.

An instant later, the weapon was in Mary's hands. She screamed loudly as she aimed a slashing cut in the direction of Wickham's chest. It drew blood. At the same time, Jem Hill emerged from the outer hedge, dealing Wickham a stunning blow to his head with the large hedging shears he carried.

Jem was at her side in mere seconds, and her assailant was on the ground, the dirty white shirt turning crimson. Mr. Bennet and several of the men had come running at the sound of the scream. "Send for Constable," said Tim. "Send for Sir Henry as well," added Mr. Bennet.

"Wickham!" Lydia spat.

The sound of his name being uttered with withering scorn by a mere chit of a girl was the last thing George Wickham heard.

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Jem, who had remained silent with a steadying arm around Mary, knelt beside Wickham before turning to Mr. Bennet. “He’s done for, sir. He won’t be harming any more innocent young women—not here at Longbourn nor in Meryton nor anywhere else in England.”

Mary maintained her self-possession, although she could taste the bile at the back of her throat.

“Let us tell Mama that I screamed because I was terrified by the sight of a dead animal in the garden. She must not know what happened.” She turned to Jane.

“I should like to lie down,” she said. And for the first time in anyone’s memory, she wept on Jane’s shoulder as though her heart would break.

Jane seated her on a bench and put her arms around her as her father and the other two girls hovered nearby.

Surprisingly, it was Lydia who spoke. “When you are ready to go in, Mary, I will have someone bring you warm water. You will feel ever so much better after you have washed. I know I did. And we will take that dress away and burn it so that you never have to see it again. Then, if you like, I will come and sit with you until you sleep. I promise to be quiet, and I will even read to you from Fordyce or any other book you choose.” Lydia turned to Jane and said, “Mary should have some hot tea with plenty of sugar and perhaps some brandy. And when she is ready for bed, you should give her something to help her sleep.” She paused and knitted her brow in thought.

“Just think, Mary! You and Jem Hill have given Wickham what he deserved. He will never hurt another girl, ever again.”

Brook Street, London - Saturday, August 8, 18__

When Elizabeth woke on the morning after her wedding, it was to the sound of the clock chiming eight.

She knew instantly where she was, and she could feel the warmth of her husband's body sprawled next to hers.

He was lying on his back, and his face looked very young, even with the shadow of his beard.

She wanted to run her hands over his face, but it would be a shame to wake him.

She carefully raised the covers and eased herself out.

"You should come back here and let me kiss you," he said sleepily. "Why get up when we can be here in bed?"

Elizabeth returned to him, smiling. "I had quite forgotten. Now I may see you in your bed every morning." Her smile grew impish. "And I know why I find that so very attractive. I had no idea of what wonders could be accomplished in bed."

"They can be accomplished in other places as well, Mrs. Darcy. But bed has its advantages. It is soft and spacious. It is quiet and private. And it is generally behind closed doors. Now come here. Let us see what we can accomplish this morning."

When at last they lay entwined, replete and contented, Elizabeth's stomach mortified her by growling again, most audibly. Darcy's laughter rumbled in his chest and shook the bed. "What is this, Mrs. Darcy? Must I feed you again?"

"Well, it has been nearly twelve hours, Mr. Darcy. If we are to continue our recent activities, it appears I must be fed. There is only one problem. If I go down to forage in the kitchen dressed as I was last night, I certainly will cause a scandal."

He stood. “We must avoid talk and suspicion at all costs, Mrs. Darcy. Put on that shirt you pilfered from me last night, please, and wait for me here.” He got into his dressing gown and rang for his valet, and when the discreet knock sounded at the door, he stepped into the hallway.

He returned in moments. “When the knock sounds again, we will go to your room, where our breakfast will have been set out on the small table there.” He looked at her with a teasing grin.

“I have ordered a large, nourishing breakfast. When we have seen to it that you are fed, you and I will part company. My valet will come to me, and one of the maids will come to you, and we will dress as civilized men and women and go downstairs to greet the new day. Do you approve?”

“Most definitely,” she replied, showing her dimples again.

“Then come and kiss me one more time.” A few moments later, he raised his head and looked down at her. “There is a problem with this shirt. On you, it reveals far more than it conceals. It is enough to incite me to riot.”

“Riot. Foraging savages. Uncivilized persons. Whatever next, Mr. Darcy? Sedition? Gunpowder, treason and plot? Marriage to you may prove very exciting. ”

“You left out abduction and dubious residences for young ladies.”

“Who would believe such tales? Why not just bespeak a dozen shirts and give them to me to wear?”

“I think not. It would rob me of a great deal of enjoyment. As it is, I envision myself getting dressed, wondering whether the shirt I am about to put on has ever been wrapped around your delectable form. I believe it will enliven the prospect of putting

on the same dull clothes each day.”

After breakfast, Elizabeth went to her dressing room.

She was greeted by a smiling young woman named Jenny who bobbed a curtsy, wished Mrs. Darcy happy, and said, “Your bath is ready, ma’am.

” Elizabeth was soon soaking, comfortably hidden by a screen as she had always been at Longbourn.

Jenny had a wrapper ready for her when she emerged, and they stood side by side considering the collection of day dresses.

Mrs. Peterson had chosen only a few things, but she had chosen well.

Elizabeth chose a gown in a russet-rose muslin very much like a gown she had at home, and she was soon seated at her mirror as Jenny brushed out her hair.

The maid clucked at the number of tangles she found and worked them carefully out with a comb but said nothing about doing the hair up in a plait at night.

She put her head to one side and paid close attention as Elizabeth described the simple style she preferred for the daytime, and before long, she was deftly styling Elizabeth’s hair just as she liked it.

There was a knock at the door. Darcy stood outside, and he and Elizabeth clasped hands and walked downstairs together. When they got to the library, he opened the door and stood aside for her to enter.

“What a delightful breeze. Is it coming from the garden?”

He turned her around and guided her to a small alcove where a French door stood open. "There is a similar door in your sitting room," he said. "I have always enjoyed it. Come and sit down."

They sat comfortably, side by side on the sofa, and he kissed her gently before beginning.

"We should be on our honeymoon, but this has been an extraordinary series of events. Let us spend as much time as we can together these first few days. The announcement of our marriage is in this morning's newspapers, so there will soon be engagements and social correspondence.

Let us go over those together until you are perfectly comfortable, dearest." He smiled and kissed her again, unable to resist. "I have a letter to write, and then I would like to take you shopping. It is an unusual way to spend the second day of one's marriage, but it is clear you are in dire want of some necessities.

Would you prefer to stay here and keep me company, or would you rather acquaint yourself with your own sitting room until we are ready to go? "

"Of course, I would rather stay here," she replied. "But there is something I would like to discuss with Mrs. Peterson."

"Let me show you the path to your sitting room. Once you have spoken to Mrs. Peterson, return here and we will visit the shops."

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He ushered her out of the French doors onto a gravel path shaded on one side by the house and on the other by a tree.

Under the tree, hidden from the house, stood an old stone bench, just large enough for two people.

“This looks like more of the work of your parents,” said Elizabeth with a smile.

“Perhaps they met here when no one was looking.”

“I would not be surprised.”

Elizabeth’s French doors were standing open, and they entered the sitting room together. “It is such a lovely room,” Elizabeth sighed. “I will be very comfortable here.”

“There is a man standing guard outside the garden walls, dearest. You may have your doors open or closed, just as you wish.”

“Open, please!”

“Then I will see you soon.” With a last kiss, he turned and walked down the garden path.

Elizabeth sent for Mrs. Peterson. “Good morning, Mrs. Darcy,” said the woman with a smile and a curtsy. “I am so pleased that the gown fits you well.”

“It suits me perfectly. It is cut in the style I have always preferred.” She pointed to the chairs by the fireplace and took one.

“Please sit down, Mrs. Peterson. There is only one item we need to discuss. I was delighted with Jenny, the young woman you sent to wait on me this morning. She is very congenial, and she showed an aptitude for her duties. In particular, she has a talent for dressing my hair, always a daunting task. I have asked her to return at six to lay my things out for dinner, and I wish to have her serve as my personal maid. I will speak to Mr. Darcy about her wages.”

“It is good of you to say so, ma’am. She seems to me to have a natural taste and discernment, and she is always acquainted with the latest fashion. She is reliable, and she seems to be a cheerful young person. I will inform her this afternoon.”

“Would you please send her here with my bonnet and pelisse and ask her to put on her own? I would like to take her with me on a shopping trip we have planned.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Darcy.”

The two women stood. “Thank you, Mrs. Peterson. I look forward to learning more about the house from you. Perhaps you will give me a tour next week.”

Elizabeth looked in on Darcy, and moments later Jenny arrived with her bonnet and pelisse. The girl’s eyes sparkled, and she curtsied. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Darcy. I will try always to be the best lady’s maid possible.”

“I am glad to have you, Jenny. Now, Mr. Darcy is taking us shopping. Your suggestions will be helpful, since I am accustomed to country life.”

The shopping trip included stops at the mantua-maker, milliner, shoemaker, and haberdasher.

Elizabeth bespoke what was needed with efficiency and dispatch.

All went well until they visited the haberdasher.

Jenny showed her true worth during this final stop, as they chose a bewildering assortment of gloves, stockings, handkerchiefs, parasols, fans, and reticules.

Elizabeth also chose nightgowns, wrappers, and peignoirs.

Finally, Elizabeth stood indecisively by a display of practical gloves in York tanned leather.

“You look as though you are in doubt about those, Lizzy.”

“I have always favored them for wear in the country. I lost my last pair on that day when I was abducted. Seeing these made me think of it.”

Darcy folded her arm in his. “We will not always be in London, and you will want heavier gloves for wear at Pemberley as winter comes on. If the association is too unpleasant, there are several kinds of good, sensible leather for you to choose from. Whatever you select, I think you may want several pairs.”

Elizabeth tried on a pair and admired them. “I have always liked these. I will not let them become unpleasant reminders. They are only gloves.” Elizabeth squared her shoulders, drew a deep breath and added the York tanned gloves to the purchases.

Finally, as they stood on the walkway trying to fit themselves, Jenny, and a mass of bandboxes into the carriage, Darcy drew out his watch. “I salute you, Mrs. Darcy. You accomplished all of that in less than three hours. You are very efficient.”

The afternoon was advancing, and when they returned home, Elizabeth thanked her

husband with a kiss and rang for tea. They sat at their ease by the fire until the door opened, and a familiar voice rang out.

“Darcy! Here I am at last. And Miss Bennet! I must say I am thankful to see you safe and well.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam, looking somewhat weary but otherwise cheerful, embraced them with his broad smile. Elizabeth handed him a cup of tea and urged him to be seated.

“You are behind the times, Cousin. Miss Bennet is now Mrs. Darcy.” Darcy took his wife’s hand in his.

“Really! That is wonderful news. A bit unexpected. I thought a wedding was planned for Michaelmas.” Fitzwilliam kissed Elizabeth’s cheek and shook his cousin’s hand. “I hope you will both be very happy. Darcy, you are a lucky man indeed.”

Once they were all seated, he continued. “I have come to beg a bed for two nights. My father will not travel on Sunday, but he will be here by midday Monday. They are preparing the house in town for his arrival, and I will get no peace there.”

“Your father is coming? Of course, your usual rooms are always at your disposal.”

“Your letter arrived at home,” replied Fitzwilliam.

“I felt it was alarming enough that my father should be acquainted with it. I suspected he would come down on our side, and it turns out I was right. But he had additional concerns that alarm me greatly. My father, who is the youngest of the three, has been troubled since childhood by Lady Catherine’s mendacity, selfishness, and cruelty.

So was your mother. Their tender years were apparently made miserable by her lying, her vicious temper, and her physical cruelty.

Why, she forced your mother into a heavy linen chest and then closed the lid.

It was only by a miracle that she did not smother.

She also placed a pillow over my father's face as he lay in his cradle, a helpless infant barely able to turn his head.

If it had not been for a vigilant nursemaid, he would have smothered.

It was far more than the usual jealousies and squabbles of brothers and sisters. ”

“Such depraved behavior in a child does not bode well for its later development,” said Darcy. “Did you know any of this before?”

“No. I spent a couple of hours closeted with my father in his library and told him the contents of your letter. He in turn acquainted me with those distressing details of their childhood. He also related the contents of a letter he had received from her shortly after your engagement was announced. As I recall, he referred to it as nonsensical. She first criticized the Bennet family. Then she detailed the entire trumped-up engagement between yourself and Anne, a tale my father knows to be false. She referred to Miss Lydia Bennet's ‘infamous elopement,’ which we all know never happened.

She ended by demanding, in the strongest possible terms, that my father assist her in putting a stop to the marriage.

My father wrote back and told her plainly that as far as he knew you were of age and might marry whom you pleased.

However, his intuition tells him that she is somehow at the bottom of all of this. Is he right?”

“Richard, he is perfectly right. Our aunt is not only involved in this, but she is also, as your father says, at the bottom of it. That includes a chain of abuses and crimes too long to enumerate here.”

“My father also described some of his suspicions concerning Rosings.”

“Rosings? But that is the hereditary estate of the de Bourghs.”

“Precisely. Anne is now twenty-six, soon to be twenty-seven. She should have inherited her father’s fortune at twenty-five, almost two years ago.

My father believes my aunt has prevented that and is keeping the estate for her own benefit.

It is a grievous offense, a crime. He intends to investigate those circumstances, and he will see his solicitor and his man of business on Tuesday.

He stands ready to lend you any assistance and to do what he can to bring justice to her victims. Including her own child, Anne. ”

“You certainly have given us a great deal to think about,” replied Darcy.

Colonel Fitzwilliam stood and begged to be excused to settle into his rooms. “Do not concern yourselves about having me on hand for dinner. I have traveled day and night to get here, and all I can think of is a bath, a good supper, and a comfortable night’s rest.” He left them with a tired smile to go upstairs.

The Darcys retired not long afterward.

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She was seated in the small summer breakfast parlor with her daughter Anne when the footman brought the London papers.

The announcement of Darcy's marriage was a stunning blow.

With Wickham unaccounted for, she had no way of striking back at Darcy either personally or through his bride—or his sister.

The fine lace collar of her dress seemed unbearably tight, and she raked at it with her fingernails.

“What is the matter, Mama?”

“You worthless, worthless girl!” screamed her mother in a hoarse croak. “You are sickly! Ugly! Useless!” She picked up the silver carving knife from the platter of ham and raised it above her head.

Anne, terrified, ran out of the room as the knife buried itself in the wooden frame of the breakfast-room door.

Hunsford Parsonage - Sunday, August 9, 18__

Charlotte Collins, already dressed for church, was enjoying a solitary walk through the garden at the parsonage when Anne de Bourgh tumbled headlong into her arms. Her appearance was alarming.

Her hair streamed about her shoulders, her skin was pale and damp with perspiration,

and her eyes were red from weeping.

She breathed in great, alarming gasps, and she felt feverish to the touch.

Charlotte put her arm about the young woman and guided her to a bench.

“Miss de Bourgh, do not try to talk. Whatever it is, you are safe here.” Charlotte wiped the young woman’s face with her handkerchief and smoothed her tumbling hair. “Just sit here and try to catch your breath. Tell me about it when you feel you are ready.”

A few minutes later, Anne’s breathing had returned to normal.

She spoke in a voice that was barely audible as she revealed the shocking details of her mother’s behavior with the hot tea and that morning with the carving knife.

As she finished her story, she burst into tears and wept bitterly in Charlotte’s arms.

At that moment, Mr. Collins emerged from the house and started down the walk toward them.

“My dear, what is the meaning of this? Why are you not ready for church?” He sputtered to a stop as he saw who was seated next to his wife.

“Miss de Bourgh, what an honor! May we escort you to services this morning?” Too self-absorbed to take note of her distress and condition, he continued. “But where is your mother?”

“Mr. Collins, Miss de Bourgh will not be attending church this morning. She has been taken ill. I shall not be attending either. I will take her into the house and assist her to lie down and will summon the doctor if needed.”

“But Mrs. Collins, regular and faithful attendance at Sunday service is necessary, and nothing can be allowed to interfere. Why Lady Catherine herself . . .”

“Oh, Mr. Collins,” his wife snapped. “What Bible have you been reading? Here is a sick person. Am I to abandon her because it is the Sabbath? I do not think so. Do not make yourself late for church. And do not mention this to Lady Catherine, although I doubt very much that she will be there.”

Mr. Collins, abashed, had no choice but to depart for the church, leaving the two ladies behind on their bench.

Charlotte assisted Anne into the house. They passed the maid as they entered, and Charlotte asked her to bring strong tea to the guest room.

“Miss de Bourgh is ill. And bring the brandy.” The girl threw her a worried look.

“Do not worry. I will tell Mr. Collins that you were not in church because you were assisting me to care for a sick person.” She gently escorted Anne upstairs to the same small, comfortable room that Elizabeth had occupied the previous spring.

“Now, let me help you remove your gown.”

The sight of Anne’s arm shocked Charlotte. “Let me assist you into bed, Miss de Bourgh. I suggest you remain in your chemise rather than trying to put a nightgown on over this. I shall send for the surgeon this afternoon.”

Anne, having choked down a small measure of brandy and a cup of strong, sweet tea, began to look better. Her color returned, and Charlotte placed a cloth dipped in lavender water on her forehead.

“Do you feel more able to talk, Miss de Bourgh?” Charlotte had seated herself in a

chair by the bed. “Tell me what has happened.”

Anne nodded and took a deep breath before speaking.

“For some time now, I have felt that something was not right with my mother. She is often heard shouting—screaming really—when no one else is present. She has always been harsh with the servants, but now she abuses them horribly and several of the housemaids have suddenly disappeared. I have heard whispers from the other servants that my mother sent them to a house for fallen women in London! She has dismissed others, including some of our most faithful servants, without references, a fate with which she now daily threatens Mrs. Jenkinson. She has also taken to drinking my father’s stores of port, and she drinks far more than what the gentlemen might consume after dinner.

I believe she may have finished the Madeira. ”

Charlotte remained silent as Anne de Bourgh related the story of her mother’s descent into drunkenness and madness.

When Anne had finished, Charlotte rang for the maid and requested the London papers for the day before.

When the anxious girl brought them, Charlotte said, “Yes, yes, I know it is the Sabbath and we do not read the newspapers. But I will read them. And send someone for the surgeon immediately.” Turning to Anne, she said, “What portion of the paper was your mother reading this morning when she threw the knife at you?”

“I am not certain, but it looked like the advertisements or social announcements.”

Charlotte shuffled through the pages with a slight frown. “Do you think this is the thing? Mr. Darcy has married Miss Elizabeth Bennet. It says here they were married

two days ago at his parish church in London. I must say, I am astonished. Your mother told us. . .”

“That Miss Bennet had fallen from grace,” Anne bit her lip. “That she had thrown herself into the arms of some depraved viscount or other.”

“Could this have been enough to throw your mother into that sort of rage?”

“Easily. For years she has been attempting to promote an engagement between Cousin Darcy and myself. Everyone knows that no such engagement ever existed. Yet she has never given it up. She was beside herself with fury after reading this announcement.” Anne paused and wiped her eyes.

“Miss de Bourgh, why have you not removed yourself from Rosings or asked your relatives for assistance? Have you been too ill to ask for help?”

“No. That is what my mother wants people to think. Although I am undersized, I am not as sickly as I am made out to be. I was slow to recover from the measles as a child, and my mother has made the most of that for years. My diet is severely restricted, my food is not nourishing, and I am always hungry. My mother gives me no freedom, as you must have observed, Mrs. Collins. She does not allow me to leave Rosings and I am certain she prevents my letters from being posted. I have no contact with the outside world, nor with my relatives, except that which she permits. I have found it is better to be invisible in my mother’s presence than to assert myself. ”

Anne drew a deep breath. “I am now twenty-six years old, and my twenty-seventh birthday is in less than three months.”

“Is it indeed? I had not realized. You have always seemed so young.”

“Rosings has been handed down for generations through my father’s family.

It is not entailed to the male line. I am perfectly well acquainted with the terms of my father's will.

I am his heiress, and I should have succeeded to Rosings and its income on the day of my twenty-fifth birthday.

However, my mother has not permitted me to do so. ”

“Oh, my dear girl! I am so very sorry. Rest assured that I will help you. Mr. Church will be here in a few minutes to look at your arm.” Charlotte took Miss de Bourgh's hand in hers. “What is it you wish to do now, Miss de Bourgh? Name it.”

“My first choice would be to go to my uncle in Derbyshire. That is so far away, I am not certain I will be able to manage it on my own. I believe if I can get to my Cousin Darcy in London, he will assist me in contacting my uncle. However, I do not see how I can travel to London. I have no money with me, not even my reticule.”

“Be easy on that head. I believe I can get you to London in safety.” There was a knock at the door. “Ah, Mr. Church. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

The surgeon entered, followed by the maid bearing a basin of water and clean towels. He unwrapped the bandage and nodded as he examined the burn. “Someone with some knowledge dressed this,” he said.

“The housekeeper at Rosings.” Anne was pale.

Mr. Church bathed the injury with cool water, tore some of the linen into strips, and bandaged the arm loosely.

“I do not believe in applying butter or other grease to burns,” he said.

“My observation is that they prevent air from reaching the wound and cause it to putrefy. Continue to wash and bandage it in clean linen—immaculate linen—morning and evening, and if the blisters open, leave them alone. This is not a large burn, though it is painful and quite deep. There is no reason why it should not heal well.”

“We may have to travel to London tomorrow.” Charlotte was troubled. “It is completely unavoidable.”

“I will give you draughts to help ease her discomfort. Watch the area carefully. When you get to London, if it shows any sign of putrefying, she must see a physician or surgeon immediately. Other than that, keep it clean and, as I have said, watch it. And see that she receives a digestible, nourishing diet. She is underfed.”

He gave Charlotte the medicine with instructions for its use. “I will see myself out.”

“Thank you, Mr. Church.”

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As Charlotte descended the stairs a few minutes later, she heard her husband's voice raised in the hallway. "And why were you not in church?"

She hurried down and found him confronting the frightened maid.

"I kept her from church to assist me with the sick person. She has done her duty in that respect. Surely, we are not expected to abandon our fellowman just because it is Sunday. The surgeon has just left Miss de Bourgh. You should see what her dear mother did to her. Now, let us go to dinner."

Charlotte had always found the dining room to be one of the best rooms in the house.

Beautifully proportioned, though small, it was graced with large windows looking out over the garden.

Today she found little cheer in it. The maids were setting out the dinner, and everything was ready.

After pausing for an interminable grace before the meal, she set about carving the cold ham, since Mr. Collins had never been taught the masculine skill of carving joints.

Then she seated herself—he never seated her when they were alone—and he picked up his knife and fork and fell to.

"And how was the attendance at church this morning?" she inquired. He had the habit of mumbling "mmm, mmm," as he ate, which she did her best to forestall with

conversation.

“Mmm, tolerable,” he replied. “Though Lady Catherine was also among the absent. I must call on her this afternoon to inquire after her health and to let her know that Miss de Bourgh is safe with us. Is, mmm, she resting comfortably?”

“Yes.” Charlotte set down her knife and fork. “She has been through a dreadful ordeal, Mr. Collins. Yesterday her mother threw a pot of boiling tea at her and scalded her arm. This morning she threw a carving knife at her and chased her out of the house. ”

“Parents have a duty to correct their children, Mrs. Collins. I am sure there was some reason.”

“To scald someone? Miss de Bourgh is not a child, and even if she were, parents should not physically harm their children. There have been many other incidents, and I would like to discuss them with you this afternoon. Something must be done to help her.”

Collins held up his hand. “Not another word, Charlotte. Not another word will you utter. I am warning you. Lady Catherine is our patroness, gracious, kind, and the exemplar of every Christian virtue. As your husband, I will not permit you to slander her in this fashion even in the privacy of our home.”

The meal continued in silence and was soon over.

Charlotte stood and, with the help of one of the maids, began preparing a plate for their guest. “Nor will you give any aid or comfort to a wayward daughter. I am going now to call on Lady Catherine. I will arrange for Miss de Bourgh’s escort home while I am there. ”

Mr. Collins stalked out of the room, and Charlotte calmly finished making up the plate. The fearful maid brought in a tray, cutlery, and linen, and they soon had a tray ready for their guest. "I will take it to her. Does Ned visit his grandmother on Sundays?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's just across the lane in back. "

"Please go there and ask him to come to the kitchen. I will not detain him more than a few minutes. I will take the tray up to our guest." She turned and left the dining room.

Miss de Bourgh admitted her. The young woman still seemed pale, but she thanked Charlotte for the food and ate hungrily.

Charlotte seated herself on the edge of the bed and said, "You are not to worry, Miss de Bourgh. I have a plan that will get you to London tomorrow. Or perhaps I should say 'will get us to London tomorrow,' for I will serve as your escort and chaperone."

"I beg you not to put yourself in harm's way, Mrs. Collins. This journey seems perilous, and while I am willing to face any danger, I would not wish to involve you. You have been so kind to me."

Charlotte gave her a smile that was slightly nervous. "I do not believe the danger will be great." She turned and left the room.

The maid approached her as she came downstairs. "Ma'am, Ned is waiting for you in the kitchen."

The young man stood as she entered. "Ned, thank you for interrupting your day of rest. I will need you to have the gig ready in the morning for myself and one other lady. Our destination is Bromley, where we will board the mail coach bound for London. What time will we need to depart? "

“For safety’s sake, ma’am, I’d say we must leave at seven. You may need to wait for a time, but it is better to be early to purchase your tickets. There is a proper, decent inn there, and I will stay with you to see you safely on to the mail coach.”

The office of Daily Morning Prayer began at seven, and Charlotte was not required to attend.

It was the ideal time. “Thank you, Ned. One last thing. Bring the gig to the lane behind the house, the one that stands between this house and your grandmother’s.

Wait for us there. We will not be late, and we will have very little baggage—perhaps a bandbox or small carpet bag.

” The gig would be crowded with three, but they were all small.

Ned stood when she stood. “I will be waiting for you there at seven, ma’am.”

“Thank you. Please give my kind regards to your grandmother.”

Charlotte went upstairs to her small, comfortable parlor.

She unlocked the compartment in her desk where she kept her pin money and the household allowance, thanking God that she had just received the allowance for the autumn quarter.

There was more than enough money to get her and Anne de Bourgh to Mr. Darcy’s house in London.

She hid the purse in her bosom, re-locked the compartment, and settled in a comfortable chair with her embroidery.

She did not have long to wait. She heard the front door open, and Mr. Collins soon entered the parlor.

“How was your visit?” she asked more calmly than she felt.

Her husband’s normally vapid countenance looked troubled—deeply, genuinely troubled.

It was one of the few times she could remember reading true emotion in his countenance.

“The visit was most disquieting, Charlotte. I went to the front door as we usually do, the butler opened it, and I asked to see Lady Catherine. He asked me to wait while he saw if she was at home. Upon his return, he told me that she was not at home. From somewhere within I could hear her shouting ‘Send him away and never permit him to return,’ followed by the shattering of glass. I also heard a woman scream.” He folded his hands for a moment and looked down. “Something is gravely amiss.”

“William, this woman chased her daughter out of the house with a carving knife this morning, as I have said. I have no reason to disbelieve Miss de Bourgh. Her distress and terror were genuine, and the burn on her arm is certainly genuine. Mr. Church has seen and treated it. The list of her crimes and aberrations as related to me by her daughter is shocking.” Charlotte enumerated them on her fingers.

“She is become a drunkard, consuming more port at a sitting than several gentlemen consume after dinner at Rosings. She screams when no one is present. She sends housemaids off to London, where they disappear. More than one person asserts that she is sending the maids into a life of sin. She abuses her servants. She has defaced and destroyed her sitting room.”

“How can we be sure of all these things? These are serious accusations.”

“Well, I have not yet reached the most serious. How old is Miss de Bourgh?”

“Why, she has recently passed her twenty-third birthday, I believe.”

“And how do you know this?”

“From her mother.”

“She is not twenty-three, Mr. Collins. She is nearly twenty-seven. She was supposed to inherit her father’s property and the fortune that goes with it when she turned twenty-five.

Instead of being mistress of Rosings, she has been kept there as a prisoner by her mother.

You should be able to verify her age yourself. Look at the parish register.”

“I will, madam.”

Collins left, and his wife awaited his return with little patience.

It did not take long, and when he returned, Collins carried the large book under his arm.

“The relevant pages from twenty-six and twenty-three years ago have been crudely torn out. They are completely missing, and I am unable to account for it. There is supposed to be only one set of keys, and they are in a drawer in my desk. I will keep this under lock and key in my own study until I learn from the authorities what to do about it.”

“How much more proof do you need, William? This is a serious business. You must

be very careful. It is unlawful to tamper with the church register and I would not have you accused of having destroyed those pages.”

“I cannot believe that a lady who has been so noted for her generosity, her condescension, her Christian virtue—that such a lady would stoop so low.”

“Well, then, I will finish the story for you, and you may decide for yourself. Why do you suppose she attacked her own daughter this morning? I will tell you. She learned from yesterday’s papers that two days ago Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy took a wife. He was married in London to Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Impossible. Miss Bennet threw herself into the arms of a depraved man, Viscount _____. Why...”

“That is why you went so hastily to Longbourn? To inform her father of that fact and to spread the news? It was not true, William. You were sent to Longbourn to publish an untruth. A lie. She caused you to bear false witness against a virtuous, decent young woman. You were her pawn. And what of poor Lydia Bennet? It was the same thing. She was cast adrift in London, trying desperately to free herself from a man who would dishonor her, and she was not yet sixteen. And there you were, posting off to Longbourn and from thence to Lucas Lodge to spread the news of her downfall, a downfall that never was. Who sent you? Who told you, or in that case, I will say who told us?”

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“I have a great deal to think about,” her husband replied. “She is our patroness. She has preferred me to this valuable living.”

“And what will that profit you if you lose your own soul, William? Who will you answer to for allowing your flock to be ravaged by that—that she-wolf?”

Charlotte noted that her husband seemed to be changing before her eyes.

The stupid, childish expression was completely gone now, and he looked like a grown man, a deeply troubled, thoughtful man.

His voice had lost its obsequious sing-song quality and had deepened in timbre almost as she listened to it.

“Charlotte, my dear, you are right. We must do whatever is necessary to ensure the safety of Miss de Bourgh and the others in that house. There will be time enough for me to think on my own sins later. It appears that I have been a fool, and I hope you can forgive me.”

Charlotte was quiet for a long moment. The stakes were high.

She knew that William Collins was not vile or vicious.

Up to now he had been fatuous more than anything else.

Silly and simpering and obsequious. Had these revelations changed him, brought out his better, more mature nature?

She had little choice but to trust him, and so trust him she would.

“I forgive you, William. I believe these terrible occurrences have opened your eyes and that I can trust you, so I will tell you. Miss de Bourgh has begged me to help her reach the protection of her uncle, Lord Matlock. Since he is in Derbyshire, a long and dangerous journey, I can best achieve that by taking her to London to her cousin, Mr. Darcy. Under his protection, and with his assistance, she can contact the earl. I plan to leave here with her tomorrow morning at seven. Ned will drive us in the gig to Bromley, and we will board the London mail coach at midmorning. The trip to London is short.”

“You will require money.”

“I have my quarterly housekeeping allowance and my pin money,” she replied.

“You may need more. I will see that you have it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Collins. Miss de Bourgh will be relieved to hear that she can depend upon you. As for the unfortunate servants in that house, you must be vigilant. Get a note to Timmons, the butler, and tell him to come to you if anything is amiss.”

“I must lock this in my study, and then I will join you for supper. I will prepare the note for Timmons this evening, and we shall open the strongbox and provide you with such funds as are immediately available.”

Brook Street, London - Sunday, August 9, 18__

Sunday morning in London found the newlyweds deeply asleep, entwined as was becoming their custom, and unwilling to awaken, A discreet knock at a somewhat early hour revealed Darcy’s valet, Larkin, with the information that it was Sunday and time for them to get up if they wished to attend church.

Elizabeth heard Darcy order breakfast brought to her room.

He then closed the door, located his shirt, and brought it over to the bed.

“Would you rather take dog’s leave, my darling? No one would fault you for a moment.” He pulled the shirt over her head.

Elizabeth yawned and stretched. “No. I cannot hide forever, much as I would like to. I am sure there will be plenty of good people amongst the gawkers, and if you are with me, I will not be facing them alone.”

“Still my bold Elizabeth.” Darcy kissed her gently, then more ardently, until Larkin’s knock sounded again at the door. “Now I had better feed you, Mrs. Darcy. You seem to require food and love at frequent, regular intervals. I must say, it is a pleasure to supply you with both.”

They settled down to a comfortable breakfast laid out on the table in Elizabeth’s room. She poured their coffee and handed a cup to her husband. “Will Colonel Fitzwilliam be joining us for church?”

“I suspect he would not miss it for the world.” Darcy sipped his coffee.

A little less than an hour later, Elizabeth and Darcy were strolling arm in arm towards the large church where they had just been married.

Fitzwilliam, resplendent in his regimentals, accompanied them, and they spent the walk chatting about the houses and who lived in each one.

As they entered and began the long walk toward the Darcy family pew, there was a slight but pronounced lull in the buzz of conversation, but as they took their seats, people began to talk again.

They almost instantly achieved an entirely satisfactory division of labor.

Elizabeth attended to the prayers and the sermon.

Darcy attended to Elizabeth. Colonel Fitzwilliam attended to the other members of the congregation.

The lengthy sermon flew by, and Elizabeth heard every word but could not have repeated a single one.

When the service was over, they left the pew and Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm.

They were approached by any number of people, and Darcy presented them to her.

All seemed to have kind words of welcome and felicitation, and very few seemed inclined to scrutinize her too harshly.

Others, who were too far away to approach, smiled and nodded.

Darcy had been concerned about rudeness or unkindness to his wife, but there was none .

“My, what a lot of people,” said Elizabeth as she took off her bonnet and pelisse in the front hallway. “And I do not remember a thing about the service.”

“I would say you were an unqualified success, Mrs. Darcy,” observed Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Could you not call me Elizabeth, or at least Cousin Elizabeth?”

“With pleasure, if you will call me Richard.”

Darcy looked on with an air of quiet satisfaction, and in a few minutes, dinner, always served at midday on Sundays, was announced.

Fitzwilliam spoke up after they were served.

“You are a trooper, Elizabeth. Having gotten through today, you may now relax with your husband. No one will call or otherwise bother you for at least a week. After that, it is anybody’s guess.

But if you are in town, they will allow you a week for your honeymoon.”

“What are your plans for this week, Fitzwilliam?” asked Darcy.

“Tomorrow I will get my kit over to my father’s house and await his arrival at midday. After that, it will be a matter of placing myself at his disposal. If necessary, I can write and get leave. This appears to be a rather extensive family emergency.”

Elizabeth looked over at her husband. “We would be honored if you and your father would join us for dinner tomorrow evening.” Darcy nodded, pleased.

“I think I can speak for my father and say we would be delighted. He will want to meet you if he has not gotten himself over here earlier in the day.”

They had just risen from dinner and retired to the library when Parker was announced.

He spoke without preamble. “I have troubling news from Longbourn.” He held up a hand.

“First of all, everyone is well. Your mother continues to improve, Mrs. Darcy, and they have received news of your wedding. Here is a letter for you from your mother

and sisters.” Parker appeared to be searching for the right words.

“Wickham emerged from hiding. He made his way to Longbourn and hid himself on the grounds. Yesterday, your sisters left the house to take the air in the garden under the protection of one of the Hills. Wickham used a moment of distraction to attempt an assault on your sister, Miss Mary Bennet, at knifepoint.”

Elizabeth’s gasp was horrified, and Darcy reached for her hand.

“No, no, Mrs. Darcy. He did not succeed. The successful person was Miss Mary. She took the knife away from him and dealt him a deep wound to the heart. She was joined by the elder Hill son, Jem, who dealt Wickham a killing blow with one of his hedging tools. Wickham is deceased. Your sister, though deeply distressed, is completely unhurt, and I am told your mother is not aware of what has happened. Your father and your other sisters are providing all comfort to Miss Mary, and it is hoped that she will recover from the shock and anguish. It should help that Jem Hill so ably defended her.”

“Mary,” breathed Elizabeth. “What have my family and I ever done to deserve all of this?” Darcy squeezed her hand more tightly, and she could feel her wedding ring. It comforted her. “What next?”

“Mrs. Darcy.” Parker’s eyes were still deeply troubled.

“You have done nothing. You are innocent people who have attracted the notice of a woman who wields great power but who is not rational. It is not just your family she has attacked. She has succeeded in ruining many innocent lives. You already know of her injuries to the Olivers. We know of many more, but we may never know the full extent of her wickedness and depravity.”

He paused and glanced sharply at Darcy, who nodded for him to continue, “In fact, it

appears that she has also plotted to harm her closest family members. Although it is impossible to fathom her reasons for doing so, we have uncovered solid evidence that she was behind the attempted abduction of Miss Georgiana Darcy.”

Elizabeth gasped and looked at Darcy, whose face was grim. “But why?”

“My sister’s fortune,” replied Darcy. “Thirty thousand pounds is a large sum to leave lying about. And in the event of Georgiana’s death, I would inherit that money.

Therefore, it would eventually go to improve her daughter’s station.

She reckoned without the fact that I would have done anything to recover Georgiana, just as I would have done for you. ”

“Her efforts to injure Mr. Darcy through his friends and family members have all failed. She has been thwarted at every turn, and this is driving her to behave in ways that are ever more reckless. With the demise of George Wickham, we have temporarily broken her power. He has functioned as her right-hand man in committing these crimes. We must move quickly to ensure that she never regains that power. I am sure Colonel Fitzwilliam, here, would say we must bring the fight to her. I believe we can defeat her and secure justice for all whom she has wronged.”

Elizabeth managed a smile. “Well said, Sergeant Parker. I am a faithful soldier in your army, and I await your orders.”

Darcy pressed her hand again. “That’s my brave Elizabeth.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

On Monday morning at a quarter to seven in Hunsford, the Reverend William Collins escorted two ladies out of the back door and down the garden path to the lane, where a gig stood waiting.

He handed two small bags to the young man who was driving before turning to the smaller of the two ladies.

“Godspeed, Miss de Bourgh,” he said as he handed her up into the gig.

Next he turned to his wife. “Godspeed, Charlotte. Do take care. Are you certain you have enough money?”

“I feel sure I do, William. I have what I started with and the extra you gave me.” She placed her hand on his arm. “Look after those poor souls at Rosings, especially Mrs. Jenkinson.”

“You have my word.” The church bell began tolling the hour, and Mr. Collins kissed his wife and handed her up into the gig.

Nine o’clock found Elizabeth presiding over a family breakfast for the first time as Mrs. Darcy and pouring coffee for her husband and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

All three were determined to be cheerful despite the dreadful news from Longbourn, and the conversation centered on their attendance at church the day before and the anticipated arrival of the Earl.

The Colonel prepared to leave directly after breakfast. “Do not be surprised, Cousin

Elizabeth, if my father stops by for a visit soon after his arrival in town. If he comes home first, I will accompany him here.”

Darcy spoke from his end of the table. “Elizabeth, we have one more errand to discharge this morning. When you have finished your breakfast, I suggest you get your bonnet and pelisse.”

The barouche was waiting for them at the front of the house as they left it arm in arm, and Darcy handed his wife up. He gave the coachman a written direction before entering the carriage himself, but to Elizabeth he would only say, with a small but satisfied smile, “My turn.”

The shop was a jeweler’s. “I like to regard myself as a compassionate man, and your trinket box has struck me as being very lonely. Indeed, it contains only one trinket at the moment. The other is around your very elegant neck. Our first task today, therefore, is to fill the trinket box. My sister has been adding to hers since her twelfth birthday, so we have some catching-up to do.”

They began to study the various cases together, and Elizabeth found his tastes coincided very much with hers and that his instincts were unerring.

“I am content, Mr. Darcy,” said Elizabeth at length. “These are all beautiful, but the most important thing is that they are gifts from you, and you have helped me to select them.”

Darcy turned back to the cases and added a necklace and earrings in pink topaz.

He also selected several pairs of combs including a pair inset with a simple design in diamonds.

Then he turned to the hovering assistant and said, “Please tell Mr. Blackstone we are

ready for him, and have these waiting for us.”

Mr. Blackstone, the proprietor, bowed Darcy and Elizabeth through a door into a large, well-appointed private office and seated them in front of a desk near a window that flooded the room with light. The sight of what was laid out there quite took Elizabeth’s breath away.

The two men sat back and regarded her with an air of expectancy.

She gazed at each parure and demi-parure in turn, not knowing what to say.

Eventually, after careful thought and encouragement from Darcy, she selected a simple riviére necklace of sapphires with matching earrings.

She was also interested by a cunningly wrought set of diamonds.

It included earrings, a beautifully simple necklace, and a sunburst brooch.

“I think you had better have both,” said Darcy. “Having seen you wearing them, I cannot choose between them.”

“It is fortunate that I have bespoken several new gowns to match such beautiful jewels,” replied Elizabeth with a teasing smile.

Elizabeth clasped the heart pendant back around her neck, Darcy shook hands with Mr. Blackstone, and they returned to the showroom together. When the jewels were wrapped and stowed safely in Darcy’s pockets, they left the store and found the barouche waiting for them in front.

“I do not know how to thank you,” said Elizabeth as they started for home.

“I cannot kiss you in this open carriage.” She spoke quietly to avoid being heard by the coachman and footman.

To her delight, Darcy winked. “Wear the sapphires for my uncle this evening,” he said.

He knew what she did not. By day’s end, Mr. Blackstone would have informed half of fashionable London of what trinkets and serious jewels from his shop had been favored by Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy and purchased for her by her obviously adoring husband.

“Well, they did tell me in Audley Street that some gentleman would soon have me covered in gems.”

“The only gentleman who will be covering you in gems is me. In fact, I would not object to seeing you covered in those sapphires and very little else.”

“If you keep whispering against my ear, Mr. Darcy, that might happen before we reach home.”

He managed to do quite a bit more whispering, and when they walked into the house, Elizabeth threw him a look that told him his presence was urgently requested above stairs.

When they reached the hallway that led to their apartments, Darcy threw her over his shoulder and carried her to their rooms, pausing to lock the door behind him.

When at length she clung to him trembling with pleasure, he laughed and kissed her and said, “I know the way to your heart, my girl, and it has nothing to do with jewels.”

This adventure proved eminently satisfactory to both of them, and eventually Elizabeth said, “I will just ring and have a light luncheon brought to my room, shall I?”

“I cannot think of any pleasanter way to pass the afternoon.”

Just as they finished their luncheon, a footman knocked and announced, “Mrs. William Collins and Miss Anne de Bourgh have arrived and are waiting downstairs.”

Puzzled, Elizabeth finally managed to say, “Please have them wait in my sitting room. We will be right down.” She was momentarily rooted to the spot by the idea that the two had come here to represent Lady Catherine. However, her husband’s voice reassured her, and they walked downstairs arm in arm.

Elizabeth embraced them both, saying, “You are very welcome to London. I am so glad to see you both.” After Darcy had greeted them, Elizabeth continued. “Let me take you upstairs. I am sure you will want to take off your bonnets and pelisses. Have you come all the way from Kent?”

Mrs. Peterson came bustling in, sent by the butler.

Darcy instructed her. “Mrs. Peterson, please arrange for a luncheon to be brought here as soon as possible and prepare the two adjoining rooms near Miss Darcy’s apartments for our guests.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, my uncle Matlock and Sergeant Parker are expected.

Please bring them in here when they arrive.

Otherwise, unless Mr. Gardiner or Mrs. Gardiner were to call, we are not to be disturbed. ”

When the ladies had returned a few minutes later, and their privacy was assured, Darcy turned to his cousin. “Now tell us why you are here, Anne. While we are certainly happy to see you, you have never left Rosings on your own before. What has happened?”

Anne’s voice shook. “My mother tried to kill me yesterday. She read the announcement of your marriage in the paper, and it made her so angry that she threw a carving knife at my head, barely missing me. I left the house and ran to the parsonage. Mr. and Mrs. Collins hid me there until this morning, the first opportunity we had of reaching London.”

Elizabeth was surprised but said nothing. She reasoned that Anne’s plight must have been dreadful indeed to have attracted the sympathy of Mr. Collins.

“That was not her first violent attack on me. The day before yesterday, she threw the contents of a pot of hot tea at me and burned my arm.”

“Anne, why would your mother attack you so violently? Was it merely the news of the marriage?”

“Fitzwilliam, I have come to understand that my mother desires but one thing: To possess Rosings and Pemberley and their associated fortunes. When she attacked me, she screamed that I was ‘useless.’ And of course, I had been useless in forwarding her ambition. You are my cousin, and I am fond of you, but I never wished to marry you. That makes me useless. My mother has kept me virtually a prisoner at home. She retains complete control of Rosings, which I should have inherited by now. I am not even given an allowance.”

“She lies about Miss de Bourgh’s age,” added Charlotte.

“My husband would have taken an oath that she had recently turned twenty-three,

when in reality she is twenty-six years old. He found yesterday that the parish register which should have recorded her birth and baptism had the relevant pages torn from the volume. This was what finally convinced him that we should give all aid and succor to Miss de Bourgh. And so here we are. I should also add that we are concerned for the welfare of those servants and retainers still at Rosings. And Mr. Collins is alone in holding things together.”

Darcy took Anne’s hand. “Here you will stay under my protection until these matters have been resolved. You have been the victim of a terrible injustice, Anne. I will do whatever is in my power to help you.”

“I had hoped to secure your assistance in getting to Derbyshire to our uncle,” said Anne.

“Fortunately, he is on his way here. In fact, he may already have arrived. Fitzwilliam is also in town, and they are dining with us this evening.”

Anne’s eyes closed briefly, and she seemed to relax for the first time. “It has been very difficult to live at Rosings with my mother. She appears to have lost her mind.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Darcy looked at his watch. "Sergeant Parker will be here at any moment, and I must speak with him. Mrs. Collins, if you wish to inform Mr. Collins of your safe arrival, perhaps you will write a note and I will see that it is delivered to him."

Charlotte stood but did not approach the desk.

"Anne must go up to her room and rest. We called in the surgeon yesterday afternoon, and he has instructed me to see that the burn remains clean and to bandage it. It is large enough to require special attention to ward off any signs of infection. Unfortunately, she has no clothes with her, and that includes night clothes."

Elizabeth stood immediately and rang for Mrs. Peterson, who sent a maid for bandages.

The three women supported Anne upstairs.

Mrs. Peterson brought a fresh nightgown belonging to Georgiana while Elizabeth and Charlotte assisted Anne to undress.

Mrs. Peterson unwrapped and observed the burn, observing, "That looks right to me." She bathed the wound, bandaged it in clean linen, and helped Anne into the soft nightgown and then into bed.

"I have a draught for her." Charlotte opened her reticule.

In a few minutes, Anne's eyes closed peacefully, and her regular breathing indicated an untroubled sleep. They left her and returned downstairs.

“The burn is not trivial, Fitzwilliam. We need to watch Anne carefully and allow her to rest. I am shocked at her condition. She is also dreadfully thin. I would say alarmingly thin, would not you, Charlotte?”

“Yes. Alarmingly thin. I noticed the same thing yesterday when she was preparing for bed at my house, and the surgeon also commented on it. I do not believe she has eaten properly. She told me her mother does not permit her to eat many foods and she is often hungry. Whether she is ill or whether she has been maltreated is a matter to be decided. She needs our care, and the surgeon has called for plenty of nourishing food.”

Darcy’s face was troubled. “Sleep will be the best thing for her now. Elizabeth, we should leave orders for the cook.”

They heard men’s voices in the hall, and Colonel Fitzwilliam entered with a tall silver-haired man who could only be the Earl of Matlock.

Darcy shook hands with his uncle and quickly performed the introductions.

After bowing gravely to Charlotte, the Earl turned to Elizabeth, took her hand in both of his, and kissed her cheek.

“Welcome to the family, Mrs. Darcy. My nephew has found himself a bride who is not only beautiful but valiant as well. I am delighted to meet you.”

“I am pleased to meet you as well, sir.”

When they had all been seated, Darcy began without preamble.

“Our cousin, Anne de Bourgh, lies in bed upstairs. She is suffering from a serious burn inflicted deliberately by her mother. She found it necessary to flee Rosings after

a second, murderous attack by her mother and has come here with the assistance of Mrs. Collins and her husband, who is the rector of Hunsford Parish.” Darcy quickly outlined the facts for his uncle, including Anne’s poor physical condition, the violent incidents of the past few days, and her situation as her mother’s prisoner.

He did not omit the misrepresentation of her age or the defacement of the parish register.

The earl sat rigidly while Darcy spoke. When Darcy finished, he stood and asked, “When may I see her?”

Elizabeth spoke up. “Sir, the burn on her arm is not extensive, but it is painful, and we are doing all within our power to see that it heals cleanly. The journey from Hunsford was exhausting and caused additional disruption to the burn. She has been given a sleeping draught and is sleeping peacefully. While she may not wish to join us for dinner, perhaps she will be able to come down to the drawing room afterwards. If not, we will arrange for you to visit her in her room. Your presence will mean a great deal to her. All she could think of during her ordeal was finding her way to your protection and when she arrived here, she asked for my husband’s assistance to travel to your home in Derbyshire.

It was only when she learned you were here that she was able to rest.”

“Well done, my dear. We will do just as you suggest.”

Darcy interrupted. “We learned yesterday that Wickham was killed while attempting to assault Miss Mary Bennet at the family home, Longbourn. He was thoroughly implicated in the scheme to abduct and abandon Miss Lydia Bennet. While Wickham has cheated the hangman, we can hope that the two hired men who murdered Caroline Bingley’s footman and abducted Elizabeth will thoroughly implicate Lady Catherine.

They will be tried at the assizes which are meeting at Wells. ”

“Mary?” Charlotte Collins was the first to speak, putting her hand to her mouth. “But what has she ever done to anyone? I am at a loss for words.”

“As were we all.”

The Earl picked up the conversation. “Wickham was obviously in the pay of my sister, serving as her executioner. She must be stopped. The situation at Rosings cannot and will not be allowed to continue. I have asked Sergeant Parker to dispatch two good men immediately to begin dealing with Catherine.” He turned to Charlotte.

“Mrs. Collins, am I correct in presuming your husband will wish to help them?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The men will carry a letter for Mr. Collins. We know that some of the servants at Rosings may be in danger, and the men will be charged with safeguarding them and with ensuring that Catherine does not escape. We must keep her there until everything is prepared.

“Before I heard what happened to Anne, I had already written to my solicitor and requested him to wait upon me at nine tomorrow morning to address what to do about my sister. Clearly things are much worse at Rosings than I could have ever imagined. We must now also review Lewis de Bourgh’s will to confirm that Anne was to have inherited her father’s entire estate at twenty-five.

That includes locating the executor and trustee of the estate.

If Sir Lewis named Catherine, then she has defrauded Anne of her money and property.

If he named someone else, either she has conspired with that person or she has deceived the rightful executor and usurped the position.

“In addition to the question of the inheritance, my sister has committed a number of grievous crimes.

Once we have dealt with Rosings, we need to identify and assist or compensate all of her victims. Among them are innocent members of several respectable families including the Bennets, the Darcys, and the Bingleys.

We must proceed in a way that protects the reputations of these families, and especially of the vulnerable young women. I will seek the advice of my solicitor.

“That is all for now, but there will be more, I assure you all.” He turned to Elizabeth with a smile. “Until this evening, Mrs. Darcy. Mrs. Collins.”

Hunsford Parsonage, Kent - Monday, August 10, 18__

Mr. Collins ate a late and lonely supper in the dining room at the parsonage.

Because he was alone, he brought a book from his study to read as he ate.

It was a curious volume, old, leatherbound, and somewhat resembling a ledger.

It was in fact the hand-written journal of Dr. Oliver, which he had found among some books left in the study by previous occupants. He had been reading it all afternoon.

Dr. Oliver’s story was doubly tragic to another priest, though it would have broken anyone’s heart.

Because of Lady Catherine’s deceit, his punishment was severe indeed.

Though Anglican clergy were never defrocked, he was deprived by his bishop of the ability to preach, to celebrate Holy Communion, to bless, to absolve people of their sins; in short, to do anything at all to minister to his congregation.

As if that cup were not bitter enough, on the very evening of the day he received this awful sentence, a woman from the village had come to the door.

Her father was dying. Dr. Oliver was needed to comfort the man, to give him the last rites, to ease his passing.

Dr. Oliver had sent the woman away, and from that moment on, his heart had been broken.

His journal was a powerful testament to his faith, which he had never abandoned.

Mr. Collins rubbed his temples, where a headache seemed to be starting.

It would have been easy, so very easy, for Lady Catherine to ruin that good man and his daughter.

Had she bribed the churchwardens? Intimidated or blackmailed them, perhaps?

Was this her first taste of the benefits to be had by ruining the lives of others simply because she could?

Mr. Collins shook his head as he reflected on his own stubbornness and blindness.

Although he had not suffered as Dr. Oliver had, he had come perilously close to abandoning all of his responsibilities.

He might lose the living at Hunsford. But wherever he found himself, he was

determined to exercise his ministry in a way that would be above reproach.

His only hope was that he would be able to take care of Charlotte.

As he sat, lost in thought, there was a loud knocking at the door and the sound of shouting in the front hall. Lady Catherine swept in, immaculately coiffed and gowned, and with every appearance of being sober. Mr. Collins rose courteously from his place at the table.

“Where is my daughter? What have you done with her? And where is your wife, Mr. Collins?”

“My wife has escorted Miss de Bourgh to a place of safety. That is all I am at liberty to tell you.”

She leaned forward so that her face was unpleasantly close to his, and flecks of spittle hit his face as she continued. “Do not cross me, Mr. Collins. I can make it very, very unpleasant for you. There are those who would support my case with the Bishop.”

“Would those be the same persons who falsely supported your case against the Reverend Doctor Charles Oliver?” Collins held up the book.

“His journal makes for interesting reading. Almost as interesting as the parish register from twenty-six years ago. The difference is that the journal is not missing any of its pages.”

She tried to snatch the book from him, and when she failed, she turned and left the room without a word.

Collins, watching from the doorway, saw Darcy’s man waiting silently near the back stairs.

He followed Lady Catherine out, staying well back in the shadows, and in a few moments, he heard her carriage rumble down the lane toward Rosings.

Brook Street, London - Monday, August 10, 18__

The dinner had turned out to be a great success, given Elizabeth's state of nerves beforehand.

Charlotte had written her letter home, washed, rested, and dressed in the gown Jenny had found for her.

Anne, looking much better after her nap, was escorted down after dinner to join the others in the drawing room.

Her uncle embraced her fondly and spoke reassuringly of her safety, though his shock at her appearance could not be entirely hidden.

Although there were intervals of serious talk, the entire party had done their best to ensure that the conversation was light, pleasant, and relaxing.

Darcy was always at his best with close friends and family, and Elizabeth realized with a little stab of delight that she formed part of that circle now.

She was also pleased with her simple gown of ivory silk, and she had worn the sapphires.

Their guests left after tea, and Charlotte and Anne begged to be excused shortly thereafter.

Elizabeth and Darcy picked up their candles and started up the stairs arm in arm.

When they reached the hallway to their rooms, Darcy said quietly, “Send your maid away.” The look in his eyes and the tone of his voice sent a delightful shiver through her, and she nodded.

When she had sent Jenny away and passed into his room, she found him waiting for her in his shirtsleeves. “I think the Earl noticed the sapphires,” she said with a smile. “Though he did not say anything.”

“He is too much of a gentleman to say anything so personal. But he noticed. And so did I.” Her preference for gowns with square-cut necklines that showed a discreet décolletage was not lost on Darcy, and this particular neckline had kept his senses on a knife-edge all evening.

He wanted nothing more at present than to explore that line between ivory silk and snowy breast, and he closed the distance between them in an instant, covering her with kisses until she moaned and pulled his face up to meet hers.

The gown and its heavy petticoats were discarded, and she stood before him in nothing but the gleaming necklace. He ran a finger around it and said roughly, “It is nothing when compared with your eyes.”

Elizabeth, never taking her eyes off him, reached up to begin removing the combs and pins from her hair. “No, not this time,” he said, reaching out a hand to stop her. “The next time I see you gowned and coiffed for the evening, I want to remember making love to you like this.”

Later, when they lay together spoon-fashion in the wide bed, he helped her remove the necklace so that it would not injure her skin as she slept.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

On Tuesday morning, Anne joined the rest of the group at breakfast. Elizabeth and Darcy both noticed that her looks were greatly improved.

Her cheeks had a more natural bloom, her eyes had all but lost their dark circles, and Jenny had arranged her hair in a natural, feminine style that accentuated her delicate features.

She asserted cheerfully that her burn was healing nicely and did not hurt very much at all.

“I have slept so well!” she exclaimed. “And this morning I have such an appetite.”

“You shall have as much as you like of whatever you like.” Elizabeth passed a heaping platter of ham and followed it with the eggs. “My mother would insist upon feeding you porridge with rich cream and plenty of sugar.”

“That sounds delicious,” replied Anne. “And I will have some just as soon as I finish these lovely eggs.” Anne set down her knife and fork.

“At home I was not permitted such foods. My mother said they had too much grease and heaviness. Breakfast was a soft-boiled egg and dry toast, though the other things were on the table. The thought of porridge with cream and sugar sounds like heaven. Mrs. Peterson has told me that nourishing food will aid my recovery from the injury.”

“And what of other meals, Anne?” Elizabeth had always enjoyed her food, and her mother was noted for keeping an excellent table.

“I ate mostly the white meat of chicken and certain delicate fish. Beef and other meats were supposed to be too difficult for me to digest, and for vegetables I had peas when they were available, potatoes without butter, and winter vegetables such as turnips. Most fruit was forbidden. The cook often made me up a gruel to soothe my digestion. But I have always felt a little hungry.”

“Here you shall have all you want. If you do not feel well, you need not eat. Otherwise, eat your fill and enjoy your food. Everything is wholesome and good. Mrs. Peterson may suggest special dishes to help you recover from your injury.”

Charlotte, too, looked well rested and less nervous. “I should consider returning home, now that Miss de Bourgh is in such good hands.”

“Mrs. Collins, I am sure you would be pleased to return to your husband and to the parish. But you are safe here. Do me the honor of accepting my protection until the difficulties at Rosings are resolved. I am certain Mr. Collins would agree with me.”

Charlotte wondered how she had ever regarded this man as aloof or standoffish. “Of course, you are right, Mr. Darcy. I thank you, and so will Mr. Collins.”

“If you like, we can send a man to Hunsford for your trunk. If you would be so good as to prepare a list of the items you require, he can be on his way within the hour and will return before evening. I am sure one of the maids at the parsonage can pack for you.”

“How kind. I will do so directly.”

“Anne, is Jenny helping you find all you need to wear among Georgiana’s things?”

“Yes. I will need to go shopping eventually, but so long as Georgiana does not mind, I can borrow her things.”

Their guests soon dispersed, and Elizabeth joined Darcy in the library.

“Let us take a turn in the garden. The morning is still cool and fresh.” Darcy offered her his arm, and they stepped together out of the French doors.

The garden was like a small jewel. The noise and traffic of the city could be heard but did not intrude.

Elizabeth sighed luxuriously. “I have not yet begun to appreciate this enough. I should come out here every day to spend time.”

Her husband kissed her. “We can also spend time here together. We no longer need to hide from family and chaperones. Now we can hide from everyone.” They sat together on a bench, and his eyes grew serious.

“Elizabeth, I must leave you for an hour or two to go to my uncle.

It concerns the damages to the various families.

I thought Anne and Mrs. Collins could use this time to rest and refresh themselves after their long day yesterday.

“The trial of Wickham’s hired men might be held as soon as today because the midsummer session of the assizes is almost at an end.

I believe they will be convicted, and if that is so, they will be hanged.

Wickham has avoided that death, though not by much.

It grieves me for the sake of both my father and old Mr. Wickham that George Wickham has met such an ignoble end, but it cannot be helped. ”

“Now, here is something much more pleasant.” Darcy reached into his pocket and brought out a letter. “I have had a letter from Georgiana, and she encloses a note for you.”

Elizabeth smiled as she opened her note.

“She is the dearest girl!” she exclaimed as she finished reading.

“She welcomes me to the family, tells me how glad she is to have me as a sister, and cannot wait until we are together at Pemberley, where she says we will have music every day. Here, you may read it for yourself. I will confess that I, too, wish we were at Pemberley.”

“It will not be long now, dearest. ”

“Do you suppose Lady Catherine was doing something to Anne’s food?” Elizabeth’s eyes held a thoughtful look.

“I think it more likely that she was being constantly underfed. Anne had a severe attack of the measles when she was already into her teens. Georgiana and I both had them as children and recovered quickly, but I remember that Anne was sick for weeks. It seems likely that her mother has used the illness as a means of restricting her diet and depriving her of fresh air and exercise. Mrs. Peterson and the cook will rise to the challenge when it comes to good food. Anne is resting well, and her appetite is good. She has always seemed too thin and small to me.”

“She is already enjoying the food. And she is eating well.”

“There is one more thing. Included in my uncle’s note this morning was an invitation for all of us to accompany him to the theater this evening. That is to be followed by supper at the Piazza.”

“How thoughtful. I feel sure Anne and Charlotte will be as delighted as I am.”

“It is a thoughtful gesture. I feel sure he wishes to lessen the burden of what is to come. It will not be easy for any of us.”

“I have something to tell you that I have been postponing, and now that I have recalled it, I want to be sure you know of it so you may tell the Earl if you think he needs to know.” Elizabeth sighed and gathered her thoughts.

“The young woman in the dungeon at Audley Street who was so badly injured is a gentleman’s daughter.

Her name is Arabella Grant, and she has been held captive for several years, Fitzwilliam!

First in various places by Mrs. Younge, then in the house in Audley Street when it was opened. ”

Her husband had gone white as a sheet. “That is not possible, Lizzy. Arabella Grant died five years ago. . .”

“Yes. I know. In a horseback riding or hunting accident or the like. Only she did not die, my dearest love. She was disowned by her family. Fitzwilliam, what is the matter?”

“Dear God. It cannot be.” Darcy turned away from Elizabeth.

After a long moment, he spoke. “She must be there because of me. Six years ago, I came to London with my aunt and uncle for my first Season. I was introduced to Miss Grant, who was also here for her first Season. Her mother had been a schoolfellow of Lady Catherine. Miss Grant and I shared two sets of dances—country dances—at

Almack's.

I was invited by her parents to attend a large dress-party at their house here, and I sent flowers and paid a morning call on Miss Grant and her mother the following day, as is customary.

It was commonly understood that she had fallen in love with a young gentleman whose name escapes me, and I lost sight of Miss Grant soon after that, and then heard of her tragic end that same autumn. What happened to her?"

"Woefully similar to all of our stories." Elizabeth took her husband's hand and held it.

"She was abducted by Wickham from a park near her father's home.

He assaulted her viciously, at knifepoint, and when he had done with her, he took her to Mrs. Younge.

She has been engaged in her present occupation since then, always entrapped by Mrs. Younge.

Her family found her, but when they learned of her circumstances, they disowned her and told the world that she had died in the horseback riding accident.

Now she is twenty-three. The gentleman who found her is still very much in love with her.

He is a younger son, and he gave up a position as secretary to a nobleman because of her.

He works now as a clerk in a counting-house, saving every farthing to redeem her.

He visits her once each month, pays for her time, and spends an hour in conversation with her.

He has never behaved improperly toward her.

I believe she honestly looked forward to the time when her youth had fled so that they could marry and be together.

She ran afoul of Mrs. Younge over a bill, and she was handed over to the abuse and suffering I told you about. ”

“What is his name?”

“Robert Mason. His firm is Conklin and Pierce, a counting-house.”

Darcy’s eyes mirrored his troubled spirit.

“I am glad you told me this, Elizabeth. I will consult with my uncle about what is to be done for her. Would you—could you—send around a note to her? Assure her that help is on the way and that her plight has not gone unheard. I will instruct Parker that if Mason wishes to call on her, he is not to be turned away and that no expense should be spared towards her recovery.”

Elizabeth placed her forehead against her husband’s so that they were eye to eye. “Hear me, Fitzwilliam. This is not your fault, and you must not blame yourself. This is the fault of George Wickham and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Blame them.”

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He pulled her close to him and spoke into her hair. "You are right, of course, my dearest Lizzy. But I cannot help wondering if there are any more." He sighed. "I must go, but I will return in a couple of hours. Try to take a rest this afternoon before the evening's entertainment."

"Fitzwilliam, there is one more thing."

"You have only to name it, Lizzy."

"Those poor little children that were in that place. My heart tells me that they will be better off with Uncle's neighbor, Evan Caldwell, than they would be at an orphanage. He and Anna will arrange for care that is more compassionate." Tears stood in her eyes.

"You are perfectly right, Lizzy. Love and compassion cost nothing, yet for children such as those, they are everything. My understanding is that the children were kidnapped but had not been harmed. With kindness and gentle questioning, it may be possible to locate their relations. I will write to Evan Caldwell this afternoon when I return home."

Elizabeth left him with a kiss and returned to her sitting room. Her guests were delighted with the prospect of an evening out. "I must write a note," said Elizabeth. "But when I have finished, let us go to my dressing room and send for Jenny."

After the note had been dispatched, they went upstairs. Jenny grasped the situation perfectly and left them, returning from Georgiana's abundant wardrobe with enchanting evening gowns for Anne and Charlotte. The problem of Anne's bandage

was solved by a pretty zephyr shawl from Elizabeth's things.

Jenny turned her attention to Elizabeth. "Will you wear the new diamond set this evening, Mrs. Darcy?"

"The necklace and earrings, but not the pendant brooch."

Jenny smiled and nodded and reached into the wardrobe, emerging with a silk gown in deep rose.

It featured the square neckline Elizabeth favored, and the bodice had been embroidered in silk that was very close to the color of the gown itself.

The only other decoration was three deep tucks at the hem, and the gown closed at the back with a row of small buttons.

"It is not a color I generally wear. "

Charlotte put her hands together. "But oh, Lizzy. How it suits you."

"Then I will wear the pink topaz set instead, Jenny."

The three ladies were very merry at luncheon. Elizabeth and Charlotte were especially glad to see the way Anne attacked the offering of fruit with every appearance of enjoyment.

"It does me good to see you enjoying your food, Anne." Elizabeth offered her the bowl of grapes. "Fruit is so nourishing, and it is so very good for you."

"And it is so very, very delicious." Anne smiled and broke off another small bunch of grapes.

As they were finishing, Elizabeth was struck with a sudden headache. Charlotte noticed immediately. "You do look pale, Lizzy. Perhaps you should go and lie down."

"I believe I will, if you ladies will be comfortable without me."

"We will be resting, too."

Elizabeth excused herself and went upstairs.

Bypassing her own room, she entered the room she and Darcy now shared.

She had soon drawn the curtains, and she lay down and closed her eyes.

She knew she should ring for hartshorn and water, but the room was so peaceful that she tried to relax.

She heard the door open, and then Darcy was standing beside her, looking down.

"I was told you had a sudden headache, dearest love. Shall I send for your maid?"

"No," she replied, reaching out for his hand. "Only stay a little while if you like. I am glad you are here."

"I will be back in just a moment." He disappeared into his dressing room and returned minutes later in his shirtsleeves.

"Can you sit up? Lean back on me." He assisted her, and soon she was leaning back against his solid form.

He began to remove the pins and combs from her hair, drawing them out carefully

one by one.

He caught its weight in his hands as it fell, drawing it gently over her shoulder.

Then she felt the tips of his fingers begin to massage her scalp, moving in delicate circles, then growing firmer, then moving to include her temples.

Finally, his hands searched out her neck and shoulders, finding all the little knots of soreness that had made her miserable.

These he worked at, one by one, until all had disappeared.

And when he had done all of that, he brushed out her hair, working the tangles free with his fingers until he heard her give a little moan of pure delight.

“Does that feel better, Lizzy?” he whispered against her ear. “Could you sleep a little now?”

“Mmm, I could sleep for a week,” she replied, not moving from where she lay against his shoulder. “Can you stay? But we must leave word to be awakened by five.”

“I have already done so, my dearest girl.” He helped her to lie down, pulled a quilt over her, and got in beside her, curling his tall form behind her. In moments they were both deeply asleep.

Later, as she dressed, Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

The theater had always been a rare treat for her, and tonight they would hear *The Marriage of Figaro*.

She put on her earrings, and Jenny clasped the beautiful pink topaz necklace about

her neck.

She picked up her gloves and her fan. “Be sure you have seen to the others, Jenny, and then take the rest of the evening off. I will see you in the morning.”

Darcy was standing by the fire in their bedroom, and a rare smile brightened his face. “You are ravishing, Mrs. Darcy.” He gave her his arm, and the two walked downstairs to join the others.

The theater was crowded with what seemed like thousands of people. Nevertheless, there was a slight hush as they entered the Earl’s box, just as there had been at the church. The Earl escorted Anne, the Darcys followed, and Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mrs. Collins brought up the rear.

Elizabeth was slightly uneasy as she turned to her husband. “I feel as though they are all staring at us.”

“No, they are not. They are all staring at you, my dearest.”

Rosings, Kent - Tuesday, August 11, 18__

She poured herself another measure of brandy and began to pace back and forth in the large drawing room.

Her private sitting room with its ink-stained walls and shattered glass, was no longer fit to be used.

Her fury over Darcy’s marriage was white-hot, and she considered what must be done to end it.

The trollop would be dealt with, properly this time.

Her body would be found floating in the Thames.

But where was Wickham? If he had disappeared, she would require new recruits.

No matter, there were plenty of able-bodied servants at Rosings who would be happy for a little extra money.

Now that she thought about it, however, Rosings had grown eerily quiet in the days following Anne's headlong flight and disappearance.

She had seen very few people in the house.

Her meals were served to her in solitary splendor by Timmons and the first footman, and her maid, Marks, continued to dress her.

That much had not changed. But she no longer heard the steps of a footman in a corridor or the hushed voices or suppressed giggles of the housemaids.

Even Mrs. Jenkinson kept to her room, pleading illness.

Strangely, she did not recognize the few servants she did encounter in passing.

She had not stooped to chase after her traitorous daughter. Of course, the wretched chit must have fled to London. Well, let her go! She'd come crying back again soon enough when she wanted money. And when she did, her life would be a living hell .

Lady Catherine had not deigned to appear at the regular daily service of Morning Prayer, and that idiot, Collins, had not shown himself at the house.

Regretfully, she realized she might have to summon him to Rosings in order to assist her in finding someone to replace Wickham.

He should know of some desperate man in the village who would be vulnerable to a little blackmail.

She summoned a footman to carry her message to Hunsford, but when the footman answered the summons, she realized she had never seen him before.

Wells, Somersetshire - Tuesday, August 11, 18__

Caroline Bingley sat between her brother Charles and Sir Robert Carter in a crowded guild hall in the town of Wells, some eighteen miles from Bath.

Maria Carter and Caroline's Uncle Bingley sat on the other side of Sir Robert.

The room had been set up as a courtroom, and Caroline and the Carters were present to testify in the assault and battery on Caroline and the murder of her footman.

She looked about her. The area where they were seated in the front row was reserved for witnesses.

Some of the other chairs were occupied by people she recognized, including the surgeon and the two constables from Bath.

She presumed that the others were bystanders from that fateful afternoon whom she had not seen .

She turned to her brother. "I am amazed at the number of spectators here. It is as if they were at a play. They will idle away an entire day watching a life-or-death struggle. It is so distasteful, and the noise is dreadful."

"Indeed, they will watch this trial and several others besides," replied Bingley. "But it is no different in London."

A hush fell over the room, and Caroline realized that the judge had entered and gone to his seat behind a table on a platform set up in the front of the room.

Clad in the scarlet robes of his office, his red face peered out from a large wig.

Caroline thought he looked peevish or perhaps dyspeptic.

Before she had time to think, the jury filed in and took the seats provided for them.

Almost immediately, two shackled prisoners were escorted in to stand in the dock.

Her brother patted her gloved hand reassuringly and placed her arm through his.

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They all turned back toward the front as the charges were read, and each prisoner answered, "Not guilty." Caroline noted that one of them wore a dirty bandage on his hand, and she assumed that this was the man she had bitten.

As the prosecutor began to speak to the jury, and she regarded the scene at the front of the improvised courtroom, she realized that the prisoners would have no advocate. They must speak for themselves.

Almost before she was aware of what was happening, her name was called.

Leaning on her brother's arm, for her ankle had not yet healed, she made her way to the front of the courtroom, stood with the Bible in her hands, and repeated the words of the oath.

The judge, noting her difficulty with her ankle, caused a chair to be brought for her, and she was seated.

The prosecutor, in a series of questions, began to elicit from her the story of the fateful day.

Caroline Bingley was both intelligent and well-educated.

Keeping her eyes on the man's face, she answered each of his questions as clearly and completely as she could.

She was determined not to provoke any laughter from the riffraff seated in the back of the courtroom.

She told concisely of setting off from the Pump Room with her footman and following her usual path through the gardens.

She related the dreadful grunt and thud that alerted her to the death of the footman, told of screaming for help, and of the sensation of having the man's hand clamped over her mouth.

"What happened next, Miss Bingley?" asked the attorney.

"He told me not to make a sound. I bit his hand as hard as I could, then I heard an oath, and moments later I fell unconscious. I knew no more until I awoke under the care of the Carters."

"And who are the Carters?"

Caroline pointed them out. "That lady and gentleman seated on the first row. They are Miss Maria Carter and her brother, Sir Robert Carter. They were the first persons to come to my assistance that day."

"What was the nature of your injuries, Miss Bingley?"

"I received a blow to the back of my head which crushed my bonnet and rendered me unconscious. I also sustained an injury to my ankle which is still causing a great deal of pain. I was treated by the surgeon, Mr. Fielding, shortly after he arrived at the scene. Mr. Fielding is here today." She pointed him out.

"Do you recognize either of the accused?"

"I never saw the men who attacked me, sir. Their faces were covered by their hats, and both were behind me the whole time. However, I recognized the voice of the man with the bandage when he spoke this morning. His voice has a hoarse quality, and I

recognize him as the person who told me not to make a sound and then swore at me before I fell unconscious. And that bandage is on the same hand that I bit.”

The prosecutor had no further questions, the accused had no questions, and the judge dismissed Caroline with his thanks.

Bingley came forward and escorted her carefully out of the courtroom and across the street to the inn.

He got his sister settled in the private parlor they had reserved for the ladies, assisted her to put her foot up, and sent for tea.

“It will be a restorative, Caroline.” After he saw that Caroline had been served, he settled back in his own chair.

“Now, do you wish to stay here until the verdict is rendered and sentence is passed? Or would you prefer to go home to rest when the Carters have finished their testimony?”

Caroline leaned back wearily. “I want to stay until the end, please, Charles. I want to be able to go and see poor old Mrs. Foster and tell her that justice has been served. It will not bring back her only son, but it is all I can offer her in the way of comfort. And from what I have heard over the past few weeks, the Bennets are entitled to their measure of justice as well.”

Just then the Carters entered. After Bingley had sent for more tea, Sir Robert said, “I will be happy to stay here with the ladies if you wish to go back to the trial, Bingley. Maria and I have given our testimony, and they are presently hearing from the police and the surgeon. There are two men of Darcy’s who apprehended the men when they returned to Bath.

The whole should not take more than another hour. ”

“Thank you, Carter, I would like to go.” Bingley stood and took his hat. “I will return with my uncle as soon as this is finished. I know I am leaving Caroline in good hands.”

The three remaining talked determinedly about pleasant topics.

It would be apparent to any onlooker that Sir Robert Carter was much taken with Caroline, and she with him.

Miss Maria Carter was pleased with the betrothal and happy to do what she could to forward the alliance.

All were anxious to return to London and thought that it would be possible to do so once this unfortunate business had been concluded.

Charles Bingley entered the courtroom and made his way back to his uncle.

Having taken his seat, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

The sheer magnitude of the crimes which had been committed overwhelmed him.

He sat with the turmoil of his thoughts, paying little attention as the prosecuting attorney addressed the jury, or as the judge gave them their charge.

They huddled together in a corner of the room to consider their verdict.

Bingley was startled from his reverie by his Uncle Bingley. “No idea how long they will take, my boy. Would you care to take a turn in the fresh air?”

“No, thank you, Uncle. I will wait here. I doubt it will be long.”

His uncle left, and Bingley barely had time to sit back again before the jury returned. It had taken them less than fifteen minutes.

A tall, stout, white-haired man identified himself as the jury foreman, and in response to questions pronounced by the clerk, delivered the verdict for each man. Guilty. Guilty. Bingley felt these words fall almost as physical blows.

Time seemed to stop as everyone stood. The judge, having put on his black cap and gloves, faced the prisoners and pronounced the same sentence on each one in turn.

“The sentence of this court is that you will be taken from here to the place from whence you came and there be kept in close confinement until the 13th day of August 18__, and upon that day that you be taken to the place of execution and there hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul.”

At that moment, Uncle Bingley touched him on the arm. “We should get back to the others. Come this way.”

All Bingley could say was, “Day after tomorrow. They will be hanged day after tomorrow.”

When she heard the news, Caroline’s eyes filled with tears, and she found herself weeping.

Afterward, she would not be able to say if it was from shock, horror at the punishment, a delayed reaction to the events of the day the crime took place, or plain relief that all was over.

Her companions allowed her some privacy to recover, and soon the group was on its

way back to Bath.

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Elizabeth and Darcy awoke as the sunlight began to creep into their room.

They parted to dress and were soon making their way downstairs to breakfast. Charlotte and Anne had just sat down and greeted them with pleasure.

Anne surveyed the display of fruits with anticipation.

“Your cook has made it his business to tempt my appetite. Just look at these lovely fruits, and most of them not in season.”

Darcy, a farmer at heart, looked over at the fruit. “We have hothouses and succession-houses at Pemberley, Anne. I will send you delicious oranges at Christmas.” A footman handed Darcy a newly arrived express letter which he took but did not open.

“I should like that, Fitzwilliam. Rosings is such a--such a useless place. Flowers are lovely, but we should be growing our own vegetables, fruits, and herbs at least. Everything is purchased. It seems such a waste.”

“We have plenty of wise people at Pemberley who can help you, Anne, and when life has become more settled, I will see that you meet them. There is no reason you should not have a fine home-farm at Rosings.”

Darcy excused himself and turned away to read his letter, and as he finished, Lord Matlock and Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived.

“Here you all are together,” said Lord Matlock. “And I happen to need to see you all

together.” He turned to Anne. “You look well this morning, Anne. I trust everyone enjoyed our evening yesterday.”

There were exclamations of delight all around, and Elizabeth poured out coffee for the Earl and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

When all had been served, Darcy related the contents of his letter.

“This letter is from Charles Bingley. The trial of the two abductors and murderers took place yesterday in the town of Wells. Both men were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. The executions will take place tomorrow.” He sighed. “There could be no other outcome.”

“I have a great deal of news as well,” said his uncle.

“We have discussed all of this before. The ownership of Rosings was easily established.

Sir Lewis left it to Anne, to be settled on her when she reached the age of five-and-twenty, as is customary.

Catherine was named as trustee on behalf of Anne until she came of age.

He also settled money on his wife to provide her with an income for her lifetime in addition to her own fortune.

I briefly informed Anne of all of this last night.

She knows we will assist her to recover her inheritance.

“I have carefully considered what to do with my sister. We cannot simply turn her

over to the authorities, as the names of her victims would inevitably become public. The scandal would be swift, inevitable, and very public, and the reputations of the young ladies involved would inevitably suffer. However, Catherine must be prevented from harming anyone else. The only acceptable course is to have her declared a person of unsound mind. A lunatic, if you will. I have instructed my solicitor to file the necessary petition with the Chancery Court today. This will be a very public inquest, it will be held in Hunsford, and I certainly do not expect my sister to allow the court to brand her a lunatic without putting up a struggle. But I also do not doubt that such will be the decision of the court.”

Lord Matlock settled back in his chair and passed his hand over his eyes.

“I have also petitioned the court to be appointed Catherine’s guardian.

That should not present a problem because I am her closest male relative, and I have no financial interest in her fortune.

Once I am her guardian, I will have her escorted to my estate in Derbyshire.

There she will be housed in a secluded and well guarded cottage.

This will enable me to care for her needs and see that she is comfortable and well treated.

” He looked at Darcy. “The estate backs up onto desolate and uninhabited moorlands.

There will be no escape. Once Catherine has been removed to Derbyshire, we can begin to determine the restitution that must be paid to her victims. I believe we should assign priority to Miss Arabella Grant.

She is in the most serious need, and her injuries seem to be the first that occurred,

second only to the Olivers.

We must also concern ourselves with helping the young women in the house in Audley Street to find proper gainful employment.

That may best be accomplished by means of education.

Any who wish to be reunited with their families can also be assisted in that effort.

“Two nurses are here from a private asylum in Derbyshire to escort and supervise Catherine while the trial is going on, and I intend to conduct interviews and hire several more nurses while I am in town. While we are awaiting the inquest, she will be moved to the dower house at Rosings and will be kept there under guard and will be cared for by these women.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam took over. “Darcy, I had a talk with Parker. He has begun sending a few hand-picked men to Hunsford, where they are being received by Mr. Collins at the parsonage. Vulnerable persons, such as young maids, older servants, Mrs. Jenkinson, and the like, are being gradually removed from the house at Rosings and are being housed temporarily with people in the village or sent to their families. A small group of dedicated, I should say very dedicated, staff are staying behind. These persons include the butler and housekeeper, the cook and several kitchen helpers, two footmen, and my aunt’s lady’s-maid.

The house will soon be infiltrated by Parker’s men, sent by twos and threes from the parsonage.

When we go to move my aunt to the dower house to await the inquest, she will be a virtual prisoner in that house.

“This morning, I wrote to my commanding officer requesting an indefinite leave of

absence. Unless the situation on the Continent changes drastically, I expect my request to be granted. I will assume responsibility for moving Aunt Catherine from Rosings to Derbyshire. Darcy, with your kind permission, Parker will assist me in those undertakings.”

“Of course,” replied his cousin.

“We should also be grateful for your assistance tomorrow when we ride into Kent to move her into the dower house. Servants and the two nurses will be going today to make ready for her.” Anne broke in.

“They will find the dower house in immaculate condition. My mother insists upon its being cleaned once each week, and she inspects it every month. All they will be required to do is to remove the holland covers from the furniture.”

“What is our departure time tomorrow morning?” Darcy looked over at Elizabeth.

“We should be on the road by eight.”

“Come and join us for breakfast at seven.”

“Now,” said the Earl. “I declare that the remainder of today shall be a respite from all cares for you young people. Find some pleasant activity and enjoy it. Walk, shop, read, write letters, or whatever strikes your fancy.”

Rosings, Kent - Thursday, August 13, 18__

Rosings was eerily quiet. She recognized her maid, Marks, as well as the butler, housekeeper, and head footman, but where were all the maids?

And who were these footmen she had never seen before?

As she sat at breakfast in the small summer breakfast parlor, her mind seemed to be racing, almost ungovernable.

She gave herself a mental shake. It was desperately important that she keep her wits about her.

Her eye fell on the decanter of brandy, and she walked over to it and added a generous portion to her coffee.

It would help. It always did. Then she sat down and began to eat a hearty breakfast, though her appetite was no longer as good as it had always been.

She needed to be ready when that idiot Collins arrived with suggestions for a new man to do her bidding.

Brook Street, London - Thursday, August 13, 18__

A discreet knock summoned Darcy from sleep at five the next morning. As Elizabeth slept peacefully on, he put on his dressing gown and opened the door to Larkin, who wished Darcy a good morning as he handed over the tray he had brought.

“Thank you, Larkin. Please return in one-half-hour and ask my wife’s maid to come as well.” Darcy poured out two cups of coffee and returned to Elizabeth, who was stirring. She smiled up at him, trying to brush the sleep from her eyes.

“Are you well, dearest?” His eyes searched her face anxiously as he handed her the coffee.

Elizabeth laughed. “Perfectly well. I could not possibly be better. Are you well?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Oh, Lizzy. You are my safe harbor. You are my

refuge.”

“Just as you are mine.” They stayed quiet for a long moment.

Elizabeth was prevented from saying all that she wanted to say by Larkin’s knock. Before long, she and Darcy went downstairs for their early breakfast, where they were joined by the Earl and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

After breakfast it was time for the men to leave.

Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm, and they all walked out of the front door into the still-quiet street.

Grooms stood with the horses, and Elizabeth saw that Darcy would ride his tall gray, the stallion he had favored at Netherfield and during their brief summer interlude at Pemberley.

He leaned over to kiss her, and she said quietly, “I will be here when you return.” The horses clattered down the street and around the corner and were lost to view.

As they rode, the men discussed what could be anticipated over the next few days. Darcy spoke first. “I am not sure I understand why my aunt is being moved to the Dower House. It seems in some respects to be quite disturbing to her. Will it not make her more difficult to look after?”

“In some senses it will,” replied his uncle.

“It is a disturbance. However, I have seen the Dower House, and it is much more confined and much more easily guarded than Rosings. In this, Richard and Parker concur. The other problem remains the sheer numbers of people who will be coming into Kent from London for this. The inn will simply not accommodate all of them, and my solicitors, their clerks, one of the two physicians, you and Elizabeth, Anne, Richard, and myself make up a party too large for the inn, and too large for the dower house if you include servants and horses. This inquest is formidable in scope, as I learned when I inquired about holding it. There will be three commissioners and no less than twenty-four sworn jurymen as well as bailiffs, perhaps the sheriff, and assorted others.”

In a little more than two hours, the party had made the turnoff for Hunsford and had pulled up and dismounted in the lane behind the parsonage.

They were greeted by Ned and several grooms and lads from the Rosings stables.

“We will lead the horses down to the stables by a quiet lane,” said Ned.

“When you require them, send word to the stables.”

“Well done,” said the Earl, dismounting and handing his horse into the care of one of the grooms. Darcy also dismounted, then removed his drab overcoat from its place behind the saddle and put it on.

A saddlebag held his pistols, powder, shot, and other necessities.

These he placed in the deep pockets of the coat.

Darcy turned to find a grim-faced Collins standing by the gate, which was open to admit them. He greeted Darcy and Fitzwilliam by name and was presented to the Earl.

“Mrs. Collins sends her greetings, sir. She is perfectly well and is still safe under my protection at my house in London with Miss de Bourgh and my wife.”

Collins bowed gravely and said, “Thank you, sir. Come in, gentlemen.” He seated them in his study, a large, comfortable room flooded with light and with a good view of the road. Parker awaited them there. A silent maid brought tea. “Have you any other news?” he asked when they had been served.

“Wickham was killed in Meryton during an unsuccessful attack on Miss Mary Bennet in her own father’s garden.

His two hired accomplices were tried at the assizes in Wells for the murder of a footman and the attempted abduction of a young lady in Bath.

They were found guilty, and they will be hanged today at the gaol in Wells. ”

“Well, I will pray for him. But he did a great deal of evil and wronged a great many people,” replied Collins.

“Indeed, I myself am far from blameless. I was Lady Catherine’s eager, if unwitting, accomplice in spreading malicious lies about innocent victims.” He bowed to Darcy.

“For that I am truly sorry.” Darcy could not identify the change in Collins.

The man looked much less fatuous. His simpering expression had vanished, and even

his voice sounded more serious, less smug, perhaps.

“I should say at the outset that I received this note from Lady Catherine at a late hour last night. She wishes me to call on her today for the purpose of identifying some man in the village who would be willing to undertake work of a delicate nature for her in London. She prefers someone who is vulnerable to blackmail, threats, or coercion.” He reached into a drawer of his desk and brought out a book.

“This is Dr. Oliver’s journal. It relates the story of his betrayal by Lady Catherine and his subsequent downfall.

I understand from my wife that you have heard much the same story from his daughter. It is here if you require it.”

“Thank you. We are here just in time,” remarked the Earl. “After what my sister has written to Mr. Collins, and knowing that Wickham and his men are no longer a threat, it seems more a question of simply going in and bringing her out.”

“Are we sure of the servants?” asked Fitzwilliam.

“As sure as we can be, sir,” replied Parker.

“I have personally interviewed each one who remains. While they have a sense of loyalty to her, they believe as we do that she is of unsound mind and that she must be prevented from harming others—or herself. I should point out that she consumes a great quantity of strong drink now. Timmons, the butler, has told me she has all but finished the port and has started on the brandy. Its effect is to make her violently angry, irrational, and abusive at first, then increasingly lethargic.”

“That may explain her behavior on Sunday,” added Collins. “She shouted loudly that I was to be sent away, and then I heard another female begin to cry.”

“And what time was this, Mr. Collins?”

“It was shortly after one o’clock in the afternoon.”

The Earl joined in. “Then it is simple. I will call on her at one o’clock, merely as a brotherly gesture, asking for a bed because I have business at--let us say Bromley.

Timmons will usher me unannounced into the formal drawing room on the main floor.

I understand that is where she sits now.

I will converse with my sister. At some point, I will either be able to walk out with her on my arm, or I will be forced to compel her to leave.

If the former, I shall escort her to her carriage, which will be waiting under the portecochère.

If the latter, I shall look for help from the men you have posted at the various doorways into the drawing room.

She will be conducted to the dower house where she can be kept under guard.

The hearing is set for Monday at noon at the Crown.

Mr. Collins, I expect you will be called upon to testify. ”

“I will be ready, sir.”

The clock on the mantelpiece showed that it was half past ten.

The men spent the next two hours planning and strategizing.

At about quarter past twelve, Darcy walked to Rosings by the back lane.

He was admitted to the kitchen, taken quietly upstairs, and stationed by the doors to the music-room, which were half opened.

He could see nothing, but he could hear Lady Catherine ordering that more brandy be brought to her.

At almost precisely one o'clock, he heard her speak up. "And what are you doing here?" she spat.

"Cathy, what a greeting for your little brother! I have urgent business in Bromley, and I am come to ask a bed for a night or two. Surely you can find a place for me here. How do you do, my dear? You are looking as well as ever."

"Well, I am not as well as ever. These servants are robbing me blind and drinking my cellars dry. My worthless daughter has fled the house, and Fitzwilliam Darcy has wed that trollop, Elizabeth Bennet. It is all very vexing, and if I do not do something to recover from it, all my plans will come to nothing!"

"Sister, what a thing to say. Why is Anne such a worthless creature?"

"She was supposed to marry Darcy, only she was too weak and stupid to know how to attract him. I did my best for her. I eliminated as many of the girls competing for him as I reasonably could, and still it has come to naught."

"Eliminated them?"

"Yes. Oh, you always were stupid. I made sure they were out of her way." She took a

sip of her brandy but did not offer any to her brother.

“I have one more hope of success. If they fish Elizabeth Bennet’s lifeless body out of the Thames, Darcy will have no choice but to marry my daughter. There will be no one else left.”

“Poor Elizabeth Bennet. I cannot believe you would wish to harm such a pretty girl. And why must this marriage between Darcy and Anne take place?” asked the Earl in the mildest of tones.

“Must I spell it out for you? And in any case, it is your fault. Yours is the fault, yours will be the responsibility. I bear no blame in any of this.”

“My fault? I am intrigued in spite of myself. Why precisely is it my fault? Perhaps there is something I can do to make amends. You had better spell it out for me, sister.”

“Very well, I will. The only thing you can do to make amends is to kill your worthless self and those two miserable sons of yours, and their spawn as well.”

The Earl was momentarily silenced at this, while Darcy from his vantage-point could only thank God that his cousin was stationed somewhere outside. He felt it was about to get a great deal uglier, and in fact it did.

Having recovered his countenance with some difficulty, the Earl went on. “My faults must be heavy indeed. Why is it my fault? What have I done to merit being taken out of this world with all my posterity? You must admit, it is a horrific fate.”

Her words seemed to ooze and drip with venom. “You should never have been born in the first place! Therefore, you should have the good sense to take yourself away! If my parents had behaved decently, they would have stopped at one child. I should

have been that child.”

“So married couples should, ah, cease to behave as married couples after their first child has been born?”

“Of course, they should. It is disgusting for them to do anything else. They are like animals otherwise. Besides, I managed to do it.”

“Really?”

“Of course. But my miserable parents not only managed to bring our sister Anne into the world, but they also then produced you. It is disgusting, begetting children like rabbits as the lower classes do who lack the refinement and decency to know better. I, and I alone, should have been Countess of Matlock.”

“And what would you have done then?”

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“Why, I would have married George Darcy in place of Anne, you fool. It would have been a brilliant match, the union of two of the finest fortunes in all England with the added ornament of a noble title.” She paused, and Darcy heard the chink of the bottle against her glass.

“I still might have done it. A few well-placed pillows and a little mishap with the linen press should have eliminated both of you at the same time—had it not been for that worthless weasel of a nursemaid. I hope she is burning in hell where she belongs.”

Lord Matlock thought of the beloved Nurse, as she was always called, enthroned like a little wizened queen in her apartments near the nursery at Matlock. Adored, cosseted, and constantly visited by three generations of Fitzwilliams, she was part of the soul of his home. He said nothing.

“But people have always stood in my way. Always. Until Darcy married that wretched girl, I still had hopes of uniting two wonderful fortunes. But all hope is gone. Even my investments have gone awry. I set up that exquisite men’s club in Audley Street, and Elizabeth Bennet could have been its brightest ornament.

Headstrong, ungrateful girl!” She began to sob uncontrollably.

“I hate you! I hate all of you! Go and leave me in peace!”

Darcy heard the glass fall to the floor and shatter. A quick look into the room revealed that Lord Matlock was attempting to guide his sister gently towards the exit to the porte-cochère. His cousin came up beside him, saying quietly, “I am here. We

should go in now.”

They entered the room, and when their aunt caught sight of them, she screamed, “Help! Murder!” and collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

Although she was a tall woman, her brother was taller.

He picked her up, threw her over one shoulder, and started toward the door.

The two younger men fell into place behind him, and Lady Catherine lifted her head and regarded them malevolently.

“You!” she hissed. “Both of you! You are all conspiring against me.”

As they walked down the steps and approached the carriage, a woman who was obviously Lady Catherine’s maid approached with a small wineglass. “Here you are, my lady. A little composer to help you relax. I’ve mixed it with some of that port wine you favor.”

The Earl set his sister down, and as he kept an iron grip on her elbow, she drank the composer greedily.

“Now, Cathy. We are simply taking you to the dower house for a few days so that your sitting room can be put to rights. You do not want to live in a house where the workmen are hammering and painting. It will all be done in less than a week.”

They were able to place her in the closed carriage without incident, and once the maid had been assisted in, the door was closed.

The coachman and head groom were on the box, and two liveried footmen had climbed up behind.

Parker and two men led at the front, while Darcy and Fitzwilliam would bring up the rear.

“We are back here,” explained his cousin, “so that she does not see us, for we are sure to set her off again.”

The drive to the dower house took all of ten minutes.

Darcy noted that it was well situated on slightly rising ground.

A garden surrounded it, full of well mown grass and decorated with the well-manicured topiary favored by Lady Catherine, and mercifully lacking in any masses of flowers or concealing shrubbery.

The ancient Tudor house was small, more like a cottage really, and consisted of two stories.

The whole was set against a lightly wooded area of the park, and there was a seldom-used lane to Hunsford not far away.

Darcy had to admit that his aunt would be easier to manage in this small place.

Indeed, she was taken into the house with very little trouble, having fallen into a deep slumber. Her brother carried her in, followed by Marks. The two nurses were waiting inside, and once she had been deposited in the largest upstairs chamber, her brother departed.

“She is asleep already,” he informed his son and nephew. He instructed the coachmen and other riders to return to the stable and turned again. “Let us return to the rectory. There are a few items we need to settle, and then Darcy, I am sure you will want to be on your way. Parker, please join us.”

Mr. Collins had a meal laid out for them, and they ate gratefully.

“She is quiet now, but she will not be quiet long,” observed the earl.

“As I recall, she and Lewis spent part of their honeymoon in that house while repairs and renovations were being done at Rosings. It was in poor shape when he inherited it. Let us hope she regards this as a sentimental holiday, though I doubt she will.”

“I plan to leave London on Sunday after church,” said Darcy. “I will bring my wife, Anne, and Mrs. Collins. My apologies for causing them to travel on the Sabbath, Mr. Collins, but it is necessary.”

“Say no more, sir. I am grateful for your kindness to my wife. It is sensible not to expose the ladies to this atmosphere for any longer than is necessary.” Once again, Darcy was baffled.

Collins’ voice had completely lost the obsequious, wheedling tone it once had, and he merely sounded like one man thanking another.

“Depending on the length of the inquest, I will escort them back to London either on Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning. It makes sense for them to remain under my protection in London until my aunt has left for Matlock.”

Collins nodded. “I agree. I shall urge Mrs. Collins to return with you until it is completely safe here, but the final decision will rest with her.”

“So, Uncle, is there anything else you require from London?”

“I do not believe so. We will meet you at Rosings on Sunday evening.”

“And what is to be done about Anne? She cannot return to Rosings without a

companion.”

“It is something I have on my mind, Fitzwilliam. She may need to reside with you until we can locate someone suitable. I know it will not be Mrs. Jenkinson. Anne feels she has been betrayed by that woman.”

“Miss de Bourgh is more than welcome to stay with us here at the parsonage until a suitable companion can be located, if she desires to return to the neighborhood. She seems to have developed a friendship with Mrs. Collins.”

Again, no sign of any obsequious toad-eating, undue sentiment, or anything aside from a neighbor wishing to be helpful.

Darcy was beginning to believe that the recent events had wrought a change in William Collins.

“Good, then. It is good to have these things settled. I had best start for home now if I wish to be there before dark.” Darcy shook hands with Collins, Parker, and Fitzwilliam and bowed to his uncle.

A groom brought his horse up from the stables, and within a half-hour, Darcy was turning onto the London road accompanied by the two of Parker’s hand-picked men who would escort them back into Kent for the inquest. Darcy said almost nothing on the two-hour ride home.

His mind was engaged with what he had seen of his aunt.

She seemed seriously deranged. Totally preoccupied with herself, she had not a thought to spare for family or loved ones, not even her own flesh and blood.

He concluded that the inquest on Monday was a good and beneficial thing.

She must not be allowed to continue to act in the world.

But she would not take kindly to being thwarted and exposed.

With such gloomy thoughts as these, the two-hour ride from Hunsford seemed to drag endlessly, but eventually they turned into Brook Street.

Darcy left the two men with his thanks and a few final instructions for Sunday afternoon.

He noted with pleasure that the windows were alight in the gathering dusk.

A groom came out to take his tired horse, and as he dismounted a small, graceful figure darted out of the house and down the front steps.

He folded his Elizabeth into his arms, and after a moment they walked into the house together.

“Let me go up and change, Lizzy. I am not fit to be seen.”

“We have all agreed to have supper in our rooms, dearest. You may go up and relax and not see anyone but me.”

They went upstairs arm in arm, and when they had gained the privacy of their room, Darcy took Elizabeth into his arms. “I would spare you what is to come, Lizzy. I would spare you if I could.”

“Oh, my love, it does not matter. She is powerless now—a poor deluded woman worthy of our pity. She cannot harm me.”

Elizabeth helped Darcy take off his jacket, waistcoat, and cravat. Then she looked at

him. “You have a headache, my dearest love.”

“Nonsense. I never have headaches.”

“No man ever has headaches, but you have one.” She sat in her chair. “Can you be comfortable sitting on the floor?”

“Of course, I can.” He came and seated himself at her feet.

Slowly and gently, she began to massage his scalp and temples, just as he had done for her.

Her hands searched for all those tense and knotted muscles in his neck, though because he was strong, she had to work hard on them.

Before she had finished, he turned his head, nestled his cheek into her lap, and fell asleep.

“How I love you,” she whispered, and before long she slept as well.

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Something was in the wind. She could practically smell it. Her composer last night had been very light, barely enough to make her drowsy. And the one they had given her this morning was even lighter.

How she hated this room! Here she had been brought as a new bride by Lewis De Bourgh.

Here she had gritted her teeth and endured his despicable attentions.

Her dark eyes grew hard. The fool had actually loved her, had thought that she loved him.

When she finally produced a sickly child, he had been fatuously delighted.

When she had banished him from her bed, he had been hurt and baffled.

How obliging of him to die on his own without any assistance from her.

For she had been well prepared by then to help him along.

She shook her head. She had to focus on the present.

Breakfast this morning had been at an unseemly hour, and Marks (the traitor!) had arrived with one of the giantesses to help her dress and had insisted that she dress with great care.

What was her brother up to? Why could she not have her composer?

Why could she not have just a splash of brandy in this wretched coffee? Why, why, why?

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The morning sun found Elizabeth and Darcy asleep in each other's arms as usual.

The massive, ornate bed was familiar to Darcy, since this room was customarily his during visits to Rosings.

It was not familiar to his wife, who could not escape the impression that the enormous, carved canopy would somehow fall on them both.

Before they retired, he had shown her the desk and chair overlooking the front avenue as the place where he had labored all night on his letter to her after the refusal at Hunsford Parsonage.

And he had laughingly allowed himself to be enticed into bed with Elizabeth's idea that they could somehow bring that story full circle by supplying it with a happy ending.

In the morning, both awakened at sunrise with the sense that something dreadful and momentous was about to happen.

They managed quite well in the single dressing room without Larkin and Jenny, who had been left at home, and were among the first to assemble downstairs.

A large breakfast had been set out on the massive sideboards in the main dining salon, and many people, mostly gentlemen, began to arrive to fill their plates and find seats at the table.

Eventually, Mr. and Mrs. Collins were shown in, having walked over from the parsonage. He carried a leather satchel, and they came and seated themselves beside the Darcys. "I have brought along the parish register and Dr. Oliver's journal in case they are needed," said Collins.

Finally, the Earl came in with Fitzwilliam and Anne. He greeted several people and came to sit near the Darcys. "All is ready, but this will be a terrible day," he observed with a shake of his head.

At eleven, when most had finished their breakfasts, the Earl stood. "I wish first of all to thank you all for coming. It is time to leave. Carriages await us on the side of the house, and we will meet again in the upstairs room of the Crown."

Hunsford, The Crown - Monday, August 17, 18__

The group filed out and took their places in several waiting carriages, which left one by one and approached Hunsford via several different lanes and roads that led in that direction.

Elizabeth and Darcy rode with Anne and Lord Matlock.

When they arrived at the Crown, they entered the coffee room together and were shown upstairs.

The room set aside was large, high-ceilinged, and brightly lit by windows.

Three chairs were arranged behind a large table at the front, twenty-four chairs in three rows of eight along one side, and a single chair on the other side, facing them.

A chair and small table were also placed near the front.

A jumble of chairs occupied the back of the room, facing the front table.

Darcy saw two men talking at the front of the room, one of whom was Mr. Moreland, his uncle's solicitor.

Mr. Moreland approached Lord Matlock's party, greeted the earl, and asked the group to be seated in the chairs at the back.

Darcy looked at his watch and saw that it was ten minutes of noon, the hour set for the inquest to convene.

The jury entered, were sworn in by the other man, apparently a clerk, and sorted themselves out into their twenty-four seats.

Two physicians, one from London and one apparently local, convened and handed documents to Mr. Moreland.

The three commissioners, who were barristers, entered in their turn and took their seats.

The room grew still, one of the commissioners consulted his watch, and suddenly a piercing, querulous voice penetrated from the stairway.

"What is this place? Where is my brother? Where are my nephews? I demand to be allowed to return home immediately!" Lady Catherine de Bourgh entered, escorted by two of the tallest women Darcy had ever seen.

They made him think of Amazons. They were neatly gowned in dark, serviceable wool with identical round bonnets, and each had Lady Catherine firmly by an elbow.

Parker followed behind. When Lady Catherine had been assisted to her seat, the

Amazons stood behind her and Parker came over and sat down.

Lady Catherine looked directly at Elizabeth and hissed “You!”

Darcy clasped Elizabeth’s hand tightly and looked down at his cousin Anne, who was seated between him and Fitzwilliam.

Her mother had taken no notice of her at all.

Anne was pale but composed. Darcy touched her hand briefly, noticed that she was trembling, and took her hand as well.

Fitzwilliam looked over and did the same with her other hand.

The clerk read out the document that had created the commission.

The first witness to be called was the butler Timmons, followed by Mrs. Toll the housekeeper, the first footman, and the coachman.

In response to questions from the commissioners, they related stories of Lady Catherine’s increasingly irrational behavior, her bouts of screaming and destruction of furnishings, her consumption of strong drink, and her abuse of the lower servants, especially the housemaids.

As the footman, last to testify, returned to his seat, Lady Catherine shouted, “Unfaithful servants! You are all guilty of petty treason, and I will see you hanged! ”

Anne was the next witness to be called. Darcy could perceive cold hatred in the face of Lady Catherine, who also cried “Worthless!” as Anne took her place.

Anne declined a chair, took the oath in a clear, well-modulated voice, and in response

to a request from the commissioners related her story.

She left nothing out including the events of the past week, her mother's recent tendency to violence and strong drink, and her own virtual imprisonment at Rosings since her adolescent years.

She concluded her testimony by expressing her fears for the servants as well as her fears for her own life and well-being.

It was apparent to Darcy that Lady Catherine did not intend to allow Anne's testimony to proceed in an orderly fashion.

Her mother interrupted her numerous times with cries of "Worthless!" and "I shall deal with you later." Anne proceeded with admirable calm, and each time her mother's interruptions interfered, she sat quietly with her hands folded in her lap while the commissioners admonished her mother into a temporary silence.

When Anne had finished, the commissioners thanked her, and she returned to her seat as her mother hissed, "You will burn in hell for betraying your mother." Anne appeared calm, but as she took Darcy's offered hand, he noted that it was ice cold and that she was quietly shivering.

Mr. Collins was next to be called. While Darcy attended carefully to the testimony, he did not learn anything new.

Lady Catherine remained silent, and Darcy was favorably impressed by the clergyman's simple eloquence.

It was apparent that Collins was profoundly affected by the story of Doctor Oliver and his family, and those present at the hearing were equally affected by his retelling.

As he concluded his narrative, Collins handed over Dr. Oliver's journal to be placed in evidence.

Timmons, Mrs. Toll, and the coachmen all nodded, as they had been at Rosings long enough to recall the incidents.

Seeing this, a commissioner asked them to stand, and each corroborated Mr. Collins' narrative.

The two physicians stood, gave their reports to the clerk, and one spoke for both.

"We have examined the patient, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, both together and separately. Her sense of right and wrong is but poorly developed. She is incapable of viewing other persons as human beings like herself. She speaks unguardedly of eliminating people who stand in her way. She has threatened to kill or harm her own daughter. Although she has not yet fallen completely into drunkenness, she appears to be in serious danger of doing so if left alone. We find that, while she is in robust health, she is non compos mentis , not of sound mind, a lunatic."

" This is not to be borne!" With these words, Lady Catherine de Bourgh leaped suddenly from her chair, overturning it and barely eluding the two nurses charged with her care.

Rather than attacking the two physicians who had just insulted her, she turned to the front row where her two nephews were seated with Elizabeth and Anne.

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The brunt of her anger seemed directed at Anne, and she rushed towards her daughter, screaming.

“You worthless, useless, paltry thing. I should have abandoned you at birth! I lament the day you were born and the day you were conceived. You are nothing to me!” Darcy and Fitzwilliam had moved as one to stand between the madwomen and the chairs where Anne and Elizabeth were seated.

When Lady Catherine attempted to attack her daughter, the colonel stepped forward and subdued her with a few practiced moves, compelling her to return to her chair and the custody of the two nurses.

“Remove her,” said a commissioner. “Take her to the adjoining room and keep her there until all testimony is concluded. She may return for the verdict if she can be brought under control.”

Darcy seated himself between his wife and his cousin as Fitzwilliam accompanied Lady Catherine and the nurses.

Once order was restored, the Earl of Matlock was called to give evidence.

“I am Lady Catherine’s nearest male relative, her brother.

Family members brought my sister’s actions to my attention, and, after investigation, I have concluded that she is a danger both to herself, by her excessive drinking, and, more importantly, to others whom she perceives to be against her interests.

In addition to her shocking behavior with respect to her own daughter, in the course of our investigations, the family discovered that she has been implicated in serious felonies that were committed at her direction.

To this end, she employed a man named George Wickham to carry out the crimes. ”

He went on to provide general details of the abductions, assaults, and murder that had been committed by men in his sister’s employ.

At length, Lord Matlock gestured with a sheaf of documents he held.

“Here is an itemized list of the other crimes Wickham has committed under my sister’s orders.

The list goes back five years.” The Earl was excused with no further questions.

After some quiet conversation among themselves, one of the commissioners announced that they did not find it necessary to examine Lady Catherine.

He then stood and summed up the testimony for the members of the jury, who were given an opportunity to retire and consider their verdict.

Lady Catherine’s voice, loud and querulous, could be heard plainly from the anteroom, interspersed with the quieter voices of the nurses.

“Do you wish us to escort you home, Anne?” asked Darcy. “I can take all of the ladies at the same time. ”

“No, Fitzwilliam. I would like to stay and see this through.”

“You are a brave girl, Anne,” said the earl. “You are to be commended.”

“Let us hope my courage does not fail me at the end, Uncle.”

It seemed that the jury would take some time with their deliberations, so Colonel Fitzwilliam went downstairs to order that tea and sandwiches be brought up.

The refreshments were welcomed by family and servants alike.

The Earl asked his son to take a cup to Lady Catherine, but in a few moments the group heard the sound of shattering porcelain, and Fitzwilliam returned shaking his head.

At length the jury returned and stood at their seats. When the commissioners had been seated, they ordered that Lady Catherine be brought in and the clerk approached the jury foreman. In answer to his questions, the foreman read a formalized statement from a paper he held:

“We find that Catherine de Bourgh is at the time of taking this inquisition a lunatic, and doth not enjoy lucid intervals so that she is not capable of the government of herself, her lands, goods, and chattels; and that she hath been in the same state of lunacy seven years last past, and upwards; but how or by what means the said Catherine de Bourgh became lunatic, we the jurors know not, unless by the visitation of God. ”

When each juror had confirmed his verdict, the room grew silent for a moment.

Lady Catherine jumped to her feet, avoiding the Amazons, and pounded her fist on the table.

“How dare you! Do you know who I am? I am an earl’s daughter, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

I am no lunatic. I am known throughout England for my virtue and my Christian charity.

Do not trifle with me or you will live to regret it. ”

By this time, the Amazons had her by the arms again.

She turned in their grasp and looked toward the witnesses.

“And you, Elizabeth Bennet! You are the cause of all of this. Obstinate, headstrong, upstart girl! You pollute the shades of Pemberley with every breath you take. I will see you drowned in the Thames. Mark my words. You will pay for this!”

The Amazons wrestled her back to her seat with some difficulty, and one of them poured a small draught into the side of her mouth. In a few moments she was quiet.

One of the commissioners addressed the group of witnesses. “This concludes the inquest. Lord Matlock, there are several documents to be signed, and these can be given to Mr. Moreland to be filed. You and the witnesses are free to go with our thanks.”

A man came in and unobtrusively spoke to Parker, who signaled the two Amazons.

Everyone stayed seated as Lady Catherine was assisted to her feet and escorted from the room.

She said nothing, but her daughter and brother both noted that there were tears on her face.

Once she had left, the man returned to inform Lord Matlock that the carriages were waiting.

Darcy looked at his watch. It was just three o'clock.

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While Darcy, the colonel, and the earl ensured that Lady Catherine was safely settled and confined in the dower house, Elizabeth and Anne returned to Rosings.

Anne confessed that she was too nervous and restless to settle quietly, so they selected some of Anne's clothing and necessities to be packed in a small trunk for her return to London.

Dinner that night was a relaxed affair, though tinged with fatigue and sorrow.

Mr. and Mrs. Collins had once again been invited, and Charlotte announced her intention of staying in Hunsford rather than returning to London.

"Despite the circumstances, I enjoyed the visit so much, Eliza. It was good to spend time with you again—and with you, Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth smiled. "I expect we will find reasons to visit Rosings more often now," she said, glancing fondly at Anne.

"On a more serious note, I have written to the bishop, and I do intend to be present with the churchwardens for his triennial visit," said Mr. Collins.

"It should be possible to do something to restore the reputation of poor, good Dr. Oliver. Older people in the village regard him as a saint, and the injustice was grave indeed."

"Well done," said Darcy from his place at the table. "Uncle, Elizabeth and I will take Anne and return to London tomorrow morning if you do not require our presence

here.”

“That will do perfectly well. I anticipate it will take a few days for my solicitors to secure the necessary documents for the guardianship, and then I can begin the trip to Matlock with my sister and her nurses.”

When Anne, seated in her rightful place at the head of the table, stood to leave with the ladies, her uncle stood, too. “Gentlemen, we will enjoy the company of the ladies this evening. My sister has quite literally not left a bottle in the cellars that is fit to drink.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled down at his cousin as he offered her his arm. “We will not let that state of affairs endure for long, Anne. Fear not.”

All eyes had been on Anne throughout dinner, and as the group sat talking in the drawing room, she was at the forefront of everyone’s concern.

Although she looked tired, she also seemed relieved, as though a weight had been taken from her.

Her color remained healthy, and that she had partaken of dinner with a good appetite.

No one felt like getting up a game of cards, and the talk turned to gardening and farming.

“I know that no fruits and vegetables are grown at Rosings, Miss de Bourgh,” said Collins.

“But now that I know of your fondness for them, I will set aside some for you from our garden. We have an abundance of summer-squash this year. But as I think of it, we have an abundance of summer-squash every year. They cannot be preserved, and

neighbors, even poorer neighbors, always say that they have more than enough from their own gardens. This is turning out to be a good year for cherries as well.” He looked over at his wife.

“My dear, I hope you do not mind. I thought it best to engage Ned’s grandmother to come in and deal with the cherries in your absence.

Else they might have rotted on the ground. ”

Charlotte laughed. “I do not mind at all, my dear. I have Ned’s grandmother’s receipt for cherry preserves, so we will have the same thing, only I will not have had to deal with all those pits!”

“Fitzwilliam says that he will introduce me to some of his gardeners from Pemberley so that I can begin to make Rosings Park a more productive place,” said Anne. “I am looking forward to that. And of course, your gardens are the boast of the neighborhood, Mr. Collins.”

They chatted until the tea tray was brought in, after which Mr. and Mrs. Collins rose to take their leave.

Anne sent for a carriage for them, and when they had been sent on their way, the family took candles and went upstairs.

Everyone was tired, and as they wished one another goodnight, Elizabeth’s thoughts returned to London.

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Dear God, but she was going to jump out of her skin!

Shut up in a room with no way out. It was beyond endurance!

The walls would soon close in on her and she would smother.

She unbuttoned the top button of her linen nightgown, but she found no relief.

She should not have spit out her composer.

It would at least have brought her oblivion.

It was past midnight, for they had come to check on her at midnight.

They would leave her alone to sleep for two hours before checking again.

A lunatic! If she could not put a stop to her brother's nonsense, before long, all of England—the entire world—would have branded her a lunatic! It was an intolerable miscarriage of justice.

She must find a way out. Her mind drifted back to the days when she had first come here as a bride.

The Dower House was a much older structure than Rosings House itself.

Built by a de Bourgh ancestor, it dated back to the time of old Henry VIII, when the Protestant religion had become law in England.

The de Bourghs, with their French heritage, had for years remained secretly true to their Catholic faith.

Unpleasant as that long ago stay with her husband had been, at least she had been able to move about freely.

She recalled one rainy day when they had been kept indoors.

Lewis had shown her all around the house, including.

. . She stopped for a moment and looked at the ugly, pretentious old fireplace.

Topped by an elaborately carved wooden mantel in the dark wood of the Tudor age, it was flanked by two pilasters made to look like columns.

She stopped, gathering her thoughts and her forces.

The room was lit only by the last embers of the fire.

No lit candles for the lunatic. She sat up in bed, found her slippers, and tied on her dressing gown.

Then she pushed open the heavy curtains.

It was a moonlit night, and objects in her room were illuminated enough to be plainly seen.

Her objective must be more than mere escape.

Her first order of business must be to find and destroy, or hide, the incriminating parish register.

With Collins and her daughter discredited, she could return to Rosings, and that would give her a base to regain her power. To the church, then, she would go.

What, then, had Lewis shown her about the fireplace so long ago?

She searched her memory. “Five, six, pick up sticks,” she said to herself—the words of the old nursery rhyme.

She counted the marguerite flowers carved in a row across the mantle.

Just as she remembered, the sixth one could be twisted, and the right-hand pilaster swung quietly aside to reveal the priest-hole behind it.

She began her descent into the darkness below.

Rosings, Kent

Elizabeth and Darcy lay awake talking quietly. “What are your thoughts on a wedding trip now that this is over, Lizzy?”

“I still want to take a wedding trip with you, dearest. But I am anxious to be with my family. I am concerned about Mama, but I am especially concerned about Mary.”

“Mary has been much in my thoughts as well. She has such religious scruples. It must be a double burden. She may wonder what she did to deserve Wickham’s attentions, and she may also feel guilt for her part in killing him. Has your sister Jane written?”

“From what I can glean from Jane’s letters, Mary seems to be handling this well so far. Jane assigns a great deal of the credit to Lydia, who has a much healthier outlook, though they were both victimized by Wickham.”

“As were you, Lizzy. Let us plan to spend at least three weeks in Hertfordshire and defer our plans for a wedding journey until we have been at Pemberley for a few months. Your family needs you, and my guess is that you need them.”

As Elizabeth embraced her husband, there was an urgent knock at the door. Timmons stood outside. “Sir, there is a fire in the village at the church. We have been asked to render assistance.”

Darcy began to put on his discarded clothes, as Elizabeth looked around for hers.

“No, you must stay here, dearest. I will go ahead with the men. I will see that a guard is left here with you and Anne. Once you are together, go to the rectory if you wish. Have the guard accompany you.” He kissed her and was gone.

Hunsford, Kent

She felt victory within her grasp. She had successfully negotiated the long flight of steps.

The tunnel was dark and musty, but the brick walls and ceiling had held up over the years.

She remembered the small door at the end, and she had been concerned, but its hinges were so rusted, and its wood was so crumbled that it had not presented any obstacle at all.

She had emerged at the edge of the woods bordering the back lane to Hunsford, and she could see the steeple as soon as she got to the lane.

She stooped to pick up a large rock and placed it in her pocket.

It would help her to force open the lock on the box where that damned book was kept .

The church was open, as it had always been, though as soon as she entered, she lost the advantage of the moonlight.

To her great satisfaction, she found what she had expected to find—a flint and steel together with a single candle on the table in the narthex.

Victory. She lit the candle in its heavy wrought iron candlestick, and paused for breath, looking around at the familiar scene.

The stone church, much like many country churches, was of undistinguished architecture in a vaguely Norman or Gothic style.

Its ceiling was high and peaked, with carved, ornamented beams supporting the roof.

Its stained-glass windows had fallen victim to some zealotry of the past, and they had been replaced with clear glass.

No carpet graced the stone floor, worn smooth and polished by generations of feet.

The center aisle was lined on both sides by wooden box pews, with some plain wooden chairs and threadbare kneeling cushions at the back for wayfarers and the poor.

The front was occupied by the altar and the high pulpit.

The box with the parish register was exactly where she expected to find it, in the drawer of the table.

She lifted it out, noting it felt satisfyingly heavy.

The narthex table, with its clutter of prayer books, tracts, candles, and other items, was too crowded for her to work on the book efficiently.

She took it into the church and laid it across the seats of two of the wooden chairs.

Then she returned to the narthex for her candle, which she set on a third chair .

It happened too quickly for her to be fully aware.

Her work on the box jostled the chairs, which in turn knocked against the chair where she had set the candle, sending it to the floor and to the old kneeling cushions.

As the kneeling cushions caught and began to blaze, she sought refuge in the small, closet-like sacristy to the right of the altar.

There was no question now about the fate of the parish register.

???

Darcy and the other men from Rosings went immediately to the church.

While the stone walls and high roof held firm, clearly a large portion of the interior was ablaze.

Darcy, who had fought enough fires at Pemberley to know how to be useful, seized an unused spade and joined the group of men outside who were busy with rakes, shovels, hoes, and buckets clearing away brush and plants from the foundations and wetting down what could not be moved.

Their water came from the well in the church yard as well as that of the parsonage and two other houses on the other side of the church.

“By the time the blaze was seen, it was too late to go in and put it out easily, sir,” said the man working next to Darcy. “If we open the doors, we’ll only make it worse. Happen it will burn down before the roof is ablaze. ”

“Tis a chance we must take,” said the man standing next to him. “It is our church, and we should go in and try to save what we can.”

It was very apparent that an argument was brewing among those fighting the fire. Half the village regarded opening the church doors as foolhardy, while the other half felt desperate to save what they could.

Darcy wisely avoided choosing sides and continued working.

He could hear the eerie sound of the glass beginning to crack in the lower panes of the tall windows.

He caught sight of his uncle, cousin, and other men from Rosings occupied in much the same way he was.

Others worked to wet down houses and buildings across the small lane that ran by the church and to ensure that there was enough space to keep the fire from spreading. The weather had been very dry.

Mr. Collins, in his shirtsleeves, seemed to be everywhere, affording a few minutes rest to exhausted workers, bringing drinks of water, shouting encouragement, keeping a sharp eye on new outbreaks, and joining in where he was needed.

Charlotte Collins stayed in the parsonage garden with Ned’s grandmother.

They provided drinks of cold water to thirsty villagers, offered cool, damp cloths and encouraged people to take a few moments to rest. It was here that Elizabeth, Anne, and their guard made themselves useful fetching and carrying cool, fresh water from the well.

Mr. Church, the surgeon, set up a makeshift dispensary in the parlor for anyone who was seriously injured.

Fortunately, he had only a few patients.

Elizabeth looked at those working. She could make out Mr. Collins, but it took her several minutes to distinguish her husband, laboring with the others.

Within minutes, the argument over opening the doors or not was settled as the windowpanes began to shatter and give way in the heat with a distressing sound, admitting plenty of air to the building and causing the flames inside to blaze higher.

Teams of men began forming at each window while another group prepared to go inside.

Every able-bodied person for miles was assembled to fight the fire.

After a long interval of desperate work, it seemed to the villagers that their efforts had begun to pay off.

While there was still a great deal of smoke, they had succeeded in getting enough water onto the flames to subdue the fire.

There was a great deal more work to be done, and they would be working for hours, but for now everyone stopped to draw a breath before continuing.

Mr. Collins, walking alongside the building, saw a sight which caused him to cry out.

“There is someone in there!” He ran to the doorway and pushed his way through the line of people there.

“Stop! I saw a person at the window. It was small, it may have been a child, but he was alive! I must bring him out!”

Darcy heard him and went forward. “Mr. Collins, I will enter first. Prepare yourself to follow me.”

“No, Mr. Darcy. This is my parish and these people have been committed to my charge. I will enter first. Please assist me to wet down my clothing.”

Collins held his arms out, and the two men standing near him soaked his clothing. At a nod from Darcy, they did the same to him. Their handkerchiefs were soaked as well. “Where was the person?” asked Darcy.

“Moving towards the rear of the nave.”

“If you are sure you saw someone, Collins, we must waste no time. I will station myself in the narthex. You will crouch on hands and knees and go forward. Keep your head down where you will find fresh air. Our greatest danger now is not from the flames but from the poisonous vapors and fumes. I will recruit the next man in line to take my place and will follow you into the nave if I do not hear your shout within two minutes. Are you ready? Move quickly when I open the door. You have two minutes until I enter.”

“I am ready.” The two men shook hands and entered the church, crouching low as they entered.

It was as black as pitch. Small pockets of embers burned toward the front, but the rear of the nave was in total darkness.

Smoke was everywhere, dark and threatening, still rising from every smoldering bit of wood that had fallen to the floor.

“Hello! Where are you?” shouted Collins, moving forward.

He had disappeared from view when Darcy, listening with every fiber of his being, thought he heard a hoarse voice.

His ears strained. He could make out a low murmur, then nothing.

“Collins! It has been two minutes. Answer me!” he shouted.

The next man in line, soaked to the skin, opened the door, entered, and crouched next to him. “Collins!” he shouted again.

“He’ll never answer anybody again,” said a hoarse, familiar voice emerging from the smoke.

“I’ve seen to that. I’ve shut his stupid mouth forever.

And that damned book is burnt up.” Lady Catherine de Bourgh, still carrying the blood-caked wrought iron candlestick, raised it in the air as if to strike at Darcy.

Instead, she fell forward and lay sprawled at the feet of her horrified nephew.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Rosings Park, Hunsford

The sorrows of the next few days were heavy indeed, made bearable only by the friendship and love which the inhabitants of Rosings had for one another.

Charlotte Collins fell into a dead faint upon witnessing her husband's body brought out of the church, and the earl had her transported to Rosings, where she could be properly cared for among friends.

Mr. Church pronounced that Lady Catherine de Bourgh had succumbed to the noxious vapors and smoke from the fire and had died as her lungs gave out.

Her funeral was held that same evening, and only four mourners were present: her brother, her two nephews, and Timmons, the butler.

In accordance with the custom of the times, ladies did not necessarily attend burials, and her daughter was not present.

She was laid to her uneasy rest beside her husband in the family burial ground.

The funeral of Mr. Collins was held the following Friday in the churchyard of the parish he had served, and by contrast the entire village turned out to mourn him.

The Bishop had come to officiate, and at the conclusion of the service, he informed the congregation of Mr. Collins' efforts to clear the name of Dr. Charles Oliver.

He commended those efforts and informed the people that after his investigations, Dr.

Oliver was completely exonerated of any wrongdoing.

Anne had arranged for the Olivers to be present, and they were overcome by the news as old friends and neighbors surrounded them.

Elizabeth had a tearful, private reunion with her father, who had arrived with Sir William and Lady Lucas as Mr. Collins' only surviving relative.

At the end of that reunion, Darcy joined them, and Mr. Bennet shared the happy news that Jane and Mr. Bingley would be married in a month's time.

Elizabeth, Darcy, and Mr. Bennet spent a quiet interval together planning the Darcys' visit to Longbourn.

Anne, in her usual quiet way, approached Charlotte to beg her to consider Rosings her home for the rest of her life if she wished.

"You were the first person to befriend me, Charlotte, and I hope we will be friends for life," she said.

Charlotte accepted, much to the relief of her parents, who were painfully aware that the entail of Longbourn had been broken with the death of Mr. Collins.

Hertfordshire

Elizabeth was beside herself with excitement as they traveled into Hertfordshire for the wedding, and as they drove up the lane to Longbourn she could barely sit still.

Her family assembled outside to greet her, and she embraced her mother with tears in her eyes.

“My dear Lizzy, you are come home!” was all Mrs. Bennet could say, but it was clear that a great weight had been lifted from her.

The family went inside, and Elizabeth was able to cheer her mother with stories of the wedding as well as descriptions of her clothes and jewels.

When Mrs. Bennet was finally ready to rest, Elizabeth and Jane stole off for a few minutes together for the first of many talks they would have during the visit.

Jane poured out her happiness over her forthcoming marriage as well as her fatigue and anxiety over Mary and their mother, and Elizabeth had much to share with her sister about both the horrors of her captivity and the joys of her marriage.

Elizabeth had been dreading her conversation with Mary. She would confess later that she had to overcome a great deal of annoyance over the presence of Lydia, who simply walked in and sat down as if invited to join in the confidences.

“I believe I am much better now,” said Mary. “At first I thought I should never recover from the shock, but I am learning to reconcile myself to it.”

“Mary is my hero,” added Lydia. “She just grabbed his knife and did what needed to be done.”

Mary squeezed her sister’s hand. “I had help. It was Jem who actually finished him off.” She shivered. “I do not wish to think of it too much, Lizzy. Perhaps I will feel more like talking about it after some time has passed.”

Elizabeth reached over and laid her hand over those of both her sisters. “I feel the same way. We three have something in common. All of us have thwarted George Wickham.”

“Yes, and thanks to Mary and Jem, nobody else has to worry about him.”

Elizabeth was touched by Lydia’s watchful care over Mary and felt a breath of hope that Mary would be able to recover from her ordeal.

After their first few days at Longbourn, the Darcys moved to Netherfield to make room for the Gardiners, arriving for the upcoming wedding.

When they arrived there, they were greeted by Caroline Bingley.

She seemed much the same as ever, if a bit subdued, and she apologized for not taking them upstairs to their room.

“My ankle is still a little weak, though it grows stronger each day.” She and Elizabeth agreed to have a long talk after dinner, and so they did.

Caroline had been quite affected by the trial and its results.

She was satisfied that justice had been done, and she took an active interest in the welfare of her footman’s elderly mother.

She also looked forward eagerly to her marriage, which would take place in the spring.

Elizabeth also had an opportunity to thank Mr. Hurst again.

She and Darcy privately thought that Louisa Hurst could not quite believe her husband’s heroics, and they both took pains to convince her that he had been instrumental in Elizabeth’s daring rescue.

It had been arranged that he would serve with a number of other gentlemen on the

governing board of a school for those inmates of the Audley Street house who needed to be trained in genteel occupations in order to escape their former lives and to make their livings.

Mr. Hurst was full of plans and was looking forward to the winter, when they would get started, He spent a great deal of time discussing this with Darcy, who was keenly interested and who, with Lord Matlock and Anne de Bourgh, would be providing the funds for the school.

Of course, there were visits around the neighborhood as Elizabeth offered her heartfelt thanks to those who had been instrumental in the search.

She was enchanted by young Ezra, who was equally enchanted by her.

And she had known the Hill brothers all of her life.

Her thanks to these and other neighbors were emotional and heartfelt.

Darcy had additional plans, and he spent many hours closeted with Mr. Bennet in the library as they discussed and planned more concrete ways in which to reward those who had been instrumental in their search.

With the wedding only days away, and with Mrs. Bennet still recovering, he and Mr. Bennet agreed to a celebration in the spring, once the crops were planted, at which farmers and gentry alike would be welcome.

By then, they would have corresponded with their ideas about more concrete rewards for those people deserving of them.

At the top of their list were Jem and Tim Hill, and their thoughts ran to suitable farms in the neighborhood.

Before anyone knew it, the day fixed for the wedding of Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley had arrived.

A radiant Jane walked the short distance to the church with her father and mother, surrounded by her sisters.

There, before their closest friends and family, Mr. Bennet gave his daughter in marriage to the man she loved as her family looked on with joy and a few tears.

Pemberley

After Jane and Charles Bingley had departed for London and their honeymoon, it was at last time for the Darcys to go home to Pemberley. The three-day journey was made considerably less tedious by the fact that they were spending it together.

At midmorning on the third day, Darcy announced that if all was well, they would be at Pemberley by early afternoon.

Soon he began pointing out landmarks to Elizabeth, and before long, they passed the spot where he had asked her to marry him.

They slowed to drive through Lambton, and Elizabeth saw again the inn, the village green, and the famous horse chestnut tree, now magnificently dressed in its autumn gold against the blue sky.

The last five miles were familiar to her—then the turn down the lane to the house, the valley and river, the woods on the other side, and suddenly the prospect of Pemberley, now her home.

The coachman stopped the carriage at the top of the hill without being asked because it was customary for members of the family returning home.

Darcy, his eyes shining, took Elizabeth's face in his hands and said, "Welcome home, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth."

Later that evening—after a joyful, tearful reunion with Georgiana, after a stroll in the gardens, and after a wonderful family dinner—Elizabeth and Darcy retired to the apartments that would be theirs.

Elizabeth was struck by the similarity between the bedchambers and those at the house in London.

The chief difference was that they were much larger and were separated by a beautifully appointed sitting room set aside for their own use. They settled on the sofa by the fire.

"I confess, dearest, that I still take fright from thinking of Lady Catherine. My fear of her has been difficult to shake off." Elizabeth burrowed closer into her husband's side.

"That is only natural, Lizzie. But it is over and done with. I saw her laid in her grave, and she can never harm another soul."

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment before her natural good humor returned. "You are right. Besides, as the new lady of Pemberley I have decided on a project that will take up a great deal of our time. It is only right that I solicit your opinions."

"Oh? And what project is that?"

"One of great import, and one we have discussed before. But I have quite forgotten. Shall we work on a dear little girl, or a horrid little boy?"

"Both," replied Darcy as he kissed his bride.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:10 am

Five young Darcys would come along to fill the nursery and to enliven the halls of Pemberley as only children can. Darcy adhered to his plan to gather the family for breakfast, and Pemberley breakfasts became known for being cheerful and chaotic.

Jane and Charles stayed on at Netherfield for about a year until they were satisfied that Mrs. Bennet was entirely well. They then purchased an estate much nearer to Pemberley and moved there with their own growing brood of children.

Mary, Kitty, and Lydia all benefitted by visits to their sister Elizabeth and by the dowries that were provided for them in settlement of the damages done by Wickham and Lady Catherine. Each was given a London Season, and each in her own way managed to marry well.

Lydia realized her dream of marrying a gallant soldier, but he was a promising young captain, a gentleman's eldest son in Colonel Fitzwilliam's regiment. When he sold his commission some years later, he and Lydia made their home at the estate he had inherited from his father.

Kitty simply fell in love with London and did not wish to live anywhere else.

She happily joined the Darcys whenever they were in Town and eventually married a Mr. Edward Renfrew, who had been a clerk for her father's old friend Sir Henry Martin.

Mr. Renfrew had a gift for the law and went on to a promising career as a barrister in London.

The Renfrews settled in a small but exquisite town house in an excellent neighborhood, and Kitty entertained and visited to her heart's content.

Her husband frequently and readily asserted that she was instrumental in assisting him to advance her career.

Mary did not appear to be inclined to marry, preferring to remain quietly at Longbourn with her parents.

She was the subject of much anxious correspondence between Elizabeth and Lydia.

Elizabeth feared that the experience with Wickham might have been too much for Mary's sensibilities and that she would never marry.

Lydia's attitude was more relaxed, and she told her sister that Mary would wed when she found the right man—or when the right man found her.

While Mary stayed at Longbourn, occasionally visiting her sisters and the growing throng of nieces and nephews, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet continued to enjoy the society of their friends in the neighborhood surrounding Meryton.

Eventually, Mr. Bennet found that the day-to-day management of the estate had become something of a burden.

James Hill, who had become a notable farmer in his own right, became Mr. Bennet's steward and deputy, and Longbourn prospered under his management.

Jem and Mary had formed a friendship after their shared experience with Wickham, and no one in the neighborhood was surprised when that friendship slowly grew into a much deeper mutual affection and regard.

They were quietly married in the church at Longbourn and settled initially in the

farmhouse on the property Jem had received.

Eventually, Mr. Bennet wished to retire, and the young Mr. and Mrs. Hill took over the management of Longbourn, eventually inheriting the property when Mr. Bennet passed away.

Sergeant Parker remained in Darcy's employ for years, marrying a pretty Derbyshire lass and taking her to London. He eventually rose to the position of steward at Pemberley, though he always had an eye for a puzzle or a mystery.

Anne settled down at Rosings with her cousin Fitzwilliam as everyone suspected she might.

She grew rosy and healthy, though she was never plump, and there were several little cousins in the nursery for the Darcy children to visit and play with.

Charlotte astonished everyone by accepting the hand of the new rector at Hunsford.

Slightly older than she, he was a good, sensible man—but an incurable romantic. He simply swept her off her feet.

One blustery February day, when the Darcys had recently concluded their first Christmas celebration, a footman brought a letter for Elizabeth. It was much traveled, and she noted that it came from the city of Philadelphia in the United States.

"Tis from Arabella Grant, Mrs. Mason," said Elizabeth.

"She writes that Mr. Mason is become well established in Philadelphia. His firm is quite successful, and they have broken ground on what she calls 'a fine, large house in the suburbs.' She also writes that a little one is expected in the summer."

The Bennets were frequent visitors to Pemberley. But the most frequent visitors of all

were the Gardiners, who remained warm and lifelong friends of Elizabeth and Darcy.