

DARCY'S PURSUIT

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
VARIATION



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M. A. Sandiford

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My dear Harriet

You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise to-morrow morning, as soon as I am missed. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy with-out him, so think it no harm to be off. You need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater; when I write to them and sign my name Lydia Wickham. What a good joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing. Pray make my excuses to Pratt for not keeping my engagement, and dancing with him to-night. Tell him I hope he will excuse me when he knows all; and tell him I will dance with him at the next ball we meet, with great pleasure. I shall send for my clothes when I get to Longbourn; but I wish you would tell Sally to mend a great slit in my worked muslin gown before they are packed up. Good-bye. Give my love to Colonel Forster. I hope you will drink to our good journey.

Your affectionate friend

Lydia Bennet

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 47

Prologue

July 1812, Brighton

Early evening was the fashionable hour for the gentry to parade in Brighton. In a park by the seafront known as the Steyne, officers in regimentals enjoyed the sun while ladies in summer dresses strolled twirling their parasols. Accompanying Mrs Harriet Forster, Lydia Bennet struggled to act normally—a hard task when she longed to shout her wonderful news for all to hear.

‘Enjoyed your dip?’ Mrs Forster asked.

Lydia thought back to their afternoon visit to the ladies beach, where they had approached the sea in a horse-drawn bathing machine, stripped off their clothes, and entered the water—an exercise supposedly beneficial to the health.

‘Oh, immensely!’ She gave the expected answer. ‘A bit cold. But that doesn’t bother me.’

‘It warms up in August.’ Mrs Forster pointed. ‘There’s Mr Pratt, with Mr Chamberlayne.’

Lydia waved, and the officers came over.

‘Mrs Forster.’ Pratt bowed. ‘And Miss Lydia. I expect to see you both tonight, at the ball?’

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the *world*,’ Mrs Forster said. ‘Why, everyone will be there!’

‘Me too!’ Lydia tried to keep a straight face. The ball was to be held in a grand hotel on Marine Parade, a short walk from their lodgings. It would include supper, and dancing till one o’clock and beyond.

Pratt addressed Lydia. ‘Will you grant me the honour of the opening set?’

‘Already engaged. But free for the second ...’ She broke off as Wickham and Denny approached, deep in conversation.

‘Capital!’ Pratt turned to see what had distracted her. ‘We’ll leave you to your walk. Until later!’

Pratt and Chamberlayne moved on, leaving Lydia relieved, and proud of her quick thinking. She wondered why Wickham looked so serious, but his usual nonchalance returned as he greeted them.

‘A fine day!’ He opened his arms. ‘And the promise of an *enjoyable evening* to come.’

Lydia met his eye. ‘I love a ball. *I cannot wait.*’

He returned her gaze with a knowing smile. ‘Nor I.’

‘Listen, George.’ Denny led Wickham to a stand of small fir trees overlooking the Marine Pavilion. ‘We must settle this now. I owe father £1200 which I absolutely *must* repay by end of August. Of this I loaned you £950, on the understanding it would be refunded within the week. That is to say, *yesterday.*’

Wickham sighed. Typical Denny, always worrying over money. The family, he knew, had a small estate in Yorkshire which yielded £400 a year, in addition to investments in funds. As the heir, Lieutenant Denny would become a landowner with a comfortable income, while Wickham had no expectations—Darcy had seen to that.

‘All right.’ Wickham adopted his most reasonable tone. ‘You’re a good friend, Denny. But the truth is, I’ve had the most confounded luck at the table. The dice just didn’t fall my way.’

Denny’s voice shook. ‘What is left?’

‘Well—not much. But I have a plan.’ Wickham leaned closer. ‘Miss Lydia. She is besotted with me, as you know. Now, I tell you this in strict confidence. *I’m eloping with her at midnight.* A chaise will take us to town, from where we’ll leave for Gretna.’ He paused before whispering, ‘Or so she believes.’

Denny stared at him. ‘Who knows about this?’

‘No-one.’

‘You realise I suppose that the Bennets aren’t rich? The daughters have £4000 *between* them, so Lydia will get at best

£800, hardly enough to repay me—and you still have other debts to settle ...’

Wickham exhaled in frustration: Denny was so slow on the uptake. ‘You don’t imagine I’ll *marry* her do you?’

‘Then what is the point?’

‘The point, my dear Denny, is to find out how much Mr Bennet is willing to pay to have her back!’

Denny gasped. ‘Are you mad? Do you really believe that Bennet will pay a significant sum to save the reputation of one daughter, at the risk of ruining his whole family?’

‘His brother-in-law runs a lucrative business in Cheapside.’

‘What of it? Do we know *how* lucrative? Or whether they are on such terms that the brother-in-law will pay a fortune to save his niece? I wouldn’t, in his position. Would you?’

Wickham frowned, fearing Denny might be right for once. ‘Maybe there’s a better way. Listen! There’s a session of high stakes faro tonight at Sir Reginald Montague’s place in Charles Street. A chance to recoup our losses and earn *serious* money. Should be a doddle. What do you say?’

A long silence. ‘I don’t know, George. I haven’t much money left to risk.’

‘All the more reason to earn some more.’ Wickham patted Denny on the back. ‘Don’t be so glum. We can do this!’

Midnight. Trembling with excitement, Lydia left the Forster’s lodgings and turned towards the Steyne. Colonel Forster was still at the ball with Harriet. Denny would be there, and Pratt, and all the others. She giggled as she imagined Pratt’s disappointment at missing their dance. But the best laugh was to imagine the expression on Mrs Forster’s face when she found *the letter*, which Lydia had placed on the sideboard in the morning room. It had been a boring wait, with nothing to do except pack a carpet bag. The night was clear with a bright moon. Perfect for a fast transfer to Epsom, then onward to London, and finally Gretna ...

The carriage would be parked halfway up the Steyne at the end of South Parade. Lydia crossed to the edge of the park. She thought of Jane and Elizabeth, so superior and sure of themselves, Mary's moralising, and Kitty's jealousy. Four older sisters, yet *she* would be the first to marry!

She reached the *rendez-vous*. No sign of the chaise, or of Wickham, or the driver. Was she early? Perhaps there had been a delay?

Lydia waited ten minutes. Carriages passed and turned into the parade. Ten more minutes. No Wickham.

She felt cold and alone. A clock struck the half hour.

What could have happened?

The Forsters might leave the ball early. While looking for her, they would find the letter ...

Tearful, shivering, she made her way back.

1

Thursday 6th August, two weeks later

Free to explore at last, Elizabeth Bennet was in no hurry to rejoin her uncle and aunt at the inn. They had reached Lambton in the early afternoon, on roads near to impassable after several days of rain had delayed their itinerary. But on arrival at the Rutland Arms these troubles had receded. The rooms were comfortable, the staff pleasant, the streets busy with contented people enjoying the sunshine.

Added to these blessings, Elizabeth had found a letter from Jane waiting in her room. It lay now in her reticule, still unread, since her aunt, who had grown up in Lambton, had insisted on showing her a chapel started by the Normans in the 12th century. Afterwards the Gardiners had returned to their room, while Elizabeth set off down Bridge Street to the river Wye.

Strolling back, a tea room caught her eye, set back from the road so that customers could sit outside. Its style was Elizabethan, with timbers supporting pink wattled walls. It looked genteel and popular. Approaching, Elizabeth realised how thirsty she was. A pot of tea would serve very well; likewise scones with jam. What was more, she could read her letter.

An outside table was free, directly under an upper floor that jettied out providing shade. Elizabeth ordered, and began reading. As soon became plain, life at Longbourn was normal. Everyone was in good health. The Robinsons had called. The Lucases had held a *soirée*. Lydia was thriving at Brighton according to Kitty, who had not however given details. Mary was more relaxed than usual, perhaps relieved at Lydia's absence.

Reading between the lines, Elizabeth sensed Jane's sadness. She had not mentioned Bingley, so Netherfield must still be unoccupied. On social calls she would meet neighbours aware of her disappointment—Mrs Bennet had seen to that. Elizabeth's thoughts turned to Pemberley, just five miles from

Lambton, where at this very moment the architect of Jane's distress might be lauding his good *judgement* in advising his friend, and his good *luck* in escaping a similar error.

She pushed the topic to the back of her mind. It would have pleased her to see Pemberley, but according to their chambermaid the family were up for the summer. If the Gardiners visited, Elizabeth would not go with them.

Putting away the letter, she noticed two elegantly attired ladies occupying a table nearer the road. The older lady was fortyish, her companion a girl of Kitty's age with an attractive face and fair hair framed by a blue bonnet. *Mother and daughter*, Elizabeth thought. A waitress hastened to serve them.

Elizabeth's tea arrived with a tiered tray holding scones, a pot of cream, and a bowl of strawberry jam. Forgetting the new arrivals she buttered a scone, added jam and a little cream, and poured tea. A refreshing sip reminded her how thirsty she was. The scone was soft inside and crisp at the edges. Perfection. She leaned back, recalling places visited during the tour, then took out Jane's letter for a second perusal.

When she looked up, a gentleman had joined the ladies at the far table. He wore an officer's blue coat on which sunlight threw patterns as it filtered through the trees. A flat straw boater revealed fair hair curled at the edges. *The father*, she thought, but perhaps not, since the young lady looked embarrassed, the older lady, fascinated. The ladies finished their tea in a hurry, and when the waitress passed again the gentleman paid the bill, jumped up, and guided the older lady to the road, the fair-haired girl hesitantly following.

The man turned round, waiting for the girl to catch up, and Elizabeth gasped as she glimpsed his face.

It was familiar. What an odd coincidence ...

She must be mistaken. But his appearance and mannerisms mirrored exactly an officer with whom she had occasionally danced—when he could be torn away from Lydia and Kitty.

Lieutenant Denny!

She had heard he came from Yorkshire—not far away. Were the ladies relatives?

Overcome by curiosity, Elizabeth ran to the road, where the ladies were entering a carriage. The gentleman climbed in after them and she got a good view of his profile. So far as she could tell there was no-one else in the carriage, but another man was riding postilion, with his back to her. She stayed a few seconds as they moved off towards the river.

Embarrassed, she returned to her seat, where a waitress was observing her anxiously.

‘Everything all right, ma’am?’

‘I thought I recognised someone ...’

‘Do you need a refill?’

Elizabeth’s mind cleared. The incident was over and she would enjoy another cup.

‘Thank you.’

Relaxing in the dappled sunlight, she recalled the beauty of the Derbyshire peaks, so austere compared with homely Lambton; no wonder Mrs Gardiner loved them. Her teapot was refilled and she tried another scone, feeling contented and drowsy. She would sleep well in the comfortable inn. Her room had a bureau where she could write a letter to Jane after dinner. Next day they would take a trip, if the weather held. To Ashford-in-the-Water perhaps. Not Pemberley ...

Footsteps interrupted her reverie. Approaching in haste from the road. She looked up, blinked, and saw a man staring at her. Tall, elegant, proud, the handsome face expressing utter bewilderment.

‘Miss Bennet?’

Her arms rose, as if seeking protection from his gaze.

‘Mr Darcy ...’

Her face was burning. It was as if they were on stage with an audience observing their every gesture. Elizabeth took deep breaths, trying to calm down, but it was Darcy who managed

to speak first, if not with perfect composure, at least with civility.

‘You are well I hope? And your family?’

‘I have been touring Derbyshire, sir. With my uncle and aunt. We are staying at the Rutland Arms.’

‘Ah.’ He paused. ‘Can you wait a moment?’

‘Of course ...’ But he had already hastened indoors. A minute passed, then he emerged, grabbed a chair from another table, and sat beside her.

‘You have been here, how long?’

‘Half an hour.’

‘I was looking for my sister and her companion. They planned to take afternoon tea after visiting the modiste. I would normally have accompanied them but had business at a hospital of which I am patron. I suppose they’ve been delayed ...’

‘I *did* see two ladies,’ Elizabeth said. ‘A mother and her daughter, perhaps. They left ten minutes ago with a gentleman who came by in a carriage.’

Darcy shook his head and fell silent, his eye constantly searching the street.

‘I expect your sister will be here soon,’ Elizabeth said.

As if making an effort to be polite, he tore himself away from the road and faced her again. ‘How long will you remain in Lambton?’

‘A week. My aunt grew up here and is keen to reacquaint herself with the area.’

‘Will you do us the honour of visiting Pemberley?’

Surprised by his improved manner, Elizabeth relaxed a little. ‘We would love to.’

‘I’d like to introduce you to my sister ...’ He threw another anxious glance at the street. ‘*Confound it*. I realise this is

ridiculous, but could you describe the ladies you saw earlier? The younger one in particular.'

'Let me see.' Elizabeth closed her eyes, trying to form an image. 'A little taller than me. Graceful, with fine features. Quiet and well-bred. Fair hair, light blue bonnet, blue dress, parasol ...'

He flinched. 'And her companion?'

'Fortyish, respectable-looking, and reserved—until the gentleman turned up. I had a sense he was trying to charm her. Cream dress with a pink floral pattern. I forget the hat.'

Darcy's face contorted. 'It *must* have been them! You have perfectly described my sister and her companion Mrs Annesley. But who could the gentleman have been? Someone they knew, evidently ...'

Elizabeth felt a stab of horror. 'Oh my God!'

He picked up her alarm. '*What?*'

'I think I recognised the man as they left. If I am right, he was Lieutenant Denny, from the militia. The officer that introduced us to ...' Her hands flew to her face.

'Mr Wickham.' Darcy glared at her, eyes wild. '*Why did you not mention this before?*'

'I didn't ...' A wave of anger swept away her intended apology. 'You are being unreasonable. How could I possibly infer a connection to your sister?'

'Where did they go?'

'Down Bridge Street ...'

'*Show me!*'

They hastened to the road, and Elizabeth pointed. 'To the river.'

'How do you know? They could have turned left into Castle Street.'

'I ran after them, to check whether the man was really Mr Denny. By the time I stopped they had almost reached the

bridge. It was a smallish carriage, crimson and black, in poor repair. Two horses, with a man riding postilion.'

'Did you recognise him?'

'He was facing the other way.'

'You must have formed some impression.' He grasped her arms as if to shake the information out of her. '*Could it have been Wickham?*'

'Mr Darcy, really ...' She pulled back.

'I'm sorry.' He released her gently, hands lingering, and regarded her with entreaty. 'Please. I beg you ...'

'I had the briefest glimpse and did not see his face.'

'I must go after them.' He regarded her, more in pain than anger. 'Forgive me, I am not myself.'

It seemed to Elizabeth that he was very much himself, but she replied softly, 'It is very shocking, and I wish you every good fortune in locating them.'

'My carriage is nearby ...' He pointed back towards the inn. 'And faster than Denny's, I wager.' He seemed set to leave when of a sudden he had second thoughts and spun back to face her. 'Miss Elizabeth ...'

'Yes?'

'You know Denny well, while I met him only twice and hardly noticed his appearance. You have seen his carriage; I have not ...' A long sigh.

'You wish me to accompany you?'

'No. It is an absurd idea, born of desperation.'

Elizabeth felt a surge of emotion that she could not account for. *She did want to help.* Her view of Darcy was unchanged. But having seen the shy, vulnerable Georgiana, and read of her trauma in Darcy's letter, it was unbearable to think of this girl in even greater peril.

'I will come.' The words were out. 'But I must inform my uncle, which will lose time ...'

Darcy turned back to the tea room. ‘Retrieve your reticule!’ He ran indoors and emerged with a waitress, bringing pencil and paper. ‘Write a note for your uncle. Tell him I will bring you to the inn this evening. Mention of my name will reassure your aunt. Excellent. Let us go.’

They were running again, up Bridge Street, where a fine green-and-gold carriage stood with a driver in readiness. Darcy tore the door open and shouted an instruction. In a flash they were on the move, accelerating towards the river.

Elizabeth lay back against the comfortable upholstery, recovering her breath as she marvelled again at the impulse that had led her into this escapade.

What have I done?

2

Georgiana Darcy gasped as the carriage lurched over the Wye bridge. *Surely we are going too fast*, she thought: perhaps the rider out front was unfamiliar with the road. At her side Mrs Annesley was still talking with Mr Denny, at ease with what was happening.

The week had been stressful, and Georgiana was looking forward to their normal routine at Pemberley, with her brother in residence and no visitors. They had travelled up from London with the Bingleys, staying on main roads—a fortunate decision since the weather had turned stormy. At Leicester William had ridden ahead to see his steward, leaving Georgiana to endure Caroline as she discoursed interminably on Darcy's *eligibility*, and on *how surprising it was* that he was still unmarried. Of course everyone knew what this meant. She wanted Darcy to marry *her*.

The trip had been bearable only through the presence of Mr Bingley, whom Georgiana had known since she was a small child. To her he had always seemed like an uncle, which made it all the more irritating when Caroline hinted he could be *something more*. It was said Bingley had admired a lady from Hertfordshire, near Netherfield, and that there were serious objections to the family.

To Georgiana's relief they had reached Pemberley on schedule in spite of the rain. It was comforting to speak with the housekeeper Mrs Reynolds, a substitute all her life for the mother she had never known. She also had her piano, books, boudoir—and of course William, although he had been moody. Caroline got on his nerves by teasing him about another lady, while Mr Bingley was unusually out of sorts, and even edgy with William.

Finally the rain had stopped. Georgiana had awoken to sunshine, and the Bingleys had left to visit relations of Mr Hurst in Doncaster. Any tension between William and Mr Bingley was gone: they were joking like the best of friends. So Georgiana had circled the gardens and practised the piano, looking forward to a relaxing afternoon in Lambton while

William fulfilled an engagement at the hospital. And so it had turned out ...

Until the advent of Mr Denny, sent by William. Or so he claimed, and they had seen no reason to doubt his word. He looked and sounded respectable. He knew their names. He had met William in Hertfordshire, then bumped into him again outside Lambton hospital. William had been delayed, so Mr Denny had offered help since he would pass by Pemberley on his way to Yorkshire ...

The carriage slowed, and Georgiana sighed with relief as it took the turn towards Eastlea Green and Pemberley.

Rationally she had nothing to fear. It was just so unlike William to entrust her care to a stranger.

Mrs Annesley was quizzing Mr Denny about his family's Yorkshire estate: *nothing grand*, he declared, merely a manor house with twenty acres. The conversation switched to the militia, which had been quartered in Hertfordshire when Mr Denny had *enjoyed the honour* of making Mr Darcy's acquaintance.

'So you met at a ball,' Mrs Annesley said.

'Indeed, we attended one at Meryton Assembly Rooms, and another at Netherfield, hosted by Mr Bingley and his sisters, who are most elegant ladies.'

'We know them well,' Mrs Annesley said with a glance at Georgiana. 'Why, they have been visiting Pemberley and left only this morning.'

'Mr Bingley adored dancing,' Denny said. 'Your master was proficient but preferred to observe, though I recall him taking the floor with one of the local daughters.'

Georgiana looked away, embarrassed and puzzled. This did not sound like William at all. Perhaps there was another side to him that she did not know? But the revelations were reassuring in one way: they proved Denny really did know her brother and Mr Bingley. She watched out of the window as they passed Eastlea Green and reached the edge of Pemberley

Woods. Soon she would be home, and this curious interlude would be over.

‘You missed the entrance!’ Mrs Annesley touched Denny’s arm, and pointed. ‘We must turn and go back.’

Denny frowned. ‘You’re sure?’

‘Of course! Tell your driver.’

Georgiana relaxed a little as the carriage slowed down. Her confidence in Denny had plunged as they drove past the lodge, but Mrs Annesley treated it merely as an amusing error. They stopped at the side of the road and she heard the rider dismount and walk towards them.

The door opened, and Georgiana froze in shock as a face she knew all too well smiled up at her.

‘Good afternoon, ladies.’

Mr Wickham. But how ...

Mrs Annesley, who had never met Wickham, replied as if nothing unusual had happened. ‘Good afternoon to you, driver. We need to go back to the lodge.’

‘Hmm.’ He smirked. ‘Hard to turn here.’

‘Then at your first opportunity.’

Wickham spoke to Denny. ‘Shall we swap? You ride, I’ll look after the ladies. It will be a fine opportunity for me to renew my acquaintance with Miss Darcy, and also to meet her charming companion.’

‘You *know* this man?’ Mrs Annesley asked Georgiana.

‘My brother may have mentioned him.’ Georgiana whispered the name.

‘*Wickham?*’ Evidently William *had* given a warning, although he had promised never to confide what had taken place at Ramsgate. Mrs Annesley confronted Denny. ‘You have deceived us, sir. Mr Darcy would never have put his trust in an associate of—*this gentleman*. We will descend immediately and return to Pemberley on foot.’

Denny looked at Wickham. ‘Well, George?’

‘Get on the horse. I’ll deal with this.’

A shrug, and Denny obeyed. Wickham smiled at Mrs Annesley. ‘Of course you may leave if you wish.’ He helped her down, then mounted the step.

‘I will leave also.’ Georgiana’s voice trembled.

‘After what we have meant to one another?’ He tried to enter, but Mrs Annesley pulled him back, red-faced and furious. ‘Miss Darcy will come with *me*. Let her go immediately!’

‘Certainly, ma’am, if you will give me room.’ Wickham stepped down, then darted back and slammed the door. The carriage moved off with Mrs Annesley running in pursuit, shouting and waving her arms, until she tripped on the verge and fell heavily.

Wickham eased Georgiana from the window.

‘Make yourself comfortable, Georgie.’

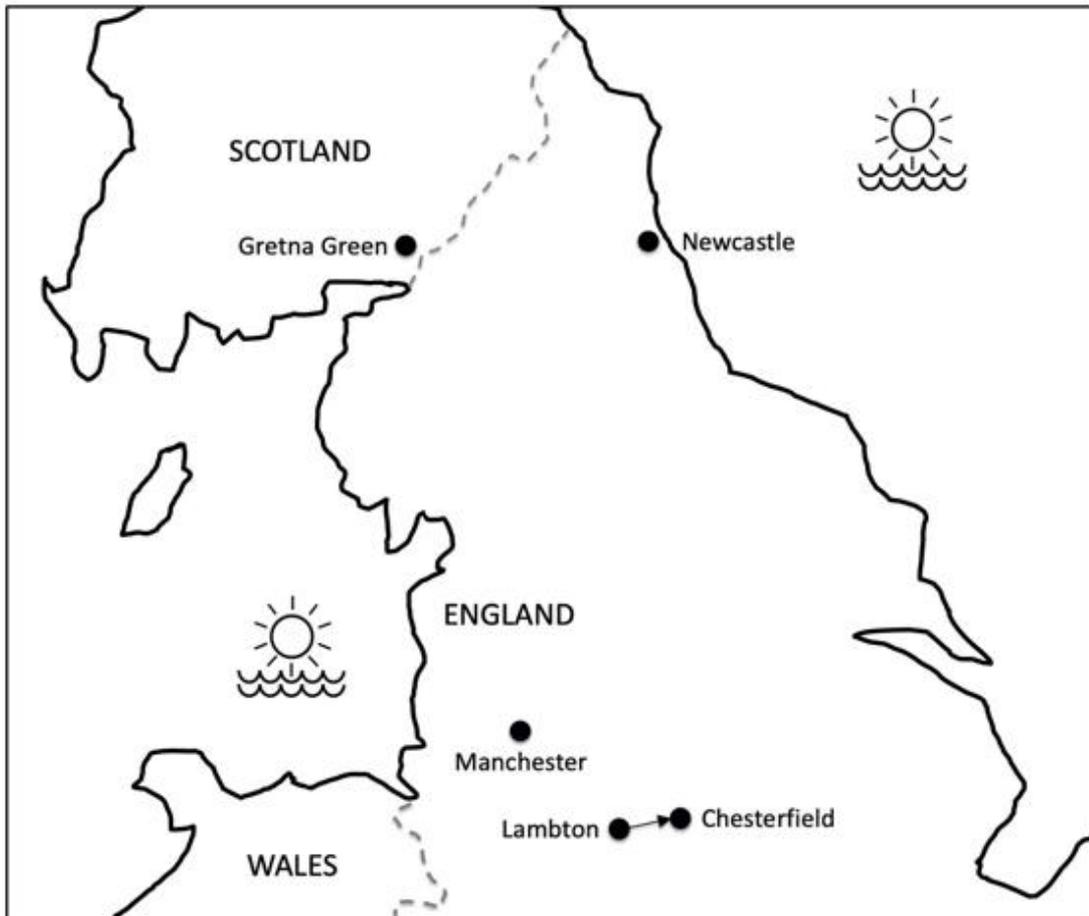
‘Mrs Annesley is hurt.’

‘She’ll be fine.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘We can discuss it later.’

She shrank into the corner of the seat.



They were over the bridge and out of Lambton as the road curled east. At a crossroads they went straight on, and Elizabeth asked, ‘Could Denny have turned off?’

Darcy, who had been leaning out of the window, pulled back into the carriage. ‘If his destination is Gretna he will aim to join the turnpike at Chesterfield.’

‘How far is that?’

‘Thirteen miles east of Lambton. This is the only good road, so I don’t see why they would deviate.’

‘They would not expect you to be on their trail so fast.’

‘Exactly. It was only through coincidence that you were present and recognised Denny.’ He looked out of the window again, as if hoping against hope that the red-and-black carriage might appear. ‘We’ll reach the coach stop at Chesterfield in two

hours. Denny and his henchman should take longer, which gives us a sporting chance.'

They fell silent, both thoughtful, and after a while Elizabeth said, 'Mr Darcy ...'

'Yes?'

'What if you *rode* after them?'

'That was my first instinct. But consider. If I caught up I would have to confront two men, possibly armed, on my own. So I would have to take my driver, Burgess, and hope that Wickham and Denny gave in without a fight. But what if the chase continued overnight, or possibly for days? In the carriage Burgess and I can share the driving, and luckily I keep pistols on board for emergencies.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'I confess I had not anticipated what might happen if we succeeded in confronting the enemy, so to speak. Harsh words I can bear, but I'm not too happy about pistols.'

Darcy's lips pressed together in what she recognised as a look of disgust—with himself, not others. 'I should never have brought you. It was madness.'

'I'm not so sure. It is hard to express in words the exact appearance of a man or a carriage. Without my help you would have to examine every driver or vehicle corresponding to my description. And if this really is an abduction, I imagine they will draw the curtains so that you cannot see inside. If Wickham is the collaborator he will sit with Miss Darcy, leaving Denny to ride postilion.'

Darcy nodded. 'You are acute. Yet this is not your affair. I had no right ...'

'Let's think it over.' Elizabeth leaned forward. 'We are assuming this is an abduction, in which case I can see *why*, but not *how*. It seems inconceivable that Denny has been hanging around Lambton for days in hope of finding your sister unprotected. He *must* have known that Miss Darcy would be in Lambton this afternoon, and that you would be away on other business. Even granting all that, how did Mr Denny entice both ladies into his carriage? I saw him work his charm on Mrs

Annesley. But to allow Miss Darcy to leave with a stranger went far beyond dereliction of duty. It was utter folly.'

Darcy nodded, his face anguished. 'I can't believe this is happening for a *second* time. First Mrs Younge. Now Mrs Annesley, who impressed me as a sensible honest woman.'

'You assume she is in collusion with Mr Denny? Or Mr Wickham?'

'I see no other explanation of the facts which you have laid out so clearly. Those devils must have some hold over her. Bribery. Or a threat.'

'If so she is a clever actor, for my strong impression was that she did not know Mr Denny. She was cool at first, then gradually warmed to him.' She paused. 'This trip to Lambton. Who knew of it in advance?'

'My housekeeper and several servants. There was no secrecy in the matter.'

'So far as I know, Mr Denny has no relations here. His family is based in Yorkshire. Mr Wickham instead grew up in the area. He may know your servants or their relatives.'

Darcy's face fell. 'As you imply, I have been negligent. I should have foreseen the danger.'

'I intended no such implication.'

'And now I have dragged *you* into this mess. I can't imagine what you think of me.'

Elizabeth made no reply, surprised and saddened at his distress. In all their dealings it was the first time she had seen him chastened, and the spectacle gave her no pleasure.

He continued, 'Are you not concerned over how this will appear to others? Such as your uncle and aunt?'

She managed a smile. 'You fear they will suspect a rather different abduction? Of myself, by you?'

'I assure you ...' He threw up his hands. 'Oh, what is the point. I know your opinion of me.'

'We're slowing.' Elizabeth saw a village green where a game of cricket was in progress. 'Where are we?'

‘Eastlea. Soon we will pass Pemberley Lodge.’

They were silent again, watching both sides of the road in case their quarry had stopped in the village. A mile out of Eastlea Green, Darcy pointed to a stone wall enclosing a forest. ‘Pemberley Woods!’

She leaned out of the window, impressed, and saw what must be the lodge further down the road. ‘Are we stopping here?’

‘If I see anyone watching the road.’

She withdrew to allow him access to the window, and caught a glimpse of a gate and rising driveway. Darcy regained his seat, shaking his head. ‘No luck.’

‘On to Chesterfield, then.’ Elizabeth clung to an armrest as the carriage swerved to avoid a passer-by. ‘Stop! Now!’

Darcy yelled to the driver, and they lurched to a halt a hundred yards on. He glared at her. ‘You want to get off?’

‘I recognised someone.’

‘Merely a farmer, leading his horse.’

‘A woman was limping at his side. I think she was Mrs Annesley.’

Darcy descended and without waiting for Elizabeth, ran back. The driver appeared at the door, a sturdy man with sharp eyes and an air of dependability.

‘Burgess, ma’am. May I assist?’

She smiled as he handed her down. ‘A wild ride.’

‘Anything for the master.’

Hastening after *the master*, Elizabeth was relieved to find that the woman was indeed Mrs Annesley, in the company of a weatherbeaten man whom Darcy appeared to know.

‘Came across ’er further up the road,’ the man was saying. ‘I never saw them as was responsible.’

Mrs Annesley stared at Elizabeth. ‘I saw you ...’

‘Miss Bennet.’ Elizabeth took the companion’s hand and smoothed back the bloodstained sleeve. ‘How did this happen?’

‘I should present Mr Arnold,’ Darcy said. ‘A farmer on the next estate. Can you wait, Mr Arnold, while we speak with Mrs Annesley in private?’ Darcy drew the companion away and beckoned Elizabeth to follow. *‘What happened?’*

Incoherently the story came out. A Lieutenant Denny had joined them in the tea room. He knew who they were, claimed to have met Darcy and Bingley in Hertfordshire, and said Darcy had asked him, as a favour, to give them a lift back to Pemberley. Events had confirmed his story—until their carriage had passed the lodge without turning.

‘Then we saw the other man.’ Mrs Annesley burst into tears. ‘And Miss Darcy identified him as *Mr Wickham ...*’

Elizabeth put an arm round her, shocked that Wickham or Denny could have used her so ill. In addition to the limp and the gashed arm, her dress was covered in mud and her hat gone. ‘You are safe now, and I’m sure this was not your fault. But how came you by these injuries? Were you pulled from the carriage by force?’

‘I was tricked, ma’am.’ The companion explained. ‘Then I ran after the carriage to plead with them, but tripped and stumbled into a branch overhanging the ditch. By the time I got up, they were gone. So I began walking back ...’

‘And met Mr Arnold,’ Darcy said.

‘He dismounted to help me.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I thought it best not to mention Miss Darcy ...’

‘You did well.’ Darcy turned to Elizabeth. ‘This is grave, but at least it allows you to return to Lambton. Since Mrs Annesley can identify both Denny and his carriage, she will accompany me while you go to Pemberley with Mr Arnold, who has my full confidence. There you will be looked after while a message is sent to your uncle.’

Elizabeth glanced at the farmer, waiting patiently beside his horse. It would be a relief to escape from this drama and rejoin the Gardiners ...

‘I thank you for your offer,’ Elizabeth said. ‘But Mrs Annesley is injured and in shock. You *cannot* take her with you

in this condition. Let Mr Arnold escort her to Pemberley, where her wounds can be tended.'

Darcy flinched, and shook his head. 'I'm grateful for all you have done. But it's out of the question.'

His commanding manner irritated her so much that she lost control. 'You are being ridiculous. And losing time.'

'Oh, I see.' He glared back. 'For protecting your safety and reputation, I am *ridiculous*. Very well, madam. Have it your own way, and do not lay the blame at my door if you suffer as a result.' He took a deep breath and spoke gently to Mrs Annesley. 'When you reach Pemberley, speak only with Mrs Reynolds on what has occurred, and ask her to send a message to the Rutland Arms, informing a Mr Gardiner that his niece Miss Bennet is safe in my company.'

He ran back with instructions for the farmer, and in a minute they were accelerating away, with Darcy seated beside Elizabeth, stone-faced, and saying not a word.

4

Staring out of the window Georgiana tried to ignore Wickham, while dreaming that her brother's green-and-gold carriage would come alongside to rescue her. She knew that in reality this was impossible. He would learn of her plight only on returning to Pemberley, and at best be an hour behind.

In short, she was alone with her captors, a predicament familiar from novels in which the heroine was kidnapped by a would-be husband. She recalled in particular a scene from Fanny Burney's *Camilla*, where Camilla's younger sister Eugenia was lured into a carriage by a man called Bellamy after attending an opera. On reaching a posting house Eugenia cried for help but was forcibly dragged back to the carriage, where Bellamy begged forgiveness, reaffirmed his love, and threatened to shoot himself unless she consented to wed him ...

Upon which the gentle Eugenia had given in.

Would she, Georgiana, be forced to make a similar concession? And how would Wickham and Denny control her when they stopped to change horses?

Still, she had known George Wickham all her life, and although deceitful he was not cruel: he might even feel genuine affection for her. He would not treat her as Bellamy had treated Eugenia.

Would he?

The road worsened as they passed farmland on one side and forest on the other. She wondered whether they would reach another toll before Chesterfield. Denny had thrown a coin to the gatekeeper at the last village, Rowsley: perhaps she should have cried for help? But she had been confused, and the opportunity had slipped away.

'Can we not slow down?' Georgiana asked.

'Aha!' Wickham smiled. 'The lovely lady speaks.'

‘This carriage is badly sprung. It’s like being shaken in a box.’

‘The road will soon improve.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘Is that not obvious? Last year, at Ramsgate, we planned to marry. Unfortunately your brother intervened—understandably since you were young. He can’t object now that you’re 16.’

Georgiana fell silent, unsure how to respond. As usual Wickham spoke calmly and pleasantly, as if the truth of his words was self-evident.

Eventually she said, ‘And what of my feelings, which may have changed since then?’

‘You said you loved me and wished to be my wife. Such a promise cannot be withdrawn. It would be the ultimate betrayal.’

Again his argument seemed unassailable, and Georgiana felt her strength ebb. On the point of tears, hardly able to speak, she whispered, ‘I do not love you now.’

‘No doubt you have been told stories. On my honour, none of it is true. As we continue our journey, you will recall how you once felt, and we will come to a proper understanding.’

Georgiana struggled not to cry, fearing he would move over to comfort her.

Unnerved by Darcy’s continuing silence, Elizabeth felt she had to say *something*. Forcing a smile, she looked at him until at last he turned to face her.

‘Mr Darcy.’ She spoke gently. ‘I realise I infuriate you, but for better or worse we are stuck together. Can we not talk civilly, as in the tea room?’

He stared at her. ‘You think I’m *angry* with you?’ A sigh. ‘I was upset when you insisted on coming. But you were right. Quite apart from her injuries, Mrs Annesley was too distressed to be of any help.’

‘Then whence the Friday face and knotted brow?’

‘My sister has been abducted! I am trying to work out the best means of getting her back.’ An ironic smile. ‘Perhaps *you* have ideas. You usually do.’

‘I can identify the *worst* strategy, which is to blame yourself.’

‘You believe that is what I am doing?’

‘Have you not been lamenting your supposed errors? Trusting Mrs Annesley? Letting the ladies shop alone? Dallying at the hospital? Wasting time in my company?’

Darcy leaned out the window as their carriage slowed. ‘The Rowsley toll gate! Excuse me ...’

He descended, and after a hasty exchange with the gatekeeper ran back. ‘Red and black coach, two horses with a postilion, half an hour ago. With luck we’ll catch them at Chesterfield.’

They passed through the village, then gathered speed as the road led to open country. Darcy looked more assured, perhaps planning his next steps rather than regretting past failings.

‘I have a question ...’ Elizabeth paused, not wishing to disturb his thoughts.

‘Yes?’

‘You must pardon my feminine, ah, apprehensions. But what will ensue when you confront Miss Darcy’s captors—who incidentally are trained soldiers?’

A faint smile. ‘That remains to be seen. The main point is that you will remain inside the carriage.’

‘You fear violence?’

‘From Wickham, I doubt it. His weapons are charm and deceit. Lieutenant Denny is an unknown quantity, at least to me ...’

‘He always struck me as inoffensive and very much in Mr Wickham’s thrall.’

‘Let us hope so.’ A shrug. ‘If we do catch up, it will most likely be at a coaching house where they will stop to change

their horses. These are busy places, and with so many observers Wickham and Denny can hardly risk a confrontation. Probably they will hand my sister over, and demand a payment in return for their co-operation in keeping the affair private.'

'If the probable outcome is a negotiation, why confine me to the carriage?'

'Having accepted your help, I have a duty to protect you from harm.'

'I remind you that I volunteered, and being of age, can decide for myself how I act.'

'You will stay inside the carriage, Miss Bennet. The matter is not for discussion.'

He turned away with a determined set to the chin that made his profile more handsome than ever, while Elizabeth, smiling faintly, resigned herself to further silence.

In the dining room of the Rutland Arms, Mr and Mrs Gardiner were awaiting a tureen of soup when a maid passed with an envelope marked *Strictly Private*.

'From Pemberley, sir.'

'Thank you, Lucy.'

Mrs Gardiner frowned as her husband opened the letter. They had received a note an hour before, pencilled in Elizabeth's hand: *Dear both, I have to leave urgently with Mr Darcy. He will bring me back this evening. I am well, do not worry. Lizzy.* What could this mean? It seemed odd, given Elizabeth's reluctance to visit Pemberley.

'Well?' She squinted at the letter, which looked short.

'Stranger and stranger.' He passed it over.

Dear Mr and Mrs Gardiner

Mr Darcy has asked me to send news of Miss Bennet, who is helping him in a very confidential matter. He hoped it could be dealt with by this evening, but owing to complications they will have to travel to Chesterfield, or further, so

he cannot say definitely when your niece will be back. Please be reassured that he will be with her at all times and give priority to her welfare. I will

inform you if we receive further news, and you are welcome to visit Pemberley at any time.

Yours very sincerely, E. Reynolds (housekeeper)

‘How extraordinary.’ Mrs Gardiner replaced the letter in its envelope as a waitress approached with their first course.

‘*A confidential matter;*’ Mr Gardiner repeated. ‘What can it possibly be?’

‘Lizzy must have met Mr Darcy at the tea room during some kind of crisis. But why would he ask *her* for help, and why would she agree, when she seems embarrassed by the very mention of his name?’

‘Could there be a secret understanding between them?’

‘She was curiously reticent after staying in Kent, where according to Maria Lucas they met Darcy again.’

‘Hmm.’ Mr Gardiner considered. ‘Are we certain Darcy can be trusted?’

‘His father was a fine man. I’ve never met the son, but he has a good reputation in the neighbourhood.’ A pause. ‘Should we write to Mr Bennet?’

‘Let’s wait for now. No reason to alarm them.’

Mrs Gardiner ladled soup, still mystified.

Chesterfield, 6.05 p.m.

Georgiana gathered her courage as their carriage stopped beside an inn. Denny dismounted to talk with Wickham at the open window.

‘Who takes care of the horses?’ Denny hissed.

Wickham leaned out. ‘We need cash. I’ll try my luck at selling them.’ His whisper was just audible. ‘Keep our passenger safe and get provisions.’

Denny opened the door. ‘Come with me, Miss Darcy. Time to stretch our legs and find something to eat.’

The inn looked grand, and quite busy: it must lie on a major route between cities. Walking beside Denny, Georgiana pondered what approach to adopt. Evidently he was in cahoots with Wickham: there seemed little point appealing to his better nature. If she tried explaining her predicament to a passer-by, she would probably be dragged outside like Eugenia.

He pointed to a saloon. ‘Drink? Bite to eat?’

She took a deep breath. ‘I need the ladies room.’

‘Later.’

‘Mr Denny, I cannot delay.’

A huff of irritation, and he followed signs to privies at the back. ‘Be quick. I will wait here.’

Passing the door, Georgiana felt a wave of exultation. *She had got away from them, for a few seconds at least.* A shared row of lavatory seats ran along a wall opposite washstands; demurely she lifted her dress and undergarments and sat next to a girl her own age. At the washstand was an older lady, genteel in appearance. For a moment they were alone, and she took her chance.

‘Excuse me.’

‘Yes?’

‘I am Miss Darcy, from Pemberley. Perhaps you know of the family?’

‘I have not that honour. Why?’

Georgiana flushed red. ‘I am in desperate need of assistance, ma’am. A man has kidnapped me and is taking me to Gretna Green. For my dowry.’

The woman blinked, flustered. ‘That is most regrettable, but I do not see what I can do ...’

Georgiana noticed she wore a ring. ‘Perhaps your husband, Mrs ...’

‘Hope.’ She touched her grey dress. ‘As you may see, I am in half-mourning, for my husband passed away just before new year. I am travelling with my sister, who is waiting for me outside. Perhaps the manager of the inn can help?’

She moved to the door, and Georgiana hastened to stay with her. In the corridor Denny moved to block their way, and bowed politely.

‘Good evening, ma’am. Lieutenant Denny at your service.’ He pointed to his blue coat, which held a badge signalling his rank. ‘This young lady is with me ...’

‘No!’ Georgiana’s cry was desperate; she tried to regain her composure. ‘I met this gentleman only this afternoon when he tricked me to enter his carriage. He is aiding a man who aims to marry me for my dowry ...’

‘Enough!’ Denny smiled at Mrs Hope. ‘Younger sisters can be such a trial, can they not? Always falling in love and running away?’

On impulse, Georgiana removed her handkerchief. ‘My name is *Miss Darcy*.’ She indicated the embroidered initials GD. ‘Georgiana Darcy. From Pemberley.’

Denny laughed. ‘You mean Georgiana *Denny*.’ He took her arm. ‘Come along, Georgie. We have worried this good lady enough.’ He bowed again. ‘I’m grateful for your concern, ma’am, and wish you a pleasant evening.’

Georgiana twisted round, as Mrs Hope watched with a bemused expression. Would she tell the manager? Probably not.

Denny dragged Georgiana to the courtyard, where he faced her angrily. ‘What the devil are you doing?’

‘You know perfectly well ...’

‘No-one will believe your pleas of coercion. You made a promise to Mr Wickham last year. His reaction is proper and honourable. We could have had a pleasant drink and a slice of game pie. Instead we will wait outside, and you will go hungry.’

They were moving again, having been joined by a post boy riding one of the new horses. Wickham had bought provisions at the inn; he and Denny were now munching pie and drinking red wine directly from the bottle, which he waved at Georgiana.

‘Don’t look so glum! Have a drink!’

She winced. ‘No, thank you.’

‘Bite of pie? Apple?’

She accepted an apple, but it was unripe, and approaching a toll gate she said, ‘I feel sick.’

Wickham passed the wine bottle to Denny; it was nearly empty. ‘Just nerves, Georgie. It will pass.’

‘I can’t control it any more ...’

Denny touched Wickham’s arm. ‘Let her out. She won’t make a fool of herself again.’

‘Then stand behind her while I pay the gatekeeper.’

Gagging, Georgiana stumbled down the step and threw up on the verge.

‘Have a sip of wine.’ Denny offered the bottle again.

She shook her head as she took out a handkerchief to clean around her mouth. Denny’s tone had caught her attention. He

sounded *sympathetic*, and the kindness was such a relief that she felt paradoxically grateful.

Perhaps he was not so bad after all?

Then why join forces with Wickham? For money? Or friendship? Or something else?

She thanked him as he helped her back into the carriage.

6

Thursday evening, 6.30 p.m.

Darcy was familiar with Chesterfield, a town near the east border of Derbyshire where several turnpikes met. Assuming Wickham was bound for Gretna he had two options: east to Retford (the direct route to the Great North Road), or north to Sheffield.

At the junction travellers had a choice of inns, the best of which was the *Whittingdon*. Before entering, they drove past the other inn so that Elizabeth could watch for Denny or his carriage, but as feared, there was no sign of either; nor did Darcy spot Georgiana or Wickham. They returned to the *Whittingdon*, which Darcy had used before, and he ran to the stables where an attendant answered his enquiries with maddening slowness.

‘Red and black you say, sir?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Young lady and two gentlemen?’

‘Perhaps in military uniform. This is very urgent. *Have you seen them?*’

‘Can’t say as I have, sir.’

‘I need to stable two horses for collection later, and take two fresh. Your best. To be fitted immediately.’

‘Where for?’

‘Sheffield. A bonus if you get us on the road inside ten minutes.’

The deal done, Darcy decided it was safe for Elizabeth to accompany him inside: Wickham had obviously visited already, or might even have risked exhausting his horses by pressing on for Retford.

In the saloon some guests were eating dinner, and after a careful look Darcy said, ‘May I ask you to stay here while I

check in the other coaching house? I will be back soon to order provisions.'

'Certainly.' She smiled and walked serenely to the bar as Darcy hurried out. He was surprised, and relieved, that she had gone along with his wishes without comment.

At the second coaching house, a smaller outfit, a sharp-faced young man was more forthcoming. 'I didn't see the lady, sir. But the carriage, yes, and a gentleman in a hurry and short of cash. Wanted to sell us his horses and hire two fresh. I had to ask the boss.' He pointed to an inner office.

'With what outcome?'

A chuckle. 'The horses had two years of running in 'em, and him being in such haste we got 'em at a good price.'

'When did this happen?'

'He left less than half an hour ago, sir.'

'In what direction?'

'He said Worksop and on to Retford.'

Re-entering the saloon Darcy was alarmed to see no sign of Elizabeth; instead a familiar voice called from a nearby table.

'I say! Mr Darcy! What brings you to these parts?'

Turning round, Darcy recognised the owner of an estate the other side of Lambton. 'Mr Entwistle! Did you by any chance see a young lady on her own hereabouts? Dark in a cream dress? Middling height?'

'Indeed I did, and dashed pretty too!' Entwistle, rotund with grey mutton chops, wagged a finger. 'Is Pemberley to be graced by a mistress? I was saying to Harriet the other day, *Mark my words, a man like Mr Darcy will hardly let another season pass without ...*'

'An interesting speculation, but I need to locate her. Urgently.'

'I could not say ...' Entwistle raised a finger. 'Aha! Unless I'm mistaken, the lady in question is entering the room at this very moment.'

Elizabeth waved and came to join them. ‘Pardon my absence, but I thought it might help if I took some steps on my own initiative ...’

He glared at her with a mixture of relief and irritation. ‘I told you to stay in the saloon.’

‘As I did, for a while.’ She looked at Entwistle. ‘Am I interrupting?’

‘I chanced upon a neighbour.’ With a sigh Darcy performed the introduction, aware that news of this liaison would spread. ‘If I may ask ...’ He spoke to Entwistle. ‘Where are you headed?’

‘Home. I am returning from London, which I find tolerable only in the summer months owing to ...’

‘As a favour could you take Miss Bennet to Lambton, where her uncle is staying at the Rutland Arms?’

‘Why, yes!’ Entwistle beamed. ‘It would be a pleasure, ma’am, and no inconvenience.’

‘Most kind, sir.’ Elizabeth returned his smile. ‘However, before my future is *fully* mapped out, there are points I need to discuss with Mr Darcy. In private.’

She pointed to a corner table, and Darcy followed and sat opposite. ‘Well?’ He struggled to control his irritation. ‘Wickham has departed for Retford with fresh horses. Mr Entwistle is a respectable gentleman in whom I have complete confidence. I beg you, let us have no more arguments and no more delays.’

‘I’m aware, sir, of the need for haste. It was for this reason that I asked for a hamper to be prepared and taken to our carriage. I also asked to see the manager, in case he had news of Miss Darcy. A long shot, but as it turned out, successful. A Mrs Hope passed by his office and informed him of a distressed girl who said she was being taken to Gretna Green. She was travelling with a lieutenant named Denny who said she was his sister.’

Darcy gasped. ‘What action did the manager take?’

‘None. Their carriage had already left.’ Elizabeth leaned forward. ‘But at least this confirms that the plan is to take Miss Darcy to Gretna. It also tells us that she is resisting, and that Denny is pretending she is his sister.’

Darcy took a deep breath, his anger easing. ‘It was ingenious of you to enquire. The hamper will save time. But please return now with Entwistle, and grant me the peace of mind of knowing you are safe.’

‘Why? I came in the first place because I could recognise Lieutenant Denny and his carriage. This remains true—unless they have hired a new one.’

Darcy shook his head. ‘Same carriage, new horses. But seriously, this is my last opportunity to return you to your uncle in the company of someone I trust. I cannot be sure by what route Wickham will reach Gretna. I may have to go all the way to Scotland and intercept him there.’

‘In which case I would have to come with you?’

‘Exactly. You might be away a week or more.’

She sighed. ‘Mr Darcy, I believe I can be of assistance. I hope I have already. It would feel like desertion to leave with your sister still in peril ...’ She paused, before asking, ‘How do you know Wickham is going to Retford?’

‘He told the attendant at the other coaching house.’

‘Is that the route you would take in his place?’

‘No. I would save time by joining the Great North Road later, in Yorkshire.’

‘Mr Wickham must realise that you will come after him. Would it not be in his interest to throw you off the scent by disguising his true route?’

‘You think he lied at the coaching house?’

‘Could he do that?’

‘The owner would have no way of checking. Nor would he care, provided the postboy came back with his horses, and full

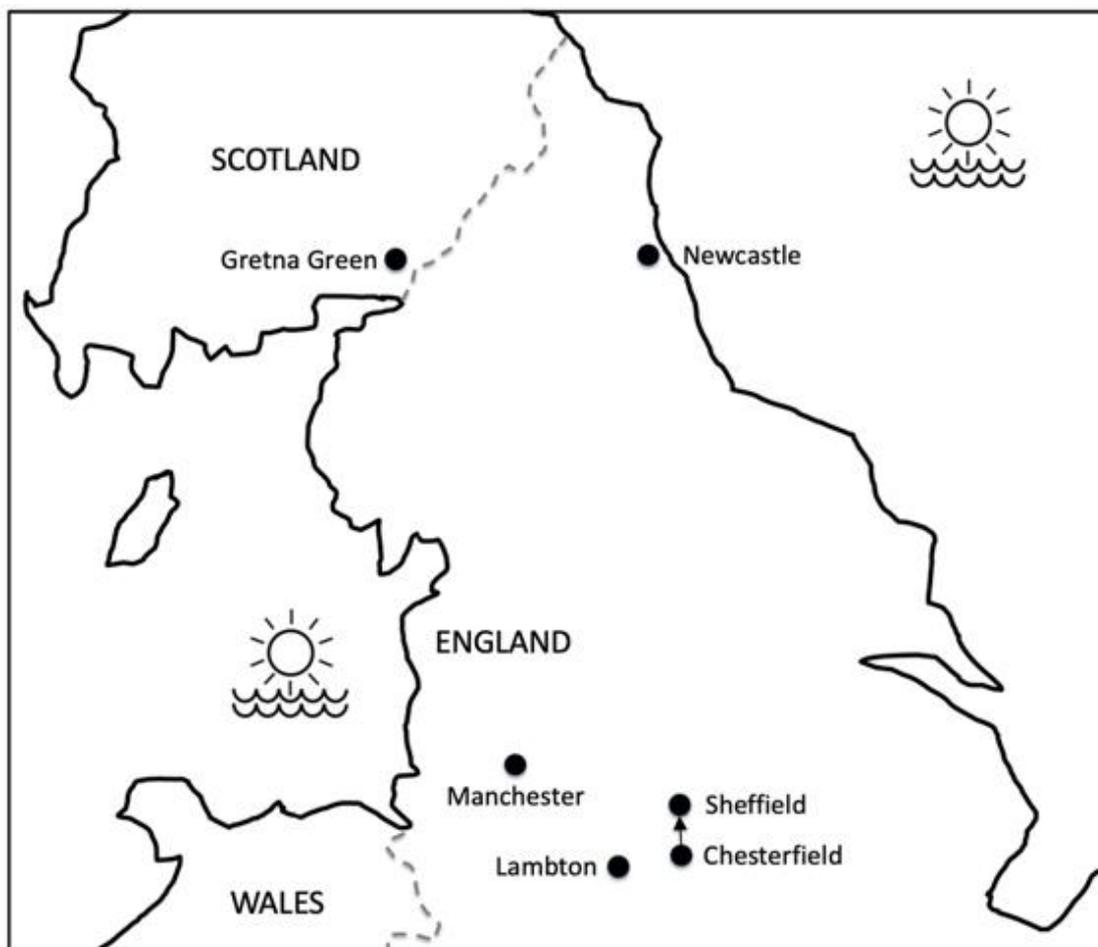
payment for the miles traversed.’ Darcy frowned, wondering why he had not considered this himself.

‘So we have no way of knowing.’ Elizabeth paused. ‘But should we not take the fastest route *in any case?* If he has really gone to Retford, we can get ahead of him.’

‘That’s right!’ Darcy slapped the table as hope returned. ‘We could intercept him at Wetherby, for instance.’ He leapt up. ‘You are infuriating, Miss Bennet, but also a marvel. Time to go!’

‘And our reliable Mr Entwistle?’

He laughed. ‘Must endure a solitary ride home.’



Thursday evening, 7.00 p.m.

Darcy's postboy was not of course a boy, but a young man of twenty, keen to impress. He wore a white beaver hat, corduroy breeches, and a jacket in yellow carrying the label of the coaching house—a uniform he hoped to exchange one day for that of a coachman. Alert for tips, he promised the speediest transfer to Sheffield—an aim assisted by his light frame, since he would ride one of the horses postilion.

With the postboy directing the horses, Darcy's manservant Burgess could take a rest in the carriage, so constraining Elizabeth and Darcy to speak politely and steer clear of past quarrels. She learned that Burgess had served Darcy for six years, and accompanied him wherever he went. Although having a quiet charm, the servant never offered an opinion. If asked a direct question he gave exactly the information sought, and no more: an ideal companion for his taciturn master.

With fresh horses and an eager rider they rattled along too noisily to speak, and focussed instead on the contents of the hamper: game pie, ham, Derby sage cheese, rolls, fruits in season—all of which luckily met with Darcy's approval, as did a bottle of Riesling wine. They reached the next toll at a village named Unstone, where Darcy questioned the gatekeeper while Elizabeth took the opportunity to stretch her legs.

'No luck.' Darcy was brisk. 'The toll collector, who evidently enjoys a tippie, has no memory of a red-and-black coach. An elephant could pass without him noticing. Are you ready?'

Observing the open toll gate, Elizabeth had an impulse. 'One moment.'

She ran past the horses and retrieved a crumpled handkerchief from under the gate post. Joining her, Darcy said impatiently, 'What now?'

'A foolish thought.' She unfolded the handkerchief, and with a whoop of triumph pointed to its embroidered letters. 'Recognise that?'

'GD! My God, it really is hers.' Darcy peered closer. 'I recognise the form of the G, with the tail curving back. So we *know* they passed this way. But the smell ...'

'Something made her sick. Rancid food maybe.'

'Or fear.' Darcy accompanied Elizabeth back to the carriage, his impatience gone. 'What led you to examine the handkerchief?'

'I've been asking myself what I would do in your sister's place, on my own with no means of escape. I think I would do what she has done: leave evidence to assist anyone coming to my rescue. Her protest at the inn might seem futile, but it was noticed. And now the discarded handkerchief.'

'You think these signs are deliberate?'

'I hope so. It would mean she is thinking clearly.'

The road went through farmland and was mostly flat. Once or twice they were delayed by a hill, where they got out to avoid straining the horses; the postboy tied a back wheel on the way down to prevent the carriage from racing out of control.

Towards Sheffield their speed slackened as the horses tired, and they discussed the next staging post. The basic plan would be the same as before: locate Wickham's carriage, or failing this, hire fresh horses and continue the pursuit. Matters were complicated by the light: it was nearing nine o'clock, and dusk was falling. But there seemed little doubt over the route. Darcy felt sure Wickham would head directly north to Barnsley, then Wakefield, with the intention of joining the Great North Road east of Leeds.

On this assumption they searched near the Angel Inn, the likely choice for a driver travelling north. With the light failing it was hard to distinguish one coach from another, and Darcy allowed Elizabeth to accompany him on foot for a closer look while the postboy earned an extra tip by getting the horses changed. No-one at the inn recollected a young lady accompanied by a gentleman in a blue military coat. But at the coaching house an attendant had served a party answering to this exact description—a mere fifteen minutes before.

Elizabeth could not help feeling sorry for Darcy as he seethed in frustration at this news; she was dismayed too at the prospect of another two hours bouncing and swaying as they headed for Barnsley. But there was nothing else to be done. Two fresh horses, another postboy, and they were moving again, with two lamps at the front corners of their carriage to illuminate the way.

The road remained busy, and in the dark the postboy had to drive carefully. The carriage had a single upholstered seat large enough for three. At one window Burgess dozed; at the other, Elizabeth watched dark trees flash by with the moon behind. Perched in between, Darcy still appeared agitated; eventually he drew a bottle from a compartment opposite and set up two glasses.

‘A sip of brandy, Miss Bennet? Soothing after a difficult day.’

‘Thank you.’ She raised the glass, observing the moonlight through the golden-brown liquor. The air was cooling now, the warmth of the brandy welcome. A long vigil lay ahead: she might as well relax.

‘You have always lived at Pemberley?’ she asked.

‘When I could.’ He leaned back, and she sensed his gaze just a few inches away. ‘Unfortunately, as you will be aware, the son of an English gentleman is expected to endure certain rites of passage. Aged eight I became a boarder at Harrow, a school north-west of London.’

‘What was that like?’

He paused, and Elizabeth sipped while waiting for him to collect his thoughts. Eventually he continued, ‘I hated it at first. The dormitories were spartan, the meals mediocre. Smaller boys were bullied and forced to run errands. I felt it my duty to master my lessons, but had little enthusiasm for them.’

‘Latin and Greek, I suppose.’ Elizabeth laughed. ‘My father views this practice as proof that Englishmen are mad. They spend vast sums to send their sons to schools where they learn languages no longer spoken, for which all writings are 2000 years out of date.’

‘He exaggerates of course. But I confess I was more interested in history.’

‘I suppose as you grew older it became more bearable.’

‘I was never happy at school.’ He became serious. ‘My mother died the year after Georgiana was born, when I was 13. Except for vacations, I was separated from her for the last five years of her life ...’ He broke off with a sigh. ‘Excuse me. These maudlin recollections can be of little interest to you.’

‘I’m sure I would have hated it.’

‘There were compensations. I knew Byron for instance, and Robert Peel, who is now in the government. But I was glad to leave—only to find myself at another educational institution. Cambridge.’

‘More Latin and Greek?’

‘History. And Politics. I was also expected to take holy orders. Nearly everyone did.’

‘So more years away from Pemberley. But perhaps you found congenial company at the university?’

‘I was ignored. You see, few young men go to university to study—unless constrained to earn their keep as lawyers or

clergy. They go to drink and gamble and make influential friends.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'How shocking!'

'I suspect you are not shocked at all. But it's true, and I was dismissed as a pious bore who had the temerity, now and then, to visit the library. With the result that I had a small social circle and only one close friend.'

Elizabeth's stomach tightened. 'Mr Bingley.'

'We had rooms in the same college ...' He paused, sensing her unease.

'Surely a man so amiable as Mr Bingley would have been popular?'

'His father owned a mill. To the sons of the nobility and landed gentry he was *nouveau-riche*, a man it would be humiliating to associate with.'

'I see.' Her face darkened. 'An attitude you evidently did not share, since in your estimation he was *too good for my sister*.'

She regretted these words immediately, and flinched as he met her eye sharply. 'What do you mean?'

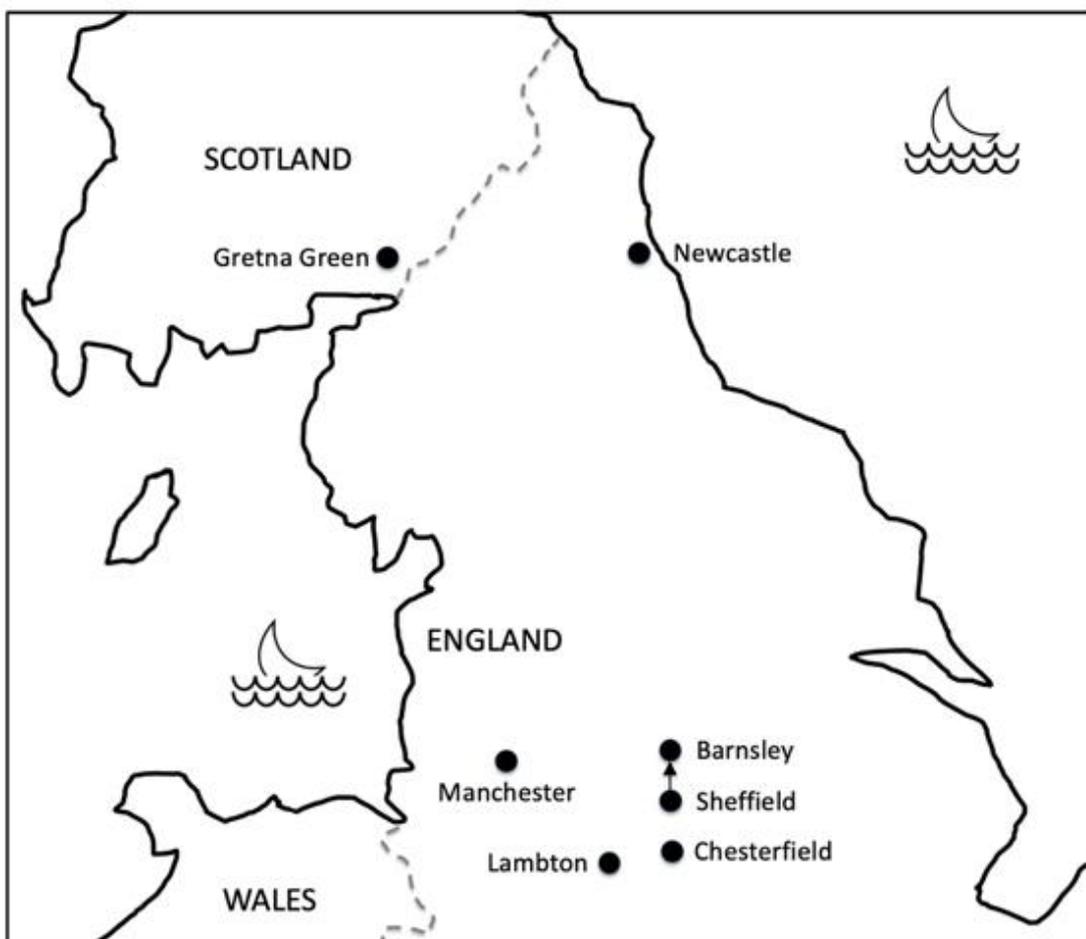
'You know perfectly well.'

'Did you not read my letter?'

'Every word.'

'Then if you comprehend the English language, you will be aware that my objection to the match had nothing to do with your family's social position. If it had been, I would scarcely have humiliated myself by making an offer to *you*.'

A stirring on Darcy's left reminded Elizabeth that they were not alone: perhaps their raised voices had roused Burgess. She turned back to the window and fell silent.



Thursday evening, 10 p.m.

A jolt woke Georgiana from disturbing dreams. Outside it was dark; the coach interior was lit only by a candle, with a pivoted glass cover that kept it upright over bumps. She saw Denny at the opposite window, huddled as if trying to sleep.

The sickness had passed; all the same, she had no wish to eat, only a keen thirst. She leaned over to the box where Wickham had put the wine bottle, and pulled it open. The lid creaked, and Denny opened his eyes.

‘Hungry?’

‘Is there anything to drink?’

‘Red or white?’

The thought of wine made her queasy. ‘Ale?’

He reached for a bottle. ‘Sorry. No glass.’

‘Where is Mr Wickham?’

Denny laughed. ‘At the reins! Slow postboy.’

‘Should we not rest at an inn and leave in the morning?’

‘And allow your brother to spoil our fun? Not going to happen.’

His tone was humorous rather than threatening, and she wondered whether an appeal to decency was worth trying. ‘Lieutenant Denny, if I may ask ...’

‘Yes?’

‘Why are you doing this?’

‘Helping Wickham?’ A shrug. ‘He’s a friend. And a good fellow.’

‘Will he pay for your assistance?’

Denny paused, embarrassed. ‘We have an *understanding*. Nothing you need worry about.’

‘But will he honour it?’

‘Of course!’

‘Are you sure?’ She lowered her voice. ‘Once at Ramsgate he swore he would never *force* me to do anything. But he was lying, wasn’t he? Because now he is making me go to Gretna. It’s my dowry he wants.’

‘He cares for you, Miss Darcy ...’

‘And how much of the dowry did he promise you?’

‘He didn’t say ...’ Denny caught himself and broke off. ‘Enough questions!’

A thought occurred to Georgiana, and she edged closer. ‘I’m concerned about your own situation. My brother has influential friends. Mr Wickham may seem a *good fellow*, but he can’t be relied on. You risk ending up with your reputation ruined and not a penny to show for it.’

Denny fell silent, and Georgiana felt a glimmer of hope. *She was not powerless*. Nothing could be done about Wickham, but

Denny was a different kind of man, easily led ...

She tried again. 'If you have money problems, are there not solutions that would serve you better?'

He stared at her. 'What do you mean?'

'Listen.' She spoke almost in a whisper. 'Anyone can be taken in by Mr Wickham. He deceived *me*, at Ramsgate. But my brother forgave me, and may forgive *you* if you recognise your error and make amends.'

'Too late for that, I'm afraid.'

'At Barnsley we'll be alone when Mr Wickham changes the horses. We can find the innkeeper and tell him to call a constable.'

Another pause, and Georgiana hoped he was giving this idea serious consideration. But he shook his head.

'The wedding ... *must* go ahead.'

'*Why?*'

'Never mind.'

Georgiana felt her hopes recede. Tears pricked her eyes, and whimpering, she returned to her seat at the window.

'Miss Darcy, I beg you ...' He seemed genuinely hurt by her distress.

'*I do not wish to marry Mr Wickham!*' She let the tears flow. 'It is the thing I most dread in all the world! If I must marry someone, let it be yourself.' She faced him, with the courage of despair. 'Then my dowry will be *yours*, not his.'

He observed her a few seconds, open-mouthed, then looked out of the window as they slowed.

'The toll,' he said. 'We're almost at Barnsley.'

While Denny paid the gatekeeper, Wickham appeared at the carriage door and poked his head inside.

'Feeling better, Georgie? We can get you a mug of warm soup at the next inn.'

She pointed to a hedge, seeking a way to delay their progress. ‘I need urgently to get out ...’

‘Wait until Barnsley.’

She tried to push past him, and after resisting for a moment he sniffed in exasperation and called to the postboy. ‘Get us through the gate. Fast!’

She sensed his eyes watching her as she crouched, and heard the carriage rumble on, and the gate clang as it was re-closed. Beyond the hedge lay pasture, but if she ran they would easily catch her. Walking back, she saw a carriage in the distance. Wickham had also seen it, and suddenly alert, called out to Denny.

‘Come here!’ He pointed. ‘Recognise that coach?’

While Denny squinted back down the road, Georgiana glimpsed bodywork lit by a lantern, and her heart jumped. *Green and gold*. Darcy’s colours. Two horses. As if sensing her excitement, Wickham manhandled her to the carriage.

‘Get in, Denny! I’ll drive. Keep a firm hold on our passenger.’

The door slammed. Georgiana felt Denny’s arm around her as the carriage jerked forward. She screamed, and a hand clamped her mouth. A whip cracked, they accelerated, and she burst into tears of frustration. *It had surely been William*. Just fifty paces away—but with the gate between them, and a toll to pay.

Had he noticed the frantic haste of their departure?

She stopped struggling. She had to keep calm. And wait.

9

Leaning out the side window, Darcy saw a gentleman looking back from the toll gate, and behind, partly hidden, what might be a blue dress. He hissed an instruction to Burgess.

‘Pistols! Now!’

Elizabeth turned sharply. ‘You see them?’

He stood aside so that she could replace him at the window. ‘What do you think?’

‘The carriage looks right. And the man nearest us could be Mr Denny.’

‘Do you see my sister?’

‘No.’

He checked again as they reached the gate, but the blue dress was no longer in view. He heard a muffled scream as the other carriage sped off. Throwing the door open he ran to the toll keeper.

‘We need the gate open. Now!’ He offered a silver coin. ‘Did you see who was in the coach ahead?’

‘Two gentlemen, sir. Young lady.’

‘Keep the change.’ He turned to the postboy. ‘Climb on the front and stay out of trouble.’

‘Why, sir?’

‘Just do it!’

Their quarry was no longer visible as Darcy mounted the postilion horse and the carriage moved off. A minute must have passed: Wickham might be a quarter-mile away. But they had gained before and could do so again. By now Burgess would have pistols primed, an insurance if Wickham refused to co-operate.

The pace was hard to judge. Darcy’s instinct was to urge the horses into a gallop, but they were tired after pulling 15 miles,

and an accident would be disastrous. Houses loomed on his right: they were reaching the edge of town.

‘White Bear Inn in half a mile,’ the postboy called. ‘And coach ahead!’

Darcy squinted into the distance and saw what might be Wickham’s carriage disappearing round a bend. He pressed the horse’s flank with his heels, signalling it to accelerate. A coaching house loomed up ahead, and he yelled back to the postboy.

‘If the carriage doesn’t stop, I have to go after it.’

‘My orders are to look after the horses, sir ...’

The road was busier ahead, and Darcy relaxed his pace to a trot as he closed within 50 yards of Wickham. *Almost there!* He would have to find an opportunity to overtake and block their way. Wickham stopped, impeded by the crush near the inn: *perhaps there was no need to get past after all.* Just draw up alongside, jump down, and confront them. With so many witnesses Wickham and Denny could hardly resort to force. They would have to negotiate.

Suddenly Wickham’s carriage pulled out past a stationary cart, barely in time to avoid a line of traffic coming the other way. Hopelessly blocked, Darcy roared at the owner of the cart as precious seconds were lost.

‘Better to stop and change horses sir,’ the postboy called down.

‘We can catch them, once the road is clear.’

The cart finally trundled down a side road, and ignoring the protests of the postboy, Darcy drove as fast as he dared towards the road for Wakefield.

Denny had drawn the curtains, but Georgiana managed to peer through a gap at the edge. Wickham was still riding at the front, urging the horses to gallop despite protests from the postboy.

Without warning they slowed, and wheeled left on to a track lined by tall trees.

‘We can’t go this way, sir!’ The bewildered postboy was obviously struggling to stay polite. ‘I have to see the horses back to the Angel. They should’ve been changed at Barnsley.’

‘I’ll buy them.’ Wickham’s voice.

‘Not mine to sell.’

The carriage stopped and Wickham dismounted. ‘Get down, and I’ll explain. You won’t get into trouble. On the contrary, you’ll go away with a generous bonus.’

Denny joined Georgiana at the window. ‘You were told to stay hidden. Move back!’

Denny pulled the curtains open, and watching over his shoulder, she saw Wickham still arguing with the postboy. Of a sudden Wickham pointed into the undergrowth, the postboy turned to look, and shockingly Wickham charged him in the back. With an oath the lad stumbled through the reeds and landed with a squelch in the ditch.

Georgiana gripped Denny’s arm. ‘*What is happening?*’

Confused, Denny tried to open the door, but Wickham had already remounted and the carriage was moving. Georgiana peered into the reeds just in time to see the postboy clawing his way out.

‘We have to do something!’

Denny sighed, and drew the curtain. ‘We can stop later. The first thing is to get clear.’

‘Mr Wickham just assaulted the postboy!’

‘Quiet! I need to think.’

Georgiana was still trembling as Denny retreated to the far corner. She assumed Wickham was trying to hide from Darcy, but how far did he expect to get with tired horses on a minor road? For a while they made fair progress; they must be over a mile from the main road. Denny remained silent, brow furrowed.

Their speed dropped, and she realised they were climbing a hill. The horses were struggling, and she was upset to hear

Wickham's oaths as he urged them on.

'Mr Denny, should we not get off to lighten the load?'

Denny opened a window. 'We may be near the top.'

'Can you see it?'

'Too dark. Wickham knows what he's doing.'

Suddenly they were moving more easily; then she felt a tilt as they began to go downhill.

With a gasp, Denny leaned out of the window. 'Stop, George! We need to tie a wheel!'

'We can make it!'

'For God's sake!' Denny became frantic as the gradient steepened. He found two cushions and took Georgiana's arm. 'Get on the floor, and brace yourself against the box. These will help.' He pushed the cushions between her and the wooden wine box. 'Hold your head in your hands.' He adopted the same position as the coach rattled and creaked; she feared it might fall apart. But their speed slackened: the road must be levelling out ...

They lurched to the right, as if trying to hold a bend.

In her mind, time slowed as the disaster unfolded. The front wheel must have hit the verge; then the carriage toppled as both wheels on the left ploughed into the ditch. She slammed into the wine box with a force that might have broken her arm except for the cushions; then toppled on Denny as the carriage keeled over.

The horses squealed; beneath, mud gurgled.

Then silence, except for the thrashing of the horses.

'Miss Darcy, are you hurt?'

'Only bruised I think.'

Denny pointed to the right-hand door looming over their heads. 'Can you reach if I support you?'

'I'll try.'

He grunted in pain as his hands found her boots and he heaved upwards. ‘Try to grab the handle.’

As Georgiana stretched, a dark shape moved overhead, and the door was pulled open from the outside. For a moment she thought a passer-by might have come to their aid. But it was Wickham who leaned over the entrance, extending a hand.

‘Out you come, madam.’

She slid over the thin carpet, awed how easily he lifted her, and winced as he shifted the hold to her waist and set her down.

‘Stay here!’

One of the horses was keening, and she longed to go to its aid. But she was concerned for Denny too, now emerging in evident pain.

‘What happened?’ Denny gasped.

‘We’d have made it but for the blasted bend.’

‘I’m surprised you’re still in one piece.’

Wickham laughed. ‘Devil’s own luck, eh? Horse threw me clear and I landed in the bracken the other side.’

‘Mr Denny is hurt,’ Georgiana said.

Wickham studied Denny. ‘Anything broken?’

‘Banged my knee.’ Denny gritted his teeth. ‘We need to attend to the horses.’

He limped to the front of the carriage, while Wickham took Georgiana’s arm and pointed to a tree stump.

‘Sit there while we get them unharnessed.’

Georgiana wondered if she could get away by running back up the road, but dismissed the idea: Wickham would catch her. Her best chance was that someone might pass. But on a minor road, towards midnight? Unlikely.

She watched the dark shapes of the men as they freed a horse and tethered it to a branch; it appeared unharmed, though frisky with fear. Then they stepped over the ditch to

look at the postilion horse, still struggling in distress. Georgiana sensed they were arguing, and wished she could hear. She had been ordered to remain on the tree stump. But with the carriage in between, they could not see her.

Was this an opportunity to run?

But where? The forest looked impenetrable. And Wickham had a horse. If she headed back towards Barnsley he would overtake her.

Softly she advanced to the carriage door, left open at an odd angle. She could hear the men talking in low voices on the opposite side.

‘Let’s put it out of its misery.’ Wickham, she thought.

‘Might be all right if we get the harness off.’ Denny.

‘Climb into the ditch and ruin our breeches? I say we go with the good horse and hole up for the night.’

A sigh from Denny. ‘This isn’t working, George. Even if we reach Gretna, Miss Darcy won’t marry you.’

‘She has no alternative.’

‘Don’t you see ...’ An anxious whisper. ‘She *hates* you. If she marries anyone she’d prefer it to be me.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘She *told* me. And it would work equally well! Better, in fact, since my debts are larger.’

‘So *that’s* what you’re up to!’

Wickham fell silent; Georgiana feared he would return and catch her eavesdropping. She listened carefully for any suggestion of movement.

‘Okay, Denny.’ No anger now: he sounded reasonable and faintly amused. ‘She’s yours, but we need to shoot this horse and get moving. As for the dowry, we take halves. Agreed?’

‘I’ll clear your debts. Nothing more.’

‘It’s £30,000 for God’s sake.’

‘£5000 on top of your debts. Last offer.’

Wickham sighed. ‘All right, but we need to move *now*. If I lift you to the door can you reach the pistol box?’

Georgiana heard a swish of bracken, and was retreating as softly as she could when Wickham’s voice rang out.

‘I told you to stay put!’

‘I saw something in the distance ...’

He looked up the road. ‘There is no-one.’

‘A branch, maybe, in the wind.’

He came close, studying her. ‘Were you listening?’

‘Of course not.’

A sniff, and he joined Denny, who had limped to the open carriage door. ‘Ready?’

He made a step by joining two hands, and Denny leaned inside and explored the area near the wine box while Wickham hung on to his legs.

‘Got it?’ Wickham said.

‘Think so. Pull me out. And mind the knee!’

‘Pass the pistol back first.’

Georgiana saw a long thin box as Wickham let it drop to the soft verge. ‘Good work, Denny.’

‘Pull me out, damn it!’

But Wickham did nothing of the sort. He stepped *forward*, pushing Denny’s legs further inside, and let go.

‘Sorry, old fellow.’

‘What the devil are you doing? Get me out!’

‘*You betrayed me.*’ Wickham sounded genuinely offended. ‘Story of my life. Cheated by Darcy. Then his sister. Now you.’ He opened the box and took the pistol. ‘I’m leaving now. Try to get out and I’ll shoot.’

Georgiana stared at him. ‘Where are you going?’

‘With you. To Gretna.’

‘How?’

He pointed. ‘On that horse to start with.’

‘No!’

He untethered the horse and led it over. ‘You can sit in front of me. Let me help you up.’

‘I’d rather die!’

‘Brave girl.’ He smiled. ‘And you’re not going to die, at least by my hand. But you *will* get on the horse. Otherwise I will shoot Denny, who fancies himself my rival.’

He advanced to the carriage, brandishing the pistol, and Georgiana cried, ‘Stop! I will do as you say.’

‘So you will.’ Wickham returned, and lifted her into the saddle. ‘Now, and also later, for Denny is not the only man I can shoot. It would be a pleasure to settle my score with your brother.’

Wickham secured the pistol in the saddle bag, and her skin crawled as he swung up behind her.

10

They were a mile out of Barnsley, racing past farmland, and so far Darcy had failed to spot a carriage ahead. He wondered how long he had been held up outside the inn. Four minutes? Five?

‘Sir!’ The postboy was frantic. ‘That man waving is one of ours! Same uniform as me.’

Darcy pulled on the reins with a cry of *Whoa*, and managed to halt beside a man on the verge, whose yellow jacket was plastered in mud.

‘Were you on a coach in front?’ he called.

‘I surely was.’ The man winced. ‘Till the blighter turned off the turnpike and shoved me into the ditch.’

‘Was he alone?’

‘There was a lieutenant too. And his sister ...’

‘Can you show us where they turned?’

‘Jed’s hurt, sir.’ Darcy’s postboy pointed to bleeding on the man’s forearm.

‘I’m fine, Sam.’ Jed turned back to Darcy. ‘We need the horses back. They went Cawthorne way.’

‘Jump on. Both of you!’ Darcy hurried to the window. ‘Burgess, keep the pistols handy! And tell Miss Bennet to stay inside.’

The turn was half a minute away, down a track where dark trees hid the moon. Darcy continued riding postilion, with the postboys perched on the front seat. Jed shouted as they passed the spot where he had been attacked, while Darcy’s postboy, Sam, began worrying whether it was worth chasing the runaways at all.

‘We might *never* catch ’em!’ He shouted to be heard over the clatter.

‘Let’s try for another mile or two,’ Darcy called back. ‘Then I’ll take you back to Barnsley, whatever happens.’

They climbed a hill, and Darcy halted as they reached the brow and turned to the postboys. ‘Shall we empty the carriage and tie a wheel?’

Sam jumped down and peered into the darkness.

‘Steepish ... Blimey! What’s that down there?’

Darcy joined him, and discerned the outline of a coach half on its side. He ran to the carriage door.

‘Burgess, come with me. Bring the pistols.’

He glanced at Elizabeth, but sensing a crisis she made no effort to intervene.

‘I’ll come!’ Sam said.

Darcy shook his head. ‘Keep the horses away from the descent. I’ll call if I need you.’

He nodded to Burgess, and they inched down, ready to dive on to the verge if they met hostile fire. The outline of a man emerged from behind the stranded coach, and Darcy whispered, ‘Down!’

Burgess crouched beside him. ‘Don’t see a weapon.’

‘Nor I.’ Darcy tried calling out. ‘*Who goes there?*’

‘Hallo!’ The man walked towards them. ‘Can you help?’

‘He’s limping,’ Burgess whispered. ‘Probably hurt in the crash.’

‘Your name, sir?’ Darcy shouted.

‘Lieutenant Denny.’

Darcy’s heart raced. *Why was Denny alone?* Had Wickham and Georgiana been badly hurt in the accident? Or worse? He handed his pistol to Burgess. ‘Keep the weapons out of sight. I don’t want to frighten him.’ He took a few paces forward and shouted, ‘Are you alone, lieutenant?’

‘Yes.’

It was too much to bear. Darcy walked briskly down the hill to confront the officer, who flinched in recognition.

‘My God! Mr Darcy!’

‘*Where is my sister?*’

‘With Wickham.’

‘*Where?*’

‘I don’t know. They rode away on the good horse.’

‘Injured?’

‘No ...’

Embarrassed, in fits and starts, Denny told his story. *He had been talked into the plan by Wickham.* Later he had come to regret it, but Wickham had been adamant and they had quarrelled. Wickham had crashed the carriage on the bend, then abandoned him and taken Georgiana ...

‘Did my sister go voluntarily?’

‘He threatened to shoot me. And yourself, in fact.’

‘He hasn’t hurt her?’

‘He wouldn’t. He really likes her, you know.’

‘Hmm.’ Darcy pointed at the wreck. ‘What happened to the other horse?’

‘I’ve been trying to unharness it, but with this leg ...’

‘Right.’ Darcy took a deep breath. ‘Mr Denny, you deserve no consideration, but if you collaborate, I will take it into account. I have two postboys from the Angel in Sheffield, who will liberate the horse. I’ll have to tie your hands before offering you transport to Barnsley, where your injuries will be tended. Is that acceptable?’

Denny frowned. ‘Is my word of honour sufficient?’

‘Under the circumstances, no.’

Darcy joined Elizabeth, who was sitting alone in the carriage. At the foot of the hill Denny was seated on a tree stump, where Burgess had tied his hands loosely behind his back. Jed and Sam were working on the horse.

‘First I should thank you,’ he said. ‘For staying safe and tolerating some brusque instructions.’

A sad smile. ‘It hardly seemed the moment to argue.’

‘But I would appreciate your opinion now. You can imagine my distress. Georgiana is in the power of that fiend, and I have only the vaguest idea where they might be. My instinct is to take a horse and go after them ...’

She nodded. ‘Mr Denny was of no help?’

‘It seems the objective remains Gretna. By what route, he has no idea. So he says.’

‘If they have quarrelled, he has nothing to gain by protecting his partner in crime.’

‘True. The crash, and the falling out, cannot have been premeditated. Their plans are in shreds, and I wager Wickham himself is unsure what to do next.’

‘I assume he will hire another carriage, or get on a mail coach. If he can afford it.’

‘He has money, having sold two horses at Chesterfield.’

‘What routes could he follow?’

‘If he sticks to main roads, there are two options. West towards Huddersfield, the Dales, and the Lake District. Or back to the Great North Road.’

‘Which would you prefer, in his place?’

‘The Great North Road is faster. But for this very reason he might avoid it.’ Darcy paused. ‘My instinct is to ride after them on the assumption that he is heading west. But the country roads are like a maze.’

‘We had the same dilemma before, at Chesterfield,’ she said. ‘Two possibilities, no way of knowing which.’

‘That’s right.’ He felt immense gratitude as he saw the way forward. ‘So we must use the same strategy. Take the fastest route, and hope to intercept them later.’

‘Where?’

‘It might be as far as Carlisle, just 12 miles from Gretna Green.’ He met her eye. ‘A long way for you to come.’

‘What else can I do?’

‘Stay at a hotel in Yorkshire? Or return by mail coach?’

‘I prefer to see this through.’

‘We’ll have to keep going. All through the night.’

‘Of course.’

There was a knock on the window, and Darcy opened the door. ‘Any luck, Sam?’

‘We have the horse out, sir. Exhausted from struggling, but not lame. I can probably walk it back to Barnsley.’

‘I will return to the inn you mentioned, the White Bear. You will find my horses at the coaching house, along with payment for the stolen horse, and a bonus. Shall I take your friend?’

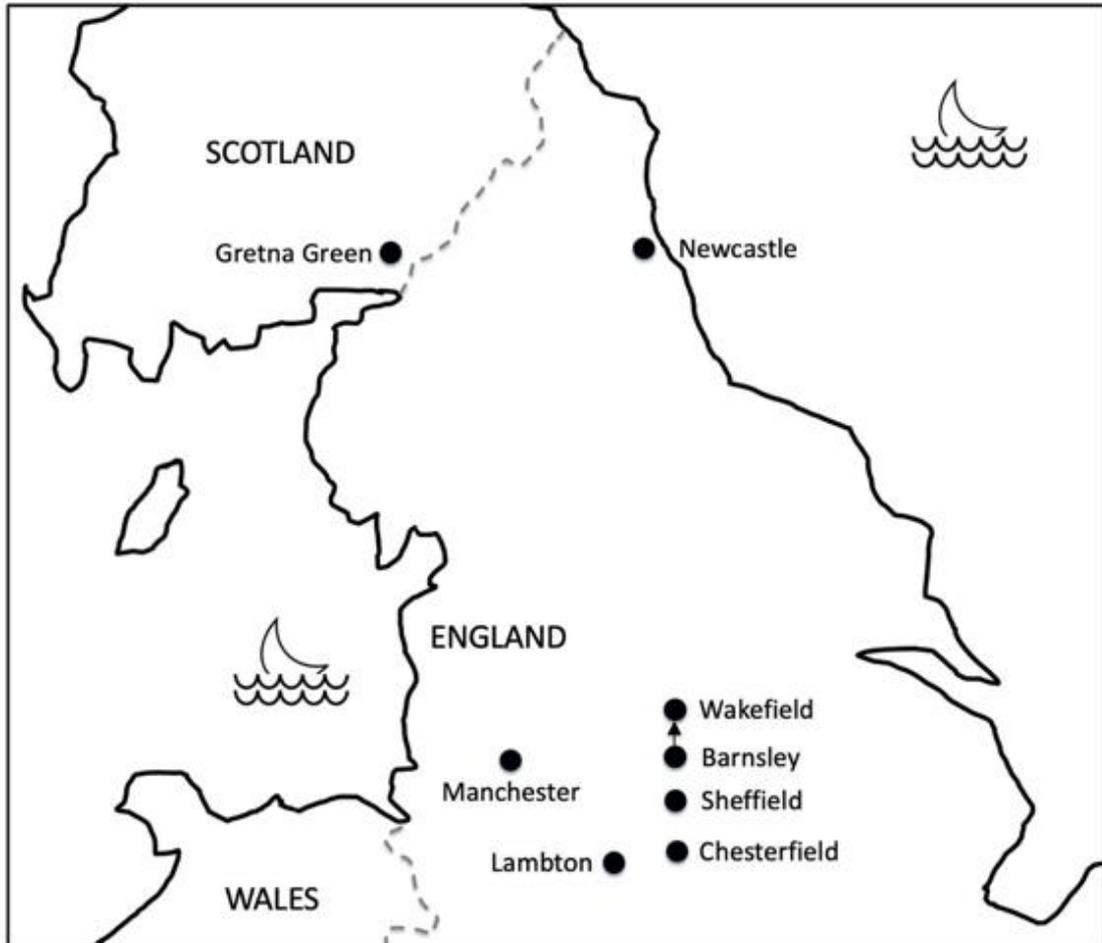
‘Yes. I’ll manage.’

‘Then we can leave.’ He turned to Elizabeth. ‘I need to interrogate Denny. Could you bear his company? He is securely trussed and cannot harm us.’

‘I’d be interested to hear his story.’

‘Excellent. Now we must get back down the hill.’

Darcy helped Elizabeth from the coach, lightening the load before organising a controlled descent.



Friday 7th August, 12.15 a.m.

Midnight had passed and they were back on the road to Wakefield, this time with fresh horses. Their party numbered four: Elizabeth sat next to Darcy, while Burgess took the reins out front—and also kept an eye on Denny, whose hands had been untied after he agreed to sign a confession witnessed by the innkeeper and read by Elizabeth.

Statement by Lieutenant John Denny of Blyton Manor, Yorkshire, given on 6th August 1812.

I declare that in July 1812, while encamped at Brighton, I joined my fellow-officer Mr George Wickham in a card game at high stakes at Sir Reginald Montague's house in Charles Street, in which we incurred losses which, if met, would ruin my family. In desperation I agreed to a plan suggested by Mr Wickham to abduct Miss Georgiana Darcy, sister of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire, and persuade her to marry him in Scotland, so gaining possession of her dowry. I accept full responsibility for this heinous act and promise to do all in my power to assist in Miss Darcy's safe recovery.

This account, quickly drafted, was deliberately incomplete. It did not mention the stable lad at Pemberley who had been gulled into informing Wickham of the Darcy family's engagements for that day, in particular, the carriage to be prepared for an outing to Lambton. It also passed over a point raised by Denny in his defence: that he had dissuaded Wickham from eloping with Lydia Bennet.

After the excitement of the chase near Barnsley, Darcy looked drawn, even defeated. Studying him with concern, Elizabeth thought she understood. An hour before he had been like a general on the battlefield, giving orders, making swift decisions, hopeful of victory. Now he was left only with the dreadful outcome: his beloved sister in the power of his worst enemy. What could she possibly say that would help? Nothing, except banalities.

He seemed to surface from a dream, and faced her as if suddenly realising she was there.

'Excuse me, Miss Bennet. I have a lot on my mind.'

'As do I.' She paused. 'May I ask something? About Mr Denny's testimony?'

His lip curled. 'Have I been foolish, do you think? To take seriously his offer of atonement?'

'Your decision surprised me. But on reflection, I think you were right. I see him not as a monster, but a superficial gullible man, charmed and misled by Wickham—just as I was, last year.'

'That was my impression, but I also had practical reasons. To summon a constable would have wasted time. And at night an extra man is useful to share the driving.' He blinked. 'But I digress. What were you going to ask me about?'

'The allegation that Mr Wickham intended to elope with my sister, Lydia. Do you believe him?'

'The dowry, I suppose, would be small?'

'Negligible compared with his debts.'

'Then I see no rational motive except to enjoy your sister's, ah, *company*, before deserting her.'

‘I wondered whether Mr Denny was making a bid for my sympathy, by claiming to have saved her.’

‘If so he must have been disappointed.’

‘You noticed?’ She sighed. ‘We are enjoined by scripture to forgive, but I confess it does not come easily to me.’

‘Nor I ...’ A thought seemed to occur to him. ‘I have long wished to beg your forgiveness for the other matter we discussed at Hunsford. Concerning another of your sisters. But perhaps it is a hopeless cause.’

‘Because I have a heart of stone? But you are no better! *My good opinion, once lost, is lost for ever.*’

‘And that, I suppose, is how you feel about me.’

Elizabeth burst out laughing. ‘That would imply I had a good opinion of you in the first place.’

Darcy managed a smile, and she said guiltily, ‘I’m sorry. This is no occasion for levity.’

‘We have to keep our spirits up somehow. One thing I would like you to know. A few days ago the Bingleys visited Pemberley, and I confessed to Charles the deceit by which I separated him from your sister.’

Elizabeth gasped. ‘With what outcome?’

‘Charles is more forgiving than you or I. He was angry, naturally enough. But recovered.’ An ironic smile. ‘He even asked my advice on how to proceed.’

‘To which you replied?’

‘That he should follow his heart.’

‘Do you think he will return to Netherfield?’

‘I hope so, since I see his affection is enduring.’

Elizabeth breathed deeply, feeling hope where previously there had been despair. ‘It was well done, Mr Darcy, and I am exceedingly grateful.’

He blinked, moved, and they fell silent, as if afraid to disturb the unexpected harmony.

Presently he said, 'You should sleep.'

'I have so much to think about.' She looked at him, feeling tired, anxious for Miss Darcy, yet somehow at peace. 'Will we ever forgive one another?'

'Why should *you* need to be forgiven?'

'Is it not obvious? The terrible things I said?'

'You were deceived by Wickham.'

'It went far beyond that. I lost my temper and insulted you in every way possible.'

'I was angry at first. Later I concluded that in some respects you were right, and resolved to improve.'

She shook her head, bewildered. 'I will *never* understand you. How can a person appear so different from what they truly are?'

'Am I the only one? I believed once that you were teasing me as a ruse to attract my interest. Whereas in reality you hated me.'

'How shall we escape this dilemma?'

'My father advised me always to tell the truth, however hurtful. A precept that has seldom worked in practice.'

Elizabeth laughed. 'Fathers have much to answer for. Mothers as well, especially in my case. Do you think Mr Denny is shocked that we are alone in this carriage?'

'I neither know nor care.'

'We should rest. And pray for a better tomorrow.'

He nodded. 'Sleep well, Miss Bennet.'

'You too.'

The grey horse was walking now, along a lane with hedgerows either side. Forced to lean against Wickham, Georgiana had ceased to worry about propriety; what ailed her was the breeze, since her spencer had been abandoned in the carriage along with her reticule and bonnet. Having the lowest opinion of Wickham she had expected his hands to stray, but he appeared interested solely in finding his way along the dark track. She did not fear he would harm her. He had been a familiar presence in her life since she was a small child; she had once even believed herself in love with him. Yet she felt entirely in his power. Somehow they would make their way to Gretna, where a wedding would be contrived whether she liked it or not.

Sleepily, she asked, 'Where are we going?'

'North.'

'Where to?'

'We'll meet a main road sooner or later.'

'I'm cold.'

'Want my coat?'

She shivered. 'I keep thinking of the poor horse.'

He made no reply. The road stretched on and on, with no change and no visible landmark. Half dozing, she came awake sharply as they heard voices. A woman crying, a man trying to calm her. Wickham whispered, 'Keep very quiet. Say nothing.'

He descended, lifted her down, and tethered the horse. A few yards ahead she glimpsed a sign suggesting they had reached a village: it said *Kexborough*. Wickham, fumbling in the saddle bag, brought out the pistol. He took her arm and guided her round the next bend, where an open green appeared on their left. Parked on the edge, next to the woodland, stood a carriage, with lanterns burning at the front.

'Two horses,' Wickham whispered. 'Looks serviceable.'

She recoiled: was he going to *steal* it?

A voice from inside the carriage startled her. A young lady, she guessed. Genteel, but angry. She strained to listen.

'Riccardo dear, stop it! This isn't right.'

A pause, and a man replied, 'You're so tempting, Kitten, how can you blame me?'

'We'll be wed tomorrow. You can surely wait one more day before opening the parcel?'

'Had we but world enough, and time, this coyness, lady, were no crime ...'

'What are you talking about?'

'A literary allusion, my fair one ...'

Wickham pulled Georgiana close and whispered. 'Stay near the horses. Say nothing. Promise?'

She nodded, and hugged herself trying to keep warm as he advanced stealthily to the side of the carriage and pulled open the door.

His voice was soft but resonant. 'Good evening.'

A scream from within, but the man replied calmly, 'And who may you be?'

'I won't harm you. But I need you both to descend, and walk away.'

'My dear fellow.' A gentleman's voice, effete, and under the circumstances, curiously insouciant. 'Kindly avert your gaze while my companion adjusts her dress. And do stop waving that pistol.'

Wickham ignored him, speaking instead to the woman. 'Make haste, madam. Then descend.'

'Let me present myself.' The gentleman again. 'Richard Grenville. Or if you permit, the *Honourable* Richard Grenville, son of Earl Grenville of Whixley, Yorkshire. Though we live mostly in town. As one does.'

Wickham peered again into the carriage. 'I see, madam, that buttons are done up and decorum satisfied. Obey me, and no-

one will be hurt.’

‘What do you say, Kitten?’ Grenville shifted towards the door. ‘Shall we act as the gentleman wishes?’

‘Richard ...’ The woman’s voice shook. ‘*Do something!*’

‘I fear we are in a poor bargaining position, my dear, since our friend here has the pistol. By the way, sir, please point the barrel downwards. Thank you. Much better.’

Wickham took a step back, and Georgiana flinched as a man got down and immediately noticed her.

‘I see you too have a companion.’ Grenville faced Georgiana and bowed. ‘Delighted to make your acquaintance.’

Confused, Georgiana watched Grenville help down the lady he had called *Kitten*. She thought she heard one of the horses move, but kept her eye on the group by the carriage, afraid of what Wickham might do next. He had his back to her now, speaking to Grenville.

‘Now walk away across the green.’

‘It pains me to obstruct your wishes,’ Grenville drawled. ‘Unfortunately, however, your threat does not impress me, for two reasons. First, my father is a Lord of the Treasury in Lord Liverpool’s government, and very influential. Any man who harms me will regret it.’

Wickham snorted. ‘Only if caught. Do as I say.’

‘I have not come to the second reason. On entering our carriage you found just two people. Myself, and Kitten. Is that not odd? Would it not be normal to bring a *driver*?’

Of a sudden Georgiana heard a rustle from behind, and a strong hand grabbed her left arm while on her other side a pistol appeared. She screamed, and as heads turned in her direction Wickham darted behind Kitten, his pistol also at the ready.

‘Well, well.’ Grenville droned on as if nothing special was happening. ‘Deadlock! Now listen. I’m sure no-one intends harm. Can we not confer and seek an accommodation satisfactory to all parties?’

Quixotically they were inside the carriage, the couples facing one another on comfortable seats while Spedding, the driver, checked the horses. Wickham had retained his pistol, which now lay at his side by the arm rest. Grenville had opened a bottle of port and was passing round *petite* glasses. In appearance she found him reassuring: middling height, slight build, and an intellectual air; he seemed to find everything mildly amusing. Kitten, elfin, pretty, and excitable, had been assigned her proper name, Miss Ada Catlin, the daughter of a gentleman from Warwickshire.

‘Let me summarise.’ Grenville evidently felt it proper he should talk most of the time. ‘Fate has set us on parallel paths, leading to a common destination. Marriage. Gretna. You have fallen on hard times and need transport, at least to the next coaching house. Ada and I are pleased to oblige two fellow-travellers of such distinction. The Darcy name is known to me. The Wickhams are new, but of their quality I have no doubt.’

Georgiana studied Grenville, impressed how easily he had coped with Wickham. *Would he help her?* Perhaps, but this was not the time to speak up. She had to pretend she was collaborating with Wickham, until a chance came to confer with Grenville in private.

‘Have you been journeying long?’ she asked.

‘From Leamington Spa,’ Miss Catlin said. ‘Our families were there for the waters ...’

Georgiana wondered why they had stopped at this tiny village, but found it difficult to get a word in as Wickham talked with Grenville about their route.

‘If I may ask ...’ She managed at last to gain Grenville’s attention. ‘What brought you to Kexborough?’

‘Ah!’ He smiled at Kitten. ‘You trespass here on a lovers’ tiff. Miss Catlin was expecting to pass the night at an inn. Having experience of Yorkshire inns, I thought it preferable to find a peaceful spot in the countryside and rest in the carriage. With your advent, however, we acquire a third option. If Mr Wickham takes a turn at the reins, my driver can rest and we can head north without stopping.’

‘So we are agreed,’ Wickham said briskly. ‘We leave directly for Wakefield and the North Road. And my horse?’

Grenville shrugged. ‘You’ll have to leave it here.’

Wickham looked disgusted, which struck Georgiana as odd since he had stolen it anyway. But she said nothing.

Friday early hours, 2.00 a.m.

Waking, Elizabeth looked across at Darcy, who had been sleeping fitfully for over an hour. They were pulling away from a toll house; she fancied she had heard Burgess talking with the gatekeeper. Ahead, their lantern illuminated a signpost: *Wakefield, ¾ mile*. Should she wake Darcy? She regarded his face in the faint light of the candle, noticing how protected she felt in his company.

He was *difficult*, she thought. One did not feel comfortable on first meeting him. But worthwhile activities were often difficult at first, from sketching to playing the piano. And she felt she had found the key to the man: his obsessional dedication to honesty. Even in a proposal of marriage he had thought it necessary to confess reservations about her family. If you did something of which he disapproved, he disdained to cover it up in vagueness or politeness. He told you directly that you were wrong. What she had not understood before was that he applied the same standards to himself. He had been wrong about Jane. He admitted it.

All of which was daunting. But also exciting, because it brought problems into the open, where they could be addressed. She recalled advice her father had given when she was a child. *If you're not sure how to pronounce a word, Lizzy, don't mumble. Say it loud and clear.*

She wondered how such a demanding companion had befriended an easy-going man like Bingley. But on reflection Bingley was no pushover, as testified by the conversation she had overheard at the Meryton ball. *Come Darcy, I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance.* It was an occasion she would not easily forget, since in response Darcy had blurted out his opinion of herself, Elizabeth, for all to hear. *Tolerable.*

Well, he had changed his mind.

Might she return the compliment?

She smiled, dreaming of what it would be like to be Mrs Darcy. Pemberley was lovely, they said. Its master, for all his faults, was handsome, rich and fascinating. Whether he still loved her was doubtful, but he showed respect by taking her opinions seriously.

Darcy blinked, and looked out of the window. 'Where are we?'

'Coming into Wakefield.'

'You did not think to rouse me?'

'You needed rest.'

He nodded. 'It's curious, but on waking there is a moment, perhaps a second or two, in which one assumes the world is normal and there's nothing to worry about. Then reality floods back.' An ironic smile. 'Perhaps you felt the same on discovering you were alone with ...'

He broke off with a sigh, and she stretched, returning his smile. 'Parts of our history have been unfortunate, but I'm getting used to you.'

'A phrase that can be taken various ways.'

'Then let us leave this discussion comfortably ambiguous and change the topic. At the inn, I see no reason why I should be confined to the carriage. We're not expecting to find Wickham there.'

'Shall we explore together while Burgess and Denny get the horses changed?'

'And if I wish to be on my own?'

'It's past two o'clock in the morning, a time when roads are deserted and ruffians lurk in dark corners.'

'I see.' She laughed, enjoying his protectiveness.

'So, Miss Darcy, tell all!' Ada Catlin was excited, perhaps glad of female company. 'How did you meet your charming Mr Wickham? At a dance, I wager.'

Grenville rolled his eyes. The three of them were alone, Wickham having taken the reins while Spedding rested at his

side. ‘You’re inquisitive, Kitten.’ A smile at Georgiana. ‘Don’t reply. It will only encourage her.’

Georgiana forced a smile. ‘The truth is complicated. But it was not at a dance.’

‘But you are so graceful. I’m sure you dance beautifully.’

‘I am not out yet. Perhaps next season.’

‘Which would explain the trip to Gretna?’ He winked. ‘Now *I* am being inquisitive.’

Georgiana felt a blush coming. Was this the moment to explain what was *really* happening? But as she searched for the words, Grenville spoke again.

‘The name *Darcy* rings a bell. Does your father keep a house in town?’

‘He did.’ She lowered her voice. ‘He passed away five years ago.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘My brother inherited, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy.’ With sudden hope, Georgiana realised Grenville might know some of her relatives. If not Darcy, perhaps Fitzwilliams or de Bourghs. ‘Have you met by any chance?’

‘I have not had that honour. But while visiting a friend in Mayfair I noticed a residence named *Darcy House*. By the park, I think.’

‘That’s right! Grosvenor Street.’

‘Nice area. Fashionable. Is your estate near London?’

‘Derbyshire.’

‘Beautiful county.’ He smiled at Miss Catlin. ‘Have you walked in the Peaks, Kitten?’

‘Hills, hills, all too exhausting.’ She turned to Georgiana, eager to change the topic. ‘Do you play and sing?’

‘Yes, but I take lessons only in piano.’

‘You have a pleasant voice,’ Grenville put in. ‘I believe you would sing beautifully.’

A nervous laugh from Kitten. ‘I envy you, Miss Darcy, for he hates it when I sing! What pieces do you play?’

‘The usual composers. Bach. Mozart.’

‘Oh.’

Miss Catlin fell silent as Grenville squeezed her hand, looking thoughtful.

They were nearing Wakefield, and Georgiana felt growing unease as Grenville engaged her in conversation while paying little attention to his fiancée. The topics were interesting—the best *tempo* for the Moonlight sonata, a Constable exhibition at the London Royal Academy—but meanwhile Kitten was looking more and more cross as she exchanged banalities with Wickham, who had entered the carriage at the last toll gate.

They halted at an inn, and Georgiana tensed as Grenville got out to order fresh horses. *She needed to be alone with him*, so that she could explain her predicament and seek his help. But how? If she contrived a reason to go into the inn, she could hardly expect him to leave the others behind ...

‘Riccardo, I need the ladies room.’ Miss Catlin took her reticule. ‘To make myself presentable.’

Grenville frowned. ‘I need to check that the horses are properly harnessed ...’ He turned to Wickham. ‘Be a good fellow, will you, and accompany Miss Catlin?’

Georgiana kept very quiet. *Was this her chance?* She wondered why Grenville had not accompanied Kitten himself and checked the horses on his return. Then she realised: if Wickham was left unsupervised, he might trick Spedding and steal the carriage—his aim all along.

There was a long pause, then after an uneasy glance at Georgiana, Wickham opened the door and climbed down, to be joined by Miss Catlin. Holding her breath, Georgiana watched them walk away and into the inn.

She was alone at last with Grenville.

The White Hart Inn was not busy, but as they stopped outside the coaching house Elizabeth noticed a party waiting in a

luxurious coach with curtains drawn; the owner was a debonair gentleman evidently known to the attendant, who referred to *our usual arrangement* as fresh horses were led out.

At last their turn came, and Darcy described Georgiana and Wickham—to no avail.

‘As expected,’ Elizabeth said as they left the office.

He nodded. ‘We can do nothing except reach Gretna as soon as possible. Shall we take some refreshment? I’ll leave Denny to assist Burgess in case Wickham turns up.’

They walked across to the inn, where a small staff was catering for mail coach drivers and others needing sustenance during the early hours. In the deserted saloon they sat at the window and shared mint tea and slices of rich fruit cake. Elizabeth noticed the coach she had seen before, parked outside the inn, and pointed.

‘Who will that be? Some lord or other I expect.’

‘His son more likely.’ Darcy rose. ‘Will you stay here a minute while I check whether the night manager has seen Wickham?’

Elizabeth finished her cake as she waited for Darcy to return. How curious that it was so easy now to be alone with him. Had he changed? Or had she? Outside, the door of the carriage opened and a man helped a lady down. They approached the entrance of the inn, a thin lady with a feather in her hat, and a tallish gentleman whose outline and gait reminded her of ...

Wickham!

She squinted into the darkness. It was impossible. And the lady was too *petite* to be Georgiana ...

Would they enter the saloon?

She had to get a closer look, and find Darcy.

Rising, alone except for a waitress at the bar, she ran to the door just in time to hear footsteps in the hall. The lady passed. *Not Georgiana.* The gentleman followed, his profile clear in the candlelight.

Her heart jumped; she almost cried out. The pleasing countenance; the smirk at the edges of the mouth. *She had to find Darcy!* Turning, she called to the waitress. ‘Where is the night manager’s office?’

‘First floor, ma’am. Shall I show you?’

‘My friend Mr Darcy is there. Can you tell him to go to the carriage parked out front. Now! It’s urgent.’

A nod, and Elizabeth rushed into the hall and out into the forecourt, to see a driver mounting the coach as if ready to leave. Waving, she ran over and rapped the door.

‘Wait! I need to speak to the people inside!’

The window opened, and she recognised the debonair gentleman from the coaching office. He stared at her, with a faint smile. ‘Good evening. Is something the matter?’

Jumping, Elizabeth glimpsed a lady sitting behind him. ‘I am looking for Miss Darcy. Is she here?’

The lady gasped and cried out. ‘Yes ...’

‘How could you know that?’ the gentleman asked, alert now, and frowning at her.

‘I recognised Mr Wickham in the saloon ...’

‘Know Wickham, do you?’ He looked towards the inn, and shouted to the driver. ‘Go, Spedding!’

‘No!’ Elizabeth climbed on to the step and pulled at the door, which swung open and nearly sent her sprawling. She teetered as the coach gathered speed, until a powerful arm levered her inside and deposited her on the back seat.

The door slammed shut, while the young lady from the Lambton tea room stared at her, trembling.

‘I don’t know you ...’

Elizabeth glared at the gentleman. ‘Why could you not wait?’

He leaned back with a superior smile. ‘I have questions too, but it would be more elegant if we began by introducing

ourselves. I am Mr Richard Grenville. I bear an honorific title, but this we may forgo for the present. Miss Darcy you already know, although the relationship is apparently not reciprocal.' A bow. 'Your turn, madam.'

In the forecourt a fight was in progress where the carriage had been parked. A woman was watching, her hands covering her face in alarm, and for a moment Darcy thought she might be Georgiana. Running closer, he recognised the man on top as Denny; the woman was a stranger.

He leaned over the man underneath, and gasped.

Wickham!

But in that case ...

He met Wickham's eye. '*Where is my sister?*'

Shocked, Wickham struggled to speak. 'Get this idiot off me.'

Darcy nodded to Denny. 'Let him sit up.' He turned to the woman, who had edged closer. 'Is this anything to do with you, madam?'

'I was—with him.' She indicated Wickham. 'I don't understand. Why is this man attacking us? And where is the carriage?'

'My sister. Miss Darcy. Do you know her?'

'Oh!' She shivered. 'Yes, she was travelling to Gretna to marry Mr Wickham. And I am to wed Mr Grenville. Where have they gone?'

'Sir!' Burgess joined them, carrying a rope. 'Is this man a prisoner?'

'We'd better bind his hands.'

Wickham scowled. 'I won't run. On my honour.'

'*Honour, George?*' Darcy nodded to Burgess. 'Securely, behind his back. Then have the carriage parked here ready to leave.' A thought struck him. 'Is Miss Bennet with you?'

'She was with you, sir.'

‘I left her in the saloon.’ He rushed to the window and peered inside.

They were seated in the saloon, the night manager standing by. Wickham was docile, his bruised face a mask of defeat. In the candlelight, his companion was revealed as a dark and elfin young lady who had apparently been abandoned by her lover. Her story was that she had gone inside the inn to wash her face and apply almond bloom; Wickham had agreed to accompany her while Grenville checked the horses. On their return the carriage had gone, and Wickham had been assaulted by Denny, a complete stranger, for no apparent reason.

Meanwhile, a search of the inn had revealed Elizabeth’s bonnet and bag, but no trace of their owner; unlikely as it seemed, she must have left with Grenville.

‘Miss Catlin.’ Darcy spoke gently. ‘I need to depart urgently. I can take you if you wish; you might even help us identify Mr Grenville. But my advice would be to send an express to your family and wait here until they collect you.’ He spoke to the night manager. ‘If you allow me to run up an account, I will pay Miss Catlin’s expenses on my return.’

‘Very well sir.’

‘Thank you.’ He glared at Wickham. ‘We must decide what to do with our prisoner, whose activities might interest the local magistrate. Is there a secure place where he can pass the night?’

‘A cellar, sir, which we use when a customer has drunk more than he ought.’

‘Excellent.’ He spoke to Denny. ‘I suggest you stay here and assist Miss Catlin.’

Miss Catlin shook her head. ‘I’ll go with you, sir.’

‘Are you ready to leave now?’

She nodded, and they hastened to the carriage.

Bewildered, Georgiana struggled to clear her mind while Grenville interrogated the newcomer, who had confessed to knowing Wickham. *Whose side was she on?*

She thought back to her exchange with Grenville, which had begun promisingly. He had been sympathetic, eager to help, until coming up with a proposal that astonished her.

‘Miss Darcy,’ he had said, ‘the horses are ready and I see only one way of ensuring your safety. We must make haste and leave *now*, before Mr Wickham returns.’

She had gasped. ‘But Miss Catlin?’

‘When we reach Whixley I will send a servant to collect her.’

Shocked, Georgiana had hardly known how to respond: how could a man in love abandon his fiancée so casually? But at that very moment Miss Bennet had forced her way in ...

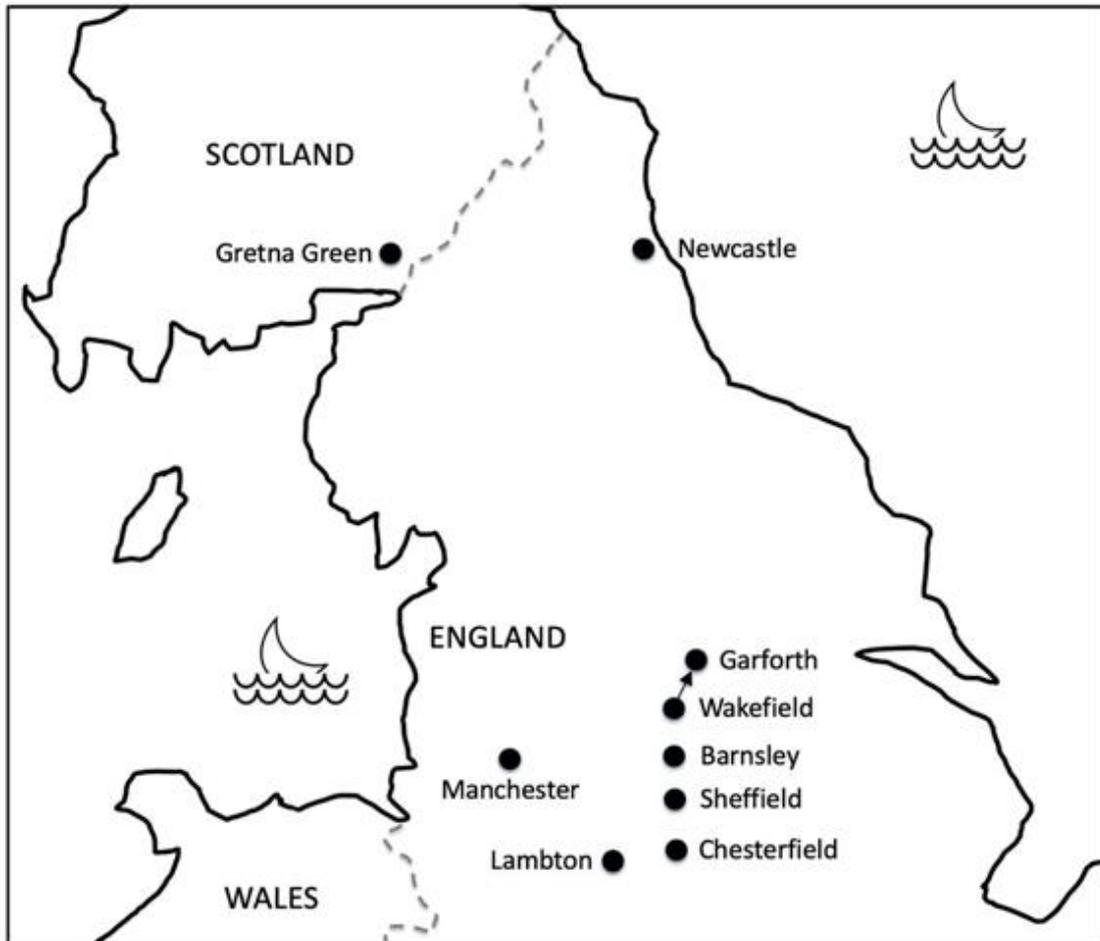
Georgiana studied Miss Bennet, still trying to persuade Grenville to go back. Like Georgiana she wore a summer dress suitable for an afternoon. Her hair was dark, her face attractive with alert eyes and generous smile lines.

But she was not smiling now. And there was something familiar about the dress ...

A connection surfaced in Georgiana’s mind. *Of course!* She *had* seen the dress before, in the tea room at Lambton. It had only been a glimpse; then Denny had occupied a seat in her line of sight ...

Had Miss Bennet been spying on Denny’s behalf, looking for a favourable moment when he could approach Mrs Annesley and Georgiana with no danger of encountering Darcy? Then followed to lend Denny and Wickham further support if needed?

Georgiana remained silent, listening.



Friday early hours, 2.40 a.m.

Twenty minutes lost, Darcy thought, as he pushed his horses to a fast trot. He recalled waiting his turn behind Grenville at the coaching house, unaware of Georgiana in a carriage a few yards away. If only she could have seen him, or heard his voice! But the curtains were drawn, and he had spoken only quietly, to Elizabeth.

And now the terms of the game had changed ...

The cool night air rushed past, making him glad of the ample neck tie under his coat. But he could see quite well in the moonlight, and the road was empty. He had taken the reins, to let Burgess rest; they had done without a postboy so as to lighten the load. Darcy too was short of sleep, but welcomed the cool air that helped him think.

At least they had taken *one* step forward: Wickham was locked in a cellar at the White Hart inn. But Georgiana was still missing, and alarmingly Elizabeth too, in the power of a man Darcy had never met. All depended on the character of Richard Grenville. He could scarcely be more villainous than Wickham. But what was his purpose? Why flee so urgently from the inn, abandoning the girl he had intended to marry, and taking two other ladies instead?

Darcy reviewed what he had learned of the family from Ada Catlin. Earl Grenville owned an estate in Yorkshire. As a Lord of the Treasury he lived mostly in town, as did his son, who visited Whixley only in winter to escape the city smog. The Honourable Richard Grenville was handsome, charming, and Oxford-educated. He had swept Miss Catlin off her feet at Leamington Spa and impressed her as trustworthy as well as entertaining. He neither gambled nor drank to excess. She had found in him no flaw except a surfeit of whimsical talk ...

Until he had thrown her over for Miss Darcy.

It seemed to Darcy that there were two possibilities. If Grenville was truly smitten, as Miss Catlin feared, he might be heading for Gretna. If instead his aim was simply to rescue Georgiana from Wickham, he would probably take her to Whixley, where she could recover while arrangements were made for her return to Pemberley. In either case his first stop would be Garforth, a distance of 10 miles. Barring accidents Darcy's coach would arrive soon after 4 a.m., with a good chance of catching up as Grenville stopped to change horses.

'But did you not see Mr Darcy beside me at the coaching house?' Elizabeth demanded.

'I saw a tall well-dressed gentleman,' Grenville said. 'A description applicable to many.'

'You must have noticed his coach. Green and gold.' She appealed to Georgiana. 'Are they not your colours?'

'Yes ...'

'How could I describe Mr Darcy and his carriage unless I knew him?'

Grenville sniffed. 'Miss Darcy has mentioned one conspirator, Lieutenant Denny. For all I know there may be others, including yourself. Anyone in the plot would be familiar with Mr Darcy's appearance.'

'I thought I saw my brother's carriage just before Barnsley.' Georgiana's voice shook. 'Mr Wickham was in a great hurry, so perhaps he saw it too.'

Elizabeth clapped her hands excitedly. 'Yes, and we saw you, or Mr Darcy did. In your blue dress.'

'Did you see your brother?' Grenville asked Georgiana.

'Only a dark figure riding postilion.'

'All very nebulous.' Grenville looked out of the window as the carriage slowed. 'The Oulton toll. I need to confer with Spedding.'

He jumped down, leaving Elizabeth alone with Georgiana. Mustering her most reassuring smile, Elizabeth said softly, 'Do you really view me as Wickham's confederate?'

'I would like to believe you.' She was near to tears. 'But it makes no sense. If you are a confidante of my brother's, why have I heard nothing about you? He is not a man who bestows friendship easily. Also ...' She shivered. 'I think I saw you. At the tea room.'

Elizabeth nodded. 'I saw you too.'

'Please don't be angry, but I wondered if you had been spying on me.'

'That's understandable. And I confess that I do in fact know Mr Denny ...'

The door opened and Grenville climbed in. 'All well?' He faced Elizabeth. 'Miss Bennet, I've decided you should leave us when we reach Garforth. Miss Darcy has endured a terrifying ordeal, and my duty is to take her to a respectable household where she can recover in safety.' He turned to Georgiana. 'Once we have arrived we can write a letter to your brother at Pemberley, to be opened by the housekeeper if he is away. They will send someone to take you home.'

They moved through the gate and gathered speed, as Elizabeth puzzled what to do. Wait for Darcy at Garforth? Or try again to win Georgiana's trust? Perhaps Grenville was as good as his word ...

Or perhaps not.

Thinking it through, she could see only one tactic with a chance of success. She would have to explain exactly how she had met Darcy, Bingley, Wickham, Denny, Lady Catherine, and the rest.

In short, admit *everything*.

Well, almost everything.

A rap on the door roused the Oulton toll collector, clad in a dressing gown and grumbling under his breath. Darcy handed over a coin. ‘Busy night?’

The greybeard peered at the silver crown, and grunted. ‘Has yah smaller?’

‘Keep it. Did a carriage pass recently?’

‘Aye.’ He pointed to the gate. ‘If ye please ...’

Burgess pulled open the gate, while Darcy produced another coin. ‘Tell me about the carriage.’

‘A gentleman, generous like yahself, sir. Often passes this way wae a lassie.’

Darcy stared at him. ‘You *know* this man?’

‘Tha’s what ah said. Father is an earl from up north ...’

‘And he came with this lady?’ He pointed to Miss Catlin at the carriage window.

The gatekeeper peered at the face revealed in the glow of the candlelight. ‘No sir. The gentleman brought a different lady, like, every time.’

Darcy climbed back on the carriage. So Grenville was making for the Great North Road—and fond of inviting young ladies to Whixley or beyond. Was there an innocent explanation?

He could not think of one.

‘Five daughters and no sons?’ Georgiana brightened as the penny dropped. ‘Yes! William did mention your family.’

Elizabeth smiled. ‘Unfavourably, I expect.’

‘Miss Bingley asked his opinion of your sister, whom she referred to as *dearest Jane*.’

‘And how did he reply?’

‘By changing the topic ...’ Georgiana frowned. ‘I think he was embarrassed since according to Miss Bingley, your family admired Mr Wickham.’

Elizabeth nodded. ‘At first. Not any more.’

Georgiana reddened. ‘I hadn’t realised *you* could be one the sisters, since Miss Bingley never mentioned a Miss Bennet. Just *dearest Jane*, and *the lady with fine eyes* ...’ She looked at Elizabeth. ‘Oh!’

Elizabeth smiled, warming to Darcy’s well-meaning sister. ‘I suppose I should be flattered.’

Grenville intervened, with the air of one stating the obvious. ‘Fortune may have favoured you in that department, Miss Bennet. But two points trouble me. You admit liking Mr Wickham. And you provide no evidence that Mr Darcy trusts you. Quite the contrary.’

‘But ...’ Georgiana appealed to Grenville. ‘Miss Bennet has changed her mind about Mr Wickham.’

He shrugged. ‘So she says. Did your brother confide his *own* opinion of the lady with fine eyes?’

Elizabeth waited anxiously as Georgiana struggled to recall. Eventually she answered, ‘He had to take care in case Miss Bingley was jealous.’

‘So Darcy *might* have liked you,’ Grenville said to Elizabeth. ‘Or might not.’

Georgiana’s face fell: it was as if she longed to put her trust in Elizabeth while at the same time accepting Grenville’s logic.

Elizabeth pulled back the curtain and saw the outline of a row of houses. ‘We’re coming into Garforth.’

Grenville nodded. ‘Where you will leave us.’

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘I can’t take the risk. But I find you *simpatica*, as they say in Rome, and hope we can part amicably. Have you enough cash to return to Hertfordshire?’

‘I can wait for Mr Darcy.’

He smiled. ‘Of course.’

They had reached an inn two miles *beyond* Garforth on the Great North Road, on the edge of a village called Aberford. Elizabeth sleepwalked beside Grenville and Georgiana as they entered a bar empty except for a driver from the mail coach. She had hoped Darcy would overtake them at Garforth, but Grenville had outmanoeuvred her.

Looking pleased with himself, Grenville ordered a tankard of ale and a pot of tea, then after a long draught stood up. ‘I must leave you for five minutes Miss Darcy, since in these small inns the ostlers are unreliable. Are you content to stay with Miss Bennet?’

As he left, Elizabeth took a deep breath. This could be her last opportunity.

Georgiana regarded her anxiously. ‘Will you manage?’

‘I can wait at the roadside, hoping that your brother sees me as they pass.’

‘Miss Bennet.’ Her voice fell to a whisper. ‘I understand how you could have been deceived by Mr Wickham. I was, myself, once ...’

Was this a chance? Elizabeth leaned forward, also whispering. ‘I would never reveal this except in extreme circumstances. But I know what happened—at Ramsgate.’

A gasp, and Georgiana turned scarlet. ‘How ...’ For the first time her timidity was replaced by an anger reminiscent of Darcy. ‘You have been deceiving me! You are in league with Mr Wickham, just as Mr Grenville suspects.’

Cursing her tiredness, Elizabeth struggled to rephrase. ‘Not Wickham! I learned of it through your brother ...’

‘He would *never* tell. He promised.’

‘Dear Miss Darcy, listen. Your brother *asked me to marry him*. In Kent, while I stayed at the parsonage near Rosings. It came as a shock, since I assumed he had no feelings except contempt for me and my family. So I lost my temper and

accused him of ruining Wickham's career. And he replied in a letter explaining all his dealings with that scoundrel, including ...' A whisper. 'The attempted elopement.'

A suspicious glare. 'Then why are you not married?'

'I rejected him.'

'*What?*' In her shock, Georgiana almost shouted. 'How could you do that? He is the kindest, most honourable man who ever lived. I don't believe you.'

'Why else do you think Miss Bingley taunted him about the lady with fine eyes? She was jealous because she feared he liked me. Which he did—although I never realised. All we did was quarrel.'

Georgiana fell silent, no longer angry, but shaking her head in bewilderment. Eventually she sighed. 'The strange thing is that I believe you. Because your story does you no credit. It makes you appear petulant. Even *foolish*.'

Elizabeth laughed. 'Finally you have my measure!'

'I'm not saying you're *really*, ah, those things. I just don't think you'd invent such a story to gain my trust. You sound like someone blurting out the truth.' Miss Darcy glanced out of the window. 'Mr Grenville is returning.'

'Do you trust *him*?'

'I think so. Do you?'

Elizabeth raised her hands, as if weighing the balance. 'I wish he hadn't abandoned his fiancée.'

'He said it was the only way to rescue me from Wickham.' She paused. 'He did seem to like talking with me.'

'That's fine, provided he can take no for an answer ...' Elizabeth broke off as Grenville entered the bar.

'All shipshape!' He bowed to Elizabeth. 'Farewell, lady with intelligent eyes. Miss Darcy, we're ready.'

'Mr Grenville ...' Georgiana looked up, blinking.

'Yes?'

‘I would like Miss Bennet to stay with us.’

‘I can leave her some money, if that is troubling you.’

‘I think she is telling the truth. About my brother. And if you agree, I’d like us to wait for him.’

‘If it really *is* your brother he’ll probably drive straight past this inn. We could wait at Wetherby if you want.’

Georgiana looked at Elizabeth, who nodded.

‘I’m most grateful, Mr Grenville,’ Georgiana said.

He shrugged, as if helpless, and directed a droll smile at Elizabeth. ‘You are either virtuous or clever, Miss Bennet, and possibly both.’

Elizabeth modestly kept silent.

At the Garforth coaching house, Darcy confronted an attendant who had obviously been seeking consolation from the wine bottle on his desk.

‘It would have been during the last half hour. Good carriage, two horses, gentleman, two ladies inside.’

A shake of the head. ‘Don’t think so.’

‘Name of Grenville.’

A cackle. ‘Mr La-di-da? Regular customer.’

‘You’re sure he didn’t stop here tonight?’

‘Positive.’

‘Where else could he have changed horses?’

‘Aberford.’ He pointed. ‘Only twenty minutes away.’ He grinned, as if sensing Darcy’s urgency. ‘Got yer sister, has he?’

Darcy felt a surge of anger at this accurate guess. Still, reprisals would lead nowhere. He ran for the carriage.

In mitigation, the attendant’s information was accurate. They joined the Great North Road, and just after entering a village found the *Black Bull*, a small inn where the night manager recognised his description.

‘Gentleman with two ladies? Yes, sir. Most particular he was, about the horses. Inspected all the harnesses while the ladies took tea. Will you be needing refreshment yourself?’

‘Are they still here?’

‘Left five minutes ago ...’

Darcy ran back to the carriage, where Burgess was talking to a stout man in an ankle-length coachman’s coat and top hat, who had been sitting outside smoking a cigar.

‘Shall we change the horses?’ Burgess said.

‘Grenville has only just left,’ Darcy said. ‘We should go now and risk it.’

The coachman waved his cigar, and bowed. ‘Might be able to help you there, sir.’

‘We don’t need a driver ...’

‘Got a team ready.’ He pointed towards the stables.

‘Fresh horses?’

‘The best.’

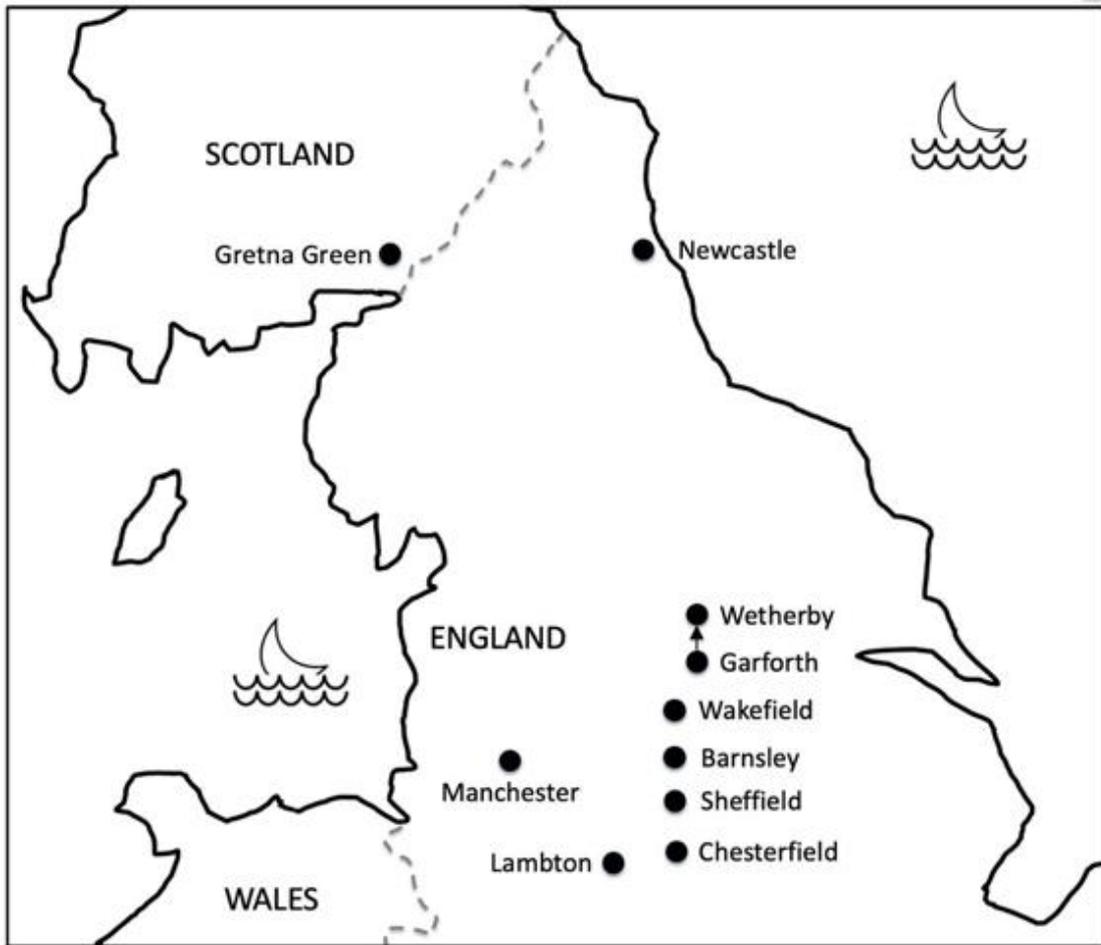
Darcy struggled to think clearly. Inns for travellers kept carriages for hire, often for men in a hurry. The coachman was weatherbeaten and grey-haired, perhaps in his fifties, but vigorous, and no doubt used to hard driving. Almost certainly they would catch Grenville well before Wetherby, even giving him a ten-minute start.

He spoke to Burgess. ‘I’ll go ahead with the coachman. Stay here with Miss Catlin.’

Darcy did his best to reassure Miss Catlin. *She would be safe at the inn with Burgess.* Darcy would return in a few hours, and it would be better for her to sleep, rather than enduring a fast and bumpy chase ...

With a nod to Burgess, Darcy took his pistol and a bag of gold coins for emergencies. In the forecourt, the coachman was ready in a light carriage. Half an hour should suffice to overtake the runaways. What remained unclear was how the earl’s son would react.

Was he violent? Or merely a cad?



Friday early morning, 5.00 a.m.

Grenville was taking a turn at the reins, leaving Elizabeth and Georgiana with Spedding. Unsure what to make of the taciturn driver, they had rested until reassured by the hum of light snoring.

‘Do you think Mr Grenville will keep his promise at Wetherby?’ Georgiana asked.

‘He seems in no hurry. Probably glad to be rid of us.’

‘Would it not be marvellous, to end this confusion and be reunited with William.’ She smiled, and whispered, ‘He will be so grateful to you.’

‘Hmm.’ Elizabeth peered out of the window; it was still dark, the moon hidden by cloud. ‘I suspect his main objective will be to keep tonight’s adventures secret.’

‘From everyone?’

‘Except Colonel Fitzwilliam.’

‘You know our cousin?’

‘He was visiting Lady Catherine de Bourgh when I was at Hunsford.’

‘Oh yes, I remember now. They returned to London in mid-April, with William in such a black mood! I thought Lady Catherine had been nagging him to marry Anne.’ A questioning look. ‘Did you ...?’

‘Yes. We were invited to Rosings.’

Georgiana sighed. ‘Have you met *all* my family?’

‘I saved the best till last.’

‘Now you are teasing me.’ She grimaced. ‘I don’t mind, but you’d better not make fun of my brother.’

‘I have already, and look what happened.’

Georgiana rolled her eyes. ‘What did you think of Lady Catherine?’

Elizabeth hesitated. ‘Amusing. Unintentionally.’

‘I hate going to Rosings, she is so daunting. William puts up with her because she is our mother’s sister.’

‘I liked the colonel.’

‘I wish he wouldn’t fight in wars.’ Georgiana looked at Elizabeth appraisingly. ‘I bet he liked you. I’m surprised *he* didn’t propose.’

‘He hinted I was not rich enough.’

‘Now I *know* you’re lying. I shan’t trust you any more.’

‘He was polite about it. *Second sons can’t marry as they like.*’ Elizabeth studied her. ‘Are you serious about not trusting me?’

‘You are never serious, so why should I be?’

Elizabeth shook her head. ‘You’re not what I expected, Miss Darcy.’

‘What do people say? That I’m timid?’

‘Something like that.’

‘In a way it’s true, but not how they think. What I am is *naïve*. No mother to guide me, only gentlemen who treat me as a child and try to protect me from the realities of life by telling me nothing.’ She met Elizabeth’s eye. ‘Which is the reason I am trusting *you*.’

‘What have *I* done?’

‘Refused to treat me as if I were made of cotton wool. At Aberford, for instance, when we had tea. You knew I’d be embarrassed that you’d heard about Ramsgate. But you said it anyway, because it was true.’

‘I could never think you feeble after what you have endured tonight.’

‘My worst nightmare. Yet I’m still here.’ She looked sad suddenly. ‘I realise that for some mad reason you don’t like my brother. But I hope he marries someone *similar* to you, rather than ...’

‘Miss Bingley?’

Georgiana clapped her hands and burst out laughing. ‘I didn’t dare say it, but yes! Mr Bingley is charming, like an uncle, but Caroline ...’

‘Don’t you sort of feel sorry for her?’

‘I feel sorry for *me*, if William submits to her wishes.’

They both laughed, inducing a groan from Spedding as he woke up.

‘All well, ladies?’

Elizabeth nodded. ‘Pardon the disturbance. Are we near Wetherby yet?’

He looked out of the window. ‘Near the turning to Boston Spa. We’ll arrive in ten minutes.’

‘Then sleep some more.’ She smiled at Georgiana. ‘We’ll be quiet as mice.’

They had reached the toll at a village called Bramham when Darcy spotted a carriage ahead. It might have turned from Leeds

or Tadcaster on the east-west crossroad. But night traffic was busier on the Great North Road, so there was a fair chance it was Grenville.

He yelled to the driver. 'Quick! I think I saw them.'

The gatekeeper, for once, was prompt, and after half a mile Darcy again glimpsed a carriage. Having studied a map at Aberford he knew they were just three miles from the Swan and Talbot inn at Wetherby, a likely staging post. By advancing close to Grenville he could stay on his tail until he stopped, and confront him at a place where there would be witnesses.

Darcy leaned out again to call to his coachman. 'Catch up a bit, then hold a distance of fifty yards!'

'Sir!' For a while the gap closed, then unaccountably the coachman cried, 'Whoa,' and their pace slackened.

'What is it?'

'Left horse flagging, sir. I think it's the breastplate.'

They came to a halt where the road met a track leading to a barn, with a farmhouse dimly visible in the distance.

'Can it be fixed?' Darcy jumped down and joined the coachman, who pointed to part of the harness.

'Too high, see? Pressing on the windpipe.'

'How long to adjust it?'

'I'll be quick, sir.'

A rustle caught Darcy's attention, and turning, he saw two men emerge from a hedge at the side of the track, one pointing a pistol.

'Good morning, gentlemen!'

The man with the pistol bowed dramatically, swirling an old-fashioned cape that he wore over his coat. He was tall and thin, with a narrow bony nose and pointed chin. His companion, perhaps the brawn of the outfit, was bearded and bear-like.

Darcy cursed his negligence in leaving his own weapon inside the carriage. He raised his hands and strove to reply in a level tone.

‘What do you want?’

‘Driver!’ The leader waved to the coachman. ‘Show us what the kind gentleman has to offer.’

With a shrug the coachman passed to the carriage door, and Darcy hoped he might find the pistol and put it to use. But the bearded accomplice kept him under close scrutiny.

‘Well, well!’ The thin man upended Darcy’s bag. ‘I applaud your excellent taste, sir. A fine pistol. And gold. A poor return in regard to *quantity*, but exemplary in quality. He spoke to the coachman. ‘You may leave us now, driver. Take your carriage, return south, and say as little as possible. We wouldn’t want to alarm anyone.’

‘*What?*’ Darcy confronted the brigand, unable to contain his anger. ‘You have taken my valuables. Why should I not proceed to Wetherby?’

The thin man waved his pistol. ‘For your own good I beg you to obey my instructions, not dispute them. Driver! Leave now!’

Darcy watched as the coach turned round, with no apparent discomfort to the horses. He faced the brigand. ‘Listen. I am trying to save my sister, who has been kidnapped. If you have any heart, call the driver back and allow me to hasten to her rescue.’

A smile. ‘An interesting story, sir, and you are free to go directly we have concluded our business. Your hat, please. And your coat.’

‘My coat holds nothing of value.’

‘It will fetch a pretty price. Bond Street?’

‘Shall I ’elp him take it off?’ the accomplice growled.

‘Wait.’ The brigand appealed again to Darcy. ‘Come sir, it would demean our transaction if I had to resort to force.’

Darcy sighed, and unbuttoned his coat. ‘If this is a transaction, what have *I* to gain?’

‘Why, the satisfaction of sharing your wealth with persons more needy. To you the loss is a flea-bite. To others it will put food on the table.’

The side-kick picked up the hat and coat and grunted, 'What about 'is boots?'

A pause, and the thin man shook his head. 'No, I think equity is satisfied, and we may part on terms of mutual respect.' A bow to Darcy. 'Farewell, and my best wishes for your quest. Do not try to follow us.'

He retreated backwards, pointing the pistol, then turned and ran into a copse on the other side of the hedge.

To pursue them would indeed be absurd: Darcy was relieved to have escaped without injury. But he was left with nothing, except shirt, breeches and boots. With the coat had gone a pocket watch, and the purse of silver coins he had been using to pay the tolls. He wondered at the coincidence that his coachman had stopped at the exact location where the highwaymen were waiting.

Was the coachman complicit, and the tale about the breastplate purely invention?

Might he even be in Grenville's pay, under instructions to delay Darcy's progress as well as robbing him?

But these questions were not urgent. To approach the farmhouse was risky. He could make for Wetherby, three miles further on—and arrive penniless. Or return to Aberford where Burgess was waiting. But that was ten miles.

To retreat was probably more sensible. But his instincts rebelled. Georgiana and Elizabeth were just up the road; at a trot he might reach the inn within half an hour and find them still there ...

It was folly, a symbolic gesture.

He began to run.

Friday morning, 6 a.m.

In the parlour of the Swan and Talbot, Elizabeth sat beside Georgiana and opposite Grenville as they enjoyed the luxury of a proper meal. The kitchens had opened and offered warm rolls with butter, hot chocolate or tea, boiled eggs, and ham from a joint. At a window seat, looking out for Darcy, they could see a glow on the horizon as dawn broke.

So far, Grenville had kept his word and acted as if he too trusted Elizabeth. Tension and mistrust had given way to camaraderie as they revived their spirits with sweet hot chocolate and fragrant rolls.

‘I must check with Spedding.’ Grenville rose and set off for the stables, while Georgiana trilled her fingers on the table top and peered out of the window.

‘If only William would come!’

‘He will.’ Elizabeth helped herself to more ham. ‘I never had a brother. What was it like, as a child?’

‘He wasn’t *there* much.’ Georgiana sighed. ‘When I was born he was at Harrow, and I have only vague recollections of him as a boy. Can you remember your earliest years?’

‘Only what I’ve been told later.’

‘My proper memories begin at five years old, by which time William was 17 and looked like an adult. In vacations from school he stayed at Pemberley and would take me on horse rides round the estate, perched in front. I felt proud and daring at being so high up. He persuaded father to buy me a clavichord. That was how I got started on music.’

‘I’m told you play very well.’

‘That’s just William being kind. Or Miss Bingley trying to win his approval. But music was always my solace. I was so much alone, you see, after father died.’

‘When was that?’

‘I was ten, and William in his last year at Cambridge. I remember Mr Bingley coming to the funeral.’

‘A sad time in anyone’s life,’ Elizabeth said.

‘William was desolate. It was then he became so serious. He had to serve as my guardian as well as master of Pemberley.’

‘A lot to take on. Especially being your guardian.’

‘He shared it with ...’ Georgiana broke off, reddening. ‘You’re teasing me.’

Elizabeth touched her hand. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I just want William to come, and for this to end.’

It was getting easier to see as an orange glow appeared on the horizon, silhouetting the distant woodlands on Darcy’s right. Two carriages had come the other way: one had even stopped to ask whether he needed help. But he had run a mile already; to return to Aberford would represent defeat. A ride north would have been welcome, but the only coach passing had ignored his wave—for which he could hardly blame them, given his recent experience.

He paused, out of breath, at a turning for a place called Boston Spa. As he resumed running, he heard another vehicle approaching from the south. It looked like a landau, and although it slowed at the junction, continued in his direction. On impulse Darcy jumped into the road and raised his hands to show he was unarmed.

Two men in scarlet and silver livery stared at him as they pulled up.

‘What are you doing?’ one called out.

‘I need a lift to the inn at Wetherby.’

‘Only a mile. Walk.’

‘It’s urgent. Life or death.’

‘Our instructions are to keep moving. And don’t shout. You’ll wake the master.’

The other driver, who looked more senior, said softly, 'He could get on the back, Jacob. Looks harmless.'

Jacob squinted at Darcy and hissed, 'Turn round!'

Darcy obeyed, confirming that no weapon was hidden, and the older man nodded.

'Climb on the back. And no noise. Agreed?'

Darcy wondered who the master might be, but the curtains were drawn. He found a space normally used for luggage or servants. Carefully he mounted, reconsidering his predicament.

Ill-dressed. Unarmed. Penniless. None of which would be a disaster, provided Grenville was honest.

The Swan and Talbot lay on a cobbled street and had extensive stabling at the rear. Ancient, with white walls and a slate roof, it was cosy rather than spacious, the ceilings so low that a tall man had to mind his head. They halted by a pavement on the side opposite, where Darcy jumped down and surveyed a street coming to life as the sun rose.

He saw one or two modest carriages. But none resembling Grenville's.

Returning to thank the drivers, he saw the carriage door wide open as an elderly gentleman descended, followed by a plainly dressed woman who might be in her late thirties. The man wore a black coat finely cut, and what looked like a grey wig with a regular curl at the ends. He turned to face Darcy and they both flinched in surprise.

'*Darcy?*' The gentleman peered at him in disbelief. 'My dear fellow, what has befallen you?'

Darcy bowed. 'Lord Sterndale. Good morning, and excuse my appearance. I was robbed on the road, and your drivers kindly took pity on me.'

'This is shocking. Come to the snug and let me buy you a warming drink.'

'An excellent suggestion, but there is something I must do first. It will not take long.'

‘Of course. May I order you coffee? With brandy?’ Lord Sterndale took the woman’s arm for support, while Darcy scanned the street again before racing to the stables, where he hailed an ostler.

‘Has a carriage just passed? Name of Grenville?’

The man looked blank, but another lad overheard. ‘Yes, sir! Might still be outside.’

Could Georgiana and Elizabeth still be in the inn? He rushed back, earning curious glances from staff and other customers. Having entered all possible rooms except the privies, he returned to the reception desk.

‘One dark, one fair?’ A fastidious-looking man regarded Darcy sceptically. ‘Indeed, sir. Friends of yours?’

‘You’re sure they’ve left?’

‘Five minutes ago, sir. The ladies seemed in no hurry, but the gentleman was eager to get back on the road ...’

In the snug Lord Sterndale had ordered not only coffee but fresh rolls and ham, of which Darcy gratefully partook: he needed to keep his strength up. He knew Sterndale from his London club Brooks’s. Once well-known as a lawyer and orator, he had risen to become Lord High Chancellor despite taking on controversial cases, including the defence of Thomas Paine, author of the radical tract *Rights of Man*. The appointment had been brief, leaving Sterndale a fixture at Brooks’s smoking room, where he entertained patrons by denouncing the government he had once served.

As Darcy concluded his account of the robbery, Lord Sterndale nodded with a wry smile.

‘Most unfortunate. As to the coachman, you are probably correct in your suspicion. The highwayman sounds like Gentleman Jack Finn, who preys on night travellers along the north road. I prosecuted him once, ten years ago at the Bailey. I had witnesses to several thefts, an open and shut case. But Finn is generous to his friends, who in return offer him alibis. And since he operates at night, the defence argues that

identification is unreliable. Did you get a clear view of his face?’

‘A good impression, in the moonlight. But to swear it in court ...’ Darcy shook his head.

‘One would have to catch him in the act. The trouble is that he rose through the ranks, first postboy, then coachman, and plays on the connection. They trust him never to harm one of their profession. But I ramble.’ Lord Sterndale poured more coffee and laced it with brandy. ‘Your sister. How may I assist?’

‘Do you know the Grenvilles?’

‘The earl, yes. A stalwart at the treasury, where he purports to manage the country’s finances. Personally I’d hesitate to trust him with my shopping list.’ He smiled at the woman at his side, whom he had introduced as his housekeeper, Mrs Deere. ‘As for the son, I’ve never met him.’

‘You know of no scandal surrounding the family?’

‘I would assess the earl as honest, generous, proud of his family. If they have run afoul of the law I have yet to hear of it.’

‘What kind of man would elope with one lady then replace her with another?’

‘He might have tired of Miss Catlin and seen no other safe way of rescuing your sister.’

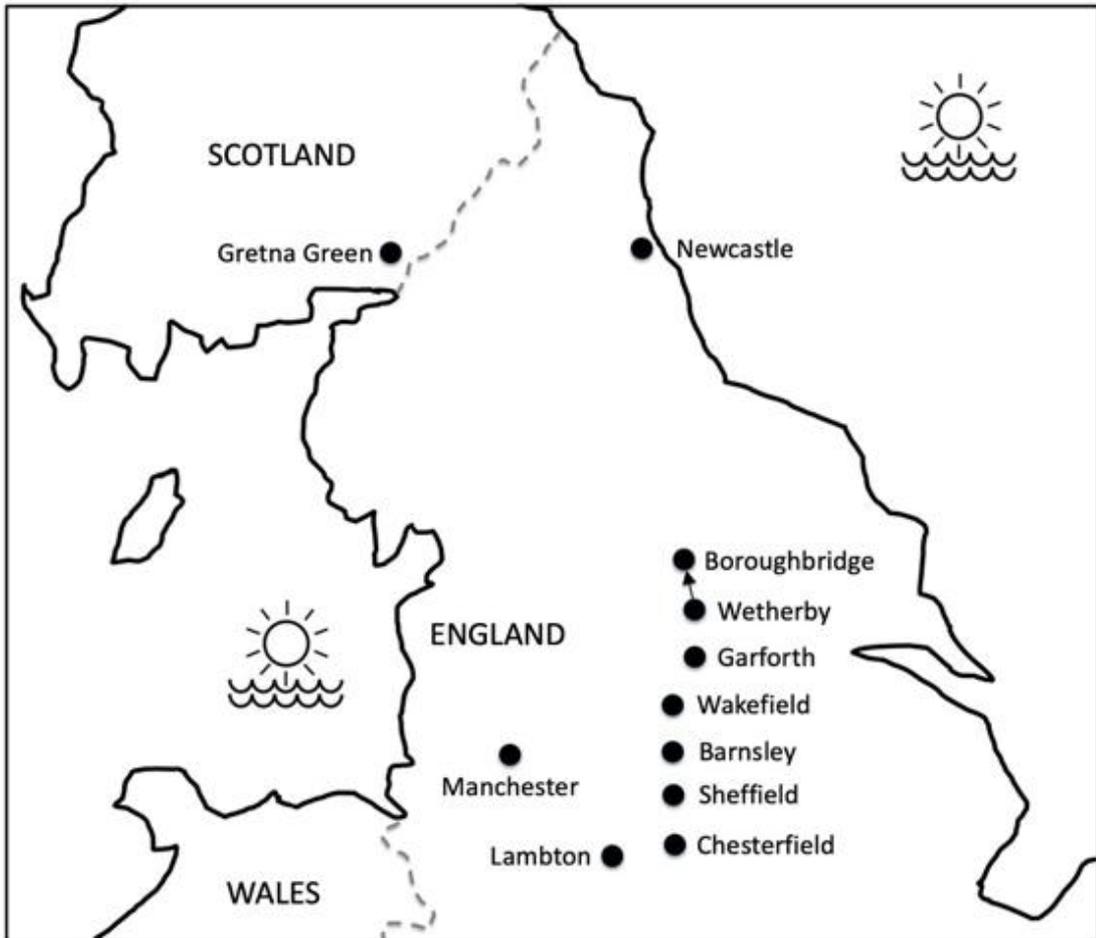
‘Whatever his motive, I have to get back on his trail.’

Lord Sterndale nodded. ‘I too am in haste.’ He glanced out of the window, checking progress on his carriage. ‘May I offer you transport to the next stage, by which time banks and shops should be open? In return, I would be grateful if you kept this chance meeting private. Never mind why. Suffice to say that I am bound for Scotland on important business.’

Darcy recalled the drawn curtains on Lord Sterndale’s carriage, and the reluctance of his drivers to take on a passenger. ‘Certainly, sir. I too have need of discretion.’

‘Then let us away.’ Lord Sterndale turned to his housekeeper. ‘Ready, Mrs Deere?’

She rose, and helped him to his feet.



Friday morning, 6.25 a.m.

‘So.’ Grenville directed a superior smile at Elizabeth. ‘No Mr Darcy.’

Elizabeth grimaced, tired of his drawl. ‘We could have waited longer.’

‘I remind you, Miss Bennet, that I am doing Miss Darcy a favour. But for me, she would remain in the clutches of Mr Wickham.’

Elizabeth fell silent. Maybe Grenville was right: he had allowed them nearly half an hour, as promised. At her side Georgiana was dispirited.

What could have happened?

Unfortunately, the most plausible explanation was some kind of confrontation between Darcy and Wickham at the White Hart

inn. What if Darcy was injured? Her mind resisted the idea, but it would explain why he had been unable to catch up.

In the morning light they made steady progress, and after an hour were approaching the cross-road from Harrogate which was also the turning to Whixley. Georgiana had fallen silent, perhaps uneasy in the presence of Grenville, whom they were now obliged to trust. Another half-hour would take them to his estate and an uncertain reception. The earl would be in London, so as oldest son, Richard Grenville would be in control.

Georgiana's anxiety was understandable, given that only hours before she had trusted another stranger—Denny. It was hard to see why a man in Grenville's position would risk scandal; unlike Denny and Wickham he had much to lose. He had been protective of Georgiana and had kept his word, so far. But there was a rather large fly in the ointment: his treatment of Miss Catlin. Perhaps one could justify the elopement, if he truly loved her and his father was obdurate. But to leave her behind in the process of rescuing Georgiana from Wickham! And subsequently, to show so little concern for her safety!

Thinking through possible outcomes, it seemed to Elizabeth that all depended on Darcy. Had he captured Wickham, and spoken to Miss Catlin? If so he would know that Georgiana was in the custody of Earl Grenville's son; after finding that Elizabeth had vanished, he would guess that she too had been taken. He would also learn that the Grenville estate lay just ten miles beyond Wetherby—a probable destination if Grenville's motive was to rescue Georgiana.

Sooner or later, then, Darcy would reach Whixley and all would be well. What a relief that at least *one* man in this drama was both competent and trustworthy ...

A man whose hand she had rejected in the harshest way imaginable just a few months ago.

Sadness overcame her, not for an opportunity spurned, but for what she had inflicted on him.

They reached the final toll before the turning to Whixley, at a remote house surrounded by farmland. The toll keeper came to open the gate; nearby two lads, perhaps his sons, were chopping wood. As Grenville jumped down to pay, two men on horseback

rode out from a row of trees, and the leader, a tall well-dressed gentleman wearing a sword, alighted beside their carriage, while his companion drew a pistol and remained close to Spedding.

Observing from a window, Elizabeth hissed a warning to Georgiana. ‘Brigands! Keep calm and do as they say.’

The leader drew his sword and advanced on Grenville, who faced him with a look of stubborn indifference. The two men presented a contrast: the newcomer was younger, strongly built, with a face glowing with health; it was easy to imagine him hunting, or engaging in some manly sport like boxing or fencing. Keeping his sword pointed down, in readiness, he addressed Grenville in the tone of one accustomed to command.

‘So, Hodgkin. Up to your tricks again, eh?’

Elizabeth gasped, and looked at Georgiana. ‘*Hodgkin?*’

The newcomer must have heard this exclamation, for he approached the window and peered inside. ‘My, my. *Two* ladies this time, Hodgkin. Greed, it seems, is your besetting sin.’ He shouted to his accomplice. ‘Is the driver armed?’

‘No sir.’ A deep voice. ‘Weapons must be inside.’

The leader opened the door a little and spoke to Elizabeth. ‘Don’t be alarmed, ma’am. I’m not going to harm you or steal your valuables. Are there pistols stowed below the seats?’

‘Stop!’ The toll keeper called out sharply, and glancing towards the house Elizabeth saw the youths who had been chopping wood, now advancing from the house brandishing shotguns. ‘What is happening here?’

‘A citizen’s arrest.’ The leader raised his hands, as if to hold off the youths. ‘Allow me to present myself. My name is Richard Grenville. My father owns Whixley estate, and *this* man ...’ He pointed. ‘Was my butler until dismissed two months ago. His driver, formerly a footman, was also dismissed. Since then, this *butler* has been passing himself off as *me*, and persuading innocent young ladies to elope to Gretna—only to ravish and abandon them *en route*. His actual name is Josiah Hodgkin, and I am taking him into custody, along with his driver.’

Elizabeth looked again at Georgiana, who looked as if the world had been turned upside-down. Trying to calm her, she whispered, 'It seems we've acquired another Richard Grenville. There are now two, the old and the new.'

Georgiana whispered back. 'But which is the real one?'

'That remains to be seen.' Elizabeth looked back to the drama at the gate, where the toll keeper was staring at the *old* Grenville—possibly Hodgkin.

'Is this true, sir?'

'Not in the least.' Without embarrassment, he drew papers from his coat. 'As proof of identity I offer my passport, and also a letter of credit for £1000, of which I have drawn £920.' He extended an arm. 'These men are thieves.'

The new Grenville laughed. 'Poppycock! Hodgkin stole those documents from my study.'

The toll keeper looked back and forth between the two gentlemen, before addressing the new Grenville.

'And yourself, sir? Have you proof?'

The new Grenville waved this away, as if astounded that proof should be needed. 'Have you not seen me travelling in Earl Grenville's convoy?'

Visibly affronted by this condescension, the toll keeper muttered, 'No. Can't say I have,' and turned to the youths, who still had their shotguns raised. 'Keep an eye on these blighters while I disarm them.'

The youths advanced, and Elizabeth froze, too curious to look away, but ready to duck if shooting broke out. The toll keeper held out a hand for the sword, and after a tense stand-off the new Grenville threw it down and signalled to his accomplice to surrender his pistol.

'Excellently done!' The old Grenville beamed at the toll keeper. 'You will be rewarded for your good judgement. Meanwhile, detain these thieves while I arrange for a constable to collect them. Spedding!' He turned to his driver. 'Prepare to leave.'

Shocked by this new twist, Elizabeth wondered whether to intervene. She was unconvinced by the passport and letter, which could indeed have been stolen. Her instinct was to believe the new Grenville, for if false, whatever was he doing here? But against this, the old Grenville did not act like a butler—and in any case, how could the new Grenville have known he would pass at this exact moment?

Perplexed, she did nothing. The old Grenville got back into the carriage, which moved off. She saw the youths still keeping guard over the other men. At her side, Georgiana was frozen in bewilderment.

For a while nobody spoke, until just before the Harrogate road Spedding brought the carriage to a halt, and Grenville got down and extended a hand towards Elizabeth.

‘Time to leave, Miss Bennet.’

She stared at him. ‘I thought we were going to Whixley.’

‘So we are. But not with you.’

‘Miss Darcy *wants* me to stay.’

Elizabeth appealed to Georgiana, who found her voice and cried, ‘Indeed I do! Mr Grenville, there is no need for this. Miss Bennet has my full trust.’

‘But not mine.’ He called the driver to come over.

Elizabeth pulled away as Spedding reached into the carriage. ‘Out you come, ma’am. I don’t want to hurt you.’

‘How dare you!’

A hand grasped her ankle, and she was pulled across the seat and down to the floor. Her hands thrashed around for a grip, but he was too quick, and she was thrown headlong into a patch of rough grass. Back in the carriage, Georgiana screamed.

‘So your rival spoke the truth.’ Elizabeth glared up at Hodgkin. ‘He really is the earl’s son, and you were his butler. I advise you to release Miss Darcy immediately. Otherwise nothing awaits you except the gallows.’

‘Believe what you wish.’ He re-entered the carriage beside Georgiana, and Elizabeth could only watch, helpless, as they

drove through the junction without turning.

It was all a lie. Hodgkin was not going to Whixley. Why would he, when the Grenvilles had dismissed him?

Elizabeth shook dirt from her dress. Her knees smarted where they had hit the ground, but otherwise she felt only a slight bruising around her ankles.

Still furious, she hurried back along the verge towards the toll gate.

19

The turnpike was getting busier, and as Elizabeth trotted down the verge she received curious glances and two offers of a lift. But the distance was short, and explanations would be complicated.

She rounded the final bend and found a police wagon parked at the house, where a constable was remonstrating with the toll keeper. Grenville and his associate were seated on the ground, having been roped to a gatepost; a footman in livery was untying them.

Elizabeth watched, getting her breath back, until Grenville noticed her and waved. He got to his feet as she approached.

‘You got away?’

‘I was thrown out of the carriage.’

He frowned at her muddied and dishevelled dress. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘No. But my friend Miss Darcy is in Hodgkin’s power, and of course he did not turn off to Whixley.’ She pointed at the police wagon. ‘How could they have arrived so fast?’

‘I’d installed a lookout at the Swann and Talbot inn.’ He pointed to his accomplice. ‘Complicated story, I’ll have to tell you later, Miss, ah ...’

‘Bennet. Listen. My friend Miss Darcy is but 16, and in great distress. Her brother is trying to catch up, but I fear he has met with an accident ...’

Grenville raised a hand. ‘I must get after Hodgkin, and will of course take care of Miss Darcy. Will you wait here for her brother?’

‘Can I come with you?’

‘The police wagon is uncomfortable and I cannot guarantee your safety.’

‘I have already survived Hodgkin and Spedding.’

He smiled. ‘Do you hunt, Miss Bennet?’

‘No.’

‘You remind me of my sister, who is fearless.’ He waved to the footman, who had finally released his accomplice. ‘Hanson, Briggs, we have an extra passenger!’

The interior of the wagon had seats at the front for guards, each beside a window, and a hard bench running down one side where prisoners could be chained to iron rings fixed to the floor. Hanson and Briggs were driving, while inside, Grenville and the constable sat beside the windows, leaving Elizabeth in the prisoners’ quarters—for which Grenville had been apologetic. But she had chosen to come, and the men needed to be ready for action.

Elizabeth had told her story, from the first abduction to the second, and it was time for Grenville to tell his. The earl had been deceived by Hodgkin, who was competent and plausible, albeit too interested in flattering the female staff. Spedding (not his real name) had been a footman in cahoots with Hodgkin, and together they had found clever ways of stealing from the estate and arranging trysts with the maids—until one night Richard Grenville had caught Hodgkin *in flagrante* and dismissed them both without a reference. Before leaving, however, Hodgkin had prised open a locked drawer in the study and walked off with a sheath of documents, including a letter of credit from a London bank that would allow him to withdraw £1000.

This had happened in June; in the weeks following, the ex-butler had taken revenge by impersonating Grenville, drawing money in his name, and wooing young ladies impressed by his title and debonair manner. The Grenvilles, aware that the money had gone, had informed the bank. Only later had they heard rumours of young ladies whom Hodgkin had enjoyed and then abandoned on the Great North Road while pretending to take them to Gretna.

‘Then why not warn the innkeepers?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘I am not the only Richard Grenville. My cousin has the same name, not to mention my father.’ He drew himself up. ‘I found a better way. I hired out my stable lad Briggs to the

Swan and Talbot at Wetherby, with instructions to ride hard to Whixley if Hodgkin turned up. In this way we laid our trap at the toll.'

Only to be detained yourselves, Elizabeth thought. For all his athleticism and confidence, Grenville did not strike her as clever: he should at least have forewarned the toll keeper closest to Whixley. But perhaps he found the affair embarrassing, or assumed that as the earl's true son and heir he would be believed over any rival.

Georgiana observed Grenville—or rather, Hodgkin—who had remained uncharacteristically silent after ejecting Elizabeth. What was he intending? Not to rescue her, evidently, otherwise he would have turned off to Whixley instead of staying on the Great North Road. So why keep her at all, rather than leaving her behind with Elizabeth? She could see only one reason. Her dowry. Gretna.

In short, she was back where she had started, alone with her abductors, the only difference being that Wickham and Denny had been replaced by another pair of ne'er-do-wells. Like Eugenia in *Camilla* she had no-one to depend on except herself. She could make a fuss when they reached the next inn at Boroughbridge. But the sequel would probably be the same as before. She was under the protection of a gentleman with proof he was an earl's son. No-one would take her pleading seriously.

She thought of Elizabeth, last seen dusting herself off at the roadside. How wonderful it would be to have her as a sister-in-law! So amusing, so honest—and so resilient. In her company she had felt strong, able to accept unpleasant realities and seek out opportunities. Now Elizabeth was far behind, and Darcy too. She was alone ...

But Elizabeth had not treated her as an innocent child. And she had defended herself before, by provoking a rift between Denny and Wickham. Hodgkin might have vulnerabilities. Perhaps he too could be worked on.

She faced him, and said matter-of-factly, 'Mr Hodgkin, may I ask where we are going now?'

A glare. 'My name, madam, is Grenville.'

'Then why did we not go to Whixley and summon the constable, as you promised?'

'Never mind.'

'And why take me with you?' She spoke gently, cajoling him. 'As an intelligent cultivated man you must have had a good reason.'

His expression softened. 'Perhaps because I regard you as an intelligent cultivated young lady.'

'I am flattered. But if you are right, can we not drop this pretence? I would like to understand who you *really* are.'

He hesitated a long time, then faced her again, with a subtle shift in his expression and tone, no longer debonair, more straightforward. 'Very well. I will admit, not without pride, that I am not the cork-brained son of an earl but an educated commoner once constrained by circumstance to serve as Grenville's servant.'

'Until you were dismissed. How could that be? I cannot believe you were incompetent.'

'The answer is very simple. He felt uncomfortable in my presence because it brought into sharp relief his own mediocrity.'

'That was presumably not the reason he gave.'

He smiled, and leaned forward, as if again sensing a connection between them. 'Indeed not, but it is true nonetheless. You see, a man like Grenville is at root a fraud. He is sent to Eton and Oxford, where with a little effort he might acquire a first-rate education in literature, history, and the arts. In reality none of this adheres. His time is wasted at the races or the card table. He leaves having gained only a conviction of his own superiority.' He spread his hands. 'In short with less merit than you or I have in our little fingers.'

'So he had advantages that you lacked ...'

'Exactly.' He picked up her cue enthusiastically. 'For my situation was the opposite. The best school a hard-working

carpenter could afford. Entering service as a lad and rising steadily to the top of my profession. Learning from artists and musicians who visited; studying in the evenings or late into the night. Enduring the constant ignorance and folly of my master while trying subtly to guide him, or cover his lapses in company. You understand?’

‘I do.’ She thought for a moment, thrown off balance by his evident sincerity. ‘Like Mr Grenville I have enjoyed the privileges of wealth. But I can imagine what it must feel like to be—misjudged. Unappreciated.’

‘Just so. A man like Grenville looks at you and sees only a gentle innocent young lady. I see genuine taste and originality of mind.’

‘You are very kind.’ She blushed. ‘And I hope one day to deserve these compliments. But remember that I am little more than a child, and a long way from home and family.’

He drew back, and looked out of the window. ‘We’re coming into Boroughbridge, where we could take coffee at the Crown Inn.’ He met her eye. ‘If you promise to collaborate.’

Georgiana nodded vaguely and he fell silent, apparently satisfied.

At the Black Bull in Aberford, Burgess sat beside Miss Catlin on a bench near the entrance. Two hours had passed since Darcy had left in the hired coach. In the meantime the sun had risen, the horses had been changed, and he had breakfasted with a dispirited-looking Miss Catlin. Attempts at conversation had led nowhere. She showed no desire to be reunited with her family in Warwickshire. Nothing interested her except an unlikely hope that Grenville would abandon Miss Darcy and come back to her.

A carriage arrived from the direction of Wetherby and circled towards the stables. Burgess advanced for a closer look. *The same coachman.* But the carriage was empty.

He ran over as the driver threw away the butt of a cigar and jumped down. ‘Hey there!’

The coachman walked past him, towards the bar, and Burgess shouted, 'Where is Mr Darcy?'

A grunt. 'Can't you see I need a drink?'

Burgess beckoned Miss Catlin and followed. In the bar the coachman ordered a tankard of ale, and after taking a long draught said, 'What is it?'

'I asked what happened to Mr Darcy. Your passenger.'

'Left me, didn't he. And I got paid nothing.'

'Did you catch up with the other party?'

A shrug, and a shake of the head.

'So you left Mr Darcy at Wetherby? Changed horses and returned? In just two hours?'

'Look.' He dropped his voice. 'This is between you and me, right?'

Burgess turned to Miss Catlin. 'Give us a few moments.'

She retreated to a corner seat while Burgess dragged the story out. *A robbery*. Three miles from Wetherby. Too dark to see the culprits. They had stolen Darcy's purse and sent the coachman away.

'And Mr Darcy? What happened to him?'

'How would I know?'

'Is there anything more you can tell me?'

'No.' A pause. 'Am I going to be paid?'

'Not by me.'

Burgess turned away and rejoined Miss Catlin, who had been watching impassively. 'I have to leave immediately.'

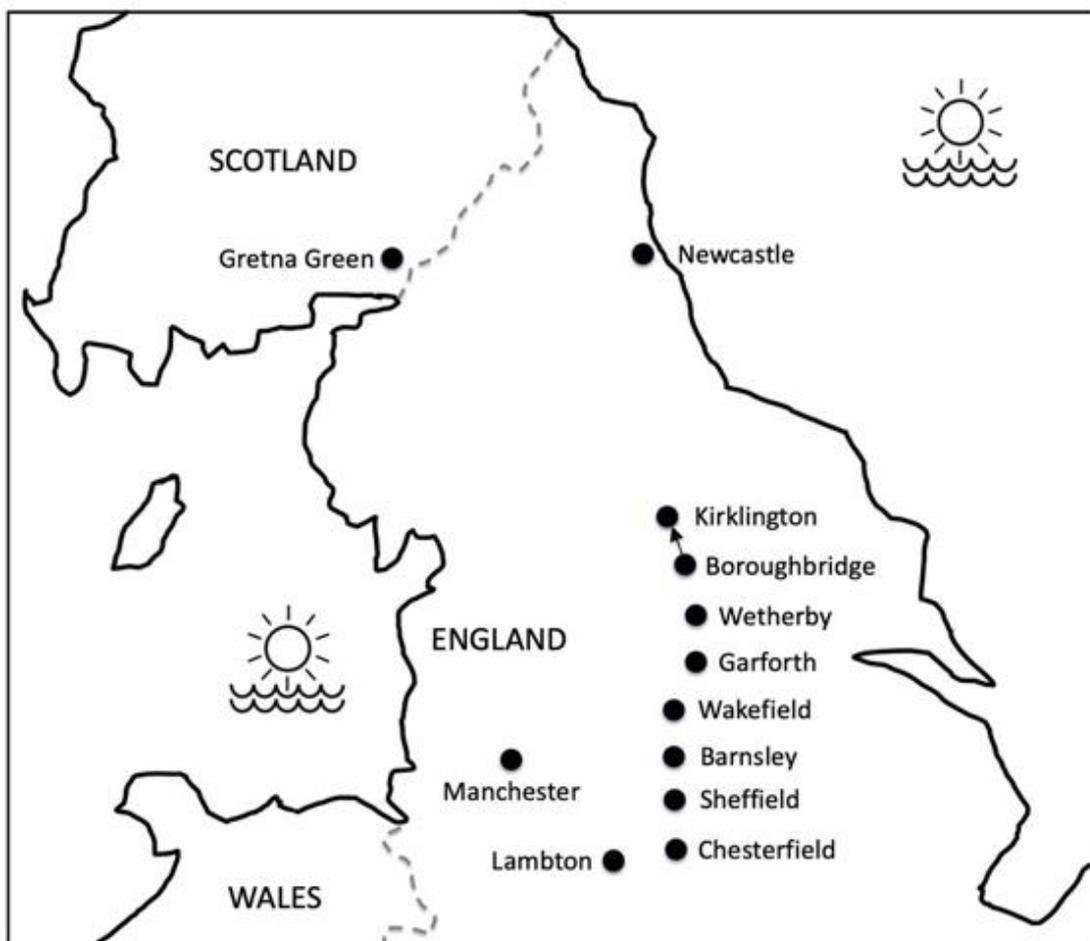
'Where?'

'North, to Wetherby. My master needs my help.'

'And Mr Grenville?' She looked bewildered.

'I don't know. Perhaps we can find him too. Stay here if you prefer, but I cannot give you money.'

Miss Catlin said nothing, but as Burgess turned to leave, she rose and trailed after him.



Friday morning, 9.30 a.m.

They had changed quickly at Boroughbridge and were now halfway to Kirklington. Still seated on the prisoner bench, Elizabeth was beginning to regret her decision as the box-like wagon bounced her up and down. Was Darcy close behind? Should she have waited at the last inn?

Apart from the discomfort, she was having doubts over the competence of her companions. The burly constable would be handy with his fists, as would Richard Grenville, but first they had to *locate* their quarry, and in a battle of wits her money was on Hodgkin. It was known that Hodgkin's coach had changed horses at the Crown Inn after 8.15 a.m., in which case he should be just half an hour up the road—*if* he had come this way. But what if he had veered off, as he had done during the night when Wickham and Georgiana spotted him parked on the village

green? They would find out at the next toll. But by then he could be anywhere.

It would depend, ultimately, on his intentions towards Georgiana. If he aspired to marry her, he would try to win the race to Gretna. If not—who could say?

A shout from Hanson, who was driving, and Grenville put his head out of the window.

‘Carriage ahead! At the Dishforth toll.’

Elizabeth sighed as the usual preparations began. Pistols cocked. Grenville’s sword ready. The horses urged to gallop. Tally ho!

But it was not Hodgkin, just a startled clergyman on his way to a neighbouring parish.

Apologies were given, and the vicar’s carriage moved to let the police wagon through. But there was a silver lining: the toll keeper reported that a man had passed just twenty minutes before with a young lady. A most pleasant and generous gentleman, son of an earl ...

At reception in the Crown Inn at Boroughbridge, Darcy earned a suspicious stare from the attendant as he asked if any messages had been left.

‘Name, sir?’

‘Darcy.’

A twitch of recognition. ‘Oh yes. A lady left a note.’ He retrieved it from a drawer. ‘Most charming, accompanied by Earl Grenville’s son, and a constable.’

‘A *constable*?’

‘Yes sir.’ Another wary glance.

‘And no-one else?’

‘Not that I saw.’

Darcy found a secluded corner and unfolded the sheet, hastily scribbled in Elizabeth’s hand.

I pray you are unhurt. If you paused at the toll before the Harrogate road you may know that the man who abandoned Kitten is not Grenville but his butler

Hodgkin, who now has your sister. I am pursuing in a police wagon with the real Grenville. Must go, good luck, EB.

On the other side was written a time, 8.50. *Forty-five minutes ago*. Darcy struggled to make sense of this transformation. Presumably the false Grenville had left Elizabeth behind while fleeing from the true Grenville, who had taken her along as a witness, or as company for Georgiana. At least Elizabeth was safe, for now. But chillingly, Georgiana was alone with a man even more dangerous than Wickham ...

While he, Darcy, was far behind with no money and no suitable clothes. His only chance was to borrow from Lord Sterndale, which would mean a further delay as they sought a bank.

Darcy ran to the forecourt—only to meet with a further crisis.

At first it seemed all was in order. The horses had been changed. Lord Sterndale's landau was ready to leave. But a smaller carriage had been jammed in front to obstruct his exit, and at its side a curious drama was unfolding. Facing Sterndale and Mrs Deere stood a tall man in a light brown frockcoat, brandishing a crop that he waved for emphasis. Lord Sterndale's drivers watched like seconds in a duel, while the newcomer was backed up by a strapping young manservant.

'Tobias, you are absurd,' Lord Sterndale said. 'For your own good turn back, and we will forget this episode ever happened.'

'On the contrary,' avowed the newcomer, 'you are no longer responsible for your actions and I have every right to intervene. You are being led astray by a person unfit to shine your boots, who seeks to exploit an elderly gentleman in his dotage.'

Darcy flinched at this insult, but Sterndale was unperturbed and continued in a tone of authority. 'You may hold any opinion of me that you wish. That is *your* freedom under the law. I may dispose of my property as I see fit. That is *mine*. If you obstruct me by force you commit a crime of assault. Order your servant to move your carriage.'

The man he had called Tobias stood tall and folded his arms. 'I shall do no such thing.'

'Then we will move it ourselves.'

Gingerly the liveried drivers advanced, and Darcy saw they would be outmatched if Tobias decided to resist. Jacob was a strong lad but his partner Seth, although deft and capable, was of slighter build, and as he tried to lead a horse away, Tobias's servant grabbed him round the waist and threw him to the ground. The onlookers gasped; none intervened—except Darcy, who ran into the melee.

Tobias's servant was soon overpowered, and as Darcy and Seth held him down, two stable lads joined in to help. Leaving the servant in their hands, Darcy ran to tackle Tobias, who had tripped Jacob and was setting about him with his crop. It was no time for fair play, and Darcy aimed his boot at the back of Tobias's leg. With a bellow Tobias folded to the ground and Darcy placed a knee on his chest.

Tobias stared up, hate in his eyes.

'Who are you?'

'An acquaintance of Lord Sterndale's. If you surrender, I will remove my knee.'

'Go to the devil.'

'What is your purpose?'

'None of your business.'

Darcy felt a hand on his shoulder, and Lord Sterndale said quietly, 'Tobias is my son, to whom, one day, my fortune will pass. Unfortunately he fails to realise that this day has not yet come.'

Tobias glowered at him. 'Get this bumpkin off me.'

'You are speaking of a gentleman from my club.'

'*Gentleman?* You have lost your mind.'

'If you refer to his attire, yes, there is a problem.' Lord Sterndale smiled. 'However, I see a remedy. As compensation for your insults, you will give Mr Darcy your coat.' He spoke to Seth and Jacob. 'Remove it!'

Rising, Darcy saw a crowd form as the carriage blocking their path was moved aside. He dusted down the coat and tried it on, taking also Tobias's hat which had come off in the fracas. One

of the coat pockets held a purse containing a few coins. He was about to return it when Lord Sterndale shook his head.

‘Keep it, Darcy.’

‘So theft is now legal?’ Tobias Sterndale sneered.

‘Your allowance comes from my estate,’ Lord Sterndale said. ‘It was *my* money that filled this purse and purchased these clothes. I will leave now. Do not attempt to follow.’

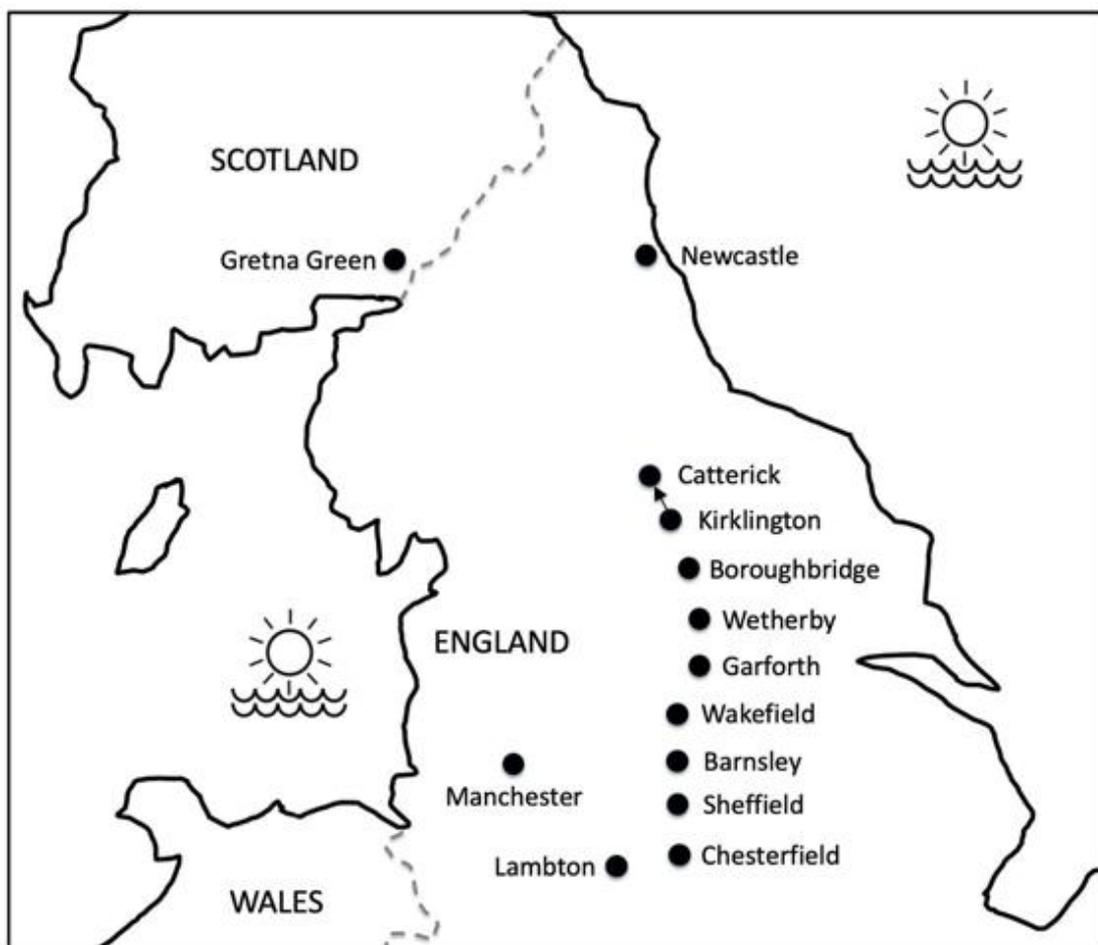
Seething, Tobias glared as Darcy and Mrs Deere helped Lord Sterndale into the carriage. Realistically he had no alternative but to accept defeat, but the sight of Darcy leaving in *his* frockcoat must have prompted a rush of blood to the head, for suddenly he raced forward, only to be seized by the stable lads, who deposited him in a horse trough.

As they pulled away, Lord Sterndale nodded to Darcy. ‘I am indebted to you.’

‘Any debt is already repaid.’ Darcy pointed to his new frockcoat. ‘Unfortunately I have received bad news at the hotel. My sister is in worse danger than before.’

‘Then stay with us at least until Kirklington. I will drive hard in case Tobias regroup.’

Mrs Deere nodded approval, her suspicion of Darcy apparently allayed now that he had proved his worth.



Friday morning, 10.45 a.m.

At Kirklington the police wagon had missed Hodgkin by ten minutes and the constable was losing appetite for the chase, finding himself already 20 miles from home. Grenville was certain they would catch up before Catterick. His confidence convinced neither Elizabeth nor the practical constable. But the Grenville earldom inspired deference, and the constable agreed to one more try.

While Elizabeth trusted Richard Grenville she found his company uninspiring. He kept probing her relationship to Darcy, although never asking directly whether they were engaged. She sensed he admired her, or at least some image of her formed at their first meeting: a woman of *spirit*, outspoken, fearless, cheerful, and resilient—as proved by her willingness to tolerate the police wagon. She was tempted to explain that at present she had none of these attributes. Georgiana's predicament terrified

her, and after the long pursuit from Lambton she felt exhausted, depressed, and in no mood for conversation; all she desired was rest.

Through the guard's window she glimpsed a monotonous landscape, mostly flat farmland with occasional villages. They were in north Yorkshire, in the valley between the dales to the west and the moors to the east. There were no difficult hills; the weather was fine; nothing impeded their progress except normal late-morning traffic.

What was she doing here?

Could she have stopped Hodgkin from making off with Georgiana?

Was Darcy safe?

Pointless thoughts. She must try to sleep, and await the next inn at Catterick.

Half an hour later Lord Sterndale's carriage reached a bank at Kirklington, where he withdrew 50 guineas for himself and 50 for Darcy. At the inn Darcy found an even briefer note from Elizabeth (*No change, still chasing*), left at a time suggesting she was nearly an hour ahead: what they had gained on the road had been lost at the bank. He was tempted to hire a fast carriage, but on reflection decided to stay with Lord Sterndale, still in fear of his son after a carriage had followed them to a toll gate. It had proved a false alarm, but Darcy felt indebted to Sterndale, and also wary of coachmen offering fast transit to the next stage—he had no wish to lose more money to the likes of Gentleman Jack Finn.

Conversation was intermittent as they rattled north on a fairly good road. Lord Sterndale was catching up on sleep; Mrs Deere avoided Darcy's eye and stared out of the window. Midway to Catterick Darcy also dozed from sheer exhaustion. Half dreaming, he heard Lord Sterndale speaking quietly to Mrs Deere, who sounded irritated. He wondered where they were bound: to Dumfries, perhaps, or Lanarkshire. Sterndale had still not confided the nature of the *business* in Scotland that had so displeased his son; the likeliest candidate, Darcy thought, was a property deal.

Emerging from this reverie, Darcy noticed an edge to Lord Sterndale's voice. The usual calm authority had given way to anger, suggesting that Mrs Deere had gone too far. Noticing that Darcy was awake, she looked away out of the window, her piqued expression reminding him of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Not for the first time, Darcy blessed his luck in having Mrs Reynolds as his housekeeper.

Elizabeth awoke on the outskirts of Catterick, with no sign yet of Hodgkin's carriage. Even Grenville looked demoralised as he tried to persuade the constable to keep going.

'We said one more stage,' the constable reminded him.

Grenville looked at Elizabeth, as if hoping she might be open to a different interpretation. Instead she said, lightly, 'Perhaps we'll catch them at the inn.'

Grenville faced the constable again. 'If you leave us here I'll have to hire a coach.'

The constable frowned. 'Is it worth it, sir? If Hodgkin persists in this nonsense we'll pick him up next time.'

'I want him *now!*' Grenville snapped. 'Also we have Miss Darcy to consider.'

'Her brother won't be far behind.'

'We don't know that,' Elizabeth said.

'The trouble is ...' Grenville spoke more gently to Elizabeth. 'Five miles out of Catterick is a parting of the ways. The Great North Road continues to Newcastle on the east coast. But if Hodgkin is aiming at Gretna he will go west through the Stainmore Gap towards the Lake District. Are you familiar with the region?'

Elizabeth smiled sadly. 'I was hoping to tour the Lakes this month with my uncle and aunt. What exactly is this *gap* you mentioned?'

'The easiest route over the Pennine Hills. Once across, you reach Penrith, then Carlisle, and so on to Gretna.'

'I fear that is where Hodgkin is bound,' Elizabeth said. 'Why else would he take Miss Darcy?'

‘Hmm.’ Grenville hesitated, letting this question hang a moment. ‘If marriage is what he intends, he need not go to Gretna. Anywhere in Scotland would serve his purpose.’

The constable shrugged. ‘Who can say what he plans? We need to look smart at Catterick and catch the blighter.’

Catterick was an ancient village now prospering as a coach stop, where the Angel inn offered accommodation and stabling. Seated alone in the parlour, Elizabeth studied a diagram that she had pencilled from a map on the wall. Nearing the top edge of Yorkshire, she was a long way from any major town: most coaches stopping here would be travelling to Newcastle on the east coast, then Berwick, where the border with Scotland reached its most distant point—the reason eloping couples favoured Gretna Green.

It was nearly 1 p.m., and customers were lunching. She had occupied a small window table overlooking the High Street. A mail coach had just stopped, and she watched as passengers got out: for all she knew, Darcy might be among them. In front of her was a plate of veal and ham pie and a salad of celery with apple, beetroot and gherkins. She ate slowly, having no idea how long she would have to wait until she received news, either from Darcy arriving from the south, or Grenville returning from the north. There was little else to do except send a letter to Lambton explaining that she was well and could not say when she would be back.

Her former companions had gone off in different directions: the constable, back to Whixley; Grenville, north-east. Neither had stopped to eat: they had downed tall glasses of ale at the bar, wrapped up slices of pie, and left as soon as their horses were ready.

Every crumb of pie had gone. She asked for camomile tea and a slice of parkin, and sipped slowly. Outside, another carriage drew up and the driver helped down an elderly gentleman attended by a female servant. A tall gentleman in a light brown frockcoat followed, gazing left and right as he searched the courtyard ...

With a gasp Elizabeth jumped to her feet, banging her knee on the table and spilling her tea. Heads turned as she ran out the main door towards the new arrivals, who were waiting as ostlers attended to their horses. The tall gentleman waved and stepped forward, and waving frantically back Elizabeth lost

control as she jumped from the pavement on to uneven cobbles, and would have fallen headlong had he not opened his arms and caught her.

Blushing, she peeped up as Darcy held her tightly.

He studied her. 'If that devil has harmed you ...'

'I'm fine. But you are bruised.' She feathered his cheek. 'And your clothes ...'

He released her slowly, and spoke to the elderly gentleman. 'Lord Sterndale, may I introduce Miss Elizabeth Bennet, of whom I spoke earlier ...'

Sterndale bowed genially, as if indulging a grandchild. 'Let us go in, madam. I believe we all have much to relate.'

She was back in the parlour, this time at a large table where Darcy, Lord Sterndale, and his housekeeper, were sampling the veal and ham pie. Elizabeth had recounted her adventures, noticing Darcy's angry reaction to her attempt to delay Hodgkin at Wakefield, and her forced ejection from his carriage after Wetherby. She knew Darcy had been robbed by a highwayman, then helped by the distinguished gentleman seated opposite—and the reasons for his change in apparel. But these dramas occupied only half her mind, for she was still agitated by their reunion in the forecourt.

Why the mad rush? What had come over her? The main reason must have been the anxiety of being alone, worried for his safety as well as Georgiana's. She had been afraid too of simply losing him if for some reason he left the forecourt. But to race into his arms, then touch his face as if they were intimate! In full view of a peer who was formerly Lord Chancellor, the most important judge in the country!

Did this mean they had to marry?

If so, why did the prospect excite her? And why had she let him hold her so long?

Common sense swept these thoughts aside. Of course they did not *have* to marry. Lord Sterndale too had secrets, including a battle with his own son. In any case, what mattered was rescuing Georgiana, not these romantic stirrings.

‘Miss Bennet.’ Darcy was speaking to her. ‘We need to confer.’ A glance at Lord Sterndale. ‘Privately, I suggest.’

‘We’ll be leaving for Brignall in five minutes.’ Sterndale looked sternly at Mrs Deere. ‘And have space should you wish to join us.’

Darcy studied Elizabeth anxiously. ‘You’re *sure* you’re unhurt?’

‘Nothing worth remarking.’

They were seated at one end of the only free table, designed for a larger party. Darcy had taken the carver chair at head of table, perhaps out of habit; Elizabeth leaned forward so that they could talk quietly, just inches apart.

‘I can’t believe you took such a risk.’

Elizabeth snorted. ‘And who contrived to lose his fortune to a highwayman, got his face bruised in a fight, and stole a frockcoat?’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘Which makes you look ridiculous.’

Darcy fingered the material. ‘In poor taste, I admit ...’

‘Stick to black. It matches your colouring and also your disposition.’ Elizabeth grinned, enjoying the provocation, but also wondering why she was so eager to pick a quarrel after greeting him with such relief.

‘Miss Bennet ...’ He gestured with his hands, as if shaking her. ‘We are wasting time.’

‘Then why keep fussing over my efforts to delay Hodgkin’s carriage? I was trying to save your sister.’

‘Enough!’ He threw her a look of contained fury. ‘We are where we are. You have met Hodgkin. I have not. What do you think he will do next?’

‘Two possibilities.’ Elizabeth hesitated, afraid of alarming him. ‘Grenville thinks your sister will be treated in the same fashion as Kitten. Miss Catlin. In other words, he will try to seduce her. If so ...’ She smiled. ‘I am confident he will not succeed.’

Darcy sighed. ‘Georgiana is very innocent ...’

‘Less than you imagine.’

‘You claim to know my sister better than I?’

She touched his arm, trying to calm him. ‘Of course not. But she is resilient. Brave. And learning fast.’

‘You said *two* possibilities.’

‘The other is that Hodgkin wants to marry her. In which case his goal will probably be Gretna.’

‘He wants her dowry.’

‘Yes, but I think he also likes and admires her. He could even be in love. I could see how their conversation fascinated him.’

Darcy flinched. ‘And did she show any sign of *returning* such feelings?’

‘She seemed to find him interesting. But she cannot like him now.’ She smiled. ‘At least I hope not, after he ordered his lackey to dump me at the roadside.’

Darcy thought awhile. ‘So if you are right, Hodgkin will make for Gretna, hoping to induce my sister to marry him. If he fails, he will discard her *en route*. Our course is therefore clear. Ride towards Gretna as fast as we can.’

‘Asking at the tolls and the inns.’ Elizabeth turned to check Lord Sterndale was still in the parlour, just as a clergyman approached with his wife on his arm.

‘Good afternoon.’ The priest bowed. ‘If you would be so gracious, all other tables are occupied.’

Elizabeth looked back at Darcy, who rose a few inches and nodded to the couple. ‘We have finished.’

‘But let me not drive you away, sir! I could not help noticing you in the forecourt when you were re-united with your charming wife. We were arriving, you see, in the mail coach.’ He sat. ‘Reverend Augustus Moon at your service. You remarked upon their reunion too, Marjorie.’

He beamed at his wife, who looked in her fifties, like her husband, with a cheerful roly-poly appearance. ‘I did. *It is a rare thing*, I said, *to see a married couple embrace one another with such delight.*’

Elizabeth reddened, unsure whether she should correct this misapprehension. She looked to Darcy for guidance, but he replied simply, ‘The mail coach is still here?’

‘It should have left. But the driver noticed a horse with a pebble in its hoof and ordered it replaced. The horse I mean. Not the pebble.’ Moon smiled at his wife, who politely tittered. ‘We had been stretching our legs, you see, so I thought we might rest a moment ...’

‘Is the coach heading up the north road?’ Darcy said.

Moon shook his head. ‘West towards Carlisle. But we are going no further than Stainmore ...’

‘My sister lives there,’ Mrs Moon explained.

Darcy faced Moon. ‘We are going the same way, and in a great hurry ...’

‘Then join us!’ The clergyman spread his arms. ‘We had companions until Kirklington but ...’

‘I suppose the mail coach runs fast?’ Darcy said.

‘Like the wind! Four horses kept ready at each stop and changed in ten minutes. Apart from the pebble, but that shows how carefully ...’ Moon broke off as a horn blew from the forecourt. ‘Time to leave, Marjorie!’

The Moons set off, and Darcy whispered urgently, ‘The mail coach is faster than Lord Sterndale’s carriage.’

‘Shall we take it?’ Elizabeth said.

‘They think we’re married.’

‘Then let us *pretend* to be married. Mr and Mrs Darcy.’

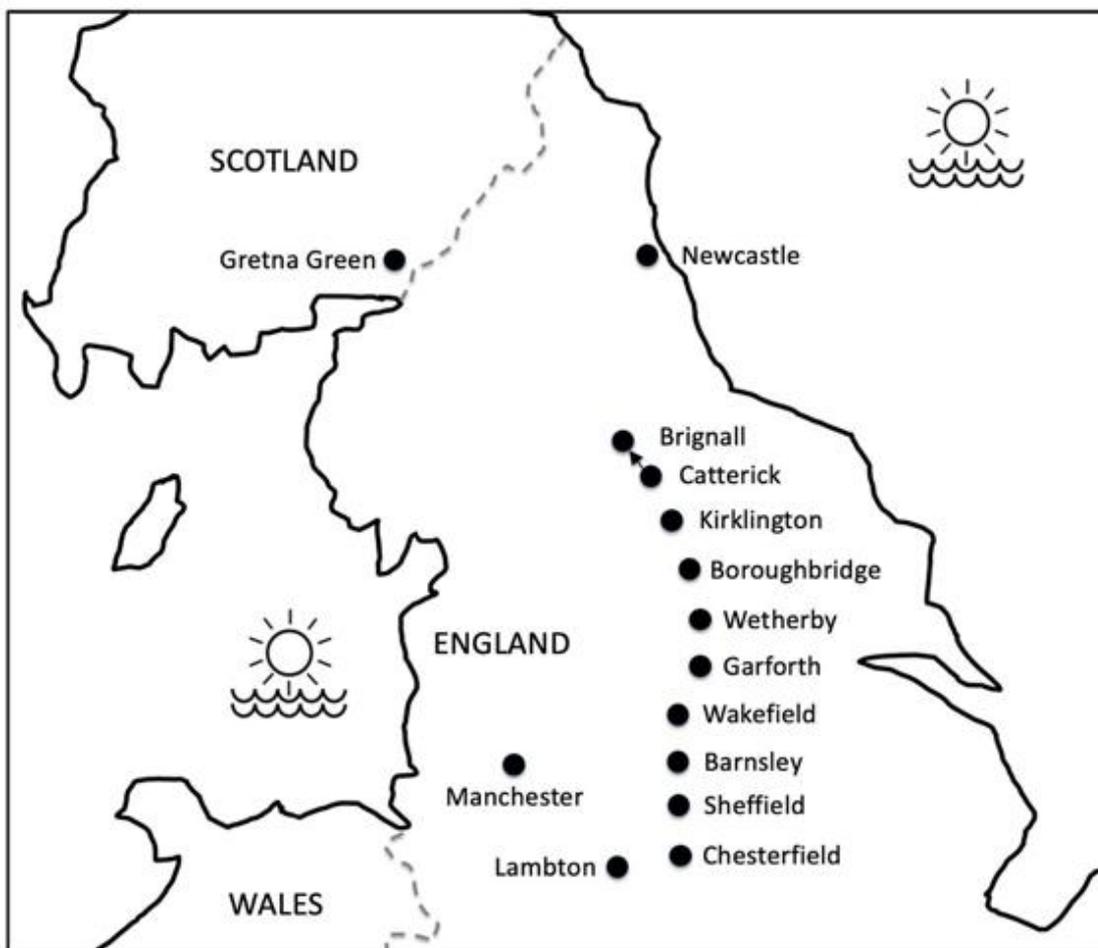
‘Not a fictional name?’

‘You’ll need to ask toll keepers whether they have seen your sister.’

‘This is madness, Elizabeth ...’ He broke off in confusion.
‘I mean, Miss Bennet.’

‘*Elizabeth* will do nicely. Or *dearest*, if you prefer.’ She gripped his arm. ‘We must find Georgiana as fast as we can. Nothing else matters.’

A nod, and Darcy went to thank Lord Sterndale while Elizabeth hastened to the forecourt.



Friday afternoon, 1.30 p.m.

The mail coach was driven by a local coachman under the orders of Royal Mail guards in red and gold uniform, one of whom was delivering a final blast on a long thin horn. Mail bags had been loaded and unloaded, four fresh horses were harnessed, and inside, Reverend Moon sat opposite his wife at the far window.

‘Two more, ma’am?’ The horn blower glanced at a clock in his leather pouch. ‘We can take up to four, or one more beside the driver. But leaving in one minute.’

Elizabeth looked round, wishing Darcy would hurry up. ‘My, ah, husband is on his way.’

A nod, then the guard’s attention was caught as another carriage drew up, momentarily blocking their way. Turning back from the inn, Elizabeth gasped.

Green and gold!

A rush of footsteps, and Darcy was beside her.

She pointed. ‘Burgess!’

‘The mail coach is faster.’ Darcy turned to the guard. ‘I need to speak to the driver of that carriage.’

‘Tell him to move out of the way.’

Elizabeth stayed near the coach door as Darcy shouted to Burgess. ‘You heard I was robbed?’

‘Yes, sir.’ The valet frowned at Darcy’s attire. ‘I gathered you might need a new coat and hat, but apparently that has been attended to.’

Darcy gasped. ‘Did you ...’

‘Purchase a replacement? Yes, sir.’

‘Then throw it down, and stay on our trail. Bignall, then on to Penrith, Carlisle, Gretna. I am going ahead in the mail coach.’

‘Very good, sir. With Miss B—’

Darcy cut him off. ‘Exactly! The coat, man!’

‘It’s inside.’

Darcy opened the carriage door, to find Miss Catlin sitting next to a hat box and a parcel. Elizabeth smiled as the purchases were handed over—her first proper look at the elfin Kitten.

The guard impatiently blew his horn again, causing Elizabeth to jump. But Burgess was already on the move, and waved to her as the green-and-gold carriage circled towards the stables.

The new frockcoat was off-the-shelf, but it fitted well (Burgess knew Darcy’s measures), and it was a relief to Elizabeth to see him in sober black rather than the foppish light brown. Moon, eager for any opportunity of starting a conversation, asked what had led to this change of wardrobe.

Darcy shrugged. ‘My coat was stolen, so I had to make do with this.’ He pointed to Tobias’s coat stuffed under the seat.

‘*Stolen?*’ Mrs Moon said.

‘I was robbed on the road during the night.’

Mrs Moon gasped, and her husband said, ‘What a calamity.’

Elizabeth, sensing Darcy’s unease, decided on impulse to move the conversation away from this topic. ‘I’m afraid my husband often suffers poor luck. It is for this reason I urge him never to play cards for money.’

Darcy directed her a stern glance, as if warning against such flights of fancy. The Moons, however, saw nothing amiss, and the reverend nodded in agreement.

‘Wise counsel, Mrs Darcy, to any gentleman.’

‘I’m sure you have enjoyed *good* luck as well,’ Mrs Moon said to Darcy.

‘In your choice of wife, for instance.’ Reverend Moon smiled gallantly at Elizabeth. ‘It was heartwarming to witness a married couple so ideally suited.’

Darcy pressed his lips together, as if clenching his teeth, and Elizabeth could not resist provoking him further. ‘It is kind of you to say so, sir, but regrettably far from the truth, at least in the eyes of Mr Darcy’s family. My husband has so many fine attributes that he was greatly sought after by the ladies at Almack’s and similar venues. It shocked everyone when he showed a preference for a person as modest as myself. Some put it down to misjudgement; others to his habitual misfortune.’

Reverend Moon shook his head. ‘For my part, I disdain the superficiality of high society, and applaud Mr Darcy’s choice. It is the deeper human qualities that define a good companion, and these I am sure you possess in abundance.’

‘That was exactly my own way of thinking,’ Darcy said. ‘Initially I was drawn to my wife’s beauty, but with further meetings I began to appreciate her good sense and liveliness of mind. It was for this reason I asked for her hand— only to be initially rejected.’ He threw a meaningful glance at Elizabeth. ‘Another instance of my *ill luck*, I suppose?’

‘Upon my word!’ For once Reverend Moon and his wife were at a loss for comment.

‘My husband is teasing,’ Elizabeth said quickly. ‘As if any lady could possibly refuse such an offer! What William, my

dear husband, is referring to is my *disbelief*, founded on a deep sense of my own inadequacy. I felt it only fair to remind him that he could do so much better!’ She beamed at Darcy. ‘But as usual he followed the honourable path. A proposal had been made. He would stand by it. And so ...’ She raised her hands. ‘Here we are!’

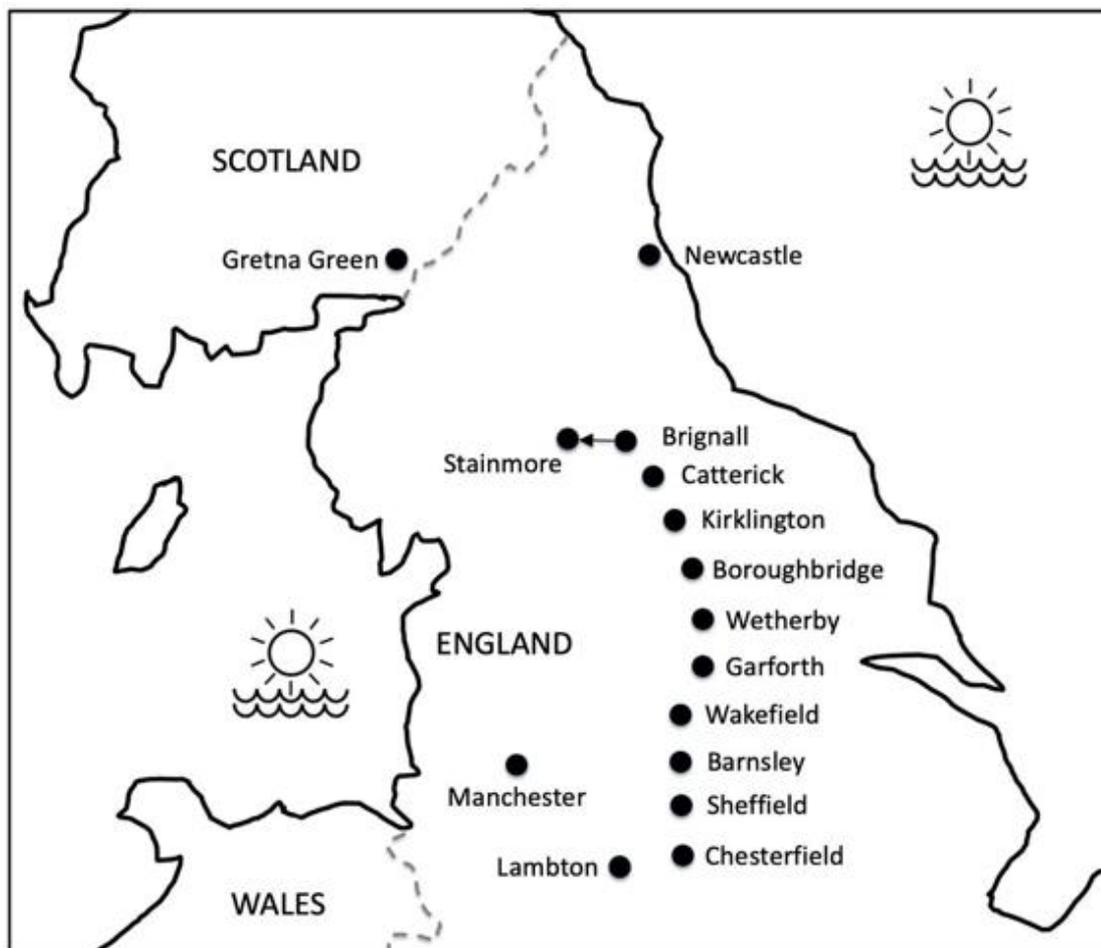
‘A beautiful story.’ Mrs Moon put a hand on her heart.

Darcy turned towards the Moons. ‘I fear Mrs Darcy and I are speaking too much of ourselves. You will also have tales to tell, probably far more edifying.’

‘Indeed ...’ The reverend was about to reply when the horn sounded again; a few seconds later the horses raced through an open gate without stopping, reminding Elizabeth that the Royal Mail coach paid no toll.

‘We’re near the turning,’ Mrs Moon said.

Elizabeth sighed. Soon they would leave the north road and strike west to Brignall; for now they could only pray that Hodgkin and Georgiana had followed the same route.



Friday afternoon, 3.20 p.m.

The turnpike ran along the outskirts of Brignall at a bridge over the river Greta, which had been an overnight stop for the London–Carlisle coach since the 17th century. Three inns prospered near the bridge, principal of which was the George, and while the mail coach underwent another rapid change, Darcy hastened to the attendant with Elizabeth on his arm.

To their relief, they struck gold at the first opportunity. The name *Hodgkin* was met only with a blank stare. But the attendant brightened on hearing Grenville. *A fine gentleman, most generous.* And yes, accompanied by a charming young lady in a blue dress. Heading in the direction of Carlisle ...

They returned to the inn forecourt, where Darcy asked, ‘Do you need refreshment?’

‘A cup of tea perhaps.’

They hastened to the bar, where Reverend Moon beckoned them to join his table, but after giving an urgent order to the waitress Darcy pointed to a small corner bench.

‘All well so far,’ Elizabeth said.

‘We’re still nearly an hour behind.’ He faced her, unsmiling. ‘Was it necessary to be quite so explicit about our history?’

‘You were no better. *Drawn to my beauty*, were you, at the Meryton ball?’

‘I was seeking an excuse not to dance, as you know full well.’

‘Why did you say I rejected you? I thought we were supposed to be a devoted couple, perfectly suited.’

‘I hadn’t time to think of anything better. Then you produced that nonsense about me being *too good for you*.’

Elizabeth laughed. ‘That was true. You are.’

‘We’re not on stage now. You can speak the truth.’

‘*I am* speaking the truth.’ She faced him, serious now. ‘I wish we could stop thinking about—Hunsford. Just wipe it from our memories.’

‘You’ve changed your mind, in my regard?’

‘Of course ...’

A pot of tea arrived, and Elizabeth quickly poured two cups. ‘We’d better drink up before our guardian in red and gold calls us outside.’

‘What were you about to say?’

She sighed. ‘I retract all I said at the parsonage. You’re a fine man, I’ve enjoyed being in your company, and your sister is lovely and a credit to you. Is that clear enough?’

He shivered, as if in shock, and seemed about to reply when the horn sounded from the forecourt. They rose, and Elizabeth took his arm, afraid he might forget to play his part.

‘Time to go, dearest. Ah, Mrs Moon. You enjoyed your tea I hope? Most refreshing on a warm afternoon ...’

Georgiana lay back, a piano sonata playing in her mind as she gazed over flat moorland extending in every direction, and occupied only by sheep. According to Hodgkin they were on a plateau separating the Yorkshire Dales from the North Pennines; quite soon they would have to drive carefully as the road wound down to Stainmore.

She had reached a sort of truce with Hodgkin, in which no reference was made to the uncomfortable reality that he was abducting her, either from infatuation, or the lure of her dowry. At inns she made no protest, nor did she appeal to his moral sense or his pity. In return, Hodgkin had given up any attempt to woo her through compliments or other intimacies. His goal must be to marry her—otherwise why carry her to Gretna? But he hoped to win her consent by subtler means: respect, and interesting conversation.

‘Have you visited Westmorland before?’ he asked.

Georgiana shook her head. ‘I have always wished to see the Lake District, which my brother says is beautiful.’

‘We will pass near Ullswater at Penrith. But now we are still in County Durham. We’ll enter Westmorland at Stainmore.’

Georgiana nodded and turned back to the window. She felt little fear of Hodgkin, only of Spedding—but realised this feeling was a mirage. The driver had ejected Elizabeth from the carriage *on Hodgkin’s orders*. As a would-be gentleman and intellectual, the ex-butler could not bear to manhandle a lady himself.

She wondered whether it was worth challenging the fantasy in which Hodgkin seemed to be living. He was *not* a gentleman, nor ever could be. By stealing from Grenville he had become a fugitive, to be hung or transported when caught. Forcing a lady to marry him would compound his crimes. Rationally he should let her go, and flee.

Instinctively Georgiana kept silence. It was dangerous to provoke a man who had lost his reason. She would go along with him. For now.

Elizabeth watched as the mail coach began a steady climb, past a landscape increasingly featureless as trees gave way to moors

extending far into the distance. The effect was soporific: one craved cottages, rivers, anything to break up the pasture and scrub. Opposite, Darcy still looked lost in thought, and she feared he might forget his role and revert to calling her Miss Bennet.

‘The backbone of England,’ Reverend Moon said. ‘But we cross at the narrowest point. By Stainmore we will have reached the other side.’

‘Nothing lives here except sheep,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Ah.’ Moon smiled at his wife. ‘Which reminds me of a poem. Remember, dear?’

‘There was an old man of Khartoum,’ Mrs Moon said.

‘Who kept two black sheep in his room,’ Moon replied.

‘They remind me, he said, of two friends who are dead.’

‘But he never would tell us of whom.’

Darcy’s eyebrows rose, and he came out of his reverie. ‘I recognise the form. A limerick.’

‘From Ireland?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘I believe so. But it is a genre to be approached with care since the content is usually, shall we say, *indelicate*.’

Reverend Moon waggled a finger. ‘That may be so, sir. But the form has a respectable pedigree as far back as Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century.’ He closed his eyes in recollection, before quoting the following:

To circumvent brimstone and fire
Expelling unsavoury desire
I piously pray
And devoutly obey
As my soul soars progressively higher

‘Entirely respectable,’ Elizabeth said, ‘although not as diverting as the two black sheep.’

‘It’s a game we play on long journeys,’ Mrs Moon said. ‘Using names of the towns through which we pass.’

‘It would be hard to rhyme *Bignall*,’ Darcy said. ‘How about Stainmore?’

Reverend Moon sniffed. ‘Too easy.’

‘*There was a young man from Carlisle*,’ his wife suggested.

Moon smiled. ‘Who was eager to walk down the aisle.’

Mrs Moon tensed, as if searching frantically for a continuation, then threw up her hands. ‘I surrender.’

‘He tried to elope,’ Elizabeth said, ‘with his sweetheart, Miss Pope.’

‘But she wanted to marry in style,’ Darcy said.

Moon clapped his hands. ‘Upon my word, Marjorie, we are outmatched.’

Elizabeth met Darcy’s eye, they smiled, and for a moment she felt their role-play blur into their true selves.

They had reached the Inn at Brough, on the north edge of Stainmore, after a descent that reminded Georgiana frighteningly of Wickham's coach crash outside Barnsley. Her hand moved instinctively to her left shoulder, still aching from the impact with the storage box. She recalled Lieutenant Denny, whose advice had saved her from serious injury. Had events turned out differently she might be travelling to Gretna Green with him now, rather than with the fantasist seated opposite.

The wall clock showed five o'clock, and the saloon was fairly busy as travellers paused for an early dinner. The inn was of pinkish stone, sturdy, and quite large for a region so unpopulated; the reason (according to Hodgkin) was the fashion for tourism in places of natural beauty. She had pressed for a full meal, but he had allowed only a sandwich while the horses were changed.

A coach-and-four drew up outside, and Hodgkin tensed as a tall gentleman jumped down. For a second Georgiana thought it might be Darcy, but this man was thinner, and extravagantly dressed. Sensing her disappointment, Hodgkin calmed down and returned to his bread and ale. A lady descended as well, and the gentleman offered her his arm while brandishing a cane with his other hand. Seconds later they entered the saloon and occupied a nearby table.

Intrigued, Georgiana studied the couple. The man was handsome, with angular features, a pencil moustache, and deft movements: he exuded confidence. His companion called him Rupert, he called her Isabella, and some kind of argument was in progress. Studying Isabella, who was facing her, Georgiana thought she looked tired and distressed; Rupert was sympathetic but also insistent. *There was no time to rest.* Speed was of the essence.

The argument continued, without rancour, but without resolution either. Georgiana turned away, not wishing to intrude, and looked out of the window as she finished her sandwich. Minutes passed; no more carriages turned up. A

wail drew her attention back to Isabella, who seemed at the end of her tether as she sat, arms folded, shaking her head and refusing to budge.

‘You *must* come,’ Rupert said.

Another shake of the head.

He sighed, and with sudden decision, leapt to his feet, clapped his hands, and addressed the whole room.

‘I have an announcement.’ Another clap of the hands silenced conversation. ‘If anyone needs a rapid transfer to Appelby, Penrith, or beyond, my coach-and-four is ready to depart immediately, at no charge.’ He scanned the room impatiently. ‘Well? Any takers?’

Some travellers gasped and there was a murmur as others conferred. Recalling the incident later, Georgiana had no recollection of weighing pros and cons. In some recess of her mind a decision was reached instantly. She stood up, hand raised and heart pounding.

‘I will come with you.’

He wheeled to face her, then his eye shifted to Hodgkin, who drawled, ‘Out of the question. The lady is with me.’

Rupert frowned, and looked back at Georgiana. ‘Good afternoon, madam. Rupert Fleet. Whom have I the honour of addressing?’

‘Miss Darcy. Georgiana.’

Fleet looked down at Hodgkin. ‘And you, sir?’

‘Richard Grenville. Son of the earl. This young lady is the daughter of a friend, and under my protection.’

‘He is lying.’ Georgiana spoke softly, so as not to sound desperate. ‘His real name is Hodgkin and he was formerly employed by the Grenvilles. Until being dismissed for misconduct.’

‘And why are you travelling with him?’ Fleet asked.

‘Mr Hodgkin abducted me in hope of making a profitable marriage.’

‘Indeed!’ Fleet turned to Hodgkin, and said mildly, ‘You deny this?’

‘Of course. It is absurd. I am Earl Grenville’s son Richard, and have documents to prove it.’

He reached into a coat pocket, but Fleet raised a hand to forestall him. ‘That will not be necessary, sir, for a very simple reason. I happen to know Richard Grenville. He is an old schoolmate and we meet now and again at my club.’

Hodgkin flinched as if he had been stung by a wasp, and Georgiana observed in shock as he crumpled, the assured eloquence replaced by silence.

Fleet, taking this in with an air of relaxed amusement, gestured to a man in military uniform on the next table.

‘Sir, I have urgent need of assistance ...’

‘I overheard.’ The officer rose, his uniform resembling Denny’s. ‘Lieutenant Fawcett of the Durham militia.’

‘Rupert Fleet. My cousin is exhausted and wishes to rest here until I return. I will get a room for her, but in view of what we have just learned ...’ He extended a hand towards Hodgkin. ‘Certain precautions are necessary.’

Fawcett nodded, and Fleet advanced to Hodgkin’s side. ‘You will accompany us to the manager. Immediately.’

Hodgkin stood up as if in a dream, and Georgiana felt almost sorry for him as with a last lingering gaze at her he trudged away, flanked by the two gentlemen. She turned to the startled Isabella, and sat beside her.

‘I hope you will be comfortable at the inn, Miss ...’

‘Delamere. Isabella. I’m very grateful.’

‘As am I. Shall we follow?’

‘We’d better. Rupert is in a frightful hurry.’

In the hall Fleet had found the manager, and plans were well advanced. The inn had ample staff to detain Hodgkin and his driver. They would be locked up while a constable was called.

A room would be prepared for Miss Delamere and a maid assigned for her use.

‘Excellent!’ Fleet blew his cousin a kiss, bowed to thank everyone else, then drew Georgiana aside. ‘Are you certain about this?’

‘I offered.’

‘I know, but as a lady who has just been abducted, you might prefer to remain under the protection of the inn.’

She paused, tempted. ‘Why do you need a passenger?’

‘I am racing another man for high stakes. The rules require two drivers and one non-driving passenger.’

‘So you took Miss Delamere.’

‘Yes.’ He regarded her kindly. ‘You can in fact trust me, but you don’t know that. Stay if you prefer and I will try to find someone else.’

Georgiana was tempted by the offer, but afraid to remain close to Hodgkin; in any case, she felt that in saving her Fleet had incurred a delay that might ruin his hopes of victory.

‘I owe it to you,’ she said.

He beamed at her with undisguised admiration. ‘Anything to retrieve from your carriage?’

She spread her arms. ‘This is all I have.’

‘Let’s go! Fast as you can!’

He strode to the exit, and with a surge of achievement unique in her experience, Georgiana ran after him.

Having travelled exclusively in private carriages or London cabs, Elizabeth was astonished by the rate at which the mail coach navigated the turnpike. Their descent was managed without requiring passengers to get off; on level road a mile was covered in as little as five minutes. At 5.30 p.m. they reached the Moons’ destination, the inn at Brough, a village in north Stainmore. Mrs Moon had begun a limerick about an elderly couple from Brough with a particular liking for snuff.

This at least demonstrated how to pronounce *Brough*, although by now Elizabeth was weary of the game.

Darcy had other matters on his mind, and as Elizabeth followed him to the inn she spotted a coach in the stabling area that looked like Hodgkin's. Crying out, she pulled on his arm. 'Wait!'

He frowned, as if calculating frantically the best course of action. 'There may be resistance. Do you want to return to the mail coach?'

'I'll come with you.'

'Can you stay here while I check? If Hodgkin or Georgiana leave the inn, yell.'

She nodded, seeing the sense of this, and waited breathlessly as Darcy ran to the parked carriage, peered within, and spoke to a stable lad.

He returned looking bewildered and said, 'Empty. But it seems the owner has been detained inside the inn.'

'And Georgiana?'

'He does not know. Come!'

They entered, striving to act normally, and after checking in the saloon went upstairs to an office, where the manager was speaking with a man in military uniform.

The manager, neat and capable-looking, beckoned them to enter. 'Lieutenant Fawcett here is waiting for a constable. How may I assist?'

Darcy explained, and the manager immediately clapped his hands. 'I had not realised you were in the neighbourhood, sir. But have no fear. Miss Darcy is safe, and the men who abducted her under lock and key. We owe this in part to the lieutenant, who collaborated in the arrest.'

'Wonderful!' The tenor of Darcy's voice changed as he relaxed. 'Please take us to my sister without delay.'

'She has left, sir ...'

'*What?*'

Lieutenant Fawcett stood up. ‘Your sister is in excellent hands. A gentleman named Mr Fleet exposed Hodgkin as a fraud after Miss Darcy had asked to serve as his passenger in a coach race. They are heading for Appelby and Penrith now in a coach-and-four.’

Darcy stared at him. ‘My sister would *never* agree to such madness.’

‘I overheard them,’ Fawcett said. ‘Mr Fleet offered to look for someone else. But he would have been delayed.’

‘Why did he need a passenger?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Rules of the race. His cousin was tired, you see ...’

‘*Cousin?*’ Darcy said.

‘Miss Delamere. She is in a private room, resting.’

‘Call her!’

The manager hastened down the corridor, and Elizabeth took Darcy’s arm, trying to calm him. ‘We must listen for the horn.’

He nodded. ‘We have five more minutes. I wish I understood *how* this Fleet persuaded my sister to go with him.’

Elizabeth pointed to the manager, returning with a lady who looked reassuringly respectable: elegant, with an open, friendly countenance that had benefitted from a recent application of rouge.

‘Miss Delamere,’ the manager announced. ‘Mr and Mrs Darcy.’

Elizabeth blinked in surprise—had she continued to behave like a wife? But it hardly mattered ...

‘You are Miss Darcy’s brother?’ Miss Delamere bobbed, smiling. ‘I am so happy to meet you! Your sister is wonderful. Such courage in adversity! Do not worry. She will be safe with Rupert.’

‘May I know something of the family?’ Darcy asked.

‘The Fleets have an estate at Huntingdon, sir.’

‘Near Cambridge?’

‘Exactly. Rupert’s mother, who was a Delamere, is there now. He has been master three years, but enjoys London in the season.’

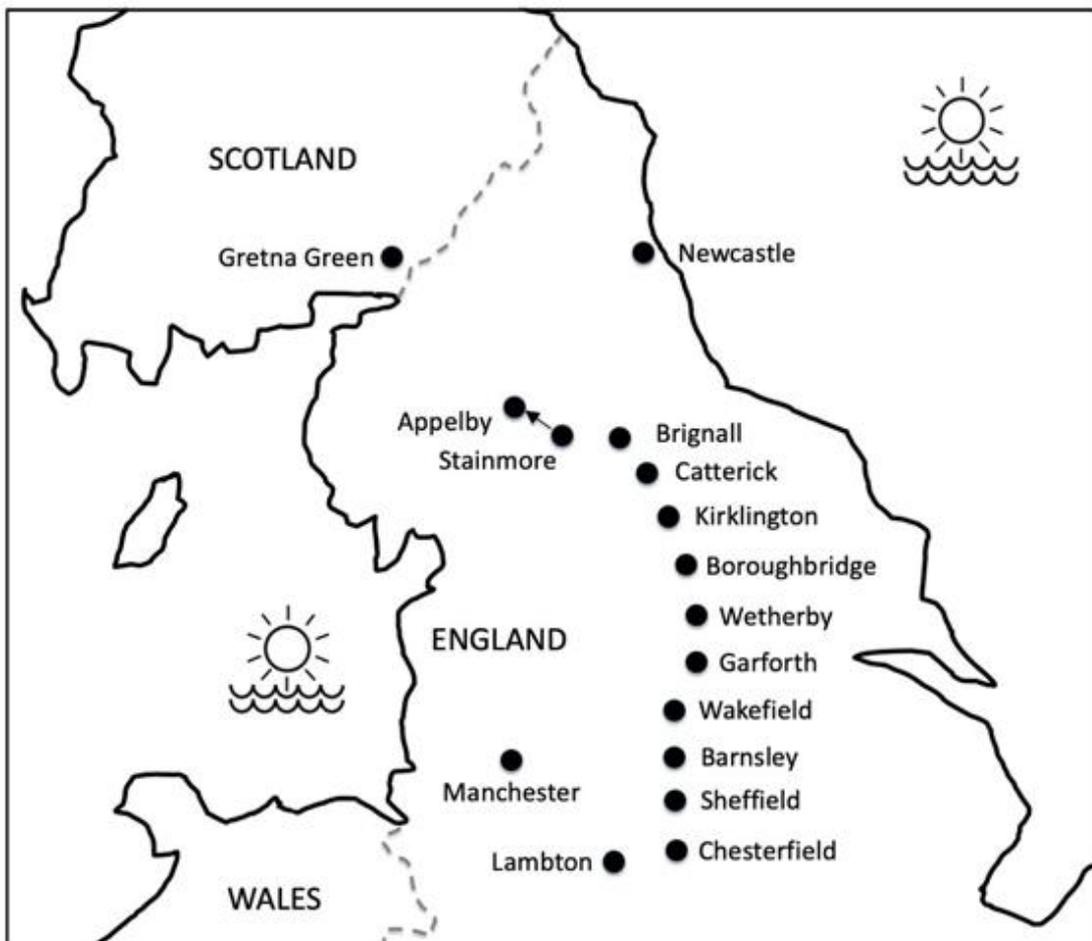
‘He is married? Betrothed?’

‘No sir. But so honourable.’ She smiled. ‘Like a knight of the round table. He took Miss Darcy because he wants to win the race. But also, I believe, because he feared that she might come to harm if left alone.’

A faint note drew Elizabeth’s attention, and she ran into the corridor to hear better.

‘The horn!’ she cried. ‘We must leave, William!’

Darcy hesitated, then bowed to Miss Delamere. ‘Thank you. I believe we may meet again.’ A nod to the others and he followed Elizabeth, almost stumbling as they ran down the stairs and into the forecourt.



Friday evening, 5.40 p.m.

Fleet's coach-and-four was built for racing over long distances: sturdy, light, well-sprung. His coachman Butters was dapper and cheerful: he had saluted Georgiana as she climbed in, and was now steering skillfully along the turnpike at the foot of the hills, at speeds that astonished her.

While she recovered from the drama at the inn, Fleet had explained the reason for his wild dash to Gretna. He had joined a club called Watiers, frequented by friends of the Regent (as a tease, Lord Byron had dubbed it the *Dandies' Club*). One evening he had been provoked by a Mr Horace Selby, who claimed he could race a coach-and-four to Brighton faster than anyone else in the *ton*. 'A paltry run,' Fleet had joked. 'For a true test of coachmanship the objective should be much further.' Selby had reacted as if to a slap in the face. 'Indeed? And what

destination *would* satisfy you, sir?’ A grin from Fleet. ‘The Scottish border at the very least.’

By now there was no climbing down. Red-faced after too much wine, Selby had issued a challenge.

After more drinking and discussion, terms had been agreed. Departure at six o’clock, just after first light, from outside the club in Piccadily. Four horses, to be changed at each stage. One man to share the driving; one non-driving passenger in the coach at all times. First man to reach the blacksmith’s shop at Gretna Green to be declared the winner and receive a stake of £1000. Any route permitted—which meant in effect the road they were following, others being slower.

‘So you took your cousin,’ Georgiana said.

‘A young lady is lighter than most men. And Isabella is a good sport.’ He smiled. ‘I’m amazed you agreed to take it on.’

She smiled back, warmed by the implied compliment. ‘I was desperate to get away from Hodgkin. He is such a convincing talker, you see. He has documents saying he is the Honourable Richard Grenville.’

‘You feared he might talk them round after I left?’

She nodded. ‘It was so fortunate that you *knew* the real Mr Grenville.’

His eyebrows went up. ‘Earl Grenville’s son? Never met him in my life.’

She stared at him, open-mouthed. ‘But you said ...’

‘I wanted to see how he reacted.’

Georgiana froze, astonished, then burst out laughing at the thought that Hodgkin had been so cleverly tricked: poetic justice for a habitual fraudster.

‘So you are a liar too,’ she said, still laughing.

‘In a good cause.’

‘So you say.’ Georgiana was surprised at her own impertinence, but sensed he would not be offended.

A shrug. ‘Get off at Appleby if you want.’

‘It would delay you.’

‘I can probably find someone else.’

‘I’ve been hoping my brother would catch up, but your coach is so fast ...’

‘You could wait for him at the next inn.’

‘I suppose ...’ She looked over empty fields to distant hills. ‘Does no-one live here?’

‘Farmers. Sheep. At least there’s not much traffic.’

‘The trouble is ...’ Georgiana sighed. ‘If you leave me at Appleby I’ll be alone again, and prey to another so-called gentleman eager to get his hands on my dowry.’

A smile. ‘I hesitate to point out the obvious, Miss Darcy, but for all you know, I may be such a gentleman.’

‘I don’t think so. You saved me from Hodgkin, after all. And you seem mostly interested in winning the race.’

‘Suppose you left your brother a message at Appleby?’

Georgiana blushed. ‘I should have done that at Brough.’

‘The manager will tell him.’ Fleet felt inside a bag opposite and drew out a bottle of wine. ‘A packed meal will be ready at the Royal Oak inn. May I offer an *aperitif*?’

As the mail coach emerged into countryside Elizabeth fell silent, adapting again to being alone with Darcy. They had said farewell to the Moons at the Brough inn, politely but with relief. There was no new passenger—and no reason to pretend they were married. The clothes Darcy had taken from Lord Sterndale’s son had been bagged and deposited on the roof, leaving the interior uncluttered.

Darcy, who had been sitting stiffly with a brooding expression, finally spoke. ‘What think you of Mr Fleet?’

‘Miss Delaware was reassuring.’

‘She is his cousin. What else would she say?’

‘Mr Collins is *my* cousin. Do I sing his praises?’

‘I am still shocked that Georgiana volunteered to place herself in Fleet’s hands.’

‘He rescued her. The alternative was to be left alone.’

‘On that argument she was right to trust Hodgkin, who rescued her from Wickham.’

Elizabeth sighed. ‘To trust or not to trust? Either can be a mistake.’

‘I always trusted you, even after—you know.’

She nodded. ‘Otherwise you would not have confided your sister’s mishap at Ramsgate.’

‘While you trusted me enough to take part in this wild venture. An offer I should never have accepted.’

‘It has certainly been exhausting, even dangerous. Yet I have loved travelling in your company.’

A wry smile. ‘In normal circumstances I would exult to hear those words. But now I can think only of Georgiana.’

‘I too, but perhaps our anxiety is misplaced, since in life there is no such thing as safety. Misfortune may strike any moment, from illness, or accident. Should that stop us enjoying the moment?’

‘My sister is very innocent and vulnerable, Elizabeth ...’ He sighed. ‘I mean, Miss Bennet.’

‘You can use my name. It reminds me how it felt to be married.’ She threw him a smile. ‘As for Miss Darcy, look on the bright side. If she survives this experience intact and unwed, she will have thrown off all vestiges of innocence and gained in confidence.’

‘I wish I could believe that.’

‘Think of challenges in your own life. Leaving home at eight years of age. Inheriting a large estate.’

‘These are normal events in the life of any landowning gentleman.’

‘Compare my own childhood, cocooned in the safety of the family home, with all importance decisions made by others on

my behalf. No wonder young ladies grow up *innocent* and *vulnerable*.’

‘I spoke of my sister. I would not apply either epithet to you.’

Elizabeth reflected. ‘*Socially* I am confident. Unafraid of meeting strangers, or speaking my mind. But *physical* courage—not really. Jane is shy but she enjoys riding. Horses scare me.’

‘In that case I am more like your sister, especially when it comes to meeting strangers.’

She smiled at him. ‘You should have proposed to *her*.’

‘She is very lovely, and yet ...’ He spread his hands. ‘The heart has its own logic.’

‘*Vive la difference?* Jane seeks a man who can break the ice when meeting new people.’

‘While Bingley seeks a woman who lets him blather and smiles at his jokes?’

She laughed. ‘So that is how you see Mr Bingley.’

‘He is equally disrespectful to me.’

‘*I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy.*’ Elizabeth recalled a speech by Bingley at Netherfield.

‘A sentiment once echoed by yourself.’

Elizabeth raised her hands, as if holding him off. ‘We promised not to talk about that. But do you think it’s true? Did you see me as having attributes you lacked? And vice-versa? So that together we would be complete?’

He sighed. ‘I idealised you. In my eyes you were wonderful, fascinating, adorable.’

‘That is kind, but did you not consider what *you* could bring to the union? Qualities that I lacked?’

‘Such as prudence, and balanced judgement?’

‘Hmm.’ A wry smile. ‘I suppose I asked for that.’

‘I would not want you any other way ...’

He broke off as the mail coach swerved and a coach-and-four raced by, driven so recklessly that it nearly veered out of

control. Darcy leaned forward, blocking Elizabeth's view of his window.

'What was that?' she cried.

'Some madman.' He frowned. 'It's very odd. You recall what I told you about Lord Sterndale? I'm almost sure the driver was his son. Tobias.'

'Whose coat you stole?'

'To be precise, it was *given* to me.'

'So Tobias has resumed his attempt to stop Lord Sterndale's business in Scotland?'

'Perhaps. But if that was really Tobias he must have already overtaken his father. So why the hurry?'

'Did you see who was inside the carriage?'

'A gentleman I did not recognise. And a young woman.'

'Could it have been Fleet and your sister?'

'I glimpsed a grey dress, more suited to a maid.'

'You'd better watch out for Tobias Sterndale at the next inn.'

He nodded, and they fell silent, both thoughtful, as the mail coach rattled ahead.

Stainmore, 6.20 p.m.

At the Brough inn, Burgess saw no sign of Darcy or Miss Bennet: the mail coach had evidently left, and would be well on its way to Appleby. A parked landau drew his attention: he had noticed it after his brief reunion with Darcy at Catterick.

Burgess opened the door for Miss Catlin as ostlers came to change his horses.

‘Will you be eating here, ma’am?’

She nodded, her pale face anxious and drawn: he wondered whether she would have been wiser to stay at the inn where they had found her, and taken a mail coach home. But in her distress she had latched on to Darcy as a gentleman she could trust—and by proxy, Burgess himself.

‘We can take twenty minutes.’ He tried to sound cheerful. ‘May I join you inside for the next stage?’

Another nod, and they walked into the inn, where Burgess recognised the elderly owner of the landau in conversation with the manager. He joined the queue, hoping to find out when the mail coach had left, then twitched as a phrase caught his attention ...

The gentleman, it turned out, was a Lord Sterndale—and *he too was enquiring about Darcy.*

‘Excuse me, my Lord.’ Burgess advanced. ‘I could not help overhearing. Mr Darcy is my master, and I am following this road in hope of finding him again.’

‘Indeed!’ Lord Sterndale stepped back, allowing Burgess to join the group. ‘It transpires he was here just a half-hour ago, only to find Miss Darcy already left, having been rescued from a fraudster posing as Earl Grenville’s son.’

A gasp from Miss Catlin. ‘*What did you say?*’ A deep blush spread over her face. ‘I’m so sorry sir ...’

‘No matter.’ Lord Sterndale spoke benignly. ‘You are acquainted with Richard Grenville?’

‘Yes! Or at least ...’ She threw up her hands. ‘I believed I was. We were to be wed at Gretna, before he abandoned me ...’

‘I fear you were deceived,’ the manager said. ‘The fraudster, a Mr Hodgkin, was *posing* as Grenville. He has been detained while we await a constable from Barnard Castle.’

‘*Here?*’ Miss Catlin cried. ‘At the inn?’

‘Yes, ma’am. In a store room.’

‘May I see him?’

The manager frowned. ‘I’m not sure ...’

‘It would be useful,’ Lord Sterndale said. ‘As confirmation that we are dealing with the same person.’

The store room was in a cellar, and on viewing the staircase Lord Sterndale decided he could forgo this re-union, and departed with his servant to the saloon. Burgess tackled the steps first, afraid Miss Catlin might trip, but she descended daintily, and the manager led them to a bolted door, lit only by a skylight.

‘He’s tied to the wall, ma’am,’ he said. ‘Don’t approach.’

They entered, and Burgess recognised the debonair man he had spotted briefly at the White Hart in Wakefield, now scowling from a bench, his hands roped to an iron ring.

The prisoner groaned as they entered. ‘What now?’

Miss Catlin stepped forward, and he almost fell off the chair.

‘*Kitten?*’

‘This is the man you knew?’ the manager asked her.

She nodded, and inched closer. ‘*You lied to me.*’

‘We had fun, did we not? What is life but a game?’

‘I *liked* you. Do you understand that? I really liked you, until—you left with Miss Darcy.’

A shrug. ‘I liked you too. Till you became a bore.’

‘You disgust me.’ She turned back to the manager. ‘It is enough.’

There were footsteps on the stairs, and a tall gentleman stumbled into the passage and cried, ‘*Where is he?*’

The manager stepped into the newcomer’s path, a hand raised. ‘Your business, sir?’

‘I am the Honourable Richard Grenville.’ The gentleman peered into the store room. ‘And this man is a blaggard named Hodgkin who was formerly my butler.’

Miss Catlin stared at him, open-mouthed. ‘You are Earl Grenville’s son?’

‘Indeed, madam.’ He turned back to the manager. ‘I believe you have stolen documents that belong to me.’

‘Upstairs, sir. Locked away.’

Grenville entered the storeroom. ‘So, Hodgkin. Not so clever now, are we?’

Hodgkin sniggered. ‘A mere joke, admittedly at your expense. I assume the courts will take a lenient view.’

‘We shall see about *that*.’ Grenville bolted the door, and spoke to Miss Catlin. ‘You were the victim?’

She looked up at him, her elfin figure contrasting with his tall powerful build. ‘I feel so foolish ...’

‘Not at all, madam, and permit me to apologise for the harm done in my name.’ He faced Burgess. ‘You are looking after this young lady?’

‘On behalf of my master. Mr Darcy.’

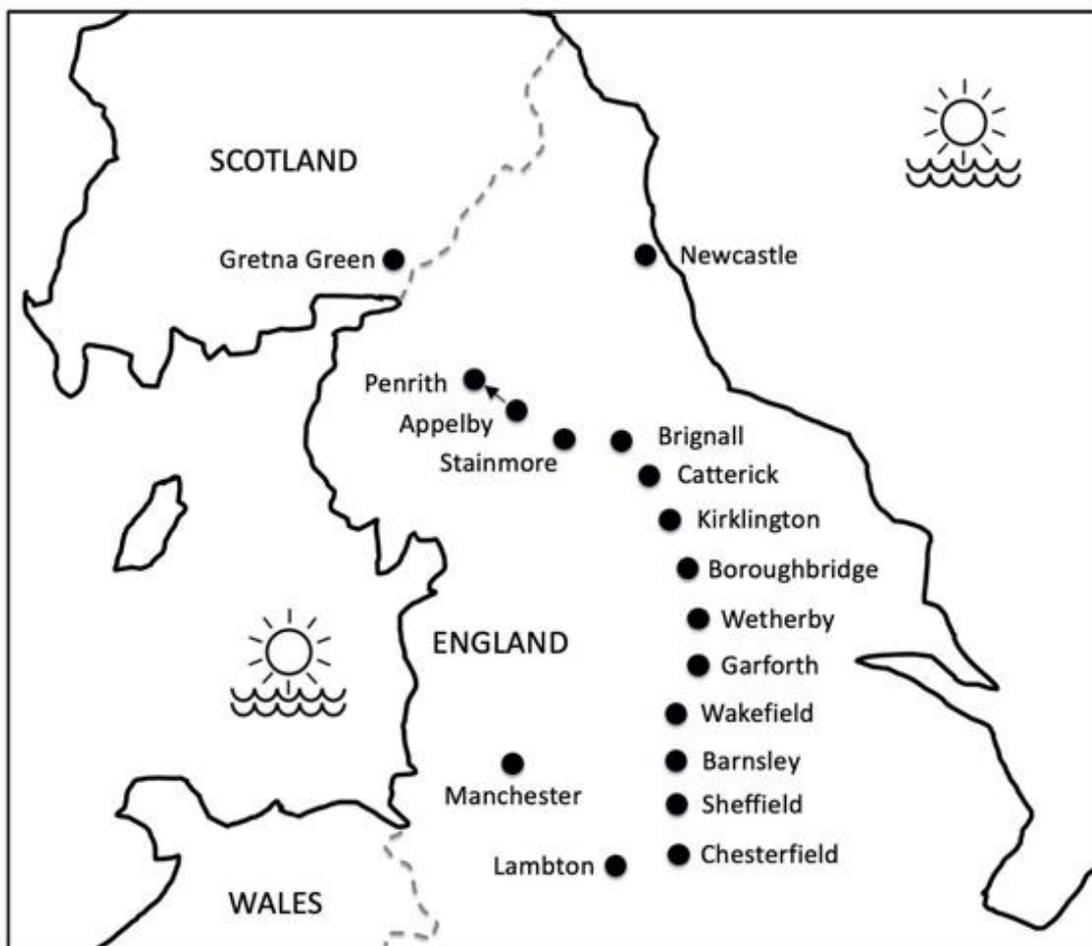
‘The responsibility is surely mine, and I am prepared to assume it ...’ A glance at Miss Catlin, who blinked in embarrassment.

‘I should stay in Mr Darcy’s carriage, sir.’

‘Then may I accompany you? I need to understand exactly how this deception was accomplished.’

She looked at Burgess, who smiled reassuringly. 'I will be travelling inside on the next stage, to catch up on sleep. We can hire a postboy to guide the horses.'

'No need,' Grenville said. 'My driver Hanson will take the reins. Have you eaten? No? Then let us quit this dank cellar and adjourn to the saloon.'



Friday evening, 7.00 p.m.

Light-headed after a glass of claret, Georgiana smiled gratefully at Rupert Fleet as he unpacked a small hamper from the Royal Oak at Appleby. The meal had no pretensions to *haute cuisine*, but she was happy to enjoy brown rolls, ham, Wensleydale cheese, pickles, and other simple fare, as they rode past pleasant views of the river Eden.

‘So you are not out yet,’ he said.

‘Do you think I should be?’

‘Not necessarily. I admire prudence, although it’s not a virtue I possess myself.’

She laughed. ‘Then it’s fortunate that Butters is driving.’

‘I will take my turn, I assure you, once it gets dark. Are you not eager to experience society? The season?’

‘I’m a timid person, Mr Fleet. Or *prudent*, as you kindly put it. I fear doing something terribly wrong.’

‘I’m sure you never made a mistake in your life. Except perhaps getting into a carriage with me.’

She said softly, ‘I did something *very* foolish, once.’

‘Once?’ He pulled the stopper from a bottle of beer and took a swig. ‘Scarcely a week passes without my committing at least one folly. I believe it’s called the human condition. Shall I open a bottle for you?’

Georgiana relaxed, loving the way he made her feel better about herself. ‘Yes. Are you ever serious?’

‘I’m serious about winning this race, and also keeping you safe.’ He popped the stopper with his thumb. ‘As for being *timid*, nonsense! You’ve been abducted twice, driven into a ditch, and co-opted into joining a madcap coach-and-four race. Yet here you sit, enjoying a private dinner with a gentleman you hardly know while streaking towards Gretna. Are you sure you know your own character?’

‘Hmm.’ She paused, finishing a mouthful of ham roll. ‘Maybe I *have* changed, partly through talking with the lady I told you about. Miss Bennet ...’

He flinched, as a whip sounded in the distance and a cry of *Whoa* came from Butters. ‘We’re on a downhill stretch.’

‘Must we get out?’

‘No, just slow down. I wish that idiot would stop cracking his whip.’ He leaned out of the window, looking back along the road. ‘Drat and perdition! It’s Selby.’

Georgiana gasped. ‘Your opponent?’

‘Indeed. Thank you for pointing that out. How the devil can he be so close behind? I didn’t see him at Appleby.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t stop.’

‘If so his horses will be tired before Penrith.’ He called out to Butters. ‘*Hold your line!* And don’t accelerate!’

An answering call from Butters was almost drowned by frantic shouting from the other carriage. Fleet put his head out

the window again and yelled, 'You can't overtake here, Horace. Wait till we're on level ground!'

'Out of my way, you white-livered chuckle-head!' Another crack of the whip, and Georgiana was nearly jolted out of her seat as the carriages strained against one another with a terrifying grinding noise. Butters must have relented, since the creaking suddenly stopped; at the same time, the other coach veered right and careered down the hill.

Fleet took Georgiana's hand. 'All right, Miss Darcy?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'I was forgetting that you're fearless.' He looked out of the window again. 'The river bends here. That halfwit will never slow down in time.'

Georgiana shifted to the left window, where the river came into view as they passed a stand of trees. Ahead was an opening leading to pasture, which sloped steeply down to the river bank. She caught a glimpse of Selby's horses as they strayed on to the verge, then wheeled round into the pasture to avoid a hedge.

'They're off the turnpike!' she cried. 'Racing towards the river.'

He moved across, and she retreated to give him access to the window. Butters stopped at the opening, where the wheels of the runaway carriage had made ruts in the damp ground. Below, Selby's coach-and-four was mired in deep mud just before the river.

'The river has burst its banks,' Fleet said. 'Did you get a lot of rain in Derbyshire last week?'

She nodded. 'Three days with hardly a stop.'

'Same here, it seems. I'd better check they're all safe.'

'I see a driver wading out.'

'There's another man, and a maid he took as passenger.' Fleet jumped down and called to Butters. 'Stay with Miss Darcy! I won't be long.'

Standing beside Butters, Georgiana was both alarmed and amused by the drama below. She had feared initially that

someone might be badly hurt, but this seemed unlikely: rather than crashing, the coach had simply lurched to a halt in the mud. Whether it could be pulled back to the turnpike was unclear, but the task would be so time-consuming that it hardly mattered: Fleet could proceed carefully to Gretna in confidence that the £1000 prize was his.

Two men had struggled to the edge of the bog and were arguing with Fleet—perhaps on who had caused the accident. From Fleet's description, the shorter gentleman, pugnacious and thick-set, must be Selby; the other was tall and sported a waistcoat but no coat or hat. She followed Butters a few yards further down the slope, trying to hear what was being said. The pasture was empty except for a flock of sheep high up on the far end.

'*Your* responsibility, Horace.' Rupert Fleet was glaring at Selby, while the waistcoated driver limped up the slope, apparently uninterested in providing any help. Selby had a thick layer of brown sludge on his breeches, up to the knee, but no evident injury.

'She'll be all right,' Selby said with a dismissive wave of the hand. 'I need to find another carriage because of *your* driver's incompetence.'

Fleet looked back at the mired coach, where a girl in a white cap was struggling to open the door. 'Hallo! Are you all right?'

A whimper. 'Banged my head, sir.'

Fleet turned on Selby. 'Enough, Horace! She's hurt and terrified. You need to get her out of there.'

'Fetch her yourself, if you think it's so important.' Selby shouted at the maid. 'Stay there, Sarah! The gentleman will get you out.'

Georgiana stared in disgust as Selby followed his driver up the slope, leaving Fleet alone. Butters approached a little closer and yelled, 'Shall I come, sir?'

'I'll manage. Stay where you are!'

Selby approached and greeted Georgiana with an exaggerated bow. 'My, my! A new passenger. What became of Miss

Delamere?’

Georgiana cringed, hating him. ‘She was tired.’

He eyed her dress up and down. ‘No jacket on such a cool evening? You should get back in the carriage.’

‘I’m not cold, thank you.’

Butters pointed down the road. ‘You’ll be needing another coach, sir. You can hire one back at Appleby.’

‘I have a better idea.’ Suddenly Selby put an arm around Georgiana and dragged her towards Fleet’s carriage. ‘Toby, deal with this fellow will you?’

Georgiana screamed and went limp, while from behind she heard grunting as Butters struggled with Selby’s driver. With an oath Selby dropped Georgiana and floored Butters with a blow to the back of the head, leaving the driver free to grab Georgiana and bundle her into the carriage.

‘Good work, Toby!’ Selby jumped in beside Georgiana. ‘Now drive!’

A shout from the river bank showed that Fleet had seen what was happening, and Georgiana caught a glimpse of him wading out of the mud with the maid in his arms. But too late. Fleet’s coach-and-four pulled back to the turnpike, under new management ...

She was again a prisoner.

Appleby, 7.35 p.m.

The mail coach had dallied at the Royal Oak inn, after making good time from Stainmore. The respite was welcome, allowing Elizabeth to have a dinner hamper packed, while Darcy confirmed that Fleet had passed—just over half an hour before.

Returning to the coach, they discovered they would no longer be the only passengers. A lawyer and his wife were to join them until Penrith.

Darcy drew Elizabeth aside with a grimace. ‘What now?’

Elizabeth smiled. ‘Mr and Mrs Darcy?’ She danced gaily to the coach step, wondering how she could be so cheerful with Georgiana still in Rupert Fleet’s power. It was not that she did not care for Darcy’s sister: quite the contrary. But she was excited by the new intimacy between herself and Darcy, and perhaps this made her optimistic. There was no reason to mistrust Fleet, after all. Eventually they would be re-united, either at Gretna or before, and all would be well.

Darcy was following her to the coach when a curious drama unfolded nearby. Two horses rode up. The first carried a man in livery who continued towards the stables; on the second, a tall man held a young woman perched in his lap. After dismounting they turned to face the mail coach, revealing clothing slathered in foul-smelling mud. Trying not to stare, Elizabeth observed obliquely. The tall man was attired like a gentleman, except that his hat was missing and his frockcoat ruined. The woman, in a plain grey dress stained from top to bottom, might be his servant.

Darcy advanced a step. ‘In the wars, sir?’

‘As you see.’ The gentleman grinned, his face handsome with a pencil moustache. ‘My own fault. I was rescuing our fair damosel here when I tripped and fell into the mire.’

‘I’m in a great hurry, but there is one point on which I can assist.’ He pointed to the roof of the mail coach, and addressed

the guard. 'Would you retrieve our packages?'

Grunting annoyance the guard complied, and the light brown coat and hat were unwrapped for inspection.

'Not to everyone's taste,' Darcy said. 'But clean.'

'Most kind.' The gentleman bowed. 'I cannot repay you at this moment ...'

'No matter.' Darcy cut short the exchange, aware that the guard was stamping in impatience, and took Elizabeth's arm. 'My dear, we must leave.'

Smiling, and glad to be rid of Tobias Sterndale's clothes, Elizabeth climbed into the mail coach, ready for another game of Mr and Mrs Darcy.

Cowering in a corner, Georgiana threw occasional glances at Selby, who observed her with smug amusement. He was stocky, with a square face and combative manner that put her in mind of a bulldog. She thought of Butters, felled by that awful blow, and hoped he was not seriously hurt.

As the shock receded, she was tempted to release some anger by telling Selby what she thought of him. But her experiences with Wickham and Denny had taught her a lesson. To reveal your feelings to an enemy was unwise, since it gave away information. For the same reason, if interrogated, it would be best to lie. *Did she care about Fleet and Butters?* No! She had joined Fleet merely as a way of making faster progress to Gretna ...

Selby eyed her, aware that she was recovering.

'So, madam, you are Rupert's latest wench—and practically a child. Your name?'

'I am nobody's *wench*.' Georgiana tried to think up a suitable alias. *Mary Smith* was too obviously false. 'Nor a child. I am Miss Ada Catlin, and 18 years old.'

'Then why travel with a scapegrace like Fleet? Have you no family? No companion or guardian?'

'I'm not sure that is your business.'

‘Indulge me.’

‘Very well.’ She shrugged. ‘I am eloping with a cousin who lives in Scotland. He awaits me at Gretna Green and I am eager to reach him as soon as possible. My parents are opposed to the match, which we arranged through letters written in code.’

His eyebrows rose. ‘So why struggle to escape? Did you not realise that I too was bound for Gretna?’

‘I preferred to travel with Mr Fleet.’

A smirk. ‘You find him handsome? He pays you pretty compliments?’

Georgiana sniffed, beginning to enjoy the dissimulation, in which she thought Miss Bennet would have excelled. ‘I care little for those attributes, which are merely skin-deep. Mr Fleet drives safely. You, sir, do not. As shown by events at the river.’

Selby laughed. ‘Then put your mind at rest. The race is in my pocket, and I have no need to take further risks.’

‘Fine. Deliver me to Gretna in one piece, and we may part on terms of respect, despite the treatment meted out to me by your driver.’

Georgiana turned away to the window, hoping she had gained his trust, and loath to speak with him any more.

Selby had reached the George Inn at Penrith, which lay on the north-west turnpike to Carlisle. The location was a busy one; at 9 p.m., in fading daylight, a few stalls were still open in Market Square, selling groceries and hot drinks. To avoid the crowds his driver had taken a parallel road to the stables, located round the back near a church. Here Georgiana descended without being restrained or otherwise molested. It seemed her tale had been believed.

‘Why not take Miss Catlin inside?’ Selby suggested after a whispered parley with his driver. ‘I’ll see to the horses.’

The driver Toby nodded, and as they walked to the saloon said awkwardly, ‘I apologise, Miss Catlin. For before.’

‘I trust there will be no repetition?’

‘Of course not.’

Almost courtly, he found a table where she ordered tea and cake, while he ate a supper of cold beef washed down with ale. Curious, she said, ‘Mr Selby calls you Toby, but I haven’t heard your full name.’

‘Tobias Sterndale.’ He wrinkled his nose, pointing to his waistcoat. ‘And despite appearances, I am a gentleman. My father is a distinguished peer of the realm, and on his death I will become Lord Sterndale.’

Georgiana fell silent, shocked, and it crossed her mind that he could be making this up—like Hodgkin.

Eventually she asked, ‘Is Mr Selby a friend of yours?’

‘I knew him a little. Then today we bumped into each other at Boroughbridge, where I had been attacked, in the most cowardly fashion, and robbed of my coat and purse.’

‘How disgraceful! The robber was a highwayman?’

‘A so-called gentleman named Darcy.’ His eyes flashed. ‘Whom I hope to meet one day and repay in similar coin. If you take my meaning.’

‘Darcy?’

In shock Georgiana blurted this out, and he studied her, alert. ‘You know the gentleman?’

‘I have heard the name.’ She struggled to stop her voice shaking. ‘So Mr Selby found you in this condition?’

A nod. ‘And offered to help. You see, I too have urgent business in Gretna, and Selby’s driver was falling asleep at the reins. So we agreed that his driver would rest at Boroughbridge while I took over.’ He paused, and met her eye. ‘A transaction I would prefer to keep private.’

‘That is why Mr Selby calls you Toby, and refers to you as his driver?’

‘Just so.’

‘Then you may rely on my secrecy.’ Georgiana rose. ‘I need to pay a visit to, ah, the ladies room.’

He nodded. ‘We’re in no hurry with Fleet out of the running. Mr Selby’s joining us for some supper.’

‘The beef looks good.’

‘I’ll order some more.’

She smiled, and left him.

Georgiana found a circuitous route to the stables, and hid while checking that Selby had gone. Two ostlers were making adjustments to the harnessing, and she approached the older one, who had a pleasant weatherbeaten face.

‘Evening, ma’am.’ He recognised her. ‘Need something from the coach, like?’

She drew him aside. ‘Have you met Mr Selby before?’

‘Once, ma’am. He passed a fortnight ago to arrange the horses for today’s trip.’

Georgiana hesitated, wondering whether she could trust him. ‘And do you know a Mr Fleet?’

He nodded, smiling. ‘That I do! They’re racing, you see, using the same inns as the mail coaches. A real gentleman, Mr Fleet. Good tipper.’ He pointed. ‘This carriage ...’

‘Yes?’

‘I thought it was Mr Fleet’s, not Mr Selby’s. But that’s my age showing. I’ll be forgetting my own name next.’

‘On the contrary.’ She leaned closer. ‘Mr Selby stole it and forced me to be his passenger.’

He stared at her. ‘Have you escaped?’

‘They have left me free because I told them I didn’t care about their race and desired only to reach Gretna. But I was lying. What I want is to stop Mr Selby from winning.’ She lowered her voice. ‘Is there a way we could slow him down without making it obvious?’

He pondered. ‘Simplest would be to give the horses more water, like. Fill their stomachs. But I have my job to consider ...’

‘You will receive praise, not blame, once Mr Selby’s villainy is exposed.’

She explained what had happened, and he grimaced, as if sharing her disgust. ‘But what of your own safety, ma’am, when they find out?’

‘My plan is to disappear.’ She looked round, afraid that Selby and Sterndale might be looking for her already.

He pointed. ‘Try the churchyard.’

She thanked him again.

Nearing Penrith, Darcy felt renewed hope. The lawyer had been unsociable, removing any need for inventive answers to intrusive questions. Elizabeth had passed the time by asking what happened inside gentlemen’s clubs, while they enjoyed the excellent pies, chicken legs and cheeses in the hamper, and drank claret from sturdy glasses. Her evident enjoyment of his company felt like a miracle—it was as if all past grievances had vanished, and they were relaxed together. Of course she was playing the role of Mrs Darcy. But surely such warmth could not be entirely simulated.

He thought it unlikely they would catch Fleet at Penrith. Both coaches had four horses and skilled drivers: even in fading light they would cover ten miles an hour on a decent road. But Fleet had a lead, and fewer passengers: in the end, all depended on whether he could be trusted.

They pulled into the town, stopped at the George Inn, and a guard sternly warned that this time there would be no delays. Five minutes, and they would leave. He ran with Elizabeth into the saloon, searching every corner for Georgiana’s blue dress.

‘Shall we ask a waiter?’ Elizabeth suggested.

He selected an alert-looking lad, who nodded immediately. ‘Yes, sir.’ He pointed to a table. ‘She was seated there, opposite a tall man who ordered beef. Blue dress, as you said,

fair hair, no jacket. The man wore no coat, only a red waistcoat. Twenty minutes ago.'

Darcy frowned, wondering why Fleet would enter without his coat, and how he had acquired a red waistcoat. 'Did you see where they went?'

'The young lady rose and asked me the way to the ladies room. Another gentleman joined her companion at the table. Next time I looked, they'd gone.'

Darcy drew Elizabeth aside. 'Interesting that Georgiana was allowed to go out unsupervised.'

'She must still trust him, as she did after he rescued her at Stainmore.'

'The descriptions of the men didn't sound quite right.'

'We could try asking at the stables.'

He sighed. 'Better get back to the mail coach. Perhaps we'll be alone again on the next stage.'

'Should we stay married all the same, in case the guards overhear us?'

He eyed her, aroused by her teasing, aching to plant a kiss on those mocking lips.

But it was not the time or place.

He guided her to the exit.

Behind the stables, St Andrew's church provided concealment in an ancient building of red stone, surrounded by a cemetery. For a while Georgiana hid behind a monument, peering through the half-light in case Selby came looking for her. The air was cooling fast, and she rubbed her arms, shivering, before venturing into the church itself, where a woman was arranging flowers at the altar.

'Good evening.' The woman looked past her as if expecting other visitors. 'Are you alone, dear?'

'I've been at the inn, waiting for my brother ...'

'You must be cold, with only a summer dress.'

‘I lost my spencer.’

‘Oh dear. When will your brother be here?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Come to the vicarage. It’s just round the corner.’ She led Georgiana to the vestry door, and across the cemetery to a gate. ‘I am Mrs Bell. The vicar’s wife.’

In the drawing a room a fire had been lit, and Mrs Bell told a maid to make a mug of tea. Standing at the hearth Georgiana thought about Selby, who by now must have found another passenger, a postboy perhaps, and left. She ought to return to the inn. But the warmth felt good, and a minute or two should make no difference.

‘Would this be of any use?’ Mrs Bell returned carrying a plain woollen shawl. ‘Unfashionable, but at least it’s clean and warm.’

Georgiana hesitated. ‘I couldn’t possibly ...’

‘I’ve no further use for it.’

‘Thank you so much. I ought to be going ...’

‘Maybe a sip of tea?’

The wool was rough, but it *was* warm, and she stayed a minute longer before leaving the vicarage and racing across the churchyard. Nearing the front of the inn she saw no sign of Selby; instead a couple was approaching a mail coach arm in arm while a guard holding a horn urged them to hurry. A peal of laughter from the lady reminded her of Miss Bennet, and the gentleman might have been Darcy ...

But if so, why were they acting like a married couple, and why was her brother wearing a different hat? Also, why were they travelling in a mail coach—and where was Burgess?

She hesitated, then a group of men from the inn walked in front of her, talking loudly. They seemed to have drunk too much and got into an argument. Frantically she dodged past, realising she *had* to check. But the mail coach was already moving, and it was too dark to see inside.

She should have left Mrs Bell earlier.

On the other hand, she could not be sure the man had been Darcy. It could have been anyone.

Demoralised, she hovered in the forecourt for another five minutes, praying that Darcy's green-and-gold carriage might arrive, with Burgess at the reins, and perhaps Miss Bennet safe and well inside. At the same time, a new worry surfaced. *Suppose Selby had already discovered the trick she had played with the horses!*

If so he might turn back, to harness fresh ones, and perhaps also to wreak vengeance on the ostler and herself.

Georgiana pulled the shawl tight, feeling it offered concealment as well as warmth, and kept her eyes on the road. Another coach-and-four was drawing up, one she did not recognise, but the deft confidence of the driver was familiar as he wheeled into the forecourt and descended with a flamboyant leap.

She edged closer, then broke into a run as the man spotted her and opened his arms.

'Mr Fleet!' Tears filled her eyes, and she laughed, exultant, as he grasped her like a child and spun her round.

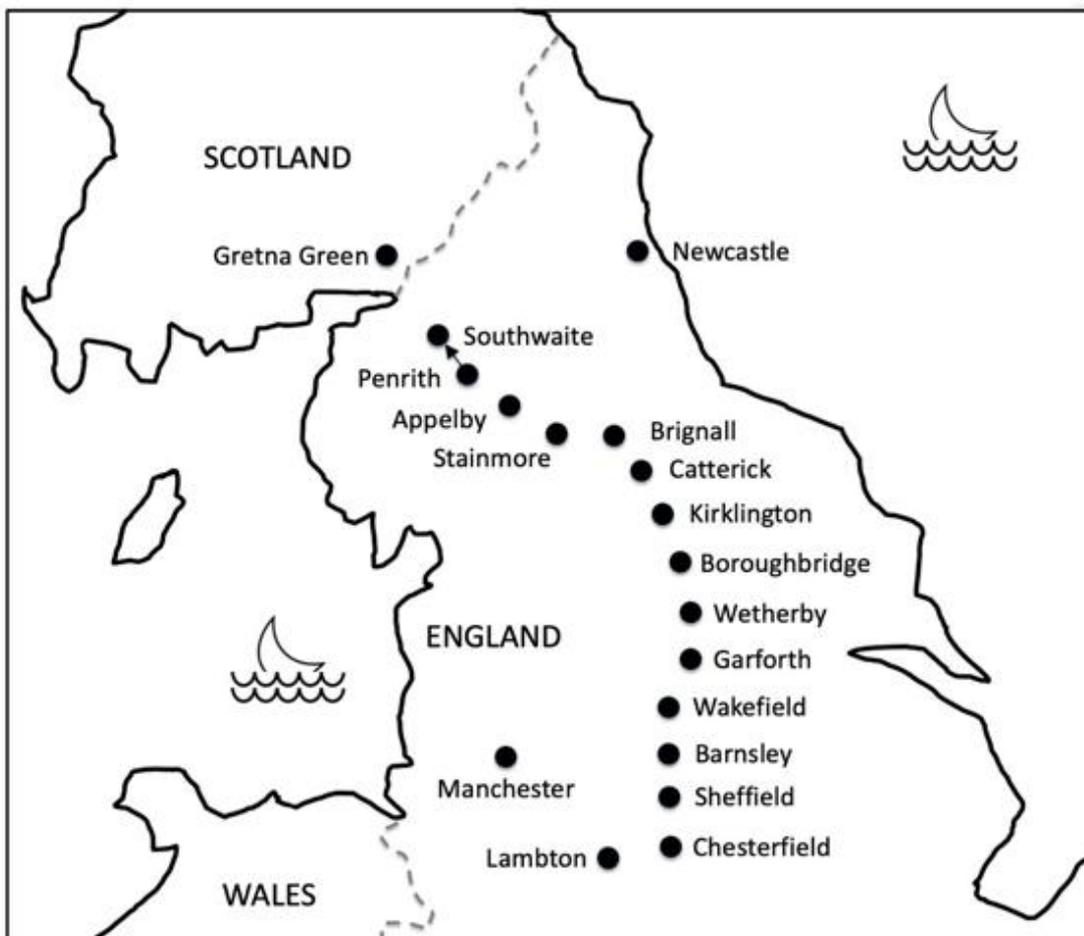
A second man emerged from the coach. 'Miss Darcy! Well met!'

'Mr Butters! Are you all right?'

'Yes, thanking you, ma'am. I was out for a few seconds. But right as rain now.'

'I've so much to tell you ...' She broke off, puzzled, as Butters helped down a maid in a filthy grey dress.

'Horses first,' Fleet said. 'Then we can talk.'



Friday evening, 9.35 p.m.

Frustratingly for Georgiana, Rupert Fleet ignored the questions that most perplexed her. How, she wondered, had he reached Appleby so quickly—and where had he obtained a new coat and hat?

Equally annoying was his failure to ask about her own adventures. He had confirmed that she was unharmed. But otherwise he appeared interested only in Selby's time of departure. She wanted to tell him how she had gone to the stables before hiding ...

He waved this away. Not urgent.

Perhaps he was right, because the priority was what to do with the maid. If Georgiana wished to stay at Penrith, Fleet would have to take Sarah as passenger ...

‘I will come with you,’ Georgiana pouted.

‘Then Sarah must stay here.’ He spoke to the manager, who called the housekeeper. Yes, one of their maids could lend Sarah clean clothes. She could sleep in the attic with the other staff, and earn her keep until Selby or Fleet returned to take her home.

‘Excellent!’ Fleet produced a coin. ‘This will cover any expenses.’

And that was all. They ran to the forecourt, where Butters already had the hired coach ready to leave.

‘You did *what?*’ Fleet cried.

‘I told you.’ Georgiana sighed. ‘Returned to the stables, spoke to an ostler ...’

‘Yes, yes, but did you not realise the risk you were running? Why would the ostler trust you?’

‘I told him your name, and for some reason he liked you more than Mr Selby. It seems you gave larger tips.’

‘I wonder whether he did as you requested and gave the horses extra.’ Fleet chuckled. ‘If so, my dear little fire-eater, you’ve got us back in the game.’

‘It made me so angry, the way that horrid man cheated after you went to his aid.’

Fleet nodded. ‘Dastardly even by Horace’s standards. I was a fool to trust him.’

‘He thought he was being clever. And another thing ...’ Georgiana paused, breathless. ‘His sidekick claimed to be the son of Lord Sterndale, and he *hates* my brother.’

‘Why?’

‘He says a Mr Darcy assaulted him and stole his coat. Which *cannot* be true. William would never do such a thing.’

‘A different Darcy, perhaps?’

‘Our name is not that common.’

‘I wonder ...’ Fleet looked out of the window, thinking. ‘Describe your brother.’

‘Tall, dark, late twenties. People say he is handsome.’

‘At Appleby a man matching that description gifted me this hat and coat.’

‘Did he give his name?’

‘We had no time since he was leaving in the mail coach.’

Georgiana gasped. ‘Was a lady with him?’

‘His wife, I assume. Dark, vivacious, cream dress.’

‘It could be ...’ She put her hands to her head. ‘You see, at Penrith I saw the mail coach leave, carrying a couple with exactly that appearance. So it could have been my brother and Miss Bennet. But they behaved like man and wife, and my brother would never act so improperly.’ A thought occurred to her. ‘Except ...’

‘Yes?’

She paused, catching herself. ‘I cannot say.’

‘Fine.’ He looked outside. ‘Almost dark. Luckily it’s still clear, so we can see by moonlight. I’d better take over from Butters at the next coaching inn.’

Georgiana nodded, still thinking about Darcy and Miss Bennet. She had nearly blurted out that there had been a proposal, in Kent, which Elizabeth had rejected ...

Had there been a change of heart? Were they engaged?

‘I hope Butters is well enough to drive,’ she said.

‘He said he was fine, and I wanted to speak with you.’ Fleet stretched. ‘Amazing, what you did. Why did you not tell me before?’

‘You never gave me a chance.’

‘Ah, so now you’re cross with me?’

‘Of course not.’

‘I am forgiven?’

She waved this away with a laugh, surprised as before how freely she talked with him. Had she been changed by the ups and downs of the mad dash northwards? Perhaps. But she had

also met two people who treated her as an adult. Miss Bennet. And now, Mr Fleet.

Still alone with Darcy, Elizabeth wrapped a blanket round her shoulders as they sped through the night towards the next coaching inn. From the guards they understood this was a small affair, located near villages in an area that had once been known as Inglewood Royal Forest. Sometimes the mail coach changed horses there, sometimes it went all the way to Carlisle without changing: it depended on conditions. Darcy thought Fleet would stop, since he would be driving his horses hard—in which case they might catch him at the inn.

It was past ten o'clock and they had been on the road for 30 hours: this would be the second night passed in a carriage. Excitement had kept her awake, but she sensed that weariness would overwhelm her once Georgiana was found and their mission accomplished. At the other window Darcy looked tense as he peered down the turnpike, as if expecting that at any moment they might reach Fleet's four-in-hand. But he must know this was unlikely; the only plausible hope was that Fleet would stop at Southwaite.

'Whoa!' The coachman cried out suddenly, and the mail coach lurched as it slowed. Thrown a little way forward, Elizabeth saved herself by grabbing a handle, while Darcy moved across to catch her—a rescue both implausible and unnecessary.

'You're all right?' he asked.

She smiled. 'As you see. What happened?'

'I don't know. Perhaps we've reached a toll gate and the guard forgot to blow his horn.'

'Not another highwayman, I hope.'

'Unlikely. Each guard has a blunderbuss.' He opened a window and looked out. 'I don't see another carriage.'

A guard had jumped down, and came to speak to Darcy. 'Sorry about that, sir. There's a loose horse on the road.'

'Escaped from a field?'

‘It has strapping attached. We think it was harnessed to a carriage, then freed.’ He grunted. ‘The things folk do.’

‘Hey!’ A shout from the other guard. ‘Another one!’

‘This is ridiculous. Sorry for the delay, sir.’

‘May we stretch our legs?’ Darcy asked.

A nod, and as the guard moved away Darcy opened the door and helped Elizabeth descend. There was no traffic, just fields, and distant trees silhouetted in the moonlight.

‘Why would anyone abandon two horses?’ she said.

Darcy shrugged. ‘Perhaps they had four horses and one was lame, so they took off its partner to keep the team balanced.’

‘They ought to have tethered them safely distant from the road.’

‘Could it have been Fleet?’ Darcy mused. ‘In a frantic hurry to win the race?’

‘I hope he is not so irresponsible.’

Darcy threw up his hands. ‘We are speculating.’

She took his arm, moved by his struggle to control his fears and think rationally. ‘Are we still married?’

‘I believe so. To impress the guards.’

‘*All the world’s a stage ...*’ She broke off. ‘Who said that?’

‘The bard. *As you like it.*’

‘My educated husband.’ She squeezed his arm. ‘But it’s true, isn’t it? In society people are often acting a part. You never know what they really want or really think.’

‘That may be so.’ He was grave, but with a slight curl of the lip that she recognised as irony. ‘However, if you wish to know what *I* want, or think, you need only ask.’

‘That is hardly credible.’ She smiled. ‘Yet I believe you.’

‘And can you give the same undertaking?’

Elizabeth laughed. ‘Now you ask too much. A woman is a feeble thing; her only weapon is deceit.’

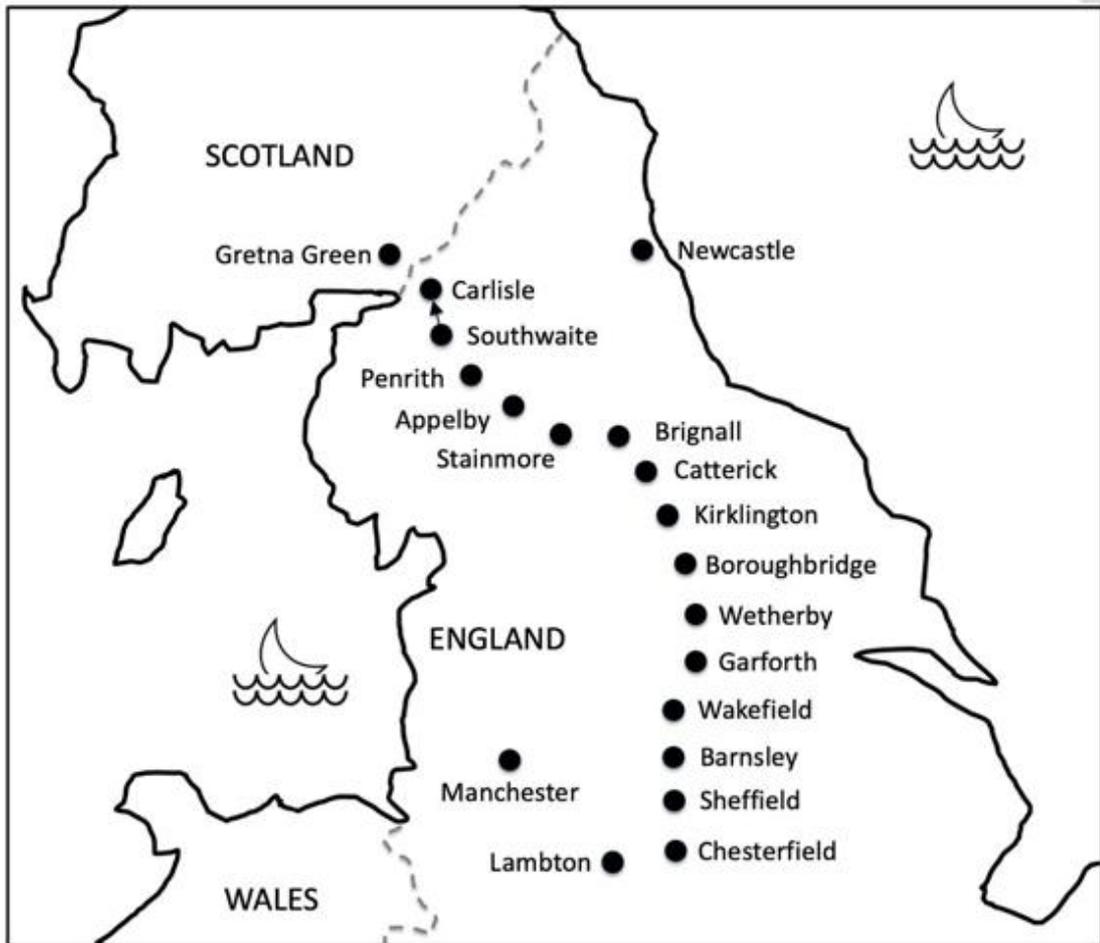
‘You think it highly interesting to remain a mystery?’

‘Now you have seen through me completely ...’ She detached her arm and pointed. ‘The guards are returning.’

‘All shipshape, sir. And madam.’ The guard opened the door for them. ‘We took off their harnesses and tethered them to a tree. I’ll ask the next inn to send a lad.’

Back in the carriage Darcy fell silent, and Elizabeth decided to let him rest. She wondered whether their conversation meant anything, or had merely been playful. On one point she was confident: if she asked Darcy a question, he would answer honestly.

In which case she had better take care what she asked.



Friday evening, 10.50 p.m.

At the Inglewood Arms in Southwaite the guards informed the innkeeper of the horses abandoned a few miles back. They decided to change their own horses too, and Darcy enquired whether other carriages had recently passed.

‘A gentlemen came in a coach-and-four.’ The attendant grinned. ‘And very crusty he was, after ditching two nags slowing him down. He’s in a race, see.’

‘A Mr Fleet, by any chance?’ Darcy said.

‘Mr Selby. We had four good horses ready and he left just a few minutes ago.’

‘Have you seen Mr Fleet?’

‘No sir. We’re holding horses in case he needs them, but he might have gone straight through to Carlisle.’

Darcy sighed, and turned to Elizabeth. ‘Shall we check at the inn?’

‘We’ve nothing else to do.’

They asked at reception whether a note had been left, then looked in the small saloon. No-one had seen a young lady in a blue dress.

Darcy shrugged, and returned to the mail coach. Fleet must have driven past the inn to save time, risking that his horses might tire before Carlisle.

Georgiana lay back, grateful for Mrs Bell’s warm shawl as the carriage sped to the inn at Southwaite. Beside her, Fleet had fallen asleep—unsurprisingly, having ridden non-stop for nearly two days. She wondered where Darcy and Elizabeth were now. If Fleet’s theory was correct, they would be travelling together in a mail coach further up the road, unaware that she, Georgiana, was now *behind* them. On reflection she thought he was probably right. His description of the gentleman who had given him the brown coat was a good match for Darcy; similarly, the lady in the cream dress sounded like Elizabeth.

Assuming this was true, she needed to warn Darcy that Sterndale was nearby—and eager for revenge. Fortunately, Fleet too had a reason for despising Sterndale, having witnessed him manhandling Georgiana into the stolen carriage. *Duels had been fought for less*, he had exclaimed, at which she had blurted out, ‘Don’t be silly! Why risk your life over someone so worthless?’

He had argued the point a little, probably just to tease her. But she still felt uneasily that some kind of reckoning was on its way. How would Darcy seek to punish the men who in various ways had mistreated her? Denny, Wickham, Hodgkin, Spedding, Selby, Sterndale—the list was lengthening.

And what if *Fleet* was not what he seemed?

She sighed and tried to sleep.

At the Inglewood Arms fresh horses were harnessed in less than ten minutes and they were back on the road with Fleet driving and Butters inside. It was nearly 11.30 p.m., and in moonlight on an almost empty turnpike they might reach Carlisle within the hour. By Fleet’s calculations they were 20 minutes behind

Selby, a gap he was confident of closing since his rival would imagine the race already won. Even the impassive Butters frowned as on straight stretches of road Fleet urged the horses into a gallop. But somehow they kept on the road without mishap, while behind the treetops the moon incongruously appeared to race along with them.

‘Where will we go in Carlisle?’ she asked Butters.

He replied in his slow measured rhythm. ‘There are several inns in English Street, ma’am, but the master is making for the Bush Hotel where the mail coach stops.’

‘Will Mr Selby stop there too?’

‘Happen. It’s the best.’

A cry from outside, and Butters opened the window and called out to Fleet. ‘Yes, sir?’

‘We’re behind the mail coach!’

‘Can you get past?’

‘I think so.’ He yelled at the horses and swerved to the other side of the turnpike. Peering out Georgiana saw the dark shape of the mail coach, with a guard seated outside on the back; then suddenly they were level and for a second she caught a glimpse of Miss Bennet at the window, with Darcy at her shoulder. Frantically she waved, but they were already out of sight.

‘My brother!’ she cried to Butters. ‘Can we stop?’

‘Need to keep going, ma’am. We’ll see them at the inn.’

Relief flooded through Georgiana. Of course there was no purpose in stopping in the middle of nowhere. But she had *seen* Darcy and Elizabeth, and they were together, just a short distance behind.

Tears filled her eyes, and she realised how much she had craved the security of family and friends.

Surely all would be well now?

Inside the green-and-gold coach, Burgess dozed while their convoy passed Southwaite and headed towards Carlisle. He was dimly aware of Richard Grenville and Miss Catlin still talking—although not about Hodgkin. *The beginnings of a romance*, he

wondered? It would represent poetic justice for Miss Catlin to find love with the *true* Grenville, having been abandoned by the fake. But perhaps they were simply passing the time while catching up with Darcy, the only gentleman that Miss Catlin fully trusted.

In the carriage behind, Lord Sterndale and his servant Mrs Deere would be asleep: it must have been a hard journey for a man of his age. Perhaps they would overnight at Carlisle, a large town with more comfortable hotels. Burgess yawned, knowing that he too needed rest. Grenville's servant Hanson was at the reins, but they would change places at Carlisle.

Richard Grenville and Ada Catlin chattered merrily on. They shared a love of swimming, apparently. It was as if Gretna was a magnet pulling men and women northwards with its promise of romance and marriage ...

Exhausted, Burgess slept.

Saturday 8th August, 12.25 a.m.

‘We’re at Carlisle, ma’am,’ Butters said.

Georgiana blinked, half dozing, and looked out at a gaslit street opening to a market square. They passed an inn called the White Hart, and another called the Angel.

‘What a lot of hotels!’

‘The Bush has the best stabling.’ Butters pointed to a three-storey terrace with arched passages.

‘I don’t see the carriage Mr Selby stole.’

‘Maybe he’s round the back.’

They turned right and right again, coming to a halt in a mews where Fleet jumped down and opened the door.

‘Did you spot the blighter?’ Butters hissed.

‘Too dark,’ Fleet said softly. ‘Stay with Miss Darcy while I prowl around.’

Butters waited impatiently as Fleet checked the stable yards and returned breathing heavily.

‘No Selby. We’d better just change the horses and leave. Take Miss Darcy to the saloon, then stay with the carriage while I try the other hotels.’

Georgiana felt uneasy at the prospect of being left by herself in the hotel, but realised that Fleet and Butters had work to do. Butters guided her through an arched passage to English Street, where she heard a clock strike half past midnight. Shops were closed, the market stalls too, but the Bush was well lit and she noticed customers in the saloon as they passed the window.

‘Can you see Selby?’ Butters asked.

She looked carefully. ‘No. You?’

He grunted. ‘Already left for Gretna, I dare say.’

Georgiana felt demoralised, for Fleet's sake, as Butters took her inside. She took the window seat and ordered tea and cake.

'All shipshape, ma'am?'

She nodded, and Butters left.

Ten minutes ticked by. Georgiana watched out for the mail coach, but first to arrive was the carriage she had just been travelling in—with fresh horses, presumably. Fleet parked off the road on a paved area normally reserved for market stalls. Excited, Georgiana ran out of the saloon: perhaps if they were quick, they could still catch up. Fleet waved, and she was about to cross the road when a second carriage drove into her path, startling her.

Not the mail coach ...

Fleet's coach-and-four, stolen by Mr Selby. Who was now seated at the front next to Tobias Sterndale, and peering at the hotel as if searching for something.

'I don't see a postboy free,' Sterndale said.

Selby pointed at Georgiana with a cry. 'Our traitorous Miss Catlin! Grab her, Toby!'

Georgiana gasped as Sterndale jumped to the pavement, just a few yards away. Turning, she dived into the passage, aiming for the mews. Even as she ran, she realised her mistake. She should have stayed near Fleet and Butters, even at the risk of another mauling. Footsteps clattered after her while she ran into the darkness.

As the mail coach arrived outside the Bush hotel Darcy saw two carriages, one in the market square, the other blocking the main road. Unable to progress, the mail coach stopped, and as he prepared to descend Darcy heard shouting from the front of the hotel.

Frantically he ran into the square, just in time to glimpse a woman disappear down an arched passage and a tall man with a limp running after her.

Georgiana? Perhaps ...

More shouting distracted him, this time from the four-in-hand parked in the square. A man leapt off, and in the gaslight Darcy recognised the brown coat he had gifted to the muddy stranger at Appleby.

‘She’s heading for the mews!’ The man was shouting to his servant. ‘Delay Selby while I go after them!’

Darcy heard Elizabeth arriving at his side as matters became even more confused. A stocky gentleman, waiting in the road, tried to intercept the man in the brown coat, who bludgeoned past him and darted into the passage.

Darcy ran to the servant. ‘*Who was the lady?*’

‘Miss Darcy, sir.’

His stomach lurched. ‘Your master is Mr Fleet?’

‘Yes ...’ But Darcy hardly heard: he was running across the road, ready to flatten Selby if he dared intervene. As he followed Fleet down the passage Darcy worried about leaving Elizabeth alone. But his duty was clear, and she should be safe with the mail coach guards.

He was out, in the mews. Peering up and down the dark narrow road he could see no-one. From the yard opposite came scuffling noises, and a cry that might be Georgiana’s. He controlled his impulse to rush, and instead edged carefully into the yard, relying on the weapon of surprise.

Georgiana had hoped to find ostlers who might offer her protection. The yard had been empty, however, and as she cast around for a hiding place Sterndale caught her easily.

‘We need a passenger,’ he snarled. ‘Will you come?’

She tried to dodge away, but he swept her off her feet and carried her to an outbuilding. ‘Then you’ll stay here. If we can’t have you, neither will Fleet.’

It must be a stable, she thought, with a bolt on the door. He bundled her inside on to a pile of straw, and was about to lock her in when a tall man ran into the yard, and she recognised Fleet’s voice.

‘*Miss Darcy? Where are you!*’

She screamed, and within seconds saw Fleet confronting Sterndale, who stared at him as if seeing a ghost.

‘Who the devil are you?’ Sterndale gasped. ‘Isn’t that my coat?’

‘I’m taking Miss Darcy,’ Fleet said. ‘Out of my way.’

‘*Darcy?* This is Miss *Catlin*.’ Sterndale ran at Fleet, and Georgiana cowered as they exchanged blows, their grunting bodies black against the moonlight.

Entering the yard Darcy sensed someone behind him, and turned to find Elizabeth looking up and down the mews. He held up a hand, and hissed, ‘Stay out of this!’

She nodded, staying quiet, and he went further into the yard, where a fight was in progress by the stables. In the moonlight he recognised Fleet’s brown coat; getting closer he was shocked to discover that the antagonist too was familiar ...

Sterndale’s son, Tobias! Last seen in a horse trough at Boroughbridge in Yorkshire.

The combatants were blocking the entrance to a stable, and as he closed, Darcy saw Georgiana crouching on the straw at the back. In a fury, he grabbed Sterndale from behind by the collar, and with all his strength heaved him to the ground.

Fleet turned to face him, breathing heavily. ‘You again! You really are a most useful chap.’

Darcy grimaced: this was no time for pleasantries. ‘Get Miss Darcy out of here! I’ll deal with Sterndale.’

‘Is *that* what you believe?’ With difficulty, Sterndale got back to his feet, obviously weary, but still belligerent. ‘Well met, Darcy. You will now pay for your meddling.’

He rushed at Darcy, who tried to deflect him while Fleet darted into the stable. Boxing defensively, to size Sterndale up, Darcy glimpsed Georgiana hand in hand with Fleet as he ran her to safety. Reassured, he gave Sterndale his full attention. A roundhouse blow grazed his cheek, but there was little force behind it, and seeing his opponent off-balance Darcy drove

forward with his shoulder and sent him sprawling back into the stable.

Darcy looked round again. Fleet and Georgiana were at the entrance to the yard, watching; Elizabeth was nearer, standing next to a horse trough.

He yelled to her, 'Stay with my sister!' and turned back to the stable, where Sterndale was on one knee and about to regain his feet. Darcy took a deep breath, and was preparing to launch a kick when Elizabeth pushed past him holding a bucket and emptied its contents into Sterndale's face. As much in shock as pain Sterndale was wiping his eyes with a sleeve when she lobbed the bucket over as well, and time seemed to slow as it sailed in a smooth arc and landed with a clang on Sterndale's head.

For a second Darcy was too shocked to react; then, recovering his senses, he slammed the stable door and drew the bolt.

'I told you to keep your distance!' He glared at Elizabeth. *'Where is my sister?'*

Elizabeth blinked. 'She was with Mr Fleet ...'

'They must have gone to the inn. Follow me! And stay close, confound you!'

Reaching English Street, Elizabeth was astonished to find the square empty. The mail coach had moved on. The four-in-hand blocking it had also gone; so had Fleet's carriage.

'There!' Darcy pointed up the road, and she glimpsed a carriage travelling north. 'That devil has taken her.'

'He's not a devil, and your sister is not a fool.' Elizabeth tried to calm him. 'They want to win his race with Selby, who must have been assisted by Sterndale.' She paused. 'I wonder how Selby got away without his driver?'

'He could have hired a coachman from the hotel, and a postboy as passenger.' Darcy sighed. 'In which case why did Fleet not do the same and leave Georgiana in safety?'

'Perhaps no other postboys were available.'

He faced her, angrily. ‘I *told* you to stay with her! But of course, nothing I say matters. You do whatever you please.’

‘I remind you that I am not your wife, nor your servant. How I act is my business, and for some inexplicable reason I was unwilling to stand by while that madman did his utmost to injure you.’

‘Your duty was to protect my sister.’

‘She was already protected by Mr Fleet. How was I to know they would run off?’ Elizabeth pointed to the hotel door. ‘Shall we check inside?’

In the saloon they found no sign of Georgiana, but a customer at the window had seen them depart. ‘Last coach to leave. Tall gentleman with a young lady in a blue dress. In a frantic hurry.’

Elizabeth faced Darcy with a shrug, and followed as he stalked outside. She felt he was at the end of his tether, and some kind of explosion was coming.

‘I’m sorry.’ She took his arm, trying to soothe him.

‘We *had* her. Safe and sound. And you let her go.’

‘We will follow her to Gretna and all will be well.’

‘The mail coach stops here and turns back to London.’ His brow furrowed. ‘We might find another for hire but I’m short of funds. *If only you would listen!*’

She turned on him, losing control. ‘Can you not see that I had a *reason* for acting as I did. Your sister was safe, while you were hard-pressed. I intervened not for the pleasure of ignoring your instructions, but because, bizarre as it may seem, I *care* for you.’

Darcy threw his hands up, paced away, then returned to confront her. ‘Of all the women in the world ...’ He looked around, as if checking they were alone. ‘Why did I ever allow you into my life? You are the most headstrong, reckless, irritating person I ever met. *What is the matter with me?* Why must I be tortured in this way?’ He gripped her arms, and looking up, she saw a change in his countenance, a

resignation, as he bent down and pressed his lips against hers, first hard, then softly as she made no effort to resist.

‘Do you ... will you ...’ He gazed at her imploringly.

‘Whatever you say.’ She smiled. ‘Now and forever.’

‘Oh my dearest ...’ He kissed her again, and she felt his body relax, as if he had surrendered after a long struggle.

‘It will be all right.’ She stroked his cheek tenderly. ‘We will reach Gretna, and find Georgiana safe. If you want me, I am yours.’

‘It was meant to be,’ he whispered, as if talking to himself. ‘There was never any point fighting it.’

‘For me too.’

They kissed again, so intently that they failed to notice the rumble of an approaching carriage. Opening her eyes, she cried out, and pointed.

‘Your green-and-gold carriage! I think that is Burgess.’

Darcy watched as a second coach pulled out and parked in the square. ‘Yes. And Lord Sterndale!’

‘We have transport to Gretna?’

He nodded, then as if aware they were being watched, pulled back a little. ‘And some explaining to do.’

Elizabeth released him, smiling.

Seated beside Elizabeth at a long mahogany table, Darcy relaxed as a bottle of cognac was passed round. Opposite him Miss Catlin was whispering to Grenville, whom she seemed to trust, while Mrs Deere looked after Lord Sterndale. The servants had been invited too: Lord Sterndale’s footmen as well as Burgess, and Grenville’s driver Hanson. In the yards at the back the ostlers were harnessing fresh horses.

After discussion with the hotel manager, arrangements had been made for Tobias Sterndale, who had escaped serious injury, but remained locked in the stable. According to Lord Sterndale his son was not habitually violent, and it would suffice to restrain him until their carriages were well on their

way to Scotland. Elizabeth did not find this argument convincing, but Darcy was willing to trust the man who had once been Britain's senior judge.

With no practical chance of catching Fleet or Selby before Gretna, the urgency had gone out of the chase. If the dashing Mr Fleet was really angling for Georgiana's dowry there was no chance of stopping him: a wedding could be completed in minutes.

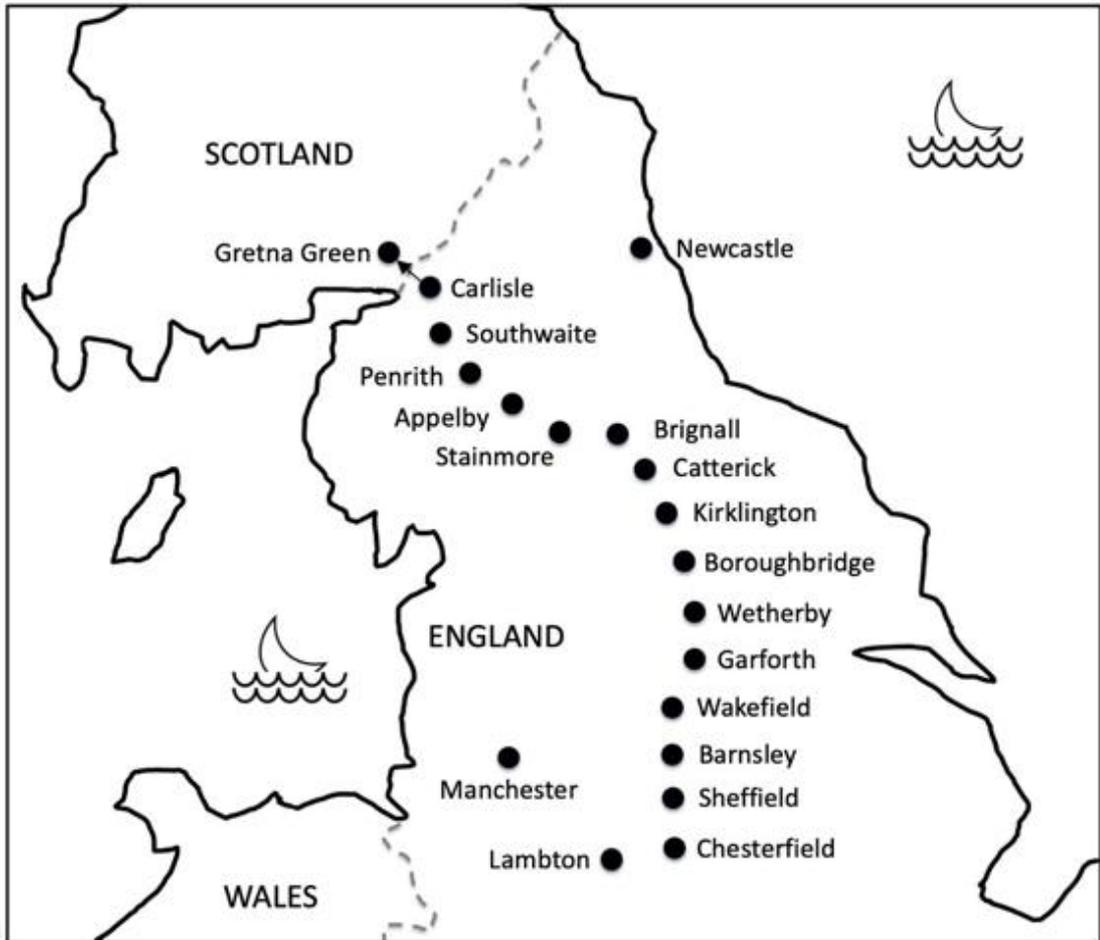
Under the table, Elizabeth took Darcy's hand.

'In two hours it will be over.'

'I know what you're going to say. What will be will be. No point worrying.'

'That's what I tell myself. It doesn't always work.'

'This helps.' Darcy raised his brandy, and companionably they clinked glasses.



Saturday early hours, 1.45 a.m.

They were a mile from Scotland, racing through the night with Butters driving. At Georgiana's side Fleet was like a coiled spring, itching to take the reins, while admitting that this would merely waste time. He could have swapped with Butters at the Bush inn, but had instead joined her inside—for a reason she thought she understood. He wanted to be sure she was unharmed.

She understood too that by coming to her rescue, Fleet had delayed his departure. He could have taken a postboy as passenger and set off immediately; instead he had gifted Selby a useful start, for her sake. It was one reason she had felt obliged to leave with him.

‘What happens when we reach Gretna?’ she asked.

He answered with his usual fluency, but she detected a nervous edge to his voice. 'Once over the river Sark we're in Scotland, with Gretna Green ahead. The turnpike bends north-west towards Glasgow, while we turn right, into the village. On the way lies the blacksmith's shop, which marks the end of the race. First man to knock on the door is the winner, with two gentlemen from my club waiting as witnesses.'

Georgiana nodded, feeling sick as the reality of Fleet's situation was made clear. There was almost no time left to overtake Selby.

'I lost you the race,' she said sadly. 'I should have stayed by the hotel entrance instead of running away.'

'Don't be silly.' Fleet put his head out of the window, and yelled to Butters. 'We're at the bridge. Gallop!'

They accelerated, and a cry came from the front. 'Think I see him, sir. Wandering all over the road as usual.'

'Get behind him and challenge as soon as we're over!'

Georgiana glimpsed the river as they rattled over a narrow bridge and Butters pulled out to pass, then withdrew. Fleet swore under his breath. 'Blighter's swerving to block our path.' Again he called out of the window. 'Stay close! Maybe he'll miss the turning!'

They slowed again, then circled right, and she heard a collision, followed by a yell from Butters.

'He's hit something, sir. The road's blocked.'

'I'll run!' Fleet wrenched the door open and grinned at Georgiana. 'Stay here! Won't be long!'

He was on the road, sprinting, and she climbed down as well, feeling she had to watch. A few yards away the stolen coach-and-four was stymied, the horses having veered on to the grass to evade a cart. Advancing, she could just make out Fleet's tall figure, in pursuit of a sturdy man who must be Selby. With long strides Fleet rapidly gained, and she could hardly contain her excitement as she realised the race would be won after all.

Then she noticed a *third* runner.

He was a postboy, by the uniform, who must have followed along the verge in case Selby needed help. Emerging from shadow as Fleet was poised to overtake, he raced into Fleet's path and clung on to his arm.

Whirling round, Fleet managed to throw the lad off. But precious seconds had been lost.

Butters joined Georgiana. 'What happened?'

'They cheated.'

'Let's go and see.'

Situated on the next corner, the blacksmith's shop was long and single-storeyed, with white walls, a slate roof, and high chimneys. Part of it was obviously domestic; the shop was distinguished by a courtyard leading to a porch, and an iron wheel hung on the wall.

In the courtyard a heated discussion was in progress. Observing from the verge, Georgiana recognised Fleet and Selby, two other gentlemen, and the postboy; at a nearby window a lamp flickered, suggesting they had roused the family.

Fleet was remonstrating with the postboy. 'That was no accident! You bumped into me deliberately.'

'I was doing my duty, like.' The postboy bristled. 'The gentleman ...' He indicated Selby. 'He said I should watch for a madman who might attack him. If you'll pardon the expression, sir.'

'In other words, you resorted to foul play,' Fleet said to Selby. 'For the second time ...' He spotted Georgiana and Butters, and beckoned them. 'As these witnesses can confirm. Miss Darcy. Butters. May I present Mr Jennings, from my club. And the Honourable Mr Fenwick.'

Tentatively Georgiana joined the assembly and curtsied. The men had contrasting builds, Jennings short and neat, Fenwick heavy-set. Both were young and both unsteady on their feet, suggesting a vigil made tolerable by the whiskey bottle.

Jennings looked at Butters with a faint smile. 'Your testimony, driver?'

Butters explained, then it was Georgiana's turn. She saw Fleet eye Selby with hatred as she described how Sterndale had thrown her into the coach.

'A devilish trick,' Fenwick said, slurring his words. 'But I see no violation of the terms of the wager.'

'Exactly,' Selby said. 'All's fair in love and war.'

'Oh yes?' Fleet was contemptuous. 'Including the treatment meted out to a lady passenger?'

'Not by me,' Selby flashed back. 'By my driver, who is not here to defend himself.'

Georgiana glared at him. 'You dragged me towards the carriage. Then punched Butters from behind.'

'*Dragged?*' Selby appealed to Jennings and Fenwick. 'I merely guided this young lady to safety before dealing with Butters, who was accosting my driver.'

'We appear to have conflicting reports,' Fenwick said.

Selby sniffed. 'The only established fact is that I arrived first. As you can testify.'

Jennings nodded, and turned to Fleet. 'I see your point of view, old boy. The trouble is that we have nothing in the terms of the bet that specifically forbids what you allege. Both parties used a coach-and-four with a driver and a passenger throughout.'

'I concur,' Fenwick said. 'The race goes to Horace.'

Fleet smiled wryly. 'So I could have shot my opponent without violating the rules? Perhaps I should have done.' He faced Selby with a dismissive shrug. 'Very well, Horace. You will receive your £1000. I would have added an extra payment ...' He raised a fist. 'And one more justly merited. But since we have ladies present, I will forgo that pleasure.' He turned to Fenwick and Jennings. 'My thanks for your assistance in the wager. Kindly inform the committee that I am resigning from Watiers.'

Jennings frowned. 'I say, no need for that, Rupert.'

‘I think there is. No reason need be given. A man likes a change now and then. I will find another club.’

Georgiana looked away, tearful at the outcome, but admiring Fleet all the more for avoiding a violent confrontation. At the turnpike corner the cart had been moved, and Selby’s coachman had coaxed his horses back to the road.

Butters pointed. ‘They’re moving. And some blighter is driving our carriage!’

‘How ...’ Georgiana peered at the two coaches, sensing further dark shapes behind.

Traffic was stalled at a corner where two carriages had been abandoned. Darcy fidgeted in frustration while Elizabeth urged him to stay inside. They had servants aplenty in their convoy; Burgess, Hanson, and the others would soon sort out the problem.

They had been travelling in Lord Sterndale’s landau, while in Darcy’s green-and-gold carriage Hanson took the reins, allowing Burgess to relax inside with Grenville and Miss Catlin. There could be no pretence now that Elizabeth was Mrs Darcy, but their embrace at Carlisle had been witnessed, and Lord Sterndale had congratulated them on their *engagement*. From Mrs Deere they had received only a scowl, but this seemed to be her normal expression; she was now complaining about the delay.

All the carriages were moving at last, and they paraded past narrow residential side roads and quiet cottages to a shop where a crowd had assembled.

Elizabeth leaned out. ‘I see her!’

‘Thank God.’ Darcy looked at Lord Sterndale. ‘May we descend here, sir?’

‘By all means.’ A grave smile. ‘But pray remain close at hand, for I have a favour to ask.’

Darcy helped Elizabeth down on to a grass verge, from where they ran hand in hand past the stationary coaches and across to the shop, where Georgiana was standing beside Fleet in front of some other men. On spotting them she whooped and rushed to

Darcy, who held her tightly before raising an arm to include Elizabeth in the embrace.

In tears, Georgiana gulped, 'I'm so sorry. I should have stayed at the inn. Are you hurt?'

'No.' He eyed her sternly. 'Are you wed?'

She laughed, her body relaxing. 'Of course not.' Drawing away, she extended a hand to Fleet, who was waiting nearby and pretending not to observe. 'Have you been introduced?'

Fleet advanced, bowed, and Darcy shook his hand. 'I'm indebted to you for saving my sister.'

'The debt is already repaid.' Fleet pointed to his coat. 'Did I hear aright at the stables? Did you steal this from the unfortunate Sterndale? And where is he, by the way?'

'On his way, I imagine. Provided he has survived Miss Bennet's assault with the bucket.'

Fleet bowed to Elizabeth again. 'Honoured to meet you, madam. I will take care never to incur your disapproval.'

'Mr Fleet lost his race,' Georgiana said. 'Through more villainy. And because he ran to save me at the inn.'

'I will gladly reimburse you, sir,' Darcy said.

Fleet shrugged. 'A mere pin-prick. It was worth it to enjoy Miss Darcy's company.'

Elizabeth felt Darcy flinch, perhaps shocked that his innocent sister had so impressed this assured gentleman. She noticed Lord Sterndale approaching on Mrs Deere's arm, with Richard Grenville adding support.

Lord Sterndale smiled at Georgiana. 'Miss Darcy I presume. A most welcome re-union.' He turned to Darcy and Elizabeth. 'A brief word in private, if I may.'

Darcy called Burgess to stay with Georgiana, as if loath to leave her alone even though he would be standing only a few yards away. Mrs Deere and Elizabeth came too, and once they had privacy Lord Sterndale addressed them quietly and without preliminaries.

‘You have tactfully not enquired into the nature of my business in Scotland. This can now be revealed, since it lies here, at Gretna.’

Elizabeth held her breath, trying to hide her shock as he continued. ‘In confidence, I have lived for some years with my housekeeper as my mistress.’ Lord Sterndale nodded to the stone-faced Mrs Deere. ‘She has borne me two sons, who are at the King’s Head with their nursemaid; for reasons of disguise, we travelled separately. I intend to marry Mrs Deere, a widow, and sign certificates making the boys my heirs in parity with my other children. It is this plan that my oldest son Tobias has sought to sabotage. He believes my conduct shameful. He also fears that his portion of my estate will be reduced.’

Elizabeth wondered what Darcy would feel about this unconventional relationship with a servant. But he asked, simply, ‘What do you ask? Besides our discretion, which of course you have.’

‘That you attend the ceremony.’ Lord Sterndale pointed to the shop. ‘Which will take place as soon as the blacksmith can be roused. And that you witness the certificates, so that before Tobias arrives, all is settled.’

A clock in the blacksmith's shop showed a quarter to three in the morning as Lord Sterndale stood with Mrs Deere at an altar comprising an anvil on top of a log. Beside them, a nursemaid kept watch over two small boys. A pair of rustic wooden chairs had been provided for Elizabeth and Georgiana; Darcy stood next to Fleet, who had agreed to serve as the other witness. Deftly the blacksmith's wife attached the handfasting rope, and the ceremony began.

‘Do you want to marry this woman?’

‘I do,’ Lord Sterndale intoned gravely.

‘Do you want to marry this man?’

‘Of course,’ Mrs Deere said. ‘That’s why we’re here.’

‘Good. I pronounce you man and wife.’ The blacksmith addressed Lord Sterndale. ‘You may kiss the bride, sir.’

‘I’ve kissed him lots of times,’ Mrs Deere complained. ‘All I want is to go to bed and sleep.’

An indulgent smile from Lord Sterndale, and the ceremony was over. A footman stepped forward with the certificates, which were duly signed and witnessed.

Outside, the streets were deserted except for Sterndale’s landau; the other carriages had been driven to the King’s Head, a short walk away. Selby, Jennings, Fenwick, Grenville, and Miss Catlin had gone to the inn; so had Hanson and one of Lord Sterndale’s footmen.

Elizabeth stood next to Darcy and Georgiana, enjoying the cool breeze. Burgess waited nearby, while Fleet helped Lady Sterndale guide her husband safely to their carriage.

‘An unusual liturgy,’ Darcy said.

‘So simple.’ Elizabeth laughed. ‘We could do it now. I’m sure the blacksmith will agree, if you have two guineas.’

Darcy smiled. ‘Is that what you want?’

Elizabeth paused, taken by surprise. She had intended only a joke, but after finally reaching Gretna, it seemed fitting that they should gain some reward for a day and a half of continuous discomfort.

‘I will do it!’ she said impulsively. ‘If you wish.’

Darcy frowned. ‘I’ve not spoken with your father. And your mother and sisters would be disappointed to miss the ceremony.’

Georgiana, who had been following this exchange with rapt excitement, pulled Darcy’s sleeve and whispered, ‘Say yes! You *know* what she’s like. She might change her mind by morning.’

Darcy blinked, obviously astonished that his timid sister could blurt out such a thing, and Georgiana fell silent as a blush spread over her face. Darcy turned to Elizabeth with an apologetic smile. ‘You have won my sister’s affection, at any rate.’

‘She fears that otherwise you might marry Miss Bingley.’

‘*What?*’ He caught himself, and suddenly they were all laughing. Finally Darcy took a deep breath, and turned to Elizabeth. ‘Well? Shall we make an impertinent young lady happy by going ahead with this madness?’

Elizabeth sighed. ‘It’s irregular and will shock our families. But this is for *us*, and it just feels—right.’

‘We’ll need witnesses.’ Darcy ran over to Fleet, who was waiting to accompany them to the inn, then returned to the shop where the blacksmith and his wife were clearing up.

Two gold coins were handed over.

The ceremony could go ahead.

‘I pronounce you man and wife.’ The blacksmith stifled a yawn. ‘You may kiss the bride, sir.’

Still in high spirits, Elizabeth was planning to complain that she had kissed Darcy already and only wanted to sleep. But his lips found hers before any of this could be spoken, and with their hands still fastened they emerged from the shop in a daze

of happiness—only to be confronted by the irate figure of Tobias Sterndale, who glared first at Darcy, then Fleet, then Elizabeth, as if unsure on whom to vent his outrage first.

‘Where is my father?’ he demanded.

‘Abed, I imagine,’ Darcy said. ‘With Lady Sterndale.’

Tobias’s shoulders slumped. ‘So they are married?’

‘Listen.’ Fleet stepped forward. ‘For your own good you must stop this. I’ve witnessed the documents your father signed. The boys will get an allowance. Your step-mother will get a dower house. The rest is yours—unless you commit some idiotic act of revenge and get transported to Australia.’

Tobias fell silent a moment, before muttering, ‘You still have my coat.’

Fleet took off the brown frockcoat. ‘Returned with relief. Meanwhile, you owe an apology to Miss Darcy.’

The apology was not exactly heartfelt, but Tobias Sterndale did face Georgiana and grunt, before donning his coat and hat and limping away towards the King’s Head.

Exhausted, and with nothing to wear except her shift, Elizabeth hardly felt ready for a traditional wedding night; in any case, Darcy was adamant that Georgiana could not be left alone. The hotel had just two rooms left, a single and a double: accordingly Elizabeth shared with Georgiana, and Darcy took the smaller room with Burgess making do with a mattress on the floor.

In their spartan chamber Elizabeth could at last splash herself in cold clean water, while Georgiana took off her dress and waited her turn. On vacating the washstand Elizabeth found Georgiana already asleep in her petticoats on top of the bed. Through the thin curtains she saw a glow on the horizon: dawn came earlier in Scotland. She snuffed the candle, and gently pushing Georgiana to one side made enough room to crawl between the sheets.

Waking, Elizabeth saw Georgiana sipping tea as she talked with a pale thin maid with red braided hair.

‘Gud morning, ma’am.’ The girl bobbed. ‘Actually afternoon, I’m thinking.’

Elizabeth sat up, bewildered. ‘So late?’

‘This is Iona,’ Georgiana said.

‘Iona Macrae.’ Another bob. ‘I’ve been asked to do for ye, since ye didna bring a maid. I hope ye like mint tea?’

‘Yes ...’ Elizabeth *was* thirsty, and also ravenous. ‘Any breakfast left?’

‘Och, to be sure ma’am. Gud porridge, bacon, or what takes yer fancy.’ The maid pointed to the dress stand. ‘I was saying to Miss Darcy, tis such a pity fer yer lovely frocks.’

Elizabeth rose and went to the washstand. ‘They’re all we have.’

‘Ye can get plain dresses at Mrs Dunbar’s in the village. But London fashions like these, no.’ The maid paused. ‘Is it London ye hail from?’

‘Derbyshire,’ Georgiana said. ‘My brother keeps a house in town.’

‘I’d so like to see London! But I must be getting along.’ Iona fingered Georgiana’s dress. ‘I could sew up the worst tears and brush off the mud ...’

‘Later,’ Elizabeth suggested.

The maid breezed out and Georgiana faced Elizabeth nervously, as if the traumas of the last two days had used up her stock of courage.

‘Miss Bennet ...’ She reddened. ‘I mean ...’

‘Elizabeth. I haven’t got used to Mrs Darcy either.’

‘I wanted to apologise ...’ Tears filled her eyes. ‘It was so bad, what I said.’

‘About me being a butterfly, always changing my mind?’

‘Yes! And urging William to marry you.’

Elizabeth smiled. ‘We were all a bit mad, I think. But I do truly love your brother, and after so much danger and confusion I craved to have my new life *settled*, with no more uncertainty and no way of going back.’

Georgiana brightened. ‘What will happen today?’

‘That will depend on Mr Darcy, who is now legally responsible for both of us. For now, dear sister-in-law, all I want is some normal food.’

They were not the only late risers. In the morning room they found Darcy with Fleet, Grenville and Miss Catlin; on seeing them he found a secluded table and ordered coffee, rolls, bacon, and other familiar treats.

Conversation was awkward, and she sensed that Darcy, like herself, was shocked to wake up married.

‘You’re happy?’ she asked eventually.

He nodded. ‘And you?’

‘Entirely. Except ...’

He flinched. ‘Yes?’

She pointed to her dress. ‘This is filthy. The maid was embarrassed. And Georgiana has no jacket, only that woollen shawl. As for your coat ...’

He raised a hand. ‘Apart from our clothing?’

‘I feel refreshed and content.’ She glanced at Georgiana. ‘But we’re wondering what happens next. There are letters to write, are there not? And we are several hundred miles from home.’

Darcy pointed to another table, where peace had apparently been restored to the Sterndale clan. Tobias, his brown coat cleaned and pressed, was seated opposite Lord Sterndale and his bride, with the boys and their nanny close at hand.

‘I had a word with Lord Sterndale,’ Darcy said. ‘He will aim for the Great North Road, stopping often, and offered to travel in convoy if we wish.’

Georgiana frowned. ‘What did you say?’

‘I thought you might prefer an alternative route.’

Elizabeth laughed. ‘You mean, any route that separates us from his son, who hates all of us. Where is Mr Selby?’

‘Departed,’ Darcy said. ‘With the two gentlemen from his club. All eager to reach town as soon as possible.’

‘Will we be taking Miss Catlin?’ Georgiana asked.

‘She will return with Grenville and Fleet, both of whom have gained her trust. Mr Fleet has to pick up his cousin Miss Delaware from the inn at Stainmore, while Mr Grenville will pursue his case against Hodgkin.’

‘We have left so many people along the way,’ Elizabeth mused. ‘Including Mr Wickham and Mr Denny.’

‘I’ve been wondering what to do about them,’ Darcy said. ‘But first we must get home.’

Elizabeth smiled, reminded that Pemberley had become her home too—and the Darcys her second family. ‘For a change of scene, would you like to return through the Lake District—which I had hoped to explore this summer with my aunt and uncle?’

Georgiana clapped her hands. ‘William?’

Darcy smiled at Elizabeth. ‘It would be a most agreeable wedding trip, although we are short on servants.’

‘How about Iona?’ Georgiana said.

‘Our maid at the hotel,’ Elizabeth explained. ‘Who longs to see London. But her father may have other ideas ...’

Mrs Dunbar’s gowns proved *very* plain, removing any incentive to dally in Gretna. By two o’clock Burgess had the carriage prepared, and they were gathered outside the hotel to say farewell to their fellow-travellers.

Some pairings were awkward. Tobias Sterndale avoided them; Miss Catlin was wary of Georgiana. But Fleet spoke with Darcy, and was conceded a final word in private with Georgiana.

They set off due *south*, at last, aiming only at Carlisle, an easy stage of just over ten miles. At such a large town Darcy could draw from a bank, using a letter of recommendation with Lord Sterndale's seal; they could then visit a modiste and acquire suitable clothes, before enjoying what the town had to offer and writing overdue letters.

It was the first time Elizabeth had travelled with Darcy and Georgiana—her family, now. They sat in a row inside, with Burgess at the reins, and an excited Iona Macrae outside on the back. As it turned out she was an orphan, having no relatives except an aunt at Lockerbie who wanted nothing to do with her. This aunt, it transpired, had been a Macrae, her father's sister, married to a man who had developed a soft spot for his pretty niece ...

Exit Iona, for whom a position had been found at the Gretna hotel, a safe distance away.

As they eased down the turnpike to Carlisle, Elizabeth noticed her usual mind-set returning. *From this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety*, the bard had written, and the words felt apposite. For two days they had been pulled up a string stretching from Lambton to Gretna, rattling in carriages, pausing briefly at inns, in groups that shifted and reformed as they encountered new enemies and allies. Her family at Longbourn, even the Gardiners in Derbyshire, had seemed in another universe. There had been an urgent task, to rescue Georgiana, to which other objectives had somehow accrued: villains to disarm, victims to help, and through it all, her deepening appreciation of the man at her side ...

To whom she was now married. Although it felt, oddly, as if they were still pretending.

Well, a night passed at Carlisle would change that, since Georgiana could room with the maid.

These thoughts were interrupted by Darcy, who asked his sister, ‘What did Mr Fleet have to say?’

‘He hoped we might meet in London if I come out next season ...’ Georgiana broke off, embarrassed.

‘Would you like to?’

‘What do you think?’

Elizabeth was careful not to react, seeing that this was a matter between brother and sister. It seemed Georgiana too was returning to her usual self—the confidence of the previous night was waning.

‘I believe you are ready,’ Darcy said. ‘These last days you have been brave, resourceful ...’ A smile. ‘And also independent.’

She blushed. ‘I should have stayed at the inn at Carlisle.’

‘Right or wrong, you made a principled decision. Does Mr Fleet plan to call at Darcy House?’

‘He said he would look for me at Almack’s and ask me to dance.’

‘And what did you say to that?’

‘Oh, nothing.’ A shy smile. ‘I said I would be happy to dance a set if he asked nicely.’

Elizabeth smiled. Not so timid after all, then.

They had reached an inn at Carlisle. A modiste was adapting dresses for delivery that evening. While Darcy explored the town with Georgiana, Elizabeth wrote first to the Gardiners, at the Rutland Arms in Lambton, postponing the task she dreaded.

By now, she guessed, Mr Bennet would have received an express from Mr Gardiner. He would know that she had left Lambton with Darcy, on urgent confidential business. Rather than trouble Mrs Bennet, he would confide only in Jane—who would feel obliged to relate some of what had passed at Hunsford.

The main task was to reassure him. But he must be prepared also for news that might upset him greatly.

What would work best? Explanation? Apology? Confession? Perhaps a lighter touch? With a sigh she began:

Dearest Father

I have news that may give you pain, although I am safe, and would be entirely happy, were I assured of your forbearance. Please prepare the fatted calf, and seek to welcome back with rejoicing your runaway daughter, whether or not she deserves it. To cut a long story short: I am married ...

The full truth could not be given: Darcy was still undecided how to explain what had happened without harming Georgiana's reputation. At least this gave Elizabeth a justification for keeping the letter short, and in a few minutes the deed was done.

Ten days later

On a warm grey afternoon Darcy gazed at the outskirts of Pemberley, as if seeking reassurance it was still the same. He saw men stocking timber for the winter, and corn ripening on the tenant farms. Life was slow-paced, serene; people got on with their jobs—pausing only to stare as his carriage came into view, for in the house certain *alterations* had been ordered in the family wing, which meant that the news could not be hidden.

Darcy was aware that a complex task lay ahead, one he characterised as *tidying up*. In two chaotic days a trail of villains and victims had been littered along the Great North Road and beyond: some of these (Hodgkin, Spedding, Miss Catlin) would be attended to by others, but Darcy felt responsible for Wickham and Denny. He also had to decide what account to give of their adventures. Too many people knew they had gone to Gretna. Should he reveal all, including Georgiana's abduction?

Darcy had not discussed these concerns with Elizabeth during their wedding trip. The moment was too precious to ruin by practical anxieties; they had lived instead in a bubble of three, each as happy as ever in their lives. Georgiana had lived in terror that her brother might marry Miss Bingley—or Anne de Bourgh, necessitating frequent visits to Rosings. To have Elizabeth as sister-in-law was a joy she had never imagined. Darcy too could not believe his good fortune, not just that Elizabeth had agreed to marry him, but that she had done so delightedly. He had feared reservations, difficulties: instead she glowed. Their time in the Lake District had been a blend of relaxation and discovery, allowing their minds to heal along with their bruises.

We are not pretending, Elizabeth thought. She really was Mrs Darcy, the mistress of this wondrous estate. But would the staff and the local gentry take her seriously, or instead regard her as an impostor who had led their master astray? How would they feel about a Scottish handfasting that violated the

normal progression from engagement to banns to public ceremony?

Looking further afield, what of her own family, and the Fitzwilliams, and the de Bourghs? They had provided no addresses for correspondence in the Lake District; in consequence, somewhere inside Pemberley house would lie a pile of *letters*—their second point of contact with an outside world evaded for so long.

It has seemed so easy and right to say a few words at a blacksmith's shop in Gretna, in front of Georgiana and a few fellow-travellers. But those words altered the social geography of several families, affecting three grand estates as well as modest Longbourn.

Well, it was done. And she had wanted it done, not later, but at that very moment, when all that mattered was the feelings of two people, and not the disapproval that would now wash over them.

They descended to a stream, bordered by trees that hid the forecourt, and only on reaching the bridge did she see a crowd forming: their carriage must have been spotted.

She straightened her bonnet, aware that her dress was more practical than elegant, and clung to Darcy's arm.

'Will I pass muster?'

'You never looked more beautiful.'

'Hmm.' She peered at the waiting group, forming into two rows, but saw no sign of the Gardiners or anyone else she knew. The carriage stopped, stable lads and footmen ran over, and heads turned as Darcy helped her down. She took his right arm, Georgiana followed a step behind, and they advanced towards the steps, where a rosy-faced maid handed Elizabeth a bouquet of white lilies mixed with sage, dill, and other herbs.

'Welcome to Pemberley, ma'am.' Her voice shook with excitement.

A chorus from the other staff echoed the welcome, and Elizabeth tried to hold back tears as they were applauded up

the steps and into the hall, where a thin elderly lady greeted her with graceful civility.

‘My housekeeper,’ Darcy said. ‘Mrs Reynolds.’

‘A pleasure, ma’am.’ Mrs Reynolds smiled. ‘Now you must prepare for a surprise, for we have other guests eager to welcome you to your new home.’

The Gardiners, Elizabeth thought, but progressing further into the hall she froze in shock as a gentleman stepped forward.

‘Well, Lizzy.’ Mr Bennet studied her, as if to check she was truly intact in body and mind. ‘It would be too much, I suppose, to expect you to acquire a husband in a manner approaching normality. But I will listen to your explanation, and being a gullible sort of man, will doubtless be reconciled. For the rest, I am relieved to find you well.’

Elizabeth hesitated, wondering where to begin, but her father had already turned to Darcy. ‘Congratulations, sir. I commend your choice, if not your *modus operandi*. I must thank you, however, for your letter, and your invitation.’

‘*Invitation?*’ Elizabeth squeezed Darcy’s arm. ‘You asked my father here? Without telling me?’

‘And a few others,’ Darcy whispered.

Mr Bennet smiled, obviously enjoying her discomfort. ‘As an expert in concealment and underhand dealing you can hardly complain, Lizzy. We are assembled in the drawing room.’

He led her to a grand salon, where a cheer rang round as the door was opened. Head spinning, Elizabeth saw Mr and Mrs Gardiner, their children, Mrs Bennet next to Mary, Kitty, even Lydia, and a smiling Jane seated next to ...

Mr Bingley.

Once explained, the gathering was not so surprising. Darcy had written an apologetic invitation to Mr Bennet during the sojourn in the Lakes; he had also advised Mrs Reynolds to expect visitors for his wedding celebration. First to arrive had

been the Gardiners, to be reunited a few days later with their children as well as the Bennet clan.

Bingley, meanwhile, had reacted promptly to Darcy's confession; even as his friend was chasing up the Great North Road he had left for Netherfield to renew his suit. A few days had sufficed, and by the time Darcy's invitation reached Longbourn, all was happily settled.

Far harder was Darcy's task in accounting for the race to Gretna that had culminated in his marriage to Elizabeth. They had considered confessing to an elopement, kept secret so as to present a *fait accompli* to the Fitzwilliams, especially Lady Catherine and the earl. However, going through the post in his in-tray, Darcy found a note which made such inventions pointless.

Dear Darcy, I have to inform you that our adventures, variously embellished and misunderstood, have become a *cause célèbre* in the *ton* following the return of Selby and his acolytes. They are even whispered in the more sober salons of Brooks's, to which I have switched my allegiance. As promised, I have forgone disclosures compromising to your sister, but I fear it is hopeless. On the bright side, her role is portrayed as heroic rather than disgraceful, and her coming out next season anticipated with fascination. None of this has yet reached the scandal sheets, but sooner or later it will; I can only reiterate my apologies, and my esteem and best wishes for you both. Sincerely, Rupert Fleet

After Elizabeth and Georgiana had also read this letter, a conclusion was quickly agreed. They would simply tell the truth.

After dinner, over coffee and liqueurs, the story was told, omitting only Georgiana's ride on horseback with Wickham and other episodes considered inessential. As Elizabeth had feared, the main embarrassment was experienced not by the Darcys but herself, as her family demonstrated all the misgivings Darcy had expressed at Hunsford and in his letter.

First came Mrs Bennet's reaction to Georgiana's abduction at Lambton, which upset her so much that she called for smelling salts. The reason, it transpired, was not a concern for Miss Darcy's welfare, but dismay that Wickham had preferred her to Lydia or Kitty. While Darcy pretended he had misheard, Mr Bennet consoled his wife and tried to explain that this was not the best way to find husbands. Then Kitty mentioned a letter from Lydia boasting that *she* was to become Mrs Wickham, a red-faced Lydia called her a liar, and Mr Bennet ordered them to sit at opposite ends of the room and remain silent ...

At last Elizabeth was alone with Darcy in his study. From the drawing room echoed cheerful sounds of singing and dancing as Georgiana entertained her sisters-in-law. It was time to work through the correspondence that had piled up in Darcy's absence, and while he drafted replies, Elizabeth read the letters related to their journey.

Dear Darcy, A brief note to update you regarding Hodgkin, who is now residing at Newgate Prison awaiting a long journey at His Majesty's pleasure. My thanks for introducing me to my fiancée Miss Catlin, who is about to leave Whixley with her father. The wedding is planned for the spring and I would be honoured if you and Mrs Darcy would attend the breakfast, should you be in town. Sincerely, Grenville.

Elizabeth smiled, hoping the petite Kitten would pass muster riding to hounds, and turned to the next, penned a week before by Lieutenant Denny from his father's small estate in Yorkshire.

Dear Sir, I have news from Wakefield that will not be entirely to your liking. Despite warnings, the magistrate was persuaded that as an officer and a gentleman, Mr Wickham could be trusted to stay with the family of the constable while awaiting trial. (He had given his word of honour &c. &c.) The outcome is as expected: he has gone, we know not where, and given his

vengeful nature, precautions may be needed. For my own part, I am ruined. My father cannot cover my debt to Sir Reginald Montague, and I will be forced to flee as the only alternative to debtors' prison. As reparation for my follies I intend to join the camp followers of our armies in Spain and contribute to the war effort. I wish you well and hope Miss Darcy was recovered unharmed. Yours, Denny.

Elizabeth leaned over Darcy and pointed to the relevant passage. 'What if Wickham attempts a further abduction?'

He nodded. 'We must remain vigilant. But the next letter provides some reassurance.'

Elizabeth returned to her pile: could the next be from Wickham himself? But the address was Edward Street in London, and the writer Mrs Younge:

Dear Mr Darcy, I want you to know that I had nothing to do with Mr Wickham's plan to marry your sister, whose welfare I have always cherished. At Ramsgate I was perhaps too obliging, believing them truly in love. You can imagine my disgust when he turned up yesterday begging my help since he was out of money, pursued by the police, betrayed by his friends, and blacklisted by the banks. As a respectable woman I refused, upon which he stormed out, claiming I left him no alternative but to get on a boat to Antwerp and try his luck on the continent. I am telling you this in case you think I had something to do with the matter, which is emphatically not so.

'Do you believe her?' Elizabeth asked.

Darcy looked up. 'It's what I would expect him to do. His only alternative would be to return to Lambton, where he has relatives. But that is the first place the authorities will look.'

'And if Wickham reaches Holland?'

'He needs money, which he can seek in only two ways: an imprudent bank, or a rich lady.' Darcy shrugged. 'He may get away with it for a while, but not, I wager, for long.'

The final letter was from Lord Sterndale, its main purpose being to reassure Darcy that his son Tobias was reconciled to his new in-laws and had returned to a rational frame of mind.

Elizabeth sighed. Nothing was certain in life, but for the time being they seemed safe from the likes of Tobias Sterndale, Hodgkin, Wickham, and Gentleman Jack Finn. Her world had been shaken up, but the bits and pieces had fallen into a happy pattern that should endure.

She rose, kissed her husband, and left him to his work.

Epilogue

March 1813, 7 months later

Darcy usually joined the London season in April, when the city was no longer shrouded in smog. But it so happened that Georgiana shared her piano *maestro* with a young lady named Frances Craddock, whose mother was friendly with a patron of Almack's—the venue of choice for a society ball. By happy coincidence Miss Craddock was to come out during the same season as Georgiana and another musical friend, Margaret Inglis, so the families agreed a date for all three to make their debut.

Even when shared, this was a daunting prospect, and it came as a surprise to Darcy when his sister approached it matter-of-factly. She practised dancing, which came easily to one so musically gifted. Elizabeth tutored her in the arts of conversation. Above all, she had finally exorcised the ghost of Ramsgate. The abduction at Lambton had overwritten disaster with triumph, like a victory in a rematch at tennis. Wickham had been outwitted and forced to flee the country. A succession of other villains had been defeated as well, and she had gained the respect of new friends.

Seated beside her husband, Elizabeth ordered wine as they watched Georgiana take the floor with a government minister's son. Darcy looked tense—far more afraid than his sister; Elizabeth hoped the wine would relax him. They had secured invitations for Mr and Mrs Bingley, both of whom had partners for the Cotillion, which they were dancing in the same eight as Georgiana. Bingley's sisters had declared a prior engagement.

‘Dearest, stop *staring*,’ Elizabeth said. ‘You have no reason to fear Georgie's partner, who looks quite overawed.’

Darcy sighed. ‘This is a marriage market. We have to be careful.’

‘Have you not vetted her card already?’

‘Most of it was filled in by the committee, with names I hardly know. Except for Mr Fleet, who has the supper set.’

‘Is that a problem?’

‘It’s welcome, actually, since it allows Georgiana to meet other young gentlemen *before* he sweeps her off her feet.’

‘She likes him. What’s wrong with that?’

‘I just want her to understand the seriousness of marriage. The choice will fix her whole life, and should be approached calmly, without haste.’

‘It would be wrong for instance to perform a handfasting ceremony on impulse at three o’clock in the morning?’

He winced. ‘Do you think Georgiana will be questioned over—you know. The abduction?’

‘Of course. But she has a reply ready. *You mustn’t believe all you read in the newspapers.*’

‘And if the interrogation continues?’

‘Deflection. *How about yourself, sir? Has your name ever appeared in the Gazette?*’

‘In short, you have been training her in duplicity. After all my efforts to make her truthful.’

‘A woman must use such weapons as she possesses.’

Darcy rolled his eyes. ‘Perhaps I *will* dance the next set, if only to escape your moonshine.’

After dancing with Jane, Darcy returned to find Elizabeth with Richard Grenville and his fiancée Miss Catlin. A date in April had been set for their wedding, and after congratulating Miss Catlin, Darcy drew Grenville aside.

‘Your families are content with the match?’ he asked.

Grenville nodded. ‘My sister was lukewarm, believing Miss Catlin too genteel. But Ada is a bit of a daredevil—which is why she ran off with Hodgkin in the first place. She and my sister are friendly rivals now.’

‘It will be the third wedding to result from our race to Gretna,’ Darcy said. ‘There may even be a fourth.’

‘You refer to your sister?’ Grenville said.

‘My valet Burgess is smitten with a maid we picked up in Scotland. Miss Iona Macrae.’

‘And Mr Fleet?’

Darcy shook his head. ‘Georgiana is but seventeen.’

Grenville paused, then reached into his pocket. ‘I have a letter here that might interest you. From a certain General Gordon, who heads the British garrison on the island of Madeira.’

‘I don’t see the relevance ...’

‘The convict ships provision there *en route* to Australia.’ Grenville handed over a sheet.

To Earl Grenville of Whixley.

Dear Sir, the Fortune has just called carrying 155 male convicts, and the captain asked me to pass on a message concerning one of their number. This man is listed as Josiah Hodgkin, but has convinced the prisoners in his mess that he is actually your son, Richard. Even the chaplain gives some credence to his story, since he talks like an educated gentleman and holds a document embossed with your seal. His intention on reaching Australia is to intercede with the governor and demand privileges commensurate with his status as heir to Whixley. I see no reason to believe any of this, but feel you should be warned in case he submits a claim on your estate.

Sincerely, General H. Gordon, Acting Governor

Darcy handed this back. ‘Could Hodgkin’s document be genuine?’

‘No. But he might have falsified the design on our seal.’

‘He can hardly trouble you from Australia.’

They returned to Elizabeth and Miss Catlin.

Rupert Fleet had arrived, and was paying his respects to Darcy when a young lady approached accompanied by a man whom Darcy recalled all too well ...

Tobias Sterndale.

Unconsciously forming a fist, Darcy sensed wariness in Fleet too as they managed an awkward greeting.

‘May I present my sister,’ Sterndale said.

Miss Sterndale joined another group, and Darcy said, ‘I trust there will be no more—trouble.’

A nod. ‘I was not in a normal state of mind, sir.’

‘Then we will let bygones be bygones. All the same, I prefer you not to approach my sister. Is your father here? And Lady Sterndale?’

He shook his head. ‘They keep to themselves.’

‘You are reconciled to the marriage?’

‘I don’t understand it.’ Sterndale sighed. ‘She is impossible, and they quarrel all the time. But yes. I accept what has happened and will honour my father’s wishes in her regard.’ A glance at Fleet. ‘Your advice at Gretna was well-considered, and I am following it.’

He turned, stiffly, and left them.

It could have all turned out differently, Elizabeth mused. Instead of losing at cards, Wickham and Denny might have made a fortune. In funds again, Wickham might have targetted Lydia. She, Elizabeth, might have avoided Darcy’s company, never realising what an opportunity she had shunned.

She rose from her bed, went to the window, and opened it a crack. In the grate the embers no longer glowed, but the room was still warm. Georgiana was staying overnight at the Craddocks, and probably still talking of the ball with Miss Craddock and Miss Inglis. Mr Fleet had been attentive, and it had been charming to watch them together ...

In the bed Darcy stirred, and sat up.

‘All well?’

‘A little fresh air.’

‘Shall I leave you?’

‘Stay.’ She returned to his side. ‘What think you of Mr Fleet?’

‘Lively. Decent. Impulsive.’

‘What I like is that they enjoy one another.’ She leaned over and kissed him. ‘Just as I enjoy you.’

‘As a victim to tease?’

‘What other reason could there be?’

‘Fleet is sensible, I’ll say that for him. In his position I would never have conceded defeat to a man like Selby.’

‘His eye was on the larger prize. He proved it by rushing to Georgiana’s aid at Carlisle.’

‘A verray, parfit, gentil knyght,’ Darcy quoted. ‘Which is a dilemma for Georgie, who has other admirers now.’

‘I think Fleet’s luck will change. If he stays the course he will win the race that matters.’

They curled up together, and Elizabeth reflected again on her own luck—which had stemmed from Wickham’s villainy. Two days had disturbed the pattern of her earlier life, and brought her happiness in the last way she had ever expected.

It could have all turned out differently ...

But it didn’t.

Afterword

Darcy's Pursuit (DP) departs from *Pride and Prejudice* (P&P) at Brighton, where Wickham incurs such serious debts that he plans (with Denny) a second run at Georgiana's dowry. Later, bad weather hampers Elizabeth's tour with the Gardiners, so that she reaches Lambton when the Darcys have already returned, and witnesses the abduction.

As is well known, the reason for such abductions (and elopements) was the ease with which marriages could be performed under Scottish law. A girl could consent at the age of twelve, and the only ceremony required was to hold hands in front of witnesses and declare your wish to marry. Under English law the rules were far stricter, owing to the Hardwicke Act of 1753, which demanded a public ceremony, in a church, in daylight, with the banns read three times beforehand, and parental consent for anyone under the age of 21. Couples wishing to escape these restrictions headed for the southernmost village in Scotland, Gretna Green, often pursued by disapproving relatives.

From London, such a journey was 350 miles (in round numbers); from Derbyshire, still over 200 miles. Travelling by horse and carriage a typical speed was 5–7 mph, which would imply 2–3 days on the road even if such levels could be maintained day and night. In reality, of course, this was impossible, since horses driven at a fast trot would tire after two hours, as well as needing food and water. So if you wished to keep the same horses, and sleep during the night, you would need weeks rather than days.

What changed this equation was the demand for an efficient mail service. By the 1800s Britain was criss-crossed by a network of turnpikes, for which detailed information is available online (www.turnpikes.org.uk). These roads were maintained by each locality, the cost being met by fees paid by road-users at toll houses along the way. On these superior roads, royal mail coaches could run at over 10 mph, and toll-keepers were required to open their gates and let them pass without delay (forewarned by a horn blast). As in DP, mail

coaches would also take a few passengers, who in this way enjoyed the fastest possible transport.

Chief among the turnpikes was the Great North Road (GNR), centuries old in 1800, which ran from London to Edinburgh on a route partly established by the Romans. As the fastest north-south connection the GNR was favoured by mail coaches (not to mention eloping couples), but for most journeys one needed to branch out: Gretna, for instance, lay well away in the north-west. Even so, the network of turnpikes was so dense that it covered almost the whole distance from Derbyshire to Gretna.

There remained the problem of tired horses, and this could be solved only by changing them. As a result, along all turnpikes, coaching houses offered stabling, and fresh horses for hire; some were also inns, offering food and overnight accommodation. As well as fresh horses, a traveller could hire a postboy to ride postilion, or a coachman. The royal mail kept horses at each stage, where ostlers gave mail coaches priority and could change their horses in 5–10 minutes.

The general system of turnpikes and coaching houses is described in the book *Quicksilver: a Hundred Years of Coaching 1750–1850*, by R.C. and J.M. Anderson, published in 1973. But for sheer geographical detail the best source is the contemporary *Cary's New Itinerary* (1798), subtitled *An accurate delineation of the great roads, both direct and cross, throughout England and Wales, with many of the principal roads in Scotland*. The author John Cary was a cartographer commissioned by the Postmaster General to survey England's roads, and the result is encyclopaedic, covering all routes and listing coaching inns along the way. Most inns named in DP come from this source (available online from Google Books); in many cases the inn still exists, and descriptions are based on historical engravings or photographs.

Almost all locations in DP are historical, exceptions of course being Pemberley and environs. Lambton is based on the town of Bakewell, which has a 12th century church as described in chapter 1 (All Saints), a hotel named the Rutland Arms, and a road named Bridge Street leading to the river

Wye. The counterpart to Pemberley is Chatsworth Park, north-east of Bakewell on the road to Chesterfield; Eastlea Green is fictional.

The novel *Camilla* by Fanny Burney (referenced in chapter 4) was published in 1796, and includes an abduction of one of the characters (Eugenia) as described.

All characters met *en route* to Gretna are fictional, but two resemble historical counterparts. Gentleman Jack Finn (the highwayman) is based on an eccentric ex-coachman Jack Rann, also known as *16-string Jack* owing to a habit of tying 8 multi-coloured strings to each knee of his breeches. Appearing before a magistrate he arrived wearing a bunch of flowers on his coat, and decorated his irons with blue ribbons. After giving insolent answers to questions he was acquitted for lack of evidence (see Wikipedia for details).

More remarkable still was Lord Erskine, the model for Lord Sterndale in DP, a former Lord Chancellor, who in 1818 (aged 66) set off for Gretna Green with his mistress and housekeeper Sarah Buck, pursued by his son Thomas. At the time Erskine had eight legitimate children; his purpose was to legitimise his two children with Buck. It was said that to avoid recognition he arrived in Gretna dressed as a woman, while Sarah Buck hid her children under her cloak. The furious Thomas arrived too late to prevent the marriage, which proved tempestuous and ended in divorce. Before these adventures, Erskine was known as a distinguished lawyer who had defended radicals and reformers including Thomas Paine, author of *Rights of Man*.

M. A. Sandiford, October 2023