**A Hunsford Tale**

by HeidiMeldrum

**Summary**

Heidi, after the shittiest day of her life thusfar, finds herself transported to Jane Austen’s fictional world. With nothing but her cleaning kit and a vague sense of familiarity, she’ll be pitted against the trials and tribulations of 19th century England and learns that the Bennets and de Bourghs are very real.

**Notes**

AN: Please note that any dialogue that might sound Austen or Heyer-esque, is meant in earnest. I listened to quite a few of their books while outlining, and some of their words might slip in. I use them only in the highest regard and mean no copyright infringement on their writings/estates.

AN the 2nd: this is my first foray into Regency (be it romance or otherwise); but I’ve done a lot of research, as much as I can. If something is blatantly wrong, or needs tweaking, where my research has been lacking, please let me know.

AN the 3rd: I’m going to do my best to post on the corresponding date of the incidents as this fic is 90 chapters long already and is almost completed. Tags will be added as we go along and meet new people (10 chapters in February, but will slow down soonish)

AN the 4th: In an effort not to break suspension of disbelief, the places where Ms. Austen blanked out a name I have made up a new ones. They are wholly fictional places, just so we have a name. I have tried to steer clear of fanon names as well, using only Ms. Austen’s work at my ‘source’ for such things.
The road blurred as Heidi wiped at her eyes, the wheel held steady by her knee.

At least it was warm enough for rain this week, she thought.

*Three feet of snow would have been a nightmare.*

She’d left the last vestiges of civilization behind, crying nonstop for nearly an hour. Wanting to avoid the traffic, she'd taken the long way from Utica, bypassing Syracuse and heading to the lake.

Heidi loved her parents' cabin but she had never taken advantage of its remote location. Not like this.

The fact that Peter still hadn't made the trek west made it even better.

Once the road straightened out of a curve, Heidi threw her tissue away and pumped a little hand sanitizer into her palm, keeping her knee on the wheel. She cursed the fact that she was crying and driving. It made everything messy.

In a few short hours, her world had fallen apart. Instead of spending one last night in her apartment, Heidi was running away to the cabin on Lake Ontario.

Heidi shivered. The heat in her junker of a car went out an hour ago and the plummeting temperatures had her wondered where her gloves were.

At 3 a.m., Heidi had been awake for twenty-one hours and she was exhausted. She'd put in a full day at the office and then gone to the dinner theater for rehearsal, where afterwards she'd been laid off. She’d loved that job. Performing for the tourists in small shows had been her creative outlet. And now it was gone.

Taking her exit, Heidi headed deeper into the woods and relaxed into the last leg of her journey. With about twenty minutes left in her drive she'd be home soon, as close to home as she was going to get.

It couldn't come fast enough.

If only they’d laid her off before she’d put in three hours of singing and stage direction.

However, none of them could have known about the disaster that had awaited her at Peter’s place.

Glancing over her shoulder at the boxes in the back seat, Heidi tried not to think about the fact that the cabin might be her only home for some time.

The hired company would be moving the bulk of her furniture to Peter's condo tomorrow. She had three more days to get her things out of her apartment before her lease was up and the pressure was on.

*Shit.*

She'd need to call to cancel the movers first thing in the morning and figure out some other place to live. Or, she needed to talk her God-awful landlord into extending her lease for another month or
She still had her day job to worry about and moving in with Peter was no longer an option.

She saw it again – them. Legs entwined on the bed, sheets fallen to the floor. Luckily, her ears were already ringing too loudly for her to hear breathing or, God forbid, a moan when she’d walked into the bedroom.

Heidi blinked her eyes, trying to clear away the memory from a few short hours ago. There was no chance she'd be moving in with Peter. Not when he’d been sleeping with another woman on the night before they took the next step in their relationship.

Heidi glanced down at the ring on her left hand, glinting in the light of passing street lamp. They would have been married in the summer.

Not anymore.

The car slipped and she glanced back at the road in the rearview, trying to correct for ice.

But, she overcorrected and the world spun. A loud crunch echoed as everything went black.

Her ears were ringing again, but it was different this time.

Heidi pushed the obstruction away from her face, recognizing it as the airbag once her eyes adjusted. She wasn't sure how long she'd been unconscious, but the clock read 3:23, so it couldn’t have been long.

She whimpered at the sight of the tree in the hood of her car, the metal crumpled like an accordion.

Eyeing the dash that now sat in the passenger seat, Heidi knew she could have died.

"Thank God."

She took a breath, her hands shaking, and unbuckled her seat, struggling to hit the release. Her pink puffy coat tangled with the belt as she moved it out of the way.

Her neck twinged as she glanced up at the highway some twenty feet above where she was. The ditch would keep her car hidden from view, and no passing driver would see her struggling up the ravine.

She reached for her phone, hoping she had reception on her piece-of-crap cell. One press of the button failed to power on the screen.

Another.

The third time, Heidi cursed: the screen was shattered.

Throwing it in her purse, Heidi squeezed her way out of the door and immediately collapsed onto the frozen ground, crying out in pain.

She wasn't going to get anywhere unless someone drove by and happened to see her. Either she’d broken her leg, or she’d dislocated her knee again.

Grinding her teeth, Heidi snagged her purse strap and gripped the car door using it to support her weight. As carefully as possible she pulled herself up off the dead leaves and branches.

With another grimace, she eyed the road with defeat, there was no chance she'd manage to crawl her way up that slope.
Wind cut through the clearing and Heidi shuddered.

She knew there was a driveway and a house down the road, somewhere.

Heidi zipped her jacket, the cold piercing through her thin cotton shirt.

If she could make it to the cabin, maybe someone would be able to help her. She’d passed the driveway leading into the woods a hundred times.

Hobbling carefully toward the back of the car, Heidi did her best to put as little pressure on her leg as possible. It wasn’t the first time she’d dislocated her knee, if that’s what had happened; but this time she wasn’t on a soccer field with a medical team nearby. Her soccer career over before it even began.

She wasn’t even sure where the closest hospital was.

Her parents’ cabin was a remote retreat, with civilization far off. There had to be emergency services somewhere, but with her cell busted, she needed a landline.

Opening the door to the backseat, Heidi grabbed her overnight bag and put it on the roof then slid into the back to reach for her version of a bug out bag, trying not to bang her knee on anything. Instead of survival supplies, she kept all-purpose cleaner, rubber gloves, and mild abrasive cleaners inside. It was her way to ensure that the surfaces could be disinfected, wherever she might end up. Though her parents kept their cabin clean, Heidi couldn’t trust that it would be up to her standards after weeks or months of being closed up.

If the owners of this house were not home, there was no way she would be breaking in without bleaching the door handles first.

Heidi swallowed, a sharp stab of pain arching through her leg. She had to get to the house down the road; her car was busted and she would need medical help soon.

Spying her scarf, the tassels tangled around the headrest, Heidi yanked it free and wrapped it around her neck.

She dropped the bag to the ground and searched for something to use as a crutch, her blinkers flashing in the darkness. It took a few moments to spot a fallen branch that would be able to hold her weight. Judging by the look of it, her new cane appeared to have fallen off the tree that her car had crashed in to.

Karma.

It took longer than she’d hoped to get herself ready. With the messenger bag on her shoulder, the overnight bag on her good arm and her purse slung across her back, Heidi knew she’d look ridiculous.

It was a shame she’d packed her beanie with the poof at the top. That would certainly have completed the look.

Heidi glanced up the ravine. Not a single car had passed since she’d gained consciousness and she needed to get to a phone before the cold set in.

With the flashlight in her right hand, Heidi walked away from the road the promise of a call for help the only thing keeping her moving.
The sky was beginning to lighten two hours later when Heidi acknowledged the truth. She had no idea where she was.

Her fitness watch flashed the time as being past five. The throb in her leg had gone from awful to screaming and she'd yet to find the cursed house. She had some naproxen in her purse; but Heidi was afraid to go searching for it. Even taking a minute to fumble and find it, swallow it dry, and get everything back on was valuable time wasted.

She'd come upon a dirt road around 4:30 and had been following it with no luck.

Needing a break, Heidi dropped the bag on a nearby rock and leaned against a tree trunk in the burgeoning light. She stared dumbly at a rock, her only friend in this barren, chilly place.

"How far away is this cabin, rock?"

Running her hand through her hair, Heidi remembered that her butterfly clip had fallen out in pieces an hour ago. She yawned in defeat and looked around. The trees were beginning to thin out, pulling away from the lane, branching out, and allowing the dawning light to spill across the dirt.

Horses whinnied in the distance and she frowned in the direction of the noise.

*Wouldn't horses still be sleeping at this hour?* At least it meant people were nearby, she thought as she picked up her bags again. That hope spurred her on, figuring she'd been walking in circles.

Heidi balanced on her good leg and grabbed her walking stick, limping down the dirt road the promise of stables lightening her heart.

By the time the sky was pink and purple with sunrise, a light dusting of snow glittering on the road, Heidi was near tears. Her leg throbbed with pain, the extent of which she'd never felt before. It was probable that she’d done irreparable damage to her leg. Even putting as little weight on it as possible was sure to keep her from going to work on Monday and racking up medical bills.

Heidi groaned at the sky. At least she'd typed out a quick text to her boss when she'd been in the store in Utica, calling in sick for the next few days. She needed to get away from the city after the hell she'd been through and with the new year resetting paid-time off, she had plenty of sick days to use.

Soon she came across a house, sitting on the side of the road, rather than at the end of it. Ancient bricks patched with plaster caught her eye and she frowned. She’d expected a 1950s ranch; but the house appeared to be one of those historic colonial buildings. Complete with a thatched roof.

Heidi stared at the roof, dumbfounded.

*Was it even legal to have a thatched roof in New York?*

She stepped up to the front door and pulled on the handle. Inside the house old-fashioned bells chimed.

"They must be going for authentic." She chuckled under her breath, her leg pulsing.

When no one answered the door, Heidi rested against the plastered wall. She was going to have to break in.

Dropping her bags, Heidi eyed the doorway, hoping to find a hidden key or something that would aid in her breaking and entering.
There was a deep snorting bellow and Heidi whipped her head around, a large horse suddenly on top of her.

"May I be of service, Miss?"

White-hot pain seared through her leg and she collapsed onto the front step, catching sight of the horse’s rider as he dismounted.

The man was at her side in an instant and Heidi, the pain blinding, didn't even pull away from his touch as he rolled her onto her side.

"Are you well?"

She looked up at him. There was something strange about the man, his jacket unlike anything she’d seen but Heidi couldn't focus.

"I need a doctor. Please." Tears spilled unbidden from her eyes.

The man nodded before her world went black. Again.
"Good afternoon, Miss."

Gasping awake, Heidi sat up at the intrusion of a voice in her head.

"I would advise against too much exertion."

A middle-aged man in a high-collared dress shirt and a vest stood in the doorway in the far right corner of the room.

"Where am I?"

Her mind was hazy and Heidi ran her hand over her face knowing something was wrong. The smell of roast beef and a wood fire washed over her. Realizing what she’d just done, Heidi shoved her hands under her thighs, her eyes fluttering against the harsh light that filtered through an open window.

"You are in my surgery."

The room, with its dirty plaster walls and filthy cabinets, was NOT a doctor's office.

"Wha-what do you mean? This isn't a surgery, it’s barely a clinic."

"It is my place of business.” He closed the door behind him.

"I need to go somewhere with a proper doctor."

The man, who’d begun to walk toward the bed, stopped. The light-hearted, teasing tone had changed and a flash of annoyance crossed his features. "I am a proper physician, I assure you. I graduated from Cambridge. Twenty-three years ago."

Heidi looked around the room again, her lip curling.

He was a liar.

"No proper doctor would have patients in a room as dirty as this.” She waved her hand toward the Kommode.

She scoffed at herself, forgetting the word in English.

Dresser.

—with its stone countertop and glass-doored hutch filled with jars and bottles.

“A doctor's office is supposed to be as sterile as possible."

The man took a calming breath. "Miss, you have been through a good deal of trauma. The laudanum is sure to be confusing matters, but I promise you that my surgery is clean."

Heidi’s stomach dropped. "Laudanum?"

The man smiled, wiping his hand on a towel, and walked over to the bed.
"I administered a dosage when Dowding brought you to the door a few hours ago. He witnessed your faint on the Browne's front step. And with the family away--"

"I'm sorry," she said, waving her hand to get him to stop talking. She needed to think. "I don't understand. I didn't think anyone still used laudanum anymore."

She tried not to pull away from his dirty hands. If she'd been drugged, there was no telling what this man intended and she had no desire to upset him.

"Your knee was displaced, dislocated. It was necessary to administer laudanum to ensure you remained unconscious while I put the joint back."

She looked down for the first time and saw her leg in a splint, an incredibly crude splint. Her jeans had been cut up to mid-thigh. A thin sheet bunched over her good leg.

"I thought it might be broken." She couldn't forget about the state of the room; but Heidi brushed it aside for now. There were more important things to worry about. "How did it look on the x-ray?"

The doctor frowned. "X-ray?"

"You didn't x-ray it?"

"My apologies, however I have no idea what this 'x-ray' is."

Her eyes went wide.

This man was unreal.

"I apologize for cutting open your…" His eyes lingered on her bare knee though his brow was knit in confusion rather than looking at her in a sexual nature. "Breeches."

"Better than taking them off, I suppose," she muttered, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Would you be so kind as to tell me what occurred to put you in such a state? You may have done irreparable damage to the tendons. It is best if I know the truth."

"I was on my way to New Haven, to my parent's cabin on Lake Ontario."

"Ontario?"

Heidi sniffed. She was starting to grow annoyed.

Who hadn't heard of Ontario? It was like five miles down the road.

"You know, between New York and Canada, one of the Great Lakes? Niagara Falls is on one side of it?"

"It is far worse than I feared." The man shook his head at her, his shoulders slumping. "You appear to have suffered brain damage in addition to the dislocated knee."

"What do you mean?" She tried not to; but there was a snippy tone in her voice that she couldn’t control.

"Miss, you are currently in England."

Her eyes locked with his, voice dead-panned. "That's funny."
Ignoring the old-fashioned bottles on the finely carved dresser, her eyes swept the room.

The pitcher and basin could easily be explained away. Maybe the doctor enjoyed antiques.

But what she couldn’t ignore was the wooden chair sitting on a dais directly across the room from her, near the only window.

Leather straps hung from the armrests, and a set of straps were looped around the front legs in some mockery of an electrocution chair.

Heidi’s throat went dry, wondering what the hell this madman was up to.

She glared him down. Now she was getting downright pissed.

"What is this, one of those prank shows? Or did I stumble into one of those old-timey tourist destinations where they teach kids how to make homemade candles and butter?"

"Miss, I do not jest. You are in England. Perhaps you could tell me what you think today’s date is?"

Heidi rolled her eyes. "If I answer truthfully, you're going to insist it's 1776 or something, aren't you?"

"Is that what year you believe it to be?"

His genuine concern surprised Heidi enough to silence the four-letter word that was about to come tumbling out. Fully decked out in soft leather pants and one of those folded white neck tie things, he was a spitting image of an actor in one of her mother's movies.

"It's February 8th, 2019. At least it was when I got in my car to come out here. So, it must be the 9th by now, unless I lost more than a day in a drug-induced haze."

The man tilted his head. "Drugs, Miss?"

"Laudanum. It’s poppy based, isn't it? I don't know much about those sorts of things. Mother always preferred the new agey stuff, like Echinacea and goldenseal."

Heidi stopped talking, realizing she was rambling, and looked away.

"What is today's date?" she asked.

"February 8th, 1812."

Heidi almost snorted, but controlled herself. "1812? As in the 'Battle of'?"

The man frowned at her.

"I just watched something about this... What was it?" Heidi tapped her fingers on her chin trying to remember, then realizing she was touching her face again, dropped them to her lap. "Something about the British trying to burn down the White House? Didn't Dolly Madison save the portrait of Washington?"

"I have no knowledge about the war in America."

Heidi’s hand balled into a fist at her side. Enough was enough.
"Listen, buddy. I don’t know what your deal is, but can’t you drop this charade and get me to a proper hospital? I'm sure this clinic is great in teaching kiddos what the world was like 200 years ago, but I need to get this knee examined."

He blinked. Heidi threw her hands up.

"Like... by a professional? An orthopedic surgeon or something?" She was speaking to him as if he were an idiot, but she didn’t care.

"I can arrange to have you sent up to London, if you wish; but traveling in the stage or in a coach would do more harm than good, I fear."

Giving up on the man’s sanity, Heidi sneered.

Maybe it was better to play along. It was clear this man was dedicated to his role. And, he had just offered to let her leave. "How far is it to London?"

"Twenty miles."

"That's it?" She raised an incredulous eyebrow, wondering if he meant twenty miles to the metropolis or if they were in a neighborhood within the city and it was twenty miles to the center. Heidi knew that London was a sprawling metropolis, but was not sure how sprawling.

The man nodded.

She shook her head, not even believing what she was about to say. "Good, then get me in a carriage and we'll get there in an hour and I can get that ‘x-ray’ done." She’d even put air-quotes around the word.

The man clasped his hands behind his back – the way people always did when they had bad news.

"Miss, the ride to London will take a half day, nearly four hours if the weather is fair and holds. And when I was out last, it was sn--."

"Oh Jesus, give me a break, dude. I get that you're enthusiastic. I get assigned a role and I live up to it, too; but I'm in some serious pain here."

"I am the only physician for at least ten miles, Miss."

It was impossible. This close to London, there’d probably be doctor’s offices on every corner.

"I am the best chance you have at healing that leg."

There was a knock on the door and the doctor called out for the person to enter.

Heidi expected a nurse, or at the least a grown woman dressed in whatever muslin concoction this tourist trap used to pass for Regency England; but she was surprised to see a girl, somewhere between twelve and fifteen, walk into the clinic. Like a thousand other extras in the movies, the girl was dressed in a regency appropriate drab floral pattern.

"Father, I wondered if your patient had yet awoken."

The man smiled and Heidi looked closely at the two people. Though the girl was blonde and the man black-haired with salt and pepper threading through his mutton chops, the family resemblance was uncanny. They had the same brow and nose, and even the same stance.
Maybe this was something they did together to bond, spending their free time showing tourists the harsh reality of the days before electricity. Heidi thought it was heartwarming, despite her anger.

Heidi eyed the stained rag on the table nearby and fought a shudder of revulsion. This room wasn’t up to standards to be used as an actual first aid station; but hopefully some tour group would come through the house wanting to learn more about 19th century healthcare and disease.

Perhaps it would be better to play along. Eventually she’d have to run into someone in modern clothing and try to convince them to get her to the hospital.

"She is, indeed. Please have Mrs. Newtown bring some broth and bread from the kitchen? Miss—"
The doctor paused, staring at her as if it hadn’t occurred to him to ask her name.

"Heidi, my name is Heidi."

"And your surname?"

"Favreau."

The girl gasped, taking a step backwards and looking at her father as if Heidi were an abomination. "She is French?"

Panic shone in the girl's eyes. Heidi knew a fair bit about acting scared, but one couldn’t fake going pale so quick.

"Rose, do as I ask."

Rose nodded, staring at Heidi. She bobbed a quick curtsey at her father and left the room without another word. His eyes still bore a kindly look when they settled on her, albeit a slightly more analytical one.

"You must be aware, even if you are from the former colonies, that the British are at war with the French and Bonaparte. You have no French accent. I would advise you not to share your last name with others in the village. Prejudice against the French will not aid in your return home."

Heidi worried her bottom lip, trying to think of what else she knew about 1812. Her mother was obsessed with Jane Austen, but as far as she knew the author never talked about the battles that her soldier characters were fighting in. Heidi was certain no romance novels help her now.

"I suppose you are right, if it really is 1812," Wanting to, but fighting back the desire to air-quote once more.

The doctor nodded, then smiled thoughtfully. "Perhaps for now, you should refer to yourself as Heidi Meldrum."

"Meldrum?"

"A distant branch of my family is named Meldrum. It will do for now."

"And your daughter?" she asked, glancing at the closed door. "Won't she know her own cousins?"

"I will handle that." He stood up, walked over to the dresser, and opened one of the bottles.

"Why are you helping me lie to your daughter?" Heidi shifted as a sharp stab cut down her leg, and she hissed at the pain.
"Do you require more laudanum?" he asked, avoiding her question.

Heidi narrowed her eyes at him. "No more laudanum."

"What do you wish for the pain?"

It was then that Heidi remembered her bags; she had a few codeine pills in her gear. She hadn’t trusted the movers not to steal them, her mother told a horror story about movers stealing her father’s medications, so she’d thrown them in her purse. The only hard-core drugs she had.

"My bags, do you have them?"

"Dowding returned an hour ago with your belongings." The doctor waved his hand toward the bags placed in a wicker chair in the far corner of the room.

"I suppose you have a convenient explanation for them as well?"

"I was hoping to ask you about them, Miss Meldrum." The doctor emphasized the fake last name. "The material is unlike anything I have ever seen. Nor have I come across the material which your overcoat was made of."

"I don't think I can explain them away." She gave him a helpless shrug. Her pink puffy coat the least of her concerns. But she hoped to egg him on. If there was some way she could get him to admit he was from 2019, she’d be golden.

When he didn’t take the bait, Heidi pursed her lips.

"Could you hand me the overnight bag? I have some medicine in them." Heidi pointed to bag with the pink and gray camo pattern on it.

The doctor nodded and brought it over.

It seemed they weren't opposed to preventing ALL modern conveniences from entering the set or they would have repacked her things in an era-appropriate trunk.

And he wouldn’t have commented on her jacket.

Heidi rummaged through the bag, pulling out the long-sleeved t-shirt and jeggings she planned to wear tomorrow. After moving the underwear out of the way, she found her overnight toiletry bag. Unzipping it, she sorted through the contents and cursed.

"Shit, it's in my other bag." The pain killers were probably sitting in the black bag on the floor of her backseat, sitting there for any scavenger to take.

He grimaced as though he’d been punched in the stomach.

"I—I." He paused, collecting his thoughts. “I cannot imagine where a woman of education learned such a foul word. Granted, there are many French who have not been raised properly…”

Heidi snapped her eyes over to him. "Excuse me?"

"That was rather vulgar for someone in such high quality clothing."

Rage grew in her chest. "Yes, I'm sure it was."

Something akin to disappointment in his eyes tempered Heidi’s words. Maybe the laudanum was
hitting her harder than she thought.

"Fine, doctor." She took a breath. "I apologize for my language, but you have to understand that where I come from, vocabulary is different. We are allowed to use such language, without repercussions."

He snorted. "No doubt. But if you wish to stay in my house and recover, I ask that you curb your tongue."

Heat suffused her cheeks as Heidi remembered the girl that played his daughter. If this was no joke and she was accused of corrupting her with bad language, there would be worse consequences than not having some pain pills.

"I will do my best."

The doctor nodded.

The more he spoke, the crazier she thought he was.

_Better not to anger her host._

Heidi settled back into the pillows, hoping to exude calm and patience. "So what's your name then? If I'm allowed to ask."

"My name is Ernest Carter. Since you were not—" The doctor coughed lightly before continuing on. "Raised in the same manner as my daughter, it is proper to address me as Doctor Carter. My wife, whom I expect will join us shortly, is titled Mrs. Carter, if you care to use such formal appellations, and she too refers to me as Doctor Carter."

"Of course." Heidi glanced down at her hands, feeling chastened. She had a part to play if she wanted to get out of here.

A silence passed between them. With no other noise around to drown out her thoughts, it became deafening.

"Could you pass me the small purse? I have some emergency pain killers in one of the pockets. I can take one of those now to help."

The doctor squinted at her, like she'd made the wrong word choice, but nodded and brought over her purse. Right where it always was, she easily pulled out the small bottle of naproxen. It wasn't codeine but at least it wasn't an opioid.

He asked for the bottle and she handed it over after pouring two pills into her palm. The doctor shook it, the pills rattling inside, and eyed the label. "It is strange, these tablets. I have not heard of this medicine before."

"I suppose not. They're made in America." Rather than going into the whole future/past thing that irritated the doctor, Heidi figured it would be safer to talk about the fact that she was supposed to be in freakin' New York State.

Heidi eyed the doctor, confusion filling her. "Why don't you speak with a British accent? You don't even sound like you're from Syracuse, so it's clear your director isn't too concerned with sounding authentic."

He frowned. "This is how I speak, how I have spoken all my life."
Doing her best to play on the British accent, something that despite her years in Community Theater she sucked at, Heidi instructed the doctor.

"You're supposed to sound like you're from Harvard Yard or Cockney, whatever that is. You know 'tally ho' and 'this is insupportable' and 'blimey, that Constable is a good bloke'.'"

The doctor shook his head, though he sported a good-natured grin. "Your mood has certainly improved. Though I can promise you that I have never heard anyone speak in such a ridiculous manner."

Heidi pursed her lips at his admission.

If he continued to insist that this was 1812, and this wasn’t some dream she’d made up, because surely she wouldn’t be questioning the year if it was, she would need to alter her approach.

Heidi only just kept herself from telling him that at first sight of someone normal, she would be leaving. Because, unfortunately, with her leg in a splint for at least the next few days, she needed more than a stolen set of car keys to escape.

"May I inspect your leg? I did reset the bones, but I must ensure that blood is flowing properly."

Since this wasn’t the first time she dislocated it, Heidi was willing to give the guy a chance. If what he did seemed legit, she wouldn't try to hobble her way out of the house in the middle of the night.

"Go ahead." She gave him a nod.

Doctor Carter returned the nod and inspected her leg, undoing the ties that kept the splint in place. "It was not a bad dislocation, in fact, it fairly moved back on its own despite the inflammation. How long had you been walking on it?"

Heidi hissed as he probed the area.

Just like a doctor to have pokey fingers.

"I crashed around 3 am."

"Dowding brought you to the surgery at 8. You mean to tell me you wandered the forests for five hours?"

Heidi nodded. "I thought I knew where I was going, but clearly I did not."

She gave a shrug, the doctor prodding her knee. Heidi tried not to flinch, it hurt like a bitch. "I found a branch to use as a crutch. In the middle of nowhere I couldn't wait for help, not with as cold as it was last night."

Doctor Carter shook his head. "It is a miracle you made it this far."

Awkward during the examination, Heidi told him more of her story. “I injured it before, ten years ago. I thought I maybe had to walk half a mile to get to the nearest home, but I must have gotten lost."

"I daresay you did, Miss Meldrum." He did not make eye contact but she could hear a lightness in his tone, his fingers massaging her injury. “And you have no knowledge about the Brownes?"

She frowned.
“The family whose home you were attempting to enter?”

Heidi shook her head.

A light knock on the door caused them both to look up and an elderly, overweight woman came in carrying a tray with a soup bowl, a crystal glass with a dark liquid in it, and a roll.

"Your broth, doctor." The woman gave a quick curtsey as she placed the tray on the edge of the dresser by the door.

"Thank you, Mrs. Newton."

The woman smiled, leaving the room without another word, and the doctor returned to his examination, checking the pulse in her foot. He turned her ankle in every possible direction and checked for numbness.

"Your circulation is not currently affected, though the swelling is intense. Best you stay abed for the next twenty-four hours, so we might monitor your progress. How quickly you heal will determine the rest of your treatment."

Heidi nodded. "I would still feel better with an x-ray."

"Is that something they have in the former colonies?"

Heidi nodded, playing along. "They take pictures of the bones through muscle and skin."

He raised an eyebrow, straightening his shoulders as if this were a great surprise.

"It’s advanced." She avoided his gaze, unsure if she could keep the scorn off her features.

"I imagine so. I would dearly love to see this x-ray. It would be helpful in my practice."

"It will revolutionize medicine."

"Do you know much about it?" His eyes alighted with possibility.

Heidi shook her head. "I barely made it through community college. My Associate’s degree is little help when it comes to medical knowledge. It had something to do with radiation, but otherwise…” She trailed off.

"That is a shame."

Heidi nodded. Her Associate’s didn’t help get her anywhere. It had been a useless degree that had only put her in debt.

“It would be fascinating to learn about such an innovation." The doctor glanced around the room, gathering a few of his tools, and Heidi blinked.

His change of topic had been a misunderstanding on her part.

"I must attend to my other patients, now that you are awake. I will be away for the rest of the day. Though I should be back by morning."

Heidi considered him. "Morning?"

"I attend to the needs of our village as well as a few of the other villages and hamlets in the district."
It is part of my contract to keep my surgery so near to the estate."

She smiled, he was probably going on lunch break. Vaguely she remembered stories her mother had told about doctor’s making house calls even in the early ‘50s in her home town. It was something she’d never considered before, but a nice touch to his backstory.

"You have a patron?" she asked.

"I do."

The doctor moved away from the bed, placing a few instruments into his typical, leather doctor's bag. "I ask that you stay in bed as much as possible until I return."

"I don't suppose I have much of a choice."

"Not if you wish to heal your injury properly. You will not be forced to remain after the twenty-four hours; but you are injured and should stay still." The doctor looked over his shoulder and gave her a genuine smile. "Doctor's Orders, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi smiled back, feigning conciliation. "Do you have anything to read or something for me to occupy my time with? If I have to stay on this bed for the next day, I’ll go nuts."

"I will send Rose in with a novel or two. Mrs. Carter enjoys reading on occasion."

"Will I meet this Mrs. Carter?" she asked, doubting the woman’s existence.

"She was called to the farm to aid in Mrs. Cooper's labor."

Heidi sat up a little straighter. "She's a midwife?"

"On days when she is feeling well, yes."

"How reassuring." Heidi gave the doctor a grin.

Doctor Carter’s features lost color, he blubbered before finding his words. "Are you with child, Miss Meldrum?"

Heat roared across Heidi’s cheeks. "Oh no, Lord no."

Doctor Carter’s shoulders slumped, clearly relieved at her denial.

“But a doctor with a midwife as a partner, that is very… modern of you."

He gave her a half shrug and glanced at his pocket watch. “I should return to my duties.”

He bought the tray of food over to Heidi.

"Eat the broth and bread and we will speak when I return." He was almost through the doorway when he turned around. "For your convenience, the chamber pot is under the cot. Mrs. Newton will clean it out later."

"What?!" Heidi dropped the spoon she’d been in the process of picking up. If crashing her car was horrible, then this was truly hell.

"We have a privy at the back of our property. We are lucky, as my duties require many visitors of differing health; but I would suggest you use the chamber pot. It will not be easy to escort you
across the courtyard."

Heidi swallowed, imagining the petri-dish of grossness that likely inhabited the pot beneath the bed. "I can't."

The doctor frowned, putting his bag back down. "Whatever do you mean, 'you can't'?"

Heidi’s stomach twisted as she stared down at the dark broth in the bowl. "I have this fear—"

Her words trailed off. There was no right way to say it within the context of this place and time.

Screw it.

"I'm a germophobe. I can't use a chamber pot."

"I do not understand."

Frustration mounted as Heidi struggled to keep hold on her temper. She’d lost it before and didn’t want to anger the man if he was delusional; but Heidi was reaching her breaking point.

As simply as she could, Heidi tried to describe her disorder to the doctor, only remembering halfway through that he wouldn't even know what a germ was.

She explained germ theory and bacteria and how they cause disease and that she literally could not use the chamber pot. Using something likely covered in millions of disease-ridden bacteria was unthinkable.

Tears burned her eyes, but she managed to keep them contained.

The doctor was quiet for several moments, as though deep in thought. "How would you suggest the clinic be cleaned then?"

Heidi sighed. "We can talk about that later; but you see that I cannot use the chamber pot now, surly."

"Indeed."

He scratched the back of his neck absently. "I will make Mrs. Newton aware, so that when Mrs. Carter returns, she will know how to tend to your needs."

Heidi spotted her messenger bag filled with cleaning supplies. Even if they were half empty, they would still be useful for what she needed. She could survive for a few days with the gear she’d carried from her wrecked car.

"I have the means to sanitize your privy and the surgery," she said, hoping the offer of friendship would ease the tension between them. "If you will permit me, I'll take care of such things while I remain here, if you'll allow me use of the kitchen fires. Boiling instruments will kill germs, and they need a full boil for a couple of minutes for sanitation’s sake.” She wasn’t entirely sure about that, but... the longer the better.

The doctor looked skeptical. "This will use a lot of fuel."

"But if it prevents illness, wouldn't that be helpful?"

"I make my money by healing, you remember?"

Heidi frowned, trying to think of the situation in terms he would understand. "If your patients know you for healing them, and keeping them from secondary infections, your good name will spread,
and wouldn't that be a better thing than making money on return visits?"

He considered her. When he laughed, a warm and quick, barking sound, Heidi almost yelped in surprise.

"You are shrewd, Miss Meldrum. Very well, I will leave instructions with Mrs. Newton to follow your advice for the day."

With that, the doctor left the clinic, leaving Heidi to lean over the edge of the cot and find the aforementioned chamber pot.
Looking around the room and finding nothing to help her, Heidi rolled her eyes, reaching for her spoon. She was starving and couldn’t deny that the broth smelled fantastic, hints of onion and herbs filled the air. Already twisting nausea began to spread from the mix of pain killers and an empty stomach.

She did not care what the kitchen looked like as she devoured the simple meal.

In this case, ignorance was bliss.

Twenty minutes passed with no visitors and Heidi grew bored. She was willing to bide her time and find out what was going on. At least, until she knew how badly her knee had been dislocated.

Heidi figured that if this guy was dedicated to his part, he would hear about her ramblings if she went raving to others about being from 206 years in the future.

And in England? How the hell had she managed a time jump and an ocean jump?

It was far more likely that she was in a cabin in the Catskills or Adirondacks and had stumbled on some crazy family or cult. At least they didn’t seem to be the Texas Chainsaw Massacre type of crazy.

Heidi eyed the empty bowl of broth and the breadcrumbs on the tray, a sick feeling taking a chokehold of her stomach.

Was she being brainwashed?

She’d eaten the food too fast to consider it, and who knew what sort of drug cocktail he’d given her while she was unconscious.

Her head swam now that she’d thought about it, trying to figure out the best way to react. She could throw up the food, getting rid of the poison and the medicine that was likely keeping her leg from screaming in pain, then she could attempt to escape, hobbled as she was in the splint.

Or, she could stay put and do as the doctor ordered.

Heidi tapped the toes of her good foot impatiently under the sheets, grateful that the splint prevented the material from rubbing on her swollen knee. It wasn’t as if she could conceivably hop out of the cot and try to escape anyway. For now, better to let the crazy man think she was complying.

Even if there was no help for it, she could come up with a game plan to get her through. If she couldn’t get far on the leg, she would need to watch her food intake, in case it was poisoned, and wait for her leg to heal enough so she could get away.

A week, tops.

She itched for her phone.

Sure, she was in a remote area of the state; but this wasn’t a Steven King novel.
She only wished the screen hadn’t shattered in the crash. It haunted her.

Hell, if she’d only grabbed her ebook reader. At least then she could have connected to the WiFi that was surely keeping employees entertained while on their lunch breaks.

Heidi cursed, glancing down at her leg.

All the technology in the world wouldn’t help her if she couldn’t get to it.

There had to be a computer around here somewhere.

She shifted on the cot hoping to see the telltale white or black plastic of a phone or the sleek silver of a tablet. A few times, she almost jumped with excitement thinking she’d spotted one, only to realize it was a trick of the light.

Her teeth gritted, Heidi clenched her fists. She would have to be patient. Not one of her best qualities.

At least, she thought, allowing herself a small smile, she was persistent. She sighed, trying to dispel the tightness that always overtook her in moments like this.

The truth would come out and she would find her way home.

A few minutes after she’d come to that decision, there was a knock on the door and she called out for whoever it was to come in.

The matron who’d carried in her lunch entered the surgery and held open the door for the doctor’s daughter and a slim blonde woman of middle-age who could only be the doctor’s wife.

“Good afternoon, Miss Meldrum.”

The woman gave her a curtsey upon entering the room and Heidi bowed her head awkwardly, unable to stand to greet them like they were accustomed to. She could, at least, feign being polite until she got away.

The maid gathered the tray from beside the bed and gave a quick bob of a curtsey before leaving the room.

Rose came to the bedside, trying to suss her out without seeming obvious and failing miserably.

“I brought Mother’s favorites.” The girl placed a couple of novels on the edge of the table. The leather-bound books were brand new, the binding almost shiny; but no modern book was made like that anymore.

Now that Heidi had a chance to get a better look, the girl definitely couldn’t be more than fifteen; young but on the cusp of womanhood.

“Thank you, I was beginning to grow bored.”

Rose nodded, trying not to stare at the woman’s strange clothing. “Do you require anything else to eat?”

This close at hand, Heidi got a better look at Rose’s dress, a simple muslin empire-waist gown with a scarf modestly covering her chest.

Heidi shook her head. “I’m not sure I could keep anything else down.”
It was partly the truth: she was queasy and the idea of being poisoned didn’t sit well. At the same time, she was still hungry. A little broth and bread didn’t go far when she hadn’t eaten anything save a peanut butter cup or two since lunch yesterday.

She tried not to dwell on the state of the kitchens if the rest of the place was as ‘authentic’ as the clinic was.

Mrs. Carter was dressed more conservatively, in an older style. It was clear they were trying to emulate the idea that women weren’t on the cutting edge of fashion once they were married and taken care of.

“Are you really French?”

Heidi shook her head before the mother shushed the daughter.

“Rose, behave yourself.”

Rose flushed, tearing her gaze away from Heidi and down at the floor.

“Miss Meldrum, my husband has asked that we provide you with a few things while you’re recovering; but I wished to tend to your needs myself.”

“I understand.” Heidi looked at the two women, trying to appraise the situation.

The woman assessed Heidi in turn. She could see it in the way the stranger leaned back a little, almost as if she wanted to cross her arms.

“Rose, darling, would you give us some privacy?”

The blonde-haired girl frowned at her mother. “I hoped to—“

With one sharp expression from Mrs. Carter, Rose muttered and stuttered an apology, quickly running out of the room without another word.

“Your daughter has spirit.”

Heidi grinned up at Mrs. Carter. Maybe if she played on the woman’s maternal instincts, Mrs. Carter would be quicker to respond to Heidi’s need for proper medical care. It was clear that while she looked meek, the mistress of the house was one to be reckoned with.

“She certainly does.” Mrs. Carter sounded wistful as she turned back. After a moment, her eyes narrowed, the corners wrinkling faintly. “My husband is a great physician, Miss Meldrum.”

The sudden reproach in Mrs. Carter’s voice was enough to stun Heidi.

“I’m sure he’s a fine healer, ma’am; but—“

“He said you chattered about strange things, almost as if you spoke in tongues. Half the words you uttered seem to have confused him. Talk of seeing bone and traveling at impossible speeds from far off lands.”

Heidi ran her fingers through the hair at the nape of her neck, averting her eyes. She felt guilty but had to protect herself. There was no way she could divulge the truth if she was, impossibly, in another time and place.

“I wish to know from your own lips if it is wise to allow you to remain in our household.”
“I was confused when I woke up,” Heidi confessed, keeping her eyes averted. “I suspect the laudanum had something to do with it. I’ve never had to take such strong medicines before.”

“Do not lie to me, Miss Meldrum.” Mrs. Carter’s hand curled into a fist.

“I swear that I am not.”

“The style of your shoes, the nature of your intimates, the sheer quality of it all appears to indicate that my husband was telling the truth, that you somehow come to us from another time. But do you seriously believe that we, educated as we are, would believe that?”

“Wait, you’ve searched my things?”

Heidi couldn’t help the anger that laced her words at the thought that they’d gone snooping through her bags. She had credit cards in her purse, for Christ’s sake. For all she knew, they’d probably maxed out her credit cards already.

“Not as closely as we should have, letting a complete stranger into our home.”

A strange dread crawled its way up Heidi’s spine.

The woman was serious. Too serious for this to be some sort of tourist trap.

“I am not one of those feeble-minded peasants that tend to believe that witches exist; but there is something strange about you, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi worried her lip. “About my name—“

Mrs. Carter stopped her with the wave of a hand. “I do not understand why, but my husband insists that we use his cousin’s surname, despite the truth. You will be Miss Meldrum while you remain in his care—“

The woman’s eyes fell on the ring on her hand and Heidi flushed. For a few moments, she’d completely forgotten about it, about him, about her broken heart.

“Unless you are married…” Mrs. Carter’s sentence trailed off, her hands falling to her side.

Her throat was dry; but Heidi managed to speak the words. “Not married. I was engaged though, until last night.”

She moved to pull the ring off her left hand. The diamond on the right was from her mother, an heirloom piece, but the one on the left, which had only yesterday promised a lifelong commitment no longer held any meaning.

Her fingers pulled on the metal once and then twice, slipping both times. The ring was stuck; her fingers had swollen enough overnight to make it impossible to remove.

“Shit.”

Mrs. Carter gasped and Heidi sighed ruefully. She didn’t normally curse in front of strangers, especially in such a professional setting as a doctor’s office, and now she’d done it twice. They couldn’t blame her though, could they? Right now, all she wanted was to get that cursed ring off.

“My apologies, Mrs. Carter. I promised your husband that I would be more careful with my language.”
The appearance of shock was still patent on Mrs. Carter’s face; but something in her eyes softened. “What happened?”

There was an awkward moment of silence. The last thing Heidi wanted to do was to relive last night, walking in on Peter and the woman. Then again, some sympathy would help her cause.

“Since you are a doctor’s wife, perhaps you will more easily pardon my crude language after I explain.”

Mrs. Carter quirked an eyebrow but took a seat on the edge of the bed, clearly interested in hearing the story.

“I found my betrothed,” she said slowly, using what was hopefully the right wording or at least not scandalous. “*in flagrante delicto* with another woman.”

Heidi’s eyes burned at the memory of Peter scrambling out of the bed, the bunched sheets tangling in his legs, as he tried to close the distance to the door.

“He wasn’t expecting me. I was supposed to begin moving my belongings into his house in a few days, our wedding only a few weeks away.” Heidi paused, hoping that Mrs. Carter wouldn’t notice the fudging of the truth. If she was supposed to be pretending to live in the 19th century, she’d need to rework some of the details. It was going to be a lot of work not to upset these people, with their old-fashioned sensibilities.

“The… other woman ran out of the room, into a side chamber and he advanced on me, trying to explain. But how could I stay?” She paused, taking a breath and trying to refrain from crying, but her eyes burned.

"We were supposed to be getting married and yet, his behavior toward other women never changed. He always acted as if he were—“ Heidi paused, trying to find an appropriate word.

“A rake?”

Heidi nodded, continuing along the slightly altered version of the truth, grateful that Mrs. Carter understood. “It was stupid of me to think I could change him. I don’t think I ever thought that I would or could, never intentionally; but love makes fools of us all, I suppose.”

She slumped against the pillow.

“I know other women do not mind such things, but I do.”

Mrs. Carter caught Heidi’s attention and though her vision blurred, she could see that the woman was handing her a handkerchief.

The idea of even touching it was repugnant, as the handkerchief was linen and used multiple times a day. But, in the spirit of good will, Heidi reached out for it and dabbed her cheeks dry.

As soon as the woman left her alone, she’d clean her face with the small bottle of hand sanitizer in her purse. She knew it would dry out her skin, but she had it just in case. Heidi much preferred hot water and soap to clean her hands.

“So you were attempting to…” Mrs. Carter paused, gesturing as if searching for the words she wanted to use. “Return to your parents’ home? Where was your Abigail?”

Heidi tried her best not to look like a deer in headlights. Who the hell was Abigail?
“My parents are in Germany, er on the Continent.”

That was not a lie, but she had no idea what Germany was called at this point in history. She was going to need an atlas and hoped her correction was enough.

“You may not approve of this, but I lived alone in an apartment in the city and didn’t think I needed to be accompanied to surprise my betrothed. Manners are different where I come from.”

Mrs. Carter shook her head and clucked. It was almost the same noise Heidi’s grandmother would make when she washed her hands too many times as a kid.

“It was foolish,” Heidi clarified, excusing her behavior.

“How did you arrive at the Browne’s front door? You are related to the family?”

“I –” Heidi paused, trying to translate what she wanted to say into whatever proper way she could to this out-of-touch woman. “I do not know them at all. My people do not hail from this part of the world.”

It was going to be highly improper for her to say the next bit, but the less people connected to her story, the less chance of them finding out it was lies.

“I fled the city in what you would consider my own carriage.”

Mrs. Carter started, eyes wide, predictably scandalized. She squinted, quizzically. Heidi prayed that she’d used the right term.

“I should not have been driving through the country in the middle of the night with the roads icy and my eyes filled with tears. I did not even think about the ice and snow. I wanted to go get away from the betrayal.”

Heidi shifted, the pain in her knee returning, and she braced herself against it.

The woman nodded, with earnest belief.

“My carriage wheels hit a patch of ice and I lost control. I crashed into a tree.”

Heidi tried her best not to outright lie, so the woman wouldn’t want more specific details. But this was the best she could come up with on the fly, merging the past with the present.

“With no servant to aid me, I gathered what I could and found my way to the village. I didn’t know where I was, just that I needed help.”

“I imagine so.” Mrs. Carter smoothed her skirts as if readying to stand. “I am impressed you made it this far.”

Heidi nodded. “I was motivated. I didn’t want to freeze.”

Mrs. Carter stood up from the stool. “Are you in need of more medicine?”

She glanced over at the bottles on the table.

“To be perfectly honest, Mrs. Carter, laudanum scares me. My parents have told me stories of people who have become dependent on the medicine. I do not wish the same for myself.”
Though Heidi expected Mrs. Carter to be surprised, her air was one of sympathy – and maybe a touch of sadness. Maybe she’d seen the effects herself.

“Some brandy then?” The woman gave Heidi a grin. “It is not quite so dangerous, I imagine.”

Heidi shook her head. “Not so dangerous. If it helps take the edge off, some brandy would be nice. Though it is early.”

She decided not to mention the fact that taking too many of her own pills so soon would leave her without any backup if she got worse. Better to keep them for later, if she could manage, and take the bulk when she was feeling well enough to hobble out of here on her own power. If the doctor didn’t let her leave tomorrow.

After Mrs. Carter poured Heidi a finger or two of the brandy, Heidi thanked the woman and downed the wickedly strong drink in one shot. She’d been a great fan of alcohol when she’d been younger; it helped her cope. But having watched an uncle descend into alcoholism, Heidi no longer touched the stuff. Now, she much preferred mixers to the actual sting of that particular poison; but the straight alcohol from Mrs. Carter would kill any bugs she might have gotten from the food.

“I have some duties to which I must attend. I will inquire with the blacksmith if he would be willing to venture out along the road to Canterbury. Doctor Carter told me you believe you crashed past midnight. You might have been walking two or three miles. If your carriage hasn’t been raided by highwaymen, Mr. Dowding should be able to collect your other belongings.”

Her stomach flipped at the mention of highwaymen. She reached for the forgotten handkerchief and twisted it in her hand before realizing what she was doing, throwing it out of reach.

“Do you have any appropriate clothing?” The woman glared pointedly at the jeans. Heidi scrambled for an explanation.

“Women wear pants in my time. It is a socially acceptable thing to do.”

“I will see if we can borrow a gown from one of our neighbors. Doctor Carter mentioned you might be healing for a fortnight before we can attempt to return you to the place whence you came.”

Heidi balked. A fortnight, that was two weeks, right? “That’s really not necessary—“

“But it is, Miss Meldrum. If you wish to live in this house, you will need to dress appropriately.”

She swallowed back further protest. Best not to get on the woman’s bad side. She sighed, trying to soften her frustration to politeness.

“Mrs. Carter? If you wouldn’t mind, could you bring my things to the bed? I would like to see what I have left. I imagine I lost a few items in the crash.”

The woman gave a nod and carried over the last bag.

As Heidi watched, she was reminded of something important.

“Would it be possible for me to see an atlas or a map of the continent? A man such as the doctor would have such books in his library.”

“Why would you require an atlas?”

“Borders change over time. I would like to see what they look like.”
Mrs. Carter frowned, seemingly at the reminder of Heidi’s oddness. After a moment, she nodded. “I will see what I can do.”

Heidi thanked the woman, giving her a smile. She didn’t mention that her carriage would be a twisted pile of metal and glass and that she’d be lucky to find it since Heidi had only barely wandered onto the dirt road when she found some civilization in a world that was definitely not her own.
When the coast was clear, Heidi dumped the contents of her purse onto her lap, grateful that she kept her bullet journal in the front pocket, along with a couple of her favorite pens. Sorting through the mess, she grabbed one of her pens and opened to one of the blank pages to start an inventory of what she had.

Her stomach dropped, noticing that her phone was missing. She was sure she’d thrown it in the side pocket before she’d left the car. Not that it would have done much good, busted as it was. She hoped they hadn’t stolen it.

Heidi knew that she'd need to use what cleaning supplies she had sparingly, if she was going to be here for two weeks before they even considered letting her go, and that idea worried her. She hadn't grabbed more stuff at the store because she thought she was going to the cabin, where supplies were old but plentiful.

Now she wished she'd stocked up in Utica. For one, her period was due at any time. It had never been regular and Heidi much preferred condoms than the pill as far as protection went so she didn’t know exactly when it would show up. She had a handful of emergency tampons at the bottom of her purse, but they would not last long.

Glancing up at the door, Heidi resolved to keep what feminine hygiene related items she did have as far away from the Carters as possible. She wasn’t sure what these people would think if they saw them, or even know what they were.

She'd already searched through the overnight bag with a pair of running shoes and flats, some extra panties (because she could never pack enough of those), her favorite make-up, various amounts of toiletries, an extra change of clothing and her nightclothes. She did her best not to acknowledge the frilly teddy she'd lovingly packed earlier in the week for their first night living together.

Heidi inspected her emergency cleaning kit next. She should have left it behind. Her therapist would have been disappointed in her for grabbing the third bag when she had a dislocated knee, but she didn't think he would give her too much flack if he ever found out where she ended up.

This bag might save her life.

Mrs. Carter appeared in the doorway sometime later with the atlas she'd promised and Heidi thanked her profusely.

Before her caregiver could disappear again, Heidi begged Mrs. Carter to take her to the toilet despite the woman insisting that she should use the chamber pot.

Eventually though, the woman relented and Heidi wrangled up her half-used container of bleach wipes and sacrificed her long sleeved t-shirt to use as a toilet seat cover, should it be required.

Mrs. Carter had been shocked at the implication that she didn’t have the place properly cleaned; but she was aware that Heidi had some ideas on making the surgery a better place for healing and it was enough to placate the woman. If anyone in this time could understand her needs, she hoped it was the members of a doctor's household.

Heidi had no words for how happy she’d been to see the doctor’s wife pull a primitive wheelchair out from behind the door. The thought of hopping all the way through their back ‘courtyard’ to the facilities nearly made her sob.
It wasn't like a modern wheelchair at all, really. This one had three wheels and was set up almost like a recliner, the seat more of a basket than anything. And, Heidi was expected to steer the thing with a pole that connected to the front wheel, like the rudder of a ship while Mrs. Carter pushed it. The chair was large and awkward and Heidi was glad to see it had evolved over the centuries. She couldn’t imagine being an invalid confined to this contraption all the time.

Mrs. Carter helped her into the outhouse and Heidi did her best to clean it before she used it.

For someone from over 200 years in the future, she was feeling a little too comfortable, despite her surroundings.

As Heidi wiped herself clean for the third time, after emptying her bladder, she resolved to keep up her guard. Empathizing with these people would get her nowhere. There was such thing as Stockholm Syndrome, after all.

“You have a fair number of odd items in your bags,” the woman said conversationally as she helped Heidi back to the surgery, pushing her in the rickety wheelchair.

Heidi leaned back on the pillows of the chair and sighed. Despite her growing acceptance of the unthinkable, her eyes were still open for signs of home and modernity. Still, there wasn’t a single sign of civilization when they’d left the main building. She’d expected to see trash cans with fast food wrappers or speakers not-so-cleverly hidden in the decorations of the estate so the owners could make announcements, or at the very least a freaking power line here or there. The house didn’t even seem to be wired for electricity, an abomination as far as she was concerned.

They reached the back door when Rose appeared. Mrs. Carter fixed her daughter with a kind but firm look, above Heidi’s head.

“Have you prepared Edward’s room for our guest?”

“Yes, mother.”

Heidi shifted in the seat to look up at the doctor 's wife more fully. “Who’s Edward?”

“Edward is my brother,” Rose said. “He studies at Oxford, but he will graduate this summer. As you are confined to the chair, you will be residing in his room during your recovery.”

Rose had noticeably straightened her posture as she talked about her brother. Not surprising considering he was studying at Oxford.

Rose helped her mother get the chair up the one step to get inside the cottage. Heidi was pushed through the kitchen, filled with the scent of baking pie crusts and meat and veggies. Together they rounded a corner and moved through a short hall into large common room, where there was a dining table to the right, large enough to seat ten people.

On the other side of a sturdy front door, an implied foyer built by a separation of furniture, sat a smattering of couches near a large hearth. It couldn’t be called a fireplace, Heidi mused, as it took up some ten feet of space on the far wall. This was clearly where the family spent much of their time, with a tea setting still sitting on an end table and a couple of books sprawled on the couch.

Heidi fully expected the main part of the house to be made of long corridors, like the house in Germany that her mother had grown up in. In that home, built sometime in the 1700s, each room was closed off to save on heat. Heidi remembered the formal dining room, between the kitchen and the living room, to always be freezing since the family didn’t bother heating it for most of the year.
Before she knew it, they'd pushed her through another short hall, opposite the first. Mrs. Carter turned them before they reached the steep and narrow staircase and pushed Heidi into a bedroom. Heidi was surprised at how warm and homey it was, with walls covered in neutral wallpaper and a full-sized bed on the long wall across from a small wood stove. The stove’s chimney bent into the wall where the hearth backed up to.

Thankfully, the stove was already lit for the night and the heat filled the room. For that last feature especially, Heidi was thankful. It was warm enough that she wouldn’t miss her pajama pants, which were decidedly missing.

Outside the window, Heidi glimpsed stone-masoned houses across the way before looking over at the young girl.

Heidi found herself curious as she balanced on one leg and stood up out of the chair, hopping over to the bed to get comfortable, even though she was worried there might be bugs. Mrs. Carter aided her in her movements, but remained curiously quiet.

“Is your brother following in your father’s footsteps?”

“Oh no, he does not have the stomach for medicine.” Rose grinned, a mischievous tone in her words. “But I think it is interesting.”

“It can be,” Heidi agreed. “But I think I’m in the same boat as your brother on that.”

Rose quirked her head.

“Medicine makes me queasy too.”

Heidi had begged off dinner sometime later, Mrs. Carter having slipped from the room after the sun set. She couldn't help but be a little concerned about the condition of the kitchen, as their pass through tour hadn’t given her enough time to take it in.

She could live off broth for a couple days and if it turned out this place was real then she would break with being polite and check out the pots and pans. She couldn't always block those nagging, intrusive thoughts; but she'd grown better at it over the past few years to the point where she could occasionally go out to restaurants without making a fuss.

It was one way, maybe, that Peter had managed to help her, though he wasn’t always patient about it.

With that, Heidi despaired. She didn’t know for sure what she would do without him.

Rose came into the room some minutes later. Heidi figured the girl was lonely and curious, especially if her mother confirmed the story that she was a long lost cousin.

“How fortunate that you found us,” she said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “It will be nice to have a guest, as you are family. We receive only patients at the surgery and none of them stay in the cottage.”

“I believe your father said I will be here for at least a fortnight recovering. Hopefully I won’t be tied to the chair for the entire time.”

Rose nodded.

“It is tiresome.” She paused and leaned in as if sharing a great secret. “Edward broke his leg once.
He was climbing trees after mother had warned him over and over again not to.”

Heidi sighed, but offered a wry smile. “I can guess how that story ended.”

Rose nodded again, her eyes mischievously bright. “Mother was so furious that she refused to let him venture to the park for the rest of the summer. She said Percival and Ewan had better things to do than to play nursemaid to the doctor’s son.”

“Percival and Ewan?”

Rose continued speaking as if she hadn’t heard Heidi’s question.

“We do not see them often. Ewan was in regimentals last time he visited. He looked so handsome. And Percival will be an Earl one day.”

Heidi held off on asking what lands he’d be in charge of at the expression on Rose’s face. It was one of utter dejection

“What’s wrong?”

Rose slumped a little. “Everyone that matters is so much older than I.”

“I’m sure things aren’t that bad.”

“It will be different when I am out, I think.”

Heidi considered Rose, confused before remembering. Out. As in society. Not as in romantic inclinations. The meaning of that word had certainly changed over the years.

“I believe I understand. May I ask your age?”

Rose nodded. “I am fourteen.”

“Fourteen is a hard time,” she said, nodding and shifting her position to better look at Rose. She remembered that time well. “You’re becoming an adult, every day you feel a little different. Noticing boys and not fitting in with the other kids your age.”

“Something like that.” Her admission was quiet.

Heidi wasn’t entirely sure that she was in the early 19th century, but damn if the girl wasn’t convincing. There was something though that Heidi could say that was likely universal.

“I wouldn’t worry, Rose. This is probably something you should talk to your mother about, but as someone a little closer in age to you, I understand what you’re going through. Your mother might too, if you explain it.”

“She will not listen to me. Women do not talk about such things, she says.”

She imagined a strict religious upbringing for Rose no matter what century they might be in.

“I have always heard that the British were more formal in their ways.”

She hoped she was remaining politically correct, straddling the fine line between stereotype and insult.

“And maybe she’s right about it not being proper; but if you ever have any questions while I’m
here you can talk to me about them. I remember being fourteen, I felt like an adult, I wanted to do things with my older cousins; but a few years later, I could see how large the age gap was, at the time it felt like nothing and I was grateful that my cousins didn’t treat me like a child even though I still was.”

Rose sat down on the bed, frowning. “You mean, I am still a child.”

“In some ways, yes. There’s a lot going on – in your body – and your mind at this age. It’s confusing, but it will get better. I promise. The next few years will be a whirlwind, but when it’s all over, you’ll miss what you have now.”

Rose scoffed. “How could I miss this wretched feeling?”

“Don’t be in a hurry to grow up,” she said, reaching out and patting Rose’s shoulder. “You’ll be an adult far longer than you’ll be a child and responsibilities are not as fun as they might seem now.”

Heidi gave the girl a grin, hoping to lighten the mood.

Before she could say anything else, it was Rose that changed the topic.

“Is your leg feeling better?”

“I think I could use some help lifting this splint onto the bed. If you wouldn’t mind.”

Rose slipped off the bed and helped Heidi get comfortable. The girl giggled as Heidi’s pants slid down her hips as she readjusted.

“Is it strange wearing those loose trousers?”

“I suppose they do look a little strange,” Heidi agreed, regarding her cut pants.

“They are not like anything mother would ever allow me to wear.”

“And she shouldn’t.” The lie came easily to her lips now. “I dressed as a man to keep anyone from growing suspicious about a woman out alone in her own carriage in the middle of the night. It was dangerous and silly of me.”

Rose appeared completely enthralled. “How did you ever devise such a scheme?”

“I ran from London so quickly my memory is a blur. If I had taken the time to think on it, I certainly would have acted with more poise and propriety.” She hoped she was using the right words for the time, but anything to keep herself from upsetting her hosts.

“Mother says that Mrs. James will lend you some gowns, since you do not have your own.”

Heidi cringed. Being larger than both of the women in this house was no pleasant thought. She only hoped that Mrs. James wasn’t overly large and that she’d be able to clean the gown before she was forced to put it on. She did not want to run the risk of lice.

She shuddered, glancing at her sleeping situation. She really hoped there were no fleas. Or, dear God, bed bugs in the house.

“I am sorry to prey on the kindness of your neighbors.”

“Oh, but no!” Rose cried with delight. “This is the most exciting thing that has happened all winter! Except that our rector came back after Christmas with a wife.”
Her eyes were wide, almost as if the wedding had been a scandal.

“He did?”

“She is a quiet thing, but nice. The two have only been married for a month, so we are not yet properly acquainted, though she sits at the front of the chapel every Sunday for services.”

“I’m sure she’s a lovely woman.”

“If you are feeling well enough, perhaps you will join us for services tomorrow and you will get to meet her.”

Heidi started. She hadn’t actually considered that yet, going to church with them. Did they intend on letting her out in public?

Privately, Heidi wanted to avoid church as much as possible. She’d been raised Catholic, but hadn’t exactly been religious about going to mass since she’d started living on her own. It could be interesting to observe other services; but she wasn’t sure how much she was going to have to fake her way through responses.

“I daresay you are right.”

The words sounded wrong in her mouth, the language too archaic, like when her mother had been binging on period movies all weekend; but her chat with Rose had made Heidi feel a little better. No matter what else was going on, Rose was a real girl with real insecurities. Someone she could help, no matter what time she’d come from.
Sunday, February 9th, 1812

Chapter Notes

I would like to take a moment, long past due, to thank my beautiful beta (Her_Royal_Majestrix) for all her hard work and support while I spent the last year and half-ish writing this story! You are the best and my biggest cheerleader!!!!

"Miss Meldrum, your replacement clothing has arrived. May I enter?"

Heidi panicked, searching the room, running her fingers through her dark brown hair. She’d spend the last half hour staring at the ceiling, hoping this was a dream and now she was running behind on her plans. She’d made a mess out of the room last night, having to balance on the one leg to get around; but she was determined not to be an invalid today. Besides, if she could get moving on her own, she could scope out the area.

Her landlord would be throwing all her things out if she didn't contact him soon.

"Come on in, Mrs. Carter."

Maybe I’m in a coma, she thought desperately, staring up at the wooden beams of the ceiling. Maybe this was a drug induced dream and she’s sleeping safely in a hospital bed in 2019.

Heidi sighed, an intrusive memory jabbing her. Her therapist had her practicing repression therapy to help control her OCD; but she never considered her dreams would take her to a place where she couldn’t escape germs. She’d not gotten any sleep last night, wondering when it was they last washed these sheets. Even with the layer of the sweatshirt between her head and the pillow.

Mrs. Carter walked into the room in another one of her corseted gowns, this one though was a little simpler than the patterned piece she’d worn yesterday, with only a small amount of embroidery at the hem. In her arms, she carried at least two or three different dresses.

Though Heidi loved dresses and skirts and getting the chance to get into costume, there was something about the Carters’ home and the absolute sincerity about these people that made this feel… unnatural.

"Mrs. James was generous enough to donate three gowns for your use while you are in Hunsford. Our village is quite charitable."

Heidi looked at them, afraid of what might be carried in the fabric.

"They are clean, Miss Meldrum."

"I wasn't—I mean. Thank you for arranging for a few dresses for me. I hope they fit."

"They may be plain, but Mrs. James has the same figure as you. I daresay she is a bit older than yourself. They will do for a day or two."
"Mrs. Carter," Heidi said, sitting back down on the bed, eyeing the dresses. They didn’t look terrible, as far as choice went. There was a sage green dress, a striped tan and beige one, and a brown dress with a floral pattern at the hem. It would, however, would be a trial to get dressed properly. She caught sight of the basin on the vanity-like piece of furniture near the window.

"Thank you very much for everything, but how hard would it be to get a bath?" She was stinky and sticky; and dressing in new clothes Heidi wanted to at least feel personally clean. She knew there would be no chance for a shower in a place like this.

"We keep a bath in the surgery, but we only arrange to heat the water once a week."

Her face paled and she knew that Mrs. Carter had seen her reaction when the woman spoke up.

"This has to do with your sickness?"

"No," Heidi blurted, then waved her hand. "Not necessarily. Where I come from we bathe every day or every other day as normal practice."

Mrs. Carter laughed, an unusually hearty sound. "You must be wealthy."

"I suppose I am, somewhat. I have a great many privileges that others do not have, but wealth is measured differently."

Mrs. Carter glanced around the room. "Perhaps we could arrange for the bath to be drawn earlier."

Heidi felt bad for bringing it up.

"Um, I could make do with a couple of pitchers of hot water. I can sponge bathe in the meantime. I do not wish to take advantage of the kindness you have shown me."

Her leg throbbed and Heidi sat up higher on the bed so that she could get the splint up on the mattress. She thanked God that she'd had that pair of yoga pants in her bags. It was stretchy enough to get over the splint, though it was tight.

"My husband is a doctor, Miss Meldrum. We heal people here."

"But they usually have a home to go to?" she asked, reading the woman's intent.

"You are outspoken for one so young." Mrs. Carter’s eyes went wide at her blunt words, but Heidi only shrugged.

"It's not the first time I've heard that about myself. I will try not to interrupt your schedule while I remain in your hus—in Doctor Carter’s care."

"Doctor Carter said you believed yourself to be in a dream."

Heidi thought carefully before speaking. "I believe I am in the wrong time. I can’t be sure what’s real, Mrs. Carter. But something about this place, about you and your daughter's relationship, it doesn't feel like a play. I just – can’t explain it."

Mrs. Carter smiled wanly when she shrugged.

"If this is not a dream, I wish I could find a way to let my parents know I’m alive. There are things that need to be taken care of and they are impossible to complete without my phone."

"If I knew what that was, Miss Meldrum, I would try to help."
“If this is some twisted show or something, you do commit. It's impressive.”

"Miss Meldrum, I do not hold with liars. I would not allow anyone else to get away with lies in my house."

"I'm not saying you're a liar, Mrs. Carter. I do not mean to offend. Just that if this is some kind of… ruse, your producers did a good job. Even the poor in South America know what a phone is."

The woman nodded as if she were placating Heidi. "I will see about that hot water. And then I will aid in dressing you once you tend to your needs."

Heidi reached out and brushed her hand over the linen bib of the gown.

"That would be great. I am not certain if I could manage all this on my own."

An hour later, Heidi had had a sponge bath with the hot water Mrs. Newton had provided, had taken part in a heated debate with Mrs. Carter over the salaciousness of her underthings, used the privy, and was sitting out in the front room with Rose, where a breakfast was waiting for her. They'd picked out the simple beige and brown dress for today and that had been okay with Heidi. It had more room in it than the others, and had allowed her to wear the yoga pants underneath.

Heidi gave up on her suspicions of the food being poisoned. As long as she didn't go into the kitchen, Heidi figured she could try not to think about it. The lie to herself would work as long as she didn't actually poke around.

You can eat in restaurants, you can eat here too.

The silverware and dishes appeared to be spotless, freshly polished even, and Heidi relaxed into her chair. At least the aroma of sausages and eggs was familiar. There was still no way she would ask what was used to make the sausages.

She'd allowed Mrs. Carter to administer a few drops of laudanum, the doctor still being away. At first, Heidi was worried about the non-doctor giving her medicine, but Mrs. Carter assured her that it would be better to take the medicine now rather than waiting for the pain to become unbearable.

Mrs. Carter had initially fretted, guiding Heidi into the great room, about not having a proper dining hall; but she explained that the reconstruction of the old farm house into a cottage had not afforded the building of such rooms. They needed the side chambers for the surgery, she’d said. Heidi wasn’t sure if she was reading too much into it, but the doctor’s wife felt the loss of such private rooms when she visited other, grander houses.

There was, she was proud to say, a small withdrawing room that the doctor had set aside for her personal use.

They were almost finished with their meal when the doorbell rang. Her hosts remained in their seats and waited for Mrs. Newton to open it, despite the fact that both of them were closer to the large front door. Rose and Mrs. Carter stood up with grace and Heidi noticed that the doctor had returned with a guest in tow.

Heidi attempted to stand but Mrs. Carter's hand rested gently on her shoulder. Apparently that gesture was universal as well and Heidi stayed put.

He greeted his wife and daughter before stepping aside to let the vaguely familiar man into the house.
"Miss Meldrum?"

"Good morning, doctor."

"I brought a visitor, who wished to call upon you."

Doctor Carter stepped aside, waving his arm in the direction of the tall, burly man.

"May I introduce, Abraham Dowding, the man who carried you to the surgery yesterday morning."

The man bowed, looking at Mrs. Carter, and then turned his attention to Heidi.

"It is a relief to see you awake, Miss Meldrum."

The man grinned at her, a goofy lopsided grin, and Heidi couldn't help but smile back. Now that she got a good look at him, Heidi could see he was a few years older than her, maybe mid-thirties, and his blond hair was pulled back from his face. It wasn’t particularly stylish for a regency hairdo; but the doctor had said he was the blacksmith. Working in those conditions, Heidi guessed he’d need to contain his hair.

"My name is Adelheid, Mr. Dowding; but my friends call me Heidi."

"The honor is mine, Heidi." He clicked the heels of his boots and gave her a short bow.

Heidi grinned. She liked this guy already.

"The honor is mine, I believe. You saved my life yesterday morning."

They spoke for a few minutes before the blacksmith came to the most pertinent of topics.

"I regret to inform you that I was unable to find any trace of your carriage, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi nodded, hope melting away. She had thought that if someone found her car they'd have to concede that this was 2019; though she had to admit it would be easy to lie about going on the journey to find the car in the first place.

"I suppose that's not a surprise."

Dowding chuckled. "I am impressed you were able to handle the delicate balance of two harnessed horses. You must have been a fair driver indeed to tackle such, all the way from London."

Heidi’s heart dropped.

_In for a penny._

"Well, it's clear I couldn't handle the two of them, isn't it?" She tried for a sideways grin and hoped it looked ironic and acting her part.

"Though how you managed to wander away from the London Road and onto the road from Canterbury, I have no idea."

Heidi shrugged as the blacksmith turned to Doctor Carter.

"You are lucky that you stumbled toward our village. The doctor sees a lot of injuries.” Dowding clapped a hand on the doctor’s back. “He is the best healer we have had in the district in thirty years."
A sheepish smile spread across the doctor’s face. "I do my best."

"You care about us country folk. What a shame it would be if you moved to in London and left us behind."

It was then that Heidi recognized a little of the country English in his voice. The accent wasn't pronounced, but she was sure there was a class difference between the two men in the room.

The room was quiet before the blacksmith reached across his chest and rubbed his shoulder as if he were feeling awkward.

"I should return to the smithy. Mrs. Dowding will not appreciate us arriving late to services."

He glanced at Heidi.

"Miss Meldrum, It is good to see you are recovering. I am sorry we could not find your horses or carriage."

"Thank you for your concern and your aid."

The doctor spoke up then, waving his arm in the direction of the front door. "Perhaps when Miss Meldrum is recovered you and your wife would join us for dinner."

"That would be delightful." Abraham nodded, a grin on his lips. "Miss Meldrum, Mrs. Carter." He bowed and left the cottage.

The doctor dismissed Rose from the breakfast table, telling her to find her spencer and a blanket for the ride. The daughter went obediently out of the room and heading toward the stairs.

"I have been thinking a lot about your predicament in the past day, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi furrowed her brow, glancing down at her knee covered by the fine linen — no, muslin, -- dress. She felt a spike of anger that she hadn’t yet encountered, remembering how neglectful her care had been by modern standards. She sighed, again doubting herself.

"Will you finally be calling an ambulance?"

"I know little about life in the former colonies; but Miss Meldrum, Miss Favreau, I think perhaps we should go on a journey."

The determined tone of his voice made Heidi stop. "What do you mean? You said yesterday I could not ride in a carriage."

"You say you live in the future and you believe you appeared in this place by accident. I would not wish to keep you from the truth. If you desire to go to London, then I shall take you."

Heidi sat up, promise causing her heart rate to pick up. "You will?"

"I think you are telling the truth, but I wish to prove to you that I too am telling the truth. I do not know how else to help you. So, we will be heading out shortly."

"But— what of church?"

"Mrs. Carter will attend and make our excuses. I believe your mental health is of utmost importance at this juncture."
Her heart dropped. "You're so sure you are right?"

"I am. And you need to see the truth."

Her stomach flipped at the foreboding in his words. She nodded reluctantly.

"The carriage will be here shortly. Rose will be accompanying us. I recommend that you guard your words carefully."

Within an hour, Heidi had been wheeled out to a carriage borrowed from the constabulary. Heidi hadn't expected the "law" to be willing to lend them a carriage; but the doctor must have had a lot of goodwill worked up with his fellow villagers to borrow it on a Sunday.

They spent the afternoon in the bouncing carriage driving away from the surgery. Rose giggled and pointed out different landmarks and points of interest to her new friend.

When they reached a village that must have been a good five miles down the road, dread settled into her gut.

Doctor Carter stopped the carriage, a barouche according to Rose, outside a shop in Westerham and Heidi took the opportunity to take in the town. It hadn't helped to settle her nerves.

The streets were not busy, as she expected for a Sunday journey, but she had hoped to see power lines and paved roads.

There was a large grassy knoll in what seemed to be the village center, as bereft of technology as anything else. Out of nowhere, Heidi was woozy again.

No tourist trap or theme park would be so large with so few people here.

Above all things, that was the one sign that Heidi could not ignore.

The streets, miles of road, had no trash along the side. Only a place like Disney could boast of such and yet, they still had trashcans every fifty feet or so, and thousands of visitors a day.

On their journey to Westerham, they had parked on the curb to let what appeared to be a stage coach race by. Otherwise they'd met with no traffic, no patrols, not even a safety fence could be seen. Either she was in a coma or by some strange phenomenon Heidi had actually ended up in 1812.

Doctor Carter left the carriage, giving them orders to stay while he called on Mr. Smith, leaving Heidi alone with Rose.

"Rose, would you mind answering a question for me?"

"Of course." The girl grinned.

"What year were you born?"

"1797. Why?"

"And you've lived here your entire life?"

She nodded, pursing her lips at Heidi. "Is something wrong, cousin?"

Oh God.
Heidi’s brain was screaming. This was far too elaborate to be a ruse. No one would spend so much money on a full five miles of sets without getting something out of it. Even in the fancy movies, they had green screens in hangers and lots, not miles and miles of wilderness set aside.

"I'm beginning to think that I may be losing my sanity."

Rose frowned dubiously. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I don't think I could explain it in a way that you would understand." She rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm.

"Is this about your betrothed?"

Heidi raised an eyebrow.

"Mother explained it to me. I understand, I think."

"It's not about that, although that's certainly part of why I feel so strange."

"I am sorry. How abominable to treat someone you love in such a manner. It is insupportable."

That last word, and the familiarity of it, forced Heidi to smile.

“Things aren’t always black and white. It’s good to try to see things from both perspectives.”

Rose huffed, sitting up straighter in her seat. “I hardly think I could.”

Heidi peeked up at the sky through the ‘moonroof’ of the carriage. “To be completely honest, neither can I. I’m trying not to think about it at all, honestly.”

When Heidi looked back down, Rose was staring at her legs. Thankfully, they were properly covered under the dress and a blanket, in the chilly early February air.

“I am sorry you were hurt. Does it ache terribly?"

“It is painful, but this isn’t the first time I’ve had in injury similar to this. In fact, it’s likely that the previous injury made it possible for it to happen again so easily.” If she was to be stuck here, she could at least impart some medical knowledge on the girl.

“You really were driving a carriage, alone?”

Heidi nodded.

“I wish I could do so,” Rose said wistfully.

Already worried about the girl’s imagination, Heidi gave her a sharp look. “I didn’t have nearly the type of training that I should have. I thought being able to ride a horse would make steering a pair of them easy. It was a mistake.” It didn’t seem like Rose would have easy access to carriages, but still…

Heidi could afford to be independent. If this were 1812, women had no say at all and she, though the situations not being equal, certainly had privileges that these women did not.

Rose nodded, looking almost sheepish.

The conversation stalled between the two of them. Concerned she may have dashed some runaway
fantasy of the girl’s, Heidi tried for a more pleasant topic.

“Have you been to London before?”

The wide, animated eyes she received in reply indicated success. “Oh yes. My uncle and aunt live on Henrietta Street. We go to visit them a few times a year.”

“How do you like it?”

“It is lovely.” Rose’s voice was airy, like she was recalling a distant memory. “My Aunt promises to take me to Almack’s one day, when I have had my season, of course.”

Heidi frowned. There was something familiar about that name.

“Are you out in society? I imagine you must be so.” Rose flushed and averted her gaze. “Mother says not to ask how old other women are, but surely you have at least seen a season. She said you had been living in London.”

The girl had no idea how secretly happy the compliment made her. Heidi had always been lucky, when she’d first turned 21 most people didn’t even believe her to be 18. Every time, she was asked for her license on the rare occasions that she did indulge, she proudly showed off her birthdate. But it had been years since anyone cared about her age.

“I’m twenty-seven.”

The girl gasped, her brown eyes going wide. “Twenty-seven!”

Heidi nodded. “I’m not ashamed.”

“But your parents! You must have been so happy to become engaged, to no longer be a burden on your family.” Her hands clapped over her mouth. “Oh. I should not have said that.”

Heidi shrugged, debating on whether or not to tell the truth, that girls were as capable as boys. Thankfully the door to the barouche opened and the doctor distracted them.

“Miss Meldrum. Are you convinced yet? Or do we continue on to London?”

Rose glanced over at Heidi.

“Were we not returning her home, father?”

“Heidi comes from somewhere much further than London, Rose.”

“Scotland?”

Heidi suppressed a laugh, but only barely.

“No, my dear, she is from the continent.”

The girl’s eyes grew wide. “So I was right? She is French?”

With a mixture of sadness and pride, Heidi settled on a half-truth, glad that she’d taken the time to study the atlas last night to confirm place names. “No, I am from the Bishopric of Muenster.” Heidi was incredibly glad that her mother had taught her the history of her family.

For once it was going to matter.
Well over ten generations had lived in the same village and luckily Germans had always been sticklers for records.

“You are not my cousin?”

“She is a cousin on her father’s side, my dear,” Doctor Carter said, his eyes on hers.

Heidi nodded her assent. "My mother was German."

She knew it would take some finesse to pull this cover story together, but Heidi was sure they’d manage.

Heidi grinned and rattled off a few phrases to prove she was proficient.

The doctor glanced up at her, now surprised himself. “I had no idea you were such a master of the language.”

“We have not had a chance to properly reacquaint ourselves, cousin.” She raised an eyebrow and smiled at the older man. In the silence the truth began to become incredibly evident. “You had other duties to attend to.”

Heidi stared out at the grassy patch in the center of the village once more. A person rode by, driving a small two-seater, one horse at the front, and asked the doctor what sort of vehicle that was.

Ignoring Rose’s incredulous raised eyebrow, Heidi nodded her head as the doctor explained the gig to her.

“That’s what it was,” she said, snapping her fingers.

“What was it?” Rose asked.

_The thing I should have said I was driving._

Heidi pursed her lips, she couldn’t change her story now.

“My friend,” she said, grasping for something to say. “Said she had a gig for me to use, rather than the carriage, but I misunderstood her. It was likely the flaw that caused me to crash into the trees.”

“I daresay you would have fared better in such a vehicle,” the doctor said.

Heidi was relieved that he’d played along, though she was beginning to feel guilty about lying to Rose. The girl just would not understand what was going on, and Heidi agreed with the Carter’s on one thing, the less people that knew the truth, the better. Now that the truth was evident.

She stared out the window, watching a couple walk by, to avoid more conversation, wishing again she’d paid more attention to her mother’s obsession with this time period.

Her mother loved reading Austen and Heyer and all the romance and manners and high teas and everything else that came with it. Heidi had never cared for such things, preferring reality to books. But now, she wished she’d paid more attention.

“Cousin?”

A hand on her blanketed knee brought Heidi out of her thoughts. She snuck a glance across the carriage to see Rose returning her gaze, concern in her voice.
She blinked, trying too late to clear away her tears and felt them fall on her cheeks. She glanced at the doctor but the man was looking at his daughter.

“Rose, will you check with Mr. Smith that he has enough unguent? I forgot to confirm it with him before I left.”

Rose nodded and let her dad help her out of the carriage.

The doctor replaced his daughter inside, sitting across from Heidi, and Heidi turned away.

It couldn’t be true. It was impossible. Beyond impossible.

“Heidi, you are determined to believe this a dream. I am sorry, but I thought this would help you see that you were not wherever you imagined yourself to be.”

The doctor spoke quietly, as if he wished to soften the blow, but it was too late.

She shook her head, her mind racing. This situation was unbelievable.

And yet, she felt awake, felt real, and felt like this could not be some twisted joke.

“How did I end up here? Why? I don’t understand. This has to be a dream, and yet—“

“I knew the moment Abraham carried you into the surgery that you were different. There was something unsettling about you.”

“My belongings certainly don’t compare to yours.”

The doctor nodded. “That and the strange watch on your wrist that glows.” He looked pointedly down at the fitness tracker.

“You’re being calm about this.”

“I have not dealt with people in the same state as you seem to find yourself; but delusions, I have found, need to be dealt with carefully and rationally.”

“And you don’t think me a witch?”

“Everything can be explained through science, I believe.”

Silence fell between them.

“I will do my best to return you to your time, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi looked at him, speculative. “You want something in return?”

“In a way.” The doctor gave a small shrug as he spoke. “You will be healing for at least a fortnight. Perhaps you can use your foresight to help me improve my surgery.”

“I—“

“I dare not expect whatever passes for your modern medicine to be achievable. I noted the list of ingredients on your ‘pain killers’. I cannot even begin to decipher their composition, but some insight to those, those… germs of yours might do a world of wonder.”

The door opened before he could continue and Rose’s pink cheeks appeared. “Mr. Smith
confirmed that you put down his order in your journal, Father.”

“I apologize for my ruse, dearest. I wished to ask Miss Meldrum how her leg was feeling, and I must protect my patient’s privacy.”

Rose nodded, pacified, though she made a show of nudging her father over on the bench so she could return to her seat.

Heidi glanced over at the doctor. She hadn’t known that patient confidentiality was a thing in these days.

Heidi found she couldn’t exactly blame the guy for his circumspection. If she was stuck at the surgery for two weeks before she could even attempt to get home (how she was going to do that, Heidi had no idea) then she certainly owed them something. She had no money, apart from a few dollars in her wallet, and could not work a debt off, being laid up as she was. If this was not a dream, Heidi didn’t want to be a useless slug.

She snorted. She couldn’t believe that she was entertaining the idea that some time portal had dropped her into 19th century England.

What the hell sort of joke did God or the gods or spirits or the cycles of reincarnation think they were playing at? If she were going to get ported back in time, shouldn’t it be for something important? Stopping Hitler or inventing electricity or stopping the Lincoln assassination, something like that made sense. What didn’t make sense was being ported back to rural England.

She sighed. Maybe if her parents hadn’t been on the river cruise of Western Europe, her mother could have come instead. Her mother loved this stuff. And would be much better at faking her way through it than she was.

Heidi’s throat closed at the thought before she could banish it. Terror rolled through her gut as she wondered what her parents would do or think when they found out she was missing.

They still had two weeks left on their vacation. If she didn’t get back in those two weeks, they would be devastated.

And so would she.

The ride back to the cottage was a blur. Heidi sat quietly, trying to collect her thoughts while Rose prattled on. She tried to listen, she did. Rose was a sweet girl and Heidi found herself liking her more than she expected, having never been big on children; but she couldn’t help her racing thoughts. Even if she did manage to find her way back to the spot where she might have come through time, who was to say that the wormhole, and she couldn’t believe she was even entertaining the idea, might still be there?

When the door to the barouche opened, Heidi was surprised to see they’d pulled into the courtyard at the back of the cottage.

Rose climbed out first, then the doctor. Heidi handed down the blankets before the doctor reached in to carry her out. The man who had been driving them climbed into the opposite door and helped Heidi finagle her way into the doctor’s arms before he placed her in the wheelchair and pushed her into the house.
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much, dear readers, for the comments and the kudos! I love you all!

It was Saturday evening, the 15th of February, Heidi standing on a short stool while Mrs. Carter mended the hem on one of Mrs. James’ gowns.

The other dresses were hanging around the room drying. Heidi had used all of her extra underwear in the week since her arrival, and had hand washed them wearing her rubber gloves the night before. She was not ready to give up her panties and had insisted to Mrs. Carter that she was well supplied in underwear, refusing to borrow such things from someone else.

Her cleaning supplies were being carefully rationed out. She would not be stuck here for months, if the worst happened, without having something to fall back on.

"If I had something to sell, I would offer to purchase fabric to make new gowns myself."

Mrs. Carter looked at her, aghast. Heidi continued, regardless.

"I can't sew well, but I can manage a little needlework. I'm bound to rack up some debts in this house. I'm sure you and your family usually expect some sort of compensation for healing."

"Doctor Carter would like for you to stay until you are fully healed. Perhaps we can talk about cost then."

The woman’s reply had been as curt as Heidi expected.

They didn’t always get along, herself and Mrs. Carter. The woman probably thought she was encroaching, but if she were going to end up being stuck here, Heidi wanted to make her position clear.

"Mrs. Carter." Heidi looked down at the woman. "Do you mind if I speak frankly?"

The older woman stopped, a pin resting between her lips, and returning her gaze.

"I understand my present situation perfectly and wish to do what I can to help."

"You are a worldly woman, Miss Meldrum," muttered Mrs. Carter as she gazed, with much preoccupation, at the hem of Heidi’s dress. A few needles wriggled between her lips as she held them in place.

"I think I take your meaning. You do not need to worry. I have no plans – um, designs on ruining your family. Rose is like a sister to me already and Doctor Carter and yourself remind me so much of my own family, I wouldn't dream of hurting either of you."

Mrs. Carter cleared her throat but said nothing. Panic welled inside Heidi. Maybe she was about to get evicted.
"I am well aware of how this may appear to outsiders and how my presence might scandalize your fine family."

"They already talk. Enough people saw Mr. Dowding carrying you to cottage last week, and plenty others saw you traveling to Westerham in the barouche."

Heidi winced. "What's been said? I mean, what have you and the doctor told the others?"

"The same that has been told to Rose. You are a cousin, jilted by your betrothed. You came to see us in a fit of despair and crashed your friend’s carriage in the process."

Heidi nodded.

"I do not like to lie." The words were strong, demanding, something Heidi hadn’t expected to hear after Mrs. Carter’s shy words a few moments before.

"I don't like it either."

"There is nothing to be done for it. We will both have to bear it. Until you return home."

Heidi glanced down at Mrs. Carter in surprise, who was picking herself up off the floor, finished with her hem marking.

"I realize how unconventional it is, but if I have your support, I will be able to hide in plain sight. I don't have a lot of knowledge about this time, I can probably fake my way through. But only if you help make my story one that people will forget soon enough."

"You are acquainted with our time?" Mrs. Carter looked physically uncomfortable asking the question.

Heidi shrugged. "It's covered in broad strokes in school, I never paid close attention, but my mother loved books written in this era. She talked about them constantly, daydreaming of living through it. She loved the manners and the formality as well as the natural state of things during this time."

Her chest tightened at the memory of her mother.

"She once told me that doctors successfully fought off an outbreak of dysentery with garlic; but I don't know the particulars of that or anything else. If I'd appeared merely a hundred years back, I could have prevented wars and advised world leaders and invented things that would have made me literally millions of pounds; but I don't know enough about these years," she said, pointing at the floor. “I don't understand this fate."

Her leg twinging, Heidi asked Mrs. Carter if she could sit down. When Mrs. Carter nodded, Heidi settled into a chair, thankful for the reprieve.

"As it is," she said, lifting her leg up to a nearby stool, navigating around in the dress and propping herself up. "Anything I can think of to invent is based on technology that won't even be on its way to being invented for another fifty to a hundred years. I simply don't have the knowledge to do much more."

"This disappoints you."

"I wouldn't mind making life a little easier. It might pay off some of the debt I am incurring by imposing on your family."
"Perhaps we can find responsibilities to occupy your time while you remain."

"I do enjoy cleaning."

Mrs. Carter’s mouth twitched. "I saw those bottles in your pack."

Heidi hesitated, a little worried that the woman would insist she use them. "It was my emergency kit, I don't have a lot of it."

"And if you are indeed stuck here, I imagine it is a fine resource."

She nodded.

"I would hazard a guess that Mrs. Newton would prefer some help in such things."

"It would be nice to have something useful to do."

"I appreciate your eagerness, Miss Meldrum."

It was a sincere comment, coming from a woman who seemed genuine. Heidi took a deep breath, gathering the courage to say what she’d wanted to since last Saturday.

"I wish to apologize for my conduct when I arrived," Heidi said, nerves twisting her gut. “I was rude. I thought I’d been abducted by crazy people and that may have prejudiced me against you at first. Once the doctor made me see that I had truly entered a different time… I regret how I may have acted."

“I may not understand what you have gone through, but I imagine it was traumatic.”

Mrs. Carter stepped forward, placing her small sewing kit on the nearby table.

"I think, Miss Meldrum, that we are going to get along." She waved her hands in the air, indicating for Heidi to remove the gown so the bulk of the work could be done.

~*~*~*~*~

The next morning, Heidi found herself in the surgery with Doctor Carter, pulling her shoulder-length hair into a pony tail. The man was taking off her splint to check on the progress of her healing. Her period had started that morning and Heidi would need to talk to one of them about what women did during this time, but now was not an appropriate time.

Her cravings for chocolate were growing and a few cups of the bitter drink weren’t going to help.

He pronounced that her knee was healing nicely, but that she should keep it in the splint for another week at least. It was the last thing Heidi wanted to hear.

"It will help with the swelling and force you to refrain yourself from too much activity. I am pleased to see that we do not need to amputate the leg."

Oh, sweet Lord.

"Me too."
Doctor Carter beamed, as if he had told her she was an heiress. "If you wish, you are welcome to join us for services later this morning."

"You mean there are plenty of curious people in the village, don’t you? And that services are the only safe place to ‘present’ me?"

"That is true. But I imagine it would do you some good to meet the people who live here. Aside from our blacksmith and his wife, you have not met with anyone else. Gossip is spreading. Best to nip it in the bud."

"I will not mind going to your services, but I am a confirmed Roman Catholic."

The poor doctor could have been pushed over with a feather at her admission.

"I should have told you that earlier, I suppose."

From the doctor’s pallor, this had been one big whopping oversight on Heidi’s part.

"I might refrain from telling the rector as Catholics are rare in this county.” He was quiet, and then clapped his hands together. "All the more reason for you to join us, if you are willing. It will be less suspicious."

"I’m not opposed to learning about other religions."

The doctor gave Heidi an approving nod. "Best not to mention it to anyone else. We shall sit in the back. If your leg begins to irritate you, we can escape with as little interruption as possible."

"That’s probably a good idea."

"You will need to practice your diction,” he said softly, “Miss Meldrum, or no one will believe whatever truth or lies we tell about you."

Heidi flushed, but he was right. He seemed to be right a lot, she noted.

"I’ll do my best not to talk then. At least not today."
“You have memorized your story?”

Heidi glanced over her shoulder at Mrs. Carter.

The church bells tolled as Doctor Carter pushed the wheelchair through the streets of Hunsford with his wife at his side and Rose trailing behind. Heidi was not comfortable at all in the seat; but it would be a hundred times better, with its thin cushion, than the hard pews waiting for her in the parsonage. At least it allowed her to have a blanket on her lap to keep the light rain from soaking her dress on the way to services.

Heidi resolved that if she were stuck here, she would help Doctor Carter rebuild this chair into something a little better. She knew enough about regular wheelchairs and that people had invented ones which allowed the user to stand up. Since she couldn't invent electric ones, she'd be damned if she didn't try to upgrade the current version of the wheelchair while she was here.

It would be her first payment toward her debt.

For now, she had her leg splinted and partially raised. The wheelchair afforded a slight incline though she wished she could have worn her pants to have it raised completely. At least the doctor offered to leave the service if the pain grew too much.

“It shouldn’t be too hard. I’m still surprised you’re doing this for me.”

“We would be cold-hearted indeed if we did not offer you help. It is apparent you are telling the truth as best you know it.”

“You both must have a great ability to judge character, Mrs. Carter.”

“The doctor prides himself on such.” Mrs. Carter smirked at her husband and they turned the corner onto the main road and Heidi watched as the villagers realized that she’d been brought out of the cottage.

Heidi stared at her hands, eager to ignore the gawkers. On her right she carried the ring from her mother, the diamond from a pair of earrings daddy had given her, the gold from various trinkets and knickknacks from both sides of the family, mother's brothers, Oma and Opa, even Heidi’s granny on her father's side.

Dressing for church this morning, Heidi was pleased to see her fingers had shrunk back to their normal size. She’d been worried at first; but considering her injury, what sort of trauma she’d gone through to slip through whatever time portal she’d been in and the change in her diet, Heidi reasoned there would have to be some sort of consequences.

That heirloom piece would never leave her hand; but the engagement ring that just a few short hours ago had been on her left hand, the one carat and chips from Peter Hicks, that had needed to go. If she did ever make it back to her time, there would be no second chances. She missed him, but was determined that the slime ball would never see her again.

Heidi dragged herself from her thoughts, already tired of the introspection.

Thankfully the village was small and it didn’t appear to Heidi that every single villager was headed to the church.
Heidi didn’t want to think about being home again and missing him. She didn’t want to think about the drunken stupor she would have been in trying to get over him. And the pints of ice cream she would have devoured.

She had pulled the engagement band off her left hand and flung it at the wall, a surge of rage igniting her cheeks. She hoped he would be fucking miserable.

The ring had bounced off the wall and disappeared under the bed. She’d look for it when she was good and ready. Probably never.

“Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi glanced up and smiled as the blacksmith came walking toward her in his Sunday best, his young wife on his arm. Dowding had come to dinner along on Friday evening, his wife ill, and had spent most of the night extolling her virtues. It had been sweet.

“Mr. Dowding.”

The Carters greeted the Dowdings, and he thanked them once again for dinner on Friday evening. They all stood awkwardly before Heidi turned to the doctor.

“Uncle, would you lend me your hand so I can properly greet Mrs. Dowding?”

If the story was to be believed, it would be up to Heidi to take the first steps.

The young woman, probably a few years younger than Heidi, quickly waved her words away.

“Please, stay seated. I do not take offense. My husband has told me about your accident.”

Heidi nodded, hoping she appeared solemn.

“It is indeed a miracle you managed to make it as far as the Browne’s home, Miss Meldrum.”

“Yes, it is. I am fortunate that your husband came upon me before I blacked out.”

Behind her, Heidi felt the doctor shift.

“I mean, fell unconscious.”

“The pain must have been extraordinary.”

“It was.”

“I trust you are on the mend?”

From behind her, the doctor spoke up. “I have recommended that Miss Meldrum remain in the splint for at least another week, but thankfully she will not lose the leg.”

Heidi gulped. She would never, ever ask how close she might have come to losing it in this time.

The young woman smiled at her. Mrs. Dowding opened her mouth to say something, but the conversation was cut short by her husband announcing that services would begin shortly.

When they reached the small yard at the front of the building, Doctor Carter directed Heidi up to the waiting line of villagers. The purpose was clear enough as the rector shook hands with the populace.
“If you don’t mind, doctor. I think I’ll stand in line. If I can borrow your arm.”

“I would be happy to lend you my arm,” he corrected.

“Of course.”

The doctor gave control of the chair over to his wife and held out his arm for Heidi to use as a brace as she pulled herself up. Heidi stood with his help and quickly folded the blanket that she’d placed on her lap in the absence of a jacket, dropping it on the chair.

Mrs. Carter pushed the chair out of the way of the villagers and Heidi tried not to watch them as they gaped at her. Heidi stood a little unsteadily, glad that the doctor and his wife would be able to placate the crowd of people gathered at the front of the parsonage.

The doctor spoke in quiet tones. “Can you manage?”

“I will be able to manage,” she said, trying to be proper. “It has been a week since the injury, and I am healing.”

Mrs. Carter smiled with approval as she joined them in the line, with Rose at her side.

As Rose moved forward, in front of her in line, the rector sucked a breath between his teeth, almost slurping. It was, in the parlance of the times, ‘most unseemly’.

She glanced over at Doctor Carter as Rose and Mrs. Carter moved on to greet the woman beside the clergyman.

“Mr. Collins. I wish to introduce you to my newest patient, a distant cousin, Miss Heidi Meldrum.”

Something about the name caused Heidi to start, but the introduction was already being made and she didn’t have time to think about it.

He sniffed with his large, flat nose. “Ahh yes, I had heard from Lady Catherine about a young woman’s most… intriguing arrival. I had been wondering if she would be well enough to join us this morning. I believe you were not in attendance last Sunday due to her care.”

Heidi’s stomach twisted. She knew something about this man. It was there on the tip of her tongue. The kind of thing that would drive her crazy all day if she didn’t figure it out.

“Yes, I am sure her arrival caused a great stir within the village.”

“Miss Meldrum, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The rector bowed and Heidi did her best to do something close to a curtsey. With one leg in a splint, it was not graceful.

“Will you allow me to introduce my bride?”

“Of course.”

She spotted a skinny, plain woman beside the parson, with frizzy, dirty blonde hair escaping the confines of the bonnet she wore.

“This is my wife, Charlotte Collins, nee Lucas, recently of Meryton.”

Her good knee buckled and Heidi reached for the doctor, her ears ringing.
It was impossible.

She looked at the doctor as she felt arms around her. They were carrying her to the wheelchair, but she could not stop staring at Charlotte. It was as if a veil cleared from in front of her at the mention of the woman’s name.

Charlotte, Collins, Meryton, and ohmygod Hunsford. They were all characters or locations in one of her mother’s favorite books.

Jesus Christ, she was in Pride and Prejudice.

The world swam around her and frantic chattering filled the air of the people who had gathered to go into the church.

No wonder Hunsford sounded so freaking familiar.

A shudder raced through her, but at least they were taking her away from the people, so she’d have some privacy while she freaked out.

Oh God, oh God, oh God…

“Miss Meldrum? Are you unwell?”

Mrs. Carter was kneeling beside the chair, the woman’s chilled fingers on her cheeks.

Part of her realized that the woman had taken the time to remove her gloves. The other part was too far panicked to care.

“I—“ She flinched, the word sounding more like a squeak.

Rose appeared suddenly, a bottle in her hand. It seemed to be one of the bottles in the surgery with brandy in it.

The bottle was popped open and waved in front of her, as if she should take a drink.

The sharp scent of vinegar engulfed her senses and Heidi snapped her head back.

“Holy—“ she started, but managed to prevent herself from saying worse.

“Welcome back, Miss Meldrum.”

“Is she well?” Rose asked.

“I am not entirely sure,” the doctor said. “Rose, please join the others. Your mother and I will be along shortly.”

Rose frowned but did as her father asked.

“Miss Meldrum, what happened?”

“You won’t believe me. I don’t even believe it.” Heidi shook her head, eyes darting back and forth between her two friends. At this point they could hardly be anything less, but how did one tell someone that they were inside a book?

Jane Austen wrote fiction. Make-believe. FAKE!
She stared at both of them in turn and swallowed, unable to comprehend the situation she found herself in.

“I know where I am.”

With everything she had, Heidi wished her mother were here. Now, more than ever, could she use her mother’s advice.

The married couple looked at each other, worry evident on their faces.

“What is it?” the doctor asked. “Is something terrible going to happen?”

“Bonaparte?”

Heidi slumped in her chair at Mrs. Carter’s question, she hadn’t even considered that.

“No, nothing like that. As far as I’m aware, Bonaparte does not make it to the shores of England.” Heidi backtracked them away from the thought of war as best she could.

“Then what is it, child?”

She leaned forward in the chair, moving her leg and pain shot up to her hip. But Heidi did her best to ignore it.

“We’re in the middle of one of the most beloved English love stories of the next two hundred years. We have been told that it was a novel, fiction. My mother has read the book at least a hundred times. There have been movies—plays written about it.”

Mrs. Carter gasped, looking past Heidi back toward the chapel.

“Mr. Collins and Charlotte?”

Heidi snorted with surprise. “Oh Lord no!”

“Then who?” Mrs. Carter was nearly apoplectic with impatience. “You have not had a strong reaction to anyone else since you’ve arrived.”

“It was the introduction with Charlotte that caused your fit,” Doctor Carter agreed.

Heidi leaned against the armrest, trying to relieve some of the tension in her thigh. She couldn’t believe the words that were about to come out of her mouth, but they had to be said.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas’s greatest friend and the cousin of Mr. Collins.”
Sunday, February 16th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the visits, kudos, and comments! They mean the world to me.

Now we're getting into it! :D

Just a little reminder: In an effort not to break suspension of disbelief, the places where Ms. Austen blanked out a name I have made up a new ones. They are wholly fictional places, just so we have a name. I have tried to steer clear of fanon names as well, using only Ms. Austen’s work at my ‘source’ for such things.

Heidi spent the service in a daze.

What she wouldn’t give to have her phone, so she could text her mom and ask for help.

The ramifications of being in this world were astronomical. She’d been getting used to the fact that she had traveled through time, and now she discovered she was in a fictional world. Nothing could have prepared her for this.

The more she considered it, the more Heidi was convinced that she must be in a coma. Someone had to have found her body at the bottom of the ravine and she must be hooked up to life support.

A complicated dream world like this HAD to be a coping mechanism. If she were still with her car, she’d be dead by now.

That seemed like a reasonable truth.

Some twisted God had ported her into the fictional world of Jane Austen. She hadn’t abhorred her mother’s favorite book like her father had; but she thought her mother’s obsession was a bit much.

She tried to make sense of her scrambled memories to recall where she was in the plot line. Mr. Collins had already married Charlotte, and most of the harm had already been done. All she could remember was that Lizzy was supposed to be visiting Charlotte soon and there would be a failed proposal.

Heidi frowned as around her the congregation began to sing.

What had her mother said about what was supposed to happen… she couldn’t remember.

By the time the service was over, Heidi had come up with a sure solution: She would watch for the arrival of the heroine. It was all she could do for now.

From what she’d managed to piece together from her memories of watching the movies with her mother, it was the failed proposal that changed Lizzy and Darcy, turning both into people worthy of the other’s love. It’s what her mother adored about the story. Not that they were forced to change but that Darcy wanted to change to become the right partner for Lizzy.

Another idea, the inevitably tempting one, pricked at her mind. She couldn’t interfere. She
WOULDN’T. They found their happiness together because of the journey they undertook to better themselves.

No, she would observe and try to figure out why she’d been cast as the person in the wheelchair in the background of this novel.

With the way things were going, Heidi couldn’t help but wonder if Jane Austen herself would appear at some point.

A hand on her shoulder shocked Heidi from her thoughts.

“Miss Meldrum.”

“Doctor Carter.” Hoping to calm her racing heart, Heidi took a breath.

“The service is over.”

Heidi glanced around, surprised to see the chapel almost empty.

“Oh dear.”

Mrs. Carter appeared at her husband’s side. “Mrs. Collins has inquired if it would be appropriate for her to call this afternoon for tea. I thought it might be wise to allow Miss Meldrum to meet Mrs. Collins.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Heidi asked with a pained smile.

Doctor Carter gave her a sage look, walking around behind Heidi. “What do you plan on doing, with your knowledge?”

It was almost as if he had read her thoughts. “Nothing for now. I do not seek to alter the past.”

She glanced up at Mrs. Carter, walking beside them as the doctor pushed the chair toward the door.

“At least, not yet,” she murmured, quietly to herself.

*~*~*~*~*

It was a couple hours later that Heidi found herself sitting in the drawing room of the renovated farmhouse waiting nervously for Mrs. Collins to visit. The great room that served as dining room and family room was apparently not good enough to have tea in with guests. Thankfully Mrs. Carter offered up her private room for the event.

If Heidi were being honest, she would have admitted to her present dread. Not that Charlotte carried the air of an intimidating woman; but Heidi worried that she would make the wrong impression. There were too many stories about how that one slight comment could change the course of history.

A rural village in the early 19th century seemed worlds away from places of importance. She wasn’t living with a president or appearing in a space shuttle or something. But now, with these characters popping up left and right, she wasn’t sure what to think.

Before Mrs. Collins’ arrival, Mrs. Carter had whisked Heidi to the side, a vaguely ominous expression on her face.
“There are strict etiquette...rules... for when guests call upon us. I would suggest you do everything you can to follow them.”

Heidi coughed uncomfortably. “I will be careful.”

Moments later, when the doorbell had rung, Mrs. Newton’s footsteps echoed in the corridor from beyond the closed doorway as the woman moved to answer the door.

However stupid these rules were, Heidi had no choice but to follow them as long as she was to remain under Mrs. Carter’s roof. She had never been a rude person, but these few days had shown her how rigid this older society was. Her mother hadn’t been joking when she talked about the structure of it all.

The wood stove in the corner was lit and flames were dancing in the grate.

Heidi made a mental note to see if they could start using these fires, of course when they weren’t expecting guests, to boil water and sterilize the instruments for the clinic...the surgery, rather. They would be wasting the firewood anyway, might as well use them for something else.

She took the opportunity to push herself off the settee and stand up in preparation for the woman’s entry to the room, balancing carefully on her one good foot. The back of her splint rested lightly on the floor enough to stabilize her stance.

Heidi glanced up to see Mrs. Newton announcing the arrival of the diminutive Mrs. Collins to Mrs. Carter and herself.

Mrs. Carter stood gracefully and had Heidi not already stood, she was sure that she’d have caught her skirts on something.

The woman of the house greeted the rector’s wife with the calm and ease of someone who had done this her entire life. The queasiness Heidi had tried to ignore surged higher in her stomach.

“Mrs. Collins, we are honored by your visit.”

To Heidi’s relief, the young woman smiled. “I wished to make the proper acquaintance of Miss Meldrum. I pray that it is acceptable that I call now. The church was busy and I did not wish to excite Miss Meldrum again after her episode.”

The woman regarded Heidi and she flushed a little, avoiding Charlotte’s eyes.

“I would like to apologize for that, Mrs. Collins. I was not quite ready to stand on my own out in the sun like that. Even if the air was chilly.”

She swallowed, hoping one of her first attempts to speak with an intention to sound natural would pass the test.

There was only so much that a supposed childhood in Germany could cover for in the faking of ESL. She was fluent in the language and even took a few German lit classes at the community college. It was an excellent detail she could weave into her background and she intended on using it for her excuse.

“Apology accepted, Miss Meldrum.” To Heidi’s relief, Charlotte flashed her a grin. “I cannot remember Mr. Collins ever jumping quite so high as he did when you tumbled toward him in your faint.”
The heat on Heidi’s cheeks grew.

Before Charlotte could say more, Mrs. Carter invited her to sit. Heidi was grateful for the diversion.

The two women chatted amiably while Heidi did her best to listen to the conversation. She needed to focus if she didn’t want to arouse suspicion; if she was made out to be odd she’d never get to experience this story from the sidelines. Heck, she didn’t even end up in Marryton (or wherever the hell it was), so she’d only get to see a little of the story. Not useful at all.

“We certainly did not expect to receive Heidi, but we were aware of her arrival in London. The Doctor’s brother had written to us, letting us know of her situation, that she’d returned from the Continent with the intention of marrying a young tradesman.”

Charlotte regarded Heidi with grave sympathy. “And that is when, I presume, you discovered the… change in circumstance?”

Heidi only nodded. It was instinctive to be surprised that Charlotte Collins had already heard the gossip; but then, she’d been learning that everyone knew everyone’s business in small towns.

“Yes. I’m afraid I made my situation worse by fleeing in my friend’s carriage in the middle of the night.” She looked down pointedly at her knee, hoping that Charlotte would understand. “I am grateful that I managed to get close enough to the village to have Mr. Dowding rescue me. It was a good thing that someone so trustworthy aided me in my hour of need.”

She felt ridiculous speaking in such a stilted manner, but… Heidi would play the game and see what happened next.

“I have only lived in Hunsford for nigh on a month. The villagers are some of the kindest people I have met.”

Even knowing the answers, Heidi couldn’t help but ask a question or two. If only to keep up the ruse. “You didn’t grow up in the village?”

“No.” Charlotte smiled, looking wistful. “I grew up in a small town north of London.”

“Oh, I think I remember now. Mr. Collins mentioned it.”

“Did he?”

“I believe so.” Realizing she could be on dangerous ground, Heidi steered the conversation away. “What is it like north of London? I have never been. I heard the winters are harsh.”

There was a vague memory in Heidi’s mind of her mother watching, a few years back, some series set in the north. It was gray and snowy, though it didn’t mean a lot. The few days she’d spent in this England so far, the weather had pretty much been the same.

“Meryton is not so very far north. Not like the counties of Derbyshire and Larkshire.”

“I see.”

By the time the conversation eventually drifted, Heidi had formed an initial opinion of Charlotte. From what she could remember, Charlotte was as the movies portrayed. A plain woman not inclined to be romantic but happy in her situation and if not eager to make friends, a kind woman and suitable as the wife of a clergyman. Heidi wondered if Mr. Collins would turn out to be just as
ludicrous as his portrayals.

So far, it seemed accurate.

They sat together for an hour chatting, nibbling on little sweets and sandwiches. She tried not to think about how much her mother would have loved this. She also did her best to resist the urge to eat with the fork the finger foods, doing her best to clean her fingers on her napkin in a new place every time she touched food.

Heidi went so far as to eye the door, wanting desperately to get her hand sanitizer from the bedroom.

“I’ll be turning twenty-eight in July,” Heidi said some minutes later, not actually sure how they’d gotten on the topic of birthdays, or even whether or not it was polite to talk about. Rose had been reluctant to talk about it when she initially arrived and Heidi couldn’t imagine what Mrs. Carter was feeling now.

Charlotte’s eyes widened as she smiled. “You can’t be serious. I was born in 1785 as well. I am surprised to hear we are nearly the same age. You do not carry yourself in the same manner as I.”

“I must admit to many situations where I was mistaken for being much younger.” Heidi paused, hoping that the look she was giving Charlotte was a mischievous one. “Which isn’t a bad thing.”

“I think many of the fairer sex would appreciate such assumptions as well.”

“My mother never appeared to be her age either. It must have been in the blood.”

“You speak as if she—“

Heidi nodded in a silent confirmation. The Carters had agreed that her parents should be dead, if she wanted to pass as being under the guardianship of her cousins and running away from London to the country.

She glanced at Mrs. Carter. Now was the time to share her story and even if Charlotte only told her husband, it was sure to be around the village in a few hours.

“Father died when I was young. I was happy in the life I had with my mother. We didn’t have much, but I imagined I’d spend the rest of my days taking care of her, when I didn’t immediately find a match.”

She paused. Heidi was admittedly not the best actress; she usually had small bit parts at the dinner theater, preferring being part of the background chorus when available. The situation now was calling for some serious thespian chops.

“We would never have imposed on my cousins as father was never close with any of them, especially after we moved to the bishopric.” Ooh, good word, Heidi.

“But Mother became sick and we had few acquaintances left that would visit from London.” She worried her bottom lip, her surge of confidence fading the further she got into her lie. “Traveling from the Continent is not easy. And when Mother died, I agreed to marry my friend. Mother and I never imagined we would be parted so soon.” Heidi paused, hoping she appeared uncomfortable, staring at her hands. “You know the rest.”

Sympathetic silence filled the room, the only sound the cracking of firewood. The secret to a believable lie was to NOT give too much detail, let others infer the rest, or it would feel forced.
The Carters had told her that the best way to have explained away the lack of any money was to say that the money went to a cousin on her mother’s side; but it was, for now at least, an unnecessary lie that would surely bring up more questions.

Charlotte glanced up at the wall and gasped with shock. “Oh, I had no notion how late it was.”

She stood, quickly dropping a half-folded napkin on her plate. “I apologize dearly, but I should return to the parsonage. Mr. Collins will be waiting for me.”

Heidi went to stand after Mrs. Carter did so herself, motioning with her hand.

Mrs. Carter spoke up. “We understand. It is easy to lose track when one is meeting new acquaintances.”

“Thank you for allowing me to call. It has been a lovely afternoon.”

“It was my pleasure,” Heidi said, leaning on the armrest. She didn’t know where it came from, but the next sentence just leapt out. “To be perfectly honest, Mrs. Collins, a relaxing visit is always agreeable to me.”

The woman stopped, her brow furrowing.

“Would you, Miss Meldrum, care to call on me at the parsonage this Wednesday for tea? Mr. Collins has the habit of calling on Rosings those afternoons to pray with Lady Catherine. I find myself in need of conversation and would greatly enjoy your company.”

Heidi glanced over at Mrs. Carter, who merely raised an interested eyebrow.

“I would be happy to join you on Wednesday.”
The canopy of trees passed overhead as Doctor Carter drove the pair of them down the road in a gig he’d borrowed from Mr. Cooper, the grocer. It had been almost two weeks since she landed in Hunsford and her leg was well enough to get around on for a few minutes at a time.

Under the seat she had packed her three bags, in case they found the location where she crossed through time. Doctor Carter insisted upon the journey as it was the only way he could think of to get her home and Heidi found she’d couldn’t disagree with him. If her presence was the only requirement needed to open the portal or whatever, maybe today she would get to go home. She refused to think about the possibility of needing some other ingredient to conjure the right situation.

Though it was cloudy, Heidi was surprised at how warm it really was. Not late April or early May, like she loved; but more like mid-March even though it was only mid-February. She had no temperature gauge and even if it still worked, her fitness tracker wasn’t so advanced that it had a weather app on it. Heidi sighed.

Being in Hunsford these past couple of weeks had been refreshing, a nice getaway from reality; but now she was determined to find her way home.

The engagement ring was back on her finger. And though it felt like a leaded-weight, she felt a little better about having it on. It was one of the only possessions she had to her name. And when she saw Peter again, she planned to throw it in his face.

*I hope he regrets what he did.*

The doctor had gone to Beckenshire a couple days ago in a hurry. There had been a duel of some sort, and one of the men involved had been shot. With the doctor out of the house, Heidi had spoken to Mrs. Carter about periods and common practices. It had not been a comfortable discussion.

The woman had explained that while some women had aprons fitted for their time, most simply bled into their clothing. Which, necessarily, kept those of higher breeding within their houses. For the poorer ladies, such stains were simply ignored while they worked in the laundries or in the fields.

The thought of suffering through that had made her stomach turn. She had marked tampons and pads down on her mental note pad as things to get invented ASAP.

Familiarity washed over Heidi as the gig turned off the road and onto what could only be described as a cow path, a large boulder at the corner.

"Doctor?"

The gig came to a stop as he gave the command to the horse with a flick of his wrist and Heidi
pulled the blanket off her legs.

"This looks familiar. I think I rested on this rock."

He climbed out and then held his hand out for her to steady herself with.

The formal manners of restricting touch would be the only thing she would miss about the Regency period. Hugging wasn't mandatory when greeting friends; they weren't forced to touch people if they did not wish to. For once, it was proper to have the physical distance she had always felt comfortable with.

It hadn't hurt that Mrs. Carter had loaned her a pair of gloves. That layer of protection from all the dirty things had made life a little easier, and Heidi had even managed to save some of her cleaning supplies in lieu of wearing gloves in the house when she could get away with it. She couldn't wash the leather, but it prevented complete meltdowns when she became overwhelmed with the situation she found herself in.

The doctor tied the horse to a tree and Heidi searched for the place where she might have entered the woods.

They walked for half an hour before Heidi gave up, her leg in considerable pain.

"Maybe I wasn't ready for this outing," she said as a light rain began to fall.

The doctor fixed her with a firm but kind look. "I promised that I would return you home, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi rubbed her eyebrow with a knuckle, considering the clearing. The bark on the trees were growing black with the rain.

Heidi shook her head, waving her hand in frustration. "It was too dark. I don't recognize anything"

She spun around. "Nothing is familiar."

"Explain to me again, exactly what happened."

"It was late, my car hit some ice, I think. I lost control and went crashing into a ravine." Her head hurt thinking about it.

"And?"

"I couldn't get back to the road with my injury and I knew that there was a house down a driveway nearby, so I hobbled for three hours and passed out on the Browne's step." She stopped to take a breath. "There was no flash of light, no shimmering portal I stepped through, no fairy ring. It wasn't even foggy out. I didn't see anything special until I came upon the boulder, where I sat for a minute and then heard horses."

Heidi waited anxiously as the doctor pondered her words. He looked as though he had decided something.

"Miss Meldrum. Perhaps we should return to the cottage."

She looked around, desperate, wondering how it might appear in the summer, the trees full of leaves and flowers dotting the countryside.

"No, I have to find my way home." Heidi gripped a handful of her slightly muddied dress. "Don't
you see? This is not mine. None of this is mine. I have to go back!"

"Miss Meldrum," the doctor said softly, "if we search much longer you will do more damage to your leg."

"But—"

"We tried and failed for the time being. We can try again another day."

Tears were burning her eyes. "Every day I remain here makes another day for my mother to think I'm dead. Can't you see how I must try?"

"This is but the first attempt. I did not say we would give up, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi looked around, she didn’t want to be here anymore, she wanted to be home; but she couldn’t be sure this was where she’d come into the country at. She needed to be patient, as long as she got home, that was all that mattered. She dragged a shuddered breath down her throat, the doctor staring at her, an eyebrow raised.

"Maybe you're right."

The doctor came closer. Strangely, she did not flinch when he rested a hand on her shoulder, covered by Mrs. Carter’s shawl.

"We can venture out to the woods as many times as you wish to try to find your way home; but as your physician, I must insist we return to the gig. You must rest your leg. Will you be able to make it back on your own power?"

"I can make it back, but I may need the use of your arm."

Doctor Carter held his arm out to her and Heidi eagerly took the help.

She wouldn't give up after one trip; but if she couldn't even find her way to the crash site, how would she figure out to activate whatever brought her through?

Heidi leaned against a wet tree trunk, sulking, as he prepared the gig for a ride in the rain. She knew he was right. She had no other choice. They would have to try again another day. Her leg was screaming in pain and she needed to rest.

For most of the ride back to the main highway, Heidi sat in silence being jostled down the path.

When she’d had enough of her pity party, Heidi broached the subject of tampons being used as bandaging for gunshot wounds. She’d been thinking about it a lot in the last couple of days. She’d managed to make it through one round of maintenance, but her supply would not last.

“These tampons, they use them to stop bleeding?” The doctor appeared incredulous, tilting his head at her.

A subject like gun-wounds was far more appropriate than using them for her periods.

“They do,” she said. “At least, they will in about 100 years, during a large war. Maybe we could talk to Mr. Dowding about making applicators.”

By the time they reached the village an hour later, Heidi was regretting the whole excursion. Her
leg was in considerable pain, she needed laudanum, and her hopes were nearly dashed. But, she’d made strides in making sure she’d get something set up for her periods, should she be here for another month.

He cleared his throat as the gig pulled up along the side of the cottage and Heidi’s eyes followed his gaze.

"It appears we have a guest."

Mrs. Carter had been giving Heidi a crash course in Regency era vocabulary and manners and rules, whenever Rose was not around and she now knew the difference between the varying vehicles of the day. She knew immediately that it was a phaeton sitting on the gravel of the small courtyard at the back of the house.

"Who is it?" she asked, sitting up and pulling the shawl over her shoulders.

"Miss Anne de Bourgh and Mrs. Jenkinson, her caretaker."

A lump formed in Heidi’s throat. She’d momentarily forgotten the storyline unfolding around her.

"She’s stopping at the cottage?"

The doctor smiled sagely. "She is one of my most frequent patients."

Heidi nodded, apprehensive at the thought of meeting the romantic rival to the main character. "I remember. She was sick with something, wasn’t she?"

He stopped the gig on the path next to the cottage. Heidi assumed he was parking there to return the gig to Mr. Cooper without blocking the de Bourgh phaeton completely in the yard. There was just enough room for the two horse-drawn vehicles to pass each other on the path.

"You are aware of Miss de Bourgh?" he asked, saying her name with emphasis.

"She had a minor role in the story." Heidi held up two fingers pinching the air between them. "She’s one of the bad guys."

"You are serious?" Laughter tinged his voice.

Heidi hesitated as the doctor climbed out of the gig. "Well, Lady Catherine was more the opposition, but…"

She took the doctor’s hand as he reached up to help her out.

"I can assure you. Miss De Bourgh is a charming, young woman. She merely happens to have a weak constitution due to her ailment."

Heidi stepped down and stood as carefully as possible, keeping her hand on the back of the bonnet that covered her head. Gazing toward the sky, she could see that the rain from the forest was catching up with them. At least the wearing of bonnets kept her head warm.

"Charming? But she only ever sat there and looked dour." Heidi stressed the last word with a hint of that British accent that apparently wasn’t a thing yet.

The doctor’s eyes took on a twinkle. "Perhaps you should give Miss de Bourgh a chance before you judge her character based on a novel’s prejudice."
She looked over at the phaeton. Squinting her eyes at the backs of the two ladies, Heidi wondered if he had a point. Everyone had their own lives, their own motivations, their own pasts, even if they weren’t specified in a book.

"I will try."

"Come, let me introduce you and then I will have to bring Miss de Bourgh into the surgery. Do you require laudanum presently?"

Heidi nodded. "Are you sure you want me to meet her? The rules of high society don't exactly…"

He gave her an enigmatic smile. "What did I just say about judging, Miss Meldrum?"

Heidi returned the smile, sheepishly. "I will do my best."

The doctor then escorted her to the back of the house. At first glance, Anne’s appearance didn't particularly shock Heidi. The woman was thin and her brown wispy hair, much like Charlotte’s, peeked out from under her bonnet. Her face was angular and her eyebrows dark but she didn't appear sick. Thin and pale, sure, but not the wasting figure she'd expected.

"Doctor Carter."

"Miss de Bourgh. I trust all is well."

Anne’s smile was bright and genuine and came to her face much more easily than Heidi had expected. "Mrs. Jenkinson and I wished to take the air. I thought it would be advisable to stop at the surgery on our way back to Rosings."

"You are always welcome at the cottage, Miss de Bourgh."

"I thought I might be introduced to your guest. Mrs. Collins has spoken fondly of her."

The doctor caught her attention. "My apologies, Miss de Bourgh, for being so remiss in my duty. This is Miss Adelheid Meldrum, a distant cousin staying with us for some time. Miss Meldrum, Miss Anne de Bourgh of Rosings Park."

Heidi did her best to curtsey without wobbling and Anne nodded her head.

"It's a pleasure to me you, Miss Meldrum."

"An honor, Miss de Bourgh."

Behind her, Mrs. Jenkinson stared. The woman would fit in with those creepy gothic nannies that might run around warning children about witches and putting good luck charms under the beds of their charges.

She appraised Heidi with narrowed eyes. Heidi couldn’t guess why, but did her best to ignore her altogether. Maybe the woman thought Heidi beneath the status of Miss de Bourgh.

Conversation stalled before Mrs. Carter and Rose appeared, much to Heidi’s gratitude.

The three women greeted each other genially.

"Dearest," said Doctor. Carter, “would you mind escorting Miss Meldrum inside while I attend to Miss de Bourgh?"
"Gladly, my dear," Mrs. Carter replied.

Miss de Bourgh frowned. "We did not intend to delay your care, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi started, surprised at the genuine words of concern. "It's alright. I mean, you weren't expected to know about it. Please forgive me. My leg has been in pain for some time. I am in need of some relief."

"I quite understand. Perhaps I can call upon you later this week and we can become acquainted?"

"That would be lovely, Miss de Bourgh." Heidi curtseyed and allowed Mrs. Carter to lead her into the side door by the clinic, hobbling on her leg.

The door closed behind them and Mrs. Carter spoke up. "You were unable to go back?"

"I couldn't find the place where I crashed. I don't know that we'll ever find it." Heidi slumped, wandering over to the edge of the bed.

"Do not give up hope, Heidi." The woman patted the hand that rested on her arm.

"I'm sure you're ready for your semi-permanent guest to get out of your hair." At the reminder of her disappointment, Heidi failed to notice the reassuring gesture that would have otherwise meant a great deal coming from Mrs. Carter.

Mrs. Carter gave her a genuine smile. "You use the strangest phrasing sometimes, Miss Meldrum."

"I noticed you didn't disagree."

Mrs. Carter smoothed her skirts, her cheeks slightly tinged. "I admit, the pressure of a guest can be stressful; but Miss Meldrum, we will miss you when you go. Rose has, forgive the saying, blossomed with your friendship."

"If I never return home, I will never be able to repay you or your family's kindness toward me." It was only after saying it that Heidi realized how true that statement was.

As she untied her bonnet, Mrs. Carter dosed out the medicine according to the doctor’s previous instructions. Heidi didn't like using it, but after the pain she'd been in, she'd agreed to use as needed. The doctor, at least, kept to his promise that he would not let her start taking it as a habit.

Rose appeared in the clinic a few minutes later.

"Mother, Mrs. Collins is in the drawing room. We were expecting her for tea."

Heidi glanced up from the cot where she was re-splinting her leg, the compression helping greatly.

"Oh crap."

Both Rose and Mrs. Carter turned, curiously. Not a word commonly in use, thank God.

"I mean, I forgot all about our plans for tea." Heidi clenched her hands, hoping they didn't dwell on her mistake.

"Mrs. Collins offered to call at a later time if—"

"Rose, please see to Mrs. Collins. We will join you both shortly."
Once the splint was in place, Heidi headed for the drawing room and Mrs. Carter went to ensure that Mrs. Newton was working on the tea and nibbles.

"Charlotte. I apologize for the delay. To be perfectly honest, I forgot we were meeting today."

"If my appearance is inconvenient," Charlotte said, beginning to stand.

"Oh, not at all. My uncle and I went searched for the crashed carriage. I thought I might be able to figure out where it was that I crashed, and retrieve the last of my belongings but we had no luck."

Charlotte nodded, a look of pity on her face. "I am sorry to hear that."

Rose helped Heidi over to a seat and the three women settled in for the afternoon break.

"If you do not mind me saying, Miss Meldrum. Miss de Bourgh's phaeton was in the courtyard. I was not sure I would be welcome."

"You are always welcome, Mrs. Collins. I was just making Miss de Bourgh's acquaintance."

"She is a dear soul, is she not?"

"The things I've heard about the family at Rosings, I must admit I expected something different."

Charlotte smiled and Rose gave a quiet giggle.

"Miss Meldrum, I was wondering--"

The woman's nervousness worried Heidi but she waited for Charlotte to continue. "I find myself in a strange situation."

"How can I help?"

"I was hoping that while you remained in Hunsford, that you would not mind joining me for tea once or twice a week. I think it would liven my spirits."

"I don't understand."

Charlotte looked down at her lap, as Heidi realized how cold her words must have sounded.

"Forgive me, I only meant that I am surprised to be singled out as a companion."

Charlotte glanced at Rose, who shifted in her seat.

"To be blunt, Miss Meldrum, to the people of Hunsford I have a role to play. You are someone of the world. Someone who is not beholden to the social strata that we find ourselves in."

Heidi narrowed her eyes, thinking she understood what was going on.

"You are in need of other forms of companionship?"

Social hierarchy was always something she could do without. If a friendship with Charlotte Collins was a temporary reprieve from the rigidity of Regency life, she would take it. Besides, she would need more friends than the Carters if, God forbid, she were stuck here for more than another few days.

"Something like that." Charlotte smiled wistfully.
Beside her, Rose whispered, “say yes.”

Heidi regarded the girl. As a bonus, maybe fostering a friendship with Charlotte now might help Rose in the future, especially since her time at the Carters would be coming to an end.

Someday.

"Mrs. Collins, I would be honored to be your friend."
AN: Thank you all for your kudos and comments!!! They keep me warm at night! :)

So sorry about the late posting of this, was supposed to go up last night.

Using a pair of tongs, Heidi fished out the last of the bottles from the boiling pot. Placing it carefully on the towel on the sideboard, she glanced out the window. She wiped away a thin sheen of sweat from her brow with a towel. She'd been set to sterilizing the doctor’s instruments all morning and had finished the last batch.

Rose was sitting nearby, altering another of Mrs. James' gowns and reciting verb conjugations of modals in German. Because Heidi was fluent, Doctor Carter thought it might be a good idea for her to impart a little knowledge on his daughter. They could not afford a proper governess and though Heidi couldn’t cover subjects like advanced math and recent history, she was glad to have something other than cleaning to do. It might not be the in-fashion language, but it would at least give the girl something productive to learn, something that would set her apart.

Doctor Carter was out making his house calls and Mrs. Carter was making a few calls to their neighbors. Mrs. Newton, last she’d seen her, was cleaning the bedchambers. Heidi knew now that the older woman was not a maid, but a housekeeper.

"Ich darf, du darfst, er, sie, es darf, wir dürfen, ihr dürft, Sie dürfen."

"Good job. Now… mögen."

Heidi listened with half an ear, thinking that she should get Rose a proper slate so she could actually write without wasting precious parchment. Heidi was due to visit Charlotte later in the afternoon for their newly established weekly tea and wanted to get her tutoring in beforehand so she wouldn’t have to go back into teaching mode when she returned.

In the last few days, Heidi had asked the doctor to take her back out to the hills to search for the spot where she may have come through time but they still hadn't found the location.

The first time it was disheartening. Now, it was becoming an increasingly desperate event.

With every trip Heidi grew less interested in going back out. The disappointment was getting so overwhelming that Heidi had stopped packing her bags. They could keep her few meagre belongings.

Though today was chillier than it had been, Heidi was aware that someday soon, if she didn’t get ported back, the story would get kicked into gear. Eventually Lizzy would come to Hunsford and so would Darcy. For some reason, the prospect of it was daunting, larger-than-life. Maybe when she met them, she would really, truly believe it all. Up until now she could find ways of excusing all of it as coincidence.

Earlier that morning, before they’d begun their German lesson, Rose had sat with Heidi to give her a lesson on British money. The girl had been shocked to learn that Heidi knew nothing about
shillings, farthings, and florins.

And while it still didn’t make much sense, she was beginning to understand the differences. Heidi wondered when Britain began using the pounds and pence system they used in modern England.

What she wouldn’t give for an internet connection…

Not that the internet would provide her with lessons in using a quill.

Heidi still detested the ancient writing utensils, much preferring to write her shorthand notes in her bullet journal with one of the few felt-tipped pens she’d brought with her through the portal.

"Okay, now try past tense of können."

Rose rattled through the past tense easily and Heidi continued with the lesson. She wasn't sure how long she'd be able to go on before she taught Rose something incorrect and made a mental note to ask the doctor if he could find a way to get his hands on some German lesson books or something. She could keep up with basics, but she was rapidly running out of simple things to teach the girl, and it had been far too many years since she’d spoken German with any regularity for Heidi to be one hundred percent certain of what she was saying.

Besides, rules of language changed over time. Along with everything else...

The doorbell rang in the front of the house and she grabbed a towel to dry her hands. With the doctor and Mrs. Carter out, it was up to Rose and herself to greet any would-be callers and direct them to come back later. Heidi followed Rose through the kitchen door and watched Mrs. Newton curtsey at their visitor.

"Lady Catherine."

Heidi’s stomach flipped at Rose’s greeting. She had yet to even see to the formidable matriarch. For reasons that anyone who had watched the series or read the books would appreciate, she had wanted to avoid it as long as possible.

The woman was pushing sixty, Heidi guessed. Her hair was white and she was tall and thin, and Heidi could see a faint resemblance between mother and daughter, despite the austere countenance of the elder de Bourgh. The woman wore an incredibly elegant formal dress, her body as corseted up as anything Heidi had yet to see.

“I see your father still has not created a proper foyer in the cottage.”

Heidi glanced at Rose.

“No, my Lady.”

“He must do so if he wishes to receive anyone of import. I simply cannot understand why Mr. Carter would allow his brother such an oversight.”

“I will remind him, Lady Catherine.” Rose gave a quick curtsey as if marking the reminder in some sort of mental tally.

Lady Catherine raised a skeptical eyebrow, her voice shrill. "Where is your father?"

"He left the cottage this morning to make house calls."

"And your mother?"
"In town visiting the apothecary. Can I be of service, Lady Catherine?"

"I need to speak with your father, but your mother will likely do."

"I will go fetch her at once."

Heidi was surprised at how well Rose was doing, going face to face with the formidable peer.

"Who is this?" Lady Catherine curled her lip toward Heidi.

Rose took a step back, allowing the woman the opportunity to take in Heidi’s appearance. "Oh, forgive me, Lady Catherine, this is my cousin. Heidi Meldrum."

She stepped forward, moving into the room. Heidi swallowed, standing straight and anticipating the woman's judgement.

After an awkward pause, Heidi curtseyed under the weight of the Lady's stare.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Lady Catherine." She averted her eyes, speaking with as much formality as she could muster.

When she looked up, Lady Catherine had narrowed her eyes, observing Heidi as the villagers had, as if she were a dangerous stranger. Heidi thought she'd grown used to it by now: but Lady Catherine terrified her. Women like her probably believed she was better than everyone else, instead of all people being equal. Not that such a statement was accepted as normal even in Heidi’s own time, so much injustice.

“I have not heard of you before, Miss Meldrum. Why is that?”

Heidi’s eyes darted over to Rose, not that the girl could help her.

The sharp rap of a cane bid her look straight back.

“ When I ask a question, I expect it to be answered.”

“Of course, Lady Catherine. I did not mean to offend.” Heidi struggled for the right words, “I thought that you would have heard of me through Mrs. Collins or Miss de Bourgh.”

“I do not mean the tittle-tattle of Hunsford. I have never heard of you in London.”

Heidi resisted the urge to wipe her clammy hands on her dress. She hadn’t expected Lady Catherine to be knowledgeable about the gossip in the city. It was one thing to know everything the village where one played magistrate, another to hear about and spread the gossip of society in London. At least, as far as she knew.

Then again, a few weeks in Hunsford had proven that gossip was the bread and butter of these simple folk.

She couldn’t exactly blame them, knowing how people stalked celebrities in her time. Their obsession to follow gossip from town had to be something similar.

The woman was sure to wait, possibly for an eternity, until she answered.

She took a deep breath. “I spent most of my youth in Germany, Lady Catherine. My father abhorred society and as my mother was German, he decided to spend much of his life on the Continent. I have spent little time in London, great city that it is.”
Momentarily, this seemed to satisfy Lady Catherine. She squared her shoulders, pride evident on her features. A woman like this probably thought London was the center of the universe. “Are you out?”

“German society is not the same as English,” she said, lying as best she could, on the fly. “But I am considered an adult, as I have been to the Hannoverian Court.” Heidi prayed that the woman didn’t have any connections to anyone in Germany.

Lady Catherine glared but stepped away after a couple of breaths. “This is most distressing.”

“I apologize, Lady Catherine.” Heidi wanted to be sick. She loathed groveling; but she knew better than to piss off the patroness.

Before she was forced to find another topic of conversation, Mrs. Carter appeared from the back of the house, looking as prim and perfect as she should, her bonnet already removed from her head, blonde hair perfectly in place.

Heidi let out a breath of quiet relief.

“Lady Catherine, how good of you to call. Can I invite you into the drawing room for some tea?”

Lady Catherine glared at Heidi before offering her hostess a tepid smile.

Mentally Heidi cursed. She should have figured it out. If nothing else, it may have staved off the awkward conversation.

“That would be excellent, Mrs. Carter.”

Now was Heidi’s chance to slip away. She made to ask Mrs. Carter if she should return to Rose’s lessons, but the woman spoke up first.

“Heidi, would you kindly fetch a jar of the salve we finished yesterday? Doctor Carter was to deliver some of the stock to Lady Catherine.”

“Of course, Aunt.” She’d already been referring to the Carters as her family so often over the past few weeks that the lie almost felt true. It was reassuring that they wished to continue the protection that being related could provide. Her only concern was what they would say when Edward returned to Hunsford in the summer. Rose had believed the lie easily enough, but someone who’d attended university might have a few more questions.

However, that would also mean she would still be stuck here. And Heidi was absolutely not going to be stuck here.

“I see no reason why the girl cannot procure it.”

Mrs. Carter avoided Lady Catherine’s gaze.

“Miss Meldrum has been providing some aid in the surgery, she knows where the salve is located.”

“Send the girl,” Lady Catherine ordered, and Mrs. Carter nodded with the slightest reluctance, ringing the bell.

Heidi stood awkwardly, unsure what was actually proper but erring on the side of too much deference kept her mouth shut.

Only a couple of minutes passed, and once Rose had been given the order to retrieve the salve,
Lady Catherine stood, making small comments to Mrs. Carter and ignoring Heidi.

When Rose returned with the antibiotic salve, Mrs. Carter and Lady Catherine turned toward the intrusion.

“Lady Catherine,” she said, giving a quick curtsey when she walked into the room and the older woman addressed her.

The woman still wore her gloves but took the container from Rose.

“Thank you, Mrs. Carter.”

Heidi clenched her jaw, her blood boiling. Even in her time, it would have been rude for Lady Catherine to thank Mrs. Carter and not the daughter.

“Thank you, Rose.” Mrs. Carter gave a nod.

Rose was NOT a servant.

Heidi fought to keep her face neutral, but couldn’t stop from walking toward the door.

“Wait for a moment, Miss Meldrum.”

The relief that had washed over Heidi at the prospect of escaping turned to ice at Lady Catherine’s interjection.

“Yes, your Ladyship?” She hoped her words were loaded with honey rather than annoyance and fear.

“My daughter tells me she made your acquaintance last week.”

“Yes, my Lady. She is a treasure.”

Lady Catherine cocked her head, as if trying to figure out if Heidi were mocking her. “How long do you intend on staying in Hunsford?”

“I am not entirely sure.” Heidi tried not to glance at Mrs. Carter. “That depends entirely on the generosity of my aunt and uncle.”

“And where will you go if they revoke their kindness?”

Heidi licked her lips, her throat going dry. “I suppose I would return to the Continent, my Lady. I have no other close relations and I dare not return to London at this time. It would be far too…”

She paused, remembering the delicacy of Charlotte’s phrasing when she’d referred to Heidi’s misfortune in love. To say what she meant, “painful,” would only add to Lady Catherine’s opinion of her character.

“…troublesome.”

“Yes.” She pursed her lips at Heidi before turning back to Mrs. Carter.

When Heidi realized that Lady Catherine had dismissed her, she curtsied hastily and fled the room for good.

By the time Lady Catherine left the cottage two hours later, Rose had helped Heidi into the dress
that the girl had been altering for her. Heidi was due to be at the parsonage in half an hour and she calmed at the prospect.

No matter how the visit went, it would be something to distract her from the utter bitch that Lady Catherine was.

The time she spent with Charlotte every couple days helped her get to know the woman. She had done her best not to ask many questions about Meryton, trying to avoid asking about the Bennets and trying to remember that she wasn’t supposed to know anything about the woman’s life in the country.

She had learned that Charlotte’s father was a squire who hated London, and that she was the oldest sister of in a family of seven children.

Thinking about her own dad, Heidi didn’t think he would have been able to handle a handful of kids. He was nice enough to her, but his patience would not have held out against seven rugrats in the house.

Heidi was not entirely surprised at how much she enjoyed being able to go over to the Collins’. With Mr. Collins out, she was able to be as frank with Charlotte as she could be and gave the Carters time to be without her.

Heidi sometimes wondered if they’d asked Charlotte particularly to befriend her for that benefit. For some reason, the idea was stinging more lately than it initially had.

When she reached the parsonage after 2:30, Charlotte greeted her at the door.

“Heidi. Come in.”

“I’m surprised to see you at the door, Charlotte.” She was glad to have moved past the need to constantly call Charlotte by her married name. In private, it was acceptable to call her by her given name. “Where is Sinclair?”

The two women exchanged courtesies, Charlotte explaining that the housekeeper had accompanied Mr. Collins to the parsonage. The two women headed to the back of the house, where Charlotte’s parlor was situated.

“I received a letter from a most particular friend, only a few minutes before your arrival.”

“Do you wish for privacy?” Heidi asked, hooking her thumb toward the door.

“But you are too polite. Do not think on it.” The two women took their usual seats and Charlotte poured the tea, her maid having prepared everything else for the two of them.

“My friend, Elizabeth Bennet, I am sure I mentioned her—“ Charlotte glanced up at Heidi, who gave her a nod. “She has confirmed that she will be able to join my father and sister on their visit here next week.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “So soon?”

“Yes, I told you of their visit, did I not?”

Heidi cleared her throat, seeing Charlotte’s concern. Her heart pounded. “I know you’ve been anticipating the visit. I’m glad your friend will be able to make the journey as well.”
“She says they will stop in London at her Aunt’s house at Gracechurch Street and then they will be arrive on the 5th sometime after noon.”

Heidi swallowed and reached for the tea cup.

“That is fantastic.” She took a sip of the cooling tea.

“My father is only to stay for a few days before he returns to Meryton, but Mr. Collins agreed to let Lizzy, I mean Elizabeth, and my sister, Maria, stay for an extended period of time.”

“That sounds wonderful. You must miss your sister.”

Charlotte’s face dropped suddenly. “I am sorry, Heidi, I do not mean to flaunt my glad tidings before you.”

Heidi almost laughed. “Don’t stress yourself, Charlotte. I have no siblings to miss and few friends. I am genuinely happy for you.”

Charlotte grinned, leaving Heidi relieved that she did not press further.

“Perhaps you would still come for tea next Friday? I imagine the next fortnight will be too busy for the two of us to spend much time together, but I would love so to introduce you to Lizzy and Lizzy to you. Perhaps we can settle on a date for you to call upon the Parsonage at that time.”

“Only if you’re sure. I would not wish to take away time from your family.” She said the words, but prayed that Charlotte wouldn’t take back the invitation.

"I insist. They will be here for at least a few weeks, and your added presence will no doubt liven up the conversation now and again."

"Then, it will be my pleasure.” Heidi grinned slyly. “Besides, learning more about you through your sister and your friend will be beneficial.”

"Oh dear," Charlotte teased, reaching for her tea cup.
Thursday, March 5th, 1812

Chapter Notes

So sorry about the delay!
Posting schedule for March:
March 5th, March 9th, March 12th, March 15th, March 16th, March 20th, March 23rd,
March 25th, March 26th, March 27th, March 28th, and March 29th.
Busy busy! :)

Thank you for all the visits, kudos, bookmarks, comments and love!

Heidi woke up in a start, her hand swiping for the snooze button and finding nothing but pillows.

She let out a trembling breath at the realization that she was staring at a plaster ceiling, cut across with dark beams.

Unsure what had woken her, Heidi wiped at the tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Down the hall, Rose played on her lute. The girl had some talent on the old-fashioned instrument. Maybe, if she were here long enough, she would ask Rose for some lessons. It was a beautiful sound.

Another tear rolled down her cheek. She hadn't expected to feel homesick; but there was something about the song that Rose practiced that sounded familiar.

She listened, but the tune was just out of reach.

She flipped the blankets off her legs, the lingering heat from the ceramic warm water bottle dissipating immediately, and jumped out of the bed, trying to stop more tears from falling. She did NOT want to be in the cottage, and she didn't think she'd be able to go and ask Rose to stop playing without explaining what was wrong.

As quickly as she could, Heidi got dressed. She snapped her bra into place, thankful that she and Mrs. Carter had been able to convert it into something a little more strapless than it had been. Mrs. Carter had tried every way to Sunday to convince her to wear stays, but the bra did the job and Heidi didn't want the woman to spend more money on her than she had to. Besides, she much preferred the comfort of a bra than the pseudo-corset. But she could never tell Mrs. Carter that.

After the bra and the petticoat, Heidi picked out one of the four dresses she had at her disposal and decided that if she ever got any money, she would buy a couple of new dresses. The lack of variety was beginning to drive her crazy. There was a rich blue dress, that had been added to the collection after Mrs. Carter spoke to Mrs. James a second time. She was saving it for her tea with Elizabeth on Friday, wanting to use it to flatter her features, knowing it would make her brown eyes pop.

If only she had some eyeshadow to help.

Heidi passed over the other gowns in favor of the brown dress with a floral pattern at the hem.

Once the dress was on and she'd managed to close it up the back on her own, Heidi grabbed one of
the few shawls that Mrs. Carter had loaned her. Neither of the ladies in the house had a spencer that fit over her shoulders and Mrs. James had been unwilling to donate one. Instead, Heidi had to make do with the shawls. She only hoped it wasn't too cold outside.

She reached across the small vanity for her ribbon and knocked her bullet journal onto the floor. Grunting, she picked it up, wiping away some dust bunnies. She'd kept it close by these last few weeks, taking notes on what she could remember of the plot of the story, wanting to use her knowledge to see if there was something wrong. But so far, everything seemed to be progressing as normal.

Though Lizzy had yet to make an appearance.

Heidi had even drudged up the shorthand she’d learned in order to keep her notes secret.

Doing her hair up in a quick bun, Heidi pulled on one of the simple straw bonnets she'd borrowed from Rose and pulled out a few wisps of hair as the style required.

Rose was playing the same passage over and over again, trying to perfect it, and Heidi had never wished more that she could have thrown on her yoga pants and sweatshirt and disappeared out the door.

When she was properly attired, Heidi tiptoed as quietly as she could down the stairs in her ballet flats, for who would look that closely at her feet. She could hear Mrs. Newton in the kitchen, banging pots and pans and thought fondly on the night, a few weeks back, that she’d helped the woman sanitize the kitchen. She’d been confused, and a little miffed, at Heidi’s suggestion; but once explanations had been shared, Mrs. Newton had taken to the new way of cleaning.

The woman had also, with some coaxing, allowed Heidi into the kitchens while she cooked meals for the family. Heidi, admittedly, didn’t know much about cooking, only theory that she learned from Alton Brown’s long-running show. Her favorite.

Noticing that the great room was free of family members, Heidi slipped out the front door.

When her time in the splint was over, the Carters had moved her upstairs to the first bedroom. Just past the landing, it was a comfortable guest room they converted for her use. Rose’s room was next to hers, and the Carters’ suite beyond sat in the bend of the farmhouse, over the kitchen.

The afternoon that they’d moved her out of Edward’s room, Rose had eagerly told her all about the renovations that the house had gone under to make it suitable for the Doctor and his needs.

Leaving the house undetected, she turned left onto the Canterbury road and away from the smithy and the rectory, not necessarily wanting to run into Charlotte or Mrs. Dowding, who stopped by now and again. Instead she headed for the village center. She'd been to the general store a couple of times with Rose for supplies and had dropped of mail at the post office, but hadn't done much exploring yet, thanks to her leg.

But it had been a month since she arrived and though she wouldn't be entirely healed for some time, Heidi needed to become accustomed to walking again.

She'd started doing a few of the exercises she could remember from the first time she'd dislocated her knee and hoped that the walking wouldn't do more harm than good. It wasn’t true physical therapy, such programs didn’t exist; but she’d do her best to adhere to what she could remember being through before and not overextend herself. Her leg twinged now and again but it was nothing like the first few times she’d been out walking with the doctor or Mrs. Carter.
Heidi reached the gazebo in the middle of the main intersection of the village, where Canterbury Road bisected the London-Guilford Highway, in record time. The intersection, set up much like a traffic circle, Heidi crossed over to the center and climbed up the couple of steps, sitting on one of the benches to watch the villagers at their daily errands.

Across the way, one of the farmers stumbled out of the tavern, the Crimson Bridle, looking like he’d had a rough night.

Most of the townsfolk ignored her presence these days, though some still stared at her. Heidi wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and simply sat, watching the townsfolk and having somewhat of an out-of-body experience feeling like Belle and observing the provincial town go about its business. A few flurries drifted slowly to the road, immediately melting and leaving the cobbles splotchy.

“Miss Meldrum?”

Heidi blinked awake, startled to see Mr. Dowding standing above her, his nose crinkled playfully.

“I must have fallen asleep.” She stretched and glanced around the gazebo to see that the activity had picked up considerably, heat suffusing her cheeks at the act of being caught napping in the middle of Hunsford, even as she rubbed her arms.

She couldn’t believe that she’d passed out. At least she could see that the clouds had cleared since she’d first arrived.

“Do you require an escort home?” The man smiled at her, polite as ever.

His kindness, though she was getting used to it, was disconcerting. The last man that had willingly been nice to her, had been Peter, and though she was not attracted to Abraham, she couldn’t help but wonder if he had some ulterior motive too.

“No.” Heidi stood, arranging her shawl into place. “Thank you. I left the cottage early this morning, needing some air. Apparently I was more tired than I thought.”

“Do you have only the scarf with you?” The blacksmith searched the gazebo, a flush coloring his cheeks.

She cursed her tongue, she’d probably overstepped propriety.

“Yes. Unfortunately, as we never found the carriage wreckage, I was never reunited with my things. I have been borrowing gowns from Mrs. James, as we are a similar size, and accessories from my aunt and cousin. There was no spencer to be had.”

Realizing she was rambling, Heidi snapped her mouth shut and shrugged.

“You have no spencer?”

Heidi shook her head, giving him a smile as he guffawed.

“Something must be done about that.”

“I have no money, Mr. Dowding. With my father’s estate tied up, and running from London with little more than my mother’s ring on my hand, I have nothing to barter with.”

Part of Heidi wished she had access to the money her own dad, not this fake one, had saved. As an
accountant, the man was a frugal spender and those tens of thousands of dollars he had stashed away would make her richer than Lady Catherine.

“I am sure the Coopers would be willing to open an account on your behalf so you can make purchases and then pay your debts back later.”

“I do not wish to enter into debt with anyone in Hunsford.”

“Doctor Carter will not provide you with an allowance?” The man frowned, disappointment evident in his features.

“The Carters are already paying for my food and board and Rose has been kind enough to lend me some necessities, but I do not wish to put them out any more than necessary. After all, I put them in debt to you when I told the doctor of the bandage applicators.”

_Tampon applicators._

Heidi looked away, realizing that she probably shouldn’t have said anything about the family’s fortunes or lack thereof.

“I thought the doctor was made of sterner things.”

“Do not blame the doctor. I do not wish to be a charity case.”

“But family—“

“Especially to family.”

He cocked his head. “You are a strange one, Miss Meldrum.”

“You are not the first to say that.”

From behind him, Heidi could see his wife walking toward them.

“I hope you’ll excuse me, Mr. Dowding. I had a few things I wished to accomplish this morning, before I so inconveniently fell asleep in the middle of Hunsford.”

“Of course, I would not dream of preventing you from your duties.” He bowed his head. “The applicators are finished. I will bring them to the surgery later this evening.”

Heidi nodded. “Mrs. Dowding,” she said, curtseying to the woman as she stopped alongside her husband.

“Good morning, Miss Meldrum.”

Mrs. Dowding looked up at her husband, who held out his arm for her and patted her hand. “We are needed at the post office, dear.”

“Yes, my love. I thought to check on Miss Meldrum, whom I saw from the grocer’s.”

“I fell asleep. Can you imagine the scandal?” Heidi waved a hand behind her toward the bench in response to Mrs. Dowding’s questioning eyebrow. “Your husband woke me before I managed to create more embarrassment.”

“In this weather?” Mrs. Dowding’s hand flew to her mouth.
“Just cold enough to be conducive to sleep, I suppose.” Heidi shrugged.

“Come along, dear. Miss Meldrum must attend to her duties, and we must call upon the Coopers.”

The trio bade each other farewell and Heidi waited until the couple were across the road before leaving the safety of the gazebo.

Thinking she might be able to handle walking the outskirts of the village, which might be half a mile, Heidi headed north on the road to London so that she could catch the crossroad past the parsonage and the rectory.

Her leg was aching considerably as she came up to the lane between Rosings and the parsonage. Knowing she was closer to home now than if she backtracked, Heidi rested against a fencepost to catch her breath when she spied a carriage pulling onto the graveled drive in front of the Collins’ home.

She hadn’t intended on snooping, but now that she could see the coach, Heidi couldn’t help herself. In that carriage was sure to be Lizzy, Maria, and the knight, Sir Lucas.

Glancing around, as if she was doing something naughty, she tried to remain nonchalant walking to a large tree at the edge of the parsonage property.

Two men stepped off the back of the coach and the driver hopped off his seat and went to open the door.

She swallowed at the sight of the first black person she’d seen since her arrival. She realized then that there wasn’t a single person of color in Hunsford.

Clearly some of the people from her time were right: men and women from other backgrounds had been erased from the stories.

She couldn’t see the side of the carriage facing the front door and, rather than missing the opportunity, Heidi snuck deeper into the brush alongside the path for a better view.

The two men were talking amiably with Mr. and Mrs. Collins, who’d walked through the doorway. The Collinses appeared to be at least friendly with the coachmen, which was odd.

Servants were ignored, not chatted with.

It was then that a short blonde step down from the carriage, wrapped in a thick shawl, her ribbons coming loose and her bonnet slipping. There was something about her, her posture perhaps, that Heidi could see even from thirty or forty feet away that screamed Charlotte’s sister.

Next, a tall figure stepped out of the carriage, allowing the taller of the two soldiers to help her down. She took in the appearance of the courtyard and Heidi could see brown curls peeking out from under the bonnet.

Mr. Collins reached out for the woman, greeting her profusely as the coachman dropped her hand.

Heidi couldn’t see any details, the way she’d turned, but there could be no denying that this woman had to be Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Her heartrate picked up at the prospect that the heroine was right there. Almost close enough to touch.
Her mother would have fainted, Heidi thought, chuckling.

The two men unloaded the trunks and gave them over to the staff at the parsonage.

The white one, the taller of the two, glanced around and for a split second, Heidi thought for sure that she’d been spotted in the brush. She tried not to move, the short hair on the back of her neck raised.

Instead of coming right at her, the man merely furrowed his brow and turned away.

Heidi slumped, sighing in relief, thankful that the foliage had kept her hidden from view.

Sir Lucas was supposed to have traveled with them, Heidi was surprised that no one else came out of the carriage. The man gave some directions to the coach and then she was surprised to see the coach heading for the road while the two men stayed behind.

They went into the house, all six of them, leaving Heidi in the cold.

She frowned at the closed door.

Heidi debated if she should leave or sneak closer to the house, peek into the drawing room, and try to figure out who they were. Neither looked like a father. Both were far too young.

She rubbed her arms again, warding off the chill, her leg throbbing. No matter what she did, Heidi needed to get moving or her bad leg would lock up and Mr. Collins would certainly find her spying.

That, she was sure, was something she would not be able to explain away.

The sun broke through the clouds at that moment and Heidi sighed, basking in the warmth. She needed to get up and go. Seeing the dirt on the fabric, she was grateful for having chosen the brown dress. At least the color would hide the evidence of her spying.

When the front door opened and the two men left the house, each tipping their heads to the people inside, Heidi followed them. They didn’t seem like normal coachmen, unless they were meeting the stage back at the post office.

As Heidi continued to shadow them, her suspicions grew. Though they walked side by side, there was something stilted about their movements, each step measured, their postures ramrod straight in a way the men of Hunsford did not move.

Tilting her head, Heidi watched as they marched toward her. She curled in on herself, there wasn’t much brush to be had in early March and if they spotted her, she’d be in trouble.

“I thought you said you had eyes for the sister,” the black man said to his companion.

“I intend on keeping my options open, Denny.”

“Be careful, friend.”

She kept the two men about twenty paces ahead of her, hoping they couldn’t hear her rustling skirts; but it also meant that she couldn’t eavesdrop on the rest of their conversation.

Once, when Denny glanced over his shoulder, Heidi jumped behind a tree. She covered her mouth with the back of her gloved hand, trying not to breathe, and counted to ten.
Peering around the tree, the two men took the turn to go into the village. With the parish church on the corner lot, Heidi slipped into the gardens and cut through the flowers and herbs to gain a little ground without strictly following the two men.

When she reached the street again, Heidi spotted them passing the lane that would lead to the cottage.

“Miss Meldrum?”

Heidi stepped backward, closing her eyes as she turned around. Mrs. Dowding stared at her with a strange expression on her face.

“Whatever are you doing?”

“I was just—” she waved her hands, pointing in the direction of the village. No excuse came to her. “I was walking and I saw those two men. Do you know them?”

Mrs. Dowding shook her head. “Do you, Miss Meldrum?”

“I thought I did, but the more I consider the tall one, the less I’m sure.”

The woman’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Should we follow them?”

“No, no, Mrs. Dowding. I am now certain that I am not acquainted with either of them.”

Mrs. Dowding frowned, her disappointment plain. “I thought that perhaps it was your betrothed, come to bare his heart to you.”

“Wouldn’t that be an interesting turn of events?”

Her eyes went wide at the prospect, though she could not stop a grin from springing to her face. “It would be the most exciting thing to happen since you arrived.”

Heidi laughed wryly. “For the onlookers, perhaps. I do not wish to reconnect with my once-betrothed.”

The woman frowned again with a begrudging nod. “Yes, perhaps you are correct.”

Heidi looked around and shivered in a way that must have been obvious.

“I will not delay you any longer, Miss Meldrum.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dowding,” Heidi replied with a smile, “both for your concern and your discretion. I fear that anyone else might have dragged me to the tavern to ensure it was not my once-betrothed.”

Mrs. Dowding’s gloved hand covered her mouth. “Oh dear! How scandalous!”

“Indeed.”

The two women parted and Heidi sighed. The adrenalin of being caught spying was receding and making her cold again.

Heidi made it to the turn by cottage when she was grabbed and pulled up against the stone wall of one of the houses.
“Who are you?”

Panic rose in her chest, immediately recognizing the coachman. His hands gripped her arms tightly, shaking her.

She had to remember to breathe.

Despite the situation, Heidi couldn’t help but notice that the dark blond of his hair shone in the sunlight. His angular face was cast in shadows, his eyes deep set; but her eyes flicked down to his lips, plump and inviting.

Whoever this guy was, he was hot up close. Very.

Heidi blinked, surprising herself. She hadn’t even looked at anyone she’d arrived; but one close encounter with this man had her quivering.

Looking down, Heidi saw that not only was he grabbing her through the shawl, but that he was wearing gloves as well. She relaxed.

At least he wasn’t touching her directly.

“Heidi Fav--Meldrum.”

The man frowned at her.

Of all the times to nearly forget her cover identity.

“Practicing your espionage skills?”

“I wasn’t!”

His hands dropped from her arms, but Heidi didn’t relax. “Do not lie to me, Miss Meldrum.”

There was threat in his tone that he didn’t bother hiding, or maybe he played up on it. He smelled faintly of oil and gun-powder.

“I saw you snooping around outside the Parsonage. My companion saw you trailing us on the lane, and then I saw you again peering from behind the shrubbery on this very road.”

Heidi swallowed. Clearly a career in espionage was not in her future. “I was curious.”

Grateful for her own gloves, Heidi drew her arms around her.

“Curious? You lie.”

“When the carriage arrived at the Parsonage, I merely wished to catch a glimpse of Miss Bennet.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Mrs. Collins told me her friend was visiting and though I did not plan it, when I saw the carriage, I wanted a better look.”

“That does little to explain why you hid in the brush or why you trailed my companion and myself away from the parsonage.”

“You saw me. But you didn’t tell them?”
“I would not dare scandalize my friends by pointing out your presence.”

“I didn’t want to—“

He tightened his lips with a hint of a smirk that stopped Heidi’s protestation.

“And from where exactly do you hail, Miss Meldrum?”

“Excuse me?” Her leg throbbed as she took a step back.

“Your accent is not local. It would not fool a child.”

“Will you tell me who you are then?” Heidi shocked herself with her abrupt tone.

“First, tell me where you are from and I will consider it.”

He was harsh but Heidi nodded, he was too smooth, too knowledgeable. If she didn’t find some way of getting him to believe her, Heidi was afraid this man would out her to the village, or at least to Charlotte and Lizzy.

“I spent a good deal of the last decade in Germany, sir, and have only just returned. I have yet to regain my local accent.”

The man took a step back, as if considering her words. He was the first person who’d had a violent outburst and it worried her. Lady Catherine had been a bitch, but this guy, was something different. Dangerous.

“That you hail from the Continent, is clear. Are you French?”

Heidi’s eyes went wide. “I am not French.”

He searched her face, as if searching for a sign of a lie.

Somewhere down her father’s line there was a Frenchman. It explained her last name, but she wasn’t about to tell him that. Besides, if he wanted the truth, she was an American.

The man frowned but took a relaxed breath, deeming her a non-threat. His shoulders relaxed and he took a step back, giving Heidi some much needed space. “I apologize for my forthright address. Along with my companion, I have my colors.”

“Your colors?” she asked, head tilting.

“We are members of the Infantry.” He shifted his stance.

Heidi nodded, remembering the march step they did down the road. “I see.”

“There have been many spies about. One can never be too careful.” The man winked at her, flirtatiously.

Heidi relaxed at his misunderstanding, though the wink twisted her insides. She remembered the way Rose had reacted to her last name and supposed that if one was being inundated with how bad the enemy was, it would be easy to see neighbors as enemies.

*How little had changed in two hundred years.*
“I owe you an apology then. Your appearance was a curiosity, sir, I did not mean to cause a soldier such as yourself any concern.”

“Wickham.”

Heidi started, her attention entirely on the man in front of her now. “Excuse me?”

“My name is Wickham, Lieutenant George Wickham, to be precise. At your service.”

He bowed with a grin, adding more flourish than necessary. Her palms grew sweaty, but she needed to act as if nothing had changed.

Instead, the world shifted around her.

Her knee buckled and before she could do anything, Wickham had gathered her in his arms.

“Miss Meldrum?” His gloved hand came up to her cheek, brushing away a curl of hair from her face.

She wriggled, incredibly uncomfortable for more than one reason. “Let me down,” she insisted, though she could feel the sleek and sinewy muscles beneath his coat.

He placed her back on the gravel beside the house. “Are you unwell?”

She stepped back, pressing against the building once more. His hands lingered on her arms again.

“Quite well,” she said, attempting to pull away and smooth her skirts. She did not want to let him know he’d ruffled her. “I am recovering from an injury. The pain has returned considerably this morning.”

Heidi looked around, avoiding his knowing gaze, her leg was screaming in pain. “I should get return to the surgery.”

“Forgive my forwardness, Miss Meldrum, but this injury is new?”

If Heidi didn’t know better, she could have sworn his mien was of someone honestly concerned.

“It happened in early February. I am still under the doctor’s care.” She tried to loosen his hand from her arm, looking around again for a way to escape.

He leaned forward, eyes twinkling.

*Boy, he’s laying on the charm.*

“Please, allow me to escort you to the surgery. It would be remiss of me, as a solider and a gentleman, to leave a woman helpless in such a state.”

“I said I was injured, not helpless,” Heidi snapped. She froze at his alarmed expression, having forgotten herself. “I’ll be fine, really,” she said more softly. “Thank you.” The last thing she wanted was to bring the man to her sanctuary.

“I insist.” His hand came out, pleading with her to take it.

She took a step away, to take her leave. “I can manage on my own.”

Wickham was at her side in an instant.
She tried to walk faster, but her knee gave out again.

Before she could recover, Wickham grabbed her elbow. “You are not able. You will direct me to
the surgery. I will brook no more objections.”

She wrenched her arm away but nodded at him. She’d been out far too long and the lack of proper
layers was making her far too cold.

They walked together to the cottage and waited until Mrs. Newton answered the front door. Heidi
needed to make sure she got a key one of these days if she wanted to keep exploring.

“Mrs. Newton.”

“Send for the Doctor, at once,” Wickham insisted and brought her into the house, gripping her
elbow in his hands. Again she was surrounded by that gunpowder scent. “I’m alright, Mr.
Wickham.”

He smiled, something close to a smirk. “Forgetting my rank so soon, Miss Meldrum? I will not
leave you until I am certain that your needs are being tended to.”

“My needs are none of your business. Besides, I live here, Lieutenant.”

Heidi sat down on the chair, debating whether she could take her shoes off or not, if it would be
okay to put her leg up. She fixed him with an impertinent glare. “The Carters are my cousins.”

Strangely, she could see the color rise over his collar. Just as quickly, it was gone.

“Then I will at least wait until the doctor arrives.”

He squatted in front of her, his hand on the armrest for balance as he searched her features.

“No, please. I do not wish for them to know I needed assistance.”

She placed her hand on his, hoping a little flirtation would get him to go.

He looked around her body to the corner where Mrs. Newton had disappeared to, frowned, and
then pushed himself to stand.

“Very well. I will respect your wishes, Miss Meldrum.”

“Thank you,” she said, pulling her hand away.

“I will be residing in Hunsford for a number of days before duty requires me to go to Brighton for a
se’en night. Perhaps we will see each other again, and I can properly apologize for thinking you a
French spy.”

Heidi gave him what she hoped was an indifferent nod, and he left the house without another word.

Mrs. Carter burst into the room from the kitchen as the front door shut.
By the time Monday afternoon rolled around, Heidi was more than ready to leave the cottage. After the doctor returned from his rounds on Thursday and once he saw the swelling of her leg, had banished her to her room. He’d given her a stern warning about overdoing her exercise, mentioned amputation if she wasn’t careful, and Heidi had been conciliatory ever since.

Though she was a little incensed at the fact that he’d basically grounded her, it was a convenient excuse to hide away from George Wickham.

The past few days had been a little nerve wracking, but thankfully the soldier had respected her wishes and stayed away from the cottage.

Wickham wasn’t supposed to be in Hunsford. That cocky bastard’s unexpected appearance had been looming in the back of her mind since he’d introduced himself.

So far, the book seemed to be on point. Charlotte was a darling and Mr. Collins was obnoxious and Lady Catherine was intimidating.

Anne’s personality was the first deviation from the book from what she could tell. The Heiress of Rosings had some sort of illness, but despite her constitution, Anne seemed spry, smart, and honestly, rather funny. To see her joke with Rose and the doctor was refreshing. Heidi didn’t know exactly what ailed Anne, though the doctor had intimated that it was more than rheumatic fever, whatever that was.

And now, with the appearance of Wickham in Hunsford, Heidi wondered if the plot was unraveling. Maybe Wickham was a perfectly nice man with no other intentions than enjoying the odd flirtation or two.

Unsure what to do with the knowledge, Heidi couldn’t help but wonder why he’d been so flirtatious with her. She was not his usual type.

Doctor Carter cleared his throat, snapping Heidi from her thoughts, as they walked to the Parsonage. She’d spent a lot of time this morning convincing the doctor that they need not use the dreaded wheelchair. She’d been in the chair all morning, compromising with the doctor, until Rose helped her into the blue dress. She’d taken the splint off at the last minute and promised that she would put it back on when she returned.

The doctor was going to call on Anne at Rosings once he’d dropped her off, saying that he wanted to check on the sickly girl. Despite the narrative, this didn’t sit well with Heidi. She had spent less than an hour with the heiress, but hadn’t seen anything desperately wrong with the woman. Not in the way Jane Austen had described it.

Her stomach twisted when the doctor rang the bell.
"Remember my counsel, Heidi."

Heidi nodded, saying goodbye to her uncle, and followed the maid into Charlotte's parlor and was unsurprised to see the three women already inside.

Charlotte introduced her guests to Heidi and finally, Heidi knew that her guesses a few days before had been correct. The shorter girl was Maria and the taller one was Elizabeth.

She had a brief moment to take in the two guests before Charlotte continued talking.

Maria resembled her sister with frizzy hair framing her face, only Maria was more blonde than brunette. The girl grinned a hello and Heidi returned the greeting before taking her first look at Lizzy.

With glossy brown hair, something reminiscent of a shampoo commercial, and slightly rounded, rosy cheeks, as if she spent most of her time smiling, Heidi could well see why Darcy fell for her. Bingley’s sister's jealousy could easily be acknowledged if this was what her competition looked like.

Fine eyes, indeed.

"We heard that you had a minor setback with your healing." Charlotte’s words pulled Heidi from her thoughts.

"Yes. I walked too far the other day and my uncle insisted that I remain home for at least a few days to rest my knee."

Charlotte quirked her lips into a frown. “That is a shame. I trust you are on the mend?”

“It was my own fault. I thought I could manage myself. Before I knew it, I was practically hobbling home.”

“If it is not an impertinence, Charlotte -- Mrs. Collins, told us of your unfortunate accident.”

Maria reached out toward Charlotte. “Sister, is she the one that Mr. Wickham was telling us about?”

A sliver of dread dried her throat.

“Mr. Wickham spoke,” she said, addressing Maria and then Lizzie, “about me?”

Lizzy smiled and Maria piped up.

“He mentioned he had the opportunity to come to a young woman’s aid in the streets of Hunsford on the day he arrived.”

Heidi frowned, wondering what else he might have said about their encounter. He might have inadvertently ruined any chance she had of becoming friends with Lizzy, and if so, it would ruin all her plans.

Lizzy leaned forward, interested in what she had to say. “Did you make the acquaintance of a man in town by that name?”

Damn it to hell. She couldn’t lie about it, but was going to suss out what he told them before she contributed to their knowledge.
“I did.”

“It was a cold morning, if memory serves, when we arrived.”

“It was.”

“Mr. Wickham said you were chilled,” Maria said.

“I did not have a spencer and I had been out far too long. It’s taking some time to rebuild a full ensemble of clothing. Especially when one must rely on the generosity of others.” At the scrutiny of Charlotte’s guests, Heidi continued. “Mrs. James has only so many extraneous gowns, and I am not nearly the same tiny size as my relatives.”

“Well, Miss Meldrum,” Lizzy said, sitting up straighter. “I might have a few things that would work for you. The gowns may need altering, but there is enough excess material in the seams. I daresay it would not be a hardship to lend you a few things.”

Heidi looked up at Elizabeth in shock.

“I couldn’t.” Besides, she thought eyeing up her new friend, Lizzy was surely more like a size eight. And she was twelve-ish.

Lizzy smiled, clasping her hands in her lap. “I insist. You can return to the clothing to Charlotte when you are through with them. But I have more than enough morning and evening gowns to last while I remain in Hunsford. You may even repurpose them if you wish. They will go to my sisters to wear soon enough anyway, and I fear they shall tear them to pieces with alterations.”

“You are generous.” Her heart skipped a beat, unable to believe that the heroine had leant her clothing.

*Her mom would totally die.*

Heidi smiled obligingly. “I will not turn down such a generous offer from someone so dear to Mrs. Collins.”

“Come now, Heidi, we are all friends here, you are welcome to call me Charlotte in Lizzy and Maria’s presence.” Some twenty minutes later, Heidi and Lizzy had returned to the parlor with a small trunk of donated goods waiting for her use. She still couldn’t believe that Elizabeth had been so kind, though Charlotte had admitted to being distressed that she hadn’t been asked herself. As a wife of local clergyman, it was up to her to be charitable with the rector’s resources and if she’d known Heidi was in such need, she would have arranged for help earlier.

"Do you play the piano, Heidi?" Maria asked, drawing Heidi back into the conversation.

She shook her head, putting her teacup back on the saucer in her hand.

"No, I never had a talent for the piano. Having each hand doing something different seemed to be too much for my mind;” she giggled. “But I have a fair voice.”

Maria frowned. "I promised mother that I would practice while I was in Hunsford, but my sister is not musical."

"It's been some time since I last sang along with proper accompaniment. I would be happy to stop by to help you.”
"What is it?"

Charlotte, by that time, had started crossing the room, the air buzzing with anticipation.

"Miss de Bourgh has come." Mr. Collins disappeared down the corridor, leaving the door to the parlor wide open.

"Please excuse me. I will return presently."

When their hostess calmly followed her husband, Maria and Lizzy walked to the window to watch.

"He acts as if the pigs were got into the garden," she said, leaning into the deep window frame, typical of these houses.

Heidi came up to stand beside Elizabeth, peeking her head over Lizzy’s shoulder.

"Is that other woman Lady Catherine?" Lizzy asked, turning to consider Heidi.

"Oh no, Lady Catherine does not accompany Miss de Bourgh on trips into Hunsford. That woman is Mrs. Jenkinson. She acts as a full-time caretaker."

The two of them watched while Charlotte greeted her guest.

"She is quite a little creature. Who could have thought she could be so thin and small?"

"Miss de Bourgh has a weak constitution from what I understand; but I find her pleasant enough."

"You do?" Elizabeth stepped away from the window and considered Heidi.

"I don't know her well, but she is thankfully nothing like her mother."

"Are they friends, Charlotte and Miss de Bourgh?"

Heidi fought not to smile at the slight jealous tone in Lizzy’s voice. "As close as neighbors with a lane between them can be, I suppose. Miss de Bourgh is not a social creature, but she does call now and then, even with us at the cottage."

"Why does she not come in then? She is abominably rude to keep Charlotte out of doors in all this wind."

"She is likely aware that my uncle awaits her arrival at Rosings."

"She sees the doctor often?"

"From what I gather." Heidi gave a nod. "I haven't been in Hunsford for long; but my uncle checks on her health a couple times during the week."

"Is she really so sick?"

Heidi worried her bottom lip. "I don't know what all I am allowed to say, but I believe she has a couple chronic conditions. They don’t rule her life, but she has good days and rough days."

Elizabeth was quiet then and Heidi wondered if she'd done something wrong.
“It will be a trial to be married to her.” A small grin crossed Lizzy’s features.

Heidi knew then which way Lizzy was leaning, still angry at Darcy, and thought it unfair. “If she marries, her husband will need to be patient.”

Heidi looked Lizzy over, trying to figure out how she could make Mr. Darcy appear to be more favorable. She couldn’t help but want to make Lizzy see him as something better than she knew the woman thought of him now.

Her mother had been adamant that the salvation of the two main characters laid in the making of themselves as the learned about the other.

“I am not certain you know of my own situation, before I arrived in Hunsford.”

“Charlotte did tell us some things.”

“I have a phobia of being dirty,” Heidi blurted.

Lizzy cocked her head and narrowed her eyes.

“I have a point, I promise,” she said, forestalling questions. “It’s a new illness, from what I can tell, not even my uncle knew about it; but the short of it is that I’m extremely uncomfortable with dirt and things that could pass along disease.”

“I have not heard of such a thing.”

Heidi shook her head. “It’s something a doctor in Germany discovered,” she lied, trying to brush over the topic. “I mention this because when I was betrothed, I thought that my fiancé was okay with knowing this about me. He was not, and the closer we came to the wedding day, the more apparent it was that it bothered him.

“Now, I know that if the man that I marry is willing to put up with my compulsions, my need, of being clean, then I will be happy.”

“It is good at least that the physician could ascertain the cause of your troubles,” Lizzy said, considering her. “Though, this condition does sound awfully burdensome.”

Heidi nodded. “Indeed it can be.”

She glanced out the window to see Anne and the Collins’ saying their goodbyes.

“Anne’s husband, if she marries, will have to know what he’s getting into, her being sickly I mean. He will surely be a better man than my ex-betrothed for being willing to help Anne through all of it.”

Lizzy was silent as she considered it all, but fiddled with the hem of her sleeve.

Heidi took a breath, unsure if she should say the next bit, but said so anyway. “Money is nothing if the man who brings it isn’t willing to accept you for everything you are, despite any objections that society might have against the match.”

Lizzy frowned at her, tilting her head and Heidi used the silence to walk over to the couch, hoping she’d done the right thing, her heart tight in her chest.

The rest of the afternoon was relatively quiet after Charlotte rejoined them.
Heidi and Maria decided that while the girl was in town, she would come over to help the girl practice her piano and the two of them sorted through the musical numbers that she’d brought with her and together they picked out a couple to practice with. Heidi insisted she get a little bit of time to read through the music on her own, since she’d never seen these songs before.

She picked a song called Robin Adair and another called The Soldier’s Adieu. It would be enough to start from and hopefully she could find something contemporary that she already knew, though knowing that Strauss and his waltzes were in Victoria’s time rather than now put her out. Schubert and Verdi and the others she knew were all years later.
Thursday, March 12th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the views, kudos, and comments! I love you all! :)

A couple of nights later, Heidi finished alterations on one of Elizabeth’s donated dresses, with Rose’s instruction, into something that fit her more properly. She and Elizabeth were close to the same height, which was surprising considering that almost all the women in Hunsford were shorter than her; but Heidi still needed to let out the sides, with the considerable amount of fabric that had been left over.

At least the dresses had been made with the idea to pass down to younger sisters, accounting for more than one size body, otherwise Heidi might not have had that extra material to work with.

She was proud of the work she’d done on the pale yellow morning dress, sitting in the great room beside the large fireplace. She might have sewn on a button or fixed a hem in the costume department before, but she’d never made her own clothes.

Rose had teased her at first, the lack of ability unfathomable to the young woman; but was proud of Heidi’s progress. And she was proud of herself.

Doctor Carter walked through the room when Heidi put the material down to stretch her fingers.

“I will be taking supper at the Bridle tonight,” he said, directing his words to his daughter. Every few nights, when he had no other plans, the doctor spent a few hours at the tavern, likely gambling, like other men of these days. It was the closest thing that Hunsford had to a men’s club, and Heidi imagined the farmers and tradesmen all smoking cheap cigars and making lewd jokes away from the discerning eyes of their wives. “Rose, your mother is at the grocer’s tending to Mrs. Cooper and the baby. Do not stay up too late.”

“Of course not, father.”

The doctor leaned over and pressed a kiss to Rose’s forehead.

“You will be able to watch the house, I trust, Heidi?”

“I’ve got this,” she said, dismissing him and wishing she had a bag of peanut M&Ms to snack on. Right now all she wanted was modern chocolate, none of this un-sugared, bitter crap, but sweet milk chocolate to melt on her tongue.

The man nodded then and left the house without another word.

Heidi took a breath. Lizzy and Maria had been in town for seven days and still Mr. Wickham hung around. She’d been doing her best to avoid the soldier, but she was curious as to why he lingered. He’d have to return to Meryton at some point, right?

The Collinses and their guests were spending their evening at Rosings and, while Heidi did not envy them for having to deal with Lady Catherine, she was desperate to know if what she’d said before had made any impact.
“Did you say something?”

She looked up at Rose, not remembering if she had actual spoken the words.

“No. But I think I might need some air.” Heidi stood, putting her sewing work over the armrest.

“You should not go wandering about at night.”

She smiled. “I won’t be long. I’m going to grab the spencer and wander in the courtyard. I need to think.”

“Do you wish for company?”

“No, Rose. You better stay inside. I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble with your father.”

Heidi’s heart panged at the disappointment on the young girl’s features. “Do not wander off,” Rose said softly.

It didn’t take long for Heidi to get ready, pulling on her yoga pants for an extra layer under the skirts, now that the splint was gone, and getting her arms into the jacket that acted more like a fashionable shrug than an actual warmth-generating piece of clothing. She had been over-the-moon when Lizzy presented her with one. A month when she’d been forced to stay inside for half of it, hadn’t been all that long without a jacket; but it was nice to have something for herself now, rather than raiding Mrs. Carter’s trunks for scarves and shawls and ponchos that would fit over her shoulders. But, she wasn’t going to put herself into more debt with her hosts, if she could help it, by insisting they purchase one for her, or the material to make it with.

Heidi had been beside herself with the generosity of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She tried not to think about her mother’s reaction to such a big-hearted moment by the heroine. Mom would have been over the moon.

Before she left her room, Heidi grabbed the pepper spray from her purse. The countryside was wild enough still that wolves might come up to the compost pile out back, and she was NOT going to get caught without it.

She tucked the vial into the leather and silk reticule Mrs. Carter had loaned her. Tugging on her gloves, Heidi then went out the back door.

Though the night air was cold, it wasn’t as bad as she’d expected. Some of the clouds from earlier in the day had kept the air warm despite the fact that it was still winter.

She walked on the gravel driveway and was grateful that it was dark enough that no one would notice the pants if they came upon her.

Heidi found herself walking past the front door of the tavern a few minutes later, having wandered to the town center from the Canterbury Road.

Glancing in the window, she saw a large fire in the hearth of the common room.

Aware that men played their games in a side chamber, some sort of private parlor, and that the doctor would be in there rather than in the common room, where a few tables sat empty, Heidi slipped inside to warm her hands.
An uproarious sound reverberated from the back of the house. Heidi searched the area, wanting to be sure that no one was manning the front desk, the logbook sitting out in the open.

She turned the book and looked at the entries. There weren’t many records on the page. Though Hunsford was a stop for the stages to change horses, they didn’t have many overnight guests.

Heidi trailed her finger along the page until she found Wickham’s name.

He was staying in one of the rooms on the first floor, which she knew by now to be the American second floor.

A set of keys peeked out from under the front cover of the book, as if they were calling to her. Covertly, Heidi glanced at the backroom doors. There was no way that Wickham wasn’t inside gambling away what little money he had.

Heidi took the set of keys and stole up the stairs.

It didn't take long for her to find the room indicated on the log. She pressed her ear against the door, listening for noises within.

After not hearing anything, but wondering if maybe Wickham might be sleeping, she knocked lightly.

"Housekeeping?"

When there was no response, Heidi used the keys.

With great luck, or maybe just that the set of keys were the masters, she'd picked the right one first and the door swung open slowly on its hinges.

She closed the door behind her, so as not to be completely obvious, and walked straight to a desk by the window. There wasn't much light in the room, but the fire banked in the woodstove gave off enough of a glow for her to be able to read. It was almost like the light from a laptop or tablet in the night.

There were a few letters, all sealed and addressed to people she didn't know. Heidi moved them out of the way and kept searching for something that might show her who this man was. Either he was an innocent, written as a villain due to the need for one, or he was a not good man; if he was going to hang around, she needed to warn Lizzy if necessary.

Maybe she'd been brought here, through time, to prevent the scandal of Wickham and Lydia.

Heidi found a small notebook in the pocket of his jacket. She pulled it out and opened it, inside held a list of debts he owed, ten pounds to the furrier in Brighton, fifty pounds to the tailor in London.

She flipped through, finding a page notated for Meryton. Including his gambling debts, the man owed nearly 500 pounds in that village alone.

Doing some quick math, Heidi added up the totals on each page. The book was only half-filled and the man was easily two thousand pounds in debt.

Dude was an excessive gambler and spender and, from what she’d overheard him say to Denny, an opportunist, but it didn't mean he was bad.
Besides she knew, canonically, that the man was deep in debt; but at least this was proof of it.

It wouldn't be enough to convince Lizzy and the others to stay away from him. As far as she could tell it was almost standard practice for people to have debts and loans and things.

She tapped the top of the notebook, trying to think of something.

What would telling the truth to her friends do to change the plot? It could make things worse.

Unbidden, her thoughts took a darker turn. He had been forceful when they’d met; she had bruises from his grip, but she had been stalking him. She wondered what sort of violent tendencies the man might have. She’d heard gossip in the streets that boxing was a common past time and along with the fact that Wickham was a soldier, trained in weapons, did he also have a habit of joining in the ring?

Heidi stared at the book, wishing she had her phone. If she could snap pictures, she could take the proof without getting caught.

"I had begun to worry about you being a fae, Miss Meldrum."

She dropped the book, snapping around to face George Wickham, standing in the doorway.

"A figment of my imagination. Your brown hair, your amber eyes a mere disguise, hiding the truth of your heritage."

"I—" Heidi looked around desperately, as his voice went from smooth to suspicious.

He leaned against the doorframe casually, in spite of his tone. "Are you going to explain why I found you in my locked and rented chamber? Do not tell me you work in an establishment such as this."

"You opened the door?" she gave him a shrug.

He chuckled and stepped into the room. "Clever. But that is not the answer I am seeking, my dear, Miss Meldrum."

"I found myself intrigued about your appearance, Mr. Wickham," she said, realizing at once she’d used the wrong word.

"I might say I reciprocate the notion."

"I don't know what came over me. One moment I was walking past the tavern and the next I was in your chamber."

He narrowed his eyes and took a few more steps toward her. "Were you searching for something in particular while you rifled through my belongings?"

"No."

He took another step toward her and Heidi stepped back, closer to the stove. "Is that my ledger?"

Heidi glanced at the desk.

"That was in my jacket, Miss Meldrum." He snatched it up, flipping through the pages. "What exactly is it you are after?"
She hadn’t ripped anything out, though that would have been a good piece of evidence had Heidi thought about it at the time.

"Nothing."

He smirked. "You are no professional spy. That much is obvious. But you are up to something."

Flirt with him, you nitwit!

Taking a step forward, she attempted to be coy. "I am ashamed to admit, I haven't been able to forget you, Mr. Wickham."

She averted her eyes, unable and unwilling to make eye contact. Heidi was sure that he wouldn't believe her if she did.

"That is interesting." He took a step closer, his shadow stretching over her. Her pulse thundered.

"This is a mistake, I shouldn't be here."

Mr. Wickham reached out. "No, but here you are."

"Please."

Mr. Wickham, much to Heidi's surprise, backed off, taking a step back. "I will not force you to join me, Miss Meldrum." His eyes flicking over to the bed in clear invitation.

"You won't?"

His bark of a laugh was so loud Heidi nearly jumped out of her skin. "Why would I seek such an awful thing when most women would join me of their own accord?"

She walked around the chair and took a few steps to the door, needing space between them. He fixed her with a gaze, somewhere between scrutiny and amusement.

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to answer a question for me before you go."

"If it's within my power to do so." She tried to be brave.

"I heard a rumor that you were betrothed to someone in London."

Heidi nodded, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"You are no society woman." His eyes took in her form.

"More like plummet."

"No, I am not."

Wickham moved toward her slowly, in an almost seductive manner, his voice low. "Then why run away from what must have been a good match? Men will always do what they are inclined to do and you would have been safe in the protection of a man with five-hundred a year."

Heidi balked at the fact that the rumor had added a price tag to her relationship. "I'm from a place where men honor their promises."

"Where would that be? The Americas?" He laughed and a shiver of dread rippled through her
"I may be twenty-seven, but I am not desperate enough to tie myself to a man that will not respect me."

Impossibly, he appeared to be surprised. "You are seven and twenty?"

Heidi had to fight not to roll her eyes, of course that was what he would focus on. "I am, and I am sure I know far more about the world than you." It was in that moment that she remembered the pepper spray in her pocket.

Her fingers twitched.

He considered her, shoulders relaxing. "Perhaps you are right, Miss Meldrum. You did break into my room, after all."

"I should go before I'm missed." Her hand rested on her pocket, the shape of the spray bottle reassuring.

"Perhaps you should."

Heidi reached the door.

"Miss Meldrum?"

She looked at him.

"Be careful out there. It can be dangerous on the streets, even in a small community like Hunsford."

Heidi left the room and shut the door behind her, her heart racing.

She wasn't sure how she managed it, but Heidi dropped the keys back on the front desk, made it out of the tavern and got home without being seen.
A thick fog blanketed the ground as Heidi walked with the Carters to the parsonage for Divine Services.

Having been in Hunsford for almost a month and a half, most of the people overlooked Heidi’s presence. It was refreshing. After the nerve-wracking scrutiny of the first few weeks, being ignored was much preferred.

Seeing Elizabeth and Maria sitting with Charlotte on one of the pews to the left of the altar, Heidi gave them a small wave before taking her seat at the end of the family’s aisle.

She’d grown used to the service. It wasn’t so wholly different from what she’d grown up with and though Mr. Collins tended to rattle on during his sermons, he wasn’t as bad as she’d expected.

When services were over, Heidi guided the Carters to the cluster that included the Collins’ party and introduced Lizzy and Maria to Doctor and Mrs. Carter. She’d already told them about Lizzy’s role weeks ago though she had yet to tell them about Wickham’s character. That was a whole different mess, and not something she wanted to consider on a day this pleasant.

“Miss Bennet, it is a great pleasure to meet you,” Mrs. Carter said. “Your generous gift to Miss Meldrum has been a blessing.”

“Though we Bennets are not the de Bourghs, we are not altogether uncharitable,” Elizabeth said, sharing a look with Charlotte.

“I never said such a thing,” Heidi said, trying to correct Lizzy’s misgivings.

“No,” Lizzy said, with a smile. “And I do not have the same generous heart as my sister; but I like to be helpful when I am able.”

As they spoke, Charlotte excused herself, saying she needed to speak with Mr. Collins and Miss de Bourgh, who had come to the service rather than receive it at Rosings for once.

“Miss Meldrum, Miss Bennet, I had no notion you were acquainted with each other.”

Heidi groaned and faced Mr. Wickham. Lieutenant Denny stood a step behind his companion.

Thankfully Lizzy graciously stepped in and introduced the two soldiers to the doctor and his wife.

“It is an honor to meet you,” he said, giving a gracious bow to the doctor. “I had the pleasure of being Miss Meldrum’s servant the other day. I believe she had an injured knee and found herself in need of an escort to the cottage.”

She flushed at the disbelief on the doctor’s face, having not previously discussed the fact that she’d had help getting home that day. But, thankfully, Mrs. Carter covered for her husband’s reaction.
“In that case, perhaps you would both like to join us for Sunday lunch? Miss Bennet,” she said, turning to address Lizzy. “You and Maria are of course invited, as long as the Collins can spare you.”

“I hardly think that will be an issue, Mrs. Carter. You are all politeness.”

An hour passed before they were all seated in the dining area of the Carters’ cottage, enjoying the first course of Sunday lunch.

Heidi had asked the Carters not to purchase some of the more… interesting cheeses, as stilton came with optional maggots. She enjoyed food, but not when it was wiggling with grubs. And she was grateful that they’d agreed.

Around the room, Heidi sat beside Lizzy and had managed to get Wickham and Denny to sit with the doctor and Mrs. Carter while Rose and Maria sat together on the other side of the table. It was the best seating arrangement Heidi could have hoped for.

“I imagine dinner at Rosings a few nights ago was pleasurable?” she asked, trying her best to emulate Mrs. Carter’s manners when speaking to Lizzy. Besides, drawing Lizzy into conversation would keep her from staring at Wickham and wondering what he was up to.

Now that she had arranged herself beside the heroine, she was afraid the man would tell her family about their second encounter in his room.

“It was pleasant.”

“Was it?” Heidi leaned forward.

“I think you may be correct when it comes to Miss de Bourgh,” Lizzy smiled thoughtfully. “My cousin’s exuberant veneration of the house might have colored my opinion of the woman.”

“And now?”

“She is very agreeable.” She sipped her wine. “Though I do wonder how she will fare in more scrutinizing company.”

“I understand your meaning.”

Lizzy nodded, placing her glass on the table.

Heidi worried her lip, before blurting out the question she wasn’t sure she should ask. “Tell me, what do you know about Mr. Wickham?”

Lizzy appeared to take in his presence. “He’s kind hearted from what I’ve witnessed, but he certainly makes love to us all.”

Heidi choked, surprised at the turn of phrase, but then nodded, realizing it likely meant something more innocent than what it meant to her.

“You know him well?”

“He has spent the winter in Meryton with his regiment. The Bennets have come to know the militia well since they arrived.”

From across the room, Heidi could see the Carters laugh. Meanwhile, a sly grin crossed Wickham’s face and Denny shook his head in disbelief.
They tittered and she caught a few of his quick glances at Rose, too quick for anyone else present to have detected. But the feeling that he might be up to his supposed tricks had her on edge.

She immediately regretted not telling her foster family about his reputation. The leering look he tried to hide from the others was evidence to her.

Heidi chatted amiably with Lizzy for the next half hour, trying not to focus the topic on either Wickham, thoughts of whom made her vaguely sick, nor Anne, though she desperately wanted to know more about Lizzy’s burgeoning friendship with the heiress.

She didn’t think Lizzy was still head over heels for Wickham and couldn’t tell if she should warn the woman point blank about his obvious tendencies.

“Miss Meldrum,” Lizzy said, getting her attention. “I was wondering about something that you may have some insight on.”

Heidi nodded, focusing her attentions on her guest. “Of course.”

“You were engaged to be married before you came to live with your cousins?”

“Yes.” Worry crept into her chest.

“I am not aware of the particulars of your relationship and I certainly do not presume to know anything about such topics, but I find myself curious.”

She smiled, hoping Lizzy didn’t see the fear in her features.

“If you were betrothed, legally, would you or have you considered suing your affianced for breach of contract?”

Heidi put her glass down. “I had no idea something like that was possible.”

“Truthfully?” Lizzy furrowed her brow and tilted her head.

“No.” She turned a little to face Elizabeth a little better.

“I wondered about your situation due to something Lady Catherine mentioned. She forthrightly spoke of the contract of marriage between Miss de Bourgh and her cousin, Mr. Darcy.”

Heidi frowned, not remembering that particular fact from the mini-series.

In a quieter voice, Lizzy continued. “Perhaps, if you found a proper attorney they could find a way for you to re-establish your reputa—“

“Miss Elizabeth,” she said, interrupting the woman and trying to keep a hold on her volume. “Please go no further. I think I understand you; but I had no dowry to give the man, and few people in London even knew of my existence, much less the existence of our match. It would be futile to ruin his name, when I have made such a clean break from him.”

“You would not wish to receive some compensation for your heart break?” Lizzy frowned down at her plate.

“I would not stoop to his level, dragging others into our situation,” she said, realizing for the first time that she believed herself. “Some part of me would love to hurt the man in the same way he hurt me, but to be honest, I want only to forget about him.”
“It would be scandalous if you did follow through with that threat.” Lizzy’s eyes were wide, but she kept her voice low.

“No doubt, but he’s far away and I have a new family that’s taken me in and is treating me with the love that I had hoped to have from him.”

“It is not the same.” Lizzy looked down at her hands and Heidi felt for the woman, wondering if something worse had happened during the Netherfield ball to separate her from Darcy.

The thought that maybe Darcy had tried to propose to her in Meryton was quickly dismissed.

“No, it is not,” Heidi scoffed. “But I trust at least some recovery time for the heartbreak would not be begrudged.”

The pair fell into silence while Heidi tried to come up with some new topic. She glanced at Wickham, who’d placed a hand on the back of Mrs. Carter’s chair as he told some story or another.

“Do you think you will return to the Continent?”

Heidi almost dropped her fork when Lizzy spoke up.

“You spent a significant amount of your youth in Germany, I believe.”

“I do not know. Perhaps, one day.” Heidi shrugged. “But I find I can tolerate the English countryside quite well. And, with people like you and Charlotte to count as friends, I find the idea of returning less inviting, when there is little to recommend itself for returning to the war-torn countryside.”

The woman smiled and Heidi hoped she’d smoothed that over. Only a moment later, as she looked over at Mr. Wickham, she was thinking about it again.

Lunch ended an hour later and Heidi relaxed once they were all gone. Mrs. Carter sent Rose up to her room to change, but in the meantime, Heidi asked if she could speak with the Carters.

When they agreed, she told them about Mr. Wickham’s past, about his life with Mr. Darcy, about his supposed philandering, and about the extortion of his inheritance.

Mrs. Carter began pacing when the doctor questioned why she hadn’t mentioned it before. Heidi was glad that Rose was not within earshot when she leaned forward and told them that she wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Just because a person is a villain in another’s story, doesn’t mean they’re inherently bad.” She pleaded with the doctor. “You told me the same thing about Miss de Bourgh.”

“I suppose I did.” The doctor pinched the bridge of his nose before continuing, “But some advanced notice in such cases would be appreciated.”

Heidi nodded, frowning. “His attentions will be drawn elsewhere, soon enough.”

“You are sure of this?”

“I am not sure of anything, but I will do everything in my power to stop him, should there be more signs of even a hint of attachment.”

They were silent for a moment. “You said Wickham had debts?”
“I’m not sure exactly how much,” she lied. “But, I remember something about Miss Elizabeth saying, in the book: ‘he’d be a fool if he took her for less than ten thousand’.”
Taking a seat on the bench at the end of the lane, Heidi yawned. She’d spent most of the early morning helping Rose, Mrs. Carter, and Mrs. Newton wash the linens and clothing. With the four of them they’d managed to knock it out quickly, but Heidi didn't think she’d ever worked so hard. She’d taken the larger items to the bleaching field, which would dry the drapes much faster than if they were taking up precious real estate on the clothes line. Rose had run back to the cottage, but Heidi needed to catch her breath.

Her hands were sure to be rough and chapped for the rest of the day, maybe even the next few days, and she cursed not having a bottle of lotion in her supplies.

She stared up at the clouds trying to figure out if it would rain before their laundry was dry.

A horse whinnied and Heidi looked back down from her cloud watching to see Anne's phaeton turning onto the surgery’s drive with only Anne in the back.

Heidi grabbed her empty laundry basket and hurried over to the courtyard to find Anne climbing out of the phaeton by the time she arrived.

"Good morning, Miss de Bourgh," she said, putting the basket down and curtseying, hoping her hair wasn’t as wild as it felt, falling out of the pins she’d used.

Anne greeted her in return and asked about the doctor.

"He's run to the post, I think. I daresay he should return presently."

The woman eyed the basket.

"Where is Mrs. Jenkinson?" Heidi asked, wringing her hands together.

"She had other duties to attend to," she said, smiling politely. "In turn, I took it upon myself to make the journey on my own."

Heidi returned the smile. "How enterprising."

Anne looked squarely at Heidi, eyes twinkling. "I daresay it was."

"Please, follow me to the surgery and out of this chilly air."

She led the way from the side foyer and into the clinic, directing Anne to a chair.

"Can I get you anything? Some tea perhaps? Or some chocolate? Breakfast won't be for another hour; but, you are welcome to join us."

The two women sat in the clinic waiting for the doctor after Heidi had asked Mrs. Newton to make some hot chocolate. She'd wanted Mrs. Carter to come in with her, but the woman had steadfastly
refused, saying that Heidi should become accustomed to playing hostess.

Returning to the surgery with her tray of drinks, Heidi put them down and began pouring cups of steaming hot chocolate. She’d almost gotten used to the more bitter taste than her usual mix, though she probably used more sugar than she should to round out the flavor.

"Miss Bennet mentioned that you are betrothed to your cousin?" she asked, desperate for some sort of small talk.

Anne nodded, a sour look on her face, before taking the cup from the small table. "I am."

Heidi frowned at Anne’s pensive expression. "You don't appear to be happy about it. I thought such a thing was good, for…"

"For people with a fortune."

She nodded.

"I find I am tied to my cousin, but I do not love him." Anne’s voice grew quiet.

"You don’t?" Heidi leaned forward, interested in Anne’s side of the story.

"The match was made when I was little more than a babe. My mother and my aunt wished to join our fortunes. My cousin and I are linked, whether we like it or not."

"Why not seek to break the contract? Is that possible?"

Anne smiled wistfully. "It is not so easy, Miss Meldrum."

"I might not be from around here, Miss de Bourgh, but you are a woman of means. Money can get you anything."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't have a lawyer’s education, but surely there's someone out there that could do the research for you. Help you break the contract if you do not want it. Why sign up for a lifelong commitment that will make you miserable?"

The woman frowned.

Heidi angled her knees toward the heiress.

"I may not be in the same situation that you find yourself in; but I would never settle for a loveless marriage. Does your cousin love you?"

"As cousins should, I think; but not in the way a husband and wife should." Anne blinked rapidly, being far more truthful than Heidi expected.

"Not to be too indelicate, Miss de Bourgh; but you have the money to pay your way out of it, I think."

Anne considered Heidi.

"As one who has just freed herself from an ill-conceived engagement, I may be biased." Heidi took a drink of her own hot chocolate, to let Anne ruminate.
“I doubt I would be strong enough to throw my future away—"

The door to the clinic burst open and Heidi jumped out of her seat dropping her cup, chocolate spilling on the rug.

"Heidi, thank God," the Doctor said, barging into the room. "Quickly, clear off the cot."

"What's—"

Before she could continue, a large man filled the doorway carrying a screaming Mr. Dowding in his arms.

"Oh no." Heidi crossed the room and grabbed the folded blankets and threw them over the nearby stool.

"I need laudanum and brandy," the Doctor ordered, his voice higher than usual.

Heidi stared, dumbfounded.

"Hurry!"

She panicked knocking a glass over as she searched desperately for the right bottles.

Out of the corner of her eye, the door to the mudroom burst open, revealing a frantic Mrs. Carter.

"I brought brandy," she announced, holding up the bottle.

Heidi finally found the laudanum and brought three bottles over to the Doctor. The large man who'd been carrying the blacksmith placed him on the operating chair and the doctor began belting the man in. It was the first time she'd seen the medieval-looking device being used.

Doctor Carter had been called out to neighboring villages for accidents and the like, but nothing as bad as this had happened in the five weeks since she’d arrived.

Trying to avoid touching anything, she handed one of the bottles to the doctor. Her eyes fell on the patient and her stomach churned at the sight of the injury.

Mr. Dowding’s hand was mangled, the skin of his wrist was black with soot. At first she could hardly believe the state of it, fingers not only twisted and bloody, but also the yellow of fat and ivory bone visible from beneath.

Heidi’s ears began to ring.

A hand on her shoulder turned her attention away from the horror.

“Get some water boiling and more clean linens for the Doctor,” Mrs. Carter ordered. She was already, expertly, helping her husband organize bottles, and laying out the tools he would require.

Glad to have something to do that didn’t involve gore, Heidi raced to the cupboard where they kept the cleaned bandages in the area she’d dubbed a mudroom. She’d washed them all clean the other day, with a few sprays of her precious bleach cleaner in the water, hoping it would help kill all bacteria. She’d hidden the bottle from prying eyes in the bottom of the basket. Heidi prayed once more for it to work.

“We need boiling water,” she ordered Mrs. Newton, barging into the kitchen. The woman nodded, as if she knew the request was coming, a flame already heating a large pot of water.
She swallowed hard, glancing over at the doorway that would lead to the rest of the house.

Thank God she’d convinced the doctor to have all his instruments sterilized and stored in airtight jars. It had been a trial to find something as airtight as she liked, but she’d spent an entire afternoon a couple weeks ago explaining the idea behind fermentation and canning and other things that would be invented soon and sterilization had been at the top of that list.

She stood motionless. This was Mr. Dowding; this was Abraham that was hurt. He’d been her savior. There had to be something she could do to help.

Without another thought, Heidi raced from the room and up the stairs to the cubby where she kept her precious supplies hidden in the guest room they’d repurposed for her.

With her small emergency tube of antibiotic ointment in her hand, the only modern possession she had that might help, Heidi raced back down the stairs. The tube had been shoved, forgotten, in the bottom of her purse months ago. She tripped over her own feet in her rush to get back downstairs catching herself just barely on the banister before rushing down the hall.

Her heart racing, Heidi burst through the door of the surgery within seconds. She could catch her breath later.

The other man, a farmer by the looks of him, stared up at her in shock.

Abraham was already tied to the operating chair, and slumped forward, passed out from what must have been a large dose of laudanum and brandy.

Chloroform didn’t seem to exist yet, but they’d given him something to knock him out.

“Put a thin coating of this on the bandages that the Doctor will put against the wound, once he’s finished,” she said, handing the tube to Mrs. Carter. “Try not to touch the ointment with your hands unless you’ve sterilized them as well. It might not completely prevent infection, but it should help.”

Mrs. Carter took one glance at the plastic tube and nodded.

There was a faint scent of burned flesh in the room now and Heidi put her hand to her stomach.

When Mrs. Newton entered the room with the boiling pot, Heidi helped the woman put it in a safe place.

“Heidi, please go out and tend to Mr. Greene and Rose. We’re enough here,” Mrs. Carter said.

Heidi gaped at the unconscious man, his head lolling off to the side of the chair.

She wiped her hands on a linen towel, red streaking on the ivory cloth and Heidi stared down at it.

Thoughts of contaminated blood rushed through her mind and she dropped the towel.

Her throat went dry at the thought that she’d just been helping with a bleeding person and didn’t have the protective gear on that anyone else would have needed. Heidi had no idea what sort of blood borne pathogens were alive in this era and her nausea returned with a vengeance.

Her hands shook and she started to go for the pot of boiling water.

She needed to get clean.
“Heidi,” Mrs. Newton barked.

Heidi snapped her head over to Mrs. Newton, whose normally quiet demeanor held something dangerous.

She looked down at the pot that held the freshly boiled, steaming water, her hands hovering nearby.

She’d lost her mind.

“I need—” She trailed off, unable to form the words of what she really needed

The woman sighed, stepping toward her. “Come, Miss Meldrum. We can use the water basin in the kitchen.”

She held her arm out, as if to pull Heidi to her side but hadn’t touched her and Heidi relaxed as she left the surgery. The terror of what she’d almost done leaving a cold chill in her chest.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Newton helped clean Heidi’s hands of the blood with some soap.

Rose appeared in the doorway, wringing her hands. "Miss de Bourgh just left the cottage in quite a state. What happened?"

"Mr. Dowding is hurt, quite badly, Miss Rose," Mrs. Newton said, handing Heidi a towel and maintaining a level of calm that Heidi hadn’t expected.

"Oh no!" Rose crossed the room, and before Heidi could stop the girl, Rose had wrapped her arms around Heidi’s waist as they stood at the counter.

"Rose, it looks bad."

"Do you think we should fetch Mrs. Dowding?"

Heidi started at the realization that Rose was addressing her and not Mrs. Newton.

"I think we should stay here. Your father is working to fix whatever happened. He may need our help."

Rose nodded and Heidi ran her eyes over the room.

“Has all the laundry been washed?” Heidi asked, thinking they could busy themselves with mindless chores.

It was almost noon when Mr. Greene left the cottage. Heidi and Rose were snacking on some cold meat, when Mrs. Carter came through the door from the surgery, her full-bodied apron splattered with blood.

At once, Heidi’s appetite fled and she placed the food back on her plate

“Doctor Carter is just finishing surgery,” Mrs. Carter said, taking a deep cleansing breath.

“Is Mr. —“ Rose started.

“Mr. Dowding is sleeping. I have no more information than that.”

“Will he be able to work again?” Mrs. Newton asked.
“Doctor Carter will not know the extent of the damage for a few weeks I daresay.”

Heidi glanced at the older woman, who frowned. It was clear she thought the answer would be a resounding ‘No’.

Doctor Carter came out of the surgery then, stumbling and haggard. His clothes splotched heavily with deep crimson. layers of brown beneath it revealing the amount of time he’d spent working. The man wiped at his forehead with a handkerchief, he smeared blood on his face. Heidi tried not to wince.

“Mr. Dowding is resting for now,” the Doctor said, doling out orders to the family. “Darling, will you keep vigil over him? Once I change these clothes, I will return.”

Mrs. Carter nodded and left the room.

“Mrs. Newton, will you fetch Mrs. Dowding?” The woman left out of the backdoor then, leaving just Heidi and Rose.

“Rose, go lay out some clean clothes for me, will you?” The girl ran off for her father’s chamber.

“Can I help you with something?” Heidi asked, seeing she was the last one in the kitchen.

He shook his head, collapsing in one of the kitchen chairs. “I wish to thank you for your help, just now.”

Heidi started, looking across the table.

“Everything that we used in the surgery today were tools that you had helped clean and prepare. If the blacksmith pulls through without an infection it will be entirely because of you.”

“He might still become infected,” Heidi said, trying to suppress a stammer. “The stuff I did wasn’t for burns or anything near as bad as this.”

“I have been a doctor long enough that I know washing my hands helps prevent infections in my patients, but I had no notion why until you came here. Anything you do, I think, is a credit to your modern ideas and to you for providing them to us.”

Her face flushed and then went pale as she glanced at the Doctor’s bloody face again.

“You need to get the blood cleaned up, Doctor.”

He nodded.

“I don’t know what sort of pathogens live in blood these days, but in my time, it’s such a dangerous thing that they train people on the proper way to dispose of blood and bloodied items.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t have that training myself, but it would be wise to be over-careful than not.”

He gave her a small smile before standing up. “We will clean up the surgery as best we can.”

Heidi followed the doctor out of the kitchens and went to sit in the great room for peace and quiet.

Leaning her head carefully on the back of the couch, she took a breath and stared at the ceiling.
Heidi wasn’t sure how much time passed before the doorbell rang. She listened for Mrs. Newton before realizing that the woman wasn’t in the cottage and got up to answer it herself.

Heidi was surprised to see Lizzy on the front step.

Both greeted each other and then Heidi smiled, letting the woman inside.

“I apologize,” she said, glancing down at her dress splattered with blood. “I haven’t yet had a chance to change.”

“I had no idea—” Lizzy’s eyes were fixed on the waist of the dress, the fabric smeared and Heidi’s stomach dropped.

“This is one of your gowns,” Heidi groaned, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling. “If I can’t get it clean, I will replace it.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Meldrum.” Lizzy waved Heidi’s apology away.

“I don’t usually help in the surgery, but an emergency arose and—.”

Lizzy nodded, looking mildly alarmed. “You need not explain. Miss de Bourgh stopped at the parsonage before returning to Rosings this morning. She told us about Mr. Dowding’s unexpected arrival.”

She glanced past Heidi’s shoulder, in question.

“He’s sleeping, as far as I am aware, recovering. My aunt and uncle are with him.”

Lizzy nodded, though her eyes were still wide with alarm.

“Please do sit down,” Heidi said, offering her hand out toward the couch. “Can I offer you some tea? I apologize; we’ve barely even breakfasted, or I’d offer something sweet.”

She smiled. “Do not trouble yourself, I beg.”

Heidi’s eyes went wide. “Of course. Do you perhaps have need of the Doctor? Or wish to see Mrs. Carter?”

Nerves fluttered in her stomach as they took their seats.

“No, Miss Meldrum. I came to the cottage to call on you.”

“Me?”

“You need not appear so surprised. We are friends, are we not?”

“Of course, but I—“

“Miss Meldrum, do not make a fuss.”

Heidi snapped her mouth shut, realizing it was Lizzy’s polite way of saying she was blathering.

“I called on the cottage because Charlotte wished to invite you to tea tomorrow, and I thought I might enjoy the walk more than she.”

She looked around, suddenly remembering her conversation with the Carters after Sunday lunch
yesterday.

“Miss Bennet, I did wish to tell you something; but yesterday was hardly the time or place. If you have a moment now?”

“What is it?” Lizzy raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Heidi leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “You are friendly with Mr. Wickham, and I would not wish to come between you; but please be wary.”

Lizzy tilted her head. “What would cause you to come to such a conclusion?”

She glanced up at the ceiling, trying to think of how to explain it, now that she’d let the cat out of the bag.

It was time for a lie.

“I know his type, and I know it well.”

“What is his type, Miss Meldrum?”

There was a tone in her voice that told Heidi that Lizzy had gone on the offensive. Rather than tell her the truth, Heidi switched to something safer.

“He’s… a fortune hunter.”

The woman wore suspicion in her features. “Men require money to live just as women do, Miss Meldrum.”

“Of course they do. I do not begrudge Mr. Wickham his desire to search for a wealthy wife; but Miss Bennet, he regularly stared at Rose and—“ she worried her bottom lip, trying to find the right phrase to trigger Lizzy into doing what she needed her to do. “As if he were calculating how much money he could get from the Carters.”

“Really, Miss Meldrum,” Lizzy scoffed. “I think you are searching for something that isn’t there.”

“I know such scheming well, I saw that face on my betrothed often enough.”

“I am unsure I believe this.”

Time for a little lie mixed with truth.

“Doctor Carter has seen him at the tables. The man spends money faster than he gets it.”

“Many people game, Miss Meldrum.” Lizzy seemed to be placating her, as if Heidi was the one who was being too conservative.

“The Doctor told me that he thought Mr. Wickham has already lost nearly five hundred pounds. He’s been in town less than a fortnight. There’s gaming and then there’s recklessness.”

Heidi sighed as Lizzy pulled away. She relaxed, not wanting to lay it on too thick but hoping to impress upon the woman just how scheming he was.

“You can believe me or not, I just ask that you be wary. What I saw yesterday, it frightens me. And if he runs up debts so quickly, I imagine he would be even quicker to find a way out of them.”
Lizzy considered her words before speaking. “I will think on what you’ve said.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet.”
Friday, March 20th, 1812

Chapter Notes

trigger warning (just in case): threat of physical attack, some violence

N early a week passed, after Mr. Dowding arrived broken and mangled at the surgery doors, before Heidi could even take a moment to breathe.

She’d joined the Collinses and their guests for tea twice in the past few days; but otherwise she had been at the cottage, taking long shifts in the surgery to keep watch over the blacksmith as he healed. Mrs. Dowding spent most of her own time beside her husband, when she could afford to leave the smithy, and Heidi did her best to keep the man as comfortable as she could while Doctor and Mrs. Carter went about their business.

The doctor had temporarily assigned her as nurse, fully aware that this would not be allowed to in her time. She was happy about it, in a morbid way. This duty, caring for the injured man, helped the Carters more than her helping Mrs. Newton clean pots.

When Abraham woke up from his medically induced coma a few days ago, it made her feel as if she were watching the movie Outsiders, like she had in middle school, when Ralph Macchio’s character had been trying to recover from the burns he’d suffered saving the kids from the burning house.

Abraham was in constant pain and the fact that he worked with his hands in the smithy could only have made his new reality worse.

At least, she’d thought with tears in her eyes, Abraham had only been burned on his hand. He could very well have lost his life.

She’d helped, though she’d had to fight a rolling stomach, with changing bandages and using what little she dared of the antibiotic ointment. So far, they’d managed to stave off infection, but the small tube wouldn’t last forever.

She would not be able to perform the same miracle again.

Heidi did her best to keep busy sitting in the surgery, reorganizing the shelves, putting together notes on what was good and what was bad, getting rid of lead and mercury, and creating a chart to track the sterilized items. She was doing better getting her compulsions under control; but it was this place that had helped her. She knew she’d never overcome them, not that she necessarily needed to; but she’d grown better at calming the impulse to clean obsessively.

Heidi had once thought that when she had kids, that would be what helped her overcome it. Kids were dirty, it’s part of what they were, but so was Regency England.

When the surgery was quiet, she tended to lose herself in the drawings of tools and other items that maybe one day she could ‘invent’. After seeing a true trauma in the surgery, she hated that in 2019 the doctor would have been able to do so much more for the man. Heidi’s first invention was a proper wheelchair, so that she could have pushed herself around rather than dealing with that awful
rudder. Then she’d drawn up an operation table, rather than using that medieval torture device. Her next invention was a stethoscope, since in *Sissi*, her favorite period movie, the doctor had used an early form of it. The movie was set in the 1850s so she knew it wasn’t long off. She wasn’t sure how to get her hands on rubber tubing, but at least she could start with the conical listening device and go from there.

There’s no way she would try to patent any of these inventions, it could potentially change the future, if the butterfly effect were real. But Heidi was convinced that one doctor using the inventions couldn’t change the course of history.

Could it?

The sketching filled her hours, though admittedly she’d wasted a lot of parchment until she got the 3D effects right, which still weren’t quite right.

Glancing up at the window, Heidi drew in a long breath, bored.

Mrs. Dowding was due any minute and Heidi offered to stay in the surgery until the woman arrived. Doctor Carter was going to go over Abraham’s treatment with his wife and decide on what was to be done next.

Heidi couldn’t wait, wanting to take the opportunity to leave the house for an hour or two.

Rose’s birthday, she learned from Mrs. Newton, was only a few weeks away and Heidi wanted to get the girl some sort of gift. She’d asked the housekeeper what would be an appropriate amount to spend, and the woman had been wary to talk about money.

After explaining why, Mrs. Newton agreed to chip in a little of her own coin, which Heidi had politely taken. She had asked Mrs. Carter for a donation as well, since she had no money to her name, and the woman had given her a few coins to use as she wished.

Heidi bounced her leg, waiting for Mrs. Dowding to arrive. The shillings and pence rattled in the reticule Mrs. Carter had let her borrow. It was the first time in nearly two months that she had money to spend.

She wasn’t sure what exactly she was going to get the girl.

There was a knock and Heidi got up to open the back door for the young wife.

“He’s still asleep,” she said, letting the woman into the entryway.

Mrs. Dowding nodded.

“I will give you a few minutes alone while I announce your arrival to the Doctor.”

“Thank you.” The woman gave her a sad smile and Heidi slipped out of the room.

When her duties had been attended to and Doctor Carter summoned to the surgery, Heidi left the cottage and headed toward the center of town.

There were only three true stores in Hunsford. The general store, open daily except Sundays from 10-4, was small but had some of everything. It was set up a lot like one of the big name pharmacy stores with everything ranging from fabric to toys. Cooper’s Grocery was located a few buildings down from the general store, while the apothecary was down the road, the last house within the town limits.
Hunsford, from what Doctor Carter had told her, was lucky to have the services of both a doctor and apothecary. Most villages, he’d told her, didn’t even have the apothecary within an easy distance.

Heidi stopped to say hello to a few of the villagers. She knew from the outset that they would be were fishing for information on Abraham, but she managed to stay tight-lipped, dodging their concerned questions.

After about an hour of ‘window shopping’ she’d managed to make a few preliminary choices, though she’d yet to settle on one gift. At least, Heidi had a better idea of the cost of the items she’d been considering, to see if it was reasonable.

She was about to head back to the cottage when hands grabbed her arms.

The tips of her shoes scraped the dirt as she was dragged forcibly to a small alley between a few of the buildings just off the main drag.

Heidi tried to cry out, but a gloved hand covered her mouth, her bonnet crunching against the wall.

This was starting to get old, she thought, locking eyes with Mr. Wickham. One of his hands pinned both her wrists above her head.

“What in the Devil’s name are you doing, Miss Meldrum?”

She squirmed, trying to remember the choreographed fights she’d taken part in on stage.

Could she kick him in the balls from here?

From around the corner, Heidi could hear the sounds of horseshoes on the cobbles. It was near noon and the stage would be coming through town.

With any luck, she could catch the driver’s attention and stop whatever Wickham planned to do.

He forced her back, his knee going between her legs to hold her in place.

Just as she shifted her weight to lift her leg to that precious organ, blessedly in range, Mr. Wickham pinned her foot to the stone with his considerably more muscular leg.

“You have quite the wicked tongue, Miss Meldrum, but less wits than I thought—”

She tried to speak again, her arms beginning to tingle from lack of blood flow. This man was far worse than she’d expected.

He sneered. “Oh no, Miss Meldrum, not until I am ready to hear your excuses.”

Panic rose in her chest.

The carriage drove past the alley entrance, but it was not the familiar stage coach, which meant the driver would not have recognized her if he’d seen her at all. The curtains were pulled back from the window, and for a brief moment it looked as if the occupant spotted her; but the carriage continued on without any sign it intended to stop.

Heidi whimpered.

“I have been scandalized, and the rumors originated with you. I know it.”
She looked about, trying to think what he might be talking about. Surely he couldn’t mean her warning to Lizzy. Heidi doubted that Lizzy would have told anyone anything. The woman was far more circumspect than that.

“Do not scream.” He pulled his hand away from her mouth, his glove sliding along her jaw until his fingers gripped her neck.

“Mr. Wickham, please.”

Her eyes stung with tears as his grip tightened. It wasn’t enough to cut off her air, but the threat was there.

“I thought we had an arrangement, Miss Meldrum. I ignored your attempt at thievery and you let me do as I wished. I thought we were becoming friends.” He sounded wounded with his last statement.

Her fingers went numb, wanting to wrench them away from him.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Is that why your uncle is cautioning everyone about my supposed lust for young girls?”

Heidi squeezed her eyes shut.

“They will not even allow me to join the tables anymore.”

The snap of leather shocked them both and Heidi almost cried out, despite his warning.

Wickham’s grip loosened enough for Heidi to pull her arms down, the blood and feeling rushing back to her fingers almost blinded her with pain.

When she opened her eyes a mere second later, Wickham was being thrown backwards onto the cobbles. A man in the familiar regimental redcoat, that Denny and Wickham sometimes wore, standing between her and Wickham, spread-eagled in the alleyway.

“Miss, are you well? Did this scoundrel harm you?” He enunciated the descriptor like a slur, looking back over his shoulder.

Heidi tore her gaze away from her savior to see a second man, a well-dressed man, blond-haired and tall, walking toward them. The tip of a horsewhip was pointed at Wickham, threateningly.

The man she’d seen in the carriage held his hand out to her as if to help her up and Heidi realized that she was collapsed back against the wall of the Fox’s home.

She stared at his hand, the redcoat an easy indicator of what this man was. The fact that he was a soldier and still pulled one of his own away from her eased her worry a smidge; but she was sure he had no idea who he truly was.

Heidi’s eyes darted to the man in the --

*Was that velvet?*

-- jacket who still wielded the whip like a pistol in Wickham’s face.

“I knew you to be unscrupulous,” the blond said, his voice a low growl, as he moved closer to Wickham. “But, assaulting a woman in daylight. George, you must be mad.”
Wickham’s eyes flashed, glaring at her, before turning back to the blond.

“You have no idea what she’s done,” Wickham spat. “My reputation—“

She narrowed her eyes at him and reached up to her throat, her voice sounding foreign as she spoke up. “I’ve done nothing but tell the truth.”

Wickham scrabbled to stand, which the man allowed.

“Get out of here, George,” the man said, snapping the whip in the air threateningly. “I will set you to rights later.”

Heidi couldn’t believe it. He was just going to let Wickham go.

She’d been physically assaulted and this well-dressed man was letting her tormentor go.

Tears sprung to her eyes, burning in unshed anticipation. This was yet another reason why this place sucked.

Misogyny to the Nth degree.

Wickham stalked off, but looked over his shoulder at her with all the contempt of a thousand fiery suns. “We will continue our discussion later, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi’s shoulders slumped as she took deep shuddering breaths. Her heart finally slowing when he disappeared around the corner.

The man in regimentals, his brown curls disheveled, stood awkwardly between them. He avoided her eyes and Heidi wondered if there were some sort of unspoken rule that he was trying to obey. Getting a better look at him, Heidi surmised that he was at least a gentleman if not a member of peerage. She could see that despite the uniform, he was from a different class than Denny and Wickham.

“I apologize for my lack of manners and the forthrightness I must use in an instance such as this.”

Heidi frowned.

“Did you come to harm by Mr. Wickham?”

She rested her hands on her knees, still breathing hard and doing her best to fight back the tears and adrenaline. She ignored both of her onlookers.

Her throat was dry and her arms and legs quaking.

“Will you run to the Bridle for some brandy, cousin?”

The man with the horsewhip, who hadn’t said a word yet, hurried off. The fact that the soldier knew the name of the tavern was enough to put Heidi at a little ease. It meant he knew Hunsford. Perhaps, she thought looking at the retreating man, they were related to the Squire in Beckenshire. Sir Riley had a large family, from what she’d heard.

Heidi closed her eyes to avoid looking at the man in front of her, trying to keep a tenuous hold on her frayed emotions. She was determined not to become a damsel, a wilted flower, or any of that shit.

Not in front of two men so… established.
She felt betrayed, but in the back of her mind knew that this soldier would not understand why she was so shaken.

The lightest brush of fabric on her shoulder caught her attention and Heidi’s eyes went wide, her head snapping up to stare at the dark-haired man. His jade eyes stormy under his brow.

He pulled his hand away as if she’d burned it with her glare and Heidi relaxed.

“My sincerest apologies. I did not mean to offend you.”

She dragged in another breath, gaining control over her lungs, though her heart raced. “You let him go?” The accusation squeaked out of her, not being what she wanted to say.

“I am well acquainted with that gentleman,” he said.

“Hardly a gentleman,” she muttered, considering him.

The muscle in his temple jumped.

If this man was a friend of Wickham’s, maybe even someone who would pay his debts, then surely the traitor would get off scot free. They were both soldiers after all.

Heidi pushed herself off the wall and the man moved back, giving her room.

“I see.” She started to stalk off, something in her chest deadening.

How stupid could she have been to think that Austen had oversold Wickham’s villainy? Heidi wished that horsewhip the man’s cousin had was hers. Or maybe, she thought, eyeing the sword at the man’s hip, she could find a bale of hay somewhere to tear to shreds with the sword.

“Miss, I beg you. Please wait?”

Something pleading in her rescuer’s voice made her stop.

“You are unwell, shaken after the incident. Wait a moment.” He stumbled trying to catch up to her side. “My cousin has run to fetch something to fortify you.”

Heidi looked steadfastly in front of her. “I assure you, I will be fine, sir.”

Not knowing his rank, but that he was higher than her, Heidi figured on deference in order to get out of the situation.

He appeared like a shadow at her side and Heidi couldn’t help but glance over. The buttons of his uniform gleamed.

“Pray, allow me to escort you to the surgery. The Doctor can ensure you are hale.”

That he knew a doctor resided in the village was another sign of his familiarity with Hunsford. He had to be from Beckenshire.

Heidi chuckled, the sound dry in her ears. “As I told Mr. Wickham weeks ago, the Carters are my family. I have no need of an escort to return home.

The uniformed man gaped, looking her over as if searching for something familiar. “You are not Miss Rose.”
Heidi snickered at the astonishment in the man’s voice.

“Oh Lord no.” She shook her head, muttering to herself. “Thinking I’m a fourteen year old.” Heidi rolled her eyes. “My name is Heidi Meldrum. The good doctor is my cousin.” She wondered if it would be enough to trigger the man’s memory. Certainly Sir Riley would have mentioned that the Doctor had some distant relation in town.

“I know the family well. I do not remember hearing of any cousin matching your description.”

Her stomach dropped.

Was the man who’d gone to the Bridle, Edward? Was this man an actual Carter cousin?

She swallowed. “I—“

He looked past her and Heidi turned as the man spoke to his companion, a smile in his voice. “You have returned.”

Heidi released a breath, thankful for the reprieve and watching the blond god return with a cup of liquor in his hand.

He didn’t look twenty-one. As he moved closer Heidi took him in. He looked more her age than some university student home on holiday.

“For you, Miss Meldrum.” Heidi caught the soldier’s eye, wondering if he too would think her a spy. It was clear he was suspicious.

She turned her gaze back to the blond. Though his coloring mimicked Rose’s, the crow’s feet and slightly receding hairline confirmed that he was NOT Edward.

The soldier took the cup from his cousin and smelled the liquid, appraising. “A Vauxhall. ‘92?”

“Only the best for the distressed lady, Ewan. The alternative wasn’t fit for a French mule.”

Heidi took the cup, though she didn’t want to drink from it. She tried not to think about how dirty the tavern was, but to refuse a drink from someone with a title, because of course he probably did, was likely to shun her from society forever.

The sharp, paint-thinner smell nearly bowled her over. Steeling herself, Heidi took a sip. The strong liquid burned its way down her throat and Heidi shuddered.

She glanced at the soldier, who gave her a rakish grin. She cocked her head at him, surprised to notice that his hair curled softly around his ears.

“Miss Meldrum resides currently at the Cottage.”

The soldier spoke as if there were only possible cottage he could be referring to. But if this man was the squire, it would make sense that he would know whose home the soldier was speaking to.

“Does she now?”

“She is a cousin of Doctor Carter.”

His words were forced as if he were trying to get the gentleman to recognize some sort of double entendre.
“A pleasant family,” the man replied, his eyebrow raising, and being completely oblivious to whatever hint his cousin was trying to give him.

“You do not need to talk over me as if I’m not here,” she said, her anger rising.

“Our apologies, dear lady.” The Redcoat gave her an entirely sincere bow. “We meant no disrespect.”

Heidi looked warily as the two men glanced at each other.

“Perhaps now we could make proper introductions, so as not to completely offend the gods of propriety.”

She raised an eyebrow when the gentleman missed his cue and the soldier made the introductions.

“Colonel Ewan Fitzwilliam, at your service.” He bowed deeply. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, despite the manner in which we were introduced. Might I introduce you to my cousin, a gentleman of highest regard, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Heidi’s stomach fell as she stared at the blond, utterly bewildered.

“Mr. Darcy?” she stammered, taking a step away from both of them and almost dropping the cup of whisky.

“You are acquainted with my cousin?”

She gaped, trying to find her words, and for the first time Heidi considered the man as Lizzy’s love interest.

The blond hair was certainly a surprise, he was no Colin Firth or Matthew what’s-his-name; but he was tall and very… commanding. And good-looking despite not having the type-casted brooding appearance.

Her mother would be surprised, flabbergasted, and confounded.

Heidi blinked, trying to cobble together something that resembled a proper sentence.

“I have the honor of calling friends some people within his acquaintance.” She wanted to sink into a hole at the ridiculous wording.

There was a glint in Mr. Darcy’s eyes, as if he thought this amusing, and she looked at the soldier, who spoke up.

“Am I to assume you do not consider Mr. Wickham your friend?”

“No. In fact,” she said, rubbing her neck. “I daresay Mr. Wickham is the villain to my heroine in this story.”

The soldier chuckled and Heidi’s eyes snapped over to him.

“You’re the colonel,” she said, finally realizing who the man was.

He gave her an honest smile.

“I am uncertain what you mean saying such a thing.” He stepped closer to his cousin, with a strut in his step. “Who has been telling tales about us, Darcy?”
“Oh dear.” Heidi stumbled backwards, reaching for the wall, her legs weak again. The cup in her hand clattered against the cobbles, spilling whisky down the wall.

“Now, I do insist that we escort you to the cottage. You have grown pallid, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi looked back at Mr. Darcy, her face and chest splotching with heat.

What a way to be introduced to the main love interest.

But then she remembered. This still was not her story. It didn’t matter how she was introduced. only that Lizzy looked good to these people.

She swallowed, steeling herself and trying to be somewhat appropriate in a setting such as this. “I believe it falls upon me to tell you that Miss Elizabeth Bennet is currently in residence at the Parsonage.”

The surprise evident in Mr. Darcy’s features, for the merest of moments, quickly vanished.

“Miss Bennet is in Hunsford?”

Heidi checked herself before she laughed at his obvious anticipation. “Yes, she is staying with Charlotte, I mean, Mrs. Collins.”

Mr. Darcy glanced past her at his cousin before returning his eyes to her.

“And Wickham, how did he come to be here?”

Heidi worried her lip, trying to figure out the best way to explain.

“Mr. Wickham and Mr. Denny escorted the two ladies to Hunsford as Sir Lucas became ill just before their departure.”

Something on Darcy’s face hardened.

“It’s alright though,” she blurted out, trying to fix whatever reversal Wickham’s appearance had done. “I did not intend to do so, but I managed to besmirch Mr. Wickham’s reputation, simply by warning the Doctor of the man’s roving eye.”

“What has he done?” The anger had returned to Mr. Darcy’s voice, his hand fisted at his side.

“Aside from a considerable gambling debt,” she said, shrugging a shoulder. She glanced at the cobbles beneath her feet. “I recognized his attempts to flirt with my young cousin and knew his behavior for something that could lead to far worse than flirtation. I could not let it stand. Perhaps it was not my place but--”

The two men looked at each other and Heidi faltered, thinking maybe she’d said too much.

She watched the silent conversation pass between Mr. Darcy and the colonel.

“When I told my uncle, he took personal offense to it. I’m afraid you came upon us just as Wickham was telling me of their confrontation.”

Until that moment, Heidi had wondered if she’d done the right thing in investigating Wickham. Even her taunting Wickham just now had worried her, that she’d besmirched someone’s good name by judging too harshly. But the look that passed between the two men, that possibly no one else but Heidi could decipher as it bounced between them, said more than enough.
Wickham *had* tried to elope with Georgiana and Mr. Darcy had thrown the man out of Pemberley for it.

She let her breath go and the small sigh must have reminded them of her presence because Mr. Darcy snapped his head over toward her, his eyes wide.

“Ewan, please escort Miss Meldrum to the cottage. I find I have some business to attend to before we arrive at Rosings.”

“I’m fine, really. There’s no need for—“

The colonel spoke up then. “A gentleman should never allow a woman to walk unescorted, not when she has recently been attacked by a rake of a most unpleasant disposition.”

She eyed him for a moment. “But you’re a soldier, not a gentleman.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed then. “Oh, I like her.”

Heidi flushed, realizing too late that she’d probably spoken out of turn.

Mr. Darcy spoke up, like the aristocrat he was. “I will direct our coach to the Park and wait for you to join me at The Crimson Bridle, in a quarter of an hour.”

There was a cold tone to his voice that caused Heidi to shiver. If this were the city, she’d expect either a 1950s rumble, or a shootout.

But this was the 1800s and the Kent countryside.

“Please, Mr. Darcy.”

“I must see to some business that should have been resolved long ago.”

The colonel held out his arm for her to take. “Come, Miss Meldrum. Do not let your saviors feel slighted, let us attend to our duties.”

Though they were trying to distract her, there was little she could do to stop either of them. She looked at both the men then and handed Mr. Darcy the empty cup of whisky.

“Very well.”

Heidi stepped forward, resting her thankfully gloved hand in the crook of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s elbow. “I will join you presently, Darcy.”

The gentleman tipped his hat at his cousin and the colonel began to lead the way before she even had a chance to say goodbye.

Eyeing the soldier as they made their way down the lane toward the Cottage, Heidi took stock of this man.

He was handsome with his more Darcy-typical dark hair though not nearly as tall as the love interest. She could definitely see why Lizzy would flirt with him, angry as she must be about the Netherfield incident.

Heidi tore her eyes way from his profile and watched the road in front of her.

This was NOT a good start to this relationship.
Heidi smoothed the fabric across her stomach, noting that it was slimmer than it had been when she first arrived, but nothing significant. Her diet had certainly changed since she landed in regency England.

At present, she was standing under the protection of the canopy in front of the grand Rosings Park. The invitation to tea had come directly from Anne yesterday afternoon, and Heidi hadn’t slept a wink.

Already she knew she would work herself to an ulcer with the goings on in Hunsford. This was more drama than she witnessed at the dinner theater all year and she’d only been in the small village for a handful of weeks. The thought that she was going to have to worry closely about clothing and proper etiquette terrified her.

But, like it or not, she’d attracted the attention of Anne de Bourgh. She would need to remain polite and friendly or suffer the consequences, which could fall on the Carters.

She reached up to her ears, making sure her mother’s earrings were in place. She hadn’t worn them since she’d realized her predicament. It wouldn’t do to wear diamonds every day, when so many people had only semi-precious stones in their jewelry. Today though, dinner at Rosings, meant she needed to be perfect, and that meant bringing out the earrings and showing them off.

The front door opened, a butler inviting her into the foyer and Heidi did her best not to gape. She’d been in castles all over Europe, in Germany, Italy, and the Czech Republic. She’d seen opulence, but it had always been at a distance because those places had been built long ago, but this... this was a living household, scrubbed clean and gleaming as one would expect of the house of someone as demanding as Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

It was almost enough to chagrin Heidi for mentally mocking Mr. Collins’ constant bragging, both in the movies and the few occasions when she’d held quick conversations with the rector. The foyer alone had two fireplaces burning low and heating the entryway.

After handing the butler her bonnet and the short jacket that had covered her arms, he indicated for her to follow him.

“The family has gathered in the Red Room. If you will follow me, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi thanked the man and trailed behind him dutifully down a large corridor, trying not to swipe at the bit of bangs that bordered her line of sight, frustrating her. Before today she’d gotten away with French twists and buns with braids as embellishments, but today, at Rosings Park, she needed to embrace the style expected of her.

Rose and Mrs. Carter had teased and pulled and snagged her hair through at least three styles before they were happy with the results.

Heidi glanced down at the blue gown she’d borrowed from Lizzy and winced. This was not a dress, morning or otherwise, that belonged in such a grand estate, and Heidi only hoped that this was the worst of what Lizzy had brought. If this was near the best, it was no wonder that Lady Catherine would have held some disdain for the heroine.

The butler wove his way down corridors and Heidi would be lost if any of the servants left her to her own devices. The elderly man stopped suddenly in front of a door, where a servant, she wasn’t
sure what the boy’s rank was, opened a set of double doors leading into a room painted in a brownish red hue. Heidi had a vague memory of a crayon reading ‘Burnt Sienna’ on the side.

The large windows, ten feet tall, had their curtains pulled back, flooding the room with afternoon sunlight. A fireplace was lit along the long wall between two of the windows, though the room didn’t seem to require heat. Large portraits in gilded frames were strategically placed around the room, emphasizing what could only be an honorable bloodline. The furniture was dark wood, though there was a bright paisley pattern on the cushions themselves, livening up the grand chamber.

Then she spotted the guests already seated in the center of the room.

Well, they had been seated anyway.

Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, along with the ladies, all stood from their chairs, save for Lady Catherine.

Heidi curtseyed, her mouth going dry, and went through the typical salutations with everyone, greeting the lady of the house first, thanks to Mrs. Carter’s instructions, and then in subsequent order by the importance of the guests.

She felt ridiculous greeting Charlotte and Mr. Collins last but, she thought sarcastically, them’s the breaks in such social circles.

Heidi was instructed to take a seat between Maria and Elizabeth, which she did. The last thing she wanted was to stumble through a conversation with Mr. Darcy or the colonel after their awkward introduction a couple days earlier.

After preparing her tea as she wished, thinking Lady Catherine’s standards would not allow for a messy kitchen, Heidi slipped into a trance, content with half-listening to the conversation around her.

She couldn’t help but wish her mother was beside her. Her mother, entranced as she’d always been with history and royal families and such, would have loved this. Even the dishes would have caught her mother’s eye and she’d likely toured the factories in which it had been made. Polish pottery and Czech crystal decorated the cabin in New York, her mother proud of where she’d been.

Her heart lurch.

And her mother would have been able to fix the mistakes that Heidi had made.

Her eyes misted with tears and she swallowed them back. It would not do to lose control in a public place like Lady Catherine’s Red Parlor.

“Miss Meldrum.”

Anne appeared to be addressing her and Heidi blinked a few times, hoping she hadn’t missed anything important during her ruminations. An enigmatic smile crossed her lips.

“I was just informing my cousins and guests that Mr. Dowding is being released to his wife’s care tomorrow. I wondered if you might comment further.”

“Yes,” she replied, grateful the subject was so familiar to her. “As long as he has no sign of infection, the doctor felt it was permissible to allow the blacksmith to return home to the care of his wife.”
“He must be in a fair bit of pain.”

“He is. But Abra- Mr. Dowding is keeping in good spirits. My uncle says that he may yet regain full function of his hand, even with such an injury.”

“The blacksmith is the best we have had in Hunsford for some time,” Lady Catherine interjected. “I daresay I made a fine choice when I selected him. It would be a shame to have to get rid of him.”

Heidi couldn’t fight the glare that must have shown on her face.

The woman’s coldness baffled her.

Anne leaned forward. “We were in the surgery, mother, when the doctor came in carrying the wounded man. It was a dreadful sight.”

Anne’s voice was threaded with nerves, as if she wanted to cover her mother’s brazen attitude with a conversation shift. Heidi glanced at the heiress.

“Were you indeed?” Lady Catherine leaned forward, predictably bug-eyed at the news. “Why did you not mention this before?”

“I thought perhaps it might be too shocking, if Mr. Dowding were to die.” Anne glanced at Heidi and smiled.

“Naturally, I ran from the room, but Miss Meldrum remained behind to help. Doctor Carter was shouting out orders and she responded, like a soldier to his commander. Miss Meldrum impressed me greatly.”

Heidi averted her eyes as the others turned toward her.

“You? In the surgery? Helping?” Lady Catherine asked, her pitch going higher with each word.

Heidi squared her shoulders. “Yes, Lady Catherine. I don’t think I would have normally done something like it, but in the moment, seeing Mr. Dowding in such a state, I knew I had to help.”

“Yes, I remember something about Dowding being your savior when you arrived in Hunsford. I am surprised you kept up the acquaintance with such a dirty man.”

Her cheeks flushed and she cursed the woman in her head. The men in this village had a horrible responsibility of repeatedly having to save her.

Maybe she was a damsel.

“Yes,” she said, explaining once again how Mr. Dowding helped get her to the Cottage when she’d collapsed with her injury on the Browne’s stoop.

The woman considered her carefully and Heidi did not flinch. She wasn’t going to lose this round.

“You aided the doctor then, in earnest? Getting blood on your gown and toying with medicines?”

Heidi almost balked at the frankness but managed to hold onto her anger. It was as if Lady Catherine had forgotten her other guests.

“It certainly isn’t something I would do as a career; but it was rewarding, to get the chance to help someone in such need.”
“Of course not.” The woman scoffed. “A woman as a doctor. Impossible.”

She gripped the edge of the seat with all her might, her knuckles going white as she tried not to show any other emotion than a blank face.

“Despite current beliefs, Lady Catherine, surely you know that women are capable of much more than society allows.”

The sentence had fallen from her lips before Heidi could catch it, and Lady Catherine’s face reddened.

“The impertinence.”

Heidi looked at Anne for some support but the woman’s only reaction was a raised eyebrow and a barely suppressed smirk.

This woman had to be the most infuriating—

“My apologies, Lady Catherine,” she blurted, conciliating. “I did not mean to upset you.”

She would not apologize for the words, but maybe she should have shown more tact.

Lady Catherine judged her silently and Heidi felt her temper flare.

“Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi glanced over at Anne, something in the woman’s features shifted in a way that must have been something she’d gotten from her father. In that moment, she did not look like her mother at all.

“I believe Miss Rose will be celebrating a birthday soon?”

Grateful beyond belief that Anne had offered a new topic of discussion, Heidi relaxed.

“Yes, her birthday is just after Easter.”

Heidi soon found herself drawn into conversation with Lizzy when the servants came to take the tea things away.

Every now and then she’d catch Darcy watching the two of them talk.

The thought that Lizzy would soon be married, whether she knew it or not, to one of the most dreamed about fictional characters ever, made Heidi think of her own fiancé.

She couldn’t help it, remembering the lingering way he had caught her eye across the room when they’d first met.

Peter hadn’t been A-list celebrity handsome, but Heidi had thought at the time that she was lucky to be considered as marriage material by someone like that.

Now she would be able to watch Darcy and Lizzy come together. If she was lucky, she’d forget about her own misfortune and the memories that still disgusted her.

At least until everything got thrown topsy-turvy because Colonel Fitzwilliam would spill the beans about his interference and ruin everything, she thought with a mental groan.
Heidi looked over at the colonel, trying not to stare at the way his curls caught the light. Maybe she could find a way to prevent the truth from coming out, or… even better… convince Mr. Darcy to fix his mistake before the truth of his involvement with Mr. Bingley’s departure to London was known.

So many times, she had warned herself against meddling. She’d been so adamant against not changing anything in the story, but now that she was getting to know Lizzy, Heidi found herself not wanting her friend to go through the pain of it all.

What she was sure of was the fact that she didn’t have much time. If she did decide on this course of action, Heidi would have to fully commit and start figuring things out.

“Miss Heidi,” Lizzy said, her voice little more than a whisper, but in the mix of the other conversations going on around them, Heidi was certain no one would be listening to Elizabeth. “I wished to apologize.”

Heidi started. “What would you have to apologize for?”

“Mr. Darcy has brought it to my attention that you had a disagreement with Mr. Wickham in the village.”

Heidi looked sharply over at the gentleman, surprised that he’d said anything to Lizzy directly. From what she remembered about the man, he had to use letters to talk about anything with confidence.

“It is one thing to be an opportunist, it is quite another to accost a woman on the street.”

She relaxed back into the seat and kept her mouth shut. At first, at least, this sounded far less barbaric than what had actually happened.

“I thought Mr. Wickham to be a kind man put out by circumstance; but Mr. Darcy and the Colonel gave me the particulars of the narrow escape they granted you. Though it is not my story to tell, they said that such actions were not surprising from the man.” Lizzy reached out and grasped Heidi’s hand.

Heidi fought not to pull her hand away at the sincere gesture of concern.

“I had not considered Mr. Wickham capable of such deceitfulness. He seemed genuine in all his manners.”

Heidi reached up to her neck, despite herself. “Neither did I. Did they tell you this in front of Mr. Collins?”

Elizabeth flashed a smile. “No, wisely they did not.”

Heidi glanced around the room, glad that no one was observing them and grateful to Mr. Darcy. That he used his massive sense of discretion to omit some details was promising. Maybe he could be swayed to make amends for his error with Jane and Bingley. If only she could contrive to get herself alone with him.

“That was fortuitous at least.”

“I appreciate your warning in light of what happened,” Lizzy said, leaning forward but glancing across their small gathering. “I might have thought Mr. Darcy a liar if I had only heard the tale from him; but with his cousin as witness and your cautioning, I knew it could not be a falsehood.
My acquaintance with Mr. Wickham is now terminated and I wished to apprise you of this at the earliest possible moment.”

Heidi’s eyes went wide at Lizzy’s admission. “You didn’t have to—not on my account, Miss Bennet.”

Heidi felt a little bad about that: after all, she’d been the one to goad Wickham into revealing his true nature.

“But I did.”

“It is appreciated. I mean, I knew Mr. Wickham was up to shenanigans, but I never would have guessed him such a fiend.”

Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow. “Shenanigans? I do not believe I am familiar with that term.”

“Up to mischief?” Heidi amended hastily, trying to find the right words to translate it into.

“I forget sometimes that you are not from England, Miss Heidi. Every now and again you say the most peculiar things.”

“That is not the first time someone has told me such,” she said quickly, staring at her hands folded in her lap.

“But that it should embarrass you. I find it exciting, wondering what you might say next.”

“At least you think so. I worry that I might be seen as ill-educated in front of someone like her Ladyship.”

As Elizabeth chuckled softly, she spotted the colonel observing them.

She was reminded then that he was a flirt himself. Hadn’t he tried to let Elizabeth down gently? Heidi couldn’t remember, but the look on his features was warm. Inviting, even.

Before Heidi had the chance to further analyze it, the colonel, saying he needed to attend to some business, took his leave from the group.

Heidi chatted with the ladies and even managed to draw Mr. Darcy into the conversation. She kept an eye on Anne, trying to watch for any hint that her feelings for her cousin might have changed. Heidi wondered how he’d gotten around the contract to marry Elizabeth in the book.

But, he would have had time, she supposed with a frown, when he went to chase down Wickham.

When the clock chimed four-thirty, Heidi followed the rest of the guests out of the drawing room and through the corridors to the front door, where their jackets and articles were waiting for them.

Before commencing their walk, Heidi wished the Collinses well as Mr. Collins needed desperately to get to the parsonage and could under no circumstance fritter away his afternoon when there were sermons to write. There was no harm, she reasoned, in enjoying the lane on her own. Since it was clear Lady Catherine liked her even less than she liked Elizabeth, it was unlikely she’d get another chance to explore the gardens of Rosings Park.

When she reached the gates at the edge of the property, her pace slow and meandering along the edge of a small garden, someone called out her name.

When she’d turned to see who’d called out, Heidi was surprised to see the colonel walking toward
her at a quick pace.

A breeze knocked her bonnet back slightly, leaving her to stand awkwardly holding the back of it as she waited for him, unsure what the man could want from her.

“Miss Meldrum,” he said, coming to a stop just a few paces away. “My apologies for the disturbance.”

“You do not disturb me, colonel.”

The colonel glanced back at Rosings. “I did not wish to speak of such things in front of my Aunt, but I did wish to reassure myself that you were in good health, in the aftermath of the incident.”

“I am well, as you can see.”

He considered his next words carefully, before giving her a dashing grin, his confidence seemingly returned.

“I daresay my Aunt would not appreciate the gesture, but I wished to convey my happiness that you are well. My cousin and I have done what we could to ensure that Mr. Wickham does not bother you again.”

Dread curled in Heidi’s stomach. “You haven’t killed him, have you?”

“Oh no,” he said. His eyes twinkled as he clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. “He is still alive; but I have sent him to Brighton with a letter for my commander. I trust it will keep him busy and out of Hunsford for a fortnight at least.”

“At least there’s that,” she said, breaking eye contact.

“You are in good health, I trust?”

Heidi nodded, stifling a laugh as his words echoed the old script. There were certain things that Jane Austen had gotten right, even if it was said by a different member of the family.

“I am well. I didn’t even need to cover up bruises on my neck.” She tilted her head slightly, revealing her neck to the colonel. It had been surprising not to see any bruises yesterday morning, and Heidi had been grateful for that small miracle. “I am unharmed, thanks to both your actions and Mr. Darcy’s.”

He drew his eyes away from her bared skin, she realized with a start how inappropriate she’d been.

“I am glad to hear it,” he stammered. “My cousin—” he cleared his throat. “It would have been appalling should you have come to harm. Mr. Darcy would have felt personally responsible.”

Heidi nodded, aware of Mr. Darcy’s reasoning; but she couldn’t let this man know that.

“Whyever for?”

A shadow crossed the colonel’s face, but in an instant, he brightened. “Mr. Wickham has been known to our family for as long as he’s been alive, and the man might have grown up alongside my cousin; but he’s always been misguided. It is foolish to admit to this, but Darcy feels the loss of his friend, and if someone would have come to harm due to Wickham, especially a friend of Miss Bennet’s…”

“I believe I understand, colonel,” she said, trying to alleviate his fears.
She robbed at her covered arms, the air chilling as a cloud passed overhead.

The colonel considered her carefully then, chastened. “Somehow you do.”

Heidi nodded.

“How? I did not think—From what Darcy said—“

“I have my ways, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” she said, trying to be mysterious. “You would not begrudge a woman her secrets, would you?”

“No, I do not believe I would,” he replied, after a moment of silence. A smirk teased across his face when he stepped back.

He looked about, as if noticing for the first time that she was out on the grounds alone. “I have delayed you, Miss Meldrum. You appear to have lost your party.”

Heidi was about to reply when he offered her his arm.

“It would be remiss of me to not offer to escort the lady home.”

“It’s not necessary, sir.”

He started to say something, but she interrupted him.

“I insist. With Wickham gone, I am safe on the half mile journey back to the cottage.”

The colonel snapped his heels together then, the sound echoing in the small clearing and surprising Heidi as he bent over in a bow.

It was like a moment from a romance novel where she should have held her hand out for the man to kiss. The thought was nonsense, really. She shouldn’t let it get to her. She was a modern woman.

His eyes met hers, questioning. She did her best to make her own gaze unyielding.

“I thank you again for all the kindness shown me, sir.”

To Heidi’s relief, he smiled, as though the offer of his arm had been all but forgotten. “Until we meet again, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi left the Park, without replying. The heat of the colonel’s gaze was on her back as she walked away.
“Ow, that’s tight,” Rose said, later that evening, pulling forward slightly.

Heidi relaxed the hair in her hand and apologized. “I’m almost done, I promise.”

The great room was lit by the fire in the hearth and two candelabras cast light from behind them as Heidi finished the French braid. It was not a style used commonly in England at this time, from what she could tell, and the subject had come up earlier in the evening after the Doctor and Mrs. Carter had gone to tend to a woman giving birth in Beckenshire.

Mrs. Carter had given Mrs. Newton the evening off to visit with her brother, which meant that Heidi and Rose were the only ones in the cottage tonight.

“There we go,” she said, tying the braid together with a ribbon.

Moving her hands away, Heidi allowed Rose to reach back and touch the hair.

“Can I see it?”

Heidi held up the little hand-mirror. “We need a second mirror.”

Rose jumped off the couch. “Come with me.”

She held her hand out for Heidi to take and pulled her along to the stairs.

Heidi stood in front of the door that led into the Carters’ master bedroom. “I don’t know if I should go in there, Rose.”

“It is only mother and father’s room.”

“But it’s their sanctuary. I wouldn’t want to—“

“Nonsense. You said I needed to see it in a mirror, and we have no other large ones. This will have to do.”

Heidi nodded and followed the girl into her parents’ room. The only time she’d been in the room before had been when the blacksmith had delivered the tampon applicators and Mrs. Carter insisted that they stay hidden in her room.
This was done so as not to scandalize the young and impressionable Rose, who had begun to wear a version of a pad that Heidi had also introduced.

The wall at the far end was lined with masonry, as if it were a true stone house. The ceiling was pitched with the roof, not leaving room for an attic; but the rafters that crossed the room looked large and stable enough for such a storage area to be added later.

The curtains were closed and the dark red fabric glowed as Rose lit one of the lamps.

In the center of the far wall was one of the biggest beds Heidi had ever seen. A proper four-poster bed with curtains and a solid frame, raised up off the floor by a good two and half feet.

Her grandmother had once had a few of them in the old house, before she’d passed, but the frames had been made of cheaper materials than the solid oak.

Rose caught her attention and Heidi noticed that all the candles in the room had been lit in those few short seconds.

“Heidi,” Rose pleaded.

Heidi crossed the room and handed Rose the small mirror.

“Turn around and sit, so your hair faces the mirror.”

Rose did as was asked and they spent a few seconds angling the two mirrors correctly.

“It looks astonishingly good,” Rose said in wondrous tones.

“It is hardly the fashion, but it does the job.”

“What do you know more hairstyles?”

“A few,” Heidi replied with a wink, thinking of the days she’d spent in the costume department watching the hairdressers prepare various updos for the actors. She’d never had the true talent that they did, but with a few tools she could probably recreate one or two for Rose.

From the front of the house, the doorbell rang and Heidi glanced down at Rose. The townsfolk knew to use the front door after sunset, as the doctor didn’t want people walking around in the dark behind the house if they’d been injured already.

“I will tend to it.” The girl jumped up and Heidi caught her arm.

“Check who it is first. From the window.”

Rose huffed but walked over to the window while Heidi blew out the candles.

“It is Charlie from Rosings.”

“Who?”

“Not who, what! Heidi, Charlie is a horse.” Rose giggled.

“If the horse has rung the doorbell, then we must answer it.” Heidi grinned, proud of her dad-joke moment as Rose completely dissolved into laughter.
Rose darted from the room and Heidi finished blowing out the candles and closing up the master bedroom, so their illicit activity wouldn’t be discovered.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, Heidi was surprised to see a tall, familiar figure standing in the doorway who was neither a butler nor a footman.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam,” she said, curtseying.

“A thousand apologies for interrupting your evening, Miss Meldrum, but I had hoped to speak with the doctor.”

“Father is helping mother with a birth.”

“That is unfortunate.”

Heidi crossed the great room to come up alongside Rose. “Is something terribly wrong, Colonel?”

“Anne--” He paused and then corrected himself. “Miss de Bourgh is unwell.”

“What’s wrong?” She shifted, wanting to cross her arms but cognizant of how that would be received.

“She complained of hot and cold flashes, but in the last hour my cousin has taken a turn for the worse.”

Heidi regarded Rose with a spike of fear in her chest.

“How sick is she?” Heidi waved her hand, frustrated at her word choice. “Do you think it’s an infection, or a recurrence of her illness? or something different?”

“She mentioned feeling as if she had taken a cold.”

There were a thousand things that could present like a cold, Heidi was sure. “That doesn’t give me much to work with, does it?”

“What do you mean by that, Miss Meldrum?”

She ignored him and turned to Rose.

“Go to your father’s library and see if he has any general knowledge books or journals, something with colds and flu—umm, grippe and other sicknesses in them.”

Rose nodded and raced up the stairs.

“What are you doing?”

“If Miss de Bourgh is so sick, I will do what I can to make her comfortable while we wait for my uncle’s return.”

The colonel laughed, incredulously but without condescension. “But surely you have no medical knowledge. You said something similar yourself just a few days hence.”

“I’m no doctor, but I can guarantee that I know more than you’d think.” She bristled at his words, she sure as hell knew more about being sick than he could ever guess. Besides, she was determined to prove herself to him.
He started to protest, but she held up a forestalling hand. “Please, wait here. I will return shortly.”

Without another word, Heidi hurried to the kitchens, grabbed one of the wicker baskets, and went into the surgery to pack whatever she could find. Now that Abraham had returned to the smithy and his wife’s care, the room was dark and quiet.

She grabbed a handful of the bandages, some of the facemasks she had been making, and the airtight bottle of back-up tools she’d sterilized. For extra measure, Heidi threw in a container of the anti-inflammatory salve she’d made with Mrs. Carter a few weeks back.

Searching the room, she quickly found the thermometer in its protective case, packed like a flute or saxophone. Not only was the large instrument delicate, but the presence of mercury set her nerves aflame. Heidi had convinced the Doctor that the health of the human body could be measured, in some ways, by the temperature. He had, apparently, no idea of the usefulness and had only picked up the thermometer a few months ago in London after hearing a lecture on Anton de Haen’s work.

When she entered the great room with a full basket, Rose had returned with a few journals in her hands.

“I will be right back,” she said, and climbed the stairs to her own room. In her overnight bag, she packed the last of her naproxen and the half-used sleeve of daytime anti-cold pills that she’d found in the bottom of her purse. She had no antibiotics, no flu medicine, no cure for smallpox and no idea what she was getting into, but if Anne needed it, she would offer it. She liked the woman. Doctor Carter had been right on that account.

In the bag, Heidi also threw her precious travel pack of disinfecting wipes. She’d guessed there were about a third of them left when she arrived, and Heidi had used a fair amount cleaning the clinic. Now she’d be lucky to have a quarter left of the 240 pack.

Heidi tried not to think about it, but if she were going to spend any time in Rosings with Anne being sick, she wanted to have them nearby, just in case.

She threw the bottle of bleach in the bag as well. If Anne were throwing up, thought Heidi, failing to suppress a shudder, it would just need to last through the next hour.

When she returned to the great room, the bag heavy in her hand, the colonel offered to take it and the basket from her.

“What is all this?”

“I’m not sure what I’ll need.”

Rose cleared her throat, “Heidi?”

“We’re going to drop you off at the Parsonage, and then I will go on to the estate with the Colonel.”

“I do not require a nursemaid,” Rose huffed with impatience.

Heidi narrowed her eyes at Rose. Now was not the time for a teen tantrum; then again, she did not want to pawn the girl off on the Collinses and create a scandal. “Very well, come to the estate, but you will wait with the colonel or perhaps in the kitchens, far away from Miss de Bourgh’s private chambers. She may be contagious and I will not bring death upon you if she is.”

The colonel took in her appearance with a mix of bemusement and concern. “What about you, Miss
Meldrum? If Miss de Bourgh’s illness is contagious, will you not become sick as well?”

Heidi glanced at the colonel, the light from the hearth turning his dark brown hair golden. She wasn’t about to tell him that she’d been inoculated for at least half the things that easily could have killed him...or poor Anne.

“We need to bank the fire,” she said, sharply.

The colonel looked across the room. “I can manage that.” He moved past them and went to dampen the flames as Heidi bent down to talk to Rose in a whisper.

“Rose, I need you to listen to me. I have never been one to get ill, but the face masks will help.”

“You have never been sick?”

“Tell me, Rose: Has your father ever talked about something called a vaccination?”

Rose was silent and then shook her head.

“It’s a process that prevents people from getting sick. I saw a journal in your father’s office that someone had created a vaccination for cowpox. Well, I had a series of them back in Germany. It will be safest for me to be the one that checks on Miss De Bourgh and categorizes her symptoms until your father returns.”

Rose was silent. “I do not think I understand what you mean, but I will respect your wishes, Heidi.”

“That’s all I ask. Stay with the colonel or whoever he puts in charge of your care, and make sure you wash your hands with warm soapy water.”

Her eyebrows knitting together, Rose only nodded.

“The same goes for you, colonel,” Heidi called behind her, seeing the man appearing in her periphery. “Lots of handwashing and avoid contact with others until the doctor gives his diagnosis.”

“As you wish, Miss Meldrum.”

“That will do for now,” she said, holding her tongue from saying anything more at this time. The colonel would not understand that when she’d spiral out after her germophobic freak outs, she’d spend hours slipping down the self-diagnosing, wiki wormhole and terrified herself with pictures and information on disease.

When the trio arrived at Rosings nearly a quarter of an hour later, after taking some time to make themselves presentable should they see Lady Catherine, Heidi asked the colonel if he would send someone out to fetch the doctor from Beckenshire.

“It could be some time before he is finished.” Heidi paused, biting the corner of her lip. The stakes were higher than anyone could understand for her to succeed.

“I thought maybe if someone sent the message, if all was well with the birth, the doctor could come earlier to the estate, rather than waiting for the Doctor to return to the cottage to relay the message.”

As seemed to be his predilection, the colonel cheerfully sprang into action. “I will go myself, this minute.”
“There’s no need for that, but the sooner someone goes, the better. I might have some basic first aid knowledge, but he is the licensed doctor.”

Heidi ignored the nagging voice in her head that reminded her of her disbelief in his abilities just a few weeks before.

The colonel bowed his head in her direction then ordered one of the valets or boot boys off in the direction of the nearby village.

They went up to the second floor and the colonel easily led the way to the family apartments, having dismissed the butler. Though she tried to focus on her plan of action, Heidi couldn’t help but notice that the estate was massive.

Most of the corridors were dark, the colonel carrying a candelabra in his hand. Heidi wondered why they weren’t using oil lamps, but kept her mouth shut.

“You will listen to the colonel.” Heidi began when they reached Anne’s chambers.

“Yes, cousin,” Rose assured earnestly.

“You will stay out of the way.”

She nodded compliantly but there was a slight sneer on her lips in typical teenager rebellion. Heidi ignored it, but pulled back on her mothering tendencies, turning her attention to the colonel instead.

“Colonel, can you place the basket over here please,” Heidi asked, pointing to a chair just outside the room. The bag she’d worn on her back during their walk was now in her hand. The halls were littered with decorative chairs and Heidi could use it as a table well enough.

She carefully sorted through the basket and found one of the masks, tying it around her face.

“It looks silly, but trust me on this,” she said, seeing the disbelief on Rose’s face.

“I said nothing, cousin.” There was a hint of laughter in Rose’s tone.

Heidi rolled her eyes. She picked up the basket, stopping the colonel’s protestations.

“You could become ill as well and it would spread through the estate like a wildfire. Please stay out of the room and ask the servants to stay away as well, until the doctor arrives at least.”

The colonel raised an eyebrow, as if he were not used to taking orders.

“Think of me as a—-” she searched for a word, her hand waving about. “---back-up general, stepping in during a battle when the real general is busy with another battalion or whatever you’d call it.”

He gave her the smallest of smirks, nodding his head in concession.

“I will keep you apprised of her condition.”

With that, she nodded at the colonel to open the door for her and went into the room, making sure it latched behind her.

A small fireplace cast an orange glow throughout the large bedroom and Heidi was surprised to see
that she had not entered a drawing room or parlor instead. Against the wall on her right was a large bed, much like the one in the Carters’ master bedroom, with four posts and a canopy of heavy damask hanging from the crossbeams.

“Miss De Bourgh?” she asked, looking toward the lump in the bed.

Anne moaned pitifully. “Who is it?”

“It’s Adelheid Meldrum.” She kept her voice at a whisper, wondering if maybe the woman had some sort of migraine, laying in the dark as she was.

“Adelheid?”

“Ern, Heidi. The doctor is indisposed, so I came instead.”

“You are educated in the ways of medicine, Miss Meldrum?” Anne’s eyes opened a crack and Heidi ducked down to her line of sight and smiled.

“No, not really. If it helps, think of me as a first responder, or a physician’s assistant.”

“I do not understand.” Anne sounded dazed, which if she had a high fever wasn’t entirely unexpected.

Heidi crossed into the room and placed the basket at the foot of the bed, out of the way of Anne’s feet, just in case.

"Miss de Bourgh, do you mind if I feel your forehead? The colonel mentioned that you had a fever."

"Feel free to do what you will, Miss Meldrum." Anne’s voice was light and airy, proving to Heidi how unwell she felt.

Heidi reached out, once again grateful for the gloves, and rested the back of her hand on Anne's forehead like her mother had. The instant heat through the leather told Heidi that the woman did have a fever.

"Miss de Bourgh, I don't know if the doctor has ever used this on you before, but I'd like to take your temperature."

She opened the case and took out the foot-long piece of glass and mercury, glad that she'd already worked out with the doctor a few important temperatures while Abraham had been in recovery. It wasn't perfect, but she knew approximately where normal human temp was. The old-fashioned device took nearly half an hour to accurately measure body temperature, but it was better than nothing.

"You'll need to hold this in your mouth, best place is under your tongue. Careful not to bite down, though. I will hold it if you wish."

Anne gave her assent and Heidi took a seat beside her.

"Do you mind also if I measure your heart rate?"

"What would you need it for?"

"I don't know exactly, to be perfectly honest; but the doctor will need it.” Heidi refrained from telling her patient that if it was extremely fast or slow, it can be a sign of something wrong.
Anne heaved a small, weary sigh. "If you must."

"You are trusting, Miss de Bourgh. I am honored."

"I feel wretched."

Heidi pulled out her bullet journal and one of her pens. She glanced over at the clock near the hearth and remembering that she would need something with a second timer, unless she could see the actual minute change.

"I will be right back."

Anne mumbled something, sounding agreeable.

Heidi went out into the corridor but failed to find anyone. Muttering a curse, she resolved that maybe she could test her against own heartrate. Resting was somewhere between 50 and 60, at least it had been while her fitness tracker worked, so she could then compare it to Anne’s. It wouldn't be perfect, but it would be something. If she tested often enough she'd be able to know if it was getting faster or slower.

Heidi re-entered the room and then placed the thermometer into Anne's mouth.

"Close your lips tightly around the glass, as best you can," she said, rubbing her cheek on her shoulder, shifting the placement of the facemask.

Anne nodded, coughing slightly.

Ten minutes passed in near silence before there was a knock on the door. Anne managed to cough around the thermometer when she could no longer suppress it.

“Can you hold the thermometer? I will check the door.”

Anne gave a short nod. Once Anne had the thermometer in her fingers, Heidi called out.

"Come in," Heidi said, standing and smoothing her skirts, fully expecting Lady Catherine on the other side.

The door opened to reveal Mr. Darcy, his eyes dancing nervously around the room.

"Please don't come any closer, Mr. Darcy."

"Miss Rose believed that you would not allow me inside without a mask." He glanced dubiously at the thermometer. "I wished to inquire after my cousin all the same."

Of course he would.

"My cousin was right," Heidi said, glancing down at the thermometer, the silver liquid inside still creeping up toward the base line. God, what she wouldn't give for a modern one. They’d have been done ages ago. "But I find I could use your help, if you would be willing, Mr. Darcy."

He bowed his head. "Anything, Miss Meldrum."

"I have the need for a watch with a second hand, if you happen to have one."

"I do indeed."
Heidi glanced over at the basket.

"Miss De Bourgh, are you well enough to hold the thermometer for a moment longer while I bring your cousin a facemask? Just nod or shake your head."

Anne nodded, and Heidi brought a facemask to the gentleman and, pulling off her glove, took the pocket watch from him.

"I'll return it momentarily."

It was warm from his body heat as she pressed the release to open the cover. Sure enough, the second hand was ticking across the face.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. If you wish to remain until I am finished, please put on the mask. It will reduce the chance of catching Miss De Bourgh's illness."

It took some time to get resituated on the bed, but she soon settled herself into position to retake hold of the thermometer, rest the watch on her knee, and find the pulse point on Anne's wrist.

After marking down the stats, Heidi glanced at the thermometer just as the liquid passed the marker.

"Another five minutes, if you please, Miss De Bourgh."

Then Heidi handed the pocket watch back to Mr. Darcy. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Miss Meldrum. Do you require anything else?"

Heidi considered her charge. "When was the last time Miss De Bourgh ate anything?"

"She managed a few bites at breakfast around 11; but otherwise nothing."

Heidi nodded. Almost twelve hours had passed since then and she needed to eat to keep her strength up.

"Would you arrange for some chicken soup for her? Something simple... water, chicken, maybe some thyme, salt, and garlic, boiled together for an hour until the chicken bones have given up all of their goodness."

Darcy raised an eyebrow. "That will help?"

"You might be surprised at its effectiveness." Heidi had seen the Alton Brown cooking show enough to know that the old wives’ tale had some basis in science.

"I will have it arranged then."

The doctor should prescribe plenty of liquids, it’s what they always did, but water was unreliable, unless she’d purified it herself.

One of these days she’d figure out how to make one of those charcoal filters.

"Thank you. Miss de Bourgh also needs liquids to rehydrate as she sweats out the fever. Could you see if there is any juice available?"

Thinking out loud she rattled through possibilities. “Any citrus would be preferable, even sterilized water mixed with lemon juice and a little sugar would work, but there isn't any of that. Wine might
"I believe I understand what you may be seeking, Miss Meldrum. I will see if the kitchens can provide something."

"Of course, I didn't mean for you specifically to do this, Mr. Darcy." The fact that he even offered had surprised her. "I warned the colonel that no one should come inside. If you could pass the message along to the proper person I would appreciate it."

He bowed, an intense look on his face, and left the room.

When the thermometer stopped moving, Heidi took the instrument from Anne's mouth and took note that it was above Rose's heated line. They hadn't had time to calibrate it or even put it against a pot of boiling water. They had, at least, managed to mark her resting temperature and then Rose’s temperature after the girl worked up a sweat running in circles around the house and bundled up under a fair amount of blankets to keep the heat up.

Anne was running at least 103 degrees, if not more. Heidi forced a gentle smile to her face.

She marked three spots on her paper, the two test locations and Anne’s temp, to get the scale right to show to the doctor. There was probably some sort of equation they could use to figure out temperature, but it was well beyond Heidi’s math skills.

By the time Heidi had wiped off the end of the instrument, with the corner torn off of one of her precious wipes, Anne had fallen asleep again.

She wondered where Lady Catherine was, thinking that the woman would surely be fretting and fawning over her sick child.

Heidi reached out with the towel she’d dampened in Anne’s water basin, and dabbed it across the sleeping patient’s forehead, hoping to cool her down.

Another knock on the door had Heidi getting up to answer it. Relief washed over her at the sight of Doctor Carter in the corridor.

"Oh, thank goodness."

She raced over to the basket, grabbed the last of the facemasks, and brought it over to the doctor.

"I left as soon as the colonel explained the situation."

Heidi quickly rattled off Anne's symptoms: fever, shortness of breath, a lot of sweating and the start of a rumbling in her chest.

The doctor listened attentively, but the alarm on his face was evident. "I will take it from here. Thank you for your help."

"I asked Mr. Darcy to arrange for the kitchens to make some fresh chicken soup. The marrow and thyme are known to help the body recover, and I also asked for liquids for Miss de Bourgh to drink. I don’t know if they'll have access to fancy citrus, but they are rich. The vitamin C will help her convalesce, just like it helps prevent scurvy."

"How do you know all of this?"

"It’s mostly common knowledge," Heidi shrugged.
With that, the doctor went to work, checking on his patient and Heidi slipped into a nearby chair to watch, completely exhausted with the last few hours of work.

Chapter End Notes

Heidi stepped out of the cottage Thursday morning with a basket on her arm. The clouds were low and if she stopped and focused, she could see the lightest of snow falls around her.

Mrs. Carter had arrived only an hour ago from Beckenshire, where she’d spent the night with the new mother and baby. Heidi had given her foster mother a rundown of Anne’s condition as they knew it when she’d returned to the cottage late last night with Rose.

The Doctor had stayed at Rosings overnight and when Mrs. Carter filled a basket for her husband after hearing of Anne’s illness, Heidi offered to take it to the estate. She was surprised when, last night, one of the maids had brought up a couple of glasses of orange juice. Heidi had made a hasty mental note to track Mr. Darcy down and thank him for listening to her ramblings. It was more than she could have hoped for.

_The shot of vitamin C had to help, right?_

“A letter for Mrs. Carter, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi glanced over to see a young boy, just about ten years old, standing at the gate.

“I’ll take that. Thank you, Thomas.”

Thomas, who ran letters for his father at the post, nodded, handed her the sealed parchment, and raced back down the road.

Heidi went inside, looking at the handwriting. “A letter,” she said, seeing Mrs. Carter walking toward her. “From Edward.”

Mrs. Carter took it from Heidi and broke the seal, reading the words. This wasn’t the first letter they’d received from Edward up at Oxford. In fact, they got a letter about once a week from their son.

“Edward will be arriving sometime this afternoon for Easter Sunday.”

Heidi’s heart melted a little at the grin on Mrs. Carter’s face. It offset some of the nervousness she felt about the boy’s--erm young man’s--arrival.

They could get away with keeping the truth from Rose. As a child, she probably knew little about extended family. A young man in college, however, would be more discerning about the arrival of Heidi as a distant cousin.

“You will get to meet Edward!” Rose bounded over to Heidi. “How exciting!”

“Yes, how wonderful,” Heidi replied, hoping she sounded excited.

“Rose, please prepare Edward’s room. It should not need much, as your cousin stayed in the room not long ago. I will be along shortly to help.”

“Yes, mother.” Rose headed toward the doorway with a skip in her step.

Heidi was so preoccupied with apprehension that she’d barely noticed Mrs. Carter come up beside her. She looked down into knowing eyes.
“Do not worry yourself needlessly. Doctor Carter and I have spoken about Edward’s return home while you are in residence. I think my son can be trusted, if you wish to tell him the truth.”

“Are you sure?”

“We leave it up to you. It is your truth to tell. If you decide it better not to, we will back the story that you’re a cousin. He will believe us.”

“You would do that?” Heidi’s eyes burned. “I didn’t think that you favored me much, Mrs. Carter.”

“You have become family, my dear. Perhaps not a second daughter, but a younger sister to myself or similar. I would not wish to make you uncomfortable. We cannot find a way to get you home and you have been a great help these past weeks.”

“That is appreciated, Mrs. Carter.”

The woman gave her a wry smile as the band of tension loosened between her shoulders. Their first encounters hadn’t been amiable, but it was good that Mrs. Carter had changed her mind.

“You had better get up to Rosings. I am sure my husband will have need of your services.”

Heidi nodded and left the cottage with the basket in hand.

By the time she was escorted to the family wing of Rosings, sometime later, Heidi hadn’t made up her mind one way or another. She was grateful that they were leaving the choice up to her, all the same.

She tied the facemask behind her head and walked into the room.

“What is she doing here?”

Heidi nearly jumped back at Lady Catherine’s venomous tone.

“Heidi has been acting as my assistant in recent weeks, Lady Catherine,” Doctor Carter said, patiently.

“Why would you require an assistant?”

“Lady Catherine, my wife suffers from a weak constitution and while she has been invaluable in helping patients who come to the surgery, Heidi’s arrival could not have come at a better time.”

Lady Catherine’s eyes shifted.

“If you desired such help I could have sent to London to find someone suitable. Miss Meldrum is hardly fit for such a role.”

“Of course, your Ladyship. If it pleases, I can send my niece back to the cottage; however, her knowledge of how things are done on the Continent has improved the care I can give my patients. By now I am certain you have been made aware of the blacksmith’s accident.”

“Yes I heard talk of such things.” Heidi winced, hoping the Doctor didn’t ask for details.

“It was with my niece’s help that I was able to save Mr. Dowding’s hand. I might have had to amputate without her and deny Mr. Dowding the ability to continue in his trade, in his source of income.”
Heidi tried not to gape like a fish. The man’s bravery was impressive.

“She is also a friend of your daughter’s,” he prattled on. “Her mere presence could well entice your daughter to fight her way through the fever.”

As though she’d finished digesting a rock, Lady Catherine was moved to reply. “I do not pretend to understand how the little Miss could help, but if she has proven herself and you find her worthy...then she may stay.”

Heidi slowly released her breath.

“For now.”

Lady Catherine straightened, drew in a breath, and then stalked out of the room.

“I can go, uncle. I do not mind.”

“No, you will stay. There are not many people, I think, that truly care for Miss de Bourgh; but I think you might.”

“I don’t know her all that well.”

“But you do not seek to use her station to better yourself, do you?”

“Hell no,” she said and slapped her hand over her mouth.

The doctor shook his head, but a smirk crossed his lips. At least he’d stopped being annoyed with some of her more vulgar language, though Heidi was doing her best not to be a bad influence.

“I thought not. What I said about Mrs. Carter is also true. She used to help at the surgery far more than she has in recent months; but I fear she is not in as good health as she would like. I had some concerns about bringing Rose on my visits; but trading the duties of keeping the house between yourself and my family will alleviate some of Mrs. Carter’s stress. If you wish to help, of course.”

“There’s little else I can do,” Heidi shrugged. “I’m used to having a day job and while not physically active, I kept myself mentally busy. There’s nothing in this world that would provide that.”

The Doctor nodded. “If you stay, perhaps we can arrange for an allowance, something to give you an income of your own.”

Heidi’s eyes went wide. “You’re offering me a job?”

“I could not provide a full salary; if our fortunes were better, I would have already provided Mrs. Carter with a maid in addition to Mrs. Newton. If you wish, though, I could provide you with a small sum to do with as you wish.”

“Having a function would be helpful,” Heidi murmured, half to herself and half to the Doctor.

Heidi remembered the letter and told the doctor that Edward would arrive sometime that afternoon. He reiterated what Mrs. Carter had said, that they would leave the truth up to her and Heidi appreciated it.

The doctor nodded, looking back at his patient.

“I have diagnosed Miss de Bourgh’s symptoms as being those of lung fever. Do you know how
your people treated it? She has a weak constitution. I am worried she will not survive this.”

Heidi considered, the phrase sounding familiar, but she had no idea what it was.

“Nothing specific,” she said, after some time. “But fever and coughing… there are a few things it could be.”

Taking a deep breath, Heidi went over to the bag she’d brought and pulled out a few of the daytime medicine tablets.

“I don’t know if these will work. People take them relieve the symptoms of influenza and common colds.” A sheen of sweat glistened on Anne’s pinched face. “How bad off is Miss de Bourgh?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“It is my professional opinion that Miss de Bourgh would need a miracle to survive the next week.”

Seeing Anne so ill and hearing her death sentence were two different things. Tears prickled Heidi’s eyes. With no modern immune system, even modern medicine might not help.

On the bed, Anne whimpered in her sleep. Heidi drew herself up, making a decision.

“I didn’t say anything last night because I didn’t want to share, but if it is that dire, I would not want to have Anne die when I could have helped.”

She tore the two tablets from the sheet of pills she’d brought with her.

“The gel inside the pill should at least take the edge off the fever, and maybe help her other symptoms.”

The doctor held out his hand and Heidi handed him the opened wrapping.

“They aren’t antibiotics or antibacterials, which would probably kill all the bad bugs in her body; but it’s hopefully enough to give her body a break to heal the rest of her symptoms.”

She considered Anne, sucking air through pursed lips.

“It may be better to start with just one. If she doesn’t have any adverse reactions in the next two or three hours, we can give her a second. I think that will be enough time to ensure she won’t have seizures or anything.” Heidi worried her lip.

The doctor managed to coax Anne awake and give her one of the pills. Heidi took a seat by the window, cracking it open to let some of the air move through the room.

“The air is most decidedly stale. It will do her no good to breathe it in over and over again.”

“This has to do with those bugs?”

Heidi nodded. “Germs, mold; all these bad things grow in warm damp places. They are as deadly as anything. I won’t keep the window open for long, just enough to refresh the air.”

The doctor allowed it and Heidi curled up near the window, guessing that when she was cold, then it would be okay to close the window again.
She picked out one of the medical journals stacked on a nearby end table and began reading.

*~*~*~*~*

Heidi startled awake sometime later, her shoulder stiff from the awkward position she’d slumped into. Letting loose a yawn, Heidi realized where she was, and glanced over at the bed.

“Good afternoon, Heidi.”

*Oh no.* Her face flushed in embarrassment. “How long was I asleep?”

He glanced at the watch hanging from the chain on his belt loop. “It is just past noon, and you slept for an hour, more or less. I daresay you selected the driest of my medical journals to entertain yourself with,” the doctor chuckled.

As Heidi blinked the last of her sleep-filled haze away, Anne’s eyes fluttered open.

*Had the medicine worked?*

The next few minutes were filled with activity while the doctor took note of Miss de Bourgh’s vitals. Heidi rang for a servant to bring up some of the broth and juice.

“They say one to two pills every four to six hours, but I wouldn’t push too hard. Miss de Bourgh is not used to the chemicals. Better to go slow.”

He mulled her words over. "Perhaps you could be willing to stay at Rosings while I return to the cottage."

Heidi sat up straighter. "Of course, you'll want to see Edward again. I can stay here for a few hours on my own."

"I will not tarry long."

The doctor left shortly before the servant entered the room with the broth and juice.

She wasn't sure how she managed it, but Heidi convinced Anne to eat almost a bowl and half of the broth before she grew too tired. Heidi had fed it to the woman, her hands too weak to hold the spoon.
Later that afternoon, when the Doctor returned to Rosings, Heidi was surprised to see that he had brought Edward along. Despite herself, Heidi had tried not to laugh during the introduction. The twenty-year-old could have passed for a hipster, skinny and tall, his almost black hair curled at the top of his head.

If he traded his cravat for a bowtie and grew an ironic mustache, he'd fit right in with some of her friends.

From home, that is.

"Heidi, I imagine you could use a bit of fresh air," the doctor said, in the corridor just outside Anne’s rooms. “I brought Edward in order that you could reconnect with your cousin."

"Father? My cousin? Are you quite serious?" Edward glanced around, presumably for servants who might overhear.

"Of course I am."

Edward pursed his lips, looked at his father for confirmation, then addressed Heidi.

"Cousin, if you would permit me?" He waved his hand toward the front of the estate and Heidi wished the doctor luck, even if it did feel like she was headed to her execution.

She followed the Carters’ son through the building and noted the ease with which he navigated the corridors. He’d been in Rosings plenty.

They remained quiet until they reached the foyer, where she pulled the spencer on over her arms and tied her bonnet over her hair.

They walked for a few silent moments down the graveled path from Rosings’ impressive entryway. Heidi felt his eyes on her, despite the both of them steadfastly avoiding each other. She wasn’t sure what to say.

He puffed out a breath, leading them down the path toward the gates. "I wish to know who you are, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi squawked. "You certainly don't pull your punches, do you?" She searched for the gardener or any other servants who might overhear and rubbed her chin. “The truth is a long and twisted story."

Edward gave her a sideways glance, betraying the smallest hint of an intrigued smile.

“Why not start at the beginning,” he prompted, continuing them past the hedgerow near the gardens. "Mother mentioned your carriage crashed into the brush and you limped your way into Hunsford?"

"Yes, I—"

On the other side of the gates of bloody Rosings, Heidi spotted George Wickham speaking to the colonel in sharp but hushed tones.

"-- You must admit there is something not right about her."
Heidi stopped, her hand gripping Edward's arm, hearing the warning in Wickham's voice. "She may be a bit of muslin; but you should be wary."

Heidi gripped Edward's elbow.

"Perhaps we should walk in the other direction, Edward," she said, starting to pull them away. A confrontation between Wickham, the colonel, and her supposed cousin would not go well.

The colonel faced the interruption. His eyes twinkled when he made eye contact, but then his brow furrowed when they fell upon Edward.

"Edward Carter, is that you?"

"Ewan," he replied, stepping away from Heidi and letting her arm drop greeting his friend jovially. "It is good to see you again."

"I had no notion you would return home for Easter."

Wickham made eye contact with Heidi, who stared back. She refused to be intimidated by him, now more so than ever.

"I found I had the time and wished to reunite with my cousin, while she was visiting." Edward stared pointedly in Heidi's direction and her stomach flipped at the not so veiled inquiry. "The holiday was as good a time as any."

From behind them, Wickham stalked off, not even waiting to be introduced to Edward. Heidi released a breath she'd unconsciously been holding.

"How fortuitous that we were in the district then. It is pleasure to see you again, Edward," he said. Heidi tore her eyes away from the retreating form of Mr. Wickham, only to see the colonel grinning at her as if she'd missed a joke.

"Please, join us, colonel," Heidi said, uneasy about going anywhere with Edward alone. She wasn't ready to spill the beans. "We were just going to enjoy a spring walk."

"I would not wish to intrude on your reunion, Miss Meldrum."

"Nonsense," she said, doing her best not to look at Edward. "I needed some air after spending the morning with Miss de Bourgh, and you are welcome to join us. Edward and I can reminisce this evening after supper."

The colonel searched the two of them. "I daresay I would enjoy a good stroll. Darcy left early this morning and I could use some company other than my Aunt."

"Mr. Darcy left Rosings?" Her stomach dropped.

"He traveled north to fetch his sister." The colonel turned his head as if searching for Mr. Wickham.

Heidi shook her head. "But why?"

"If my cousin is indeed so sick, Darcy wished to give his sister the opportunity to say goodbye."

"But that—" Heidi snapped her mouth shut. She stared up at the sky, exasperated.
The plot was all sorts of discombobulated now.

"Is something amiss?"

Heidi took a fortifying breath. She couldn't let these people know. "No, not at all. I just didn't think that Georg—Miss Darcy was close to her cousin."

"As her only female cousin, they could be closer, I expect. But, they are family nonetheless."

Heidi nodded, a slight flush of embarrassment coloring her cheeks. Though she had some cousins, distance had always prevented her from being in close contact with any of them, at least until things like social media and texting became widespread.

The three companions headed away from Hunsford, walking up the lane that passed between Rosings and the parsonage. Heidi allowed the two men to talk, slipping behind them a few paces as they traded stories and the colonel learned about Edward's schooling.

“Tell me, colonel. Miss Bennet mentioned that she’d made Mr. Darcy’s acquaintance in Meryton, when the man was in town with a companion. Do you know much about Mr. Bingley?”

“Not at all,” he said, sidling up beside her. “I have never met him, but my cousin dotes on him as if he were a younger brother.”

“Does he, indeed?”

“Quite, in fact, he is currently celebrating, though he would never admit to it, the successful separation of his friend to a most unfortunate young lady.”

Heidi balked, knowing exactly what was coming.

The colonel was supposed to be having this conversation with Lizzy, not with her.

“Careful,” Edward complained, pulling his arm away from her. “You grip my arm as if you are hanging from a ledge.”

Heidi flushed with embarrassment. “Sorry.”

She could feel the colonel staring at her.

“It’s a wonder he could triumph over the broken heart of a young couple in love,” she said, more to herself than to the colonel. But still, she hoped he heard her words. Maybe that little push would be enough.

Luckily the man had better manners than her, because he did not take the bait, and Heidi was too nervous to say anything else.

Instead they walked in silence for almost half an hour, taking a dirt path off the lane once they'd passed the boundary of Rosings. She’d dropped Edward’s arm sometime after the two men started chatting about their youths, wanting not to interfere or draw attention to herself. Having to lie about her childhood was not something she felt like doing.

Some of the trees were already beginning to wake from their winter slumber and Heidi was glad to see a little greenery for once. It would be beautiful soon, the trees bursting to bloom. She wondered if there were any fruiting trees out in the wilderness and if she would still be here to see them.

They wandered in a way that felt aimless, but the two men had intimate knowledge of the flat
forest, Heidi made the decision not to interrupt the flow of the conversation.

Heidi frowned, seeing what appeared to be a small ditch off the side of the path. The clearing at the bottom of it was eerily familiar.

"Just a moment," she said, calling out to her companions some fifty feet ahead and eased her way down the incline toward a single tree encircled by brush. Already her spine tingled with hope as she pulled her skirts out of the way of her ballet flats.

"Miss Meldrum!"

"I'll be right back," she said, waving her hand behind her. She stumbled over her feet at the bottom of the incline.

Catching herself on a tree branch just before falling on her face, Heidi let out an exclamation.

"Oops!"

Overhead, Edward called out in warning. "Heidi, be careful."

"I'm fine, jeez. It's just a little slippery." She smoothed her skirts, hoping she hadn’t stained the muslin, and glanced at her surroundings.

Her heart thumped as the glint of something metallic caught her eye.

She parted the brush with her gloved hands and reached out, cocking her head as she tried to make sense of it. Picking up the piece of metallic plastic, her stomach twisted.

It was the hood ornament from her old beat up car.

The letters caught the light of the sun and her mouth went dry.

This was the place. *This* was where she'd crossed over.

"What is it?" Edward called out.

Heidi tried to speak, but couldn't find the words, looking back down at the emblem. She blinked, trying to restart her brain.

"Nothing, it's nothing," she said.

Tears burned in her eyes. She wasn't crazy; she had *not* lost her mind. In her hand was undeniable truth that somehow these two worlds had merged at this point and sent her through time.

But how was she going to explain what she was doing to either of them? How could she open up whatever wormhole or thing she’d traveled through?

She walked around behind the tree, needing to hide from their inquisitive eyes, and spotted damage to the truck at just about bumper height. Red paint chips shone on the splinters and the tree damaged where a large branch had been ripped from the trunk.

Her gloved hand trailed over the bark, but nothing happened.

Out of sight, Heidi dropped the ornament onto the grass and fell to her knees.

She'd fully expected that in the moment that she found the place, that it would let her go home, that
she could return to New York and her life and everything modern. Looking around, there wasn’t an energy field or shimmer of a portal; there wasn’t anything that indicated that she could return home.

Even the forest was silent, still as the grave.

Unsure how much time had passed, Heidi stifled her sobs when a shadow appeared in her periphery.

"Miss Meldrum?"

She closed her eyes at the colonel’s voice, trying to calm herself before she spoke. Heidi leaned back on her legs, wiping at her face with her sleeve.

"I'm fine. It's nothing."

The colonel squatted beside her, handing Heidi a handkerchief. "It is not nothing, Miss Meldrum. If you are injured—"

She closed her eyes. "I'm well, thank you. Please, don't say anything to Edward."

"Why ever not?"

She dabbed at her face, cleaning the tears away with the colonel cloth, and handed it back.

"Had this something to do with Wickham’s appearance at Rosings?"

Heidi shook her head, vehemently. The colonel started to stand and Heidi reached out to stop him.

"No, no, please."

He let out a breath, and gave her a look, his lips pursed together, as if he pitied her. "Miss Meldrum. What is wrong? Something is amiss, you cannot deny it."

She turned away, she couldn't tell him. Not the truth, not now. There was no way; but she had to say something.

"My uncle and I have been searching for the place where I might have crashed the carriage," she said, wishing she’d used the word phaeton or curricle instead. "We’ve been looking for almost two months, I never considered it would be this close to Rosings."

"What do you mean?"

"We were searching in the wrong place."

"How do you know this is the right place?"

She reached out and covered the hood ornament with her hand, hoping that the colonel didn't see it.

"For the first time, I recognize the tree."

Palming the ornament, Heidi began to pull herself up, but the colonel took her elbow in his hand to help her.

Heidi allowed him to help her up and leaned against the colonel.
"You are certain that the carriage came to ruin at this place?" He glanced around, and Heidi clenched her fist, angry at herself. There was no sign of wreckage from a carriage. At least the tree was splintered.

"Look at this," she said, pointing at the damage. "This is the tree, where everything changed."

"What do you mean by that?"

She snapped her mouth shut. "Nothing...my, my circumstances, I mean."

The colonel sighed, as though readying himself to further interrogate her, but Edward’s appearance robbed the words from his mouth.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Heidi pulled away from the colonel. "Nothing, Edward. I fear perhaps I've ventured too far today. My knee, you see, is giving me pains."

"Perhaps you are correct." Edward mouth tightened, his eyes narrowing at the colonel. “Father mentioned you injured yourself."

Heidi glanced at her leg, surprised that she had forgotten about it. Now that he’d mentioned it, her knee was aching.

She took Edward’s offered arm, reminding herself that it was more proper for her to take her 'cousin's' arm rather than the colonel’s. Edward led her back up the hill and Heidi glanced back at the colonel, who reached out and touched the splintered wood. He bent down to fiddle with his shoe and Heidi turned around, not wanting to be caught staring.

She remained quiet throughout the journey back to Rosings, as too did the two gentlemen.

The colonel trailed behind for most of the remaining tour, only coming up alongside them when Rosings was once again with view.

"You have had quite an adventure in recent months, Miss Meldrum."

The words could have been an accusation, but she was surprised to hear only curiosity in the colonel’s voice when he spoke.

Curiosity and warmth.

She held his eyes, calmer than she had when he’d first come upon her in the alley, being assaulted by Wickham.

When they reached the gates at Rosings, the colonel bid them a pleasant evening. From there, Heidi could no longer avoid Edward’s questioning.

"Mother said you were different."

"You might be surprised."

"You are certainly not my cousin, I think."

Heidi sighed, dropping her hand from his arm now that they’d turned the corner away from Rosings.
"No, I am not."

He stopped and reared up on her, and though he was younger and smaller than her, Heidi took a step back.

"Who are you?"

"I am a nobody that your parents have taken in."

"Why would they do such a thing?" he asked, knitting his eyebrows together.

"I have lost everything, my world is gone, and your parents have done the most charitable thing imaginable."

His eyes went wide. "Whatever do you mean by that?"

Exasperated, she did her best to try to explain that she had crashed her 'carriage' and had found herself stumbling into Hunsford as the colonel had intimated. About the Austen link Heidi remained silent, the fewer that knew about that particular storyline the better.

Heidi was cold by the time she'd finished her explanations, with the two of them ending up at the bench at the end of the lane from the surgery. She rubbed her frigid hands together, despite the cover of the leather gloves.

For his part, Edward was too shocked to register the temperature whatsoever. "You are entirely serious?"

"I am. The proof is in your home, things I managed to bring with me, that I had no idea would be so out of place in this world. I admit, it took me some time to come to terms with what I'd managed to do."

He leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees and rubbing his own hands together, only more pensively than she had.

"This is a lot to absorb, Miss Meldrum."

"Believe me, I understand. That your family would do what they've done for me, it is beyond anything. They have been more than accommodating and kind. To grant me a place to live, to be willing to let me earn a place in their lives and to keep me protected. It is more than I could have ever expected."

A thought occurred to her.

"I think you should be aware that your sister believes me to be your cousin and nothing more. A Meldrum from the north."

Edward frowned, nodding at her. "She is young still. Innocent in the ways of the world. It seems to be a wise choice, though I admit to being uneducated in this manner as well."

He chuckled, and Heidi smiled.

"Will you keep my secret?"

Appraising her, Edward settled back on the bench in contemplation. "I do have questions..."

"I would be happy to answer them, but perhaps we should return to the cottage. It is getting late
and I'm sure your mother would like to spend more time with you."

Edward nodded, seemingly in agreement. “We can continue this conversation after supper, when Rose goes up to bed.”

Heidi sighed with resignation. “I think we had better, for both our sakes.”
Saturday, March 28th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Back home, finally. It was a long week.

One or two more chapters and then back to regularly scheduled posting :D

Saturday morning came quickly, and Heidi yawned as she stared at the basket she was to take to Rosings. Mrs. Dowding had burst into the great room a little after midnight on Friday night with terrible news. Abraham’s hand had become infected.

There were a great many things that Heidi had expected to learn at the cottage, but how to amputate a hand had not been one of them. She’d begged the doctor to try to save as much of it as he could.

Yet in the end. Mr. and Mrs. Dowding had waited too long to alert the doctor of the infection. The entire hand, at the wrist, was now gone.

The blow to the Doctor, to the entire household, had been devastating.

None of them had gotten much sleep in the last thirty-six hours or so. Heidi had dozed off and on, crunched up on a couch in the great room, afraid to go too far if the Doctor needed her. And had run errands and checked on Anne a few times on Friday, not staying long as the woman appeared to be on the mend.

Now she was getting ready to head to Rosings to check on Anne’s progress to give the Doctor some time to sleep.

With a quick stop at the apothecary and her pepper spray tucked in the bottom of the basket, Heidi headed up to the parsonage alone.

Upon being brought into the dining room, she wasn't surprised to see the family still at breakfast. Spotting Mr. Collins, she immediately altered her plan of attack.

"It's early to call upon the household, and Lady Catherine is sure to disapprove of it; but I wanted to drop off the tinctures you ordered on my way to Rosings."

Mr. Collins’ eyes darted about, his hands flapping like a gawky crane. Heidi blinked slowly, trying for patience and hoping he didn’t turn her away.

"Miss Meldrum, please join us," Mr. Collins said, rooting himself into being a host. "What Lady Catherine is unaware of will not signify."

Heidi glanced at Lizzy, whose dancing eyes betrayed a smirk behind her chocolate cup. Before she was tempted to smile herself, Heidi wisely averted her eyes.

"The invitation is appreciated, but I should continue on my errand. Is there any message that you might wish for me to relay to her Ladyship?"
Mr. Collins opened his mouth before his wife’s perfectly-timed reply.

"That is kind of you, Miss Meldrum, but we have nothing to report," Charlotte said.

"Miss Bennet, if you have no other plans, perhaps you’d like to join me?"

Lizzy smiled with perfect politeness. "Do you truly wish for company while you keep watch over Miss de Bourgh?"

"There is no longer any threat that Miss de Bourgh might be contagious,” Heidi reassured, hoping to coax Lizzy into joining her. It would be the perfect time to get the two together without Lady Catherine’s watchful eye.

“She sleeps much of the day; rest and fluids are what she needs now. Having a companion at my side might prevent me from lacking in my duty. Of course,” she added hastily, “I understand if you have other plans.”

Lizzy’s head tilted with an unusually shy reluctance. "I am sorry, Miss Meldrum; but I am afraid I do have other engagements."

"Of course,” Heidi replied, giving a shrug and polite smile to the woman. She would have to contrive another way to spend more time with the heroine, her friend, one way or another.

Heidi left the Parsonage not long after she unpacked the few vials and tinctures that she’d picked up from the apothecary. Reaching the front door of the estate, she spotted a carriage coming up the path just behind her.

Moving out of the way, Heidi stared in awe at the impressive four-horse drawn carriage. One of the coachmen stopped the vehicle and a footman, or whoever, jumped down and opened the door.

Heidi noted that she needed to spend a little time learning the roles of the servants if she wanted to fit in with her new friends. They all knew exactly what job each uniform meant.

A tall blond man stepped out of the carriage and Heidi nearly lost her footing.

Though she could not secure a moment with the heroine, the hero had returned. She was relieved, at least there was still time to fix his mistakes.

"Mr. Darcy, what a pleasant surprise,” she said, dropping a quick curtsey as she spoke. “I had not anticipated that you would return so soon."

His features were serious, standing in the gravel, that he probably wouldn’t have even noticed her had she not spoken up.

"Miss Meldrum.” He blinked quickly. “How fares my cousin? Does she yet live?"

"Certainly.” Heidi grinned. “Miss de Bourgh grows stronger with every passing hour.”

He took a step back, his eyes wide. "She is recovering?"

"Yes, the doctor managed to reverse the fever," Heidi explained, knowing better than to take any of the credit. "She's not completely recovered; but she is coming around. Doctor Carter thinks it will be at least a fortnight before the coughing is gone, and she is excused from services on Sunday."

If he hadn’t been starched up to his neck in all that formalwear, Heidi would have expected to see him slump a little with relief.
"That is good news," he said, too brusquely.

A bonnet appeared in the doorway of the carriage.

"Who is this, brother?"

Mr. Darcy stepped to the side and, rather than letting the help do it, he offered his hand up to Georgiana, who peeked her head out.

The girl was impeccably dressed in a light blue muslin gown, detailed with white lace points along the cuffs of her sleeves that bespoke her higher class. Heidi raised an eyebrow at her appearance, overwhelmed at the bedazzled shoe that appeared when she stepped down onto the gravel.

"This is Miss Heidi Meldrum, dove."

This was where Heidi could finally see the typical darker features she'd been expecting of Mr. Darcy. Georgiana, as she appraised Heidi in turn, had a dark head of hair and big brown eyes that almost sparkled in the sun.

"Miss Meldrum, may I present my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Heidi said, dipping low.

"You are a friend of Miss Elizabeth Bennet?" Georgiana dropped her eyes.

"We are acquainted. As a matter of fact, I was speaking to Miss Elizabeth only a few moments ago."

Georgiana glanced at her brother, a smirk on her lips. "Perhaps I will get to meet her while I am at Rosings."

"I think that is a good possibility, Miss Darcy."

"You are going into the estate?" Darcy interjected, his eyes on the arched doorway.

"I promised to spend the morning with Miss De Bourgh." Heidi held up the basket in her arms as evidence. "I brought more garlic and honey for her treatment."

Darcy eyed her disdainfully. "Garlic and honey?"

"They're antibacterial. I mean to say, they fight the bugs inside Anne – Miss de Bourgh-- that are making her sick."

"She has insects inside her?" Georgiana asked, with her eyes wide.

"We all do, though we can't see them." Heidi smiled at Georgiana’s dubious disgust. "Most of the bugs keep us healthy, but some can make us sick."

Mr. Darcy raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"It's true," Heidi insisted with a chuckle.

Georgiana looked at her brother, with wide eyes, her cheeks flushing. "You are going into the Estate to see Miss de Bourgh? You are also friends with my cousin?"

"The Doctor is otherwise engaged helping with Mr. Dowding." Heidi turned her attention to Mr.
Darcy. “He’s had a bit of a setback, I’m afraid.”

_That was an understatement._

She smiled at Georgiana. “I have been spending time with Miss de Bourgh in the hopes that I might help her. And, to be completely frank, the Cottage is growing claustrophobic and I am enjoying spending some time in a different environment.”

As if the old bat had heard, the estate doors opened and Lady Catherine appeared, sweeping her arms out in a grand gesture.

"Nephew," she said. "Mrs. Jenkinson told me of your arrival and I wished greet you myself."

Mr. Darcy embraced his aunt, looking uncomfortable as ever, and when he stepped away, Georgiana did the same.

"Come, we must get you set up in your rooms."

Georgiana appeared afraid, or at the very least, intimidated as hell.

"I beg a private word with you," Heidi whispered, turning her head so that hopefully only Mr. Darcy played witness to her speech.

"I will join you presently, dove," Mr. Darcy said, allowing his sister to go with Lady Catherine.

The woman glared at Heidi, who held her ground.

"I see you have returned," the old woman said, her voice dripping with disdain.

"My uncle, is unfortunately, indisposed, caring for Mr. Dowding, he has sent me to tend to Miss de Bourgh. He hopes to call upon Rosings later this afternoon to attend to her needs himself."

Lady Catherine practically rolled her eyes. "Come with me, niece. Let us adjourn to more civil company."

"Civil, I’ll show you civil,” Heidi muttered.

Lady Catherine glared over her shoulder and Heidi pursed her lips, avoiding the woman’s gaze as she led her niece through the heavy front doors.

"What is it you required, Miss Meldrum?"

Heidi’s eyes went wide at Mr. Darcy’s question and she fumbled for an excuse, until settling on some truth.

"I do not mean to upset you, Mr. Darcy. I don't know if you'll see your cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, soon; but in case Georgiana intends on going into Hunsford this morning. Mr. Wickham has returned."

Fury darkened his sapphire eyes.

His countenance flipped on its head. Mr. Darcy went from congenial and curious to a red-faced demon.

"He is staying at the inn?"
Heidi nodded furiously, stammering out her words as quickly as possible so he wouldn’t storm off and do anything rash. "E-Edward and I saw him in conversation with the colonel on Thursday. I wanted to apprise you of the situation."

Darcy regained a modicum of composure, but the dangerous spark was still there. "Thank you for telling me this." His words were calmer now.

He started to walk away, heading for the lane rather than into the estate. Heidi’s thoughts swum. Things were already different than the movies, there was no telling what anyone would do.

"Please, do not do anything rash, Mr. Darcy."

His spine straightened as though he’d been pelted with a rock. "What exactly do you mean by that?" His words were vitriolic.

Heidi shrank back. "You have reasons to hate Mr. Wickham; but people like him, they’re vermin, they keep coming back no matter how often you attempt to rid yourself of them."

His temple jumped as he clenched his jaw, regaining his composure. "And what do you suggest I do? You have an answer for everything. Do you not?"

Heidi rankled. "I can’t tell you what to do. You need to find a way to beat him at his own game, before he finds a way to bring ruin upon all you love."

"Be careful, Miss Meldrum. Preposterous as your words may be, they comprise an ominous supposition, especially for one so ‘ill-acquainted’ with the man in question."

Heidi huffed, digging her heels in the dirt. "I do not threaten you, sir. On the contrary, it is a warning. I have seen what Wickham can do. Tread carefully."

He narrowed his eyes at her, the anger in his features mostly subsiding. "I will concede to pondering it, Miss Meldrum. If nothing more."

Though her cheeks were blazing at his typical Darcy attitude, Heidi somehow managed a polite nod.

Trying to forget about the incident, she spent the next few hours with Anne, taking her vitals while the patient drifted in and out of sleep. Heidi tried to feed her as much broth and tea with honey as she could get Anne to take.

When it came time to leave, Heidi made her way through the family wing toward the back staircase, preferring it to the grand staircases where she might meet with Lady Catherine.

"Miss Meldrum!"

Georgiana appeared as if an angel from one of the side corridors, her bonnet glowing like a halo around her dark curls in a shaft of sunlight.

Heidi greeted the girl and waited, but quirked a puzzled eyebrow. For someone supposedly so meek, Georgiana certainly had gumption to go calling out to her in such a manner.

"Since you are a friend of Miss Bennet’s,” Georgiana’s voice dipped quieter, “and trusted by my brother, I hoped you would not mind joining me on a tour of the gardens.”

“You wish me to accompany you?”
“There are few enough walking companions within Rosings. My other choice is Mrs. Jenkinson.” Georgiana leaned in, her eyes darting around the corridor before she whispered. “She believes in witches and hexes, if you can imagine it.”

Heidi chuckled at the sly smile on Georgiana’s face.

“Why, Miss Darcy, I fully expected you to be a demure young lady.”

Alarm crossed the girl’s face. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Oh no, not at all.” Heidi made sure not to laugh this time. “You are a perfect young lady by all accounts.”

“Thank you,” Georgiana said, softly.

Trying to remain as formal as possible, and not to be a bad influence, Heidi spent a moment formulating her next question. “Are you perchance acquainted with my cousin, Miss Rose Carter?” Heidi offered the young girl her arm, heading for the stairwell. “I believe you would both get along famously.”

“I regret that I have not yet made her acquaintance. My visits to Rosings have never afforded me the opportunity to meet with young ladies in Hunsford.”

“How dreadful. I must insist upon introducing you to her, if your brother allows it, of course.” Heidi dipped her head in deference, remembering that it was polite to do so.

They walked out of the house together, Heidi stopping to put her bonnet back on.

Stepping out into the sunlight, Heidi relished the warmth, brighter and keener than it had been for the past few days. She grinned, noting the time.

“I discovered a new walk on the grounds the other day. I imagine it will become my favorite. Perhaps you’d wish to accompany me?”

With a bashful nod from Georgiana, the two of them headed toward the lake at the back of the estate. If Lizzy were walking today they would come upon her.

Sure enough, when they reached the lake, Heidi spotted Lizzy wandering along her normal path, completely unaware of their approach. Heidi felt a little like one of those scheming matchmakers in the Hallmark movies.

Before Lizzy could disappear into the woods, Heidi waved a hand. “Miss Bennet, I have someone here that wishes to become acquainted with you,” she said, when they were close enough to chat amiably.

Elizabeth’s look of mild distraction brightened as she examined Georgiana. “It would be an honor to make the acquaintance of another of the Hunsford locals. I admit I have been remiss in meeting everyone.”

Georgiana blushed, averting her eyes.

“My newest friend is in fact not from Hunsford.”

“She is not?” Lizzy looked Georgiana over, more carefully this time.

“May I present to you, Miss Georgiana Darcy? Miss Darcy, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”
“Miss Darcy!” Elizabeth gasped, curtseying. “I had no notion you were journeying to Rosings.” She paused. If Heidi had not known better, she would have never guessed at the likely million thoughts racing through Miss Bennet’s mind. “It is truly an honor to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Miss Bennet. I have heard such lovely stories from my brother. I am happy to make your acquaintance.”

“Your brother has made you aware of my existence?”

Georgiana lowered her head as she nodded. Heidi could easily guess as to the reason for the girl’s shy countenance. “Yes, he regaled me with tales of how well you played the piano when last you saw him in Meryton.”

“I am afraid your brother has perjured himself, though I would not know why.”

“I have not heard you play, but I can imagine that Mr. Darcy does not often praise a lady under any pretense or falsehood,” Heidi said.

“It is you, Miss Meldrum, that puts me to shame. You sang so beautifully last week, when you and Miss Lucas studied together.”

“But I do not play the piano, a fault purely of my own, and Miss Georgiana was only just telling me how much she admires the piano forte.”

“It is my favorite instrument,” the girl admitted with a bashful smile.

The three women took to the path. At first, Heidi used the nearly empty basket as an excuse to get the two future sisters-in-law to walk side by side. It worked only for a few minutes before they drifted apart again, but Heidi reminded herself to remain patient. She could not seem overly eager when making matches, even of a friendly nature.

To her relief, before long the two young women were chatting about fashion and pianos and the virtues of long walks. Heidi had to admit that seeing them together, without big brother looming around, was more heartwarming that she had imagined.

By the time they rounded toward the front of the estate, they’d probably walked a good two or three miles, just wandering. Heidi relished every moment.

It was then that Heidi spotted two familiar figures heading toward them at a quick pace. Her mouth went dry.

The blond hair was now too familiar, so too the furrowed brow. Even from this distance she could see that Mr. Darcy was livid.

Beside him, the colonel spoke, in tones they couldn’t yet hear. Mr. Darcy spat something back at him. Heidi had to think fast.

“I should get back to the cottage. I hadn’t expected to be away for so long.”

Both ladies turned, as Heidi had prayed they would. Lizzy eyed her with some concern.

“Is it Mr. Dowding? You mentioned this morning at the parsonage that he’d been unwell.”

“He is ill indeed, Miss Bennet. It is a shame that after all the precautions the doctor took, that an infection set in.” She would have said more, but with Georgiana, Heidi wasn’t sure how sheltered
the girl was.

Lizzy’s complexion took on a slight pallor. “He was hale when he returned to the smithy, was he not?”

“As much as one can be when recovering from such an injury.”

Heidi tried not to close her eyes with dread when two shadows, tall and long, appeared on the path beside her.

With her diversion miserably failed, she faced the music.

The colonel was the first to speak, amiable as always. She was only mildly relieved to see that though Darcy’s features had softened, his expression was still piqued.

“Miss Bennet, I was unaware you had called upon Rosings this afternoon?”

“I sometimes walk the grounds, with Lady Catherine’s permission, of course,” Lizzy demurred.

The colonel smiled. “I would not dare think otherwise. It is always a pleasure to see you.”

At least the colonel had the ability to calm his cousin.

A beat of silence passed, and Heidi remembered her stupid diversion, she couldn’t back out now.

“Please excuse me, gentlemen, ladies. I should return to the cottage.”

“Allow me to escort you, Miss Meldrum,” the colonel said, stepping forward.

Heidi averted her eyes, trying to tune out the warmth in his words. “That’s not necessary, colonel; but it is appreciated all the same.”

“I insist upon it, Miss Meldrum.” There was a warning tone in his voice and Heidi looked toward him, the man glancing over at Georgiana. “I would consider it my duty.”

Her heart fluttered. There was no way this man was escorting her home. He needed to pull Darcy away to give Lizzy and Georgiana more time to bond.

“Well, I would not wish to cause a soldier to shirk his duty.” The words tumbled from her mouth, completely the opposite of what she’d wanted to say.

She gave an inward groan before addressing Elizabeth and Georgiana with the most genuine smile she could muster. “I look forward to seeing you again soon. I will, after all, call upon Miss de Bourgh in the morning for a few hours, though I expect Miss de Bourgh will be feeling well enough by then for visitors.”

She bowed her head toward the other male in the group. “Mr. Darcy, it is always a pleasure.”

She curtseyed and started toward the gate. With every step, the discomfort of the colonel at her back became more of a nuisance as he worked to catch up with her swift exit.

When the colonel caught up with her, just inside the gate, he reached out and touched her elbow. Heidi stopped in her tracks, catching herself before yanking her arm away.

“I wish to apologize, Miss Meldrum, for my impertinence. I merely wished to keep an eye out for you with Wickham in town.”
“I know why you did what you did, colonel,” Heidi said, more sharply than she’d intended. “I am aware of Mr. Wickham’s return to Hunsford, but I can take care of myself.”

“If you will forgive me the observation, I beg to differ. When Mr. Darcy and I first arrived your virtue was nearly taken away from you.”

Heidi bit back the first retort that sprang to her mind. It was a reminder that, in these matters, she needed to tread carefully. The moment she was known to be despoiled would certainly be the end of her acceptance into what little ‘polite society’ there was in Hunsford. It was almost certain that the Carters would kick her out should that tidbit be known.

Her condition had always, embarrassingly, prevented her from being intimate too often. Peter, the first man she’d ever really wanted, had never been … enthusiastic; but in the minds of these people, she would be forever spoiled if they knew the truth.

“I am not some silly girl, fresh out of school yard, colonel. The moment that Mr. Wickham returned to Hunsford, I took steps to protect myself.”

The man stopped in his tracks. “Whatever do you mean?”

Heidi touched the rim of the basket. “In here, I have stored a weapon that would incapacitate Mr. Wickham, should he choose to grab my attention in the same manner as before.”

He eyed it with a dubiouness that not even his polite nature could conceal. “Surely you do not carry a revolver.”

“And what is it?”

“You would allow me some secrets, would you not?”

Heidi offered him a hint of a smile, despite herself. The colonel considered her, before smiling in turn, and inclining his head in her direction. “Very well, if you do not wish to tell me, I will not inquire further.”

“The sentiment is appreciated.”

“For now, at least, consider me as your protection.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. The man was impossible, but rather than letting him get her more worked up, Heidi relented.

“I could certainly do worse than a trained soldier as a protector.”

He offered her his arm once again. “I am grateful you see the way of it, Miss Meldrum.”

Arm-in-arm, they walked along Brighton Road.

Coming upon Canterbury Road, Heidi stole a glance up at her escort. Even if he was old-fashioned, she had to tell herself that this WAS the olden days. The kindness and respect that he exhibited weren’t mocking or pretentious. They were simply the manners that he’d grown up with and what society expected of this man.

She was the oddity, not him.
The inside of her arm, where it brushed against the sleeve of his jacket began to tingle uncomfortably. He was, in addition to being polite, the son of an Earl. Even more so than Mr. Darcy, he’d had these rules and responsibilities drilled into him to ensure that everyone he came in contact with knew exactly where he was in the ranks of both society and military.

The colonel glanced down at her, the slight curl of his dark hair softening his face.

“Is something amiss, Miss Meldrum?”

Heidi dispelled her thoughts, trying to come up with an excuse.

“It’s been a long day, colonel. Please forgive any misdeeds on my part.”

“Is Miss de Bourgh’s condition worsening?”

Heidi was confused. Then she remembered what she’d been doing for the past three days.

“Miss de Bourgh is well, much better than I could have hoped. Please know that this has nothing to do with her.”

“I will not insist you explain then, if you do not wish to; but should you require my assistance with anything, do not hesitate to ask.”

Heidi worried her bottom lip, wondering if she had the right to say what she wanted. “May I speak freely?”

“Of course.”

“I had always assumed that the English were stuffy and snob-nosed, cold even; but everyone, save a couple of people, that I’ve met since my arrival in Hunsford have been warm and inviting. It is surprising. It makes me uncomfortable, when I think about it. I hadn’t expected it.”

“Then I am grateful to have proven the stereotypes false.”

“To be honest, I expected someone of your rank to be among the worst offenders; and yet you treat me humanely.”

“I enjoy my life, Miss Meldrum. I find I look at the world a little brighter than most.” His free hand rested on top of hers. “But it does not signify that I would neglect my duties.”

Something about his words were familiar and Heidi stopped him. She could not believe she didn’t recognized it earlier.

“Oh Lord, you don’t think—” her face flushed, words spilling from her mouth. “I can assure you that I do not have any designs upon you. If Miss Elizabeth is not good enough to marry Mr. Darcy, there is no question of me even being in the running to marry the son of an Earl, even a second or third son.”

The colonel faltered. “Why would you believe something so preposterous about my cousin? He is a gentleman, and she a gentleman’s daughter.”

Heidi turned her gaze. “For one, Miss de Bourgh has made no secret of the contract between herself and her cousin, though she does not love him. So, who else would Miss Bennet fancy, other than someone like yourself? I’ve seen the looks between them, when they think no one else is watching. But I know well, that Mr. Darcy, as things are, considers her family so much beneath his that
society would shun them, and perhaps they’re right.”

She stopped cold, realizing what she’d said, now that they’d turned down the road the cottage was on.

“I should probably get inside,” she said, thumbing toward the cottage.

Wanting to flee into the sanctuary of the renovated farm house, her throat went dry when she spotted Mr. Wickham standing at the end of the lane.

“What in heaven’s name?”

Heidi went pale at the uncharacteristic, but unmistakable, rage billowing in the colonel’s eyes.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, perhaps you’d wish to come inside, I could have Mrs. Newton make some tea.”

He reached for his hip. “Perhaps I should end this, once and for all.”

“Colonel, please.” Heidi held up a hand in protest, trying not to dignify Wickham with a glance. “He will have to return to Meryton soon enough, I’m sure. Come inside, have a cup of tea, and I’m sure he’ll grow bored and return to the tavern.”

With some fifty feet between them, the colonel scowled at Wickham, his jaw clamped so firmly it was a wonder his teeth didn’t shatter.

The colonel drew a deep breath and relented. “As you wish, Miss Meldrum. Though I would like to also have a few words with the Doctor, if he’s available.”

Heidi opened the gate and followed the path to the front door, ringing the bell to summon Mrs. Newton and ignoring the burning desire to stare at Wickham.
“You are looking well this morning, Miss de Bourgh,” Heidi said, putting her basket on the nearby chair. Rosings was all but empty when she’d arrived, the bulk of the servants and residents attending Easter Sunday services.

“I am feeling well,” Anne replied, coughing only a little into her handkerchief.

Heidi reached out and helped Anne sit up properly against her pillows.

“You look it. Keep this up and you’ll be ready to hit the ton and make all the ladies jealous.”

Anne managed a weak, wheezy laugh and Heidi grinned in kind. “I do not believe that I need to join those in London to find a husband, Miss Meldrum.”

“The marriage contract,” Heidi nodded, feeling guilty. “I apologize for bringing it up.”

“You did not mention it. I did. It does not signify. I know who I would wish to marry if I were ever free of it.”

Her throat closed. This was certainly never mentioned in anything Austen had written, at least, she guessed.

“You are in love, Miss de Bourgh?”

Anne glanced toward the window, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I had a flirtation with an old family friend when we were younger.”

“Old as in—“

“We have known each other since we were both in short pants.”

Heidi quirked her head at the turn of phrase but continued on. “An age difference isn’t a bad thing. Unless you’re fourteen and he’s thirty,” she muttered, almost to herself. Luckily, Anne was too occupied elsewhere to catch on.

“He was kind and treated me with affection.”

“And?”

“What does it matter? A contract exists between Darcy and I.” Anne waved her hand in the air, dismissing her words.
“I told you before, Miss de Bourgh. There are ways around such things if you have money.” Heidi sat on the edge of the bed and made eye contact. “And. You. do.”

Silence settled between them. When Anne’s eyelids drooped a few breaths later, Heidi picked at her dirty nails, knowing her charge would fall asleep shortly.

“Do you think the doctor will allow me join my guests for tea?”

Heidi’s hands flew under her skirt. “It’s possible, I suppose,” Heidi struggled to keep her voice even. “Though I do not have the training of the physician, I would say you are markedly improved these last days. Though, not wholly well.”

Anne considered her before speaking. “Thanks to your attentive care, Miss Meldrum.”

“Oh, I didn’t do much.”

“Do not think I am unaware of how many hours you have dedicated to overseeing my care.”

“It’s nothing really. I simply played nursemaid to help free the doctor so he could take care of others once you were out of danger.”

“Is it a German custom to be unable to accept a compliment when given, Miss Meldrum?”

“No,” Heidi replied, wringing her hands in her lap. “But I have been told that I do not accept praise well.”

Anne lifted her chin. For the first time, Heidi swore Lady Catherine was reflected back at her. “We must break you of the habit.”

Heidi dismissed her with a laugh. “I would never presume to waste your time with such a hopeless case.”

Anne raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I did it again, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

When the Doctor arrived an hour later, Heidi had taken Anne’s temperature and was happy to see it was right on the normal line. It might have even been a smidge lower had the patient not been tucked under the blankets as she was. The two women were talking over a cup of hot water with lemon and Heidi apprised her of the happenings in Hunsford since she’d fallen ill, censored of course.

“Am I well enough to join the family for tea this afternoon?” Anne quirked an eyebrow up at the doctor.

“I would say you are, Miss de Bourgh. In fact, I will grant you two hours out of bed today as long as you remain escorted. You are recovering but by no means healthy. No tours of the gardens yet. I would recommend eating supper in your room as well.”

Anne nodded dutifully.

“I can make plans to return this evening to ensure that you did not overextend yourself, if you wish.” Doctor Carter offered.
“Miss Meldrum,” Anne said instead. “Would you care to join the family for tea?”

Heidi tried to suppress a squeak. “You’re inviting me to tea? At Rosings?”

Anne cocked her head at the Doctor, as if she’d been misunderstood. “Yes, I am. You must come, as I wish it, and this is my estate.”

Heidi blinked. “Of course, Miss de Bourgh.”

Anne straightened on the bed, puffing herself up like a goose. “That is what I wished to hear.”

The doctor coughed uncomfortably. “I do have a question for you, Miss de Bourgh, of a more private nature.”

“I can leave,” Heidi said, getting up from her seat.

“No, it is quite alright, Miss Meldrum.” Anne waved her concerns away. “I believe you know more about my current state of affairs than even I do.”

“Only if you’re certain.”

Anne glared at her and Heidi sat back down.

“Have you had any flarings of that ghostly pain since the fever came upon you?”

Anne was quiet. “I cannot be certain; but I do not believe so. Is that strange?”

Heidi shrugged.

“I have had some conversations with Miss Meldrum, and I have a notion concerning possible treatments.”

Her eyes went wide as Heidi looked back and forth between the two others. “What have I done now?”

The Doctor laughed. “I have had some time to consider certain conversations and if Miss de Bourgh has not had any ill effects while she was sick, perhaps she has one of those allergies you spoke of.”

Anne looked thinner than usual, frailer, but by no means sicker than she was normally.

“It is possible, I suppose. With Anne’s system relatively empty, at this point, it would be easy enough to add foods in carefully, testing if they trigger her symptoms. Eliminating anything that would from her diet.”

“That is precisely what I was thinking.”

“Are you ready for a treat then, Miss de Bourgh?” Heidi bit her bottom lip in anticipation.

The Doctor interjected before the heiress could protest.

“For the next few weeks, I wish for you to take note of everything that you eat. We will add things slowly to your diet as you recover, and perhaps we can see if anything alters your state of comfort.”

Anne looked from the Doctor and then to Heidi in utter bewilderment. “This is very peculiar, is it not?”
“It is nothing that I have attempted before, but the science is logical.”

“Where would you have me begin?”

“Consuming broths as you have been, adding rice, bread, some fruit. Then, if you feel no ill-effects, we can alter your diet. No cakes or sweets as of yet, but you may consume sandwiches at tea, if you so wish.”

“Well,” said Anne with a wry smile in Heidi’s direction. “Thank heaven for that.”

After the doctor left, Heidi rang the bell for a maid to help Anne get dressed and exited the room to give her patient some privacy. She had been able to do most everything else when it came to playing nurse, except to help Miss de Bourgh to the chamber pot. She hadn’t been able to overcome that fear, Heidi thought, waiting out in the hall.

Since she’d been in regency England, Heidi had done her best to drink as little as possible to avoid bathroom trips, though the toilet at the back of the courtyard was now mostly up to her standards. She’d spoken to the doctor about installing a stone seat that they could seal with resin. Her backside would freeze, but it would be easy to sanitize.

If she had to go to the bathroom, Heidi used the one at the back of the cottage. If she was away from the cottage, she was forced to hold it until near bursting. If not for her skirts, Heidi would have probably squatted in other places, but it was almost impossible not to pee all over herself in the damned dresses.

Looking for a mirror, after the maid had gone, temporarily forgetting about the lack of such things always at hand, Heidi could only assume that she passed for acceptable. At least she looked exquisite in cobalt.

“Is my gown appropriate enough for tea as such a fine estate??” Heidi asked as she offered her elbow to Miss de Bourgh, helping her back out of bed, needing the reassurance.

“Mother does not begrudge the lower classes the signs of their humble lives.”

“That does not answer my question,” she said, eying Anne sideways.

“You are forthright in your manners.”

“I am trying to curb my tongue, I promise.”

“There is nothing wrong with what you say, Miss Meldrum. But some topics are best suited for certain types of company, would you not agree?”

“I never had to curb my tongue before.” Heidi huffed a shallow laugh. “I am getting better at it, I hope.”

They came upon the set of stairs that led to the back of the house.

“I have asked Mrs. Jenkinson to have Mother to set up tea in the conservatory today, now that I am feeling better, I hope a little sunlight will liven the mood. The Red Drawing room tends to be stifling.”

Heidi nodded, taking the stairs behind Anne, watching carefully for weakness. The woman hadn’t been out of bed more than a few minutes at a time in almost a week.
The landing at the turn of the staircase housed a small table and a love-seat sized couch. Light from a high window illuminated the fabric, making the spot a cozy one.

“I love this house,” she said, absentmindedly.

“What did you say?” Anne asked, stopping on the step to take a breath.

Heidi quirked her head in the direction of the landing.

“It is just fascinating to me to find little corners and nooks like this. Makes these large palatial estates into homes. Where I’m from, the houses all look the same; they call it cookie cutter. There’s no personality to them.”

“I confess I am partial to Rosings.”

“Most of us do love the homes we grew up in.”

By the time the two women reached the conservatory, the family was assembled and waiting.

Heidi curtseyed and greeted the Darcys, Lady Catherine, and the colonel.

She knew better than to bring it up with Georgiana in the room, but Heidi found herself curious to know if Mr. Wickham had reappeared after the colonel had left the cottage.

“You are looking wonderful this afternoon, Anne. Does she not glow with health, Fitzwilliam?”

Heidi sat down in her chair, doing her best not to roll her eyes. They hadn’t been in the room more than a minute and already Lady Catherine was pushing her daughter onto her nephew.

“She is indeed looking well, Aunt.”

“Yes,” Lady Catherine’s voice grew shrill. “I have always thought of Anne as a striking beauty, myself. She has her father’s eyes, but luckily not his brow. It is a shame she never had the chance to finish her season, she would have been the belle of the ton.”

She stared at Heidi in blatant triumph. As if, Heidi thought with a snort, she were actually to weasel in on Anne’s territory.

Mr. Darcy spoke up. “It is a shame I missed it.”

Lady Catherine balked for a blink of an eye and then straightened her shoulders.

“And when will you be making your season, niece?”

Georgiana flushed at the sudden attention.

“I thought it best to wait another year or two,” Darcy said. “Georgiana still has much to learn.”

“You must bring the Masters to Pemberly, nephew. She must be the belle of the season, lest all your work be a waste.” Lady Catherine’s voice chilled as she addressed Heidi. “I suppose you never came out, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi swallowed. “No, your Ladyship. At least, not in England,” she said, glancing at the four cousins, knowing they’d talked about this, to some extent, already. “Though, the tradition is a little different in Germany.”
The old woman raised an eyebrow. “Indeed.”

Heidi went through the motions yet again, dealing with the unbelieving matron. It was inconceivable to nearly all of them that she’d wanted to marry someone who was faithful.

“The poor may do as they wish, I suppose,” Lady Catherine said with a shrug. “Imagine, marrying for love? Duty and honor are paramount in England, Miss Meldrum. I hope you have learned that much since you returned to your motherland.”

Heidi had sworn up and down that the old goat wouldn’t get to her. And still, her eyes were burning now too.

“Mother!” Anne snapped, surprising everyone in the room.

“Anne, how can you consider a woman like this to be a companion? It is abominable.”

Heidi stood and before she could think, out the profanity came. Of its own cursed volition.

From the saucer-shaped eyes of everyone at the table, there was no chance of her protesting that she’d merely said ‘luck’.

Lady Catherine gasped. “I have never—“

Heidi shoved her chair back, the legs grating the floor. She would not be demeaned in front of all these important people.

The colonel and Mr. Darcy stood automatically, though she avoided them. She did not think she could bear it.

“Excuse me, I have some urgent duties to attend to at the cottage. The—my uncle wished for me to return as soon as possible.”

“Miss Meldrum,” Anne begged. “Do stay.”

“Please,” Heidi said, catching the colonel’s eye. She could not forego her duties as nursemaid to Anne, no matter how upset she was at her own faux pas. “Make sure someone returns Miss de Bourgh to her chambers before three. Her two hours of socializing will be over by then and I would not wish to upset the doctor by slowing her recovery.”

“Miss Meldrum.”

“Please.” She fled over to the door, hearing Lady Catherine stage-whisper to the family.

“Stop with this nonsense. She hopes to leech on to one of you to better her station. Let her go.”

Heidi closed the door behind her, only just out of the room then, taking a right and hoping it was the right way to get to the front door. Any door would do.

At least she could make Lizzy appear to be a better choice by comparison, she thought darkly, stalking through the corridors until she found a familiar painting that signaled her location.

Reaching the front door, Heidi remembered the basket that she’d left upstairs. She would have to ask the doctor to get it and hope that no one opened it, with the pack of bleach wipes in it and pepper spray inside.

One thing was for sure: she would never darken the halls of Rosings again.
"That will be 11 and 6," Mr. Cooper said, holding out his hand toward Heidi for his money, almost a week after Easter.

She sorted through the coins, knowing now what their values were, and pulled out the appropriate amount. It was a lot of coin, almost three days of wages for someone like Mrs. Newton, and it was now going to the shop keeper.

Heidi had never had a great salary, but she never imagined spending what would have been an equivalent of nearly $400 for a few items she would have spent $30 on. The inflation rates were unbelievable.

"Thank you, sir," she said, taking the package tied with a ribbon, from the man. With a little more than a week until Rose's birthday, she'd started to grow worried that she wouldn't find anything that would be appropriate; but a nice journal and a brand new quill had to be a great gift for a fifteen year old girl.

Heidi stepped out of the store, glancing up at the sky. It was clear but cold and she was ready for spring to finally arrive.

Charlotte, Lizzy, Georgiana, and Maria were walking down the street in her direction and Heidi grinned at them.

"Miss Meldrum!"

She instinctively looked for the two men who might be in tow, but wasn’t exactly surprised that they were nowhere to be found.

She greeted her friends, though she tried to avoid Georgiana. After her ‘horrid display’ she was hoping the girl hadn’t told the others what she’d said, nor what Lady Catherine had countered in reply.

“What brings you out on this chilly morning, if we may inquire?”

“I purchased a gift for my cousin. Her birthday is on the thirteenth, and I wished to surprise her with a small token.”

She held out the small, beribboned journal.

“That is lovely,” Georgiana said, fingers reaching out to caress the bound leather.

Heidi felt silly as Mr. Darcy’s younger sister examined the small trinket. It must seem like such an inadequate gift to someone with such wealth.

“Father is coming to Hunsford in a few days,” Maria said, cutting the awkward silence. “He is
feeling much better now.”

“He is?”

“Indeed,” Charlotte said. “He will stay until it is time for Miss Bennet and my sister to return to Meryton.”

“So soon?” Panic rose in her chest. There hadn’t been enough time yet. Lizzy hadn’t seen Darcy nearly enough, had she? With Anne’s illness, Heidi hadn’t been able to keep track of anything.

She swayed a little on her feet, her stomach churning, woefully unprepared for the news.

“Miss Meldrum? You have gone pale.” Lizzy stepped forward, lightly touching her arm with concern.

Heidi blinked a few times, her vision blurring. “I’m fine. I skipped breakfast, perhaps I’m beginning to feel the hunger.”

“Not even any toast or chocolate?” Georgiana asked, as though Heidi’s inadvertent fast were a death sentence.

“I wasn’t hungry before I left the cottage. And I appear to have lost track of the hour.”

“Come, let us sit,” Charlotte said, waving her hand toward the gazebo.

“No, I’m better. I will just make sure to eat a little something when I return to the cottage.”

“Yes,” Lizzy said, putting a comforting hand on Heidi’s shoulder. “You had better ensure that you do.”

“Good morning, ladies.”

Heidi almost gave herself whiplash at the speed at which she faced Mr. Wickham.

“A lovely morning, is it not?” His eyes alight, he bounced on the balls of his feet, as if he had wonderful news.

Trying to prevent her throat from closing, Heidi glanced over her shoulder in apprehensive horror to first Georgiana, and then Lizzy.

When their eyes connected, Heidi silently begged Lizzy for help. The puzzled frown in reply only reminded her that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was still unaware of the depths of Wickham’s depravity beyond what he had done to Heidi. Meanwhile, Georgiana’s eyes were already damningly wide and glassy.

Charlotte was being polite to the soldier, but Heidi couldn’t tear her gaze away from the young girl who had almost had her life ruined by this scoundrel.

“Miss Bennet, will you take our new friend into the shop? I am certain she would love to see the inventory of journals.” Heidi laced her words with as much leading consideration as she dared.

Elizabeth looked at Georgiana and then up at Mr. Wickham, nodding slowly.

Heidi wanted to scream until Lizzy spoke up.

“Yes, of course. It would be my pleasure.” Taking Georgiana’s arm in hers, breaking the line of
sight she had with the soldier, Lizzy excused herself and the two walked away.

Heidi relaxed a little bit before turning to face the character who had now, for all intents and purposes, become her own story’s villain.

“Mr. Wickham,” she said, trying to forestall the man. She was positive he’d try to follow the two girls. “I’m surprised you’re still in Hunsford. I thought would have returned to Meryton by now, to rejoin the regiment.”

The man watched the retreating forms rather than directing his attention to Heidi, who was about the same height as he was. She stepped between the two groups, cutting their escape from his view.

“There was something familiar about that girl.” He shifted to get a better look, but Heidi mirrored him to block the line of sight.

“No one of any importance,” Heidi said, before Charlotte could respond.

He squinted at her, amber eyes dark.

Heidi gestured casually. “I’ve only just made her acquaintance. I thought I had met everyone in the district. Turns out, I was wrong.”

“Yes, Miss Meldrum,” he said with a sour expression. “You do have a knack for meeting new people.”

“Where is Lieutenant Denny?” she asked, ignoring his comment as she looked around. “Did he not join you? I hoped to see him again.”

“The lieutenant has gone back to Meryton ahead of myself. I will follow in a few days.” He watched her, pointedly. “I found I had some business to attend to before I rejoined the regiment.”


“I had some debts, I desired to settle them before taking leave of your quaint village.”

“And,” Heidi said, narrowing her eyes at him, “where did you get the money?”

Both Charlotte and Maria gasped, but she ignored them.

Mr. Wickham took a step forward and pulled himself up to his full height, as if to intimidate her.

“Though it is none of your business, I found myself a patron who was kind enough to help me repay the debts I owed.”

She met her eyes with his. “It must be nice to have a few friends left.”

His left eye twitched. Heidi was sure he would strike her, but instead he huffed. Tipping his head in Charlotte’s direction, Wickham strode away.

Only when she was sure he was out of earshot did Heidi’s breath come out in a shudder.

“Miss Meldrum!”

Charlotte and Maria were staring at her as if she’d just grown a set of horns.

“What has come over you?”
Her hand shook as she rubbed the back of her neck.

“I don’t know,” she said, watching Mr. Wickham’s retreating form. All she knew is that she’d likely made this entire situation worse. “Perhaps I should eat something.”

“Let us return to the parsonage,” Charlotte suggested. “I can have Sinclair make tea. Despite the early hour I think we could all use the refreshment.”

“I should stop at the smithy, I promised my uncle—”

“You can call upon the Dowdings after tea.” Charlotte was insistent and Heidi nodded dumbly.

“I suppose I can,” Heidi said, the words deafening to her own ears.

When Lizzy and Georgiana rejoined them, the five ladies walked together to the parsonage.

They had only just sat down to wait for tea when the doorbell rang. Heidi was packing her gloves into her reticule when Mr. Darcy and the colonel were escorted into the parlor.

Charlotte expressed surprise but asked the maid to add two settings for tea. After pleasantries were exchanged, Georgiana gave her brother a hug, proving to Heidi that she was out of sorts after the close encounter.

“I apologize for interrupting your early tea,” Mr. Darcy said, over his sister’s head. “But we noticed a… disturbance in the square.”

Heidi looked away.

“It was but a small disagreement with the lieutenant. All is well,” Charlotte said. Heidi appreciated Charlotte’s ability to control the conversation; but she would be forced to explain at some point.

“Maybe I should go,” she said, searching the room for an escape.

“Miss Meldrum, sit. Please.”

Making a scene would only make things worse. She sat as ordered.

Afternoon tea was something akin to torture. Heidi’s hands sweated, her chest ached, and her head spun like she’d done a few shots of tequila. She kept catching both the colonel and Mr. Darcy watching her, though Lizzy and Charlotte did a good job of keeping the two younger girls occupied with conversation. They even managed to convince Maria and Georgiana to pick out a few duets that they could play sometime at Rosings after dinner.

Despite her best intentions, she’d accomplished nothing more than making herself a nervous wreck. What had she been thinking about facing down that prig? It was dangerous, idiotic, and probably pointless.

Not like she wasn’t already seen as an ill-mannered country bumpkin by the rest of them.

Her eyes burned with unshed tears. She just wanted to go home, it didn’t matter if it was the cottage, where she could rot away, or back to New York, where she could pretend that this was all a terrible dream.

She was making a fucking mess of it.

“Miss Meldrum?”
Her heart leapt to her throat when Heidi noticed the colonel sitting beside her on the couch.

“I’m sorry, did you say something? I fear I am distracted this afternoon. Please forgive me.”

She had to find a way to fix this.

“I wanted, if the opportunity presented itself, to apologize for my Aunt’s impertinence on Sunday.”

“It’s not necessary—“

He reached out, as if to take her hand, but pulled back. “Please, allow me to finish?”

Heidi wanted to cross her legs, but stifled the urge, instead she folded her hands in her lap.

“It was abominable what I am certain you overheard my aunt decry, after you dedicated the better part of a week to caring for her daughter. I am sorry and I daresay my cousin is as well. Please accept our most sincere apologies.”

“There is no need for your apology. Lady Catherine is entitled to say such things. She preserves rank above all else. My vulgarity certainly did not help.”

He gave a quiet snort at that, but continued, “it is all she knows of the world, and though it is not an excuse, it is a reason why she acts the way she does.”

“Perhaps it was silly of me to think that one could get by on her own merits, no matter her station.”

“I think it refreshing that you have such hopes, Miss Meldrum. I am no less aware of the words we exchanged earlier. I would not have you take them back. Not all British are alike in manner.”

“Because the poor can afford to be silly, I suppose.”

The hurt in his eyes was plain. Heidi took a defeated breath.

“It seems I am not fit for any company today. I should go.”

She made to stand.

“Miss Meldrum?”

Her throat tightened at the prospect of this being the last time she saw any of the main players of the story. She would lock herself up in the cottage until they left, if only to keep herself from ruining everything.

She faced the colonel, who had also stood, and held out her hand for the man to shake.

He stared at the bare skin.

“I’d kiss your cheek in farewell like the Germans do, but it would definitely be inappropriate.”

“In farewell? Miss Meldrum, what are you talking about?” There was a pleading tone in his voice, but Heidi refused to make eye contact. Instead, she watched his hand envelop hers.

Fighting a quivering lip, Heidi said what she could say to help the colonel make things right. “I’ve done what I can to get Wickham out of the way. Darcy must come clean to Miss Bennet about his
preventing Bingley from knowing about Miss Bennet’s being in London. It may be the only way to save the relationship.”

She pulled her hand from his, too quickly.

“I feel much better now.” She gave her hostess a deep curtsey. “Thank you for your kindness.” She frowned, hating goodbyes. “Miss Darcy, it was a pleasure to see you again.”

The rest of the party stood.

“I wish all of you a pleasant day,” she said, preventing anyone from addressing her.

Heidi gave a second curtsey to the room and then she fled the parsonage.
Heidi stood at the front door of Rosings Park, her stomach rolling. When the invitation arrived at the Cottage for her to join everyone at Rosings for dinner on Sunday, Heidi could hardly believe it. She’d left the parsonage with the intent of hiding away and now she was preparing to face them all again.

Mrs. Carter and Rose had insisted that she go. They knew enough of the tale and her precipitous fall from Lady Catherine’s favor, though Heidi had been too embarrassed to tell them everything that had transpired.

“You must overcome your adversity, if you wish to live a full life, Heidi,” Mrs. Carter had said. Rose nodding obediently beside her mother. “You cannot allow Lady Catherine to win.”

Even the doctor had chimed in that morning telling her that she had to go.

“If you do not attend Lady Catherine and her guests, you may come to regret what you could have done.”

The doctor had been stern when she asked what she was supposed to do if the colonel questioned her about the Darcy comment.

“You will do whatever is necessary to fix this.”

The doctor had asked Heidi to take note of the food being served, as Anne had already complained about discomfort and he wished her to take a close watch of what foods they were eating, if there was something she could see that would be obvious to her modern eyes.

Now, she fiddled with the ribbon that held her bonnet in place. In a moment, the door would open.

She managed to hold her composure when the door opened and she was led into the small dining room. The intimacy of the setting was already uncomfortable as the guests had already found their places at the round table. Of course, the only open space was smack between Anne and Lady Catherine.

On the other side of Lady Catherine sat Darcy, Georgiana, and the colonel. Mr. Collins, Charlotte, Lizzy, and Maria had taken a variety of seats between the colonel and Mrs. Jenkinson. Heidi’s memory of the last time she called on Rosings Park, the utter disgrace of it, brought the first prickle of tears to her eyes.

The first course came out within seconds of her seating and conversation began flowing among the guests once more. Heidi thanked Anne for the invitation, but otherwise kept her mouth shut.

She was surprised at the delicate mouth feel of the consommé that was placed on the table before her. This was not the same type of food they had at tea or that had come up with the broths and other nibbles that had been sent up to Anne’s rooms; this food was decadent and rich.

Heidi almost laughed to herself. Still, the rich ate French style cuisine, even if they were at war.

Sure enough, the second course was as French as the first. She wondered how it was settling in Anne’s gut. Maybe simple English fare was something Anne needed, maybe even the dreaded food of the poor.
She would think on it and ask about it, if she found the appropriate time.

Lady Catherine talked through dinner and Mr. Collins hung on her every word. Heidi was glad that the woman was ignoring her, but dinner was only the first part of the evening.

There were looks, she noticed, between Georgiana and Mr. Darcy that Heidi couldn’t decipher and Heidi hoped that they had not had another close incident with Mr. Wickham after the other day.

Three separate times, Lady Catherine mentioned how well her daughter was looking, directing her comments at Mr. Darcy and Lizzy grew more and more despondent throughout the night.

When after the ladies withdrew after dinner, Heidi gravitated toward Miss Darcy, thinking that maybe she could spend the evening convincing Georgiana to play the piano and she could turn pages for her. Anything that would get her away from the rest of the party. Being here, feeling the scrutiny of the others, none of them willing to break the silence, was awful and she had no idea what to do. She should have just stayed home.

What she wanted to do, what would have made her absolutely ecstatic with pleasure, would have been to stomp up to Lady Catherine, stick a finger in her face and echo one of the last lines of *Ever After* at the woman.

“You’re just the same as me, you big nobody!”

She grinned at the internal monologue.

“And what are you smiling about, Miss Meldrum?”

Georgiana asked, grinning at her.

“Just a memory, a long time in the past.”

Georgiana leaned forward. “I daresay I have never met anyone who has been to Germany before, what’s it like?”

“Well,” Heidi said, surprised that no one had ever asked her about it before. She considered what to say, but stuck to the truth, as much as possible.

“The place where I’m from is part of the lowlands, by that I mean, close to sea level though we lived some hundred miles inland from the North Sea. It’s always cold, though it rarely snows, much like Kent.”

Heidi smoothed a wrinkle on her skirt but when Georgiana remained focused on her Heidi pursed her lips, thinking. It had been years since she visited her mom’s hometown, but she had to remember something.

“The area is famous for their sheep, both for wool and meat,” she said, ticking the items off on her fingers. “And peat bogs. It’s rural. Though I have been as far south as Schönbrunn in Austria on the other side of the Alps, where the Hapsburgs rule.”

She smiled at the sparkle in Georgiana’s eye, deciding to go for broke and continue weaving her description.

“In fact, I was just sixteen when I visited and toured the castle. Well, what was open to the public; of course, the family wings were off-limits. But as majestic as it was, there’s nothing in the Alps that can compare to the lands near where I grew up. The town was founded in the 900s, the first
church built there around 960 anno domini.”

She took a breath, knowing she was rambling. But no one else was inclined to interrupt, so she shrugged and kept on. She was talking to Georgiana after all.

“They actually just finished, not too long ago, building the hunting castle for the bishopric. There’s nothing else quite like it. The main living quarters are in a building at the center of a clearing, and like spokes on a carriage wheel, there are cobbled paths leading to the outbuildings,” she waved her hand as memories flooded her mind. “Which include the kitchens and servants quarters, and a chapel, with a cemetery behind it. The lanes are lined with trees that will one day canopy across, giving shade to the visitors, they’re called ‘Alleys’ in German,” she said, giving the word its proper pronunciation and making it sound more like ah-leh rather than al-ee.

“The stables, to the west of the estate, are some of the largest I’ve seen. Herr August has a passion for hunting the deer in the area. There are three interconnected lakes near the back of the property, the middle one has a small island in the middle with a gazebo built on it and a bridge leading across. There are even a few swans that live there. It is perhaps one of the most peaceful places I’ve ever been to."

“It sounds lovely.”

Miraculously it was Lady Catherine that had spoken.

Heidi looked up to see the entire party looking at her, having listened to her reminiscing.

“It’s nothing compared to Rosings, my Lady,” Heidi managed to say. “But there’s a peace to the lands that washes over me while I’m there that I have not, as yet, been able to recreate.”

Realizing she had babbled, Heidi searched the room hoping someone would interject.

She was saved instead by the men walking in from their secret gathering.

“Georgiana, would you consider playing the piano forte? I have a dear wish to hear some music this eve.”

The girl blushed, her eyes on her aunt.

“In front of all these people?”

Heidi stood up then, knowing that it would be she, not Lizzy, who would need to help the child. It would give Lizzy more time to chat up Darcy and get her away from the stares of the rest of the party.

“Let us see what we can find, Miss Darcy. Perhaps there will even be something in there I recognize, and you can play while I sing.”

It was likely that Lady Catherine had the music that Charlotte had, and if nothing else she could futz her way through some aria or something that Georgiana would know. No one else sang in the room, so they surely wouldn’t have a good enough ear, except maybe Lizzy, to know she’d faked her way through.

Standing, Heidi caught a glimpse of Anne, smiling in her direction.

They went to the cabinet near the piano forte, in the adjoining room, that had the sheet music in it. To her great surprise, Heidi found a few compositions by Bach and Handel in them that she
actually knew. Together, she and Georgiana managed to find two pieces that they either could sing or play with at least some accuracy.

Georgiana took her place at the piano forte, Heidi standing just behind her right shoulder. Once the girl finished her intro, Heidi began to sing.

They played both songs before Heidi begged Georgiana for a break, her throat dry and scratchy.

“You sang well, Miss Meldrum,” Georgiana said, standing from the bench. “My voice is nothing compared to yours.”

“I have had some training, but I have no doubt that you would outshine me easily, with the proper tutelage.” Heidi glanced down at the toes of her shoes, poking out from under her dress.

“Even with a hundred years I would never think I could sing so well.”

“You are all politeness, Miss Darcy.”

When she sat down again, Heidi begged out of playing any card games. She had not expected to have to know them, but made a note to ask Rose or Mrs. Carter to teach her to play in case the opportunity arose once more. She did not want to seem ungrateful.

“I do not know any of these games. I played German rummy and an obscure game called Uno,” she said, thinking of the simple card game wondering briefly if it was a Milton-Bradley game or, what was the other one, Mattel? “But never whist.”

“Your education has been lacking.” Lady Catherine looked down her nose at Heidi, even if they were at the same level.

“When I had a governess, I studied everything from calculus to operatic singing,” Heidi blurted, annoyance rising in her chest. “But no, we did not spend time learning card games. You are right, Lady Catherine.”

She caught Elizabeth’s eye and it was enough to calm her ire. For now.

“My apologies. My nostalgia for home is overwhelming tonight. Please, play your games. I will gladly step aside to observe.”

“Miss Meldrum, perhaps you would join me for a turn about the room?”

The phrasing knocked Heidi’s mind for a spin as she gaped at Lizzy.

“I daresay a turn would do me well.” The words came out awkwardly, too awkwardly in response to such a classic line, but Heidi couldn’t pass up the opportunity to join Lizzy.

“This is a disaster,” she whispered, after they’d been walking about thirty seconds.

“My poor Miss Meldrum. It is clear that you are uncomfortable.”

“My wish to apologize to you for the other day, Miss Bennet. It was abominably rude the way I ran out of the parsonage, and I feel awful.”

“It is not I who requires an apology, Miss Meldrum, but dearest Charlotte. She was upset when you left in such a manner. My friend only wished to help.”

“I find myself struggling in this world,” Heidi admitted, though Lizzy would misunderstand. “The
maintenance of rank is something Germans simply do not do. It’s no wonder my father fled to the Continent with my mother all those years ago.”

“I had no idea that the German country was so different from our own.”

“It is a separate empire, Miss Bennet. There would naturally be differences.”

“I suppose I never thought about it.”

Heidi chewed on her bottom lip. “Miss Bennet, when you return to Longbourne, would it be impertinent of me to ask you to write, when you can? I find I have need of your friendship. Of course, I have Charlotte now, but you have been an exceptional friend, since you arrived. I never expected it.”

“I believe I should be able to do something of the sort.” she said with a wink, “I daresay I would like my dresses back some day.”

Heidi winced. “Of course. I am only borrowing them and I would be a poor friend indeed if I did not return what I’d borrowed.”

A more serious look overtook Elizabeth. “I would gift them, if I could. However, they are not my property to give.”

“I understand, believe me,” Heidi said, stopping Lizzy’s guilt-laced words. “I may not have sisters, but I imagine that being able to share clothing greatly increases the allowances for other things.”
Monday, April 6th, 1812

AN: I did a thing.... Created a tumblr so you fine readers can see my face claims and location claims for the story. If you wanna see: heidimeldrum.tumblr.com I'll add more throughout, when we see new locations, etc. But I wanted to share what I used for my inspiration.

“I’ve been thinking,” Heidi said, pouring of vinegar into a jar. It wasn’t isopropyl alcohol, but it was the best thing she had for helping keep things clean, if not sterile.

She wished she’d paid more attention to the chemical-free cleaning fad, online message boards, and whatnot would have been helpful resources.

Monday afternoons Heidi and the Doctor had started a routine, cleaning the surgery, whether it needed it or not.

And usually, it was needed.

“I had an aunt who suffered from some of the same symptoms as Miss de Bourgh.”

Her rubber gloves still on, Heidi placed the sterilized tools, that had been drying on a piece of linen into the airtight bucket.

“Did you?” the doctor replied, folding some of the freshly bleached bandages.

“It’s clear she suffers from multiple issues, but is it possible that she has a disease of the nerves?”

“Many women have nervous concerns, Heidi.”

Heidi couldn’t help the annoyance that filled her at the doctor’s statement, but she held her tongue. Just like she couldn’t stop her reaction to misogyny, this man had grown up when people assumed or even forced women into this weak role. She didn’t know how to fix it, but she added it to her mental tally of things to eradicate.

Though her supplies were already disastrously low, she wanted to do her best to keep the surgery clean. And she was managing what she had as closely as she could, sacrificing some of her needs for the greater good. With luck, the supplies would last another six months.

“Not nervous issues,” she said. “The nerves themselves. Some people, mostly women, suffer from this disease. They don’t even know exactly what causes it in my time, and male doctors, even in my day believe some of it is faked, because they’re jerks.” She paused, glanced over her shoulder at the doctor, and grinned.

He narrowed his eyes at her, but couldn’t help the quiver of a smirk in the corner of his mouth.

“But essentially overactive nerves in the body are firing back responses to the brain when nothing is happening, or so I’ve understood.”
The doctor stopped folding the linens and Heidi explained further the symptoms of fibromyalgia, and said that her Aunt had controlled it by cutting out bread from her diet.

It might not work for Anne, but she thought that it couldn’t hurt to try.

“You were willing to try contain her symptoms with a diet, and we don’t know exactly what Miss de Bourgh suffers from. If she feels better, continuing her present course seems to be smart.”

“I will agree with that, and anything that eases her suffering is useful.”

“If I ever do return home,” she said, staring out the window. “I hope that I’ve at least provided some insight and that it allows for some modernization.”

“If you disappear, I will write it all down and spread my success as far as I dare. You are concerned about changing the future and I will respect it while you remain with us. But I would like to use your knowledge to help people.”

“I do not fault you for wanting to capitalize on my knowledge, but it is strange to think about stealing someone else’s ideas and making them my own. Still feels like stealing if they haven’t happened for you yet.”

“I believe I understand.”

“All I ask, doctor, is that you be careful with the knowledge you now carry.”

From the front of the house, the doorbell rang, and she glanced at the clock, thinking it strange that they were having callers at this hour.

The door to the clinic crashed against the wall, and Heidi cried out in surprise as she knocked into the jar of vinegar water, the liquid spilling across the counter.

“Heidi, you have a guest,” Rose said, grinning.

Heidi dabbed at the spill with her apron. “Me?”

“Yes, he” the girl said, proudly emphasizing the word, “is waiting in the drawing room.”

The doctor shrugged. She smiled, noting that his dark hair, beginning to gray at the temples, was disheveled from the work they’d been doing. She pulled her gloves off and left them on the countertop before following Rose out of the surgery. Thankfully, she passed the shining surface of a serving tray and took two seconds to smooth down her own frizzing hair.

Rose opened the drawing room door, a devilish grin on her face as she waved her hand for Heidi to enter.

Heidi stopped short in the doorway to the drawing room.

“Colonel,” she said, spotting the head of dark curled hair as he stood.

“I was not expecting your call,” she said, stammering as cogent words evaded her.

He stood, eyes grim, and bowed his head in her direction.

“I had not expected to call, myself.” He paused, as though considering the right words to say. “But my situation has changed, and I wished to see you.”
Heidi closed the door behind her, a pout on Rose’s face as she disappeared, and walked deeper into the room. Her hands were clammy as she took a seat opposite the small end table from the chair the colonel had been using. The air in the room was heavy.

“Please be seated,” she said, unable to meet his eyes.

The colonel cocked his head. “Forgive me, Miss Meldrum, but there is something most...pungent...”

Heidi quickly untied the apron and threw it under the chair. “We had a spill, in the surgery,” she said, face hot.

He huffed, staring at her not so subtle attempt to act normal. Heidi wanted to bury her head in a throw pillow.

“I was to be at the whim of my cousin for another fortnight, but I have received orders to accompany Mr. Wickham to Meryton before reporting to my regiment. We are to move our encampment for the summer and there are preparations to be made.”

“I can certainly understand that,” she said, the knowledge that Wickham was leaving, first in her mind. “I assume you’ll be summering at Brighton?”

“Indeed,” the colonel agreed. “But how did you know that?”

Shit.

“It seems like a proper place for training. After all you did send Mr. Wickham to the coast a few weeks ago. There are some sort of headquarters there, I presume?” She tried to keep the shaking from her voice, thinking about what this meant for the story. At least if the colonel was leaving, that meant that the Darcys were staying. There was still plenty of time to get the main characters together.

“You are right.” He gave her a strange look and Heidi bit the inside of her lip. Something about the colonel seemed to predispose her to giving away too much information. She would need to watch it in future, if she ever saw him again.

“I have been meaning to discuss Mr. Wickham’s return to Hunsford. He came to me with the notion that you worked as spy for the French.”

Heidi nodded, doing her best to focus on the conversation at hand. “Yes, I overheard something to that effect.”

He smiled, polite and shy, his hand scratching at his chest. “There is something strange about you, Miss Meldrum. I cannot put my finger on it, but I do not believe you to be a spy. A spy would be better at their job.”

Heidi swallowed, her chest flushing. He’d repeated what Wickham had said to her, almost verbatim.

“I should tell you also, that with my departure, Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy will be returning to Pemberley.”

No! Heidi’s eyes darted away from the colonel, and then back. They couldn’t be leaving yet, it was impossible.
Her hands shaking, Heidi wished for something other than the armrest to grip. “So soon?”

“Indeed, my cousin finds that business calls him north and Miss Darcy, though she would never complain, is homesick at present. I am certain you can understand.”

“But they cannot go, colonel.”

“It is settled. They are taking the barouche this afternoon.”

“No! There hasn’t been enough time.” Realizing who she’d spoken in front of, Heidi snapped her mouth shut.

He rubbed thumb over an eyebrow, muttering something too low for her to hear.

Then he looked up, his shoulders straight and the colonel stared at her, unabashedly. “I find myself curious about the things you say, first about Darcy and London, now this? Perhaps you could explain? Your conversation makes perfect sense one minute and then you speak of things that you should have no knowledge of. I do not understand.”

Heidi sat up a little, her mouth going dry.

“First, tell me something,” she said, narrowing her eyes, thinking maybe she could distract him.

“If I can.”

“Has Darcy been acting strange? Did he take a trip to the Parsonage yesterday, or ‘go for a walk’ in the evening?”

The colonel frowned, clearly trying to think back on the day before. “He spent the evening with Georgiana and myself. Lady Catherine was away and Miss de Bourgh spent much of the night in her own rooms. Why?”

“Do you think he’s proposed to Miss Bennet yet?”

He jumped back a little, eyes wide. “You think he wished to propose to Miss Bennet?”

“I am certain he did, though if he went through with it, it would likely have been for naught, unless he apologized for his interference between Bingley and Jane.”

The colonel frowned. “If I am to understand you correctly, you are inferring that my friend’s triumph in preventing the engagement of his friend was—“

“At the detriment to Miss Jane Bennet, Elizabeth’s eldest and dearest sister—”

“I can hardly believe it,” he interrupted.

Heidi shrugged, clapping her hands together. “I pieced it together from what conversations I’d had with Miss Elizabeth and what you’ve told me. Miss Elizabeth would never consider marrying a man who celebrated the separation of a most beloved sister and a man the sister loved.”

He sighed, at length. “That is grave indeed.”

Heidi heaved a sigh of her own. “It is why I said what I said the other night, in the hopes that should we never meet again, perhaps you could set the record straight, and help the two people that admire each other overcome what separates them.”
“I did not gather that at all. I am sorry if I failed you, but you must know that my cousin is contracted to marry Miss de Bourgh.”

Heidi threw her hands up in exasperation. “Always with these abhorrent contracts. Colonel, Mr. Darcy has ten thousand a year, surely he can afford a lawyer to sue to break the contract or whatever must be done.”

“It would break Anne’s heart.”

“You might be surprised,” she said under her breath.

“Furthermore,” he continued, scooting forward and pressing his hands against the armrest, as if he hadn’t heard her, “I do not hold with matchmaking. It’s an abominable past time, playing with the emotions of others.”

“I wasn’t—she started, but held her tongue, making her hands into fists. No matter what excuses she gave, that was exactly what she was doing, and to explain her actual situation would make him think she were insane. “You are right, it is abominable.” Across the short distance between them, the colonel visibly relaxed. “But I thought that if I could not be happy in marriage, maybe I could help someone else find happiness.”

He pursed his lips together and when Heidi drew her eyes up to his, she found him searching her face.

“It would be a shame if you gave up on yourself, Miss Meldrum.” As he turned away, Heidi began wringing her hands together in her lap, a trusty habit to calm her when little else could.

“Your words of courage are appreciated, but you and I both know that in society, I’m considered an old maid.” She waved her hand theatrically in the air. “Doomed to never find a husband and die alone.”

His mouth gaped open and Heidi held up her hand to forestall his protestation.

“In two hundred years, the world could be different.” It was different. And at least then she’d have her own job so she could be independent while she recovered from her heartbreak.

“I could only imagine it would be, Miss Meldrum.” He gave her a strange smile then, as if he were just placating the crazy woman.

Heidi sighed. It was no use. Any of this. “So, you called to bid me farewell?”

“I wanted you to reassure you that Mr. Wickham and his problems would be leaving Hunsford for good.” The colonel fiddled with his pocket watch chain as silence filled the drawing room. “I find myself concerned for your well-being, whether or not you carry your own protection.”

The smile he gave her then, though he looked up at her through his brow, was one of a friend sharing an inside joke.

Heidi couldn’t help but smile in return. “Thank you, colonel. It will make my life a little less worrisome, knowing that Wickham is gone.”

The room was quiet again, Heidi’s ears ringing. She struggled to find something to say.

“When do your cousins leave, this afternoon?” Speaking the words made her stomach churn. This plan, this experiment, this desire to fix the plot, it had all gone wrong. Heidi wanted to curl up in
the corner and cry.

“Sometime after tea, but before dinner. They intend on overnighting at the house in London. With the good weather and good road, they should arrive within three hours.”

“Do you think it would be impertinent for me to make a quick call at Rosings? I have so enjoyed my time with Miss Darcy and I would love to wish her farewell.”

The colonel offered a wan smile. “That could be arranged. In fact, I could escort you now, if you wished.”

Heidi looked down ruefully at her clothes. In the corner of her eye, Heidi spotted the hem of the apron stained with vinegar, hastily hidden under the chair.

“I should get make myself presentable.”

He raised an eyebrow of surprise.

“It would not do to smell of vinegar when walking through the front doors of Rosings. Will you wait? I will return presently.”

He nodded, and Heidi raced from the room, at least as quickly as she would allow herself, and headed for the staircase.

“Whatever is happening?” Rose asked, popping her head up from behind the couch facing the hearth in the great room. “Did the colonel propose?”

Heidi gripped her chest in shock at Rose’s surprise appearance.

“What do you mean?” She looked at Rose as if she’d grown a second head.

“He admires you, does he not? I just knew the colonel would call on the cottage to propose.”

Heidi barked with laughter, her heart calming in her chest now that her attacker was only the mere chit of a girl. “Rose, you speak nonsense. The colonel doesn’t think of me in such a way.”

“Then why did mother say I couldn’t join you? Was privacy not required for such matters?”

Rose pouted.

Heidi took a breath, glanced up the stairs, and then walked over to Rose.

“Dearest, he is the younger son of an Earl. The colonel needs to marry for money, and I certainly have none of that.”

Rose frowned.” But he has money, surely he has some income.”

“To continue living as he does as a bachelor, but with a wife and family, the woman he marries would need to provide a large sum, I think.”

“That is hardly fair.”

“Life rarely is, Rose,” Heidi said, patting Rose’s knee. “Besides, I don’t think I would be ready to make such a commitment, not when I still dream about Peter.”

Rose knitted her brows. “You still think about him? But he broke your heart.”
“You’ll see one day,” Heidi frowned. “Well, hopefully you won’t. The heart is a funny thing and though someone can disappoint you so completely one day, it doesn’t always mean that you’ll hate them forever from that moment on, even if you wished it.”

With a silent slump of her shoulders, Rose gave up.

“Now, I need to go upstairs and get ready.”

“But wherever are you going?”

“The colonel is going to escort me to Rosings, so that I call upon Miss Darcy.” The words stuck in her throat. Saying them made it real.

“They depart this evening.”
Heidi dropped the cast iron pan down onto the stovetop with a grunt, so loud it echoed in the kitchen. The cursed thing was burned, smoke billowing from the oven.

She’d been so excited to see the oven that first day she’d ventured into the kitchen. It was so modern, but Heidi had been deceived. She had thought that cooking over a hearth would have been her worst nightmare, but this? Dealing with a strange cooking device while trying to use what precious ingredients she could convince Mrs. Carter to purchase for the cake she was trying to make was more than she could handle.

Mrs. Newton burst into the room from the courtyard where she’d been hanging up the wash.

“Is everything alright, Miss?”

“It’s ruined,” Heidi said, her eyes beginning to water. “I thought I’d gotten the proportions right, but it didn’t rise, and now it’s charcoal.” She threw the dishrag she’d been using as a pot holder onto the ground.

“Oh dear,” the housekeeper offered, stepping deeper into her domain. “Perhaps we can start over?”

“I used all of it,” she replied, waving her hand in the direction of the bin they used to wash the cutlery and cookware.

Heidi bent down to pick up the dishrag and placed it on the handle of a nearby drawer.

Today was Rose’s fifteenth birthday and Heidi had wanted to make a cake for the girl. Heidi preferred pineapple upside down cake or typical American style cakes with fluffy textures, but it seemed that baking powder and baking soda hadn’t been invented yet.

Mrs. Newton had told her that royal icing existed in England at this time, but sugar was so incredibly expensive that it would be nearly impossible to make in a household of the doctor’s rank. The sugar budget had to be used for the necessities of tea and actual baked goods rather than icing.

Heidi stared at the burned cake, trying to think how she could salvage the situation. Her eyes narrowed at the brown edges. “There were a few marzipan pieces in the pantry, left over from tea on Sunday, right?”

“Yes.”

“And we have chocolate.”

Mrs. Newton nodded.

“I’ve made marzipan cookies before; I could try to make those instead.”
The two women went to work, both taking turns to grind the sugar into more of a powder.

When the dough for the cookies rested in the dark, chilly pantry, Heidi looked at the ruined cake in the pan. Her mind worked as she tried to figure out a way to save the ingredients.

“I have an idea.”

Setting Mrs. Newton on the task of creating a double boiler, the older woman began melting some of their breakfast chocolate. Heidi instructed her on making a ganache. It wouldn’t be perfect, since chocolate was made differently in her day, but maybe it could work. Heidi was desperate.

“You are a genius,” Mrs. Newton said, as the chocolate melted in the bowl a few minutes later.

“I didn’t invent it.”

“Why wait until now to try your hand at baking?”

“Baking is an art, Mrs. Newton, and while I might be able to piece some things together, it’s only because I have read some books rather than actually having some skill.”

She might have devoured every episode of Good Eats five or six times over the years, but when Heidi got in front of a stove to actually cook, she usually just boiled some pasta and ate it with pesto or as a salad. In fact, Peter had always mocked her mercilessly for being a woman who didn’t know how to cook.

At least she didn’t have to listen to that shit anymore.

Mrs. Newton tended the chocolate and Heidi scooped out the cake and crumbled it into a bowl. As long as they held together for her to truffle them into the ganache, it would work.

When all the ingredients were ready, Heidi let Mrs. Newton return to her duties while she tackled the making of the pseudo-cake pops.

Finishing the work nearly an hour later, having to maintain the heat on the chocolate carefully, all of the cake balls had been rolled in the ganache and were cooling on the cleaned countertop. More than once had she grumbled about not having a heating pad to do the job for her.

“It smells lovely,” Mrs. Newton said, looking at the food laid out and ready. She went to the china cabinet and pulled out enough wine glasses for the family. The doctor had mentioned that he had a surprise for Rose but that he wanted to share it before Maria arrived and the housekeeper clearly thought now was the time.

“I daresay my uncle would allow you to partake as well, Mrs. Newton,” Heidi grinned.

“Oh no, Miss Heidi. I could never. Not without his express permission.”

Heidi shrugged, and pulled out the decanter of wine they used at dinner, pouring out a bit in each glass.

“At least it’s only a few of us today.” Heidi wiped the crumbs on the table into her hand, to throw into the bucket that would go out to compost later this evening and looked over at the spread. “Will you fetch my aunt and uncle? I think it would be a prime time to show the birthday girl what we’ve accomplished.”

Mrs. Newton bobbed a curtsey and headed toward the surgery.
Rose had invited Maria Lucas to join them, but otherwise it was just to be the Carters at tea. Sir William had come from London just that morning, signaling impending departure of the heroine.

Heidi was sure Rose would have also invited Georgiana, but they were probably settled in Pemberley once again.

Before the guest arrived, Heidi ran up to her room to get changed into the darker blue dress she’d worn on her first visit to Rosings.

She found Rose in the drawing room with her mother finishing up last minute touches in decorating the room. Heidi was surprised to see that they’d somehow moved the coffee table from the great room and into the parlor. It didn’t match the décor, but it did add another place for them to put all the goodies that were going to be served.

“Rose, would you join me?” she asked. “I thought you might like to see what all had been prepared for your feast.”

She let Rose lead the way into the kitchens, with Mrs. Carter trailing behind.

Heidi opened the door with a flourish and Rose stepped into the room with a gasp.

“This is amazing,” the girl marveled, gazing in awe at the work surface covered with goodies.

The doctor had arrived in time to witness his daughter’s surprise.

“Miss Heidi and I spent the morning preparing plenty of sweets for your special day, Miss Rose,” Mrs. Newton exclaimed.

“Thank you!” Rose, with tears in her eyes, hugged both Mrs. Newton and Heidi in turn.

“We also chipped in and bought you a little something.”

Rose’s eyes went wide as Heidi pulled out the gift from the cupboard where she’d hidden it.

With shaking hands, the girl took the gift and untied the ribbon. It wasn’t a proper wrapping, but it looked nice, Heidi mused.

“Every heroine at the cusp of adulthood needs a good journal,” she said, feeling poetic.

After another round of ‘thank yous’, the doctor clinked his glass importantly with the back of a knife. He smiled at Mrs. Carter before turning his attention to his daughter.

“Rose, in the next few weeks, when the Masters leave London, you will begin taking lessons in the art of dancing so you will be able to join the other girls on the dancefloor for the Michaelmas assembly.”

Rose’s eyes went wide. “Really? Do you mean it?”

Mrs. Carter had never looked at her daughter with more pride and affection.

“Would your father fun you in such a manner?”

Heidi felt as if she were missing something and cocked her head as Rose wrapped her father’s waist in a bear hug.

“Do you mean that there are no assemblies at all until December?” she asked Mrs. Carter. In fact,
now that they’d brought it up, the lack of any sort of dance parties did seem strange. They were all the rage in Austen’s books, but Hunsford village hadn’t advertised anything of the sort.

Rose giggled. “Michaelmas is in September.”

“We never celebrated it in Germany. I assumed it was near Christmas,” Heidi said with a shrug, the lie coming easily to her lips. She smirked down at Rose.

The Carters shook their heads, chuckling as Rose completely dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Shortly thereafter Heidi helped Mrs. Newton bring the food in from the kitchen before going up to change into the nicest of the gowns she’d borrowed from Lizzy. When she returned to the drawing room, she’d put her hair up in a fancy updo and joined Rose in waiting for their guest.

It wasn’t until that moment, watching Rose nervously pace in wait, that she understood how much she’d neglected Rose in the weeks prior. The arrival of Elizabeth Bennet had stolen all her free time, intentional or not.

“What do you say to the two of us going shopping tomorrow, cousin? Now that I know that Michaelmas is in September, I am sure I should look into what sort of dress I might wish to make.”

Rose clasped her hands together. “You would do that?”

Heidi tried not to laugh at her effusiveness. Oh, to be fifteen again…

“We need to pick out some new ink for the pen. Mr. Cooper had a few choices, but I thought it best that you chose your favorite. Perhaps we could even go to the tavern for a lemonade afterward.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Maria arrived moments later, and tea was enjoyed by all. Heidi was surprised at how well Maria and Rose got along and again felt a little guilty. She’d been so distracted by her own participation in the plot that she’d completely missed the friendship that had blossomed between Maria and Rose.

Perhaps, on second thought, there were other cues she had missed as well.
Heidi groaned, flipping over in bed and staring at the wall in the early morning light. The cramping in her abdomen was a clear sign of what was going to make itself known once she started walking around.

Heidi slipped her feet and then knees out from under the covers and onto the cold wood floor. Hissing in shock, she crawled to the spot where she’d hidden her medicines under the dresser, since no one would move the large furniture it was the perfect place to hide some things.

She peeked into the darkness to find the small pouch where she’d stored the last of her tampons and the one panty liner, and a chill raced through her veins. The pouch was gone.

Pursing her lips, Heidi looked at the drapes, which only let in a sliver of light. She couldn’t tell how late in the morning it was, but Mrs. Carter would not be awake yet.

Thankful that Mr. Dowding had made a few applicator prototypes before he’d been injured, Heidi knew they were down in the surgery and she’d have to deal without them for now. Unless, Mrs. Carter had any in her vanity in her room, it wouldn’t do to have Rose stumble on such things. If so, maybe relief was closer than she’d expected.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. This was not how she wanted to spend her day.

Allowing herself to wallow, she sang the first verse of ‘I’m Only Happy When It Rains’ at a volume too low for anyone passing to hear.

Not sure how long she’d been laying on the floor, Heidi gathered the skirts of her nightgown and stood, mentally preparing to face the day.

If the Carters were awake, Heidi could easily gain entrance to their chambers and get what she needed; if not, then it was a trip across the cold stone floor of the great room and through the kitchen.

Heidi wasn’t sure if Mrs. Carter had told her daughter about their invention, but better not to get caught by anyone. In fact, Heidi was surprised at how well Mrs. Carter had taken the idea of the invention. She supposed that because she was a midwife, the woman had a little more gumption when it came to such things.

She pulled back the drapes and sneered at the window. With the weather as it was, the fog was annoyingly thick. She was supposed to help with some laundry today, but there was little chance of them drying anything in the courtyard in the mist. Instead Mrs. Newton would drop down the drying racks in the small utility/mudroom between the surgery and kitchen to accommodate a smaller selection.

She had plans to go to the shop with Rose today to pick out ink. She didn’t exactly want to leave the house on a day like this, with things happening; but to make Rose happy, she would.

After getting what she needed from Mrs. Carter, and dressing, Heidi joined the family for breakfast around 10:30, the doctor ate his meal quickly and left to make his house calls. The young women left the cottage a few minutes after 11 and made their way together to the small shopping quarter.
arm-in-arm.

Heidi hoped that their shopping excursion would take a while, because she’d promised to help Mrs. Carter with the embroidery and sewing that was backing up and Heidi hated sewing. Mrs. Carter said that she might enjoy it more, if she practiced. Heidi was almost queasy realizing how closely Mrs. Carter echoed Lady Catherine. However gentle the tone, it was a reminder that Heidi would never 100 percent fit in, here.

Rose and Heidi exited the general store sometime later, Rose with a new pot of ink, when Lizzy called out to them.

“Good morning, Miss Bennet,” Heidi said. “How are the Collinses this morning?”

“They are well indeed,” Lizzy replied cheerfully. “I wished to take a stroll through the village to allow Sir Lucas some time with his daughters in private.”

“I’m sure they consider you family, Miss Bennet; but I wholly take your meaning. I felt the same a few weeks after my arrival in Hunsford. My poor aunt and uncle probably wish for my disappearance now and then as well.”

The midday bells chimed over the constabulary across the square from where Heidi and Lizzy stood.

“It must be a great comfort to know that you are welcome at the cottage. The Carters are a kind family, and not everyone would welcome a relation for as long as they have, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

They continued speaking, Heidi enjoying the conversation away from most of the propriety that had to be upheld when others were listening. She wanted to ask about Darcy, to find out for sure if he’d proposed, but Heidi doubted she could get away with so bold a question.

The noon stagecoach echoed down the street and Heidi and Lizzy took a few steps back to move out of the way of traffic while continuing their conversation.

In all honesty, it had taken Heidi some time to get used to the idea that the roads were only used a few times a day by the through-traffic of stage coaches.

A shout caught her attention and turned just in time to see the stage round the corner at a quick speed.

Her heart leapt into her throat seeing Rose reaching into the street for the jar of ink that she’d dropped.

“Forget it!” Heidi shouted, already running as fast as her skirts would allow in the hopes of pulling her out of the way.

Rose looked up at Heidi’s voice, but it was already too late.

The carriage and four horses were nearly on top of Rose before the coachman could halt the carriage. It was impact enough to propel Rose through the air, landing with a sickening crunch five feet from where she’d been standing.

Heidi raced to Rose’s side. Behind her there was shouting, but it was all muffled as she fell to her knees.
“Rose,” she said, reaching out to cup the girl’s cheek. Her eyes were closed, and Heidi’s heart pounded deafeningly.

“Rose,” she screamed.

Still nothing.

Someone crouched down on the other side of Rose’s prone form.

“My God, Is she al--?”

“Someone fetch Mrs. Carter!” Heidi shouted out at the crowd.

“Don’t touch her,” she ordered, seeing hands reaching out. “We can’t move her, not yet.”

A groan escaped Rose’s lips, and Heidi had to steady herself, trying not to collapse with relief.

“Try not to move, Rose,” she said, unsure if the girl could hear her. Heidi reached out and tucked a loosened curl behind Rose’s ear.

The gravity of the situation washed over her only then. She had absolutely no training for this.

She spotted Mr. Cooper and Mr. James standing nearby.

“We need something to brace her neck and blankets or something to carry her to the surgery.”

Rose blinked awake.

“Rose, honey, try not to move.”

“—I shall not.”

Heidi flinched at the dazed tone. “Stay awake for me, alright? Does anything hurt? Can you feel your toes?”

Something shifted and Heidi looked down to see Rose’s shoes move.

“That’s good.” She smiled down at Rose, hoping to reassure her.

“My arm,” Rose said with a groan as she looked down to her right side.

Acid churned in Heidi’s stomach. The elbow appeared to be over-extended.

“It might be broken, but we need to have your father examine it.”

“As you say,” Rose murmured.

“Don’t move, please,” Heidi begged. “I don’t want you to make your injuries worse.”

“Rose!”

The crowd parted and Mrs. Carter raced through the crowd, collapsing onto the cobbles beside her daughter.

“We need to get her out of the street,” Heidi said.

“I can carry her,” Mrs. Carter insisted, her hands running gently over Rose’s perspiring brow and
not looking up at Heidi.

“We need to be careful of neck wounds, or we could make her injuries worse.”

Mrs. Carter glanced up, dazed. Though Heidi had figured her patroness had seen this type of accident before, it had never been her own daughter. Heidi rested a hand on Mrs. Carter’s nearby knee.

“I’ve sent Mr. Cooper to get something that we can brace her with. If we can get a blanket or something stable to move her on, we can get her out of the road at the very least, but she needs to be stabilized.”

It took some time, once the men returned, for them to figure out a way to cushion Rose’s neck. But with some pillows, cloth, and ribbons from the shop, they managed something that was passable.

Mr. James brought what he called a camp bed, and Heidi nearly cried with relief. It was just what they needed, with a wooden frame and a mattress made of a layer of canvas stretched across the bars.

“I have not used it since my infantry days, but it should be what you need.”

Heidi thanked him. With Rose’s neck as braced as possible, Heidi instructed them to roll her over and put the flat frame under her body, like she’d seen on medical dramas.

By that time most of the people had cleared away, but Heidi and Mrs. Carter still had to work to move villagers out of the path as Mr. Cooper and Mr. James carried Rose home.

Reaching the cottage, Heidi cleared away some space and gave the men enough room to maneuver the camp bed into the surgery.

Mrs. Carter raced to her daughter’s side as soon as she was lowered to the bed.

“Is there anything we can fetch for you, Miss Meldrum?” Mr. Cooper asked.

“No, I don’t know what do to from here,” she said, rubbing the ball of her thumb over an eyebrow. Taking a few steps closer to the two men, she lowered her voice. “We just need my uncle to assess her condition.”

Mr. Cooper nodded grimly and Mrs. Newton appeared in the doorway from the mudroom.

Lizzy quickly gathered the woman up and directed her from the room. Heidi’s stomach lurched, she hadn’t even realized that Lizzy had come along.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Heidi said, returning her gaze to the men. “I do not think we require your help any longer. You may return home.”

Both bowed and left.

“Mrs. Carter,” Heidi said, walking to Rose’s temporary bed. “We should keep Rose awake until the doctor gets here. The dangers outweigh the good that a nap could do.”

Mrs. Carter nodded grimly.

She wasn’t sure how much time passed before the doctor arrived, half in a panic. She could see in his face that he was trying to remain calm as he asked what happened.
Heidi explained everything that she could remember, and then more about concussions and the possible broken arm. She’d never had either, but they were a big deal.

“I took care of her to the best of my ability, sir,” she said, feeling like she should apologize after seeing the defeat in his features.

“Please, take Mrs. Carter into the drawing room and have some tea made. I will tend to Rose myself.”

Heidi nodded immediately, guiding Mrs. Carter through the house and into the intimate room, surprised to see Lizzy and Mrs. Newton inside.

“I had no notion that you were still here, Miss Bennet.”

“I considered returning to the parsonage, but I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed.”

“I—I am grateful for your help, Miss Bennet.” Though Mrs. Carter smiled at Lizzy, her words were halting and distracted.

Heidi flinched. “I was just going see about some tea. Would you care to join us?”

“I would not wish to intrude.” Lizzy glanced toward the door, like a worried mother at the ER in one of those TV shows.

“I think Rose will be fine; she’s young and will heal quickly. You are welcome to stay as long as my Aunt has no objections.”

The two looked over at the mother who was dazed herself. It must have been the first time Rose had been hurt, though Heidi knew that Edward had been in scrapes in the past.

Lizzy only nodded, knowing she needed to stay.

“Good. I will return presently.”

Before the door closed behind her, Lizzy was talking to Mrs. Carter, drawing her out of the stupor.

When Heidi returned with a plate full of left over cookies from yesterday and a filled tea can, Lizzy was already sitting next to Mrs. Carter, clasping hands and whispering words of consolation and hope.

Heidi poured the tea and prepared it for Mrs. Carter, knowing by now how much honey and cream to add, and then poured some for the rest of the ladies in the room.

They chatted for nearly an hour, Lizzy and Heidi doing their best to distract Mrs. Carter, before the doctor entered the room, his expression solemn.

Mrs. Carter almost dropped her cup and saucer. “How is she?”

“Her arm is broken,” Doctor Carter said. “And she does have a significant bump on the head, but I will not know if she is concussed for some time.”

He crossed the room and took the seat beside his wife that Lizzy had vacated at his arrival.

“She is in a good deal of pain, but will be well enough soon, I daresay. One of us should keep watch for tonight. Such trauma can be dangerous.”
“I’ll watch her, if you wish, uncle. I can get some sleep presently and then stay up overnight, if you wish.”

“That would be appreciated, niece, thank you.”

Heidi nodded, putting her cup on the table.

“I should return to the parsonage,” Lizzy said, standing up. “I am sure my disappearance has been noted,” she added, wearily.

“Let me escort you to the door.”

After giving everyone her farewell, Lizzy followed Heidi out of the room and to the front of the house.

“Sir Lucas, Maria, and I will be leaving tomorrow morning. He wishes to return home sooner, now that he knows Charlotte is well settled.”

Oh no.

“So soon? I thought you’d surely stay another fortnight.”

Lizzy laughed heartily. “You begin to sound like Lady Catherine.”

Heidi drew her hands to her chest dramatically. “Heaven forbid.”

“She desired that we stay a full two months, but Father wrote to hasten my return, so we will be leaving sooner than expected. I think she intended me to stay in Hunsford until mid-June when she was planning to take a trip into town.”

Heidi waggled her eyebrows at Lizzy.

“You dare to tell me you did not wish to share a carriage with the venerable Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

Elizabeth shook her head, giving Heidi a shaming look.

Heidi grew serious. “I admit, your company in Hunsford has been so pleasurable that I would love for you to stay until June as well; but you must be eager to reconnect with your sisters.”

Lizzy looked at her with some sadness.

“Will you be staying to London to visit your Aunt and Uncle Gardiner?”

“With Sir Lucas as an escort we may stay overnight, but I am uncertain. I can see already that his visit is weighing on him.”

Heidi pressed her lips together. “If you wait, I’m sure I can gather the dresses you lent me, I hope it will not be too long before I can build my own wardrobe. I admit it will be unsettling once you’ve gone. Hunsford will grow far too quiet.”

Lizzy clasped Heidi’s hands in hers. “Keep the dresses for now. I daresay I will make the journey to Hunsford again soon. I enjoyed my visit.”

Heidi squeezed back before letting go, knowing what was to come for Lizzy.
“I suppose the disappearance of her nephews has devastated the Lady of Rosings.”

“I believe she only tolerated our company because she had no better prospects last night.”

“That is a shame, for you are one of my most favorite people.”

Lizzy smiled. “I admit, I never expected to find my dearest friend in such good hands.”

“Tell me,” Heidi ventured, she might never get the answer if she didn’t ask now. “Did you see Mr. Darcy again, after dinner the other night?”

An ashen look crossed Elizabeth’s face. “Sometimes, I worry you might be a mind reader, Miss Meldrum.”

“So, he did come see you?”

“He left me a letter.”

Heidi raised an eyebrow. “A letter?”

“I will not bore you with the bulk of the content, but he apologized for something I hadn’t even known he’d done. Not for certain anyway.”

“Did you think him sincere?” Her heart leapt into her throat.

Elizabeth thought on her words.

“I believe he was entirely sincere in his regret, though I am surprised. It makes me curious.”

“About what?”

“You have been witness to our friendship these last weeks, and I find your frankness refreshing, so I know you will take what I ask to heart.”

“Yes, of course.” Heidi waited with baited breath.

“Do you think he thought of me fondly?”

Heidi wanted to say ‘yes yes, a thousand times yes!’ but managed to maintain at least a pretended air of civility.

“I believe he does.” Heidi’s heart fluttered as she gave a sincere nod.

“He said he wished to make amends for this mistake he made.”

“What sort of mistake,” she asked, feigning ignorance.

Lizzy shrugged, though her brow was furrowed as if conflicted. “I would not seek to besmirch his good name, now that he feels remorse.”

“I would not wish you to betray his trust.”

Lizzy clasped Heidi’s hands. “Thank you for understanding.”

Heidi looked out onto the road, knowing she couldn’t delay Lizzy’s departure any longer. “Well then,” she said, stepping back under the doorframe. “I wish you all the best, Miss Bennet.”
“And I, you,” she replied, curtseying. “Please give my well wishes to Rose. I do not know if I will see anyone else before we leave on the morrow.”

“I will.”

“And do write to me at Longbourne. I would enjoy hearing from you.”

“And I, you.”

Heidi waited in the doorway until Lizzy disappeared onto the Canterbury Road.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Rose :( 
Monday, April 20th, 1812

Chapter Notes

AN: Lizzy’s gone! Whatever will Heidi do to keep busy? ;)

It was Monday before Heidi stepped out of the cottage. Stealing a few moments for reflection, Heidi walked along the lane toward the Brighton Road.

Horses were out to pasture and Heidi stopped to watch them eating in the warm sunlight.

“I intended to ring at the front door; but I noticed you were walking on the lane, and thought it might be better to speak with you privately.”

Heidi turned and greeted Anne, surprised at the visit.

“You came to see me?”

“I did. We have not seen you at Rosings in almost a fortnight, and I found I missed the companionship.”

“I did notice that you came unaccompanied, save for your driver,” Heidi said, looking past Anne’s shoulder at the empty street.

“Given that you put the idea in my head, perhaps you would wish to accompany me on a journey.”

“Me, Miss de Bourgh?” Heidi balked, wondering what the heiress was up to.

“You.” She nodded, her brown frizz glowing like a halo with the sun backlighting it.

“I am honored to be considered a good enough companion, but why and where?”

Anne gave Heidi an enigmatic smile.

“The truth of the matter is that I have some business to attend to, and I do not think that my mother would approve.”

Heidi gaped, surprised at the blatant disregard of her mother’s wishes.

“I am sure I can guess your thoughts. But in recent weeks, the things I have borne witness to have only strengthened my resolve.” Anne took in a gulp of air, her lips taut with determination.

“I do not wish to marry my cousin. Therefore, the contract must be broken. I wish to marry for love and I have the freedom to do so, as I have my own fortune to rely upon.”

Heidi fought the urge to give Anne a round of effusive applause. She’d never expected the woman to have such a backbone.

Anne coughed, covering her face with her handkerchief. Brave though she was, maybe she wasn’t still entirely over the pneumonia. She drew herself up again, as though resolute to remain firm in a way to which she was unaccustomed.
“My mother wishes to leave in June to go to town, and I would like to have my business concluded by then. I have written to my uncle, in Larkshire County, and he has invited me to Gariton to handle the aforementioned business.”

“Your uncle? Is this one of the de Bourgh relations?”

Anne gave a cryptic smile, as though delighting in keeping Heidi in suspense.

“My mother’s brother, the Earl.”

This was one surprise after another.

“And you think me worthy to accompany you on this journey?”

“It was you, after all, who said I had the money to change my destiny and that is exactly what I intend to do.”

“Please, Miss de Bourgh—“

“No, stop, do not speak,” she said, holding up a hand. “Mother knows nothing of this, and it will remain so, until my plans have been completed.”

“But I don’t understand. Why the change of heart?”

“I feel better. For the first time in my life, though I am not completely healed, I feel more alive. I wish to enjoy my life rather than simply live in it.”

Anne grinned and her tone changed to sincerity. “You would like to join me on this adventure, would you not?”

“I think it would be a grand adventure, but what if the Carters need me?”

“They will surely not begrudge my wishes. I am willing to hire some help, if they are so dependent on your aid.”

Heidi’s heart sank at the mention of money.

“Miss de Bourgh” she said slowly. “I must admit that this is something I never expected; but I must be frank to the point where you might find me impertinent. I have little money to my own name, so little in fact that the doctor has considered giving me an allowance from the funds he has set aside for his own daughter’s dowry. It would be wrong of me to assume that he would be willing to give up the funds for such an adventure and even more so of me to assume that you would be footing the entire bill. I know the English are uncomfortable with such talk, but that is the truth of the matter. I would not wish to inconvenience anyone more than I have already.”

Anne gave her a warm smile and Heidi sighed with relief, amazed that she’d managed without fumbling her words. It was so embarrassing, but if she had her own money that would be a much different story; except all her money was in 2018 and she was stuck penniless.

“If you do not wish to join me, I will not force you; but I had intended on becoming your patroness of sorts. I know well that many of your clothes were donated by Miss Bennet as there could be no mistaking the patterns and materials as something you would not have chosen. I already planned to take it upon myself to give you a new wardrobe to wear while on the journey. It is not as if, as you have pointed out, I do not have the funds.”
“I never expected charity.”

“This is not charity, this is an investment.”

“You find me worthy of investment?”

Anne grinned sagely. “You are perhaps the only person of my acquaintance that has never been interested in me for my money. You have never once intimated that you were desirous of funds and never expected anything from me. Mrs. Collins and Ms. Bennet have been pleasant enough, but they all play the game; you are genuine.”

“I’m an ignorant moose,” Heidi countered.

Anne covered her mouth with her gloved hand, as though forgetting she was free to giggle in such company.

“Perhaps, but I enjoy your companionship, and maybe, once I’ve freed myself and my cousin of this contract, for he believes in doing everything properly and I cannot be the only one that has seen the looks he gave Miss Bennet, we can talk about a different arrangement.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Think of this adventure as a trial. We will be spending some weeks together, going to the North, visiting my family. My mother has her steward, of course, but it is about time that I begin making my own decisions and having someone I trust at my side would not be a bad thing.”

“Like a job interview?”

“Something of sorts,” Anne shrugged. “Come with me, we can see how well we get on, and maybe at the end of it, I will have gained the confidence I need to do what I should have done when I hit my majority and taken over the running of Rosings Park for myself.”

Heidi glanced up at the clouds, mind racing. Rose was injured. No doubt, her absence would be a burden on the Carter household. On the other hand, Anne—her truest friend in this new world—was presenting her with the opportunity of a lifetime.

It was the latter thought that won out.

“Very well, Miss de Bourgh,” she replied with a grin. “I suppose I shall not argue with the heiress to Rosings any further. I will need to speak to my aunt and uncle though, as the house is not the same since Rose got hurt.”

At this, Anne gave a sly smile.

“I have already spoken to the doctor and he has agreed. You see, I asked already knowing you had permission.”

“That was nefarious of you,” Heidi said, waving an accusing finger at the other woman.

“As I said before, I am my own woman.”

Before Heidi could say anything, Anne continued.

“I have also asked the doctor if we should not take Rose with us.”

“She’s to join us?” Heidi wasn’t sure how she felt about that, the girl was in a sling. Then again,
she mused, it would take care of her concern about leaving the Carters alone to tend to Rose themselves. She could keep an eye on the girl while she was on the mend, bringing some adventure to all their lives.

“Doctor Carter assures me that she will be well enough to travel soon enough. I thought it might be a learning experience for the girl, to get to know the countryside, perhaps learn some of English history, and we would return her to her father when they journey to Oxford for Edward’s graduation in June.”

Heidi glanced at the courtyard, the driver having returned to his seat on the phaeton. “I only have one final question, when do we leave?”
Thursday, May 7th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Aaaand, I'm a day late! So sorry! You'll get another chapter tomorrow! :(

“Would you look at that?” Rose gasped, leaning over the pile of pillows they’d used to keep her protected in the best chaise and four Rosings could provide.

Heidi craned her neck to gaze out the window of the carriage.

It appeared they’d arrived and though the fog was still heavy, the estate rose impressively over the green.

An old building, straight out of the middle ages, was sprawled over what must have been at least two acres of hilly landscape. Towers buttressed up between connecting corridors like a maze as the carriage drove toward the main entrance at the back of the long driveway.

Heidi’s mouth went dry as she stared at the ivy growing up to the first floor on many of the façade’s walls.

She thought about Sissi and how she must have felt seeing the Schönbrunn for the first time. Sure the princess had been surrounded by royalty her entire life, but to be thrust into the spotlight at the royal palace rather than her country estate, must have been intimidating.

“We didn’t pack enough clothes,” she muttered.

Anne laughed. “So you approve of my uncle’s estate, then?”

“It is impressive, Miss Anne,” Rose said.

By the first night on their journey, Anne and Heidi had settled into a closer relationship. The heiress had even gone so far to let Rose drop the honorifics when they were alone. They’d stopped at an inn in Harlow on their way north, supplying their own sheets and pillows for the beds, never knowing if the inns they would be staying at might be infested with fleas.

Heidi had written a short letter to Lizzy then, having forgotten to before, saying that if she wished to write, to send the letter to Wych Elm Hall until they returned in June. Heidi was desperate to discover what was happening in Longbourn now that the family would certainly be aware of Wickham’s misdeeds.

They’d been on the road traveling for nearly a week and to help pass the time, when they weren’t helping Rose with history lessons on England or gossiping about what might have occurred to the current King, resulting in his son’s regency, Heidi had told the two ladies the story of Les Misérables. She changed the timeline a little, since the Battle of Waterloo hadn’t yet occurred. Heidi was still haunted by the two-hundred pages of Hugo’s novel covering the battle; but aside from that, she tried to remember all the small details she could. The musical didn’t cover much of the background details, but she’d read the novel for a literature class she’d taken in college and had loved it.
By drawing out the backstories of each character as best she could, Heidi had managed the impressive feat of making the story last for two days. And while she had sung some of the songs from the musical, she’d avoided the raunchier ones when Fantine was prostituting herself out, unwilling to have that talk with the young girl. In between, she’d take breaks by telling them the Disney versions of certain fairy tales, singing the songs whenever she could.

She had also told them the heimat version of the story of Sissi. Heidi, though she knew the truth of what happened to Elisabeth, preferred the movie over the tragedy that had befallen the woman as the Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

When the large chaise came to a stop, Anne climbed out first, followed by Heidi and then Rose, who was helped gingerly by the footman. Heidi had, at first, resented the fact that Lady Catherine had insisted on at least three servants accompanying them, but after all the travel they’d done, Heidi was glad that the three men were available for their needs.

Still, Heidi feared it would never be instinctive for her to ignore ‘the help.’

Waiting for them was a small entourage of servants, likely there to assist with the unloading and unpacking of their luggage.

itles and forms of address rattled in her head as Heidi stepped onto the gravel. From the letter Anne had shared with her, Heidi knew that the Earl, the Baron of Blakely, and Mr. de Bourgh should be joining them. The Baron was the eldest son with his own courtesy title and everything, and the colonel’s older brother.

To be perfectly honest, all the information Heidi was absorbing, duke this and earl that, was a little overwhelming. As long as she got the style right when talking to them, that’s all she needed to know.

Coming down the stairs from the front door were three handsomely dressed men. Each was dressed in velvet coats, their cuffs only just showing in order to allow their cufflinks to catch the light. Anne had explained, at the inn in Harlow, that this was the fashion and Heidi, remembering Mr. Darcy’s cuffs, had merely shaken her head at the information.

Heidi fought the urge to smooth her skirts as Anne walked up to a striking older gentleman. She typically preferred guys that looked about her own age, maybe 40ish at the high end and Heidi wondered if this was the lawyer cousin.

“Niece,” he said. “How glad we are to see you.”

Her stomach lurched.

“Your lordship.” Anne curtseyed at the Earl.

They exchanged pleasantries as Anne had warned her. Privately her friend had mentioned that her uncle was a stickler for manners, even more so than Lady Catherine, and Heidi was determined not to embarrass her friend by doing the wrong thing.

Larkshire, a county Heidi had no knowledge of, was situated between York and Lancashire counties. Heidi had wondered about it, but even she had to admit that she didn’t know anything about English geography.

The man on the Earl’s right bore similar features and, now that she’d had the chance to take them in, Heidi guessed him to be the heir. His necktie far more styled than the cravats of the other two men. His hair was a full dusky brown, somewhere between blond and that deep rich brown of the
The two men were introduced as Baron Percival Fitzwilliam, the heir to the Earldom and older brother of the colonel, as she’d suspected. The second man was Ambrose de Bourgh, Anne’s cousin, the attorney living in the nearby city of Gariton.

Heidi was surprised that Lady Catherine had allowed her nephew to become an attorney. The woman was someone who would absolutely forbid it.

Heidi did her best to remain meek and polite throughout the introductions, feeling completely underdressed compared to the men, and she kept an eye on Rose as the girl followed them inside the estate.

“You will each have your own rooms, in the guest wing. Smithwick will convey you to your chambers,” the Earl said. “Do not hesitate to ring, should you find yourselves in need.” He glanced at his pocket watch. “We will meet again in the south parlor for afternoon tea in an hour.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

Before they had a chance to even talk to the other two men, the cousins followed the earl, leaving Heidi and Rose standing in the corridor with Anne and the butler.

Heidi gripped the reticule in her hand. Her uncle had put Heidi in charge of fifty pounds which were to be used to supplement Miss de Bourgh’s generosity and to pay for anything she or Rose might want on the journey for themselves. So far she’d managed to get Anne to let her pay for one night at the inn; but otherwise the majority of the money was accounted for.

The room that Smithwick brought her to was breathtaking. The deep brown wallpaper, which Heidi might have thought too dark on its own, decorated with a golden Fleur des Lis pattern. The set of three windows, situated in a semicircle along the back wall, were draped in yellow curtains in what came closest to what Heidi might call goldenrod.

There was a couch near the center of the room, facing the windows, with a reading nook feel and on the near wall was a large four-poster bed, with a canopy of the same golden color and beautiful, cream-colored duvet.

The room rivaled the one that Anne had at Rosings and Heidi couldn’t help the glee that bubbled up. She’d never been vain, but a bedroom like this would certainly make one feel like they were a queen.

Or, she thought as she chuckled aloud, at least a countess.

With the help of a chambermaid, Heidi changed into the sage dress from Mrs. James, not wanting to break her new dresses in quite yet. She wanted to dismiss the girl, not being used to such attentions, but she knew better than to insult her host by refusing the help. The girl helped rearrange Heidi’s hair into something more period-appropriate, brushing back the wisps of hair that had come loose.

After Heidi dismissed the servant, saying she’d just be waiting for Rose, she checked her face in the mirror at the small vanity. The need to do something in order to impress the patriarch of the family and his son had her pulling out the small tube of makeup she’d brought through the portal. Those spare drops of BB cream would not last long if she were going to spend a lot of time with
Anne’s family, but she wanted to make a good impression and hadn’t been able to help herself.

The makeup evened out her complexion, and though she wanted to swipe some color on her eyes, it would not go over well in present company.

Maybe at dinner, should they be meeting any more important guests, she could swipe a little of the lavender eyeshadow over her eyes.

The sparkle from her earrings caught her eye. Anne had asked about them, and Heidi had said that they and the ring from her mother were the only things that she had to her name, and though she could sell them if her position became desperate, she hoped it would not come to that. Anne had more questions, Heidi could tell, but thankfully, the woman held them back. She understood that such topics could not be talked about in front of Rose.

While she was alone, Heidi took the small pouch out of the reticule, in which she carried Peter’s ring, and shoved it under the mattress. If she got the chance, Heidi fully intended on selling the loathsome thing. She didn’t want it, and the money would help immensely. She would have sold it already, except for the fact that Hunsford had no jeweler and she wanted to ensure she got as much money as she could for it. Bad memories aside, getting rid of it might be the only funds she’d have to her name in this place that the doctor did not provide.

She first considered using whatever she got to repay the doctor for his generosity, but Heidi was concerned that if she was stuck here, maybe the Carters would grow tired of her and kick her out. She’d need that money to make her way in this world. With the earl in attendance at the house, maybe she could ask him to use his connections to find either a proper jeweler or appraiser, or maybe she could sell it straight to his lordship.

As of yet, she hadn’t mentioned her plans to either woman or the earl. Short as their first encounter was, he didn’t seem the friendly sort. However, there were two other trustworthy men in the estate that she could ask.

A knock on her door signaled Rose’s arrival.

“What a lovely view,” she said, rushing to the set of windows.

“I have not had a chance yet to take it in,” Heidi replied, joining her cousin. Heidi could see that Rose had not put her sling back over her arm. “Do not forget that we need to check on the bandaging.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “I had the maid ensure the knots were fast.”

Heidi pursed her lips at the snappish tone. It had been a long few days cooped up in the carriage, so she let it go. Arguing about it wouldn’t make the teenage girl less cranky.

“Very well,” she said, keeping her tone light. “Let us check on Miss Anne.”

To her surprise, Heidi found that Anne’s room was even more impressive than her own. Anne’s quarters were covered in white and crimson wallpaper, matching the bed’s canopy and coverings. It was a corner room, with two sets of windows, bringing in far more light than Heidi’s had.

She wondered for a fleeting moment if Rose’s room was this grand as well.

“The house is truly impressive,” she said, before looking at Anne. The woman had changed as well, into a dress with a blue linen skirt and a satin top. As always, she was lovely.
“It is a gem,” Anne replied, letting the maid finish rearranging her hair.

It wasn’t much longer before Heidi and her companions were conveyed into a bright yellow parlor of some type, the ceilings decorated with filigree just like Rosings had been. Proving, as if it needed to be done, that they were a family of wealth.

The earl, the baron, and the attorney already in attendance and stood to greet them. Heidi felt a little like a princess, though this was a regular occurrence for them.

“Your rooms were satisfactory,” the earl said, stating it as a fact rather than a question.

“Yes, thank you.”

He waved his hand toward the settees and armchairs in the center of the room, not near the hearth. The windows were open, letting in a soft breeze and Heidi breathed in the scent of flowers in the air.

“Our rooms are lovely, your lordship,” she said, awkward as she took her seat. “I have not had the pleasure of such rooms in quite some time. This estate is breathtaking.”

The earl’s eyebrows furrowed and Heidi grew afraid that she’d said something wrong already.

Conversation started in a halted manner. Heidi wasn’t sure what to say and Rose, as the youngest, certainly couldn’t be held accountable to host the conversation; but eventually Anne was drawn in and reconnecting with her two cousins brightened her features.

Heidi folded her hands in her lap while the maid served tea, glancing at the baron, whose frown indicated how little he wished to join them.

“You simply must come into Gariton while you are at Wych Elm,” Ambrose said, to Anne. “I have a lovely townhouse and my wife is an exceptional house keeper.”

“How is your wife? I have not seen her since your last trip to Bath, when you stayed at Rosings.”

“She is well. Though she longs for town and I am afraid I cannot afford to make the journey to London as much as she would like.”

Ambrose then drew Rose into conversation about music. Rose boasted that she was given permission by her father to attend some masters this winter and he asked about her favorite subjects and what she might like to focus on while in town. Heidi listened politely, thinking it better to remain a silent observer.

The earl excused himself, stating that he had duties to attend to and Heidi watched the man leave, hoping they hadn’t offended their host.

“Miss Meldrum sings famously well,” Anne said, when the door closed behind the earl.

“Does she?” Ambrose asked, raising an eyebrow in Heidi’s direction.

“I have had some training, but I am no prima donna by any stretch of the imagination.” She shifted in her seat. “I’m afraid I do not know many of the English country songs.”

“If you have a composer you prefer, I can have some music sent in from Gariton, “Ambrose said, piping up. “We have a couple of local masters in the city that keep a variety on hand.”

“That is unnecessary, I would not wish to put anyone out.”
“Nonsense,” Ambrose said, leaning forward. “It is no trouble. In fact, if you provide me with a list, when I return to the city in a couple of days, I can pick them up myself.”

Heidi flushed, awkward.

“You are returning to Gariton so soon?” Anne asked.

“I imagine I will have some paperwork to have drawn up by then.” He gave Anne a grin that spoke of the clandestine duties she’d asked him to perform.

Heidi looked at the baron and saw him furrow his brow.

“As long as we would not be in your way, perhaps we can join you. I would dearly love to see the city again. I have not been this far north since my season.”

“I would be delighted to show you and your companions around the fair city.”
The next morning, Heidi found herself exploring the halls of the estate, her fingers trailing along an ancient tapestry. She wasn't sure if Anne or Rose were awake yet, but the urge to explore got the better of her. This medieval estate certainly had the feel that it could be haunted: dark corridors, dark masculine wall hangings, and stone floors were all part of the aesthetic. The sprawling estate made her want to map it out.

She avoided the family wing, not wanting to intrude; but went downstairs to explore the common areas. Not all that surprised about the complexity of an estate built in the 1600’s, Heidi was enthralled. Like some sort of inspiration for the Louvre, with the wings jutting out, making a U-shape of the estate, the living quarters were on the additions built over the back wings of the house. Some of the doors were open, as servants fluttered about before breakfast was served, and she was interested in finding the library. Ambrose had mentioned it at supper last night, and though she could have easily asked one of the servants where it was, she assumed from his directions that it was down this corridor, past the long gallery of portraits of the historic Fitzwilliam family.

It was hard to imagine Lady Catherine trampling down the hallways of the estate forty or more years ago.

Dismissing the first room as a lounge of some sort, Heidi closed the door and moved further down the hall. The second door opened to a conservatory, like the one at Rosings, with large windows allowing massive amount of light to come streaming in. Heidi wondered if this was used as a greenhouse or if there was a separate house somewhere on the grounds.

When she reached the third, Heidi told herself that this was going to be the last room she checked. If she was wrong she could ask the baron where it was when she joined the family for breakfast in an hour. She needed some topic to broach with the future earl and it would be a good start, asking where the library was. If she were going to be staying here for almost a month, she'd need something to talk about, right?

Jackpot, she thought, opening the door and revealing a room whose walls were lined with bookshelves.

Heidi stepped inside, closing the door behind her and—

“Ho-ly shit,” she said, before she could catch herself.

The man kept his back to her as the woman he was with scrabbled to cover her chest.

Heidi reached for the door.

“I am so sorry, I—“

“Miss Meldrum, wait."

Her hand dropped from the door handle, recognizing the voice instantly, though he’d said little at dinner the night before.

His shoulders shrugged and Heidi watched from behind as his lordship apparently tucked himself
back into his britches.

Her mouth went dry.

“I didn’t see anything,” she said, and raced from the room.

Heidi took the closest set of stairs back to the first floor and hoped she could find her room quickly.

Nobles had a weird sense of what was honorable and what was not, but she never expected to walk in on the baron boinking some woman up against the library shelves. Definitely not at 9 am.

Reaching her room, Heidi caught herself just before slamming the door shut. Her breathing was erratic as she tried to calm her heart.

Holy Jesus, she’d just seen something bad, very bad.

Well, not murder bad, but bad.

Heidi leaned her head against the door and stared up at the ceiling, as she slid down the wood and collapsed onto the floor. Her hands were shaking and suddenly the image of Peter fucking the other woman flashed in her mind.

Before she could even breathe, Heidi began sobbing.

Heavy footsteps echoed through the corridor and Heidi panicked.

She shimmied away from the door and slithered under the bed, pulling her skirts with her just as there was a knock on her door.

“Miss Meldrum?”

She closed her eyes.

“May I enter?”

Before she could have responded, the door latch lifted. Heidi shoved her hand in her mouth, ignoring how dirty it might be. Right now, being quiet was more important than anything.

“Miss Meldrum?”

She could see the shoes of the baron as he stepped into the room and she held her breath, not even daring to breathe from her nose. She’d seen those serial killer movies before and did not want to get caught because she was huffing.

He called out for her again and stepped through the room searching. After a few moments, his footsteps thudded away before he closed the door behind him.

Ripping her hand from her mouth, Heidi pulled herself out from under the bed and quickly went to her stash of modern items that had been locked in a chest. She furiously brushed her teeth at the basin, washing the taste of dirt out of her mouth.

“Shtupid shtupid girl,” she muttered as she counted down the proper two minutes, staring at herself in the mirror.

Seeing that some strands had fallen out of their confinement when she spit into the basin, Heidi
quickly re-pinned her hair.

When a maid entered the room sometime later, announcing that breakfast was being served in the parlor, Heidi considered not going at all; but that would surely make whatever situation she’d find herself in worse.

“Will you wait, please? I could use an escort down there.”

“Miss?”

“I don’t want to get lost in a great house such as this,” she said, her cheeks reddening.

“Yes, miss.”

Taking another look in the mirror, Heidi couldn’t leave her room without putting on at least a little of the cream. Her face was red and splotchy and it would surely give away that she’d seen something.

Heidi dismissed the girl to the hall, just so she could finish her ablutions. She shuddered as the word left her thoughts, still not liking the sound of it, and took care of the make-up situation.

A few more drops of her makeup disappeared from the tube.

When she reached the breakfast parlor everyone, even Rose, was already at the table.

The men stood from their seats.

“Please don’t get up. I apologize for my tardiness,” she said, taking the only empty seat. Though it was thankfully between Anne and Rose, she found that Percival was sitting across from her.

Heidi ate her breakfast slowly and carefully, answering questions when asked, but not offering up any information to keep the conversation going.

“Percival.” The earl’s voice was low but demanding.

Heidi looked up, as did the rest of the table, and the heir sniffed and a small pill box snapped shut.

“I despise your use at the table.”

“Yes, father.”

Percival’s lip curled, but he put the case away. Heidi frowned, wondering what he had been doing.

Breakfast continued for another twenty minutes or so without incident before the earl announced that he was headed into town later that afternoon and would not be back for dinner.

“Since the weather is so fine, I thought I might go riding after breakfast,” Anne announced. “Would it be possible to use one of horses in the stables? I would not wish to tire out my own so soon after our journey”

“Of course,” Percival said. “If you wish for company I need to stretch out Achilles. We could take the trail around the lake.”

The earl’s expression suggested displeasure at his son, but he said nothing. She played with marmalade that had spilled off her toast with her fork, acting like the conversation wasn’t awkward.
“Would you care to join us, Miss Meldrum? If you come, we can surely persuade Ambrose to join us.”

“I’m afraid I do not have a riding habit,” she said, grateful that such needs weren’t considered back in Hunsford when they’d ordered some outfits from London. Hopefully it would take a fortnight to get anything like it from Gariton, and she would be in the clear. Heidi did not intend on using her uncle’s money for more clothing.

“That does not signify. I am sure some of mother’s old things would do well enough.”

The earl gave his son another cold look.

"I would rather your mother’s things remained as they were."

Beside her, Anne avoided her uncle’s eye and Heidi tried to keep a smile on her face.

“I should stay with Rose, with her arm, I wouldn’t presume to—“

“Nonsense. We have an entire staff here to—“

“Miss Carter,” Heidi said a bit more firmly, “has been placed in my care. I would not wish to foist my responsibilities onto anyone else, especially since she has been feeling so unwell since the accident.”

“You need not speak about me as if I were not present.” Rose’s cheeks flushed.

“I’m sorry, Rose.”

Rose smiled, and not getting the hint, she continued, “you are more than welcome to go riding, I will be perfectly capable of keeping myself occupied. The Baron has already provided me with a stack of novels from the library so I will be indisposed for the foreseeable future.”

"Without the proper attire, I would not wish to ride," she said, seeing the intense look that the earl was giving her. She was running out of excuses.

Two hours later, Heidi found herself all trussed up in one of the former countess’ riding habits, despite her loud, and the earl’s subtler, protestations. Unfortunately, the dress was an older style and Heidi had been forced to wear the stays that she’d purchased prior to leaving Hunsford. She had one of the maids helping, but with no one able to empathize with the pain of never having been forced into such tight clothing before, she made sure to ask them to keep it a little loose.

The maid made eye contact but didn't comment, doing what was asked.

When the horses were pulled out of the stables and lined up for them to ride, a pack on Ambrose’s horse filled with wine and some nibbles, Heidi spotted the sidesaddle on the horse that had stopped in front of her.

Her stomach dropped.

“Anne,” she said, squeaking out her friend’s name.

The woman walked over with a questioning expression.

“I’ve never ridden side-saddle,” she said. She eyed the saddle, looking to see if she could fake that it was broken and she couldn’t ride; she’d rather ride bareback than make a fool of herself.
"How did you ride before?"

"I wore breeches and rode in the same manner as my father."

Anne gasped.

"How surprising," Percival said drolly, waving his hand toward one of the larger grooms.

Anne caught Heidi’s attention with a few quick words. "Miss Meldrum, observe as I seat my horse. It is simple."

The boy, who was sturdy, knelt down, fingers woven together in front of him. Anne placed her foot in the boy's hands and after a quick count off, the boy lifted her into the air and Anne settled on the saddle with the ease of someone who’d done it a thousand times. Heidi had no idea that Anne could ride, but she appeared to have misjudged the situation.

"That doesn't look so bad," Heidi said, trying not to let them see her fear.

Percival and Ambrose gave each other a smile and her chest clenched.

The boy knelt in front of Heidi and she placed her foot in his hands as she reached up for the pommel.

The infernal horse was huge. She hadn't even thought about horses since she'd gone to camp that summer.

"One, two, three," he said, and Heidi jumped off with her left foot.

It moved just as she was aiming for the saddle. Heidi shrieked, missing her target and landing with a hard thump on the dirt.

"You need to calm yourself, Miss Meldrum," Ambrose said with a smile, running his hand down the horse’s neck in a calming fashion. "She feels your nerves."

Heidi nodded, her ass throbbing with the aftershocks of her fall, and after centering herself, tried again. This time, she was able to seat herself and managed to put her right leg on the other side of the top pommel.

"Very good, Miss Meldrum," Percival said, his hand caressing the horse’s neck.

"At least I managed something." Though her words were quiet, inwardly Heidi was incredibly pleased that she'd managed to seat herself on the horse’s back on only the second try.

"That was a fine first seating," Anne said, with an encouraging grin.

Glancing up at the side of the house, the earl was standing in a window overlooking the stables. She didn't think she'd get scolded, but Percival most certainly would for going against his father's wishes.

The men mounted their steeds and Heidi soon found herself in the middle of the group as they rode out onto the Fitzwilliam lands. As the grounds became hillier toward the edge of the estate, she felt her skirts slide up precariously. The whole off-the-side thing definitely had a learning curve, but she managed to slide over to find her balance.

Ambrose and his mare sidled up beside her.
"Have you had the opportunity to attend any assemblies since your return to England? You were in London for some time before you joined your uncle's family."

"I have not had the pleasure," Heidi replied.

"That is a shame. Perhaps while you are in the north there will be an event you can attend."

She blanched and, before thinking, blurted, "I really hope not."

Ambrose quirked a mischievous eyebrow. "Is it not a universal truth that all women enjoyed a good party? Mrs. De Bourgh certainly does."

"Unfortunately," Heidi confessed, not really liking the fact that she had to admit to not knowing something, "I don't know a single country dance. The moment I would be asked to the dance floor, I would be known as a fraud."

"Not a single one?"

"No," she shook her head, blushing in embarrassment. "I can waltz, salsa, swing and box step, but I could not even begin to understand a country dance."

"I do not know what most of the others were," Ambrose said with a puzzled turn of his mouth, "but I have heard of the waltz. Quite a scandalous dance if the rumors are true, though I cannot say that I have ever seen it in practice."

Heidi grinned, thinking about the dance in a different context. "I daresay it is."

"I would be interested in seeing a demonstration."

"Your wife may think otherwise."

He chortled, good-naturedly. "Indeed. You must meet her when we journey to Gariton."

"It would be a pleasure," she said.

Chapter End Notes

Oopsie!
Tuesday, May 12th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Welcome, new readers and old!

Sorry, it's a day late! I didn't sleep last night, so does it count still as the 12th?? Eh?? :D

Heidi took a breath, steeling herself and avoiding looking the man who held her arm. It was probably uncouth what she was about to do, but she couldn’t help herself. "I wish to apologize for the other day, your lordship. I did not mean to--- intrude."

As they’d promised, the Baron and Mr. de Bourgh had brought their guests to Gariton, not only to see the city, but to also finalize some of Anne’s paperwork.

She’d expected to be on Mr. de Bourgh’s arm, she’d gotten to know the lawyer well the past few days; but Heidi found herself inexplicably on the arm of the baron.

Though it had already been a few days since the incident, Heidi hadn’t had the nerve to address what she’d seen and now that he was taking his duties as host seriously, she didn’t wish to let the awkwardness grow.

"It is I who should apologize,” he said, stopping and pulling them to the side, out of the way of the other shoppers walking past. “I should have been more...discreet in the location of my activities."

Heidi flushed. "I should not have presumed to go exploring in a place that was not my own."

Percival gave a laugh. "We could spend the entire morning apologizing for our own faults, Miss Meldrum,” he said with dry humor. “I will forgive you if you forgive me."

She grinned. She couldn't forget about the scene she'd walked in on that first morning, but she couldn't fault the guy too much, she supposed. He was used to such freedoms in his world. Who was she to judge? Minus the fact that the image was burned into her brain. What she wouldn’t give for a little brain bleach.

“Very well,” she said, taking his arm. “You are forgiven.” They caught up with Ambrose and Anne, who’d come to a stop in front of a non-descript office front.

"This is my place of business," Ambrose said, thumbing over toward the front door.

The baron nodded and Heidi caught him watching her. "Unless you have need of us, I thought to take Miss Meldrum to George's Tailory so she might purchase a proper riding habit."

Rather than protesting, Heidi kept quiet as Ambrose and Anne took their leave. She didn’t particularly relish the idea of spending the morning in an office watching while Anne signed papers.

Rose had stayed at Wych Elm after having collapsed in a fit the night before. Doctor Burk, who had been called at the late hour from Gariton, had said that it was a direct result of the concussion
she’d experienced in Hunsford and Heidi had spent much of the night keeping an eye on her cousin. When he’d returned this morning, Doctor Burk said she was recovering well and should stay abed, though the girl’s headache would dissipate throughout the day.

After some futile protesting on Heidí’s part, Rose had successfully shooed Heidi out of her room to join the others on the excursion. Promising Rose that she could join them at a later date, once she was feeling better, had brought such a smile to the girl’s face that Heidi quickly put aside her guilt at the chance to spend some time with adults alone.

Stepping off the sidewalk to cross toward the shopping district after saying their goodbyes to Anne and Mr. de Bourgh, Heidi addressed her escort. "I do not think that I need a riding habit, my Lord. I doubt I will do much riding when I return to Hunsford." She was certainly not going to spend the money from the doctor on something that might never again be worn.

"You do not wish for new clothing? I thought all women admired shopping."

"You will find, if we continue to spend time together, that I am not like any woman you’ll likely meet."

"That I can believe." He grinned down at her, his brow shading his deep-set eyes. He looked less like his brother and more like Mr. Darcy; but, they were cousins, so that at least made sense.

She clutched the reticule in her hand, the ring inside. Maybe his Lordship could help her with it, now that she was in a place with proper stores. And the distraction might prevent her from spending more of her uncle’s money.

"I was thinking," she began, causing Percival to incline his head. "You are a man of some means."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I would imagine so."

"Do you have a jeweler that you trust? Or someone that would be willing to buy a trinket from me?"

"I do not understand."

She pursed her lips. She should have known that Percival would ask more questions that she’d bargained for.

"I have a ring I’d like to rid myself of, but there were no jewelers in Hunsford, and I do not expect that I would get a fair price as a random person walking into any store. Seeing as you have a reputation within Gariton or at least a recognizable name, perhaps you could recommend a buyer. Someone who wouldn’t cheat me."

He considered her, in the shade of a milliner’s shop. "I have a man. Do you have the trinket with you?"

“Yes.” Heidi relaxed. She felt better about being alone with Lord Fitzwilliam now that she’d apologized. He’d been gracious and forgiving about her trespasses. It was clear he was not like his father.

"We can walk there, if you wish. It is but a few streets north of here."

Stepping into the shop after he diverted them from the trek to the tailory, Heidi was introduced to James Peterson, who had, apparently, attended university with Percival.
That was good enough for her.

When asked, Heidi produced the one-karat brilliant cut solitaire from her bag and placed it on the counter.

"I wish to sell this ring," she said, sliding it across the wood.

Mr. Peterson whistled, picking it up. "This is a remarkable jewel, my lady," he said, picking it up. "I have never seen its like."

Heidi didn't know much about the diamond industry, but it stood to reason that the cut was relatively new, in the grand scheme of jewelry. It was possible he really hadn't ever seen anything like it before.

"I don't mean to correct you," she said with a sheepish smile, "but I'm not a lady."

"With a diamond of this clarity at your disposal?"

He glanced past her at the baron, who was still a step behind her.

"Miss Meldrum is an officer's daughter—" he began in explanation.

She reached out, almost resting her hand on his wrist, but pulled away at the last second, realizing that touching a future earl without permission was probably frowned upon. "But I am no lady, just lucky enough to call his lordship a friend. I think."

Mr. Peterson considered this. "He is a good friend to have. Do you wish to sell the entire piece or just the diamond?" He turned his attention back down to the ring.

Heidi shrugged. "Maybe you could give me the price for the gold and the diamond? I do not know for sure yet."

"Give me a few moments, please," he said, flipping the ring into his palm and taking it to his workshop in the back.

"That was a remarkable trinket," Percival said when they were alone.

"It was my engagement ring."

"Engagement ring? Your betrothed must have had a keen eye for jewelry to impress James."

"He was—" Heidi paused, not having prepared for this line of questioning. "in trade." Peter hadn't been rich or anything, but the ring had definitely been purchased with the intent to make his friends jealous. "It was an heirloom piece," she lied.

"It appeared to be brand new."

"I had it cleaned not long ago," she said, lying again and resisting the urge to bite her lip. Even though her entire place in this world was a lie, deceiving his lordship, with all his genuine curiosity, was inducing some exceptional guilt.

Heidi examined the jewelry out on display on the counter of the store, not wanting to continue the line of conversation. She flinched, noticing there were no price tags.

That was never a good sign.
Percival pulled his snuff tin out of an inner pocket of his jacket and took a pinch. Now that she knew it was tobacco, Heidi was less interested in it, mostly because her first thought had been some sort of cocaine.

The image of a 1980’s Hollywood party, with his lordship and friends doing lines of coke, sequins everywhere, had her smirking. The baron seemed like the sort that wouldn’t be able to pass up such debauchery.

She smirked, sneaking a glance at his lordship, while they waited.

When Mr. Peterson walked out into the storefront, he had a large grin on his face and looked across at her escort before addressing Heidi.

"This ring is one of a kind, Miss Meldrum, one that many a jeweler would covet for its craftsmanship. If it were mine, I would be reluctant to part with it."

"I have my mother's ring, with a nearly identical cut. I have no desire to keep that wretched piece," she said, taking off the glove on her right hand and showing the ring to him.

The man took her hand, and Heidi fought the instinct to cringe at his touch, knowing her reaction would be misinterpreted.

"This ring means more to me than a hundred of those."

He shook his head in wonderment. “Truly the work of a master."

"The best," she lied. "I have few things that I can claim in the world as mine.” She swallowed, a surge of emotion threatening to choke her. “But, I would rather see that ring at the bottom of the Atlantic than on my hand again."

The jeweler’s expression softened thoughtfully. “Very well, Miss Meldrum. The good news is that I would willingly purchase the ring, the bad news is that I do not currently have the bank notes to pay you."

"What do you mean by that, Peterson?"

Heidi almost started. She'd forgotten that his lordship was in the store with her. He stepped up to the counter.

"I mean,” Mr. Peterson said, kindly. “That for the gold, I could give you twenty pounds right now."

"Twenty pounds," Heidi repeated, trying to calculate that out.

"You could purchase a dozen riding habits with that, Miss Meldrum," Percival said, grinning.

Her eyes went wide. "I'm a little afraid to ask about the diamond."

Mr. Peterson considered her before speaking.

"You may wish to offer Miss Meldrum your arm, Fitzwilliam. She may need a steadying hand. If she considers twenty pounds to be outrageous for the gold…"

“IT wouldn’t normally be,” Heidi managed to say. “But I’m only just getting used to using pounds and groats. The conversion of currency is a bit… tricky.”
Leaning her hand on the counter, Heidi continued. “And I will not need to take his Lordship’s arm for fear of swooning,” she said, waving a dismissive hand. The idea of her fainting like some damsel was ridiculous.

“Very well,” Mr. Peterson started, looking down at the ring in his hand. "A stone of this size and clarity would be purchased for around four hundred fifty pounds; but this cut is so immaculate and as you are his Lordship's friend, I would purchase it for five hundred fifty pounds. The right setting could make this a thousand-pound piece of jewelry, fit for only the most discerning of clients."

Her throat went dry and her knees weakened.

"You...what?" She looked over at the lord at her side. “How much is that, what could I get for that?"

He laughed, shaking his straw-colored head of hair. "If I recall correctly, five hundred pounds could pay half a year's rent on a townhouse in London."

Heidi took several short, quick breaths, trying to comprehend how much that was. In modern times it would have been crap; but right now, five hundred fifty pounds was a small fortune. Six months of rent on a townhouse in a capital city, all at once, was incredible. It certainly wasn’t comparable to whatever the doctor made, but it would ease her troubles considerably if Percival said she could buy twelve riding habits for the 20 pounds.

"You see why I do not have the funds immediately available."

"Indeed, Peterson," he replied, still chuckling. "That sort of capital is usually tied in investments."

"I think," Heidi said, finding her voice. "I need to sit down."

They quickly found a chair and Heidi slumped into it as best she could. Now that she was being forced to wear the longer stays, slumping was a lot harder than it used to be.

"Selling that stone would surely ease some of your struggles, now that you find yourself without —" He stopped speaking as Heidi dragged her eyes up to him. "My apologies."

"I need to think about this rationally," she said, looking at the jeweler, and ignoring the baron’s minor misstep. "This is more than what I expected." Heidi wanted to laugh at herself. Understatement of the freaking year.

"I understand," the jeweler said. “But please, think of me should you decide to sell."

Lord Fitzwilliam, seeing Heidi’s pallor, crossed respectfully back to his friend.

"I need to sell the gold, at the very least," she said, a few moments later, looking up at the two men who’d been quietly talking at the counter. "The profit from that will allow me to repay some of my debts to my uncle."

"If you give me an hour, I can take the stone from the gold and have the money and the stone ready for you."

Heidi smoothed her skirts, determined to compose herself. "I think that would be best, for now at least. I am to remain in the district for another fortnight. I can make a less emotional decision at a later time about the diamond."
The jeweler nodded, barely containing a grin at his good fortune.

Heidi fell into step beside her companion, her mind still reeling from the news that if she sold her diamond she'd have more than enough money to keep her set up for some time. But as they walked down the road, Heidi supposed more and more that maybe she should keep the diamond. Carrying around that much money seemed unwise.

"It makes me nervous, realizing I was carrying the ring around like it was nothing," she admitted. "It could have been stolen by some kid."

"I doubt that," he said. "We have little crime in Gariton."

"Any place can be susceptible to crime, your lordship."

He shrugged, changing the subject. "You knew your ring was unique, that is why you wished to sell it to someone reputable?"

Heidi nodded, watching the road.

"Yes, I—" Her eyes fell on a shop across the street.

*Antonio's Confectionary and Gelato*

The door was wide open, and she caught a waft of chocolate on the air. "Gelato? Really?"

Beside her, Lord Fitzwilliam chuckled. "Miss Meldrum has a sweet tooth?"

"It never occurred to me that I'd see a candy shop in town. I haven't had gelato in longer than I care to remember."

"It is early in the day—"

"It's never too early for ice cream, your lordship." Heidi crossed the street, after checking for carriages, and walked inside the shop, not bothering to ensure that Percival had followed.

As soon as she stepped inside the smell of chocolate, sugar, and cold washed over her. Her mouth watered instantly.

"Good morning," the proprietor said, spotting her in the doorway. His eyes travelled over her, as if searching for the cues needed to know how to address her properly. "How may Antonio serve you today, Miss?"

Heidi wanted to say 'one of everything' but she managed to hold off. Glancing around, she tried not to think about the state of the back of the house. The shop front was clean, at least relatively so, and she would, for this one moment, pretend that that was enough.

"I can't believe it," she said, stepping up to the counter where cookies and cakes were displayed. "You really have gelato?"

"Indeed, my lady," the man said, bowing his head with a chuckle in his voice.

"I'm not a—" she started to protest, thinking maybe she needed to talk to Anne about the quality of her clothes. If every passing person on the street thought she was of the same ilk as Anne and Percival, she'd spent too much on clothing.
"Your lordship," the proprietor said, ignoring her words and tipping his head in the direction of the door. "I trust you are in good health."

The two men shook hands.

"Antonio, yes, I am well. I realize it is early, but my friend wishes to sample some of your wares, I believe."

"Anything for a friend of yours."

After browsing the list of flavors, like marshmallow, barberry, burnt toast, and parmesan, Heidi settled on pistachio.

"Would you care for something as well, your lordship?" she asked, looking at her companion. "My treat."

"This is highly unusual, Miss Meldrum," he said, eying her reticule.

Heidi worried her lip. "I did not mean to offend, I just thought with my earlier good fortune that—"

"Do not trouble yourself. It is extraordinary; but if you wish, I would be happy to let you 'treat' me."

The man ordered his own gelato and the two of them waited for Antonio to dish up their mid-morning sweet.

When it was prepared, Heidi took the little spoon and scooped out the green Italian-style ice cream.

Coldness and that familiar taste of pistachios exploded on her tongue with that first bite. She closed her eyes and moaned at the sweetness.

It felt like years since she'd last had proper ice cream. And this one taste was divine.

Heidi spooned out another bite and this time let it melt on her tongue like an exquisite piece of smooth milk chocolate.

A snort caused Heidi's eyes to pop open and she caught the same jade eyes as his brother’s staring back at her.

"Oh Lord," she said, realizing what she'd done. Her reaction to the ice cream was probably more sensual than was permitted in mixed society.

"Are you well?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I did not expect to get lost in my memories."

"It does not signify," Percival said, sensing her discomfort. He directed her to sit on the nearby bench finishing their gelato.

When the bowl was empty, Heidi brought it to the counter. Addressing Antonio, Heidi continued. "The gelato was divine."

He grinned. "I gathered as much, my lady."

Returning to the jeweler’s shop, the gelato successfully distracting the baron from wanting to take her to the tailory, Heidi made her decision and sold the gold only to Mr. Peterson.
"I understand, Miss Meldrum, but that stone is beautiful. I wish I could have bought it."

"I may yet change my mind and it would be scandalous of me to find a different jeweler. My business is yours."

The man glanced slyly to his left. "Perhaps you could convince the lady to part with the diamond, Fitzwilliam. I pray you to come back to my shop, I already have ideas on how to set the stone."

"That I can promise." She grinned.

"Then I look forward to seeing your lovely face once more."

The jeweler returned her smile and Heidi rolled her eyes.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, good sir."

Mr. Peterson reached out to take Heidi's gloved hand, placing a kiss on her knuckle.

"I dearly hope it will, my lady."

"Still not a lady, Mr. Peterson."
Wednesday, May 20th, 1812

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They had been at the estate for almost two weeks when the earl received a letter announcing that they were to have a guest, a viscount, that night for dinner. The earl convinced Ambrose to have his wife sent for to equalize the party as the guest’s wife would not be joining them.

Thankful that they’d planned ahead and had a dress or two made for more formal occasions, Heidi had been primped and primed to meet this viscount in a sage green satin gown that had an overlay of sheer fabric embroidered with golden flowers along the hem. It was a fancy dress, maybe too fancy for an intimate dinner party; but Anne insisted Heidi wear it tonight.

They had, over the last two weeks, spent a generous amount of time on the grounds exploring, at least on the days when Anne felt well enough to do so. Heidi was beginning to grow accustomed to riding sidesaddle and found she was pretty good at it.

They’d taken a second trip to Gariton just a few days ago to check on the measurements of the new garments that she’d bought with her own money and on their way back had managed to find a food store that stocked a new fancy sauce called ‘ketchup’. Heidi had nearly died. It was, in all actuality, closer to a Worcestershire sauce than actual ketchup, but she’d immediately bought three bottles to the surprise of Lord Percival and to the glee of Rose.

They’d picked up a few other little trinkets while in town, but Heidi had put a stop to frivolous spending. She didn’t want to tell Rose that she’d sold her gold for money. They were rapidly getting closer to the day when they’d head back to the south and she still hadn’t decided what to do about the diamond.

She was nervous about the dinner party. It was one thing to meet family of Anne de Bourgh, because Anne could easily explain away whatever faux pas she made, but to have an honest to goodness guest, especially one that was ‘off-book,’ gave Heidi the jitters.

Mrs. Mary de Bourgh arrived that evening an hour or two before their guest of honor was to join them. Heidi was not surprised to see that Ambrose had selected a gorgeous petite woman with a hint of Scarlet Johansson in her features to be his wife.

She was pleasant enough but seemed suspicious of Heidi, at least, the constant glances from across the room gave that impression. It was not long before Mrs. de Bourgh circumscribed toward her.

“You are the niece of Miss de Bourgh’s physician?” she asked, incredulously. The woman’s eyebrows rose practically to her hairline.

Heidi couldn’t pretend she wasn’t disappointed. It was the first time since Heidi had arrived that she’d faced a woman who was immediately suspicious. Lady Catherine’s disgust had been expected, but not Mrs. de Bourgh’s. The women exchanged only summary pleasantries before Mrs. de Bourgh curtsied and moved on, much to Heidi’s relief.

As far as her encounters with the men in the family, she still wasn’t thrilled with the earl, though his ingrained misogynistic tendencies were to be expected. In all honesty, Heidi was surprised that most of the men she’d dealt with so far had a feminist streak.

“His Lordship, William Lamb, Viscount Melbourne,” the butler announced a few minutes after
seven.

Heidi stood along with the others, as the well-appointed man entered the room and greeted the earl as an old friend might. The viscount was only about thirty years of age, but he had the stance of a man carrying the world on his shoulders.

Their eyes connected while introductions were being made, but it was long enough for Heidi to be stunned by the peridot eyes that reflected back at her. She wondered what could have happened to the man to cause him to look so harried.

Heidi was introduced second to last in the room. Though not common practice to allow Rose to join them, the young girl had been invited to help round out the dinner party.

When dinner was announced some half an hour later, everyone enjoying glasses of sherry in the parlor, Heidi found herself seated between the baron and Mr. de Bourgh. Either husbands and wives were not allowed to sit beside each other, or they were putting the lowest ranked people as far from the earl as possible.

With the baron sitting at the foot of the table, Rose was across from Heidi and Anne took the seat next to her uncle and across from the viscount, while Mrs. de Bourgh sat beside the guest of honor.

It was all well arranged.

The viscount was quiet throughout the meal, though he answered questions of the earl and asked Anne a few things. Heidi watched rapturously. There was something familiar about the man but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Perhaps you would be willing to accompany me at the piano forte this evening when we join the party in the drawing room, Miss Meldrum?”

Surprised at being directly addressed, Heidi looked up from her dinner plate to see Mr. de Bourgh smiling at her expectantly.

After their business in Gariton had concluded the other day, the attorney had taken Heidi to a music instructor where they had picked out a couple of musical pieces. Ambrose had insisted upon it, saying that his wife much preferred playing her lute and he rarely had a chance to play the piano forte with such an accomplished singing partner.

“I would be delighted.”

Heidi glanced at Rose, who gave her a shy smile. She felt bad that Rose had ended up beside Mary, but Rose was able to hold her own.

When the party separated after dinner, Rose left to go up to bed, complaining of a headache. Heidi watched her rise with a worried frown, convinced it was the aftereffects of Rose’s concussion.

“Are you certain you are well?” Heidi asked, standing in the corridor as Anne led the way to the withdrawing room.

“I will just go to sleep, I promise.”

“I do not need to send for Doctor Burk?”

“No,” Rose said, rolling her eyes petulantly.
Heidi winced.

Rose said goodnight to Anne and Mrs. de Bourgh and disappeared down the corridor to the stairs at the back of the wing.

“I hear,” Mrs. de Bourgh said as soon as they took their seats in the drawing room “that there is some scandal with her ladyship.”

Anne leaned forward in her seat. “What do you mean?”

“They say that the viscountess is having an affair, but no one seems to know with whom.” The woman, having vomited out that juicy piece of gossip, as if she could no longer hold it back, tittered with laughter.

“Is she really?” Anne asked, sounding intrigued.

“One can never be certain, but I heard it from Lady Smith myself. And she is incredibly knowledgeable about such things.”

“It’s dangerous to spread gossip,” Heidi said in a clipped tone. “It tends to do more harm than the entertainment it is worth.”

Mrs. de Bourgh glared at her from across the coffee table.

So much for civility.

After that, Heidi remained quiet while the other ladies talked and was relieved when, nearly an hour later, the gentlemen joined them.

“We could set up a four for whist, if anyone is interested?” The baron said, looking out at the ladies.

“I would much enjoy a game or two,” Mrs. de Bourgh replied, a large grin on her face.

Heidi glanced at Anne. They still hadn’t even touched card games, and Anne would certainly remember her bowing out the last time a dinner party evolved into playing cards.

Anne was walking toward the group as well and Heidi fought not to flinch. She could find no help from her friend in this matter.

“Miss Meldrum,” Mr. de Bourgh piped up, “unless you desire greatly to play against my ruthless cousin, shall we?” He waved an open palm toward the piano, relief washing through her at the excuse being handed to her.

“I would love to join you at the piano forte,” she said. It was clear she would be forced to be sociable tonight and damn if she didn’t want to stay away from Mrs. de Bourgh. Mr. de Bourgh’s wife might have been tolerable in small doses, but the gossiping Heidi just couldn’t handle.

She glanced at the viscount and couldn’t help but wonder if the rumor was true. If it were, he and she could commiserate with his betrayal; but at least she wasn’t someone famous enough to have her bad luggage aired out to all and sundry.

Heidi stood beside the piano, reading the music over her pianist’s shoulder.

“Could you play the chord? I’d like to find my key before I begin.”
He raised an eyebrow in her direction, and when she nodded to confirm, he played a G-major scale. She wished she’d had a chance to warm up, but this was a family gathering, not a show at the theater.

He counted off the beat and started playing, fingers deft on the keys throughout the intro.

Together, Heidi sang along with his piano work for nearly half an hour when her voice began to give.

“Thank you,” she said, when Mr. de Bourgh stood from the bench. “I haven’t sung with such a master of the piano in a long time.”

The lawyer gave her a smile. “It is my pleasure.”

They parted then, Mr. de Bourgh going to his wife’s side and Heidi taking a seat on one of the couches, watching the game. Curiously, the earl had disappeared, leaving the viscount and Percival playing whist with Anne and Mary.

Heidi allowed her thoughts to drift until the cushion shifted as she was being joined by someone.

“Your lordship,” she said, coming back to herself, and seeing the viscount beside her.

“I have not yet had the pleasure of a conversation with you, Miss Meldrum.”

Her cheeks heated, his voice washing over her like butter. “I am not so interesting, my lord,” she said, sitting up straighter.

He raised an intrigued eyebrow. “If you will forgive me, I would not be so quick to judge myself, if I were you. The Fitzwilliam family is cautious in their generosity and yet here you are at an intimate dinner party with only one other guest.”

Heidi swallowed back the nerves that closed her throat. She didn’t think she’d had a genuine compliment from anyone since she’d arrived. Sure, the baron and Mr. de Bourgh were kind, but they were the hosts here.

“I am certain that the only reason I was invited was for the simple fact that I was already in residence as Miss de Bourgh’s companion.”

“A safe assumption to make, but you have won their hearts on your own merit, if the conversations I have heard are even half truthful.”

Heidi glanced over at the table.

“I am most certain that I am merely an amusement, your lordship, but it’s of...no consequence. I am perfectly aware of my rank.” Wanting to change the subject, Heidi remembered something that Anne had said earlier in the day. “I believe I heard that you are a member of Parliament?”

The man gave a nod. “I am, I am the representative for Portarlington.”

“If you don’t mind my impertinence, where is Portarlington?”

“Ireland.”

“I’ve never been to Ireland,” she said, trying to remember anything she might have known about the country. “But I remember reading something...There is a castle there with the world’s largest telescope...”
“I do not know of such a place.” He shifted on the settee.

Heidi furrowed her brow, trying to remember. She’d seen a documentary back in her time. “Budd, Byer, something?”

“Birr Castle?”

“That is what it was called,” she said, grinning, relieved that he knew what she was talking about.

“I know of no telescope on the grounds,” he said, frowning.

A flush rose on her cheeks as her stomach dropped.

_Busted._

It was built sometime near the Regency period, wasn’t it? _Wasn’t it?!_

“Is there anything interesting about Portalington?” she asked, quickly trying to change the subject. "Did anything important happen there, I mean?"

He raised an eyebrow and Heidi inwardly flinched, wondering if she was being too curious.

“Nothing much. But Huguenots were given refuge after the Williamite Wars in the 1660s.”

Heidi frowned. She knew little about the Huguenots or anything about the Williamites, though both were vaguely familiar. She couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something important about this man.

A half-smile accompanied Melbourne’s raised eyebrow. “Is something amiss?”

“I feel as if I’ve heard of you before, your lordship, and I only wish to place the memory.”

A shadow crossed his face. It took a moment for the horror to dawn on Heidi about what he’d presumed she’d suggested. She quickly corrected course.

“I remember my parents mentioning something about either you or your father when I was younger,” Heidi stammered.

Lord Melbourne’s brow creased with a hint of a frown. “Forgive me, but I was not aware I had achieved such renown.”

“Only, I meant...I...”

Heidi shrunk back as his eyes darkened. She felt like she was about to be violently ill.

Her own memories, from her other world, and Mrs. de Bourgh’s sniping rushed back to her.

Caroline Lamb.

Affair.

Melbourne.

_Lord M._

There was a faint ringing in her ears. He was speaking.
“Are you well?”

“I seem to be suffering a headache of my own.” She gulped in a small breath, her hands shaking in her lap.

She knew this man. Or, at least, what he would one day become.

Holy shit, did she know who the man was.

How she could have forgotten the infamous Lord M that her mother had been in love with since her childhood? She'd watched the German movie with her mother at least a dozen times. *Victoria in Dover*, and the beautiful Romy Schneider, would forever be in her memory.

When she was older, Heidi had looked up the truths about Victoria and Elisabeth, two of Romy Schneider's biggest roles, when she'd been in middle school. Learning the sad truth about Sissi had almost ruined the movies for her, but Heidi had poured over the information with vigor.

Her thoughts returning to the present, Heidi realized that she'd just had dinner with the future prime minister of England and Queen Victoria's most trusted advisor. She had been one freaking degree from the future queen and she'd missed her chance.

This wasn't some wizened older gentleman; but the younger version of him. Twenty to forty years before he found his true place in the world.

Heidi gulped.

“Perhaps Miss Rose and I are adjusting to the climate. A walk—turn—about the room might help.”

He nodded with a smile that was almost sad. “Of course, Miss Meldrum,” he said softly. “I hope the turn does you well.”

They rose, his bow gentlemanly as it could be. Her ears burned with guilt as she turned away, hoping no one was watching.

He did not offer to join her and Heidi was grateful.

**Chapter End Notes**

*a little fandom crisscrossing :) I hope you enjoyed, my lovely readers*
Wednesday, June 3rd, 1812

Chapter Notes

AN: There is a slur being used, but I used it because of period typical dialogue. Its used as sparingly as possible, and Heidi does her best to correct the situation, using it as a learning moment.
AN2: I'm a little behind, forgot to post last night, so you'll get one chapter now and a second after work this evening.

Another two weeks passed after the awkward conversation with the viscount before everything on Anne’s end of the contract was settled, delaying their departure date and cutting short the time they’d have to spend at Pemberley. Ambrose was to travel with them to Derbyshire and from what Heidi could tell, Mrs. de Bourgh, as she still insisted on being called, was not happy about her husband leaving at the end of the month to collect Darcy’s signature and finalize the breaking of the de Bourgh/Darcy marriage contract.

She couldn’t help but wish to be a fly on the wall during Anne and Darcy’s conversation; but she’d seen little of the negotiations as she tended to Rose and did not think she’d see more while at Pemberley.

Honestly, she wondered how Mr. Darcy would take it. She assumed that in the books either the contract wasn’t official or he’d disposed of it before their wedding took place. If she remembered correctly, Jane Austen certainly didn’t talk about it in the novel. At the very least, the movies never broached the subject.

It was a couple days into June when they left Larkshire County for Pemberley and Heidi was sad as the grand Fitzwilliam estate disappeared in the distance. She’d absolutely loved the old medieval castle, but her excitement at the prospect of seeing Pemberley was one she could not deny. To finally see the house that had helped push Lizzy to fall for Mr. Darcy made her shamelessly giddy.

Heidi sat beside Rose during this last leg of the journey. Rose had been given permission to remove her sling when Doctor Burk called on her yesterday for one final check-up. Blessedly, the two women had been allowed to sit facing forward. Most other days, Heidi was happy to sit backward in the barouche, but Anne read her excitement and both of the family members had granted Heidi and Rose the ability to see Pemberley without craning their necks to look backwards through the window.

They had changed positions when they stopped in Lambton, Heidi begging to stop in, despite Ambrose insisting they were ‘naught but ten minutes’ from the estate. She couldn’t help herself, even if the rest of the party thought she was crazy. This may be the only time that she’d ever be this far north, and she needed to see the actual tavern where all the important events happened.

The tavern, where they’d refreshed themselves, had been the quaintest country inn, very much the same as the Crimson Bridle in Hunsford. It boasted paneled walls and a large hearth with more private rooms toward the back for gaming; but Heidi had reveled in the fact that if everything proceeded as planned, Lizzy would be reunited wit Bingley in this room, Mr. Darcy would speak with the Gardiners here, and if she hadn’t stopped the horrors that Wickham would soon bring upon the Bennets like she hoped, this is where Lizzy would receive the letter that would change
everything.

That last thought stole some pleasure from Heidi. Even Rose noticed her slumping in the booth.

“You are pale.”

“It has been a long day of traveling. I look forward to refreshing myself at Pemberley.”

She managed to shake off their concern with a few more white lies, but her mood had soured considerably.

Now, as they passed through the gates of Pemberley, the metaphorical butterflies returned. She was grateful that the weather had held out; clouds had been threatening rain for at least the past two hours, and her stomach rolled, her dark thoughts consuming.

Heidi’s mouth went dry as they rounded a curve in the road. The trees giving way to a large park.

The clouds had parted, so there was no mistaking the exquisite, impressive façade appearing dramatically in the courtyard.

“Mother of God,” Heidi muttered. The yellow stone and detailed renaissance-period balustrades on the roof, almost church-like, were impressive. With two levels of windows at the central part of the building, a dozen or so Grecian columns littered the central façade, two one-story wings flanked what was certainly the original building, attaching two wings with two or three levels on either side.

The Fitzwilliam estate had been massive and medieval, but Pemberley was the epitome of the era.

“You might wish to clean the drool off your face.”

Heidi glared at Ambrose, who was proffering his handkerchief. “You are an abomination, sir.”

“Is it not lovely, Heidi?” Anne queried, obviously anxious to keep the peace.

“Indeed,” Heidi replied, shooting a slyly vindictive glance at a smiling Ambrose.

They were greeted by Mr. Darcy and Georgiana at the front doors. Rose and Georgiana greeting each other as old and easy-going friends. It warmed her heart.

Addressing Anne, Georgiana spoke up when they climbed the steps into the estate, “I was unaware that Miss Rose would be accompanying you, cousin. How wonderful it is to see you again. I must hear all about your journey.”

Within moments, just like at the Fitzwilliam estate, they were led to their own rooms and given time to freshen up. As late in the day as it was now, they had missed tea because she’d insisted on stopping at Lambton.

Heidi apologized but told their host that Miss Elizabeth had some family that had grown up in the village and she wished to admire it.

It was clear, by the way she hovered over Rose that Georgiana had missed the companionship of a girl around her own age and Mr. Darcy had given her sister permission to show Rose around while they conducted their business. That the girls got along so well warmed Heidi’s heart. Her cousin didn’t have many friends in Hunsford and that she might have a companion in Miss Darcy was fantastic.
When her trunks were brought up to her room, Heidi dismissed the maid to her privacy. With newly purchased locks to place on them, the trunks and her money were secure and she didn’t want any of the servants to come across the large fortune she’d stored inside. As of now, only his lordship knew of her financial gain.

She’d sold the diamond to Mr. Peterson just a few days before they’d left. The chance to have 550 pounds owed to her by the Bank of England was too good to refuse. Heidi had taken about fifty pounds in coinage; but the rest she’d requested, with Lord Fitzwilliam acting as her executor (because apparently women were too stupid to do their own banking), that the bills be broken into the equivalent of IOUs of ten and twenty pounds.

The baron had believed her to be silly, but Heidi insisted upon it.

“Until I can figure out what I’m going to do with it, I’d rather have the money in small bills. Less of a chance to lose a fortune in a gust of wind that way.”

“You may want to invest it,” he’d suggested. “Either in speculations or businesses. It would gain interest and could be profitable in other ways as well.”

Heidi had given the man a look, she wouldn’t go near a speculation unless she could piece together what sort of future that particular venture might have. Such things could lead to ruin and she wouldn’t lose the only money she had.

“I will speak with my uncle on my return to Hunsford and figure out what is to be done. I know it’s not a lot of money, in your world, but it may be all the money I ever have. I wish to make wise decisions, not that you wouldn’t give me sound advice, but…”

Her thoughts trailed off as she spread the bills out on the duvet of her bed and counted them all out, to make sure she had 500 pounds. Actual bill currency wasn’t a thing yet. Instead, aside from what circulated in coins, a person filled out the note with their signature that promised the bank would pay the recipient ten to one thousand pounds when they returned it into said bank. In essence, they were more like cashier’s checks than actual greenbacks would have been. A tricky thing, this money business.

What she wouldn’t give for a working debit card right about now.

A quick rap sounded on the door. Heidi flipped the end of the blanket over the money and went to answer the door.

“Miss Darcy!” she said, pulling the door tightly against her figure. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Glancing out into the hallway, Heidi realized that Georgiana had come alone with a serious expression on her face. Dread pooled in her gut. “Is Rose alright?”

“I am not certain.” There was a waivering in her voice that immediately put Heidi on alert.

“What happened?”

“We were in the library, and she had—“ Georgiana stumbled over her words, her chest tightening in angst.

“What is it, Miss Darcy?”

“I left Mrs. Reynolds with her.”
“Just a moment,” she said, and left the doorway to gather the money on the bed. She could deal with it later, but it needed to not be out for any servant to see and take.

She looked up as she stuffed the bills into the trunk only to see Georgiana standing inside the doorway staring at the bed.

“What was that?”

“Nothing of importance,” she said, snapping the lid shut and locking it tight. “Now, where is Rose?”

Georgiana kept her eyes on the trunk.

“Miss Darcy?” Heidi asked, deliberately adding fire to her tone to snap the girl awake.

Georgiana gasped, as if she were coming awake suddenly. “The library.”

“Take me to her?”

These episodes, which Doctor Carter believed would dissipate with time, had happened only a handful of times since they’d left on their journey. There was little she could do save to get Rose into bed and allow her to sleep it off; but she still needed to check on the girl and be there when she first woke up, if only to calm her fears. Doctor Burk had warned her that there was little to be done and if they got worse then she should call on the physician who attended to Pemberley’s needs.

They crossed from the guest wing to the front of the house, where the large library was located, and already a small gathering of servants milled in front of the doorway. They had to be ordered to move aside and Heidi came into the library to see Rose resting on a chaise. The poor girl was completely drained of color, with a thin sheen of perspiration on her brow.

“She came round a moment ago,” an elderly woman said, looking first at Miss Darcy and then at Heidi.

“Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds,” Georgiana replied.

Heidi knelt on the floor beside the chaise and asked the woman to have a towel and basin brought up. “With cool, but not frigid water in it.”

Heidi spoke softly to Rose, trying to figure out the extent of her dizziness, knowing well by now how these episodes hit her.

By the time the towel arrived, so had Mr. Darcy, Anne, and Ambrose.

“Is she well?”

“She’ll be fine,” Heidi assured, looking up at Georgiana, who towered over her while she sat on the floor. Addressing the rest of the room, Heidi quickly explained to the Darcy’s about Rose’s condition, that she hoped the dizzy spells would go away, and what had happened a few days after the Darcy’s had left Hunsford.

“We had no idea, I am sorry you took such a turn,” Georgiana said comfortingly to Rose.

“How would you have known?” Rose asked, her voice low.

“Perhaps I should get my cousin up into bed.”
Mr. Darcy called for the butler to carry Rose up into her rooms and Heidi followed behind.

“I will call for the apothecary,” Mr. Darcy said, gravely.

“There is no need. My cousin merely needs a good night’s rest. Though, if it will reassure you, I can pay the fee, if you wish to bring the man to Pemberley. You might keep a maid near her room, in case she requires anything? However, I have found that once my cousin it put to bed, she will not awaken until the morning.”

Mr. Darcy nodded, clearly not one hundred percent placated but satisfied enough to let the matter rest.

“Will Miss Carter feel well enough for in the morning, do you think?” Georgiana broached.

“I daresay she will be able to join us for breakfast, though I hardly expect her to be recovered before then.”

The perfectly teenaged pout on the girl’s lips almost made Heidi laugh.

“You and I can spend the afternoon together, Miss Darcy, after I insure that my cousin is well tended,” Heidi consoled with a smile. “Your brother and cousins have some business to conduct. I had intended to spend the afternoon either on a walk of the grounds or in my quarters reading.”

“You are certainly welcome to the library,” Georgiana said, looking around the room.

“Now that I know where it is, I might take you up on the offer.” At least, she hoped, she wouldn’t walk into anyone enjoying the pleasures of the flesh in this room.

The butler came and gathered Rose in his arms.

“Supper is at 9,” Mr. Darcy said, addressing his sister.

“Yes,” she said, bobbing her head.

“Yes, brother,” she said, bobbing her head.

“Is my presence required for anything this afternoon, Anne?”

Anne smiled at Heidi. “No, you are free to spend it as you wish.”

Heidi nodded politely, though she wished that she’d get to join them.

“As long as we stay in or near the estate, in case my cousin’s condition worsens, I would be honored to spend the afternoon with you.”

It was an hour later that Heidi found herself roaming the grounds of Pemberley with Georgiana and Rover.

The large dog, sized somewhere between a German shepherd and Great Dane, was walking at Georgiana’s side unleashed.

She gave it a sideways glance, having never been an animal person. To her relief, the dog seemed to be ignoring her and enjoying the exercise.

“Pardon my curiosity, but that was quite a sum of bank notes,” Georgiana said, when they were clear of the estate.

“Yes,” Heidi said. “I sold some things while in Gariton.” She tried not to hem and haw as they
walked. “I wished to ensure I still had all the notes. I am not used to handling such sums.”

The girl pursed her lips but nodded.

Georgiana took the stick from Rover’s mouth and threw it in the direction of the woods. The dog watched it, and when Georgiana gave a quick flick of her wrist, it bounded off in the direction that the stick had flown.

“He’s well trained,” Heidi said, stopping beside the girl and wishing desperately to break the awkward silence between them.

“My father loved animals. Rover was one of his favorites.”

Georgiana sighed, sadness washing over her features before she regained control of herself. “My brother prefers that if I am to go wandering on the grounds that one of the dogs accompany me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Sometimes gypsies or vagrants try to poach on the land.” Georgiana gave a shrug.

She fought not to wince, wanting to tell Georgiana that they preferred the term ‘Roma’; but was afraid her ‘knowledge’ might bring up some questions that she was unable to answer. Especially in the wake of the girl seeing the pile of bank notes on her bed.

Georgiana pulled a new stick from Rover’s mouth, when he bounded back to them.

“How many dogs are there on the estate?”

“Including the hunting dogs? There are forty-six, I believe.”

Heidi’s eyes went wide. “Forty-six?”

“They are well cared for,” Georgiana assured. “We have three men on staff that ensure the dogs get exercised. The dogs even work with the horses occasionally.”

“That is incredible, Miss Darcy,” she said, impressed.

Georgiana searched the clearing. “Would you like to see something fun?”

“I would be delighted. What is it?”

Georgiana started running, beckoning Heidi to join her. The dog raced at his mistress’ side as Heidi tried to keep up.

Following a path cut through a grove of trees, the area suddenly cleared and Georgiana stopped in her tracks.

At first, all Heidi saw were four brackish slabs. As she looked closer, however, she could make out worn and crumbling stones beneath thick tangles of vines.

They were walls, or what was left of them. One of the buildings still bore a roof that looked two minutes from caving in.

She wondered, a chill crawling up her back, who had lived here.

“What is this place?”
“It is the site of the original estate.”

She stepped forward, reaching out toward the ivy-cloaked stones.

“Father always said it dated back to the early 1100s, but I am not entirely sure.”

Heidi blinked. “1100?”

“It is a favorite spot of mine,” Georgiana said, sounding wistful. “My brother and Mr. Wickham used to play hide and go seek with me in the ruins.” The girl paused. “It has been years since they last joined me,” she finished more softly.

Heidi wanted to ask about Mr. Wickham; Georgiana was the one that brought him up, after all. But she wasn’t sure how to broach the subject of what might have happened during the elopement event.

She ducked her head under an old doorway and into the darkness of the dilapidated building. There wasn’t much light inside, the roof apparently replaced by dirt, so any rotted slats were covered preventing light from breaking through.

Georgiana told her to wait and she disappeared into the dark, coming back only moments later with a lit lantern and a grin on her face.

“Is this your hideaway, Miss Darcy?”

Heidi grabbed her skirts, careful not to trip, as she followed Georgiana inside.

“I came out here a lot after father died. My brother seems to have forgotten about this place.”

Heidi looked around the dark chamber, surprised at how open Georgiana was being. The setting would have fit in more at the Fitzwilliam estate, all dark and creepy as it was. The perfect background for those Gothic romances her mother loved, except it was at Pemberley. And Georgiana was telling her some personal things, things that Heidi never expected insight on.

Her heart ached for the girl who desperately needed a companion. Lizzy moving to Pemberley could not happen soon enough.

“Come!”

Georgiana waved at Heidi to follow and they moved deeper into the chambers, another shiver rolling down her back. She was surprised that the underground maze was so large, what with trees surrounding the grove, but they were sloping down as they moved deeper into the maze.

"Rover, guard."

The dog trotted off toward the front of the ruins.

There was a chest sitting in one empty room, raised up on rocks to protect it, presumably from the mud of a rainstorm. Georgiana leaned over it and unlocked it from a key she kept around her neck and pulled out a few novels and a couple of pillows.

“It is dry now, would you like to read?”

“It’s not getting too late in the evening, is it?”

“Mr. Campion will fetch me if we stay too long.”
“Your refuge is lovely, Miss Darcy.”

“Please, call me Georgiana.”

“As you wish, Miss Georgiana,” Heidi acquiesced with a smile.

They sat and Georgiana read aloud one of the short stories in the books she had stored in the ruins while Heidi curled her legs up on the pillow and listened.

They were underground for somewhere around an hour when a whistle echoed overhead.

“We must return to the estate,” she said, standing and walking over to the trunk. Heidi helped the girl clean up the space and the two girls, now joined by Rover, left the ruins and headed up to Pemberley.

“I am aware of what you and Miss Elizabeth did for me that day, in Hunsford,” Georgiana said, her voice a whisper as they approached the house.

“What do you mean?” Heidi worried her lip, hoping the girl wouldn’t look up at her.

“Mr. Wickham. Your efforts to protect me were appreciated, but you need not have done so.”

“Why not, if I may ask?”

Georgiana smiled in a way that made her look older than her fifteen years. “I must be exposed to some adversity, if I wish to find my way in life, should I not?”

Heidi’s heart almost burst with sympathy and pride. What wisdom from such a young girl!

“Some adversity is fine, but not at the expense of your comfort, Miss Georgiana. We wished only to protect you from a man who has proved himself false.”

“How do you mean?”

“You number one duty is not to marry well or do what must be done, but to be true to yourself and make yourself happy. Mr. Wickham, despite whatever mask he shows the world, is not a pleasant person.”

“How do you know this? Did my brother tell you what happened?”

“What did happen?”

Georgiana looked to the ground, her gait slowing. “I am not supposed to talk about it.”

“You can trust me, Georgiana, I am not a society woman that thrives on gossip; but you need not share if you do not wish. I understand.” She ran her hand over her skirts trying to ease the tension.

As they stopped just below the stairs that led up into the back of the house, Heidi clasped Georgiana’s hands in hers. When the girl made eye contact, her eyes were glassy. Heidi smiled through her pity.

“I imagine there aren’t many women out there like me, but I can honestly say that my temperament and Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s are alike in that manner. We both know the importance of discretion.” She hoped the hint was strong enough to imprint upon Georgiana’s mind.

“You mean, like about your once-betrothed? No one seems to know who he was.”
Heidi chuckled. “I doubt very much that the truth of who it was will ever reach the light of day.”

Georgiana understood, or at least accepted Heidi’s statement as fact. They climbed the stairs only to find Mrs. Reynolds standing at the door, ready to scold them for being late to change for dinner.
Yes, two updates in one day, so if you jumped to the latest chapter and did not read anything new in the past four hours, please go back and read 33 :) I don't want you to be confused.

That being said, Enjoy!!!!!

“A letter for you, Miss Meldrum.”

One of the second footmen was standing in the doorway to the breakfast room holding a small silver tray in her direction the next morning.

“For me?”

The rest of the party looked at Heidi with interest as she reached for the letter.

“It’s been redirected from Wych Elm,” she said, glancing at Anne. “Do you mind if I read it now? I can leave the table.”

“If you need privacy, Miss Meldrum, you are welcome to go.”

“It shouldn’t be important, but I wouldn’t wish to be rude.”

Anne gave a knowing smile. “In that case, you are welcome to stay.”

Heidi broke the seal and read the words of Elizabeth Bennet.

Dearest Miss Meldrum,

I trust this letter will find you well. Tell me, how is Miss Carter in the aftermath of the accident? I have thought of her often in recent weeks and wish her well.

I am writing to tell you that Mr Bingley has come to Longbourne and asked for Jane’s hand in marriage! It is the most wonderful of news. They are to be married at the end of June, once all the banns have been read.

With the table watching, Heidi struggled not to do a cartwheel of joy. She had managed it. She had REALLY managed it. The rift had been closed well before the elopement could even take place. Everything was falling into place.

I owe you a great debt, for I know the truth now between Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley and it seems that the man has taken it upon himself to right the wrongs he committed against my most beloved sister. It is a small miracle. I cannot tell you how happy the house is with this news and they know not to whom they should give their thanks.

Mother is beyond the moon and flutters about attempting to prepare Jane’s wedding trousseau. It terrifies me to see the whirlwind she has become and how she might act with subsequent daughters
as we marry.

Heidi glanced up at the room. Thankfully, they had returned to their breakfast, save for Georgiana who glanced at her through the corner of her eye, clearly intrigued.

Should you wish to reach me in the next month, please direct your letters to the Inn at Appleby-in-Westmoreland. My uncle thought his business would keep him from enjoying a long holiday, but the situation has changed. We now intend to summer in the north through the middle of August.

I wish you all the best on your journeys and I hope to be able to invite you to Longbourne soon.

Yours, Elizabeth Bennet

Heidi reread the letter and frowned down at the location Lizzy had noted as her future address. There was something not right about this.

“Tell me, Mr. Darcy,” she said, hoping she did not sound nervous. “Is it possible that you have heard of Appleby-in-Westmoreland?”

“I believe it is in the Lake District,” he said, after pause. “North of Derbyshire in Cumberland. Why do you ask?”

Her stomach dropped.

“The Lake District?”

“I believe so.”

“Shit.” The word spilled out from her lips before Heidi could stop it.

Here we go again, Heidi thought with an internal groan as she bit her lip. Her mind flashed back to the conversation with Lord Melbourne she’d been trying to forget.

She had to rein in her mouth.

Mr. Darcy raised an imperious, and perhaps slightly amused, eyebrow. “Is something the matter?”

“Everything is just fine,” she said, sounding anything but. Heidi folded the letter back up.

“Are you certain?” Anne pressed.

“Just some unexpected news,” she replied, stomach rolling. So much for everything being perfect.

How the hell was she going to fix this?

If Lizzy spent the summer far north of Pemberley, how would she get to know Darcy? They needed this time, especially after everything she and Anne had done to open the way for the wedding.

Mother-trucker.

Heidi made eye contact with Mr. Darcy, watching her with as much concern as scrutiny.

Would it be possible for her to direct him to Appleby-in-Westmoreland so they could get the chance to rekindle things, or would her meddling make things worse?
Damnit, Lizzy needed to see Pemberley! That was the whole point of all this.

“Are you sure you are well, Miss Meldrum? I believe you just growled.”

Heidi nearly choked on her own spit at that comment. “Perhaps I should excuse myself. It appears I have too much on my mind at present.”

“Very well,” Mr. Darcy said. “But you will recall we wish to leave by noon to make good time.”

Heidi nodded, absentmindedly. They were supposed to be meeting up with the Carters at Oxford. With Edward’s graduation occurring and Rose out of the house, the plan was to meet up in the university town and then spend a few days in London before the entire party returned to Hunsford.

She stood and so did Mr. Darcy and Ambrose, doing their gentleman-thing, and Heidi raced from the room. Once she was out of sight, she flopped on a chaise in the south drawing room.

Her leg bounced with nervous energy.

The one person who could devise the best plan was her mother, and she was more than two-hundred years away.

Heidi stalked out of the estate, leaving out of the back door and heading toward the ruins.

She’d been wandering the estate for almost an hour with no answers when she spotted a soft glow at the edge of a copse of trees. She crept closer, doing so stealthily, until she tripped over a gnarled tree root.

As she stood upright, brushing dirt and twigs from her skirt, eight pairs of deep brown eyes looked back at her.

Georgiana’s words of warning enveloped her.

It was the camp of Roma—an entire family by the looks of it. They were literally camping in the woods of the estate. It was no surprise that Darcy had been cautious.

“I am so sorry,” she said, taking a few steps back and raised an eyebrow at the wagon and horses to the left of the campsite. She couldn’t the a frisson of concern that raced to her gut at the thought that something might happen to her, but she shook the thought clear as she stared. Those brown eyes were not menacing, in the way a movie might portray them, but...tired.

“You are from the estate?” called out the only adult male she could see. He was gruff and sun-browned, but appeared to be no older than mid-40.

“In a manner of speaking. I’m visiting the family.”

Her palms slickened with sweat, despite her attempts to calm herself. If she was wrong, if they had horrible plans, she had nothing, not her pepper spray, not a knife, not even a whistle if they abducted her or held her for ransom.

“Stop it,” she muttered to herself, but her racing heart and twisting gut wouldn’t listen.

“You look, as we say, as though you have seen a mulo,” the woman said, standing from where she’d been tending a small fire pit.

“Mulo?”
The woman grinned, revealing a missing molar or two. “A spirit, no?”

Heidi’s shoulders relaxed.

“I’m afraid I’m not myself this morning. I will not tell the Master that you are here. I promise.”

“Come, have a drink, tell us what weighs on your mind.”

Heidi glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the estate and sighed. She shouldn’t, but...

“Thank you.”

The woman sent the handful of children out into the woods and suddenly Heidi was alone with the presumed mother and father.

“I can’t stay long. I shouldn’t even be here now. Someone at the estate will start a search for me soon enough, and I would not wish for you to be discovered.”

“Sit.”

Heidi did as she was bade and took the cup of wine from the woman.

“You are a curious one. You realized who we were, and yet you did not scream,” she said after silence passed.

“I was told that some of your people have been spotted out on the grounds before. While I didn’t realize I would stumble on your camp, I suppose I knew it was possible.”

“The estate is some distance from here,” the man said then, sitting beside his wife. His English was heavily accented, but understandable enough.

“I was distracted. I hardly know how far I have gone.”

“You carry a heavy burden.”

Heidi gave the woman what she hoped was a sardonic smile.

No shit.

“I believe you could say that to almost everyone and be correct. We all carry burdens.”

The Roma returned her smile. “But you are different.”

“Still, another truth to apply to everyone.”

“Do you wish for a small divination, my lady?”

Heidi rolled her eyes. “I don’t believe in fortune-telling. It’s a mere trick of interpreting what you see.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps it is,” she said. “But we are good at seeing what others wish not to expose.”

“Very well then. But I don’t have any money.” Heidi corrected herself when the woman returned the sardonic smile. “I don’t have any with me and therefore would be a waste of your skills in interpretation, without some sort of reciprocation.”
“No charge, my lady.”

“You should know then, that I am no lady.” Heidi raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, we are aware,” the man said, a light chuckle in his voice.

“Come and sit beside the fire and I will tell you what I can.”

Heidi took one of the seats vacated by the children and put the cup of honeyed wine down on the tray they’d set up. She’d drunk from it without even looking for lip-prints. Mortification raced through her.

The woman considered her, taking in her attire and hair and everything else about her, Heidi was sure.

She waited patiently while she grasped Heidi’s hands in hers. Heidi struggled internally, so few people touched her these days, even through gloves. The longer they sat in silence, the more Heidi’s anxiety turned to interested suspense.

“You have traveled far to come to this place, here in Derbyshire.”

Heidi tried not to roll her eyes twice. If the woman hadn’t seen her about the grounds before, or in town, she was merely stating the obvious.

“You family—“ the woman paused, staring into Heidi’s eyes. “They are not dead, but they are gone, beyond your reach.”

Heidi cocked her head. That was not so obvious. The woman continued, looking carefully at Heidi’s palms. A shiver rolled down her spine.

“There are good things you can be doing here, enriching things that will make the lives of many better than they were. Your plans may have gone off course, but they will find their way back, I believe, to where they should be.”

At that, Heidi swallowed, thinking about Lizzy and Darcy.

“You cannot turn back the hands of time, nor can you make them jump ahead. You may never be able to reclaim what is lost. You must accept that this is your life now, and live it as best you can. Only then will you find peace.”

The woman leaned back in her seat, taking her own deep breath.

“I don’t know how helpful that is,” Heidi said, shifting on the stool. After all, she thought, dismissing the last of the shivers, it was still a general augury.

“It is the truth.”

“And sage advice to give to any young woman with a funny accent.”

The husband’s bare hand grabbed her gloved one so quickly, Heidi barely squeaked before he spoke up.

“You were born in the wrong time, madam gaji, but that does not signify that you will live a life of grief. You can find happiness here, in these days.”

Heidi paled, but before she could say anything, one of the children burst into the clearing.
“There are two riders.”

Before she could do or ask anything else, the rest of the family began throwing their things into the wagon, putting out the fire and gathering what they could.

It was only a few minutes before they were packed. Heidi felt like she’d only had time to blink once or twice before everything was ready.

“Trust your heart, you will find peace,” the woman said, climbing onto the seat at the front and before Heidi could respond, they were riding down the path at a quick pace. Their wagon bounced on the grass as they escaped.

Before she could even comprehend what they’d said, the pounding beat of horses’ hooves filled her ears and Heidi turned to see Mr. Darcy and Ambrose riding at a quick pace toward her.

Mr. Darcy leapt from his saddle, coming up to her side with his eyes wide and gasping for breath. “You have given us quite a scare.”

She looked at him and then over his shoulder at Ambrose, his mane of black hair disheveled from the ride. She blinked slowly as if the world were in a haze, and maybe it was.

He reached out and rested his hand on her shoulder, bringing Heidi back to reality with a gasp.

“I’m fine,” she said, still trying to catch her breath as if she’d been running, but more aware than she had been a moment ago. She didn’t think that the wine had been drugged, but she felt a bit… slow and off-balance.

“Chase them off the property,” Mr. Darcy ordered, shouting toward Ambrose.

“No,” Heidi cried out, just as the attorney was getting ready to turn his horse.

Mr. Darcy’s eyes held flames.

“They did nothing except offer me hospitality,” she protested, her eyes narrowing. “Do not chase them off today.”

“They are trespassing on my land, Miss Meldrum,” he said, the threat of violence in his tone.

“I do not begrudge you your rights, Mr. Darcy. But for today, leave them be. As a favor to me?”

His eyes darted back and forth, debating what to do, before he nodded. “Very well, they may stay, for today.”

Heidi relaxed.

“If,” he continued, narrowing his eyes. “You will tell us what had you so out of sorts this morning at breakfast.”

Her throat went dry looking up into Mr. Darcy’s brown eyes. “It was nothing of importance.”

He gave her a weary look.

“I swear it. The news was shocking at first, that I received, but now that I’ve had time to think on it, there is nothing the matter, just surprising.”

Mr. Darcy didn’t seem satisfied with her evasion, but let it slide. “Let us return to the estate.”
Heidi said nothing as he and Ambrose helped her up, placing her on the front of Mr. Darcy’s saddle. He, it seemed, was a stronger rider.

“Will you be able to handle yourself on Copperheart?”

“Well enough, I imagine,” she said. “The extra practice I received while at your cousin’s estate certainly helped.”

Though his arms wrapped around her intimately as he held the reins, Heidi was relaxed rather than nervous to have the infamous Mr. Darcy practically enveloping her.

It was a surprise that she felt nothing for the hero of the story. He was gentlemanly and smelled of anise, but otherwise there was no particular draw to the tall man.

The trio rode then back to Pemberley and within an hour Ambrose had departed to Gariton with the signed paperwork. For his part, Darcy had his trunks packed so that he could join them as escorts on their journey to Oxford, saying he would ride on to London to attend to some business.

At this point, Heidi reflected dourly, it might be just as well. Lizzy wasn’t coming to Pemberley, and the plot was fucked.

Again.
Wednesday, June 10th, 1812

Chapter Notes

AN: trigger warning: assault, not sexual, but I wanted to warn just in case (I’ve marked the scene with asterisks)

The de Bourgh carriage stopped in front of the Carter townhouse on Henrietta Street almost a week after they left Pemberley with one less passenger inside.

“It was kind of you to offer to take the luggage,” Heidi said to Anne as they waited for the coachman to come down and open the door.

“It allowed the doctor and his family the chance to reconnect,” Anne said. “It was an easy decision to make. We did not require the entirety of the backward facing bench, which provided us a little more freedom.”

They had spent a few days in Oxford celebrating Edward’s graduation and helping pack up his things from his dormitory. The entire time, Heidi tried to work her mind around Lizzy’s trip to the Lake Country and how she could divert their plans; but without help, she was sadly out of ideas.

When it came time to leave Oxford, Anne had suggested that the family travel together while her carriage carried the bulk of the trunks and various items that did not fit on the top of the stage that they had borrowed from the constabulary.

The door opened and Heidi followed Anne out of the carriage, seeing for the first time a true London townhouse. It was narrower than she’d expected it to be, but guessed that these townhouses were thin and long rather than wide. Street access was sure to be a premium.

There was no party waiting for their arrival, no gathering of servants, which was strange considering the greetings that they had received at the estates, but Heidi walked up to the door and rang the bell.

A butler showed them into the parlor and a younger woman with dark brown hair and impeccable skin walked into the room.

“Doña Carter,” Heidi said, standing and greeting their hostess.

Having spent a late night awake with her uncle and Edward, she had learned everything she needed to know about the aunt and uncle that she would be meeting. She’d learned that the woman was a Spanish Lady who’d emigrated north after meeting Mr. Carter when he’d come to Spain for a business matter. They had, according to the doctor, fallen in love at first sight, despite the fact that he was almost fifteen years her elder. They had no children, but it was implied that her new ‘aunt’ had suffered from at least two miscarriages in the last fifteen years.

Doctor and Mrs. Carter had spent the night at the townhouse on their way to Oxford and had warned his brother and wife of Heidi’s special circumstances. He did not give Heidi many details about the conversation itself, but the doctor had assured Heidi that his elder brother and his wife were on board with the story of her being a cousin.
They too would cover for her.

She couldn’t help her stomach flipping in nervous anxiety at this first introduction, especially with the doctor nowhere in sight to manage the damn thing.

“Niece,” the woman said, sweeping through the room and hugging Heidi in a surprising move.

“A-aunt,” she said, returning the hug.

“It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. It is a shame that we were not aware of your arrival to the city this winter. You could have easily stayed here, with us.”

Pulling away from the embrace, Heidi’s eyes went wide. “I did not wish to intrude,” she said, completely stunned by the warm greeting and her ease at lying while witnesses might be present. “I would like to introduce you to Miss Anne de Bourgh.”

Better to get Anne’s introduction out of the way and possibly distract from any personal stories with Anne at her side, She couldn’t be sure if the doña had been told the made-up story or if she was so certain of the actual truth that she could so easily lie about it.

They waited in the parlor for the Carters to arrive for three hours, exchanging polite chatter, before it became apparent that something must have happened. The carriage, from what she’d known, had been right behind them. An hour late would have been nothing, but Heidi could not find an explanation for the longer delay.

By the time six o’clock came around, the doña had summoned Mr. Carter home from his club early and sent him down the road to search for the missing family members. Heidi’s stomach tied in knots.

It wasn’t until almost nine that Mr. Carter returned, his brother and the family in tow.

“What happened?” Heidi asked as Mrs. Carter and her cousins gathered in the parlor.

The maid was quickly and efficiently doling out drinks to the recent arrivals.

“The carriage broke an axel,” the doctor said striding into the room behind them gratefully taking the glass that the maid handed to him.

Mrs. Carter limped into a chair nearby, her hair having come loose, and her dress tattered and worse for the wear.

“Please let Mrs. Timmons know that we will eat in half an hour,” Doña Carter instructed the maid, her accent thick.

The maid disappeared through the door.

The doctor settled into the seat beside his wife, while Mr. Carter, with his silver hair and crow’s feet, grinned.

“Those blasted horses,” he said, with a joking tone. “Far too wild, in my opinion. Should have kept your old ones.”

Doctor Carter rolled his eyes. “As if we had a second set of horses at the tavern.”

“You didn’t switch off at a posting house?”
“You, brother, are the only one of us who could have done such a thing.”

Mr. Carter made a noise a shrugged his shoulder while the doctor continued his story. “We stayed with the coach while the groomsman went off to next posting station to find a replacement carriage. Unfortunately, there were none to be had. It is a miracle that Miss de Bourgh took our luggage with her, else we would have been stuck overnight while my brother returned and convinced Miss de Bourgh to let us borrow her carriage.”

Anne smiled kindly at the doctor. “It would not have been a difficult thing.”

By the time the party settled into the dining room some fifteen minutes later, with their restorative alcoholic drinks in hand, Heidi was beginning to feel at ease again.

“As the young people are likely wishing for some excitement that is not connected with faulty horses or carriages, with your permission, brother,” the doña announced, “I have managed to obtain a few invitations from the Patronesses for Miss de Bourgh, Heidi, and Edward. If they are amenable, I hope they would join me tomorrow night at Almacks.”

Anne, sitting beside Heidi, dropped her fork onto the table with a clatter.

“That is quite generous,” Mrs. Carter said, sitting up. Her eyes glinted with excitement despite whatever pain she might have been in. “I daresay it would do Edward some good.”

The doña grinned, giving her sister-in-law a nod.

Her friend spoke up then, “you need not gain entrance for myself, doña. I am entirely aware how rare it is to be gifted with such an invitation.”

“It does not signify, the act of requesting the invitations was a simple thing. I may not have been a patroness, but I count many of the inner circle as my dearest friends,” she admitted, a grin on her face. “I have done much for them these past years, they owe me a favor or two.”

Anne’s demeanor changed, and she demurred. “We are honored that you would use your influence to acquire tickets. I never imagined I would have the pleasure.”

The woman waved off Anne’s gratitude.

“Do not mention it, my dear. The ladies were happy to grant the invitations when they learned who my guests were.”

Anne swallowed. “If it is not an impertinence, what do you mean by that?”

“Surely, Miss de Bourgh, you are aware that your presence would be a welcome novelty at any event.”

“I wonder that anyone even knew of me.”

“There are many who remember your season. They were surprised when you never returned.”

Anne glanced down at the table. “I believe I understand.”

Mrs. Carter spoke up then, cutting off their hostess. “Idle minds allow for tongues to wag, Miss de Bourgh, best to face them rather than being accosted by their curiosity on the streets.”

Anne flushed with shame. Part of Heidi was desperate to learn why Anne had not finished her Season. There had been allusions to it since she’d first met the woman; but other than being sickly,
Heidi had no idea.

Just as quickly, the doña dismissed Anne’s obvious worry with a cluck.

“Oh, do not let a little notoriety concern you, Miss de Bourgh. You will all have a lovely time and I will protect you from any unwanted attention, though it would be wise to greet the Patronesses and thank them for the honor.”

“Naturally.”

“I’m sorry,” Heidi said, unable to contain herself any longer. “But where are we going?”

Doña Carter quirked an eyebrow at her question and then explained that the Almack’s Assembly Rooms consisted of the most exclusive club in London. She said that if anyone wished to attend an event at Almack’s, one was required to be approved by the Patronesses to be granted a ticket. Usually the wait list was quite long to be invited, even at this time of the year.

“You mean,” she said, leaning forward. “We bumped everyone else back by three places?”

“In a sense,” said the doña, her eyes sparkling, “but what good is a friendship if you cannot use it to your own benefit now and again?”

They made plans to go out the next morning, after breakfast, to purchase accessories to accompany the gowns that they would wear later in the evening. The doña and Mrs. Carter insisted that they would find something and there was still plenty of time for alterations to be done, should they be required. Heidi had no idea how they’d manage it; but the women of the house that knew of such things were perfectly content and she tried not to question it.

Going to Almack’s did not equate to a court function which meant, according to Doña Carter, that Heidi could attend without the prerequisite of being presented at court. Heidi thought it was silly that even at 27 she’d need to be on the books as being ‘presented’, but having spent the last month in the company of society, she understood that the rules of nobles and their peers were what separated them from the ‘common man.’

However stupid and inflexible they were.

It wasn’t until Heidi was out on the streets of London the next morning that the significance of the invitation dawned on her. Mrs. Carter had stayed home with Rose while the doctor had gone to attend to some of his own business. The rest of the family, Mr. Carter and Edward included, walked out in order to do a bit of shopping before their eventful evening.

Heidi, taking up the back of the group, looked at their party. Anne walked alongside the doña at the front and Heidi was sure the girl was being enveloped in conversation that went well over Heidi’s own head. She did not envy Anne, the society woman.

“Cousin,” she called out to Edward, who was walking with his uncle ahead of them. “I’d like to speak to you, if you have some time.”

Edward left the company of his uncle, waiting for her, and Heidi wrapped her hand around his arm.

“They’re going to make me dance, aren’t they?” she asked, in as quiet a tone as she could manage.

Edward stopped in his tracks, the rest of the family continuing on without looking back. “I admit that had not occurred to me.”
“I can’t go, I can’t—“ She tried to compose herself, though she felt queasy. It was going to be like Elaine in that Seinfeld episode. Except...with a country dance.

She could not go.

She would make a fool of herself and a fool of Anne and a fool of her family.

No, absolutely not. She would have to thank her aunt and politely decline. Or, send Mrs. Carter in her place.

No. No. No.

“Hush, Heidi,” he said, patting her hand gloved in her newly purchased linen set rather than the kidskin gloves that Mrs. Carter had leant her all those months ago. “We will practice this afternoon with a few steps. You said yourself you knew how to perform the dances of your time. At least you can keep time. It will be a start.”

Heidi looked at Edward, who was just about the same height as she was.

She took a deep shuddering breath, centering herself on Edward’s calming demeanor.

He still needed that ironic mustache. Maybe a craft beer in his hands, a lager or some time, or a hoppy, gross, IPA.

Unable to stop her ensuing grin, Heidi relaxed a little.

“You are right. I can manage to fake my way through, besides I doubt that at 27 I shall be anyone’s first choice,” she noted wryly. Realizing she was rambling, Heidi couldn’t stop herself, “but accompanying Miss De Bourgh might put me at greater risk of being noticed, if the doña’s comments at dinner last night are any sort of indication.”

“Quite.” Edward smiled at Heidi’s alarmed look. “I promise that I will remain nearby. I will protect you from the wandering eye of the dandies and rakes.”

“I am obliged to you, Edward,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder. “You are my savior.” Heidi said the words in such a teasing manner that she rolled her eyes at herself.

The younger man grinned. “That remains to be seen. And do not forget, dear cousin, I may call in a favor one day,” he teased.

Doña Carter, turning back and seeing Heidi and Edward arm in arm, shooed off her husband and Edward in the direction of St. James' Street toward the tailory.

“We need some peace, gentlemen, so that we may select our accessories for this evening. It will not do to have you hovering.”

Mr. Carter laughed and then clapped his nephew on his shoulder. “Come then, nephew. It will not due to serve as distractions to the great ladies of Henrietta Street.”

It was just past two in the afternoon, after hours of window shopping and spending far too much money on a new gown that had been perfect for her, when Heidi found herself walking with Anne away from Grosvenor Square and toward Hyde Park. Edward had gone into a bookshop nearby while their host and hostess had stopped into the milliner’s to place an order. Rather than loitering on the busy street, Heidi suggested that the two of them take some air at the famous park.
With Anne at her side, they walked along Park Lane enjoying the bits of shade that the trees provided. Her brand new glass beaded, peacock colored hair-comb was in a small box in the bag in her hand. It had been a splurge, but she couldn’t wait to put it in her hair tonight.

Turning around at Oxford Street, Heidi was surprised to see the familiar dark form of Lt Denny walking toward them.

“Lieutenant Denny,” she said, curtseying. “I did not expect to see you in London.” Her thoughts went immediately to Wickham, despite herself.

“Miss Meldrum, Miss de Bourgh,” he bowed politely.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to say goodbye before you left for the north when last you were in Hunsford.”

His feet shuffled on the sidewalk. “Left in a hurry, I am sorry to say.”

“I wanted to say I was sorry,” Heidi continued abruptly, “that you got mixed up with Wickham.”

“I am sorry as well, Miss Meldrum.”

“What for? It was Wickham who committed the offense. It was my fault.”

His eyes clouded over.

Something sank in the pit of Heidi’s stomach at the expression on his face.

“No, I am sorry for being forced to take part in this. You must know that if I did not come to you now, that he would have found someone else to do the deed.”

Heidi narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Denny’s voice got quiet as he took a step closer. “I will keep Miss de Bourgh safe and come back for you, I promise.”

He took a step back, pulling Anne away from her. “I hope one day you can forgive me.”

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Heidi reached out to catch Anne’s wrist. “What the Hell are you doing?”

Before she could do anything else, a pair of arms wrapped around Heidi’s waist while Anne cried out in alarm, trying to pull her arm free from Denny’s grip.

“Go!” Wickham growled.

Before she could scream, Wickham let go with one arm and jammed his hand over her mouth, preventing her from alerting others. Denny disappeared down the road, his arm gripping Anne’s wrist.

*Jesus Christ.* Wickham’s M.O. was starting to get old.

Wickham, having lost his two handed grip, only grabbed her waist tighter and lifted her off the street.

As Wickham turned her, pulling her into an alleyway, half of her gown was already cloaked in the
shadows.

Her fingers dug into his arm, trying to get him to let go, but with gloves on, she couldn’t dig her nails in. She was still wriggling to no avail as Wickham drew her toward the alleyway. The man was far stronger than she’d ever guessed.

She didn’t have time to panic.

She didn’t have time for anything.

Another man appeared on the street, watching Wickham drag her back. She wanted to scream at him, but the flash in this stranger’s eyes spoke volumes. He was the lookout.

This was some coordinated Seal Team Six crap.

Heidi’s mind flashed back to her days at the theatre when they had been choreographing a fight scene on the set. She didn’t have much knowledge but it would have to be enough.

Wickham was strong, but he was still human.

Knowing she didn’t have long before he would overwhelm her, she kicked at a nearby wall, throwing herself back to knock him off balance.

He grunted in pain, but stumbled enough to loosen his grip. She slid down a few inches.

Just enough.

With her feet back on the ground, she used her leverage to turn and whipped her hand around his neck and brought her knee up to his nose.

She felt the crunch of bone ricochet through his skull and into the hands that held his face in place. Heidi released him in the horror of what she’d done. Mr. Wickham stumbled backward, crying out in pain.

Searching for something to use as a weapon, Heidi scrambled for a nearby barrel, having been left there by some errant shopkeeper or another. The lid came off easily and Mr. Wickham closed the distance between them. He flicked his bloodied glove in the air, a spray of red painting the alleyway.

“You bitch!”

Heidi held her ground, gripping the lid tightly, not sure what he was going to do.

But it was to no avail as he bounded forward, reached out, and ripped the wood from her hand, shattering the rotted lid against the nearby brick wall.

He came back at her and Heidi did something she’d never expected to do.

Wickham reached for her arm and her knee came up, connecting with his groin.

“Not again, you asshole.”

She’d hit him as hard as she could, though a brush against his tender bits would probably have been enough to incapacitate him until she could find a policeman or something.

He collapsed onto the ground, wheezing.
Leaning forward, she rested her hands on her knees and drew in a deep breath, wheezing herself. Wickham groaned and rolled on the ground, grasping his manhood while blood from his nose spilled onto the street.

“Heidi!”

“Miss Meldrum!”

Her head snapped up and Edward was running toward her at full tilt, Lieutenant Denny trailing behind him. The creepy witness/lookout-man gone from the alleyway.

With the two of them, against all odds, was Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Heidi leaned against the wall and stared at the writhing Wickham, wondering where in the hell all these soldiers were coming from.

Edward pulled Heidi into an embrace and she allowed herself to be hugged, collapsing against his chest.

“How dare you,” the colonel said, growling at Wickham.

The sound of metal swishing through the air had Heidi pulling away from the embrace and watching as the colonel slashed Wickham across the cheek. Blood welled in the wound, but Heidi, even in her crazed state, could see that it was nothing but a superficial wound.

“I should call you out for this impertinence.”

“Are you hurt?” Edward asked, pulling her attention back to her cousin. Edward stepped back while she’d managed to catch her breath, though she couldn’t stop the shaking in her hands and knees.

Heidi shook her head, staring down at Wickham, who was still struggling to do more than crawl in the filthy street. The colonel looked as if he wanted to say more, fury stiffening his back, his cheeks flaming red.

“Where are the others?” she asked, in an effort to distract him from the murderous rage.

“Our uncle is fetching the Bow Street Runners,” Edward said, “I thank God Denny found us.”

Heidi’s stomach flipped, the name sounding like a gang. “No.”

The colonel snapped his head around, with an intensity on his features that she hadn’t expected. “They may not be militia men, but they are law enforcement. They can deal with Wickham.”

She grimaced at her faux pas, not a gang then, but some sort of police. “I mean,” she said, taking a breath and rubbing her neck. “Let him go.”


“I am entirely serious.” She stepped away from Edward and knelt down beside Wickham, who glared daggers at her.

“I have every reason to let the colonel turn you over to the police. He is witness to your stalking, your assaults, your nature. But you will never again come near me or the people I care about. Do
you understand me?"

“I merely wished to pay you back for your kindness,” he said, spitting a mouthful of blood on her skirts.

“I do not jest, sir. You see now how I repay your repeated assaults.” She took a breath, trying to ignore the shakes that rolled through her body. Heidi’s eyes drifted to his nose, certain she’d broken it. “If I see you again, I will call for Runners, I will destroy you.”

Shaking her head, she dropped some of the anger in her voice. “To think, that I believed you to be misunderstood, that you weren’t an opportunistic prig. That circumstance had merely been cruel to you.”

She smirked. It was her one chance to use the line from *Ever After*. The drama geek in her couldn’t resist.

Locking eyes with the man, Heidi spoke her words, ice dripping from her lips. “I will forget you from this day forward; but you will most certainly remember me every day for the rest of your life.”

Heidi reached out then and brushed the colonel’s forearm to stay his blade, her legs weak. He stiffened and she used his position to pull herself up from the crouch she’d been in, glancing at the three other men.

“If you’ve called the police, it won’t be long before they arrive. We need to get our stories straight.”

She turned back to Wickham. “Get off the street and run, lest you wish to get caught.”

He scrambled to his feet and raced off, just as whistles filled the air.

“You too, Denny,” she said.

The man averted his eyes, as if he wanted to stay and make amends but did not want to risk the wrath of the runners. “I am sorry.”

“I know,” she said, pursing her lips. “I do not fault you. I doubt you had any choice in the matter.”

“You cannot be serious,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, his head snapping at her.

“There was another accomplice,” Heidi said, glaring up at him. “Denny told me point blank that he would fetch you as soon as he got Anne to safety. That is not the action of a man willing to harm someone.”

She turned to face Denny. “Please, go before the Runners get the wrong idea.”

He bowed his head at her, glanced at the two men, and then ran off.

She stepped between Edward and the retreating form of Denny. “You tell them, Wickham ran off,” she said firmly. “He ran off when he saw you.”

Edward paced, shaking his head with disbelief. “I cannot believe this.”

“Edward,” she demanded, grabbing his arm. “When the police ask, he ran off before you could stop him.”
“Why, why would you protect him? He is a fiend!”

She looked back at the colonel and then again at Edward. There was no way either man would ever understand, so she might as well speak the truth. People weren’t just villains in a novel.

“He has antagonized me since we first met. We have been at each other’s throats, trading insults for months. It stops today.” She swallowed, gathering her courage. “I hope that my goodwill will turn him into someone better. Maybe this is his moment of change.”

“You cannot change his nature,” said the colonel with a sigh.

Heidi looked down the path where Wickham had run from.

“Perhaps not, but my telling my uncle of my suspicions might have put him on a path of darkness. I will not have that on my conscience.”

The colonel’s countenance was grave. "He must be forced to face the consequences of his actions."

“His nose is broken.” Heidi chuckled. “He won’t be able to rise to the occasion for some time. I got him good.”

The two men looked at each other, features unreadable.

"You will not wander off alone again, Heidi," Edward demanded.

Ire rose in her chest, overwhelming the intense exhaustion that had begun to weigh her down. "First, I wasn’t alone to begin with, we were ambushed. And second, what right have you to command me?"

The colonel reached out for her and Heidi yanked her arm away and glared at Edward.

"You are not my father!"

"But he is a male relative, Miss Meldrum. It is your duty to obey him."

Heidi glared at the colonel. "The hell he is! Where I come from——"

"You are in England," Edward snapped, his finger pointing at her. “There are rules you must follow.”

Heidi held back defiant tears, though his words drained her of the anger that had threatened to explode out of her.

Misogynistic as it was, in this time, they were right. She was in England, in 1812 and she’d just been attacked.

It went against every modern bone in her body, but maybe playing it safe was the better thing to do.

"There are rumors of highwaymen and scoundrels preying on women in London even within the parks. I ask you to remain accompanied at all times, if only for the sanity of those who care for you."

Before she could say anything else, the officers came, ending what had become a sour conversation. She took comfort only that they both, reluctantly, yielded to her demands with their silence.
By the time she returned to Henrietta Street, escorted by the good colonel and Edward, the adrenalin had begun to wear off. Heidi fairly collapsed onto the chair in the front parlor as she pulled at the ribbon still barely holding her cracked bonnet in place. Her hands only shook intermittently.

The colonel took off his hat, stepping into the foyer. “How is my cousin?” he asked the butler.

“She is in her rooms, being tended to by the doctor.”

“I shall go up at once.” With that, the colonel disappeared up the stairs.

“I forgot about Anne,” Heidi said, turning to Edward. “Was she alright? Did she—”

“The lieutenant, from what I could gather, was ordered to distract Miss de Bourgh while Wickham and his friend took you. He brought her directly to us. I daresay we were being watched when I entered the shop as he knew exactly where to go.”

“Was she harmed?”

“No,” Edward said, placing his hand over hers, to console her. “Not at that moment. Merely shaken at what had occurred, concerned for your welfare.”

Heidi leaned her head against the wall behind the chair, her bonnet on her lap.

“You have certainly had an interesting day, Heidi.” His voice was soft.

She gave Edward a side-glance and blinked slowly. She was still angry with him, for what he'd said.

“I am looking forward to going to sleep.”

“You certainly cannot do that,” he said.

Heidi sat up. “What do you mean?”

“We have an invitation to Almack’s tonight, remember?” He pulled from his pocket the small bag that held the new comb she’d purchased.

“Oh God.” Heidi buried her face in her hands. She had all but forgotten. “Must we?” she asked, groaning.

“You mean to tell me that you spent a fair bit of coin on a ball gown that you do not wish to wear?”

“I forgot about that,” she admitted. That salmon-pink dress was phenomenal and she would regret
not wearing it to such an exclusive event; but she would not go if Anne was not okay. Screw propriety and politeness.

Edward laughed before drawing his lips into a pensive line. “I still do not understand why you let Wickham go; but I am determined to believe that you had your reasons.”

“I did,” she rolled her head to the side, rendering him a bit lopsided. “At least, I think I did. What if I made a mistake?”

“We do not all have the gift of foresight, Heidi,” he said. “We just do what we think is best.”

“When did you get so wise?”

“I have begun to see the world differently in the months since your arrival.”

Heidi cocked her head inquiringly. “How so?”

“It is fantastical, your story. But I believe you nonetheless, especially after seeing Wickham with a bloodied nose.”

With a smile, Heidi slipped back into thought. "While we were at Pemberley, I ran into a few Roma hiding on the estate."

"Who?"

"Gypsies," she said, wincing at the word. "We call them Roma in my time. The woman said something to me, that seemed to indicate that she knew about my travels."

Edward pulled away and took her in, his brow furrowing.

"They are made out to be swindlers, but even as skeptical as I am, what she said, it meant something."

She sighed, the weight of the words she was about to speak heavy on her tongue. Part of her wanted to cry. Somehow, she could not.

“I don't think I will be able to go back.” Her eyes burned.

She felt Edward’s warmth nearer until he was right next to her on the settee. "You never know, Heidi."

"You're right, but maybe I need to start thinking of this place in more permanent terms."

"Would it be such a bad thing?"

She smiled. "I suppose not. Not everything is bad, though you have no indoor plumbing and women’s rights are primeval. But those are things that I can change."

They sat there, shoulder to shoulder, without speaking.

“I always dreamed about what my life would have been like if I’d had siblings,” she said. “Rose is lucky to have a brother like you to protect her.”

“I did little to help you today.”

“You care. And if something were to happen to your parents, she will be able to lean on you, to
count on you to support her until she comes of age or marries.”

“She can lean on you too.”

"Of course she can, but it is different. You know this time and place so much better and can tell her how to act properly, what to do or say that will keep her safest. I fear I’ll always be learning these things.”

“I hope you stay. I think we will get along famously. I can see that we will be a great team someday. And you can tip me off on any interesting tidbits you might remember.”

“Like what?” She asked, eying him curiously.

“Oh,” he said, a devilish grin on his angular face. “Perhaps which ladies at Almack’s are destined to be great heroines and heiresses?”

Heidi rolled her eyes and playfully nudged him with her elbow.

There was a knock and Heidi pulled away to see the colonel standing in the doorway.

“My cousin is unwell,” he said, coming into the room. “The doctor says it is matter of her nerves, likely brought on by what happened near the park.”

Heidi stood, guilt chilling her mood. “Does my uncle need help?”

The colonel shook his head. “No. He has ordered Anne to bed.”

“Perhaps we should just cancel tonight’s festivities. It’s silly to go out when—“

Edward spoke up then and Heidi pursed her lips at him. “This may be the only chance you get to see the lovely Almack’s club, cousin. We will go.”

Heidi reached for the colonel, imploring him silently to tell Edward that they should stay home. Before she could say anything, however, her adopted cousin grinned.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, do you have plans this evening?”

The man frowned, eyes darting back and forth between them. “Not that I am aware of.”

“You have your own standing voucher, do you not?”

Heidi’s chest tightened when the colonel nodded.

“I do, indeed.”

Edward turned to look at her. "And you’ve a lovely new gown, do you not?” He glared at her, as if he were imploring her to take the bait. But Heidi would not force the colonel to accompany them.

"Yes, but—"

"Then, it is settled. You must accompany us tonight. Besides,” he said, leaning forward as if in conspiracy with the other man. “My cousin has no knowledge of country dances, and I may not be able to stay by her side all night. You must step in and keep her from having to fight off the hordes of gentleman callers who would wish to put her in an embarrassing situation.”

“In that case,” the colonel said drolly, “I would be honored to play your cousin’s protector.”

“Capital!” Edward proclaimed in triumph, ignoring Heidi’s glare. “Too late to back out now; a gentleman has called upon you and you cannot refuse him.”

"I will simply need to alert my companions that I would not be joining them tonight."

Heidi gestured at the colonel while facing Edward. "You see, he already has plans, he does not need to come with."

"Fitzwilliam?" Edward said, turning back to the colonel with a question.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Miss Meldrum, however I would much rather join the Carters and Meldrums at Almack’s than spend the evening at the club." The colonel chortled.

Heidi gaped. Traitor. She couldn’t remember him ever actually laughing like that before.

"There, now, stop trying to talk him out of it, cousin." With that, Edward left the room, Heidi staring after him bewildered.

"I apologize for my cousin, colonel. I have no idea what’s gotten into him." Her eyes fell on the open doorway.

"It is no trouble, Miss Meldrum. Your cousin has always been a meddling menace."

Heidi looked up at the colonel, hearing a smile in his voice. "Will you do me a favor?" she asked, accepting her fate.

"I am at your service," he said, tilting his head at her.

"London society is a mystery to me. Would you warn me, should we come into contact with people you don't intrinsically trust? I think it is rather obvious that I cannot be trusted to know the difference."

"You may trust in my discretion," he said seriously, searching her eyes. “However, I was under the impression that you had been living in London this winter. Surely you would know by now enough of society to survive without my guidance." 

"I," she started, quickly coming up with a lie. "Did not venture out into society, as I was in mourning for my mother."

His expression darkened. For the first time, Heidi noticed how deeply green his eyes could become. She stared into them, warmth enveloping her as physically as a shawl might.

She cleared her throat. "I was to be married once my mourning was over and my betrothed thought so little of society’s intrigues that we stayed away."

Drawing her eyes down, she spotted the colonel’s hand fisting at his side.

"Is it possible we will see your former betrothed at Almacks this eve?"

Heidi’s stomach clenched as she fumbled for another lie. "I doubt it," she hedged. "I will certainly let you know if I see him."

"I do not recall you mentioning a name before, but it is possible he is already known to me. I have spent many winters in the city."
There was no time to say anything but the first name that came to mind. "His name is George, George Glass."

Heidi’s stomach dropped.

What a dumbass, she thought, mentally shaking her head. Here she was in 1812, there was no chance of running into Peter Hicks and here she had used the worst fake name ever!

Jan Brady would be proud.

She could only hope that the real George Glass, if there was one, lived far from London.

Wanting to look away, but unable to, she noted that his eyes sparkled with mischief. "I cannot say that I am aware of any members of the Glass family."

Swallowing her nerves and certain that he couldn’t know she’d just lied to him, Heidi cleared her throat. "Good," she said. "I mean, if he is not truly part of society then there's no worry about running into him at Almack’s. It lessens my worries considerably."

"What of his relations? Did you not know who his connections were?"

"He kept me isolated, I'm afraid," she said, hedging. "There was not much he trusted me with."

The colonel frowned, as if trying to understand. She was being vague and cagey and if she didn’t stop talking soon the colonel would figure it out.

"I thought he was protecting me from a society that would shun me, not having money; but the more I think about it, the more I consider what sort of double life he may have been leading."

That at least was true.

But no more feeling sorry for herself. He was a cad and not worthy of her heartache.

"I am sorry for that."

Heidi shrugged, the lies tasting like ash, but the colonel’s features twisted then.

"But you mean to say that you were sharing a dwelling with Mister Glass?"

Heidi’s inner alarm blared like a siren.

Shit, shit shit!

She knew what he was intimating, and while she hadn’t been living with him, she’d slept with Peter. Their friendship would be severed if he learned she’d been promiscuous, at least in his interpretation of the word.

"I mean—that is to say—" Heidi tried to backtrack, tried to fix this. "I hadn’t moved in with him yet," she said, shaking her head, trying desperately to play it off. Miraculously, Heidi held her tongue before she said something worse.

"That is a relief." He pursed his lips, eyes narrowing at her, but then his features softened. "I am sorry that you suffered at his hands."

"Do not be," she said, relieved that his attention had been diverted. "I am perfectly at peace with it. I fled what was clearly a bad situation, I reconnected with family that I hadn't even realized I still
had, and I've met some people, yourself included, that I would have never met otherwise."

That hint of mischief sparkled in his eyes once again. Feeling a brush of heat in her cheeks, Heidi smiled up at the colonel. Her heart fluttered in her chest and she did her best to ignore it.

"Life seems to have worked out for the best."

Chapter End Notes

You'll get Almack's tomorrow! My favorite chapter to date!

Isn't Edward a stinker??
"There is no need to be nervous," Edward said, his hand covering Heidi's as they walked toward the club. "You know the rules of etiquette, and both the colonel and I are here. Our aunt will not wish to see you fail, either."

"Yes, yes." Heidi hissed. "Keep my mouth shut and bat my eyelashes, I get it. But I wish Anne were here. I feel like a traitor leaving her alone at the house"

Edward sighed wearily. “She was not feeling her best, and that is the end of it.”

Ahead of them, the colonel escorted Doña Carter into the building. As the Fitzwilliam household had a full sized carriage at their disposal, the colonel had offered to pick the Carter’s up and escort the attendees to the assembly hall. The Doctor and Mr. Carter had opted to go to the club, while Mrs. Carter kept an eye on Anne and Rose.

Looking up at the famous club, Heidi couldn’t help but feel underwhelmed. The Almack’s assembly rooms were surprisingly plain on the outside, with only a brick wall and windows, looking more like a warehouse than a famous club.

Heidi frowned. "I still think this is ridiculous. Our aunt only received the invitations on the condition that she would bring Miss de Bourgh."

He squeezed her hand in warning. Heidi gave him the most brilliant smile she could muster.

"Take this moment to shine," he said, glancing down at her dress. "The women will all be aflutter with your unexpected appearance. You are a mystery."

"But—"

Edward led the two of them into a well-appointed foyer, with high ceilings and gilded sconces. "If you are to stay, like the... Roma said, then you will be required to join society and find a husband. Like it, or not. This is the best place to embark on such a journey. Word will spread, they will see you with our aunt, introduced to the patronesses, and, perhaps best of all, at the side of an Earl’s son."

In front of them, Heidi could see Doña Carter handing their vouchers to what might have been an emcee.

"Husbands are overrated."

"I cannot say I would know." He grinned at her.

Heidi rolled her eyes. "You're insufferable."
"Come now, best behavior," he warned, leading Heidi through the doors.

"You aren't nervous?"

"I may not be society elite, but I know how they act. I went to school with their brothers and sons, nephews and cousins. They do not scare me."

She took a breath and entered the assembly room, awkwardly holding the fan she’d purchased this afternoon to go with the dress. *Princess Diaries* fluttered through her mind and she hoped she wasn’t asked to flirt with one.

The assembly room was nothing short of amazing.

From the high ceiling hung a dozen chandeliers, the walls were filigreed and crown molded within an inch of their lives, and marble statues were placed sporadically against the walls. It was like something from a dream.

The balconies that overlooked the dance floor were already filled with people, even though they'd arrived early at almost ten p.m. And there below, waiting for the next song were dozens of men and women, all in their best gowns and suits.

Edward led Heidi along the edge of the room behind their hostess until they reached a small alcove at the back of the large hall.

Doña Carter curtseyed deeply to the couple of ladies already gathered in the alcove.

"My dears, it is a pleasure to see you again. I am unsure if you have already been introduced properly, but wish to present to you Colonel Fitzwilliam, the younger son of the Earl of Larkshire."

The man greeted each of the women in turn, showing how well-bred he was. He appeared to already know one of the young ladies as they greeted each other less formally and Heidi tilted her head trying to remember any conversation at Wych Elm where her name might have been brought up.

Heidi tried not to think how plain she felt in comparison to the ladies, despite being all trussed up like a turkey. Or how the colonel’s features had lit up when he’d bowed toward the countess.

"My niece and nephew," her aunt said, waving her hand in Heidi’s direction and she was grateful that Edward pulled her forward.

Beside her, he dropped her hand and bowed deeply to the ladies. Heidi quickly curtseyed and waited for Edward’s signal.

Heidi was introduced to Countess Esterházy, another name that sounded familiar to her, and Countess Emily Cowper, the lady to whom the colonel was already acquainted.

"Viscountess Castlereagh is due to arrive within the hour, madam."

"Do have someone sent for me, as I have long wished to reunite with her ladyship."

Heidi’s jaw almost dropped as she listened to the exchange. Her aunt was some sort of contemporary with these peers, but she never expected them to defer to her rather than the other way around.

Heidi remained silent as the women spoke until the Countess Esterházy dismissed them.
Only then, walking away, did Heidi breathe fully. The stays she'd been squeezed into made it difficult enough to breathe without her nervous energy.

The salmon pink gown she'd purchased was made of what the seamstress called silk gauze. Heidi had never heard of the fabric; but figured the woman had been speaking about the outer layer, gauze easy enough to interpret. Frilled at the deep neckline with lace, it fell to the floor with the barest hint of a train. Heidi would need to be wary of it. The dresses she usually wore, if she wore them, never trailed behind her.

The choice of the color surprised her as well. Heidi had never been a fan of pink, but she'd seen herself in the mirror at the tailor's shop and had fallen in love with it. The pink made her hair resemble luscious chocolate, not that people had any idea what good and proper chocolate looked like.

Heidi and Edward moved seamlessly through the hall. Thankfully, Edward did not insist upon keeping her on his arm weaving their way through the ever-growing crowd.

Catching a whiff of someone’s body odor, Heidi pulled the lavender scented kerchief that Mrs. Carter had let her borrow to her nose. It was a pungent reminder that not everyone would have bathed before coming to the club.

Above her, the orchestra seated on one of the balconies began playing music, filling the air with a lively tune.

"Come along," Edward said, ducking them out of the way of the lines that were beginning to form for dancing. The edges of the room suddenly bordered on claustrophobic. Luckily, he led her into an alcove of their own and offered her a seat on one of the tall stools.

Heidi watched the dance rapturously. They hadn't had time to practice any steps this afternoon and she was determined to have at least an idea of what to expect, should someone ask to escort her in a dance.

The colonel appeared halfway through the song and Edward bowed out of the alcove to find a dance partner at Heidi's insistence.

"You should have fun," Heidi said, urging her cousin toward the dancefloor. "I am safe enough here."

He looked at the colonel, some sort of masculine, silent conversation passing between them, and disappeared into the crowd, when Heidi insisted he invite the red-haired girl who strolled past to the next dance.

"You need not wait with me either, colonel. I have protection should I need it," she said, tapping the reticule hanging from her wrist. He glanced at the pouch and then back up at her. "You didn't think I wouldn't leave home without it, did you?" She grinned.

Standing at her side, his eyes darkened when he leaned over to whisper near her ear over the noise of the room. "And yet, you did not use it today when you should have."

Heidi looked down, chastened. "I made the mistake of thinking that being with a group would have made me safe. I will not make that mistake again."

The colonel pursed his lips, pulling away. "I still wish you would have allowed the runners to take custody of Mr. Wickham. At the very least I should be facing the man on the green for a duel."
Her stomach churned, the thought that he’d fight for her honor twisting her insides. "I told that solider today that I would never again think of him. I will not let Wickham ruin my night. I beg you not to allow him to ruin yours."

He tilted his head at her, searching her face. "My apologies, Miss Meldrum."

"You are not the one that owes me an apology." She wanted to reach out and rest her hand over his, which sat perched on the tabletop nearby.

"I would have wished to hear his explanation rather than let him run." The colonel cleared his throat.

She pursed her lips. "Now, no more talk of that unpleasant event. Please, go find a young woman to dance with. You have just as much right as my cousin to enjoy the evening."

"I fully intend on enjoying myself, but I thought perhaps you would be interested in a diversion first."

Heidi looked at him properly then. "Whatever could you mean by that?"

He grinned. "There are some people in attendance tonight that I believe you know."

"I know people?" Nervous energy filled her at the thought that the colonel had found someone named George Glass within the crowd.

"If you will permit me," he said, holding out his hand.

"Colonel?"

The colonel turned around and Heidi stood to greet whoever it was. If it was a Mr. Glass, she’d never forgive herself for dooming the man just because he’d shared the name of some made up boyfriend that Jan Brady concocted.

"Ahh Mr. Bingley."

"Mr. Bingley?" Relief washed over Heidi that the name was not, in fact, Glass. It took her a second to process the significance of it.

*The* Mr. Bingley. After all of the anticipation over Mr. Darcy’s bad-deeds, she’d completely forgotten that she hadn’t even met the guy yet.

As the colonel introduced them, Heidi soaked in the details. The skin at the corners of his eyes wrinkled as the man smiled, blue eyes alight in laughter. Dark auburn hair framed his face and Heidi felt her stomach flip. She wasn’t normally attracted to redheads, but she could certainly see the appeal.

"I imagine I owe you congratulations, on your upcoming nuptials," she said, once introductions were made.

Bingley, also more solidly built than she’d expected, grinned widely. "How, may I ask, do you know of my felicity?"

"I am friends with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I received a letter from her about a week past informing me of the happy tidings."

"Ah," he said warmly. "My angel mentioned that her sister had made new friends during her visit
Heidi grinned. "I am fortunate that Miss Bennet thinks highly enough of me to mention to her sister. Is Miss Jane Bennet at the assembly tonight?" She stood on her toes to look around his form. "I would dearly love to make her acquaintance."

"No, she is at home, at Longbourne. I hope to return to Meryton proper soon. Business brings me to London, and as such I have accompanied my sister, Caroline, to the assembly rooms tonight."

Heidi glanced at Fitzwilliam. The fear that she might have to speak to the woman left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Perhaps I could introduce you to her. I believe she is dancing with the Viscount Coghlan."

"That would be lovely, Mr. Bingley. I look forward to making her acquaintance." Heidi smiled, but her stomach soured. Caroline had always seemed like a bitch. She could only hope it was a misunderstanding of character similar to Anne de Bourgh.

"I was surprised to see Mr. Darcy in town the other day. He mentioned he had escorted his cousin, and I believe yourself, as far as Oxford?"

Heidi nodded and then explained that she had been traveling with Miss de Bourgh for a month and they had chanced to stop in Pemberley on their way to meet with her cousin in Oxford for his graduation. Heidi remained mum on the business they concluded.

There was a commotion in the alcove nearby. When Heidi looked up, a man was practically sprinting past their small group.

Her blood ran cold. It was none other than the Viscount Lamb—Lord Melbourne.

"Oh no," she murmured. On instinct, she started to move, wondering if there had been some altercation with his wife.

*The scandal!*

Even if he would never want to speak to her again after her impertinence, she felt the unwavering desire to offer him friendship or consolation. It was the least she could do after the way she had left things between them.

She was about to excuse herself to chase after the viscount when her aunt appeared in the archway where she’d been introduced to Mr. Bingley.

"Mr. Bingley and I will fetch a few lemonades for our female companions," the colonel announced, anticipating the doña’s wish.

"I have just heard the most interesting news," the noble woman said, sliding into the alcove beside Heidi. "I simply must share it with someone."

Heidi waved her hand to invite Doña Carter to speak, though she already had a sinking feeling as to what the woman was about to say. "What has happened?"

"Lady Reilly just told me that the Viscountess of Melbourne has been having an affair with Lord Byron. Can you imagine?"

Trying to act as if she hadn’t just choked on her own spit, Heidi covered her mouth with her fan.
She knew nothing about Byron except for some odd studies on him in English classes in school, but there was no doubt in her mind that, of course, he would have been the same man to scandalize Lord M.

Because, of course he would.

"It is the most shocking thing to happen in months."

Standing, Heidi took a few steps toward the exit, needing to check on her acquaintance. He certainly wasn’t a friend, but Jesus, if this was the sort of thing that his supposed friends talked about, she had to try to relieve his embarrassment, shouldn’t she?

"Niece, what is it?" Her aunt’s hand grasped her wrist.

"I must speak with him."

"With whom?"

"Lord Melbourne."

"I do not think that is wise."

Before she could wrench her arm from the doña’s grip, the two men and Edward stood in the way, blocking her exit.

"Let me pass, please. I beg you." Heidi insisted, looking past the men. “We are acquainted.”

"With whom, cousin?"

Heidi looked at Edward, pleading with him. "Lord Melbourne. You know I must." She hoped her words held the weight that they needed to. She no longer wanted to keep the truth from Melbourne, no matter how she’d resolved against it a few weeks ago.

“I will join you,” Edward said, nodding slowly and stepping aside to let her pass.

Heidi followed the path that the gentleman had taken and found herself in the nearly empty lobby, no sign of the man in question.

“I think he has gone,” Edward said. "Was it truly an important message you wished to relay?"

Heidi nodded, pursing her lips in frustration.

“Let us return to our party.” He held his arm out for her and led her back to their alcove. “Perhaps you will have another chance.”

“Have you accomplished your mission, Miss Meldrum?”

Heidi startled at the colonel’s words when she sidled into the alcove next to her aunt.

“Lord Melbourne was already gone,” Heidi replied dejectedly.

"Melbourne?"

A woman, tall and striking in a burgundy dress, appeared at Mr. Bingley’s side. What could have been a positively gorgeous face was twisted with an expression bordering on disdain.
Caroline effing Bingley.

There was no other possibility of her identity.

"He is a friend," she said, quickly.

"Is he indeed?" the woman practically oozed disbelief. "You are friends with the viscount?"

The colonel placed a cup of lemonade in front of Heidi and she thanked him, realizing only then how parched she was. She took sip and placed it back on the table, spotting the lip marks on the opposite side.

Heidi recoiled but smiled at the colonel, whose eyes were on hers. Heidi would need to find a way to dispose of the drink without being rude. She absolutely could not continue drinking it now.

"I made his acquaintance during an intimate dinner party at Wych Elm Hall a fortnight hence." Silently she added, not that it should matter to you.

“Oh, of course...” The woman nodded patronizingly, and merely flicked up her fan.

"I was unaware that Melbourne paid calls on the estate this summer," the colonel said gently.

“I believe his visit was unexpected,” she said, avoiding the other woman’s censure. “He joined our dinner party prompting his lordship to invite the de Bourgh’s for supper.”

Much as she wanted to talk about the dinner, Heidi erred on the side of caution. She wanted to prove to the colonel that she could back up her story without feeding the fire. Caroline’s greedy little ears would hear no gossip from her.

Changing the topic, Heidi asked for an introduction to the young woman, unsure of protocol. Thankfully her intuition had been correct and it was Caroline that had come to join them. Heidi might have been embarrassed if it was someone else, because she certainly didn’t want to be rude in front of someone who might matter.

The Bingleys lingered in the alcove for half an hour, Heidi drew Mr. Bingley into conversation and was grateful that her aunt kept Caroline occupied. They spoke about the impending nuptials and Caroline interjected now and again convinced that Mr. Darcy would be available as a date, though she didn't explicitly say it. The conversation turned to confirm what Edward and the colonel had said earlier, that there had been another attack by masked men, this time in Hyde Park.

Maybe they were right in being so concerned about her safety, especially if more than just herself were being targeted by roving bandits.

The image of Wickham as a wild west cowboy flashed in her mind.

"I think I could use a bit of fresh air," she said, mind whirling in the aftermath of the conversation.

The colonel took her hand and drew it through his arm. "Please, allow me to escort you to the balconies on the first floor," he said.

"If you'll just point me in the direction of the stairs."

"It would not do for a woman to be out on the balconies alone.” He raised his eyebrows as if hopeful, his tone softening. “Your cousin has put you into my care. Please allow me to attend to your needs.”
Heidi could see her aunt give an approving nod and remembering that she’d just a few hours ago been a victim of an attack, Heidi bit her lip and pushed down her pride. "Very well."

The colonel led her through the crowd and up a stairwell, packed with people. The air grew warmer as they climbed up to the first floor and Heidi gasped, the stays tight around her chest.

"What a low-born creature on his arm—"

Heidi turned, hearing the woman’s words. She almost pulled her hand from the colonel’s grip, but his hand held hers tightly.

She glared at the woman but allowed the colonel to continue leading the way.

"Did you hear that?" she said, fuming as they turned the corner.

"I did." He opened the door to one of the balconies near the end of the corridor, leaving it open.

"That is exactly why I did not wish for you to accompany me." Rage and hurt choked her.

He took a step closer to her. "Miss Meldrum—"

"No, please don't," she said, holding out a hand to stop him. “Surely you can see how even in my best, they can tell I don't belong here."

The colonel sighed, his fingers drumming against the railing. "You do belong at Almack's. A little...want for refinement does not mean you do not belong just as much as the rest of them."

Her heart lurched. Heidi wasn't sure if she should take offense or be grateful for the rest of his comment.

"That's kind of you, colonel, but that's a lie."

Averting her eyes, Heidi watched his palm flatten on the wood.

He cleared his throat. "You must have more faith in yourself, Miss Meldrum."

He looked as if he were going to reach out to her and Heidi swallowed, preparing to step back.

"Fitzwilliam!"

Heidi looked toward the doorway to see a gentleman grinning at the two of them.

"Brigham," the colonel said, his demeanor stiffening as he closed the distance between the balcony and the doorway to greet this friend. "I was under the impression you had already left town."

"I found I had some business that has delayed my departure," the man said before eying Heidi. "Who, may I ask, is this enchanting young lady?"

"Forgive me, Brigham, may I present Miss Meldrum, lately of Kent."

Heidi stepped forward and allowed herself to be introduced to the Baronet of Kinedale, which was apparently located somewhere near the Scotland border. She couldn’t help but stare at his incredible blond muttonchops.

He’d certainly committed to the style, hadn’t he?
The two men fell into easy conversation and Heidi stepped back, giving them privacy as she looked out onto the street below. They had been at the assembly long enough that the traffic had begun to dwindle to almost nothing, save for a carriage or two waiting to take their patrons home.

"I believe they will be playing another quadrille soon," the baronet said, suddenly appearing at Heidi’s side. "Perhaps you would do me the honor of the next dance, Miss Meldrum?"

Heidi froze, staring out at the street, unable to look at the baronet. Her mouth went dry. She had to say something but she absolutely could not accept.

Colonel Fitzwilliam’s brow furrowed and Heidi bit her lip, unsure how to reject this man.

"My apologies, Brigham," the colonel interjected, taking a step toward her. “But Miss Meldrum has promised the next dance to myself, and I am afraid her card is full for the rest of the night.”

She wanted to ask why he had done that, why save her from the humiliation she was bound to suffer; but Heidi put on her game face and turned to look at the Baronet.

"My apologies, Baronet," she said, trying to ease the sudden tension in her chest.

He reached for her hand and kissed her knuckle. "Perhaps next time then."

"It has been a pleasure," she said, taking back her hand as soon as she could and unfolding her fan, hoping it looked flirtatious rather than terrified.

Colonel Fitzwilliam took her arm and the two of them headed down the corridor and back into the assembly room.

“I fear we may be forced to dance, Miss Meldrum,” the colonel said, as they left the baronet behind. “My friend will likely be observing from the balcony. To decline a dance by feigning a different partner, and then not dancing… The scandal would surely be all over the journals in the morning so we must follow through.”

“But I don’t—“ she said, starting to protest.

“If you will allow me to guide your steps, I am certain we can convince him, at least, that this was intentional.”

Heidi swallowed. This was NOT supposed to happen. She looked around, hoping to find Edward. He could get her out of this.

“We are lucky he was incorrect in regards to the quadrille. I believe a duple minor is to be next.”

“What is that?” she asked, heart thumping in her chest.

“It will be easy enough to imitate. If you will listen to my instructions I will ensure we remain at the end of the line.”

“No,” she said, stopping on the stairs. “I cannot, I simply cannot.”

His hand gripped hers, pleading. “You will fare well enough, trust me.”

Someone behind them on the stairwell complained about their stopping in the path, and the colonel shuffled them to the railing, taking a further step so that when he turned around to address her, he was just a few inches shorter than her own 5’7’’.
She locked eyes with him. “Please,” she said, shaking her head and already feeling ill.

“You will manage it, I am assured,” he said, giving her a warm smile. “It is but a 16 bar dance, it is not the running of an estate.”

Heidi rolled her eyes and fumbled for her fan with her free hand, needing something to hold on to that wasn’t the colonel’s warm and inviting embrace, little as it was.

“You need only to come to the center of the line, join hands with the group and circle round once. Then you will go back to your position, do a turn, and then we circle round again in the opposite direction.”

She glanced over at the couples already lining up in preparation as the ensemble played an inter-set musical number.

“Then the first couple will join hands, slip to the second place and complete a two hand turn.”

Her eyes went wide. “I don’t understand the words that are coming out of your mouth, colonel, I beg you.”

He smiled at her, a promise in his gaze. “This is perhaps the easiest of the dances we will encounter tonight. You must join me, or the baronet will know something is amiss. You would not wish to insult the man, would you?”

She shook her head.

The colonel pulled at her hand, the heat of his touch seeping through her glove, and he turned toward the dancefloor.

Mortification colored her cheeks as she spotted Bingley and Caroline.

Oh no, please not them.

“Look, Mr. Bingley and his sister are near the end. We can join with them. No one will be the wiser.”

He leaned in, whispering the next words in her ear. “The beat will sound fast, but the steps are not.”

With his warm breath dancing across her neck, Heidi shivered. “You aren’t helping, colonel.”

His only response to Heidi’s sputtering was a smirk.

Ignoring her protest, he waved over to Bingley, who sported a bright grin.

Her heart twisted at the scorn on Caroline’s face. It was clear that the woman wanted nothing to do with her. And Heidi couldn’t help but feel the same.

“Come,” he said, offering her his arm. She wanted to protest, but had little choice unless she wished to cause more of a scene.

Standing beside Caroline when they crossed the dancefloor, nausea rose in her gut as a flute and piano started playing.

The music was quick and Heidi tried to center on the count, anything to focus her nervous energy.
The colonel looked down the line and quickly changed places with Bingley.

Beside her, Caroline glared but moved around Heidi to the right side, aligning herself with her brother again.

She glanced across the space between them. His eyes, darker than normal, locked with hers and Heidi sucked in a breath. Unsure why exactly, she expected him to lick his lips; but he only stared, a soft smile on his mouth.

At an assigned moment, some ten bars or so into the music, the men along the row bowed and Heidi completely missed the cue to curtsey.

She hoped she didn’t fall on her face.

Her cheeks flushed, but before she could react everyone else in their group stepped forward and held out their hands. Stumbling forward, she took the colonel’s offered left hand while Caroline took her right, though the turn had already started by the time she’d connected with the woman.

Heidi watched the back of the colonel’s dark brown head of hair while they completed the turn. The curls she’d only noticed in passing before seemed more tantalizing tonight than they’d ever been.

They stepped away from the middle and she glanced over to see that she’d missed the single spin that the dancers did.

Looking at the colonel, wide-eyed, she stepped forward and took the hands of her neighbors. At the last moment, she followed Caroline around in the circle.

She drew in a quick breath by the time they made it back to their starting points and managed to do the spin alone this time.

Just before she started to move to the center, she caught the colonel giving her a small halting motion with his hand. A beat passed and Caroline and Bingley had stepped to the middle and sidestepped between herself and the colonel.

Enjoying a brief reprieve without anything to do for a measure or two, she watched as Caroline and her brother met in the middle again and did a turn together.

The colonel tipped his head toward her and moved to take up the place Bingley had inhabited and Heidi quickly mirrored his actions, giving Caroline her spot.

Then the loop started over again with the four of them stepping to the center.

It wasn’t until after the second group circle that Heidi stepped forward realizing that she was supposed to hold the colonel’s hands as he led them through the center back to their first position and she’d missed it the first time.

“You are doing well,” he said, light dancing in his eyes.

“You do not need to lie. Not for my sake.”

She stepped back into the line and then came to the center to join hands with him again for a single turn.

“I do not lie,” he said, the light in his eyes dimming to something unreadable. “You are doing well.
Far better than your cousin intimated.”

He licked the corner of his upper lip and Heidi almost faltered in her step, proving him wrong.

They parted and Heidi returned to her spot in the second position and the loop started over again.

She took Caroline’s hand easily this time and followed the colonel around in the circle, starting to understand the moves.

If this was it, then she could handle this.

_Hopefully this was it._

Caroline was inspecting her, but rather than worry about the woman, grateful for the choreography work she’d done in the theater for _Grease_ and _Hairspray_, Heidi focused on her partner on the other side of the line.

The moment for the two of them to come together again came quickly.

“I daresay you will understand country dances in short order,” he said, leading them down to the second position.

“Nothing too complicated, I beg,” she said, lighter this time around than the first.

He chuckled as they stepped apart.

Two rounds passed and Heidi struggled to come up with something to say to the man. Now that she was understanding the footing better, it was clearly time for them to small-talk.

The colonel stepped forward for their coming together and Heidi itched to rub the back of her neck. She felt… odd and the sensation only grew.

“Only another fifty to go,” he said, breaking her concentration.

“Fifty?”

He smiled knowingly at her. “This is a thirty minute set, Miss Meldrum.”

She glared at him. “How cruel. I will surely pass out in exhaustion before then.”

He shook his head at her, lips curled in a smile, as they took up the second position and started the dance over again.

Struggling to calm her frazzled nerves, Heidi realized on her tenth or fifteenth cycle that she was actually bobbing her head to the beat while Caroline and Bingley danced between them.

“I am afraid to point it out, but I believe you are enjoying yourself,” the colonel said as they participated in the group turn.

“I am,” she admitted, with some surprise.

“Miss Meldrum did not wish to dance?” Bingley asked over the music.

“No,” she said, doing her best NOT to look at Caroline. “We listened to far different music in Germany. I’m afraid my knowledge of English country dance is limited. I did not wish to make a fool of myself.”
“Indeed, Miss Meldrum?” Caroline asked, the judgement clear in her tone.

Rather than rise to the insult, Heidi threw one back instead. “I am sure one as practiced as yourself would notice a novice from a mile away, Miss Bingley, no matter how well one faked it.”

She snuck a glance at the colonel as the brother and sister met for their promenade and noticed that he struggled to keep a straight face.

“What dances did you learn during your time in Germany?” the colonel asked, a few turns later, breaking the silence that had settled between them as they began their short walk to position two.

“The Waltz, for one. And the Ländler.” she said, hoping she’d remember the dance from her days as one of the background dancers in her production of Sound of Music, should he insist upon a demonstration.

They stepped together for their single turn and his baritone voice rumbled over her shoulder. “I have heard of the Waltz, it is rather intimate, is it not? Scandalously so?”

“I suppose it can be incredibly intimate,” she said, feeling the heat from his body as they met.

She struggled to find her words, worrying her bottom lip.

Heidi knew she was attracted to him, but the world had fallen away around her and the only thing she could see was this man, holding her hands as they spun.

The moment was broken as they stepped away to return to the line and Heidi dragged in a breath, heart thumping in her chest.

Remembering that she was in a public venue, Heidi mentally pushed past the swirling confusion in her mind to focus on what she’d been talking about with the colonel. “Though because my mother taught me the dance steps in our drawing room, I perhaps have a different outlook than most.”

She giggled at the memory, having changed the location at the last minute. Dancing in the kitchen was probably not something she should share with someone who had likely never been in his estates’ so-called ‘below stairs’ section.

“I would be interested in seeing your German dances someday.”

Heidi flushed and demurred, glad that they were in the group circle again.

By the time the dance ended some minutes later, Heidi was exhausted. She bowed to Bingley and Caroline as the dancers dispersed. The colonel held his arm out for her.

“Perhaps some lemonade to refresh ourselves?” he asked, leading her away from the dance floor.

She nodded, trying to regain control of her breathing. Flipping open her fan with some practiced ease, she cooled her face.

“I believe I was correct. You danced masterfully, once you caught the footing.”

“It was only sixteen bars,” she said, flippantly echoing his words. The cool air from the fan already refreshing her.

“You certainly caught the eye of more than one gentleman in the room,” he said, leaning over to whisper in her ear.
She fluttered her fan, a blush on her cheeks, ignoring the fact that goosebumps raced down her arm. “They were likely waiting for me to make a spectacle of myself.”

Heidi dragged her teeth over her upper lip searching for something to say after her awkward admission. “Though you were correct about the dance being an easy one to learn.”

He straightened a little, guiding her through the crowd. “I cannot believe what I am hearing,” he said, gasping in feigned shock. “Miss Meldrum has admitted that I was correct.”

“Do not let it go to your head, colonel. An inflated ego can always be popped.”

His green eyes cut toward her, though she could see a smirk beginning to form. A nervous flutter raced through to her toes.

“Perhaps you are correct as well,” he said, stepping up to the bar and signaling for the bartender to serve them.

When the lemonades were placed in front of them, Heidi was surprised to see the glasses polished clean with nary a fingerprint on them. She glanced over at the colonel, who gave her a private smile but said nothing as he handed her glass over.

He cleared his throat, and she saw him look over the attendees. “I would not be surprised to find a line of men asking for the pleasure of a dance within next half hour.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head at him. “You flatter me; but I think I am unable to dance for the remainder of the evening. You have worn me out.”

His knot of his cravat bobbed as if he’d swallowed hard and Heidi closed her eyes in embarrassment.

“It would be upsetting indeed to learn that one set had so utterly exhausted you. One might be tempted to believe you did not wish to honor him with a second chance to grace the dance floor with you at his side.”

Heidi laughed uncomfortably, the innuendo that she was sure he had no idea about, was making her sweat. “Not at all, I assure you,” she said, wanting to fall into a hole.

The couple returned to the alcove then and Heidi was happy that enough of the group had been in and out of the alcove to save it, though the doña was nowhere to be seen. Heidi was in desperate need of a little breathing room.

“You did well for your first dance at Almack’s, cousin,” Edward said, grinning at her and leaning over the cocktail-height table in the center of the alcove.

“I do not know how you manage to do this for hours at a time,” she admitted, sliding onto one of the stools.

“It grows easier with practice, I daresay,” he teased, glancing over at the colonel. “I thank you for accompanying Miss Meldrum, sir. She was hesitant to dance.”

“Your cousin was a more than capable partner, despite her concerns.”

The warm smile the colonel gave her made Heidi blush and she took a drink of the sweetened lemonade averting her eyes.
As she sipped, she wondered what “more than capable” really meant.
Thursday, June 11th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments on chapter 37.

The plot goes on :)

It was 4 am when Heidi and the rest of the party stumbled into the Carters’ townhouse. She hummed My Fair Lady as she entered the foyer, glancing over her shoulder at the carriage.

They’d said good evening to the colonel, who was continuing on to the Fitzwilliam townhouse on George Street and Heidi watched the carriage round the corner before heading up to her bedroom.

The maid, Hannah, followed Heidi up to her room, and almost falling asleep on the stairs, Heidi turned to her.

“Please have a bath sent up in the morning,” she said, disgustingly sweaty, sticky, and stinky.

“What time, Miss?” Hannah asked.

“Nine? Is that late enough?” she asked, plopping down in the chair in her room and slipping her feet out of her heeled shoes.

Stretching her toes, Heidi looked up at the girl, realizing how badly she needed to pee, with only the chamber pot available.

“Help me with the dress,” she said. “And then you may go. You have a long day ahead of you.”

The girl averted her eyes.

“Get some rest,” she said, after Hannah peeled her out of the gown. “If it helps give you a moment or two of peace, do not worry about my morning tea. I can wait until breakfast.”

“Yes, Miss.” She blushed.

Once she was alone, Heidi used some of her precious modern face wash, of which there were only a few pumps left, and some of the soap they’d purchased in Gariton, to clean her face, neck, and hands before climbing into bed. She did not want to sully those sheets with the muck of the city. She’d done the same after the attack, but felt the ritual needed to be completed once more before sleeping.

Slipping under the sheets once she was presentable enough, Heidi couldn’t help but dream about that one wonderful dance she’d shared with the colonel.

The next morning Heidi found herself freshly bathed and ready to face the day. The bath had been brought up by the servants around 9 as requested, and she’d lounged longer than she expected to, still exhausted from the day before.

She’d stopped in to check on Anne, who was going to try to get out of bed soon. Heidi, sorry about
Anne missing out, had waffled back and forth on whether to tell Anne it was boring, or to give her all of the particulars. In the end, Heidi painted the evening with all the detail she could, insisting that once Anne felt better they would maybe see about staying longer or coming back to London later in the month. The invitations were written out as being granted for a month at a time, which was useful, except for the fact that they would be leaving London in a day or two. She even mentioned the part about the Lord Melbourne and how Miss Bingley had been incensed that she knew the Viscount and Caroline had not.

Heidi was glad that at least this news had brought a smile to her friend’s exceptionally ivoried complexion.

Notably, she stopped short of mentioning anything about her dance with the colonel. She did not want to gush about the dance or how well she’d done, and give Anne any inkling of the crush that was rapidly taking over her mind when it came to her cousin.

Nothing could ever come from it, after all.

Arriving at the breakfast table with Rose around 11:30, her stomach growling, Heidi was not surprised to see Edward and her hostess still eating. Though Edward’s eyes were bloodshot, it was the doña who appeared to be hungover, with her color a little green and only picking at her breakfast.

“A letter arrived for you this morning,” the woman said, sounding chipper despite her post-party recovery.

Heidi reached out and took the letter from the small silver tray the butler held in her direction.

“What’s this?” she asked, not recognizing the handwriting.

When neither the doña nor Edward replied, she opened the envelope and glanced at the signature at the bottom of the parchment.

“It’s from Countess Cowper. Have I done something wrong?” Heidi looked up at the doña, who watched her.

“Not at all,” her aunt grinned, her voice accented with just a hint of that Spanish lilt.

Heidi’s eyes narrowed skeptically. “Surely the card was meant for you, madam.” Heidi had picked up on the social cues last night that the men and women who addressed her aunt did not call her the Doña, but rather madam. It seemed to be a blanket term for those ladies who were from foreign backgrounds.

“The Condesa would not leave a calling card for me,” doña Carter replied. “She would merely call upon me.”

Heidi frowned. “I don’t understand. What does this mean?”

“Neither do I, my dear, but you have been summoned. You must go and visit the Condesa this afternoon. Only she knows why the card was sent.”

The only-slightly older woman lifted her cup gingerly, clearly trying to smile despite her obvious nausea. “Best not to leave a lady waiting.”

“But how does one call upon a countess?” Heidi asked. Though she was nervous, she couldn’t help the thrill of excitement that someone had noticed her.
“You need only to remain polite and answer what questions she may have.”

“Edward?”

He gave her a smirk and shook his head. “I cannot help you in this, cousin.”

Heidi took a breath and smiled. “I suppose I should pick out a dress then. What would be suitable for calling upon the countess?”

A few hours later Heidi found herself in the Carters’ phaeton being driven down the London streets toward the Countess Cowper’s London home. Morning calls, something that Heidi hadn’t encountered at Rosings or at Wych Elm, were apparently made in the early afternoon hours, something she just couldn’t wrap her head around.

The home she’d been taken to was not one of the townhouses, but an actual freestanding building. Red brick with white accents, the home rose from basement windows up three floors and two dormers on the roof for what could only be servants’ quarters.

She rang the bell and was immediately escorted into a drawing room by the butler. She’d been dressed in a gown that was appropriate to wear in front of a lady such as the countess, thank goodness she’d made a few purchases at Anne’s behest, and her stomach twisted as she handed the doña’s card to the butler. Enclosed was a quickly penned note from her aunt announcing Heidi, as she did not have her own card.

The drawing room had a fireplace but the windows were open to a courtyard surrounded by the rest of the house on all four sides.

She hadn’t been able to convince Mrs. Carter or Anne to come with her either, and Rose was far too young accompany her in the first place.

Mrs. Carter had given her a run-through of what to expect, not feeling comfortable enough to ask the doña such questions, though the eldest of the two Carter in-laws had done so from the bed, feeling even more indisposed than the doña had.

Heidi could not shake the unnerving sight. Mrs. Carter, always energetic, had never locked herself up in her room like this before.

Keeping her bonnet on, as her hostess had warned her, Heidi was escorted into a room near the back of the house.

Heidi curtseyed low when the countess appeared in the doorway, fair-faced with dark curls framing her angular features, she was regal and intimidating despite her thin frame. The woman didn’t apologize for not being ready for her, but Heidi didn’t expect it either. The further away from the de Bourgh’s she got the more pompous the society members were, save for Mr. Bingley.

The countess stepped further into the room, almost crowding Heidi after they greeted each other.

“I asked you to call on the Cowper estate, Miss Meldrum, as I heard an interesting tale about you.”

Heidi didn’t take a seat until the countess had chosen hers. She almost jumped right back up again when the woman fixed her with a intense, though faintly amused, glare.

“You wished to speak to my brother, why?”

Heidi straightened. Brother? “Forgive my impertinence, your ladyship, but who is your brother?”
The woman made a noise between a huff and a chuckle. “Why, the Viscount Melbourne.”

Oh God. Brother.

The color drained from her face. “I was not aware you were related to his lordship, my lady. Please forgive me.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “There is nothing to forgive. Madam Carter assured me that you knew little of English society, though you carried yourself as if have at least some awareness of the way things are done.”

When a beat passed without the countess saying anything, Heidi realized that the woman had asked her a question and she had yet to answer.

“I wished to speak with his lordship in the hopes that I could have reassured him in the wake of what was being said last night by the rest of the attendees.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at her. “What business was it of yours?”

“It is not. I would never have crossed such a line. I just… your brother seemed… out of sorts. I thought I might have a word with him.”

Countess Cowper watched Heidi but let the silence stretch until Heidi was again compelled to fill it.

“His lordship dined at Wych Elm Hall a fortnight ago with the Earl of Larkshire and I happened to be in residence. At the time, the viscount and I shared a conversation after dinner where he said some kind things to me. I had hoped to return the favor,” she said, taking a breath and trying to come up with the best way to explain who she was and what she wanted to do for Victoria’s precious Lord M. “I’m what some people might call—“

The door to the room crashed against the wall. Heidi jumped out of her seat at the sound and only just managed to keep herself from crying out in surprise.

A young boy, maybe five or six years old, stood in the doorway, staring at her.

“George,” the countess said, warm and motherly.

Heidi glanced at the woman as she crossed the room, without apology, and squatted in front of the boy, whispering words to him.

His eyes looked past his mother, who whispered something, and up at Heidi. When she smiled back at him, the boy buried his face in the countess’ skirts.

The countess stood and rang the bell before taking the boy’s hand.

“Come along, George,” she said, guiding him around the couch but not touching him. “Miss Meldrum, might I introduce to you my nephew, George Augustus Frederick Lamb.”

Nephew. Oh.

Heidi curtseyed to the boy, bowing her head.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lamb,” she said, wondering if she should be calling him a Lord instead.
The boy stared at the floor, rocking on his toes. Heidi frowned. She couldn’t be certain but his motions appeared to be tell-tale signs of being on the autism spectrum.

“He does not speak well,” The countess said softly, to which Heidi could only nod, knowing how hard it would be to tend to a child with a disorder like his in days before it was considered abnormal NOT to send kids like that to some asylum. Her heart went out to the family.

“George, this is Miss Heidi Meldrum, a friend of mine and your father.”

His eyes went wide before he buried his face in his hands, leaning toward his aunt’s ear. She squinted intently, listening to whatever he whispered to her, before she broke into a warm smile.

“Miss Meldrum, George has informed me that he wished you to know that your dress is pretty.”

Heidi grinned and knelt to the boy’s eye level, partially to figure out what was wrong, but mostly because he was adorable.

“I thank you for the compliment, Mr. Lamb. I like my dress as well. It is pretty.” She slid her hand over the fabric.

He gave a quick grin and then hid behind his aunt again.

“George?”

Heidi gasped at the suddenness of the familiar voice, a shadow darkening the doorway above her.

“Come along, George.”

“Your lordship,” Heidi said, standing and then quickly dropping a curtsey to Lord Melbourne.

The boy raced to his father. Her eyes burned with tears as the boy wrapped his arms around Lord Melbourne’s waist. Though there were a few younger children in Hunsford, Heidi hadn’t had any interaction with kids under ten since she’d arrived. It warmed her heart to see this great man tending to the needs of his son.

“Miss Meldrum, I was unaware that you were known to the countess.”

Heidi looked at the countess and grinned. “I only recently made her ladyship’s acquaintance and had no notion at all that you were related.”

Lord Melbourne patted his son’s head and then sent him off to whom Heidi could only assume was a governess of some sort.

“I had Miss Meldrum summoned because she said she wished to speak to you, dear brother.”

Her stomach twisted, the weight of both of the Lambs looking at her overwhelming.

“Yes, I—“ she started.

The front doorbell rang and Heidi had only moments before she’d be kicked from the house. Visits such as hers were not guaranteed to be private and if she didn’t get out what she wanted to now, she’d likely not get the chance to before they were interrupted.

“Now that I’m here, it seems ridiculous. You’ll hardly believe me anyway.” She glanced at the crown-molded ceiling, utterly disgusted that she’d made enough of a scene that she’d garnered the countess’ attention last night. And why the hell couldn’t she have watched that PBS/BBC Victoria
series like her mother had wanted?

“It was important enough for you to wish to track my brother down.”

She steeled herself against Emily’s words. This was the make-or-break moment.

“I only wished to say that though your heart may be bruised now, there is greatness in your future.”

Lord Melbourne’s brow creased before his lips drew into a thin smile. “Some do not bruise as easily, Miss Meldrum. At least, not in ways that others can see.”

“Victoria will need your guidance one day,” Heidi blurted, slapping a hand over her mouth.

“Who is Victoria?”

Heidi ignored the countess’ exclamation. There wouldn’t much time, and there was so much that this man deserved to know.

“You will be stronger for this, I swear it. You will return to Parliament, good sir, and soon you will rise higher than you could ever imagine.”

“What could you possibly mean?” he said, taking a step or two deeper into the room, the door shutting behind him.


“I do not understand a word of this.” Though his words were stern, there was enough gentleness in them, something he seemed to bear no matter the circumstances, that gave her the courage to continue.

“You could say I’m somewhat of a prophet.” She pinched her mother’s ring from the outside of the leather. “If I tell you too much, it may ruin everything. Think of Oedipus,” she said, knowing she was on the verge of rambling or giving too much away again. “But I wanted to give you hope that despite all this scandal, there will be a light at the end of the tunnel. Do not give up.”

“Again I ask,” Emily said, clearly having none of it, “Who is Victoria?”

Her eyes snapped over to the countess. “She will be queen one day.”

There was a knock on the door and all three of the inhabitants jumped when the butler came in and handed the countess another card.

“I beg you both not to speak to anyone of what I’ve said, it could endanger the Crown itself,” said Heidi, backing away and readying herself to curtsey.

The two siblings were still looking at each other. Though the countess was vexed, the expression on Lord Melbourne’s face was one she couldn’t read.

Perhaps she wasn’t meant to.

“I’ve taken up enough of your time,” she said, looking at the door and seeing another finely dressed woman entering the room.

The woman calling on the countess stopped and let out a gasp at the sight of his lordship within his sister’s private room.
“I bid you a good day, countess, Lord Melbourne... Thank you again for receiving me.” She hoped her voice held steady as she turned and walked away, wondering what mess she could have possibly created for herself.

Heidi fairly raced out of the house then, cheeks flaming in embarrassment, and looked for the phaeton to make her escape. Instead, she spotted a broad, familiar back and a now-familiar cadet blue overcoat.

“Mr. Bingley?”

The man himself turned, his eyes sparkling with a mirth that could only be found in someone like Bingley. “Miss Meldrum, what a pleasant surprise.” He looked around. “May I ask what you are doing on Mount Street?”

The wide thoroughfare was busy, but she didn’t realize that Bingley would be living so close to Mayfair.

“I paid a call on the countess,” she said, glancing at the nearby building.

He looked up at the door that sat centered above the set of stairs, and realization dawned on his face. “I see you managed to speak to the Lambs after all?”

Heidi tried to smile. “Her ladyship invited me to call upon her.”

“Ah, wonderful!”

They stepped to the side to let a man pushing a large cart down the sidewalk pass. Heidi, seeing the instruments he carried, couldn’t pass up the opportunity for luck.

“Sir!”

“Ma’am?” the man said, resting the back of the cart back on the cobbles.

“Can I shake your hand?”

“Ma’am?”

“Whatever are you doing, Miss Meldrum?” Mr. Bingley said in a half-whisper as he leaned in, a chuckle in his voice.

“Don’t you know? Chimney sweeps are good luck.”

“I do not believe I have heard of that.”

Heidi leaned in and sang a verse of the Mary Poppins song, quickly and quietly, to Mr. Bingley and the sweep.

“Now I am certain that I have never heard of such a thing.” He laughed, full-bellied this time.

“Well, it is a custom in Germany,” she said, straightening her back. “It’s especially lucky to have one at a wedding.”

Heidi, never so grateful that gloves were all the rage, shoved her hand out into the small circle of their bodies.

The chimney sweep looked first at her and then over at Mr. Bingley before wiping his hands on his
trousers and shaking her hand, tentatively.

“She grinned at the sweep as he bowed with profound bewilderment, still shaking his head as he picked up his cart and went on his way.

When she turned back, Bingley bore a lopsided smile that could only be called goofy.

“Surely you jested, Miss Meldrum,” he said with amused certainty.

“Never,” she replied with a grin. She looked behind her at the countess’ house, calm washing over her. Even if she had divulged too much of the future, she had done so with good intentions. “Not when good fortune is on the line.”

This world, she thought, glancing back at the road and at the receding silhouette of the chimney sweep, could do with that.

“And now, I must be on my way,” she said, spotting the phaeton and the driver coming down the road.
A handful of days later, Heidi found herself back in Hunsford, the familiar hills of Kent welcoming her home. Their stop in London had been short but glorious, but she was happy to come back to the cottage. There hadn’t been another chance to go to Almack’s but Anne was feeling much better and the colonel had called on his cousin a couple of times, though he hadn’t stopped to say hello to her.

As the de Bourgh barouche disappeared around the corner, headed for Rosings, Heidi looked up at the windows with a frown. At this hour, the candles were usually all lit. Mrs. Newton was a stickler for making sure the house looked lived in and warm.

The few that were missing, never so on Newton’s watch, seemed like gaping black holes. Fear clogged her throat.

Something was dreadfully wrong with their housekeeper.

Since it was literally impossible to open the front door without a key, she considered going around back, as the door would be unlocked there; but she’d already rung the doorbell. It wouldn’t be reasonable to walk around after she’d summoned the older housekeeper. If she was even there.

Heidi wandered away from the door, looking at the other windows as she waited for Mrs. Newton. Finally, the door opened with its typical squeak. Strangely, no one was in view.

“Miss Meldrum, you have arrived.”

Heidi’s heart sank. Mrs. Newton’s face was splotchy and red.

“Where is everyone?” she asked, walking into the house. Only the candlesticks on the table lit the room; not even the fire in the hearth was burning. Heidi pulled off her gloves and untied her bonnet.

The Carters had left London early that morning and Heidi had stayed behind with Anne, who’d wanted to make a quick stop at a house in town before leaving for the south.

They’d been only a few hours behind the family. Certainly not enough time for anything to have
happened.

“It’s the mistress,” Mrs. Newton said, sniffing.

Heidi glanced toward the back of the room toward the stairs, unbuttoning her jacket.

“She is in the surgery, with the rest of the family.”

“What is going on?”

“The doctor will not tell me, but the family has been inside since they arrived.”

“Take my things upstairs, will you? I will see what I can find out.”

The woman bobbed a curtsey, taking the gloves and the bonnet and the shawl she’d thrown over her shoulders to keep the wind on her arms to a minimum.

She opened the door to the surgery as quietly as she could, surprised at the amount of light flooding into the corridor.

“What is it?” she asked, seeing Edward closest to the door. His eyes were bloodshot and her gaze fell deeper into the room. Mrs. Carter was on the cot, her body bowed up like someone who needed an exorcism.

Her stomach dropped.

“Mother had an episode in the carriage,” he said in hushed tones, walking toward her. His cheek nearly brushed hers as he whispered to Heidi. “Father thinks it is tetanus.”

Heidi’s eyes shot over to Mrs. Carter, whose spasm had receded. Rose rested her hand on her mother’s and the doctor only stared down at his wife.

“Is he sure?”

“Father says the seizures have been happening for a few days now.”

“She appeared well enough in London.”

Edward shook his head. “I thought her nerves had just gotten worse, but I noticed this morning that
it was more than that.”

She reached out and held his arm, feeling like she couldn’t draw a full breath.

“Tetanus, I can’t believe it. How?”

Edward shrugged, looking absolutely forlorn.

Heidi, though she wanted to be in the surgery trying to help, made herself scarce. She told Mrs. Newton of the possible diagnosis and headed to the doctor’s study to see if she could find any journals on the subject. She didn’t know much about tetanus, other than that she’d gotten her booster a few months ago when she’d last gone to her doctor as the vaccine had lapsed. It was also called lockjaw and came from infections or bacteria or something, but otherwise, she had no idea. Her mother had said it came from rusted nails.

Mrs. Newton appeared in the doorway to the study near nine o’clock that evening.

“Lady Catherine, Miss Meldrum.”

Internally, Heidi groaned.

Holy mother of God, what else was going to happen tonight? Was freaking Tom Hiddleston going to walk through that door?

“She never leaves Rosings this late at night.” Heidi said, putting the journal down.

“She is waiting in the parlor, Miss.”

Heidi pulled herself off the floor where she had the journals spread out on the rug. There wasn’t much light from the one candle, but it had been enough to find that the doctor had nothing on lockjaw or tetanus in his collection.

“Perhaps Miss de Bourgh is feeling ill again,” she said, half to herself, rubbing her eyebrows. “Best not to disturb the doctor, I can tell her ladyship that he will be over as soon as possible.”

“You misunderstand. She called on the cottage specifically to seek you out.”

A cold finger of fear rolled down her spine.

“Don’t disturb the family. I will see to whatever her ladyship requires.”
Mrs. Newton bobbed her agreement and the two of them headed downstairs.

Reaching the small parlor, Heidi wasn’t surprised to see that her ladyship hadn’t taken a seat. Instead, she seemed to have been pacing, her walking stick leaning against the armrest of the couch.

“You have certainly kept me waiting.”

Heidi looked around behind her, as if Mrs. Newton still stood there, but she wasn’t.

“I am sorry, Lady Catherine,” she said. “Mrs. Carter is unwell and the family is tending to her.”

“I hardly care about the family tonight.”

Even with her hatred of violence, it took everything for Heidi to not slug the old bitch in the face.

“Might I offer you some refreshments? Please, do be seated, your ladyship.” Heidi gritted her teeth, but managed to sound civil. The woman was on a tear, her body almost glowing with anger, but Heidi was determined not to let the woman’s tongue get the better of her.

“I wondered what you thought you would gain by accompanying my daughter on this ill-advised journey.”

“Lady Catherine, you yourself approved of our trip.” Heidi tried not to frown.

“I would never have done such a thing if I would have known about your designs.”

“My designs?” Heidi clenched her jaw trying not to say something wrong.

“I cannot imagine how you convinced my Anne to dissolve her contract, but I can guarantee you will never again enter the grounds of Rosings.” Her hand fisted in her lap.

“I didn’t—“

“Do not interrupt me, only answer the questions I pose.”

Heidi held her tongue; the woman had inadvertently mirrored a speech by the Kaiser’s mother in Sissi.
“Anne came to me only an hour past telling me that she had forsaken her contract to my nephew and insisted that she would be the one to determine who she would marry.”

Heidi couldn’t help but feel proud of her friend for sticking up for herself.

“I know such thoughts of marrying for love exist in the lower classes, but I NEVER expected they would pollute my own family.”

“Don’t you want your daughter—“

If Lady Catherine’s eyes had been lasers, the glare she gave Heidi would have killed her.

“I have spent the last thirty years grooming my daughter into an example for all of society to emulate and you destroy it within a few months all in the name of friendship.” Lady Catherine spat the word out of her mouth as if it were shit.

Heidi clasped her hands behind her back. She was getting very, very close to losing her resolve to not throw the miserable bat an uppercut.

The woman stepped forward, close enough for Heidi to detect the notes of stale lavender clinging to her.

“What motive could you possibly have for ruining perhaps forever the happiness of my daughter? Were you bribed by someone? Is that why you came to Hunsford? Make friends and then destroy lives?”

“You ladyship, Anne is my dearest friend—“ Heidi took a step back, wishing she’d insisted that her ladyship sit down.

“And that! Speaking about her as if you are intimate.”

“Lady Catherine,” she said, trying a different tact, “It was Miss de Bourgh’s idea to break the contract. I had no notion of—“

The woman closed the distance between them, looking Heidi up and down as if she were shit on her shoe. “Do not feign ignorance with me, Miss Meldrum. I have done everything in my power to assure the success of the de Bourgh name, and you would undermine my life’s work, why? So you could have my nephew as a husband?”

“I don’t want Mr. Darcy,” she said, searching the woman’s face, trying to figure out what all this blustering was about.
“Then your friend, Miss Bennet. Was it all her idea? Was that the way of it? When she couldn’t have Mr. Collins, she decided to destroy us all?”

“Miss Bennet has nothing to do with this,” Heidi hissed, realizing where the woman’s train of thought seemed to be going. “She has no idea of any of Miss de Bourgh’s actions over the last month or so.”

“I know well her father’s estate is entailed upon Mr. Collins. Did she think she could undermine her cousin’s right to the grounds if she married my nephew?”

Lady Catherine wasn’t even listening to her any more.

Heidi swallowed. She didn’t know what happened after the marriage between Darcy and Lizzy in the books; but it was entirely possible that such a thing could have occurred. With 10,000 a year, he’d have plenty of money to purchase the estate out from under the Collinses.

“Lady Catherine, Miss de Bourgh is a grown woman. Is she not allowed to do as she wishes? She has money to spare, why would she wish to live in an unhappy marriage simply to merge fortunes?”

“Do not presume to tell me what my daughter may or may not want in life. I have sacrificed everything for her. She would not disobey me in this request if you had not put the idea into her head.”

“I wish for Miss de Bourgh’s happiness, above all else. She is my friend--”

“Not from this moment forward.” She stabbed the cane into the floor. “Your privilege of coming to Rosings has been revoked. I am considering getting rid of the doctor. There are plenty of physicians in England that will do just as well as Carter would.”

All the air left her lungs. She would be cut from one of the greatest stories of all time. But, the story was less important than the Carters losing their source of income as she was the one that had been guiding him these last months.

She absolutely could not allow the Carters to fail.

“No one in the whole of Europe is a better doctor that my uncle,” she cried indignantly, having enough. “He is working to revolutionize healthcare beyond anything else in the world, except maybe the healers in Asia.”

Lady Catherine’s mouth dropped open, the woman at a rare loss for words.
“The world will profit from what he’s accomplishing and you can believe that if you let him go you will never see Hunsford prosperous.”

Just to spite Lady Catherine, she could ‘invent’ every single item she could remember, from bras to wheelchairs, and patent them and give all the money to the Carters if that’s how Lady Catherine wanted to play. She could make the Carters millions if she wanted to, timeline be damned. She could even discover pasteurization and toilet paper, if she wanted. She would turn the tables on Lady Catherine and make the Carter’s the foremost business family of all time if she wished.

“You dare raise your voice at me?”

The skin around Heidi’s collar was heating dangerously. The lid she’d so carefully kept closed was about to blow.

“Mrs. Carter lies in the surgery dying of tetanus,” she said, almost shouting at her ladyship. “And you think to bully me? I have bigger problems than some entitled woman thinking she’s better than everyone else. You have insulted me and my family enough for one day. And, on their behalf, I ask you to quit this house!”

Lady Catherine gaped like a fish. “I have never been so insulted in my life.” She grabbed her cane and stormed out of the room.

Heidi released her breath and collapsed onto the couch, gasping for air.

“Holy shit, what have I done?” she asked, staring at the carpet and bracing her elbows on her knees.
Posting a little early because we're closing tomorrow, selling our house, buying a house and moving. I don't know what our internet situation will be like and I don't want to be late. So... enjoy?

Again, thank you so much for all the love!

“Are you sure there is nothing you can do?”

Heidi’s throat closed, looking at the figure in the bed as her cousin spoke in quiet tones. They’d been keeping watch over Mrs. Carter for almost two weeks, her condition deteriorating more quickly than even the doctor expected.

She shook her head, repeating what she’d said to Doctor Carter only an hour ago.

“It was too late the moment the infection entered her body. There is nothing any of us could have done to prevent it.”

“I thought she had stumbled, maybe sprained an ankle when the carriage broke,” the doctor’s voice had cracked. “I never expected she had injured herself. Not…” The memory of his voice trailed off in her head, Heidi unwilling to hear those words again.

It had been days since Mrs. Carter had last been conscious enough to speak to any of them. They’d been giving her laudanum, to help with pain and help relax her, keeping some of the lesser seizures at bay, but there was nothing they could give her for the worst of them. Heidi had been helping make broth and tried to help force feed the woman, to allow her at least some calories.

But time was running out.

Heidi didn’t have a clue how to tell the doctor about intravenous therapy; there had been no hints in his journals about that either, so either it didn’t exist or it hadn’t moved from wherever it had been discovered to their little corner of England.

Glancing at the clock, Heidi noted the time.

“If you wish, I can take Rose to services. They’re due to start soon. The two of us can pray,” she said, knowing it would be impossible to entice either of the men to leave the bedside. Besides, it wasn’t as if they had anyone else able to hold Mrs. Carter down if she seized again.

The doctor nodded absently, sending a pang straight through Heidi’s heart. It was devastating bearing witness to Mrs. Carter, growing weaker as the sickness consumed her. There was not a single thing she could do but keep the family distracted and remind the two men to eat and drink.

They were all exhausted.

Her eyes burned but she kept her tears contained.
The only visitors they’d allowed to the cottage in the past week had been Lady Catherine’s unexpected visit and Mr. Dowding, who had come to show the doctor how the amputation was healing. He’d carried with him the news that Napoleon had invaded Russia. Despite everything happening in London and in Hunsford, Heidi couldn’t believe that she’d forgotten about the war all together.

Heidi grabbed the letter she’d been writing and found Rose sitting in the garden, pulling petals off the multitude of flowers in bloom.

“Rose, why don’t you come with me to services?” she asked, not wanting to listen to Mr. Collins drone on and on about sin and vice, but thinking maybe some praying would help the girl.

“Is mother--?” Rose trailed off, tears already glistening in her eyes.

“No, my love,” she said, kneeling down to Rose’s level. “But I find that praying helps both ease my own soul and maybe even help your mother.”

“I do not want her to die, Heidi.”

“Neither do I,” she said, reaching out and resting her hand on Rose’s. “Come, let’s go. At least the beauty of Hunsford may help ease our sorrows.”

She stood and held her hand out for Rose to take.

They walked along the street toward the Canterbury highway before they saw anyone. Mr. and Mrs. Cooper stopped across the street when Heidi and Rose appeared and whispered to each other. Heidi, not wanting to subject Rose to gossip as they were probably all talking about the tragedy of Mrs. Carter, kept Rose on the far side of the road.

“What do you say to a turn in the parsonage gardens before we join the rest of the village?”

Rose merely nodded and Heidi led the way.

The whispers continued through their reflections and the services and stares came from even the front of the rectory while Mr. Collins droned on and on about finding joy in the lives that the Lord God had seen fit to grant them.

The second that Mr. Collins announced that the services were over, Heidi pulled Rose along and the two of them slipped out of the rectory before the processional began. Pity for a not-quite-dead-yet mother would not be borne.

“I have a quick stop to make and then we’ll head home.”

Rose nodded and allowed Heidi to pull her to her feet.

Heidi led the way to the post office, the letter for the Carters tucked in her purse.

“Wait here a moment?”

Rose nodded and she walked inside.

Mr. Hamilton glanced at her, his features cold, which wasn’t exactly what she’d expected from someone who knew that her aunt was on her deathbed.

“If there’s post coming today, will you send this out for me?”
He took the letter from her. “A coach will pass through after one.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.”

He harrumphed.

She turned to face the man fully then, though she’d been prepared to leave the office as soon as she’d dropped the parchment on the counter. “Is something the matter?”

“There’s word going about that you cut a sham, Miss Meldrum.”

Her ears burned, the phrase foreign. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“You bamboozled her Ladyship.”

“I did nothing of the sort!” She balked.

“Them that work at the estate say Lady Catherine came to call on the family when she learned of Mrs. Carter’s bein’ sick and that you sent her right off when she offered help.”

Heidi saw red and slammed her hand on the countertop. “When Lady Catherine called upon the cottage, she accused me of ruining her daughter’s life and I told her that Mrs. Carter was dying, and she stormed out. She offered no help and threatened to drive my uncle from the town.”

“If you will pardon, Miss, that’s not what they’re tellin’ at the estate.”

She growled, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. Shit was hitting the fan. “Her Ladyship slanders my family. I will not stand for it.”

“I would be careful if I were you, Miss Meldrum. Rosings is a powerful estate. I would not anger the family.”

“I was a friend to Miss de Bourgh, nothing but a friend.” Her eyes began to sting. “Mrs. Carter lays dying and they spread rumors for their amusement.” She waved her hand absently in the air.

“Is she truly close to death?”

“I doubt my aunt will see the week complete, if she survives the night.”

The man visibly flinched. “I am sorry for tha’.”

The door behind her opened and she reached out to the envelope resting on the counter.

“Please have it sent as quickly as possible,” she said, placing a few of the coins that she’d intended on using for the collection before the shameless stares of the parishioners.

“Will do, Miss,” he said, taking her cues for what they were.

“Sorry, Rose,” she said, turning back to the girl. If one person, without knowledge of what had occurred, had given her that death glare, no wonder the other Hunsfordians had been so cold.

“What happened?” Rose asked, ever astute, as they stepped out of the post office.

She would not say a word about Lady Catherine’s threat, but she had no problem telling Rose about the visit, if the entire town knew. “Do you remember the night we returned from London?”
Rose nodded.

“I had a visit from Lady Catherine and I might have said some things that she didn’t like.”

“What did you say?”

Heidi shook her head. “Best not to repeat it. I don’t regret my words, but I fear they may have been misconstrued and the entire village knows about our verbal sparring.”

Rose winced. “Did you anger her ladyship much?”

Heidi nodded. “I’m afraid she’s banned my entrance into Rosings.”

“Has she really?” Rose asked, her eyes growing wide as saucers. “You must have said something very naughty.”

“I did.” She had been thinking a lot on the words she’d exchanged with the patroness and in her bullet journal drawing up plans for various items she could invent if the woman followed through with her threat.

When they returned to the cottage, Heidi was surprised to find Charlotte and Mr. Collins waiting in the parlor. The pitying look on her friend’s face was enough to make Heidi want to cry; but there was no time, not with Mr. Collins as a witness.

“I had no notion you intended to call on the cottage this afternoon,” she said, greeting them. She wanted to keep Rose at her side, as support, but the girl didn’t need to hear the lecture from Mr. Collins that Heidi was sure to have coming.

“I thought,” Mr. Collins began, ”when receiving the news that you had insulted my patroness, that I would never again allow someone like yourself into my house. However, my wife, with the insight of the angels, has convinced me to come speak to you about the prudence of holding one’s tongue.”

“Mr. Collins—“

“Please, allow me to finish,” he said, holding up his hand.

“I wouldn’t dare interrupt, save the desire to offer you a seat,” she said, trying her damnest to be polite. If she just let this guy blather for however long he wished, maybe it would get them all off her back. She could be polite and contrite and wish to make amends in the face of the village, but inwardly she intended on hating the woman just as much as before.

Now was not the best time to be petty, but she was still furious about Lady Catherine’s bullshit accusations.

The Collinses took the offered seats and Heidi rang the bell so that she could offer them refreshments as well.

She needed to be polite or she might well lose the only other female friend she had.

“We perfectly understand that the news of Mrs. Carter’s illness must have come as a great shock, and that her untimely death will certainly ease her pain, but we must always be aware of where we are and who we are addressing.”

Heidi clenched her jaw.
“What my husband means to say,” Charlotte cut in, “is that it is most prudent to hold our tongues no matter how we feel.”

Heidi wanted to say that holding her tongue was exactly what was wrong with this British society. Pretending like problems didn’t exist doesn’t make them go away, but she didn’t think Mr. Collins would care.

“Mrs. Collins told me just the other day that The Lord would not wish for those who are fortunate enough to be in good health, like ourselves, to ignore those that need help the most, which I think we can all agree would be yourselves.”

Rage burned in her chest and Heidi clenched her hands into fists.

“It is important to be charitable, Mr. Collins,” Charlotte said, resting her hand over her husband’s. “When people are in such straits as the Carters are now, it is wise to help them when possible.”

“Thank you, Charlotte,” Heidi said, grateful that Charlotte was at least trying to turn her husband’s words into something more tactful.

Mr. Collins continued his lecture for some time, but eventually Charlotte reminded her husband that they must get back to the Parsonage to change for their invitation to Rosings.

Mr. Collins, in his unique fashion, hurried them to the door.

Before Heidi could wave goodbye, Charlotte turned back.

“If you need any help, do not hesitate to send Rose over. I would be happy to aid in the running of the house. I know how well Mrs. Carter managed everything.”

“I thank you, and understand your meaning, Mrs. Collins. It would not do to have me in your home, at least not until this feud with Lady Catherine blows over.”

Charlotte gave Heidi a sad smile and then bid her farewell.
The doorbell rang late Tuesday evening as Heidi was working to clean the great room. Mrs. Newton and Rose were cooking in the kitchen preparing Savoy and Naples biscuits, which were apparently popular in the north, for the mourners who would attend the memorial after services.

The funeral for Mrs. Carter, who passed away on Sunday night, was planned for Wednesday afternoon and she’d kept herself busy. It had rained on Sunday night, and the muffled whimpers and choked sobs beneath the constant patter on the window glass were the only sounds in the cottage when Mrs. Carter had passed just after two in the morning.

Heidi had been running ragged for the past 36 hours, doing everything she could think of to help the doctor and Edward with the arrangements.

Thankfully one of the doctor’s patients was an undertaker for Hunsford and the surrounding villages.

Creepy as it was to keep the body of Mrs. Carter in the house while she was washed and prepared for burial, Heidi found it was also calming for the soul. For the first time in weeks, the poor woman looked peaceful and free of pain.

As long as she didn’t have to touch the body.

Once that thought had formed in her mind, Heidi felt guilty and tried to banish the shameful words.

At Edward’s insistence, Heidi had asked Mrs. Newton about the cost of a funeral such as Mrs. Carter’s. Though the woman had been initially reluctant, she’d told her through tears that the funeral of someone like Mrs. Carter could cost upwards of 100 pounds.

She’d taken about twenty-five pounds worth of notes and brought them to the undertaker when there had been guests at the house, asking him to use her money toward the final bill, which included a coffin, the use of a hearse from the house to the parsonage and cemetery, and two horses. The man had bowed his head, telling Heidi that it would ease some of the good Doctor’s sufferings and Heidi insisted that he not tell her uncle where the money had come from.

With all of the sad events, Heidi hadn’t had the chance to tell him of her sale of the diamond ring. He didn’t know how much she had, and maybe, now, she would keep it to herself. Just so he never found out who’d mysteriously donated money to help ease his burdens.

She threw her wiping cloth over her shoulder and answered the door.

“Miss de Bourgh,” she said, shocked at Anne’s appearance.

“May I come in?”

Heidi stepped aside and let Anne into the great room, looking around the street for spies before
closings the door.

“I didn’t expect to see you,” she said, looking around the room awkwardly.

“My mother is being insufferable.”

Heidi took a deep breath before speaking, trying to censor herself. “You shouldn’t be here, not with her edict.”

“I found my duties to my friends superseded those to my family.”

The admission made Heidi pause. “Can I offer you any refreshments?”

“No,” Anne said, untying her bonnet. “I have come to help you.”

“Help me?”

“I sent Rosings’ kitchen maid and one of our parlor maids to the back door to aid with the keeping of the house. I hoped to,” she paused, giving an odd look about the room. “Help in some way.”

“That is kind of you, Miss de Bourgh. Certainly not expected, in light of what occurred between your mother and myself.”

“I am aware of what the servants are saying, Heidi; I can guarantee I do not believe a word of it.”

Heidi flinched.

_Time to swallow some pride._

“That is refreshing, Anne,” she said. “But I was rude to your mother. My temper got the best of me, you see.”

To Heidi’s relief, Anne didn’t bat an eye. “My mother excels at raising the tempers of those she lords over.”

Before Heidi could express her surprise at that particular admission, Edward appeared, fully dressed in cravat and waistcoat, his hat under his arm.

“Edward?” she said, as he blew past where they were standing.

He didn’t even look over. “I am going out.”

He left the house, the door slamming shut. Heidi flinched at the violence of his actions and glanced at her friend.

“It is heartbreaking.” Anne said, her eyes on the closed door.

“I wish there were some way to help the family, but other than domestic work and keeping the house running, I have no idea what to do.” She shrugged and slipped into a chair at the table, exhaustion beginning to overwhelm her.

“You being here, supporting them in the little things are what will matter, even if they do not know it now.”

The doorbell rang again.
“Did your cousin forget something, do you think?”

Heidi opened the door, seeing the doña and Mr. Carter waiting in the yard.

Her aunt embraced Heidi in a flurry. “Oh Heidi, my poor dear.”

Releasing her, the doña cupped Heidi’s cheeks with her hands. “How are you?”

Before Heidi could reply with more than a shrug or pull her cheeks away from the gloves, the woman continued, dropping her hands.

“Where is Mrs. Newton?”

“She is in the kitchen with Rose. I should have sent an express,” Heidi worried her bottom lip, realizing that she’d never alerted the Carter’s to her Aunt’s death. “I am sorry to tell you this but my aunt passed away early Monday morning.”

“But Miss de Bourgh sent an express that arrived this morning. We left straight away.”

Heidi looked over at Anne. “You did that?”

Anne smiled sadly at her. “I thought they would like to join the family for this time of grieving.”

Heidi reached out, resting her hand on Anne’s forearm. “Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Anne nodded.

“Pray, tell me where Rose is?”

“With Mrs. Newton, aunt.”

The woman walked deeper into the house leaving Heidi alone with Anne and her uncle.

“I apologize for my wife,” Mr. Carter said, taking off his hat. A man of few words, Heidi was surprised he apologized. “She is distracted with her task.”

“May I take your coat?”

He nodded and gave his things to Heidi.

“It is a pleasure to see you again,” he said, bowing his head toward Anne as Heidi moved to the armoire where such outer items were kept.

“My uncle is in the surgery keeping watch over Mrs. Carter. Should I fetch him?”

“No, I will go on back.” The gentleman frowned and spoke lowly at Heidi once she’d returned. “We saw Edward in the street, he was shaken.”

“I hope your presence will help them in their grief,” Heidi said, surprised at how relieved she felt now that they’d arrived.

Not only would the two personalities shine some light on what promised to be dreary days ahead, but they would also help guide her in whatever arranging she might have missed. The doctor had been useless since Mrs. Carter died, and she couldn’t fault him. Still, Heidi had been leaning heavily on Mrs. Newton for help and the woman was overwhelmed as it was, trying to be strong while her mistress lay dead in the surgery.
“I will tend to my brother,” Mr. Carter said, then turned to Anne. “Please forgive my haste.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Anne said and then Mr. Carter disappeared deeper into the house as well.

There was silence between them for a few beats.

“I admit, I am glad you have come to visit and I would steal you away for some late evening conversing if I could; but I would not wish you to incur your mother’s wrath.”

“I do not fear my mother, Heidi. Not after what has come between us.”

“She was furious.”

“Indeed.” Anne glanced over at the couch that sat in front of the large hearth in the great room. “Heidi, there is something I wished to—“

Rose ran through the room and took the stairs two at a time, sobbing in her hands.

Heidi heaved a sigh. “I don’t think we’ll have much time to converse tonight, whether you stay or go.”

Anne had a sad smile on her face, looking back at the staircase. “Perhaps I should come over another day, after the funeral. We have some things to discuss.”

“Is it something important?”

“Nothing that cannot wait, I assure you.” Anne placed her bonnet back over her hair.

Heidi smiled then and crossed the room back to the door, to open it for Anne.

“I will leave you then,” Anne said, tilting her head at Heidi. “My kitchen maid and chamber maid will stay for the next couple days.”

“The estate won’t miss them?”

“Not in the least.”

“The gesture and help are appreciated.”

With that, Heidi opened the door and walked Anne out to where her phaeton and driver were waiting. She had only a second to wonder where the Carters’ own carriage was before the driver from London appeared from the side of the house. She would need to find a place for him to sleep as well.

“Good evening, Miss de Bourgh,” she said.

“Please give my condolences to your aunt and uncle, Miss Meldrum,” Anne said with a sad smile. “Should you need anything, send Betty or Sarah to the estate.”
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the likes, and comments and bookmarks!

Thanks too for the good wishes for my move. I like to think they helped things from being worse, because this move was filled with disasters.

Not only did I get a flat tire and my husband had someone hit the moving truck when he was picking it up, but we also had the hot water heater bust while the movers were moving us in AAAAND the original movers that we had cancelled on us 90 minutes before they were supposed to show up (after they'd confirmed half an hour earlier that they would be there) because "it was too far away". Oh, and they did it via text, and never answered the phone afterward. We got ghosted.

I know stuff goes wrong during moves, it happens, but it felt like we hit the disaster lottery (because that's not everything, but the biggest things... )
Anyway, I hope you enjoy this short little chapter.

Oh, I forgot to say, while the troop was in London I added a few aesthetics to the blog. Go check it out if you haven't already :) heidimeldrum.tumblr.com

“Is Mr. Davies available?” Heidi asked the girl that had opened the door. She was one of the half dozen children in the home, but Heidi couldn’t remember her name.

“Father’s in the gardens, Miss Meldrum,” the girl said, giving her a curtsey. “May I fetch him for you?”

“It would be appreciated,” she said, following the girl into the foyer.

The girl raced off into the annals of the house and Heidi looked around. Though she’d been in the apothecary’s home before, picking up tinctures for Anne and the doctor and even once for Charlotte, she’d never seen the home so bright and airy.

She caught her reflection in the mirror, her cheeks flushed. It was a hot day and the layers of linen were already sticking to her. What she wouldn’t give to be able to wear a tank top and running shorts instead. Or, to have mother-flippin’ air conditioning!

It was three days after Mrs. Carter’s burial and the doctor was still barring himself into his rooms. Only Mr. Carter was given permission to go inside to bring his brother food. It made Heidi’s heart ache. She couldn’t even begin to imagine the pain of losing one’s spouse.
Rose spent the last three days crying. In a way, she was glad that the girl had had the chance to say goodbye at the house before the caretaker had come to remove Mrs. Carter’s body. The women in the family had all been forced to stay behind at the cottage during the services, it being improper for women to attend a funeral.

Such banishments were ridiculous.

She’d never tell anyone in the Carter family, but Heidi had slipped out to ‘go to the bathroom’ about half an hour after the funeral was to begin. She’d made it to the cemetery just in time to watch the interment from the bushes.

It had been just a solemn as she’d expected, but she was glad that she’d come, even if she had to hide, to watch as they said their final goodbyes. From what she could tell the entire male population of Hunsford had shown up, including many people that she’d never met before, who Heidi could only guess at being patients from surrounding villages.

“Miss Meldrum, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” The older gentleman placed a well-used towel on a nearby side table.

“I hoped you could help me, Mr. Davies,” she said, dragging her eyes back to the man.

The man waved his arm to invite her into the drawing room.

“How can I be of service?”

“It is likely impertinent of me, but in light of the happenings at the cottage, I hoped that maybe you would be willing to aid my uncle.”

The man nodded, looking like he’d been expecting her request.

“I’m afraid he is lost and though he has his brother here, I am certain that his patients need his guidance and help. His grief... has left him unable to make house calls as he normally does. Would it be possible for you to visit the surrounding villages this week?”

"You mean for me to take the mantle of doctor?” he asked, looking a little concerned.

"I wouldn't ask you to diagnose them, but make sure there's nothing immediately wrong, or take notes on who are the worse off. Anything that might help put a priority on what is going on. You could bring the list around and maybe that would convince my uncle that getting back to work would be the best thing for him."

"He has the right to mourn, Miss Meldrum."

Heidi tried not to flinch at the hint of condemnation in the man's voice.

"I do not begrudge him his pain, Mr. Davies, but surely you can see the benefit to finding a way to overcome the grief, to keep one’s mind occupied when things seem darkest." Heidi gave the older man a shrug, not sure how else to say what she wanted to say.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, filling the silence when Heidi's words failed her. "I will do what I can."

"I will pay you, if it's a great expense," she said, her eyes watering at the sudden memory of Mrs. Carter lying in the cot in the surgery. "I would not ask you to do this without compensation, only do not tell my uncle, he would not approve."
The apothecary gave a chuckle, looking her over almost salaciously. "To think, Lady Catherine calls you a sponge on her daughter."

"Excuse me?" Heidi said, breathlessly.

"My apologies, Miss Meldrum. They do not seem to know you."

"They certainly don’t," she said, taking a deep breath. She gave her farewells to Mr. Davies and left the house shortly afterward, a bracelet of flowers on her wrist from one of the younger girls.

It was late that evening, well past dinner, when the doorbell rang. The doña and Heidi had been speaking quietly near the hearth, Rose recently gone up to bed. Mr. Carter had taken the doctor up to bed an hour ago and had not returned and Heidi wondered, briefly, if they were drinking or just sleeping in the chambers.

Rather than rely on Mrs. Newton, Heidi stood to get the door herself.

Before Heidi could reach the door, loud knocking echoed in the room.

"Who could it be at this hour?"

Heidi unlocked the door and opened it to see Mr. Dowding, with his bad arm wrapped around a passed out Edward.

"Come in," she said, hurriedly, stepping out of the way.

"I will fetch my husband," the doña said, heading for the stairs.

"Please, put him down on the couch," Heidi directed Mr. Dowding. "Can I help?"

"I may have lost my hand; but I can handle this whelp," he said with a grunt.

Mr. Dowding dropped Edward on the couch from a height a little uncomfortable for Heidi, but Edward slept through it.

"He is completely foxed. Poor child."

Heidi watched with pity as he began snoring. "Thank you for bringing him home."

"It was no trouble. I have been in his place, it is not easy to lose a mother." He realized to whom he was speaking to and his cheeks went red. "I did not mean to—"

"You did not offend me, Mr. Dowding. I understand." Heidi looked around the room feeling awkward and wondering what was keeping Mr. Carter.

"I want to thank you and your wife for the kind basket she brought over the other day."

"It was nothing compared to what you and your family did for me."

Heidi worried her bottom lip before speaking. "I am sorry that the doctor couldn't save your hand."

The man shrugged, his mouth curling into a faint smile. "It does make my trade difficult, but with Mrs. Dowding’s help I am in search of an apprentice."

"You are?"
"If I wish to keep the business, it is perhaps wise to be realistic." He gave her a one-sided smirk. "I have a growing family to feed."

"That's a practical way to look at it." The response was out of her mouth before Heidi had a chance to realize what he'd actually just told her.

Heidi cocked her head. "If I overstep, please tell me, but are you saying Mrs. Dowding is expecting?"

Mr. Dowding blushed, rubbing the back of his neck, and nodded.

"Congratulations!" she said, trying to remain quiet, but truly happy for the young couple.

Mr. Carter appeared then and Heidi stopped short of her instinctive, but socially inappropriate, urge to embrace the blacksmith.

"Thank you for returning my errant nephew," he said, his cravat loose around his neck.

Mr. Dowding nodded. "I should return to the smithy. Mrs. Dowding will be waiting for me," he said, giving Mr. Carter a nod.

They said their goodbyes and Heidi walked to the door to let the former blacksmith out of the house.

When they were both outside, Heidi stopped him.

"Mr. Dowding, if you are looking for an apprentice, I have an order I'd like to put into the queue."

"Queue?"

"Um… list? When you get the apprenticeship started, could you put my request at the top of your list?"

"Of course, anything." He took a step closer to the house. "What is it?"

"I would like a stiletto."

He leaned in, as he realized what she'd asked for. "A weapon? Why would you require a weapon?"

"I was attacked in London."

Mr. Dowding drew his brows together clearly trying to make sense of what she was saying.

"Do you remember the soldier, Wickham? He resided at the Bridle while the Collins’ had their guests."

He gave a slow nod, as if remembering.

"He attempted to assault me."

"I am sorry, did you say assault?" He shuddered visibly at her admission, his hand fisting at his side.

"I managed to fend him off, but I would prefer to have something that I can use should I be unable to convince him to leave me alone."
"If I may ask, what did you do?" The angry tinge to his voice warmed her heart.

"He grabbed me from behind," she said, downplaying the incident. "But I found a way to slip from his grasp and incapacitate him."

"You did?" His eyes went round and a smirk crossed his lips, as if proud of her.

"My cousin was witness. You can ask him, when he's sober."

Mr. Dowding chuckled at that.

"I think I broke his nose, Wickham’s that is." She straightened at the admission, proud of herself.

"You are one of a kind, Miss Meldrum." He shook his head, disbelieving.

"An aberration, to put it nicely."

"An enigma."

"You are complimentary, Mr. Dowding." Heidi grinned at him facetiously. "I have some ideas already, on the design; but your advice would be appreciated. I don't want to use it, but maybe if something like this happens again, I'll be able to scare them off. I did not enjoy feeling helpless."

The man frowned before raising his arms in mock surrender. "I am not fond of the idea that you would need to fend off attackers, but I will put you first on the list."

"Good night, Mr. Dowding." She stepped back into the doorway, giving him a kind smile.

"I just ask in return that you kindly keep our news quiet for now. We have not had the chance to see the doctor, but Mrs. Dowding is certain."

"Of course," Heidi said with a nod. "Your secret is safe with me."

Mr. Dowding tipped his head and walked down the path to the street before she slipped back inside to rejoin the Carters in the house.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Heidi smoothed her thumb over the flat rock, staring at the creek below her. She'd needed to get out of the house. That morning, Mrs. Newton had casually mentioned that she'd noticed Heidi had scrubbed every surface in the cottage clean twice in the last se'night. Until that moment, she had not known that she'd been slipping back into her compulsive cleaning.

She aimed and then lobbed the rock out at the water, it skipped a record three times before plunking into the slow moving creek and disappearing.

Heidi sighed. She’d never been good at distracting herself.

After nearly a week at the cottage, their relatives had returned to London that morning, promising to keep in touch with Heidi and asking her to write truly on how their brother and his family were holding up.

The house was too quiet.

They had explained to her, understanding that she had no point of reference, that the doctor would likely be wearing his mourning armband for a year, while the children would be in mourning officially for six months. Heidi had explained to them that mourning was up to those who grieved in her time, whether it be wearing black for a day or avoiding social engagements for years afterward. There were no real traditions that were followed anymore, at least not in mainstream society, though she was sure some religions and cultures still had some requirements.

The house was depressing and Heidi, though she understood the reasons behind it, couldn't find herself willingly showing all of the world that she was the 'victim' of a death. Private mourning was another thing, but Heidi reminded herself that she was not in 2019.

She wiped at a tear rolling down her cheek and steadied herself, intent on finding another stone to throw and something else to ponder.

A dance master had come to Hunsford to teach the new variations on current dances and Heidi had been unable to convince Rose to go with her. She'd spent the evening a few nights back learning the contradanse, the quadrille, and the cotillion. It would be months of practice, in her bedroom alone, before she would feel comfortable with any of them, Heidi was sure. At least now she wouldn't make a fool of herself if she ended up at Almack’s being asked to dance by people like the baronet without the colonel to rely on.

She'd expected the assembly hall to be filled with 10-16 year-olds preparing for their Seasons, but even older couples were taking part in the lessons. Apparently, there were variations to every dance with each new year and it was important to know what had changed. There were even a good number of the younger single men at the lesson, needing to learn the moves themselves if they wished to impress their sweethearts.

Heidi did her best to dab as discreetly as possible at her brow, knowing that woman were supposedly ‘incapable’ of sweating. She couldn’t help but wish that she had a southern belle styled, lace edged parasol right about now. She’d seen umbrellas in London, and cursed her lack of foresight.
After throwing another half dozen or so of the smooth stones into the creek, Heidi returned to the cottage and entered through the surgery door.

"You have a guest, Miss Meldrum," Mrs. Newton said, looking up from the pie she was making.

One of these days she would get around to showing the woman some new recipes, something modern and probably French in origin. British food, she'd found, was bland as hell. And she did not want to know how many times she'd eaten offal.

Pulling the ribbon on her bonnet, Heidi asked who it was, but Mrs. Newton was too focused on her pie to answer.

The ban on her invitation to Rosings still stood, so Heidi was shocked to see that Charlotte and Anne were awaiting her in the parlor.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Collins, Miss de Bourgh," Heidi said, unable to contain her smile. "I must stay that I'm surprised. I did not expect to see either of you today."

"Did you not?" Anne asked, grinning.

Heidi furrowed her brow and looked at each woman in turn. "Why have you come to visit—really?"

"With mother having ridden off in the middle of the night to tend to business, I asked Mrs. Collins if she would wish to join me in calling on you this afternoon."

She blinked, wondering why they would call and why Lady Catherine had disappeared.

"Happy birthday, Miss Meldrum," Mrs. Collins said with an entirely too-proud-of-herself grin. Charlotte held out a beautiful bouquet of marigolds.

"I ventured into the grounds myself to pick them out," Anne grinned, glancing at the flowers.

"Is it the 8th already?" Heidi could easily believe that she’d lost track of the days, but she’d never forgotten her birthday.

Anne chuckled. "You forgot your own birthday?"

"It's been…" Heidi gave a shrug, knowing she didn’t need to elaborate.

"I wanted to invite you to tea, but as the situation has been unfavorable in Hunsford in recent weeks, there has not been the chance."

"I have missed our weekly visits, Mrs. Collins; but I daresay your husband would not approve of our continued friendship."

Charlotte gave Heidi a knowing look. "My husband and I have come to an understanding when it comes to the Carter family and their cousin."

"As have my mother and I," Anne chimed in. "Her ridiculous ban has been lifted."

Heidi look at her dumbfounded. "She relented? No, not possible."

Anne offered only a sly smile as an explanation.

"Whatever it is you said to convince your mother to-- you need not have done that on my account."
Even as she said the words, Heidi did not completely mean them. The last few weeks without any contact with either woman had been miserable.

The doorbell rang and though everything in her wanted to get up and answer it, Heidi stayed put. Mrs. Newton could deal with the door.

The house was a shell of itself now, with Mrs. Carter gone. They had few visitors now to liven up the atmosphere, and Heidi had been forced to play hostess since the doctor was in no form and Edward was out drinking more often than not.

She winced at the thought, wondering how to help her grieving cousin.

"It is early yet," Heidi said, leaning forward to get a better look at the clock on the windowsill. "But perhaps I could have a bottle of Madeira opened. We could celebrate the renewed friendship."

"And the birthday girl."

Heidi smiled at Anne’s teasing remark.

Mrs. Newton opened the door. "Colonel Fitzwilliam is in the Great Room, Miss Meldrum. He wishes to speak to you."

"What is my cousin doing in Hunsford?" Anne shifted in her seat to face the door.

"Send him in, Mrs. Newton. He is more than welcome to join us."

The housekeeper bobbed her head and left the room.

She hadn’t seen the colonel since the night at Almack’s and had no idea he would be in the county. Heidi looked at Anne, her chest fluttering at the prospect of seeing him again.

"Colonel," Heidi said, when he appeared at the door. She curtseyed and he returned with a bow and then he greeted his cousin and Mrs. Collins, both as warmly as he’d greeted her. Heidi offered the colonel a seat.

He did a double take when he took notice of the black gown she was wearing.

Heidi looked at the women, unsure what to say. There was likely some sort of custom on relaying the news of a death, though she had no idea how to handle it.

"If you have not yet heard the news, cousin, Mrs. Carter passed away nearly a fortnight ago. The family is in mourning," Anne said.

The colonel’s jaw clenched. He looked so stricken that Heidi had to resist the instinct to embrace him. His hand fluttered over the breast of his jacket, in a reassuring gesture.

Heidi wondered if he kept a piece of his own mother tucked into the hidden pockets of his uniform, a locket or keepsake perhaps.

"I don't understand? She appeared to be in good health when last I saw her."

Knowing that she should be the one to speak, Heidi fought the unexpected tightness in her throat.

"Mrs. Carter died from complications of tetanus."

He leaned forward, hands folding and unfolding in his lap. "How shocking." His eyes flitted up to
Heidi, the green a darker shade than she’d ever seen them as they connected with hers. “That is a tragedy. If there is any aid that I can offer…”

Heidi shook her head, stomach flipping at the intimacy of their conversation. "Thank you for the offer, colonel. There is nothing to be done.”

A beat passed between them before Heidi realized she needed to say something to break the deafening silence.

Wanting to get away from the morbid topic, Heidi focused on something else. "Not that I am complaining about your arrival; but I did not expect to see you in Hunsford again this summer. You were to return to Brighton with the Regiment, were you not?”

The colonel started to say something and then stopped, rethinking. "I have been sent to Hunsford on assignment.”

“Have the French arrived?” Anne asked.

“There has been an incident,” he said, looking at the ladies. “That I must resolve.”

"What sort of incident?” Anne asked, leaning forward.

A trickle of nerves coated the back of her throat.

"We believe that Wickham has deserted his post."

The world focused in on the colonel, Heidi's ears ringing with his words. "De-deserted."

"I returned to Brighton with Wickham and Denny as planned,” he said, his eyes traveling back to hers. Charlotte, from what she knew, had no notion of what had occurred between herself and the soldier in London. Heidi shook her head as minutely as possible, hoping he understood not to say too much. She also had no intention of triggering any sort of panic in Miss de Bourgh.

“On Friday night, Wickham disappeared. I have been sent to follow one of his possible routes.”

Her stomach twisted, as the Pride and Prejudice plot came to the front of her mind. "Was he traveling alone?"

He frowned at her, his eyes peering right through her, to the core of the truth that she couldn’t tell him. "There is evidence that he traveled with a companion."

*Companion, my ass.*

She swallowed convulsively against the lump in her throat before speaking, "with Miss Lydia Bennet?"

Pulling away, as if surprised, the colonel confirmed what she’d been thinking. "Yes, but how in the world did you guess that?"

"It is a long story,” she said, averting her eyes. “One you might not believe.""
details… she couldn't remember.

Dag-nabbit!

The room was silent, but Heidi refused to speak. She could not tell him now.

"We have traced the two to Hunsford. I was on my way to the tavern when I considered it wise to alert your family about his coming to town."

"Why would he come here?" Charlotte asked.

Heidi ignored Charlotte’s question as her thoughts raced. If she'd failed in her plans to thwart Wickham, that meant that the original plot was still going on.

It was then that she put together the passing comment from earlier.

Lady Catherine moved quickly, didn't she?

The colonel spoke up, unaware of the chaos that was Heidi’s head. "We believe he still had a few acquaintances in the area that might have been willing to let him overnight or lend him funds."

"They won't make it to Gretna Green," she said, remembering the scene with Colin Firth in London. He'd gone to a house, where a woman had almost closed the door on him. She had known the plan.

"What do you mean?" Anne asked, her eyes sliding over to Heidi.

“I said nothing of Gretna Green,” the colonel noted.

"I," she started, wringing her hands together, her cheeks flaming. She would have to lie, or tell them the entire truth, but if she wasted time on that the Colonel might miss his chance to stop it. "well, that’s were such things usually end up, don’t they?"

The colonel glared and Heidi struggled to find something else to say.

“Wickham has contacts in London that would surely give him shelter."

"How do you know this?" The look he gave her was one of outright suspicion and Heidi shrank at the intensity of it.

She HAD to fix this, despite whatever trust she had earned or would break now with the colonel.

"Georgiana mentioned a woman who accompanied her to Ramsgate," she lied, "a woman she knew from London."

"Mrs. Younge?"

Heidi snapped her fingers at the colonel, the name instantly familiar. "That's who it was."

Beside her, Anne raised a doubtful eyebrow.

"I mean," Heidi clarified, “certainly a woman such as that would be willing to hide a scoundrel like Wickham."

"I cannot believe that Miss Darcy told you this, even with her confidence," the colonel said, assessing her. "But I will investigate this idea further."
Heidi smiled softly, still reeling with the news. "Thank you, colonel.

The colonel rose from his seat.

Panic filled her chest.

He had just arrived, and already, he was leaving.

"If the lieutenant is not in Hunsford, I will travel on to London with the knowledge you have shared."

Heidi stood, mirroring his movements, heart in her throat.

He nodded and glanced at the door, debating internally before turning his attention back at the room. "I think perhaps it would be allowable for me to admit... I am being sent to the Continent."

"You are being send to the warfront?" Anne asked.

Heidi reached out for the nearby end table, desperate for something to hold on to.

"I have my orders. As soon as Wickham can be found I am to board a ship."

Her head spun. This was too much.

Too.

Much.

She wracked her brain, trying to remember any small fact she might have about the battles to come, anything that she could think of that might save his life; but nothing came to her.

"Be careful."

An image from a movie, she couldn’t even remember the title, of a person being lanced in the neck during a Napoleonic Battle, made Heidi nearly stumble. She gasped at the crystal clear memory, but managed to get herself composed by the time the rest of the party looked at her.

She gave what she hoped to be, an innocent, airy smile, which only made the colonel furrow his brow, though he spoke to Anne.

"I do not intend on being reckless," he replied, looking at Heidi with more suspicion.

"Let me escort you to the door, colonel," Heidi said. The entire conversation had been awkward and Heidi wasn't ready to be alone with the girls, certain that they would ask questions about how she'd known about Mrs. Younge. Better to leave the room with the colonel and delay the conversation as much as possible.

“I wish to have a word with you, before I depart,” he said, once the door had shut behind her.

“Of course,” she said, trying to remain calm at the fire in his eyes, escorting him further down the hall and away from the parlor door.

“Did you have something to do with this ridiculous quest?” he asked, turning on her, unable to hold in his question any longer.

Her eyes went wide and Heidi took a step back, colliding with the wall.
“How could you say that?”

“You let him leave unchecked that afternoon near Hyde Park,” he said, growling low, aware that there were others in the house that might overhear him. “Was Miss Bennet your target?”

“No! Of course not! I swear.” Her heart leapt in her chest.

“You know more than what you are saying,” he pointed out. “I do not believe that my ward would have told you about the woman. She has no notion of the Ms. Younge’s connection to Wickham.”

Heidi swallowed, bile rising in her throat as she tried to figure something out to say.

His eyes flashed.

“I—” Then she remembered something she’d done and hoped never to come clean about, especially not to him. “I snuck into the lieutenant's rooms,” she said. “When he first arrived.”

“You did what?” The colonel advanced on her, confusion in his eyes, and Heidi pressed herself against the wall.

“I was suspicious of his intentions. I--- I found his ledger and saw some names.”

She swallowed, his eyes stormy as they searched hers.

“He caught me in his rooms. It was stupid. But Mrs. Younge’s name was in the book, it has to mean something.”

She tore her eyes away from the colonel’s, unable to bear the betrayal in them, his hand drawn into a fist.

“It was wicked,” she said, tears burning in her eyes. “But I had to know if he was truly a threat to my cousin. He was flirting with a girl. Can you not see that?”

“It—I cannot believe you would be so...so reckless!”

“I had to protect my family. Would you not do the same?”

His voice was quiet. “No wonder Wickham was adamant you were a bit of muslin, entering his rooms as you did.”

Heidi flinched.

The colonel huffed out a breath and stepped away from her, heading for the front door and tugging his fingers through his hair.

It was longer than she remembered it being.

“I beg you,” she started, grabbing his attention and his wrist. “Do not leave here in anger.”

“What else do you expect of me, Miss Meldrum?” Her name was like a curse on his lips and Heidi nearly lost what composure she had left. “I cannot be sure if I can trust anything you say.”

Heidi opened the front door, feeling absolutely sick.

"I would have you track down that woman, I would have you believe me, though I cannot explain more without delaying your saving the reputation of a girl much like Miss Georgiana, and I would
have you do everything in your power to avoid Belgium, and Waterloo." she said.

It was the only battle of Napoleon’s she could remember, aside from Austerlitz. And that was only thanks to Victor Hugo and the trip she’d taken to the memorial hill in Belgium with her father during one of their trips to Europe.

The colonel searched her face, his jaw clenching and unclenching. Heidi tried to stand her ground and struggled not to whimper under his scrutiny.

"I bid you farewell, Miss Meldrum." He tilted his head down and Heidi jumped forward, needing him to listen to her.

"I beg you to heed my words, colonel." She tried to give him a smile as put his hat on, but failed. The warmth of his eyes, as they in the candlelight at Almack’s, had been snuffed out.

"Please, give my condolences to the doctor and the rest of your family."

She couldn’t speak, but nodded her head as he walked away, feeling much like Lizzy had that day in the inn at Lambton.

Chapter End Notes

*runs away*

Oh, and Happy Birthday Heidi :)}
Heidi leaned her head against the door, struggling to regain control. She could not, under any circumstances, go back into that parlor with her head in shambles as it was.

Her eyes burned and she took a breath, her hand shaking on the door handle. Even though nothing was certain, she had a sinking feeling, the type she had learned to trust ever since her crash landing in this time.

She would never see him again.

Releasing a long-held breath, Heidi pulled herself to her feet, swallowed and then headed back to the kitchens for that bottle of Madeira that she had promised to bring out for the ladies before the colonel had arrived.

By the time she’d placed three glasses on the tray and had picked out a bottle from their small store of wine, Heidi was confident that her mask of calm would convince. She was looking forward to the burn of alcohol to calm her nerves, though the madeira would be nothing like the brandy she yearned for.

“Do you require any help?”

She turned, surprised to see Anne standing in the doorway.

“No. I will join you in the parlor presently. I apologize for the delay.”

Anne’s eyes flickered with what Heidi feared was a knowing look, but then the woman nodded and turned to go back to the room. Heidi followed, letting Anne open the door for her.

“Drinks?” she asked, holding up the tray and offering it to Charlotte.

After serving the two women, Heidi settled into a chair. She held up her glass, hoping she could hide the shaking of her hand.

“To the colonel,” she said. “That he finds his quarry.”

Her eyes flitted to Anne only briefly before taking a modest sip.

“How was it that you deduced that Wickham had run off with Lydia?” Charlotte asked, staring at her over the glass.

“I couldn’t be sure,” she said, struggling to find an excuse. “But I received a letter from Miss Elizabeth that said that Lydia had gone with a friend to Brighton for the summer. After Wickham’s flirtations with Rose, it was an easy assumption to make, as Wickham was friends with Bennets in Meryton.”
“That is quite the assumption,” Charlotte said, eyeing her carefully.

Anne worried her bottom lip, frowning at her.

“I didn’t think about it, to be honest,” she said, averting her eyes from both of their intense gazes. “I should have been more discrete, in case I was wrong.”

“And Gretna Green?”

“Is it not where people elope to? Is that not one of the biggest plots in novels?” she asked, dread clenching at her heart. “eloping with one’s true love, that their parents never approved of?”

Across the table, Anne sighed, though Charlotte did not pick up on the noise.

“It is lucky Miss Georgiana told you of the woman,” Charlotte said. “If she is, in actuality, a confidante of Mr. Wickham.”

“I only hope I have not steered the colonel in a wrong direction.”

She needed to stop talking, Heidi warned herself. She was only digging herself in deeper.

Charlotte smoothed her skirt politely, though her eyebrow was ever so slightly arched. “Quite right, Miss Meldrum. I do admit I find myself awed by your intuition.”

Heidi stifled a sigh. She’d fooled no one.

Dear Jesus, where was her mother when she needed her?

Heidi gripped the paisley cushion beneath her with determination. She needed to rebuild trust after the gaffes she’d already committed. There were only so many blunders her friends could forgive or ignore.

For now, keeping her trap shut about the whole thing was the best remedy Heidi could think of.

They spoke then, for a few minutes longer, but soon Charlotte announced that she must return to the parsonage but wished Heidi a happy birthday, despite what had occurred.

Heidi escorted the women out of the house and the look Anne gave her as they climbed into Anne’s phaeton and drove off spoke of a promise. Heidi knew with that look that Anne would insist upon Heidi telling her the truth of what had happened.

As soon as the carriage round the bend, she leaned against the door exhausted.
Dearest readers, I am back with the next chapter. Mostly survived the move. In case you were keeping track: our movers cancelled, our hot water heater broke (we didn't have hot water for 17 days), the pump on the pool we really didn't want broke, our fridge broke, our washer had the wrong plug so we had to get a different one installed, the dog almost broke out of the metal fence, which has been reinforced and we had guests three weeks in so we had to have the house ready. Thank GOODNESS I had this chapter prepped, or it wouldn't have been posted today!

Thank you so much for reading and all the love!

I hope you enjoy the next chapter!

The crunch of wheels on gravel distracted Heidi from her one-woman rendition of Evanescence’s *Fallen* album.

It had been almost three weeks since the colonel had stormed out of the cottage and she’d thrown herself into the duties of running a house, as the doctor busied himself with house calls for the first time since Mrs. Carter’s death a month ago. Though she’d seen Anne and Charlotte in passing, Heidi had not been asked to join them for tea or speak to them longer than a typical greeting before services on Sunday.

Every day spent pondering when Anne would corner her for the truth had Heidi wondering if she’d damaged the friendship beyond repair.

Putting the basket of tomatoes out of the way, she picked herself up to see Mr. Carter climbing out of a gig.

“Uncle,” she said, going over and greeting him. “We were not expecting you so soon.” The couple planned to visit for the weekend, or so she’d been told, and here they were arriving two days early.

“I wished to surprise the family,” he said, eyes wide. “All the better to teach my brother a lesson in punctuality.”

Heidi shook her head. “You are devious.” She’d learned during their last visit that Mr. Carter had a secret wild streak and that mischievousness did wonders for the doctor’s state of mind.

The doña climbed out of the gig with her uncle’s help.

“Come, let us get you settled, and I will see to your luggage. We can have one of the Hamilton boys sent up to take your horse and gig to the posting house,” she said.

“I already made the stop, Heidi. They will be along shortly.”

Heidi nodded and then opened the back door for her uncle.

A couple hours later, Heidi found herself sitting in the parlor with the doña and Rose. Her uncles and Edward were out of the house and she thought they were hunting, but she couldn’t be sure.
Since the London-Carters had arrived, she had brought in the vegetables and had, with Rose’s help, prepared Edward’s room for their aunt and uncle. For a few days the eldest would be bunking in the couch in his father’s study.

She was glad that they had come back. Someone needed to tend to the doctor or he was going fall ill. To Heidi’s dismay, his tenderness toward her had become stubbornness in the preceding weeks; ever since his wife’s death, the man cared little about what she had to say regarding his health.

When the doorbell rang, Heidi got up to answer it, as Mrs. Newton was tending to other things, the laundry and kitchen notwithstanding.

Heidi had tried to convince the woman that she could help with more of the household duties, but the aging housekeeper insisted on doing as much as possible on her own. Heidi had a suspicion that the woman needed the distraction as much as the rest of the family needed theirs. The doctor had his work, Edward had drinking, and Rose had taken to drawing in her room.

The entire house was depressed. The thought of caring for Edward and Rose if something happened to the doctor was too much to even contemplate.

When Heidi opened the door, she was drawn away from her shock.

Anne stood on the step.

“I did not expect you to call today,” she said, stepping aside to let the woman in the house. “Am I forgetting an appointment?

“I hope I am not interrupting. I merely saw the gig at the posting house and wished to extend an invitation to the entire family to join my mother and I for dinner at Rosings tomorrow. Mr. and Mrs. Collins will be in attendance, but I do not think that will signify.”

“I must admit to being shocked at the invitation,” she said, smoothing the fabric that had bunched around her waist.

“You should not be. My mother will enjoy the company of the doña, as someone who has been in society, and it has been some time since the Carter family has dined with us. Though, if you do not wish—“ Anne looked directly at Heidi then, letting her words die out.

“We would be delighted to join you for dinner tomorrow.”

“Then it is settled.” Anne paused and furrowed her brow.

“Is there something else?” Heidi cocked her head, trying to catch Anne’s attention.

“No, everything is fine.”

They hadn’t had the chance to talk at all since the fiasco a few weeks ago, not without an audience, and Heidi had decided that at the next opportunity she would come clean. She just had not expected the rest of the family to be here when the chance arose.

“Anne,” she started, “I mean, Miss de Bourgh. Would you care to join me on a walk?”

Anne’s expression deflated, and Heidi knew it had been a mistake to correct herself.

“There are some things I wished to tell you, but I have been unable to contrive a chance meeting these last weeks.”
“This sounds serious, Miss Meldrum,” Anne said, and this time Heidi felt her own jolt of disappointment at hearing Anne use a more formal tone.

She pursed her lips, knowing she did this to herself, but she needed to get through this and tell Anne the truth. The woman deserved to know.

She should have told her months ago. “Will you join me on the path?”

Anne nodded and allowed Heidi to draw her along the road until they reached the bench at the end of the lane.

“I have not been entirely truthful with you. And I believe I owe you an explanation.”

When Anne tried to turn away, Heidi earnestly took the woman’s hands in her own, tamping down the mental imagery of germs coating her skin. She had not thought to put on gloves and she cursed herself for it.

“I haven’t been truthful with many people here in England, save for members of the Carter family.”

Anne frowned at her. “Is the truth so horrible, Miss Meldrum?”

“No, it is not. At least, I don’t think it is, only, it could potentially be dangerous for you to know.”

Anne’s mouth curved into a small smile as Heidi let her friend’s hands drop. “You couldn’t possibly be a brigand!”

“No!” Heidi said, louder than she’d expected, almost laughing. “No, I’m no brigand, but I am something that you may consider worse.”

The woman at her side swallowed audibly. “You are frightening me.”

Heidi took a deep breath, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “I am from the future.”

Anne snorted. “You jest.”

“I am entirely serious,” Heidi whispered, bile churning in her stomach.

Anne scrutinized her with a look that bore the slightest shade of her overbearing mother. “Tell me something, then. If you speak truly, prove it.”

Heidi worried her lip. She’d been debating for days how to actually handle this conversation, having settled on nothing.

She couldn’t very well tell the woman that she was cast as a minor character in a novel. If she were following the ‘rules’ for any time travel book or movie she’d ever known, to say something could mean catastrophe.

Then again, Heidi wasn’t sure if it was possible to make things worse than she had already.

“Napoleon will be defeated in the Battle of Waterloo, it is a place in Belgium.”

“That could be a wild guess.”

“It could be, but it’s not.”
“Tell me something else?”

Heidi sighed with frustration, trying to think of a better way to explain. She wasn’t good at winging it...but, she was good at making lists.

Ticking each one off her fingers, Heidi began.

“In the 1850s war will break out in the Americas over slavery, the North and South will fight each other, and in the end the North will win, but it will take decades for the South to recover. In 1914, an assassin will kill Archduke Ferdinand to destroy the monarchy and it will start a war like no one has seen. In 1912, the largest cruise liner ever to sail will make its maiden voyage across the Atlantic and hit an iceberg and some 1,200 people will die in the ocean before anyone can rescue them. In the 1930s, a man, blaming Jews to be the reason why Germany has lost the Great War, will start his campaign, much like Napoleon, to take over Europe. At least six million men women and children will be killed in his work camps thanks to the fascism that spread through Europe.”

For a torturous, stretching moment, Anne was silent.

“Melbourne,” she said, realizing she had something to truly admit to.

“What about him?”

“He will be elected Prime Minister in a few years.”

Anne frowned.

“Advising Queen Victoria. I don’t think she is born yet, but she will be young when she takes the throne.”

Her friend’s eyes darted back and forth over her features. “You are serious?”

Heidi nodded.

“I am, Anne,” Heidi said firmly, using her friend’s given name to emphasize her honesty.

She pulled the glove off her right hand.

“This ring was given to me by my mother this past Christmas. The diamond is cut in such a way that your cousin’s jeweler had never before seen.” She tugged the ring off her finger. “Can you read the inscription?”

Anne took the ring from Heidi and turned it over.

“All my love, mom. 2018.” The woman looked up from where she was reading. “This is real?”

Heidi nodded, taking the ring back and replacing it on her right hand.

“How did you come to be here? Why?”

“The truth is that I was running from an unfaithful fiancé when my car crashed into a ravine. I came awake in the forest, and with my hurt leg, managed to find my way to the Browne’s house where Mr. Dowding found me exhausted and dehydrated.”

“This is... most extraordinary,” Anne breathed. “I can hardly believe it.”

“It took me some time to come to terms with it myself, if I’m perfectly honest,” Heidi said,
the ring back and placing it on her finger. “I still don’t believe it. My mother and father were alive when last I saw them, but they might as well be dead, over two hundred years in the future.”

“I suppose they are, Miss Meldrum.” Anne paused, but Heidi could see there were still things she wished to say and held her own tongue. “But such knowledge as yours is dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Not if I am careful.” Heidi took a breath, huffing the air out and pulling at her thumb. “if I say too much, or say the wrong thing, the future may be altered. Maybe it prevents Melbourne from taking office, and anything good he might have done never comes to pass, or maybe someone worse takes the position and England is thrown into a depression or falls to Napoleon or…” Heidi took a breath, giving her friend a shrug. “A million things could happen that would alter the future.”

“Have you changed anything yet?” Anne asked, her voice higher than normal.

She shifted on the bench. “It is possible.”

Anne cocked her head, and Heidi wanted to groan as the woman caught her unspoken meaning. “The day Ewan came to the cottage? You knew far more than you should have.” Anne turned to face her fully.

Heidi averted her eyes but nodded her head. The woman was far more astute than she’d expected, and though she was tempted to lie, it was too late to do so.

“You… attempted to stop Mr. Wickham from eloping with Miss Bennet’s sister.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I wished to save the family of the scandal.”

“What family? Why?”

Heidi braced the back of her neck with her hands. She couldn’t get the words out.

“You must tell me, Heidi. You have come this far.”

“I cannot,” she said.

“But why?”

“Because, everything I have done since I arrived was to prevent Mr. Wickham’s elopement with Lydia, but nothing I have done worked to push him off course, which means that no matter what I do, the outcome remains the same.”

“Why did you know Wickham? What made you know that he was going to elope? Did he do something during the war? Is he the future secretary of state?”

If the situation weren’t so serious, Heidi might have laughed at Anne’s jump to conclusions.

“He is a villain in a love story,” she said, forcing herself to keep her eyes open and watch Anne’s reactions.

The woman blinked, her eyes narrowing as she tried to make sense of what she’d said. “A love story?”
Heidi clenched her jaw. “If I tell you more… Anne, you may never speak to me again.”

Anne released a breath. “My story?”

Heidi let her eyes close, feeling pained. “In the love story of Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Beside her, Anne went still, and Heidi felt her breath leave her.

Anne was silent, taking in everything that she’d learned. “All those suggestions to break the contract, all your bluster in front of my mother, all of those months pretending to be my friend?”

Anne’s voice was low and controlled. “I never meant to interfere—“

“But you did.”

“And me,” she said. “To me, they were always supposed to get married. Whatever obstacles existed—“

“I thought I could trust you.”

“You can, please, you must believe me. Surely after everything—“

Anne clenched her jaw. “I shall take my leave, Miss Meldrum. You have given me much to think on.” she said, and pushed off the bench.

Heidi watched wanly as Anne walked out of sight.

“And the fuck ups continue,” she muttered to herself before burying her face in her hands.

It was later that evening when she recalled the invitation to Rosings, surely now rescinded, that the tears finally came.
Chapter Notes

AN: should have gone up last night, oopsie!

“I have your order, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi shrieked in surprise, whipping around to fight off the intruder, hands poised in the air for some ninja move she’d never accomplish.

Her muscles relaxed, her face reddening, at the sight of Mr. Dowding, tall and imposing, standing in the doorway of the surgery. The blacksmith burst into laughter.

“You scared the bejeezus outta me,” she said, clutching her bosom and gasping for air.

She’d been folding freshly laundered bandages and linens and hadn’t even heard the doorbell.

Mr. Dowding only continued laughing, holding his belly with his bad arm. “I gather I did. I rang the bell but there was no answer,” he said, waving his arm in the direction of the door, once he’d found his breath. “I wished to check the courtyard before I left. The surgery door was left wide open,” he said in an accusatory tone.

Heidi rolled her eyes. She couldn’t be expected to remember everything all the time.

“Please, come inside,” she said, trying to sound amiable as she waved toward the drawing room. “I’m afraid you find me alone at the cottage today.”

He stepped aside to let her pass. The man was wide enough to block the doorway and Heidi shook her head.

“Yes. Rather than sending the boy, I thought I should bring your purchase ‘round.”

Abraham was holding a small bundle.

“Is this the--?”

Dowding grinned and Heidi took it from him, unwrapping the parchment as she walked toward the dining table.

She pulled the blade from its leather sheath, marveling at the simple design. Mr. Dowding’s new apprentice had managed to stamp a diamond shaped hole through the handle and swirled blue and green glass had been poured into the center, making it look like a glittering comb or hair stick rather than the weapon it was.

Heidi had used pens to bun or French twist her hair into place and this weapon would be a good way to accomplish the same thing while having protection.

The weapon had rounded edges along the blade, acting more like a letter opener than a dagger. But the shining steel came to a sharp point, just as she’d envisioned.
“This is beautiful,” she said. Heidi ran her thumb over the tip, feeling the edge like she might test the honing of a kitchen knife. “This will certainly keep assailants away and do damage if they do not.”

“We made a matching set,” he said, reaching back into the pouch, “but only one is an actual blade. You will need to be careful to remember which is which.” He handed her the second piece, a replica of the first minus the sharpness of the edges.

“Thank you, Mr. Dowding. I love them.” She hoped he could read in her features just how much she appreciated his craftsmanship.

She didn’t want to use the weapon and would probably need to find someone to teach her how to hold it properly; but it would at least give another attacker pause if she wielded it at him. Though, she did not expect to see Mr. Wickham again.

Especially not now that he’d married or eloped with the youngest Bennet daughter...

She really should have had the man arrested when she had the chance. She’d been like Bilbo letting Gollum, or was he Sméagol at that point then? go.

Heidi had had no news from the Bennets nor Charlotte on the matter. As feared and expected, Mrs. Collins had withdrawn abruptly after Heidi’s admissions about Wickham and Lydia.

“If you do use it as a hair piece, Miss Meldrum, I recommend leaving the blade in the sheath. We would not want you to cut yourself. I had it crafted by Coulson, so it should hold up under the conditions you wish it for.”

“As you suggest,” Heidi said with a smile. The man, Coulson, was a leatherworker in Beckenshire and repaired shoes or any of the leather breeches or saddles in Hunsford. She trusted that Mr. Dowding would not steer her wrong.

Now that she considered it, if Coulson could make a garter for her, the pepper spray or the stiletto could get hidden under her skirts as well. It would be a far better place to keep it than in the awkward, drawstring reticule.

“You mentioned the family was out today?” he asked, shrugging his shoulder in the direction of the corridor.

Heidi nodded. “The family has gone up to London, and Mrs. Newton is visiting her brother. I promised NOT to burn the house down while I tended to the gardens.”

"Has such a thing occurred previously?"

She snorted in laughter. “I can be distracted, as you know. I burned a cake--”

The doorbell rang.

“Please, excuse me for a moment,” Heidi said gently, pointing to the door.

He nodded and stepped aside and Heidi tended to the interruption.

Young Andrew Hamilton stood at the doorway, holding out the parchment. "A letter for you, Miss Meldrum."

"Thank you," she said to the second son who was acting as courier today, taking the letter with
shaking hands. She gave him a couple of shillings that sat in a ceramic near the door for just such an occasion.

It had been almost six weeks, not that she was counting, since the colonel had stormed out of the cottage and every time a letter arrived, Heidi expected it to contain information about his death.

Though she’d looked forward to relaxing and her time alone, it had allowed her to stew over the conversations she’d had with the colonel and Anne earlier this summer. She hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Anne de Bourgh in the past three weeks, a sure sign that her friendship with the woman was over. Since she hadn’t been sure about propriety in such cases, she had sent word of a sudden “illness,” preventing her from attending the dinner at Rosings and saving Anne from the complication of having to rescind her invitation after saying she “needed space.” Heidi had received only a terse reply of regrets, conveying the barest politeness.

It was not the only sign that Heidi was no longer welcome to the realm of the de Bourghs. When Rosings needed salves for her Ladyship or tinctures for Anne, they sent Mrs. Jenkinson to fetch them.

It hurt, but there was little Heidi could do to mend their friendship, save to storm Rosings, which wouldn’t right all her wrongs.

But the loss of the friendships she’d made, all three of them, hurt more than she’d cared to admit. She’d even packed her bags a few nights ago and made the journey to the grove, thinking maybe she could be ported back.

As with all her previous attempts, nothing had happened.

Breaking the wafer on the letter, Heidi heard Mr. Dowding walking through the house. A quick glance at the name at the bottom indicated that the letter was from Jane Bingley.

Heidi frowned at it. She had to read the name twice, just to make sure she was reading what she thought she was reading.

*Miss Meldrum,*

*I write to you at the insistence of my sister and my husband, who both agree it would not be an imposition for me to tell you that we will be venturing into Kent for our bridal tour during the week of August 16th.*

Heidi grinned at Jane’s politeness. She’d liked Bingley when she’d met him in London and only wished she’d had the opportunity to meet his wife.

*We hope to be in the area of Hunsford on the 20th and pray it would be agreeable to you if we were to invite you to join us for a meal or perhaps tea at the famous Crimson Bridle. Whichever would best suit.*

She bit her bottom lip, already looking forward to meeting Jane and seeing Bingley again. The last time she’d seen him had been on the street in front of the Cowper estate.

*I would dearly love to make the acquaintance of the woman who has been such a great friend of my sister. Lizzy will, naturally, be accompanying us, and she wishes to see you again.*

Her brow furrowed.

*She tells me great stories of your young cousin Rose, and I would be happy to meet your aunt and*
Heidi looked up at Mr. Dowding, uncomprehending.

“Is it normal for a sister to join a newlywed couple on their bridal tour?”

Mr. Dowding rubbed the back of his neck, which had turned red. “Yes, I believe it is.”

Apparently, this was something men and women didn’t talk about in mixed company. Still, her curiosity got the better of her before she could tamp it.

“Why?

“They do not bring chaperones on bridal tours in Germany?”

Heidi gasped. “No,” she said, exaggeratingly.

Mr. Dowding took a breath and contorted his face in an uncomfortable manner. “If a couple is lucky enough to enjoy a bridal tour, a sister or aunt accompanies the newlyweds to give them the opportunity to get to know each other.”

Heidi frowned. It had to be one of those archaic scenarios where the woman would stand over them, ensuring the marriage was consummated or something. “How would that help?”

He worried his lip. “The female relative acts as a conversation starter.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, her eyes widening.

That was NOT the direction she had expected. Not a chaperone then, more of a distraction when one had been staring into their dinner plate all night without anything to say to the person they’d pledged their lives to.

Heidi thought she much preferred the modern way of doing things. Dating and getting all the awkwardness out of your system before making the relationship legally binding.

“Thank you, for explaining it to me.”

Mr. Dowding shuffled his feet, averting his eyes. Heidi was at a loss, knowing she should stop. Instead, Heidi went for broke.

“Did you go on a bridal tour with your wife?”

He shook his head. “No, though we did spend some time at Mrs. Dowding’s aunt’s cottage in Devonshire.”

“Ahh,” Heidi said, more awkward than before.

Mr. Dowding shifted awkwardly. “Perhaps I should leave you in peace.”

“Yes,” she said, grateful for the distraction. “I must answer this letter. And thank you, so much, for the hair sticks.”
He tipped his head to her and she reached for the door handle. “If you require anything else, do not hesitate. Especially while your uncle is not in residence. Mrs. Dowding and I would be happy to assist.”

Heidi smiled at him and opened the door. “Have a good day, Mr. Dowding.”

Once alone, Heidi considered the letter in her hand. The Bingleys and Lizzy were due to arrive in two days.
Two days later, Heidi was elbow deep in chicken soup and readying herself for the consequences. She’d received a second letter from Jane late last night detailing when they would arrive, and Heidi had made the decision to offer them dinner and rooms for the night if they wished to stay out of the inn.

With the Carters all in London for an extended family vacation, therapy, Heidi had been left to her own devices. She’d learned how to make a passable pasta, though she was sure that Italian grandmothers would turn their noses up at it, and she’d been surviving on salads she made from the fresh veggies she was tending in the garden.

She’d even managed to make a couple jars of jellies with the raspberries that grew along the back hedge. Though she couldn’t guarantee they would hold for long.

Thankfully, she’d been able to ask Mrs. Dowding for help when it came to preparing a meal for her guests and the woman had been shocked when she’d learned that though Heidi had some skills she’d never before had to slaughter and pluck a chicken.

It had been a learning experience, Heidi thought, trying to block the memory and wishing more than ever that Mrs. Newton had returned.

At least, with the chicken on her mind, Heidi wasn’t thinking about her friends and the lies she’d had to tell.

Heidi wet her suddenly dry lips and returned to her duties. There were rolls in the stove and she’d purchased raw sausages that were boiling in ale and onions for a second course, in the hearth that doubled as a second burner. Mrs. Dowding had even taken the time to show her how to properly handle cooking over an open fire, something Mrs. Dowding hadn’t the patience for.

Hearing the doorbell, Heidi pulled the rolls from the oven and headed to the front of the house. Heidi’s eyes fell immediately on the familiar profile of Mr. Bingley, standing in the doorway. She grinned. “It is ever so good to see you again, Mr. Bingley,” she said, curtseying and stepping back to let them inside.

Mr. Bingley introduced his wife, a shy smile on Jane’s face lit up when Heidi grinned back at her. “Allow me to introduce Mrs. Jane Bingley,” he said, grinning and bubbly like a glass of champagne and rainbows.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance,” she said, smiling at his ridiculous lovesick puppy ways, “Mrs. Bingley.”

“And you as well,” the bride said, dipping her blonde curls as she curtseyed. She was a few inches shorter than Heidi but not by much and very clearly related to Lizzy, who appeared behind the couple.

“It is good to see you again, Miss Bennet,” Heidi said, around Jane.

“Thank you for opening your home to us,” Lizzy said. “We were surprised indeed to find the letter waiting at the Bridle when we arrived.”
“If you have not already rented rooms, you are all welcome to stay in the Cottage. I am the only one home at present. Some company would be a welcome thing,” she said, waving her hand about the dark room.

Realizing her faux pas, Heidi quickly lit a few of the sconces to lighten up the room. “Sorry, I would rather not burn candles when I’m not around to supervise. I have been in the kitchen for most of the day…” She laughed awkwardly.

Bingley frowned at her. “You are alone? We would never have imposed--”

Heidi quickly explained that the rest of the family was in London and that Mrs. Newton was visiting her brother.

“It does not signify, dinner will be ready presently.”

*And everything is under control,* she struggled not to say aloud.

“It is your prerogative, naturally,” she said, babbling. “But the rooms are ready, should you wish to stay with me and save some coin. I can even make breakfast in the morning,” Heidi assured cheerfully, leading the way to the parlor.

She excused herself, to check on dinner.

The soup was simmering, she dumped the rice in and noted the time for 10-15 more minutes of cooking, checked on the sausages to make sure they hadn’t exploded, and placed the rolls in the porcelain bowl, covering it with a tea towel. The salad had already been mixed and was just waiting on a last minute application of the vinaigrette she’d made.

“I apologize that I will be back and forth, tending to the last few details on the supper,” she said, entering the parlor with a tray of glasses. She’d brought a couple bottles of alcohol up from the larder yesterday at Mrs. Dowding’s guidance. “But once the meal is fully prepared. I will be at your disposal.”

She poured drinks for everyone. “You are of course welcome to join me in the kitchen while I finish the last of the work.”

“You are educated in the art of cookery?” Jane asked, incredulously.

“I will leave you to judge that,” Heidi said, trying to hide her nervousness. “But if it all ends up horribly, I daresay we can get dinner at the Bridle easily.”

“I can help, if you are desirous of such things,” Lizzy said, standing.

Within ten minutes, the table was set with the first course. Soup was ladled into the bowls and the rolls placed near the tureen and soon Bingley and Jane had taken their seats. Heidi ensured everyone was served before taking her seat at the head of the table.

“It smells delicious,” Bingley said, leaning over the soup bowl.

Heidi took the first spoonful, indicating the others could eat. Despite all her worries, she was pleased with the way that her mother’s soup had turned out.

They eased into conversation, once Heidi began asking about the wedding and how the ceremony had been, telling them that she’d never seen a British wedding before.
Heidi had let Jane talk about the dress and the ceremony and how they’d ridden off in a barouche after a small gathering at Longbourne with their friends and family.

She ACHED to ask about Lydia and Wickham, but did not want to be the one to bring it up, if it was bad news.

“We have only just begun our tour,” Jane said, when Heidi had asked. “But we spent a week in Cornwall.”

“My angel wished to see the Purthcurno Beaches before we stopped in Truro, and who was I to keep her from it?” He leaned over and took Jane’s hand, the woman blushing prettily in the candlelight of the great room.

“I have never been to that part of England,” Heidi admitted. “Is it lovely?”

“It was everything I could have wished for,” Jane said, a blush on her cheeks. Heidi had an anachronistic urge to take the eldest Bennet sister out for a cocktail so she could dish.

Good for her, she mused, trying not to give Jane a knowing smirk.

By the time they’d moved on from soup to the main course, complete with side salads filled with the veggies she’d been harvesting for the past week or so, Heidi felt like she’d been doing this her whole life. Everyone had enjoyed the soup, enough so that Jane had asked what the egg garnish had been.

The Eier stich hadn’t turned out exactly right, but soufflé-ing it in the oven had approximated the way her mother had cooked it in the microwave.

Putting a bite of sausage into her mouth, Heidi was surprised when Lizzy was the one that broke the silence.

"I wished to thank you, for your contribution in aiding my family," she said, putting her fork down.

Heidi’s heartbeat stuttered. “My contribution? I don’t understand.”

"I hope you do not mind that I told my sister of your intervention.”

Averting her eyes, Heidi steeled herself before looking up at her guests. “I’m sorry, Miss Bennet, but you have caught me completely unaware. What happened?”

Lizzy looked at Jane, and her cheeks grew rosy when she turned her brown eyes back to Heidi.

“You have not heard?”

Heidi shook her head, swallowing the last bit of food still in her mouth.

“How awkward,” she said. The woman fiddled with her fork. “Mr. Wickham and my sister were found in London, Mr. Darcy made it clear that without your knowledge, they might never have found him.”

“I only gave the colonel a name,” she said. “One they already knew.”

“It might have been too late, without your help,” Jane said gently.

Heidi rubbed at her eyebrow. “So, you all know then, about my transgression?” She remembered telling the colonel how she’d snuck into Wickham’s rooms with the clarity that it might have
happened yesterday and she inwardly winced at the memory.

"Just the three of us," Lizzy said, waving her hand to encapsulate the room. "Mr. Darcy was at the wedding, Jane's of course, and when I asked, he gave me the whole of what had transpired in London with Lydia."

Heidi let her eyes slide over to Bingley, who appeared entirely too at ease for her comfort.

This was bad stuff, wasn’t it?? They probably thought her some sort of hoyden.

“Just the three of us,” Lizzy said, waving her hand to encapsulate the room. "Mr. Darcy was at the wedding, Jane's of course, and when I asked, he gave me the whole of what had transpired in London with Lydia."

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“My family owes you a great debt in the part you played in recovering my sister," Lizzy said, her voice warm with sincere gratitude.

“I did nothing,” Heidi said, almost at a whisper in her surprise. “Nothing significant.”

She was not going to mention the fact that her odd behavior had driven Charlotte away, or that the truth, as she could tell it, to the colonel had pushed him away, or that the whole truth had caused Anne to disappear from her life.

Heidi smiled, picking at her plate and putting another bite in her mouth, despite her now rolling stomach. She would get through this dinner without an incident, come hell or high water.

"Perhaps, but Mr. Darcy was adamant that it was on your advice that he and the colonel went in search of the proprietress, Mrs. Younge."

Heidi could only shrug, not trusting her voice to say anything helpful.

Elizabeth shook her head with rueful resignation. "My youngest sister is now married to a husband who is a wicked man. I should have done more to prevent it. But thanks to you, we have managed to minimize the scandal."

Shifting in her seat, Heidi rapped her fingers on the table. "Miss Elizabeth, it is no more your fault than it was mine. I'm sure you did everything you thought you could to prevent such a thing, but Lydia must learn to live with her actions as we all must."

"I suppose you are right, Miss Meldrum," said Elizabeth with a smile. “Thank you for your kind words.

"I must remember to thank Mr. Darcy for his kind words then, when next, if ever, I see the gentleman."

“I daresay it will not be as long as you might think,” Jane teased, and Heidi snapped her head over to the woman.

“He is not at Rosings, is he?” she asked, panic in her chest.

“No,” Lizzy said, a laugh in his voice. “What my sister means to say, is that Mr. Darcy and I are engaged."

Heidi broke into a grin, unable to feign anything this time. This was all happening so quickly, her head was spinning. "Are you, really?"

"Indeed I am." Elizabeth looked at her quizzically. “Though you almost look as though you are not surprised by the news."

"Oh no," Heidi said hastily. “I am...very surprised! And so incredibly happy for you, Miss Bennet.
That is wonderful.”

Inwardly Heidi cheered. At least the Lydia fiasco hadn’t prevented Mr. Darcy from popping the question, though she could hardly guess what might have happened since the summer, since her last communication with the girl had been utterly disastrous.

She was a little afraid to ask, Heidi could admit to herself. After all that worrying, she clearly hadn’t needed to interfere at all. And to be perfectly honest with herself, she’d completely forgotten about Lizzy and Darcy in the weeks since she’d left Pemberley. She felt a little guilty about it.

The Bingleys and Miss Bennet did not take Heidi up on her offer to stay at the cottage, saying that they’d already unpacked their things. Heidi tried to keep her composure when they said they had had plans to spend time with Charlotte and Mr. Collins tomorrow.

Before they left, Heidi begrudgingly allowed Lizzy to help her clear the table and carry their dirty dishes to the sink.

"I do not wish to alarm you,” Lizzy said, when they were both alone. “But, Mr. Darcy tells me that you were attacked by Wickham in London.”

Heidi swallowed, not inclined at all to revisit the conversation or the incident. But at the same time, she was unsurprised that the colonel had told his cousin what happened.

"I am glad to see that you did not come out of the incident harmed."

Heidi thanked her, feeling awkward.

When her guests left, close to midnight, Heidi climbed the stairs to her room, exhausted. She’d deal with the pile of dishes and pots and pans in the morning.
A week before Michaelmas found Heidi in the parlor helping Rose with the final touches for a dress for the assembly. The top was made of a sky blue muslin that the doña had gifted to Rose with the intention of pairing it with a black skirt. In truth, it appeared like an attempt at a riding habit a la Sissi, but it at least allowed Rose to be in the black of mourning while still looking festive for the party.

Strangely, the rules for mourning weren’t as strict as she’d expected. Heidi couldn’t be sure when they came about, thinking of her American Girl doll from 1904. Nothing had been mentioned in it, though she supposed it couldn’t be left to children’s books to explain the ‘propriety’ of grieving.

The door to the parlor opened and Mrs. Newton entered.

“Miss Anne de Bourgh,” she said, introducing the woman.

Heidi dropped her sewing on the nearby table and fought the butterflies that were wreaking havoc in her gut.

As soon as Mrs. Newton closed the door, Heidi’s words burst from her like an unplugged fire hydrant.

“Please, sit down,” she said, waving toward the couch. “I cannot say I was expecting to see you at the Cottage. Are you well?”

“I am well,” Anne, Miss de Bourgh, said, taking the offered seat.

The seconds passed in silence.

Mrs. Newton entered the room once more, with a tray of tea things and poured for them. Heidi watched the woman and could see she recognized the tension between the two ladies.

Soon, they were alone again.

Once it was clear that Anne had no intention of initiating the conversation, Heidi averted her eyes before taking a deep breath. Something had to be said.

“I am sorry. It was terrible of me to lie, and I truly never meant to hurt you.”

“I am sorry too,” Miss de Bourgh said, resigned. “For the way I handled your situation.”

“It was a reasonable response,” she said, fiddling with a piece of ribbon that had fallen away from the table.

“I found myself thinking much on what you said that day on the lane these last weeks.”

Heidi nodded, she had thought of little else in the past two months, knowing she’d turned herself into a recluse and had obsessed over the conversation ad nauseam.

“I have some questions, if you do not mind.”
“No,” Heidi said, shaking her head. “You may ask me anything. I would not… I mean to say, I will do my best to answer as honestly as possible.”

Anne considered this for a moment or two. “Where was your home?”

“I am American, actually. I’m from New York State,” she said, wringing her fingers in her lap.

“Lord in Heaven,” Anne replied, leaning forward. “And your family? Are the Carters some sort of ancestor?”

Heidi shook her head. “No, not at all. At least I don’t think so. I had no knowledge of them before I arrived in Hunsford and Mr. Dowding brought me to the surgery.”

“But you did know my cousin, Miss Elizabeth, and Mr. Wickham,” Anne said, counting them off on her hand.

She nodded, not sure how detailed Anne was going to make her get.

“And you knew of me?”

“You were mentioned in the story, yes.”

“But Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth…”

“They were not destined to be together, because of fate or destiny or something silly like that,” Heidi said. “But the story I was told was that they married, yes.”

She had decided weeks ago that if Anne were ever to ask her about this story, she would tell it as if it were truth, not fiction. These were real people, who lived and breathed, and laughed and cried. Heidi wasn’t sure how Anne would handle the knowledge that she was a figment of someone’s imagination turned to life.

“Where did you learn about the existence of their relationship?”

“It is part of schooling, as integral as reading Shakespeare. Theirs was a tale of overcoming one’s pride, even when it is wounded, to become a better person.”

“That does make it seem like a fairy tale,” Anne said, crossing her ankles under her skirts. “Wickham? What was his part?”

“He was… the bad guy, a counter to Mr. Darcy. He was supposed to be the suave good looking one that was most definitely NOT good.”

“Suave?” Anne said bewildered. “This is how you knew him?”

“I never intended anything that happened,” Heidi blurted. “I merely thought to observe as the story unfolded, and I grew curious to see if the stories told the truth about the people that were living and breathing in front of me.”

“I see,” Anne said softly. Whether her change of tone meant thoughtfulness or uncertainty, Heidi could not help but elaborate.

“I never expected to catch the antagonizing eye of Mr. Wickham, I’m afraid I mucked that up pretty well. Just as you were so much better than the story said, I thought for sure there had to be something good in him. No one is pure villain. But I had to know the truth.”
She pulled at the end of the ribbon in her hand, starting to unravel it, and put it down in embarrassment.

“By the time I realized Wickham was indeed wicked, I had already interfered too much.”

“And you knew me, or my story, and you wished to do the same?”

“No, not exactly.” Heidi pursed her lips, feeling more awkward with each second. “Your mother was part of the story, another villain who stood between Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth’s happiness. She thought, at least as it was explained in the tales, that Miss Elizabeth was below Mr. Darcy’s station. You, or rather the you in the stories, were in the background, as a threat, rather than a real tangible person.” She looked up at Anne apologetically.

“I am glad to have had the chance to get to know you, Miss de Bourgh,” she said, making sure she made eye contact. “You are a better friend to me than I could have ever imagined. Most people, had they been put in my place, would have loved Elizabeth and stayed far away from you; but I can honestly say that these past months, being your friend, has made me happier than I’d ever imagined.”

Anne said nothing before smiling. “It is shocking to hear that one is a character in a story.”

“I can only imagine,” was all Heidi could think to say.

“Tell me, then,” Anne said, leaning in with a mischievous gleam in her eye. “How does the story end?”

Heidi sighed, unable to resist a small grin in return. At this point, what did it hurt? Most of the plots were either closed or in the process of being closed.

“Mr. Wickham and Lydia attempt an elopement, but they are prevented from escaping to Scotland by Mr. Darcy, who insists they marry.”

“Which you prevented by telling my cousin of the woman who housed them.”

Heidi nodded. “Then, Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet are married.”

“That too has occurred.”

“And finally, Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth are married.”

Anne cleared her throat. “I do not know if you heard that Miss Elizabeth is to be married to Mr. Darcy before Michaelmas.”

“Yes,” she said, worrying her bottom lip. “Mr. and Mrs. Bingley called on the cottage in August. Miss Elizabeth told me the news then.” There would be little reason to lie about anything else, now that Anne knew the deepest and darkest of her secrets.

“Yes,” Anne said. “I called upon on Mrs. Collins during their stay at Hunsford. Miss Elizabeth and I had the opportunity for a tête-à-tête, as the French say.”

“You did?” Heidi asked, leaning forward.

“I did not mention your… interference… to the woman, but I did say that she had my full blessing for the match.”

Heidi released a breath.
“You are relieved?”

“I had hoped that you and Miss Elizabeth would become friends.” Heidi smiled. “It sounds like perhaps you have that chance now.”

“There are no other stories?”

Heidi shook her head. “No, nothing that we know of, in any case.”

A shadow crossed Anne’s face. “Have you told this to Mrs. Collins?”

“No, I have not.”

“I would suggest you do, at some point soon.”

Heidi bit the inside of her lip. “You do not think it is too late?”

“No,” said Anne, cocking her head ever so slightly. “Does she not deserve the truth as well?”

“Yes, Mi—Anne,” replied Heidi, her bravery returning. “I suppose she does, though...”

“Though?”

Heidi winced. “Perhaps without Mr. Collins around?”

Anne took a sip of her long forgotten tea. “I agree, Heidi.”

Surprisingly, a smile slowly formed on Miss de Bourgh’s face.

“Well then, all is settled.” she said, after prolonging Heidi’s trepidation far longer than was comfortable.

“Settled?”

“I mean to say that my future is not pre-destined and I may do as I wish.”

Heidi eyed her skeptically. “What do you wish to do?”

“I wish for you to join me in London after Michaelmas.”

“What do you mean, join?” Heidi asked, sitting up straighter.

“You will help me find my own destiny.”

Chapter End Notes

More updates, at a quicker pace with the London trip :) Sorry the summer was such a slow update season!
Heidi grinned as the crowd of men and women lined up for the next dance. She and Anne had returned to London a few days ago and had been included on an invitation to the doña for an assembly held by Lady Jessop.

Anne had wandered off to get them both drinks while she held the table on a balcony overlooking the room below.

The past few weeks had flown by in a flurry of activity, now that things were fully reconciled between Heidi and her dearest friend in her home in another time.

The Season would not officially begin until Parliament was called in January, but in the meantime, Anne wished to grow accustomed to the stress of city living, in preparation for the busy winter.

Now that Anne knew the truth about her origins, Heidi was receiving detailed lessons on how to act and behave in Regency society. And Heidi, though embarrassed at the realization that she’d been getting things wrong, appreciated the help.

According to custom, Anne had insisted Heidi have a couple dozen calling cards ordered so that they could send the cards to their acquaintance to let their friends know that they were in town. Heidi, in return, maintained that she only needed a couple since the only people she knew were Mr. and Mrs. Bingley, Miss Bingley, and the Countess Cowper, though she wasn’t sure how eager that woman was to see her again. Anne claimed she needed to make more, in case she met new friends and wished to call upon them.

She found she couldn’t argue with that.

The two of them were living at the Carters’ home on Henrietta Street, as it was a permanent residence, and Anne had insisted that she pay a small fee to the Carters for the allowance of their rooms. They had originally balked at such payment, happy to host the women as guests; but Anne had made the point that if they’d moved into the Fitzwilliam house, it would have meant the transfer of staff and the usage of utilities that would have cost far more than if they simply paid rent. And Anne was happy to help her friends as they had helped her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Anne was walking toward her with a couple of companions, carrying two glasses of wine.

“Miss Lucas,” she exclaimed, seeing Maria appear through the crowd. “I had no notion you would be in town.”

The two ladies greeted each other, and Heidi was reintroduced to Sir Lucas. She’d only met him briefly during his short stay in Hunsford, but he was a gentle-hearted man, if goofy.

“I thought to bring them to our table,” Anne said. “As there are few enough places out in the lower rooms.”

Heidi thanked Anne for the drink and invited their guests to sit.

She was surprised, as the conversation went on, at how at ease she felt in London this time around.
Heidi thought maybe it was because Anne knew the truth about her. It prevented her from having to worry about slip-ups for sure, but it was also helpful to know what to expect at parties such as this. Heidi had even attended the Michaelmas Assembly in Hunsford last week and had practiced her quadrilles and contre danses with some of the younger men in the village as well as with Mr. Davies, the apothecary, and Mr. Dowding. She found the dances enjoyable enough, though nothing could hold a candle to the way the colonel had danced with her. She still blushed at the thought that she’d offered to show him how to waltz.

Heidi forced the memory out of her mind when she remembered how upset he’d been when he’d taken his leave of her in July.

“I did not think to see you in town, Sir Lucas,” Heidi said, during a lull in the conversation. “I was under the impression that you did not enjoy London Society.”

“Ah, well, you see,” he started, his rosy cheeks giving him a flustered appearance. “I enjoy the country far better; however, with my eldest lately married, I thought it wise to bring Miss Lucas to town. She is of an age and will find enjoyment in such events.”

Heidi nodded. “I think that is an excellent idea,” she said, smiling at Maria and drinking from her glass.

“Miss de Bourgh,” a loud and obnoxious voice called out and Heidi grimaced as her companion turned to greet Caroline Bingley.

Anne stood and greeted the woman, remaining polite as usual, and introduced the rest of the table, though she didn’t need to. Everyone here was well acquainted with the snobbish woman.

“Oh, how charming,” Miss Bingley said in saccharine tones. “I suppose it is wise, even for the heiress of Rosings, to engage in more...mercantile...conversation from time to time.”

“I find the Lucas family to be treasures, every one of them,” Anne said, her voice as strong as Heidi had ever heard it.

“I had hoped to speak with you, should I run into you again, Miss de Bourgh,” Caroline continued. “We hardly had the chance to get to know one another that time I came to Rosings with Mr. Darcy and my dear brother.”

Heidi couldn’t even feign a polite countenance as the woman turned her back at the rest of the table, effectively cutting them out of the chat.

She glanced at Maria, appalled. “Have you discovered any new pieces to play recently?” she asked the girl, figuring it best to pretend Caroline’s ‘cut’ hadn’t happened.

Maria chatted happily about a wonderful new composition she’d heard a master play just last week. She thought it was a Handel but wasn’t sure and couldn’t find anyone who knew the tune. Heidi kept half an ear on what Caroline was saying while Maria prattled.

Though she couldn’t make out the words that were exchanged, the mounting aggravation on Anne’s face was plain.

Heidi looked around the room for anything to use as a distraction and found it in the familiar face of Baronet Brigham who was escorting a woman through the room.

“Excuse me, Miss Bingley, but I simply must borrow Miss de Bourgh,” she said, standing, and resting her arm on Anne’s elbow. “I see someone she absolutely must be introduced to. I hope you
won’t mind.”

She tugged until Anne slid off her seat.

“I am sorry, Miss Bingley,” Anne said, playing along. “Miss Meldrum and I have been waiting all night for a chance for her to introduce me to—”

“The Baronet,” Heidi interrupted.

Caroline eyed them suspiciously. “Of course, one must never keep a baronet waiting.”

Anne curtseyed, as did Caroline (rather perfectly to Heidi’s irritation) before Heidi managed to get Anne away.

“That was a touch scandalous, my dear,” she whispered, taking Heidi’s arm. “But well done.”

“I’ll not ask you what you spoke of just yet.” Heidi resisted the urge to check on Caroline. “But you looked as though you needed a rescue. Come, I should introduce you to the Baronet. It wouldn’t do to not follow through with a lie if she’s still watching.” It did not escape Heidi that she was pulling the same play that the colonel had, in reverse.

“Oh, but you are devious, Miss Meldrum!”

Heidi flashed her friend a grin and led Anne through the room where they managed to catch the man on his way to the stairs that would lead down to the dance floor.

“Baronet Brigham,” she said, a little louder than probably necessary.

The man turned and Heidi was certain he would call her out on her rudeness, but in the end he allowed Heidi to make the introductions and introduced to them in return the niece of Lady Heathcote, Miss Florentia Heathcote.

Once the introductions had been made, Heidi wished them a pleasant dance.

“If either of you fine young ladies happen to have an empty dance on your card, it would be a pleasure to share the dance floor with either one of you. Consider it my honor.”

He flattered and grinned and, as decorum required, Anne agreed.

Just before they parted, the man leaned forward as if getting ready to share a great secret.

“In fact, there will be a small gathering at my townhouse in Mayfair early next week. You are both welcome to attend. There will be food and dancing and some gaming of course. I could have an invitation sent round in the morning to…”

“Henrietta Street,” Anne said. “We are currently in residence with Miss Meldrum’s aunt and uncle, Mr. and Doña Carter.”

“Henrietta Street,” he said, confirming, and sending Heidi a nearly indecent smile.

Anne flushed at her side and gripped Heidi’s wrist lightly. “We will consult our calendars and send a response either in favor or in regret.”

“Yes, of course.” With a satisfied nod, the man turned to the young Miss Heathcote. “Shall we?”

Now that they were free from Caroline’s clutches, Heidi and Anne stopped for more wine and then
spoke quietly in a corner near the dance floor. Anne knew many of the names they’d been hearing and when she could, gave a run down on the person, though most of her information came from her mother.

“How in the Lord’s name did you know the Baronet?” Anne asked.

“Your cousin introduced us.”

Anne frowned.

“The colonel,” she elaborated.

“This was the night at Almack’s?”

“Yes. They seemed to know each other well. Something about being friends during their days at university, I think.”

“I imagine an acquaintance is permissible then,” Anne said. “If my cousin was friendly with him.”

“From what I could tell, he was. They only spoke for a moment or two, so I cannot be certain.”

Miss de Bourgh paused momentarily. “It is surprising, though.”

“What is?”

“That he should renew an acquaintance from his schooling days. From what my lady mother always said, it was a trying time for him.”

“Trying?”

“I do not know the particulars,” Anne said with a smile. “I should think, though,” she continued softly, “that he would only wish to make such conversation with anyone from his time there whilst he was in the most agreeable of moods.”

The breeze from an open window hit the back of Heidi’s neck, highlighting the fact of how stuffy it had become.

“The colonel has always seemed pleasant to me.”

She watched the dance floor for a beat or two and then turned her gaze back to her cup of wine. “His conversation, I mean. Very pleasant.”

Chapter End Notes

so many conflicting accounts with when the season opened, etc, but I finally settled on the idea of the season in the winter (when the air wasn’t quite as smelly), if it’s wrong, I apologize, since these chapters were originally written for summer but then… research
Tuesday, October 13th, 1812

“Your morning tea, Miss,” the maid said, from the other side of the bed curtains.

Heidi flipped onto her stomach, hiding her face unnecessarily as she moaned in response. Her head throbbed and her stomach lurched as she tried and failed to pull herself up in bed.

Despite her best intentions, she’d gone and overdone it during her third London party.

Heidi gripped her head. Too much wine, too much tobacco in the gaming hall, and too many women doused in eau de toilette to cover their foul body odor.

She’d need to remember to make some more of the scented handkerchiefs Mrs. Carter kept the next time she went to a party at the baronet’s home. Naturally, she’d left them all behind in Hunsford.

“Are you unwell, Miss?” said the maid, tentatively.

“I’ll be fine,” Heidi replied. “Perhaps someone could arrange a pot of sterilized water for me? It would be appreciated.”

“Of course, Miss.”

Heidi leaned back against the headboard and kept her eyes closed. The sheets were hot and soaked with her sweat. The choice between needing to open the curtains and risking vomiting from leaning over was a terrible one.

She’d gotten the Carters’ cook in the habit of boiling large quantities of water for her during their last stay. The woman didn’t understand it, but the doctor had lied about it being part of her treatment in staying healthy and it had been enough to stop any more questioning. She needed to find a way to create a charcoal filter, though she was beginning to have some ideas. At least they were already sifting out sediment throughout the boiling process.

Water, lots of water for the morning, and she could rehydrate and stay at home and NOT use one of the public bathrooms by leaving the house.

“Before you leave,” she said, hearing the girl still messing about in the room, likely pulling curtains open and picking up the few pieces of clothing that Heidi had left where they’d fallen, “please ensure Miss de Bourgh gets some water as well.”

“Of course, Miss.”

The girl shuffled out of the room then, and Heidi closed her eyes.

Today was going to be Hell.

When, four hours later, she managed to drag herself out of bed, get a bath, eat some stale toasted bread, take a couple of her dwindling supply of Naproxen and had the maid dress her in something that was appropriate, Heidi went downstairs to find Anne in the garden at the back of the house.

“You look about as chipper as I feel,” Heidi said, half groaning.

Anne winced sympathetically at Heidi’s croaked words. She collapsed onto the bench beside her friend.
“It was a fun party last night, was it not?”

“It was fun, but the wine and the stench gave me the worst migraine.”

“Yes, it is a pity,” Anne said. “I could hardly walk this morning. I am afraid such quantities of alcohol have been devastating to my nerves.”

Heidi reached into the pocket she insisted all of her dresses have and pulled out a small pill box.

“For you, Anne,” she said, popping off the lid with a flourish. “It won’t help with the nerve pain, I don’t think, but it will help with the after effects of alcohol.”

“What is this?”

“Medicine I had with me when I traveled. I managed to give you a couple of these before, when you had your fever in the spring. Don’t have many left, so don’t waste it.”

“You knew quite a bit about that?” Anne asked, eying her carefully. They hadn’t spoken much about the revelations that had passed between them, not when there were witnesses about, but these last few days at the Carter townhome had relaxed both Heidi and Anne enough to allow such talk to float between them as a matter of fact. Though they never mentioned the *Pride and Prejudice* plot.

She shrugged. “I don’t have much specialized knowledge, just a bunch of facts that I’ve learned throughout my life. Street-wise, they call it, though I think that had more to do with people who actually lived on the streets.” Heidi caught herself trailing off and focused on Anne. “I have been helping the doctor modernize, as you know, and though I do not have the training most doctors have, even in this age, I at least know more about the causes of illness.”

“Do tell me,” Anne said, taking the pill and drinking some of the water like Heidi had suggested.

She spent much of the early afternoon explaining modern medicine, what she knew anyway, until one of the maids appeared in the garden.

The girl handed Heidi the card. As a cousin of the *master*, she still hated that word, she outranked Anne in this house, despite the difference in social standing.

“It’s your cousin, the Baron of Blakely,” Heidi said, surprised that Percival had shown up on Henrietta Street. “Would it be agreeable to meet with him here, do you think? Or should we meet with him in the parlor.”

Anne nodded. “It will be proper to meet in the garden.”

“Please escort him out to the garden,” Heidi said, turning back to the maid. “I would not wish to take up any of Doña Carter’s more formal chambers for a guest of mine.”

The girl bobbed and went back inside.

After Percival greeted both of them, he took a seat on the chair beside Anne. Heidi hadn’t seen the man since they’d left Wych Elm, but it was clear that he still kept in contact with his cousin, which was reassuring.

“I heard a rumor that you attended the soiree at Brigham’s last night? I trust you remained unmolested.” He crossed his legs.
"What do you mean?"

Leaning forward, the baron rested his elbows on his knees. "There are tales of ruffians antagonizing ladies at night when they depart gatherings."

Heidi suppressed a shudder as that vision of brick and her bonnet falling over her eyes came back into her head. "My uncle has been attentive. We have not been unescorted these last days." She wasn’t sure why she felt the need to explain it to the gentleman sitting across from her, but she had, despite the memory that had flooded her mind.

At least she had worn her hairsticks.

Heidi was sure Anne would grow suspicious if she kept wearing them. She would need to test out the sheath she’d had Coulson make. Better to keep such a thing hidden some of the time.

"My advice is to be careful, and as you have few protectors," he said, turning to Anne. "I wished to make my concerns known."

His brow furrowed. "I had no notion you were acquainted with Brigham."

"Miss Meldrum was introduced to the baronet by your brother. When she introduced us at the Jessop’s party last week, he invited us his own soiree."

He trained his eyes on Heidi next, considering her in a way that made Heidi want to fidget. "I had forgotten that Miss Meldrum knows my little brother."

*Ask about him, you nitwit.*

Heidi sat up straighter. "We saw him last when he stopped in Hunsford on the hunt for that Wickham fellow. Have you heard from him since he left for Spain?" She did her best NOT to give herself away, not about her history with Wickham nor her concern over the colonel.

"You know more than I, Miss Meldrum. How did he fare?"

Anne spoke up before she could. "He was well enough, though he looked exhausted. I daresay Wickham put up a good chase."

Percival nodded. "Insupportable situation."

"But it all worked out in the end."

"Yes, and now Darcy and Miss Elizabeth are to be married." He waited, as if unwilling to speak the next. "And we are next, you must know this."

"We both have our duties to perform." Anne nodded at her cousin.

"Wait a minute," Heidi said, looking between them both in surprise. "You two—" she pointed her finger, moving it back and forth. After what she’d witnessed in Wych Elm Hall, Heidi would never have suspected--

Percival snorted.

Anne gasped, her hands to her chest. "Heaven forbid, no!"

Heidi slumped, the adrenalin having spiked. "Thank goodness, I was sure I’d missed something."
Anne chuckled. “No, I would not trade one cousin for the other. Though I love them all, I do not care of any of them in such a way.”

“Good,” Heidi said. “I mean...” Her face flushed.

“Come,” Percival said, clapping his hands together and changing the subject. “I came to call on you both so I could take you out to the parks. It is a lovely day and a shame to spend it all in the back garden.”

“I am afraid, I am no good company today,” Anne said, waving her hand.

Percival nodded, understanding evident in his features. Anne had a few bad days at Wych Elm; there was little more to say than that.

“But do take Miss Meldrum with you. I doubt she has ever been paraded through Vauxhall Gardens. It will be an adventure.”

His eyes turned to hers, sparkling like he’d just discovered gold. “Miss Meldrum, will you join me on a tour through the gardens?”

“Are you sure it would be proper?” Heidi asked Anne, hoping her concern was evident in her eyes.

Anne smiled mysteriously. “Only if the parties have a sort of... understanding that surpasses friendship.”

“As we have no such understanding, and Miss de Bourgh is feeling unwell it would only be proper for me to take the place of escort,” Percival said. “Please do not be offended, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi couldn’t help herself and responded with a snobbish accent. “I’m not offended in the least. I don’t find you attractive either.”

Percival’s eyes went wide and his mouth gaped open.

Heidi giggled.

“That was cruel,” he said, haughtily pulling himself up to his full height.

“I daresay all be well then,” Heidi bantered. “Though there will be gossip.”

“My reputation can weather the storm.”

*It could weather a lot more than that.*

“And I have no reputation to ruin.” She said it with a smile, but some part of Heidi wished she did fit in with these people.

“You will when you are seen on the arm of my cousin in the Gardens.”

Heidi rolled her eyes. “Like I was much of a catch anyway. Maybe I can be a charity case, though. Do you think the Ton would take pity on me?” She batted her eyes at Anne.

“You are both insufferable,” Anne said, shaking her head wryly. “Come, Miss Meldrum, let us prepare you for your first parade.”

Percival bowed as the two women stood and headed for the door.
“You can entertain yourself for a few minutes, can you not, cousin mine?” Anne asked, talking to her cousin over her shoulder as if dismissing him.

“Now,” Anne whispered to Heidi, abrupt in her excitement, as they passed into the corridor. “We must find you attire worthy of an outing with a future earl, intentions to marry or not.”

When, some half hour later, Heidi found herself walking down the sidewalk beside the baron, she tried to ignore her rolling stomach. Having no food, a liter of water, and too much wine in the past eighteen hours or so had begun to twist her insides.

Walking together, Heidi blocked the nausea with a sheer force of will and tried to focus on what was happening around her. She was surprised when she couldn’t find anything to talk about.

Today felt different than their walk in Gariton had, the man at her side carried himself in an odd manner. It wasn’t as though he was being deliberate about it, from what she could tell, but something had changed.

“Vauxhall Gardens,” he said, leading them under a large, arched gateway and into a park. Percival stepped up to the man and reached into his jacket.

“That’ll be six shillings, my lord,” he said, tipping his head at the baron.

Heidi reached for the small reticule wrapped around her wrist.

“Let me pay,” she started, but before she could open it. Percival had given the man their money and pulled her along.

“I know well of your propensity to treat me, but I simply must insist upon paying despite your desire for egalitarianism of the sexes.” He leaned in closer. “You would not wish to unman me, would you?”

Heidi shook her head. “As a modern woman, I should not allow you to guilt me into it.” She pursed her lips, looking him up and down in what was probably a rude manner. “Then again, I have no wish to unman you.”

The words had come out more flirtatious than she expected. Truthfully, it was nice to be able to be familiar with a guy again. She hadn’t had a proper male friend in years, not since Peter had come along and seen every guy to be a threat to their relationship. Edward, she thought with sadness, was dealing with his own shit.

Heidi pushed the thoughts away, determined to enjoy the afternoon stroll.

They walked along the park lane and took in the trees and lanterns that lined the paths. Dozens, maybe even hundreds, of people walked with them on the path.

“There is to be a masque at the end of the month. Has Doña Carter alluded to it yet?”

“A masque? Like a masquerade?” Heidi grinned. “With fancy dresses and Venetian-style masks with feathers?”

“Yes, like a masquerade,” he parroted, a large grin on his face. “I take it that no one has mentioned it.”

“Not at all, but who is hosting it? I cannot be sure we actually have an invitation.” Her fingers gripped the crook of his arm tighter. “At least, the Carters may have received one, but I certainly
have not been invited.”

“You are invited. I am inviting you, right this moment.”

She furrowed her brow at him. “Unless you are hosting it, I am not certain you should be inviting people all willy nilly.” Heidi waved her hand about in the air.

He laughed. “You have the most interesting turns of phrase.”

Heidi blushed but recovered. “And you, after all these promises to your cousin about not having designs upon me, have practically asked me out on a date. I am on to you, Mister.”

For the second time she’d ever seen, his face drew serious, making his brown eyes even darker than they always appeared. “On the topic of interludes, I must apologize.”

Heidi stilled, allowing her hand to drop from his arm while Percival continued walking. When she’d stopped, Percival turned. A grin slowly crossed his features.

Something about the way the trees cast shadows on his face, on his hair made the man look ever so much like his brother. Her heart skipped a beat, remembering the last time she’d seen the colonel.

His lips were moving and Heidi forced herself to pay attention to what he was saying.

“I again assure you I do not see you as a conquest or a possible bride, dear Miss Meldrum. You need not fear me.”

“I know well I’m not in the running for a bride,” she guffawed.

“Not even my cousin Anne would bring with her the funds I need to bring into Wych Elm Hall.”

“You don’t have to—“

“Miss Meldrum,” he blurted. “I have taken a turn with you on this fine day to inform you that I wish to be a patron of sorts for you.”

Heidi, who was about to resume walking, stopped dead in her tracks. “Excuse me? What do you mean, exactly? And, more importantly, why?”

“Call it the prerogative of the wealthy and slightly insane.” He gave her a shrug.

“Why on Earth would you wish to do such a thing? Your father would certainly not approve of this.”

“I quite enjoy goading my father.” His eyes sparkled.

“I will not be a pawn in your games, your Lordship,” Heidi said with a thin smile, taking a step back.

She was half-teasing, but half not. She did not believe Percival had mal-intent, but she had not asked for help. It wasn’t mansplaining, per se, but close enough.

Percival’s countenance turned serious once again. “I did not mean to offend, Miss Meldrum. In fact, it is the opposite that I wished.”

“I wish people would ask what I want,” she said, frustrated with this entire game.
She took in their surroundings to ensure no one was listening.

“All these manners and courtesies and intrigues, it’s all a bunch of bull—baloney,” she said, managing to catch her tongue at the last second. "Men seem to think they know everything about what a woman could possibly want or need, when all we require is someone to listen to what we’re saying.”

“You do not believe men capable of listening?’

“We are smart, as smart as you, but this male posturing, forcing us to –“

There was a snickering nearby and Heidi’s mouth snapped shut. She hadn’t realized just how busy the gardens were.

“I should go,” she said, taking a step back, feeling humiliated and a little angry at having lost her temper.

“Wait,” he said, reaching out for her arm. “You truly believe those words.”

“I do,” she said, trying to ignore the people staring. This man knew how to deal with crowds, if he wasn’t concerned, then she was going to try not to be. The anger she’d begun to feel cooled, looking at the baron’s utterly helpless face.

She wanted to bury her head in her hands. “Perhaps I did indulge in too much wine last night. I have forgotten myself.”

He stepped forward with a soft smile and offered her his arm. “Consider all forgiven, Miss Meldrum. Come then, perhaps I should return you home.”

“Please don’t think I’m not grateful for your friendship, your Lordship, but this world is foreign to me. Sometimes I forget to hold my tongue. If you still wish to become my patron, I am afraid you have your hands full, though I still do not understand why.”

“You need not apologize, Miss Meldrum. Your outlook is refreshing.”

“Oh dear,” she said, relaxing at his reassurance.

Percival chuckled and the two of them headed back to the Carters’ townhome on Henrietta Street.
Heidi twirled down the corridor, whistling one of the songs they’d heard the night before at the opera. They had seen *La clemenza di Scipione* by Bach and while this particular opera was new to her, Heidi had fallen in love with the arias of act 2. She had little knowledge of what composers were around and popular in London these days and had been pleasantly surprised when Doña Carter returned home with tickets to the show a few days ago after going out on an errand. It had been a week since she’d seen the baron and Mr. and Doña Carter and guests had finally received the official invitation to the Masque that was to take place on All Hallow’s Eve.

*There was certainly no trick or treating in 1812 England.*

Seamstresses had been picked in preparation for the event and designs had been drawn up and material chosen, now all they had to do was wait for the first fitting sometime in the next week or two. Not that there was much time left.

They’d seen the Bingleys last night at the opera and the couple had joined them for dinner at Mr. Carter’s club, which seemed to be having a family night when women were welcome, and the five of them had enjoyed a late night of revelry.

It made sense to her now, having lived in this privileged life off and on since the summer, as to why society members only called on their friends after noon. When one stayed out until 2 a.m. or longer they were bound to sleep late and needed time to get over their hangovers.

Heidi shook her head at the memory, vowing not to do that again, and was only glad that she had managed to control her stomach while she’d walked around the park with the baron. She had certainly never expected the baron’s offer to help her, a lowly nobody, when dealing with society; but then again most of the people she’d met had been welcoming.

It only made her miss her mother more, thinking how much she would have enjoyed this.

Heidi swallowed back the flood of emotions the bottom of the stairs.

The doorbell rang and just as she reached the door to answer it, the butler, Cornel, called out to her, entering from a side corridor.

“I will answer it, Miss.”

Heidi pulled her hand back from the doorknob. “Sorry.”

It was only the door to the entryway, but it was still tough for Heidi to forget her old habits altogether.

Heidi wanted to wait and see who it was, but knew better than to gawk if Hungarian royalty might be visiting her aunt.

She slipped into the study at the back of the house as Mr. Carter had given her access to his books if she wanted it. Sick of all the hand sewing, Heidi had jumped at the opportunity.

She’d just picked out a novel when the butler entered the room and caught her snuggling in on the
couch, her slip-on shoes rudely just sitting on the floor.

Snapping the book shut she tried not to get caught but knew the older man had seen it, judging by
the disgust on his face.

“This arrived for you, Miss.”

Heidi took the parchment and broke the seal, catching the Fitzwilliam coat of arms in the blue
sealing wax.

While she read the note, Cornel retreated to the doorway but did not leave.

“His lordship awaits a response,” he said, catching her confused mein.

“Tell him, yes,” she said, wondering why he didn’t just come into the house. Instead, the man had
requested she meet him on the corner of Edward and Duke Streets a couple of blocks down the
road.

The butler bowed and turned to leave.

“Would I—” Heidi stopped.

“Yes, Miss?”

“Nothing, please relay my message,” she said. It would be easier just to ask the man, but, servants
talked, and Heidi didn’t want to give them any gossip to talk about.

_Screw propriety._

Doña Carter was tending to household issues and she certainly couldn’t ask Anne. The note had
been specific on that account.

Heidi ran upstairs, taking the book with her to read later. After pulling on her gloves, she had one
of the maids help her into her sage and ivory checkered carriage dress. She slipped the stiletto into
the sheath on her calf, knowing it wouldn’t do to be wearing something so sparkling in her hair at
eleven-thirty in the morning. And under a bonnet.

She didn’t think she needed the protection against the baron but certainly didn’t know who might
be between her and their meeting spot if women were being accosted on a regular basis on the
streets of the neighborhoods. The threat of violence was not one she could ignore. She would not
be caught again.

Then she left the house as discreetly as possible, telling the footman, Mattison, that she would
return in an hour or so. He gave her directions to the correct corner and Heidi thanked him.

Heidi found a small shop at the corner where she expected to meet Percival and almost laughed
realizing it was a confectionary. Percival walked out and tipped his hat at her.

“My lady, some gelato for you?” he asked, waving his hand in the direction of the door.

“I promise to control my delight this time,” she grinned, thinking of their first trip into Gariton
where she’d made a fool of herself with the pistachio treat.

Once they had their treats, this time trying the parmesan flavor, Percival led them down the lane
and toward Manchester square.
Privately, she wondered what the colonel might think of her spending time with his brother. She certainly had no romantic feelings for the baron, but Percival’s offer to act as a patron had her wondering what he might say.

“I apologize for the intrigue of the card,” Percival said, drawing her thoughts to the present and spooning out some of his blackberry gelato. “I have asked you to meet me today in secret for a good reason.”

Heidi mmm-hmm’ed with a mouth full of ice cream melting on her tongue.

“My cousin’s birthday is in a couple of weeks and I wished to surprise her with an intimate dinner party.”

Heidi wiped her lips in the most ladylike fashion possible. She shouldn’t be surprised that Percy—Percival—was that thoughtful.

“That is nice of you.”

“I hoped to enlist you into my plans.”

“Me?” Heidi wondered what use she could be to a man with a fortune like his.

“A friend of mine returned from France this week, he was serving under Delrymple, and I wish to reacquaint him with my cousin, as a surprise.”

A thought occurred to her and Heidi couldn’t resist asking. “This is Anne’s secret love?”

He grinned, roguishly. “He is. Though she thinks she hid it from us, there is great feeling between the two of them. However, with the contract between Anne and Darcy, it would have been impossible for them to act. Now, they are both free.”

“Was there an impediment, erm, something preventing him before?”

“His father did not approve of Anne, thinking her family too snobbish for his son to be truly accepted, as he is of a different class than her.”

Her eyes went wide. “You would willingly help your cousin attain a match that was beneath her?”

“My friend is her equal in every way, save perhaps money.”

“How very noble, your lordship.” Heidi scraped at the last couple of mouthfuls in the bottom of the bowl.

He winked. “We are not all ridiculous.”

They walked for a few moments, passing store fronts and enjoying the gelato without a word. Percival was not one to push conversation on her.

“I wish to apologize,” Percival said, breaking the silence. “At Vauxhall, you spoke honestly and I did not take it to heart. I hope that I did not offend when I offered my services as patron.”

Licking her lip free of the salty ice cream, Heidi made eye contact. “You did not offend, exactly,” she said, hedging. “I should apologize myself, but I cannot help feeling stifled here. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, whatever society thinks.”

“Most women need protection.”
She pursed her lips.

“Go on,” he said, goading. “What do you wish to say?”

“First, if men allowed women to be able to protect themselves, allowed them to train with swords or guns or what have you, then maybe men wouldn’t be forced to do the protecting for them. They would be able to do it themselves.”

He raised an eyebrow but waited for her to continue.

“And... if men were taught to respect women properly, women wouldn’t be forced to need the protection in the first place.”

Percival was quiet, but Heidi could see that he was considering.

“Perhaps you have a point,” he said, with a defeated look on his face that did not entirely displease her.

Heidi paused and looked both ways before crossing the street. They’d promised to bring back their bowls and spoons to the proprietor and Percival had left some extra money behind as collateral and now with her bowl nearly empty they were looping their way back. Despite her promise, she’d housed that gelato and wished she had more.

A shrill voice called out. “Miss Meldrum?”

“Walk quicker,” she hissed, hearing Caroline Bingley’s call, trying desperately not to give herself away.

“What?” he asked, laughter in his voice, doing nothing to hasten his step.

“I wish to avoid—“

“Miss Meldrum, how lovely to see you.”

Heidi rolled her eyes, steeled herself, and turned to face Caroline, a grin plastered on her face. She could not avoid it now. Caroline fairly glittered, her smile and her eyes sending out all the typical flirting signals and Heidi fought not to gag.

“Miss Meldrum, I had a notion that was you. I saw you the other night at the opera, you know. Though I am terribly vexed that you appeared to not see me.”

“Indeed, Miss Bingley,” Heidi said, the baron shifting beside her. “I did not see you. I was aware of your brother’s attendance, but I was unaware you too enjoyed Bach.”

She fluttered her fan, a sunshaft opening overhead. “Oh, I simply adore Bach,” she said. “He was the tenor, was he not?”

Heidi pursed her lips, trying not to let the woman see her annoyance and trying to figure out how to tell the insufferable git that—

“The tenor was Braham, I believe, Miss Bingley,” Percival said, inclining his head. “A genius in his art.”

“Oh, yes.”

Heidi glanced at her companion, hoping he saw the thanks in her eyes as Caroline continued.
“I was speaking with Lord Leveridge just last night about how brilliant Braham’s singing was.”

The three of them chatted for a few inane minutes. Fortunately, Percival picked up on her desire to leave and managed to make an excuse for them to return their bowls to the shop on the corner for they had arrangements that they were running late for and Heidi let out a relieved huff of breath once they rounded the corner.

“You do not enjoy the company of Miss Bingley?”

“Please do not think me catty.”

He gave her a confused look.

“Spiteful, devious, underhanded. I promise I am not usually like that. I just--- Caroline Bingley—“

“No need to excite yourself, Miss Meldrum. I have heard tales from both Darcy and my brother. Wretched thing. You will hear no judgment on your opinion from me.”

They crossed the street and returned the bowls to the proprietor. “Could you give a recommendation or two on a proper gift for someone such as Miss de Bourgh? I’m afraid I have little knowledge in the area of gift-giving to a member of the peerage.”

“I guarantee that my cousin will adore anything you gift her, if it comes from the heart.” His words were sincere, but his tone suggested teasing.

“You are not helpful.”

“I would propose jewelry; however, you are not a male.”

“Most decidedly,” she balked. “Miss de Bourgh and I do not have that sort of relationship anyway.”

Percival choked on laughter, and Heidi flushed, realizing who she was talking to and where she was. “Indeed, Miss Meldrum.”

She narrowed her eyes, considering. “I think I’d like to make the dinner that night. Do you think the cooks will protest? I do so love arranging parties.”

“You can do whatever you wish as you reside upstairs in the household.”

Heidi pursed her lips. “I don’t like that much. Just because we have the fortune to be born in certain families doesn’t make us better or worse than anyone else.” She looked up at him sideways. “I mean to say—“

“I admire your willingness to be kind to all creatures, Miss Meldrum, but,” he shrugged, “things are as they are.”

“So does that mean I can go into the kitchens, or not?”

“That depends on whether you will be distracting my cousin as we set up the surprise.”

Heidi mulled it over. “I suppose I could make up the menu at least and show the cook what to do, and manage to get Anne out of the house. But I need to find a top of the line cooking supply store of some sort, to see what I have access to.”

“That would be appropriate, I will speak to my cook. You will have the best of chefs at your disposal.”
Heidi beamed. “Thank you, your Lordship.

Chapter End Notes

Sunday October 25th, 1812

Chapter Notes

AN: A new OC character, please forgive me… I couldn’t help myself
Happy birthday, Anne!

Oh, and I noticed that I made a mistake in Percy's address, hopefully I won't miss
anymore, but he should be Lord Fitzwilliam from here on out. So sorry!

also: footnote: the website said early 1800’s so I’m going with it ;)

Heidi’s heart thumped in her chest as she watched the clock. The Bingleys and the mystery guest
were to arrive in ten minutes. Her body buzzed in anticipation. She couldn’t wait for Anne’s
reunion with her childhood love. She only hoped the spark would still be there.

Her friend deserved to be happy.

She sat beside Doña Carter in the drawing room of the Fitzwilliam townhome, waiting anxiously.

In times like this, Heidi used to scrub surfaces clean and wash her hands, but the maids had done
such a wonderful job at making the rooms spotless that she couldn’t even use it as an excuse to
burn off some of her nervous energy. Besides, she was playing semi-hostess for the event and that
meant maintaining a look of calm, however difficult that was.

From across the room, where he was talking to Mr. Darcy, Lord Fitzwilliam caught her eye.

If he had grinned, she would have lost the thin hold she had on her composure, but the look was so
quick that Heidi breathed a sigh of relief when he turned away.

She moved to talk to Anne. It was fifteen minutes until the dinner bell rang. Everyone who had
already arrived had been served drinks, and if she didn’t find something to distract her, Heidi was
going to go crazy.

“Thank you for tonight,” Anne said, placing her wine glass on the nearby table.

“It was a pleasure to do, I only hope the menu is a hit,” she replied, wishing she could put a coaster
under Anne’s glass.

The doorbell rang, setting the nervous churning in Heidi’s stomach to motion once again.

“That should be Bingley,” the baron said, and a few moments later, the door opened, revealing the
male guest.

“I heard there was a woman who was celebrating her birthday on George Street this evening. I
wonder if she would mind terribly if I joined the dinner party.”

Anne looked over at the door, confusion on her face, and Heidi grinned as her friend’s face lit up
with surprise. Anne jumped out of her seat to greet the man, dressed in a dark green overcoat, and
knocked over the wine glass.

Heidi caught the delicate crystal, but not before a good deal had sloshed onto the rug.

Within a blink, a maid was kneeling at her side, dabbing at the spill.

Heidi handed the glass over to the maid and looked at the couple.

“Get some vinegar on that,” she said, absentmindedly.

Anne was making introductions to the room while holding the largest bouquet of flowers Heidi had seen since her arrival.

A hand appeared at her side.

“Mr. Darcy,” she said, taking his hand to help her off the floor.

“I understand you took part in helping my cousin arrange this little surprise for Miss de Bourgh?” Heidi grinned.

“Anne, Miss de Bourgh, deserves to be happy,” she said, looking at the couple as the Carters were being introduced.

“Indeed she does.”

Mr. Darcy looked as if he wished to say more, but they were interrupted by Anne and the mystery man, who had made their way around the room. She put Mr. Darcy out of her mind.

“John, this is my dearest friend, Miss Heidi Meldrum,” Anne said, introducing them. “Heidi, this is Doctor John Watson.”

The world around Heidi blurred as she stared at the shorter man, forgetting her manners. Heidi blinked as her stomach dropped.

“Did you say, Doctor John Watson?” she asked, almost inaudibly.

The man looked at Anne, raising an eyebrow.

Heidi’s knee gave out when Anne confirmed what she’d heard. Reaching out for the nearest pillar, Heidi found a soft body instead. Arms wrapped around her waist while she was being led back into her chair. Her ears were ringing to the point that she couldn’t hear anything around her, staring at the doctor.

He was motioning to the others and Heidi tilted her head, seeing his face grow in her eyes until it was a few inches from her face.

The snap of fingers near her ears and the sharp scent of vinegar startled Heidi into awareness with a gasp.

Heidi breathed in sharply, her hands shaking in her lap. A glass of water appeared.

“Miss Meldrum?”

“Please, drink something,” Anne said. And Heidi looked up at her friend, just behind Doctor John Watson.
She nodded, taking the cup and drained it, drinking the cold water heartily before handing the cup back to Anne.

“I am well,” she said, finding her voice, and looking past Anne and the doctor toward the other guests.

The dinner bell rang, and everyone looked around, unsure what to do.

“Please go to dinner, I will join you presently.”

Their host wrangled up his guests and they filtered out, murmuring to themselves and Heidi slumped back into the cushion while the doctor picked himself up from his crouching position.

“Does Miss Meldrum often have such fits?” the doctor said, concern in his voice as he spoke to Anne.

“This is the first I have ever seen,” Anne said, bewildered. “She may become flustered now and then, but she has little need for smelling salts.”

“I’m sorry,” Heidi said, closing her eyes against the bright room. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“We will join the party momentarily,” Anne assured her companion.

Heidi opened her eyes to see Anne resting a hand on Doctor Watson’s sleeve.

He considered her for a beat and then nodded. “Should you need me—“

“I know where you are,” Anne finished for him, smiling.

He left the room and Heidi was alone with Anne, who took the seat beside her.

“What has come over you?”

Heidi stared at the door. “It was probably a complete coincidence,” she said, rubbing her eyes with her finger and thumb. “Besides, John and Watson are common names, I’m sure.”

“What are you babbling about?”

Heidi took a breath. “I apologize, Anne, for causing a disruption in the festivities.”

She had no idea how to explain to the woman that ANOTHER fictional character had appeared. Not only that, but some fifty or sixty years too early. Conan Doyle was a contemporary with Victorian England, right?

It HAD to be a coincidence. It just had to.

“You have no need to apologize, I only wish to know that you are well.”

Rubbing the back of her neck, Heidi nodded. “I will be.”

Anne looked over at the door. “Do you know John, from the novel?” she asked. “Is he, is he important?”

Heidi cursed silently; Anne was far too astute for her own good.

“Not, exactly,” she said, deciding that the truth was best. “There is a famous series of detective
stories, written by a man, who likely isn’t even alive yet, and one of his characters is a man named John Watson, a doctor in the regiment, who helps solve crimes for Scotland Yard, erm… what the Bow Street Runners probably become.”

Anne snorted. “Well, no wonder you were in need of smelling salts.”

Heidi nodded. “I’m afraid the coincidence knocked me off-kilter.”

“I daresay the same would have happened to any of us tonight, should we be in the same situation.”

Anne stood. “If you are well enough, we can join the rest of the party in the dining room.”

Heidi looked at the offered arm. “I will be along shortly,” she said, needing a few moments of peace. “Please tell them to go ahead and have them serve the first course.”

Her friend smiled, her lilac silk-gauze gown rustling as she curtsied. “So I shall.”

When she joined the others in the dining room, the guests had already been served the first course. Heidi had worked most of the past few days with Mrs. Walker, the Fitzwilliams’ cook, with recipes that would suit Miss de Bourgh’s delicate stomach. She’d introduced the idea of flat bread pizzas and cauliflower as a pizza crust substitute.

Baron Fitzwilliam had introduced Heidi to the woman and had insisted that she listen to Heidi, as Miss Meldrum has spent a great deal of time with Miss de Bourgh and knows her stomach complaints well. It was close enough to the truth that Heidi managed to gain a little bit of an edge and she brought the woman up to speed on the idea of olive oil, arugula, and other various Italian specialties she’d managed to find with his Lordship at a small specialty shop on Clerkenwell Road.

One of the foods she missed more than anything was pizza: good, fresh from the wood-fired stove pizza. She wanted to treat everyone to the idea of it, though it didn’t seem to be a known food item, at least the Italian shop was willing to talk to her about it.

She’d told the small Italian woman at the shop, Nona Maria, about his lordship’s family member who got sick when eating food with flour in it, and the woman was interested, like maybe she had some ideas about a solution. Heidi promised to come back soon, Nona Maria inviting her to Sunday dinner after she’d expressed a love for buffalo-milk mozzarella and prosciutto and the myriad of other Italian foods. Of course, she’d done her best to separate out the different regions. Her studies of the atlas had shown her that Italy was more city/states at this point rather than a unified country.

Sitting at the foot of the table, acting as a second host opposite of his lordship, Heidi spent much of the meal conversing with Mr. Darcy and Mr. Carter. Rather, she listened as the two men spoke around her. By now, she knew that one was only allowed to talk to the person directly to your right and left, but at the foot of the table that sometimes didn’t happen.

She waved off their concerns, promising the guests that she did feel better, and managed to steer the conversation away from herself while she watched John and Anne talk privately for most of the night. They were, of course, the picture of propriety, but there were moments, even from the other side of the table, that she could see that they both still cared greatly for the other.

When it came time for the men to enjoy their cigars and brandy, Heidi ushered the women into the drawing room for coffee.

A part of her was glad that the two-hour ordeal was over with. It gave her a break from watching
all the couples fawning over their significant other.

Knowing she’d come a long way from her earliest days in in Regency England, she was surprised how much it hurt to see.

It was only made worse when she thought of the look of disappointment on the colonel’s face and the tone in his voice made her want to crawl under a rock and live there forever.

Now was not the time to focus on her mistakes. And a mistake it had been.

Swallowing back the lump in her throat, Heidi went through the motions, asking the ladies if anyone wished to play cards or play piano. She was only happy to sing, if she could have accompaniment, but only if the others wished to hear her.

In the end, Lizzy and Doña Carter played a duet. Heidi had been surprised when her aunt offered to play, but the older woman grinned brightly, saying how it had been years since she had the chance to play for a party, and the two eagerly found some older tunes to entertain the others with.

Heidi took a seat near Jane and listened while Jane and Anne chatted, teasing a bit of lace on the end table at her side since they weren’t paying attention to her.

When the men joined them an hour later, Heidi found herself at the piano singing while Doña Carter played a song from *Don Giovanni* and she tipped her head toward the arrivals while the older woman finished off the last page of the piece.

“My love,” Mr. Carter said, walking up to the piano and taking his wife’s hand. “It has been years since I heard you play so beautifully.”

Doña Carter blushed demurely and allowed her husband to press a kiss to her outstretched hand and escort her to a seat.

Heidi followed the group and Percival offered to have the tables set up for whist. Only a few people were interested, but in the end, Bingley and Anne were playing against Darcy and Lizzy.

Finding herself sitting alone and enjoying the view, rather than actively participating, Heidi was surprised to see their host taking a seat next to her.

“I am glad to find you alone, Miss Meldrum,” he said, tucking the tail of his coat underneath him. “I had hoped to speak to you.”

“It’s not as though we haven’t had ample time to speak before now.” She gave him a smile, hoping it was bright, but it lacked the sparkle it should have had.

“I wished to converse about something of a delicate nature, if you would be willing.”

Heidi’s eyebrows knitted together, leaning forward. “This does sound serious.”

“Forgive my forthrightness, I do not mean to offend, however, I am aware that you have had indirect influence on the outcome of both Anne and Darcy’s personal happiness, would you be willing to do the same for myself?”

Heidi straightened. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I daresay now is not the most opportune moment to speak of details,” he said, looking at the room. His eyes settled on Anne and nodded, thinking she understood.
“How can I help, my lord?”

“You know of my… predilection of ignoring my duty,” he said, waving his hand in his lap.

She nodded.

“My father has been— ,” he paused, reconsidering his words. “It is time I find a partner, a wife. You have some skill in matchmaking, I though perhaps since you are intimate with my family, you might be willing to help me find someone.”

Heidi parted her lips, blinking a few times.

This was different, and quite unexpected.

Looking around to see if anyone was listening, Heidi spoke quietly. “You wish me to help you find a bride?”

The future earl pursed his lips, but gave her a nod. “We need not speak of the details this evening. Perhaps I might be permitted to call upon you sometime in the next few days at Henrietta Street. We could discuss it further?”

“What about your—“ Heidi drawled out, trying to figure out the proper name for lover. “Paramour.”

The Lord averted his eyes. “I know of your past, Miss Meldrum. The disappointments you faced with an unfaithful partner, if you will permit me to say such things. You might be surprised to learn that I have the same morals as you do. If you would help but find me a wife, someone equal to the task, I can guarantee I will disengage from that particular pastime.”

Heidi searched him, his aqua eyes open for inspection. He was entirely truthful, which was surprising.

“I will think on it, Lord Fitzwilliam. If you come to Henrietta Street tomorrow, I will give you my answer.”
Thursday, October 29th, 1812

“Miss Meldrum!”

Heidi spun around, surprised at the voice that called out to her.

“How fortuitous it is to find you out on this fine morning.”

Heidi smiled politely and greeted Baronet Brigham, who was swinging the handle of his cane lightly as he weaved his way through the crowd.

“I was informing Lord Chatterly of the immense boredom I find myself overcome with since I returned to town, and now I have the felicity of finding you on an excursion.”

Heidi looked around for the aforementioned lord and when the baronet noticed, he waved his hand and laughed.

“Oh child,” he said.

She bristled at the use of the nickname. She’d thought it just as demeaning when Karlheinz Böhm called Romy Schneider that in the second *Sissi* movie.

“I saw him at the club.”

“I see.” Heidi was surprised that he’d sought her out, having only a few conversations with the baronet as of yet, Heidi didn’t expect that he would intentionally call out to her, not in the middle of Mayfair.

“Where is your dear aunt?”

“She has gone into Madam Dubois’ shop and I have Mattison as a companion while I await her return.”

She’d received a letter at breakfast from the baron, saying that unfortunately he had to delay his calling on her and with Anne feeling unwell after their intimate dinner party last night, she thought it wouldn’t be a bad thing to venture out with her aunt to get some air.

Brigham followed the hand she held out in the direction of the footman who stood an appropriate distance away.

“That is wonderful.”

Heidi cocked her head at him. “Is it?”

“Yes,” he said, grinning at her. ”For I have a desire to wile away the next hour on a tour through Hyde Park. Would you care to join me?”

Heidi glanced at a clock on a nearby building. “I have some time, sir; however, I am waiting for my aunt.”

“Send Mattison to tell her where you will be. She will gladly give permission, I assure you.”

“Forgive me, but I hardly know you,” she said.
He barked with laughter. “I had no idea you were so set on propriety, my dear. But I can guarantee that our promenade will be a proper one, should that be your desire. With Mattison as a chaperone. It would not do to have myself overrun by the Bow Street Runners.”

“Is the situation of roving bandits so dangerous that a walk in the park could be treacherous?”

He gave a good-natured laugh. “No, I hardly think scoundrels will attack in broad daylight. But we will be safe enough if your footman were to join us.”

Little did he know. But the weight on her leg reminded her that she had protection if this man turned out to be another Wickham. She couldn’t help but think about that day and Heidi conjured an image of the man who’d been the lookout. She didn’t think she’d ever forget his face despite the mere glimpses she’d gotten of him.

Her decoy hair stick was currently being used as a hatpin in her bonnet, but the weapon was tucked safely away.

Heidi looked over at the footman, who gave a nod and then disappeared around the corner and into the alleyway that led to the side door of Madam DuBois’.

When the footman returned later, it was with Doña Carter’s blessing, as long as Mattison was willing to play chaperone. The man had nodded his consent and soon Heidi found herself being escorted to Hyde Park on the arm of the baronet.

When they reached the Park, Heidi let the baronet pay for her admission fee, knowing better than to insist she pay, and the couple walked under the tree-lined path. Besides, he was not a cousin of her friend, with whom she could get away with such revolutionary ideas.

“My family has been closely tied with the Fitzwilliam seat for some hundred years,” he said, without prompting some minutes later. “I may not have grown up alongside his lordship, but I have been friends with the colonel for ages.”

Heidi only nodded. The baronet never appeared to run dry of conversation.

“In fact, we attended Eaton together, all those years ago.” He leaned over, whispering conspiringly. “I daresay the colonel had a wild streak in those days. He’s a bit of a bore now.”

It was only then that she recalled Anne’s comment from weeks ago. Of the ‘trying time’ Fitz apparently had while at school.

It was better not to pry, but she felt a morbid curiosity about what had happened.

Instead, she went for the safer topic. “Having responsibilities as he does, I imagine it changes one’s outlook.”

“Too responsible, in my mind,” he replied, waving her off. “We are young and should be enjoying ourselves.”

“Do you enjoy yourself, baronet?”

The man gasped, feigning clutching at his heart. “How shocking, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi rolled her eyes.

“I enjoy gaming, like any young buck.” He gave her a shrug. And then, after a sideways look,
inquired, “do you enjoy yourself, Miss Meldrum?”

Heidi flushed.

Dude was like Kenickie from Grease, or, even better, the Fonz, *smooth like butter*.

Rather than respond, Heidi nodded toward the walk ahead. With an intrigued smile, the baronet took the hint, leading her through the crowds of people.

“Come, let us watch the whips on Rotten Row,” he said, taking them away from the path and to a small grassy knoll that overlooked a path where a good dozen or so gigs were being driven by well-dressed men and hordes of girls staring on.

Baronet Brigham pointed out people that he knew and complimented some of his friends on their skill and Heidi was surprised to find herself relaxed with the man.

“Some refreshment for you, my lady?”

Heidi followed the baronet’s hand to where he waved at a small lemonade stand. She was thirsty and it was tempting, but Heidi didn’t trust the street vendors in 2019, much less 1812.

“Thank you, but I do not suffer from thirst.” She didn’t want to even consider what sort of bathroom accommodations might be available to her at the park. Yes, she’d used a chamber pot when necessary; as there were only so many places that had access to a proper privy or outhouse and yes, it had worked in a pinch, but the feeling of disgust had not left her until she’d had the chance to scrub herself clean hours later in the privacy of her bedroom.

They stood together for half an hour, Heidi catching the baronet sneaking looks at her now and then, but she did her best to remain focused on the stage. When the bells from a nearby chapel rang out, she looked at her escort.

“We should perhaps return to Bruton Street. I have a few things to attend to this afternoon.”

He was gracious and offered her his arm.

“That’s quite the hatpin you have,” he said, pointing up toward it.

“Yes, I had it made by the blacksmith in Hunsford,” she said, reaching up to touch it despite herself

“Did you indeed?”

“Well, it was his apprentice,” she said, averting her eyes. “I thought a trinket like it would be good practice for the youth.”

“You are generous.”

Heidi demurred, feeling silly. “It turned out well enough.”

“May I see it?”

Heidi swallowed, only to cough and choke on her own spit. The way he’d spoken sounded positively lewd.

The baronet clapped her on her back.

“I did not intend to—“ he started.
“You surprised me, is all, your lordship.” She reached up with her left hand and tugged at the hairpin, grateful that the weapon was around her calf.

“Let me,” he offered, and reached up to take it.

Feeling her neck heat, she bent her head down, and the baronet slid the stick from the hat easily, his chest brushing against her shoulder. He turned it in his hand, inspecting, as she watched, the scent of lavender overwhelming her.

“It is a bit crude,” he said. “It is clear the maker is no master; but it is a nice piece.”

“I find I like it. It adds something special to the bonnet and I need not use ribbons to secure the bonnet to my head. I find the ribbons ever so constricting.”

The moment the words slipped from her mouth, she knew she’d said the wrong thing. The baronet grinned at her, in a lascivious way that meant that he’d picked up on a double entendre, whether she’d meant it or not.

“Oh dear,” she said, her stomach flipping.

Thankfully, the baronet, clearly not heartless altogether, did not take the bait.

“Come, we must return you to your aunt, Miss Meldrum.” He reached out for her hand, and then tucked it into the crook of his arm, his hand resting on top of hers.

Heidi pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and rolled her eyes up at the sky as he began to lead them back the way they’d come.

*My stupid mouth.*

They walked together in silence, Heidi internally reprimanding herself, until they reached the gates of the park.

“Will you be attending the Masque on Saturday?” the baronet asked as they waited for a break in the traffic to meander across the street.

“I will,” she said, though she wished she could lie.

He swiped at his blond fringe. “I do not know what your dance card might look like, but I would be honored if you saved one of the first dances for me.”

Heidi glanced at him from her periphery, unsure how serious he was being. “I do not believe I have any dances currently spoken for.”

The man gave her a dazzling smile. “Wonderful. I will save all the best dances for you, Miss Meldrum.”
Heidi gave a little twirl in front of the floor length mirror in the assembly hall. The dress she’d designed was a masterpiece and, boy howdy, did she look good in it. She’d based the design off Danielle’s masque dress in *Ever After*, though she’d had to sub in blue satin for the gray since the seamstress hadn’t had any on hand.

Doña Carter had been a little...uncertain about the off-the-shoulder look, but Heidi couldn’t be more delighted. It was surely scandalous, but, it’s what she’d wanted, and Heidi had paid the seamstress a little extra if only to have her comply. If she was going to steal a dress design from a movie, she was going to do it right.

The blue gossamer train twinkled brilliantly in the candlelight, its small crystals attached in looped designs, rather like the fleur de lis. She’d been specific NOT to copy the floral symbol exactly, as she didn’t want to scandalize her friends due to the flagrant French influence. All the same, Heidi was pleased with what the seamstress had managed in the short timeline.

“You look beautiful, Heidi,” Anne said, walking over to her with a small, glass goblet of wine. “I am still jealous.” They both carried Venetian masks, but after the first half hour at the event, no one cared about being unmasked.

“You look lovely as well,” Heidi said. She took the glass, lifted it at Anne in acknowledgement and took a sip, admiring the look of Anne’s gown. Her friend had opted for red satin, her dress fashionable with ruffled sleeves and rhinestone encrusted gossamer cascading over her bosom and draped over her skirts.

“Your uncle has found a table for us on the north balcony,” she said.

Following Anne up the flight of stairs, Heidi unfurled her fan, dipped in mint water of her own creation, to help disguise the scent of body odor, and cooled her face.

Maybe these things would grow more bearable as winter set in.

They found the Carters sitting at a table with John Watson and the baron. Heidi took the seat beside his lordship, not wanting to begrudge Anne the chance to talk with her love. They still hadn’t had the chance to have a proper talk, but Heidi didn’t need confirmation from her friend that the couple were on their way to being married.

“Do you know,” she said, placing her mask on the table, “if there is a Baker Street in London?”

“Baker Street?” Percival asked, shifting to look at her. “Of course there is.”

“One of these days I should very much enjoy walking along it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “There is nothing but townhouses and a grocer, I believe. Hardly noteworthy.”

She looked him squarely in the eye. “Nonetheless, it must happen.”

She cut her eyes over to John Watson. She needed to know if there was a 221B on the street. It was a matter of utmost importance.

“Your wish is my command, Miss Meldrum,” the baron said, tipping his head at her.
Heidi pulled herself up to her full height, looking down her nose at him, though she had to tilt her head back to do it. “I should expect nothing less.”

He chuckled, shaking his head at her.

“Have you, perchance, heard from your brother on the front lines?” she asked, playing with a lace edge on her mask.

“I have not. I daresay there is little time for writing letters in Spain.”

“I suppose you are right,” she said, pursing her lips at her own awkwardness.

A shadow darkened the table and Heidi looked up to see the baronet at her side. “You wear the hair sticks once more,” he said.

“They are my favorite,” she replied, resting her hands on her fan as she turned.

“Good evening, your lordship, madam, sir,” he said, inclining his head toward the highest-ranking members of their table. “I trust everyone is having an enjoyable evening.”

“Good evening, baronet,” Doña Carter said, by way of greeting.

“I believe you reserved the first dance for me, unless you are otherwise engaged?” he asked, inclining his head toward at Heidi.

She allowed him this, thankful for the reprieve from the awkward silence that had settled between herself and Percival. She needed to talk to him of his own plans, but it could wait.

On the dancefloor a minute or two later, a quadrille began, and Heidi was once again grateful for the few lessons she’d managed before coming to town. They danced as partners for the first song and Heidi found she’d enjoyed it immensely, the way the baronet had flattered and simpered. She’d laughed at his antics the entire time, rolling her eyes when he flirted.

When the song ended, Brigham licked at his bottom lip considering.

Heidi faltered, tripping over her own feet, wanting to get back to her table and immediately the baronet was at her side, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her from the line.

“Come.,” he said, waving at one of the servants with a tray of wine. “You are unwell. I will return you to your friends.”

Heidi pulled away from Brigham. “I’m fine, I promise.” She took a deep breath and a grateful near chug of the wine. “I merely lost my footing.” She looked at him, his dark brown eyes gleaming in the candlelight, and swallowed reflexively. “I think I need some air.”

She unfolded the fan on her wrist and fanned her face.

The baronet nodded, offering her his arm. “Let us take a turn in the gardens.”

Heidi’s eyes went wide. “They have a garden?”

“It would be my pleasure to show you.” He grinned, then led the way through a set of doors. What could only be described as a rooftop deck sprawled out in front of Heidi some twenty feet, planters filled with flowers and topiaries dotted the landscape. Though the view left something to be desired, the setting was romantic, lit with lanterns.
"This is impressive," she said, raising an eyebrow. Brigham led her to a bench and sat down beside her.

Again, Heidi smelled lavender and a hint of mint in the air and looked sideways at the man.

"If you will permit me the impropriety," Brigham started. "I wish to say how truly lovely you look this eve."

"I imagine I can forgive you," she said, unable to stop her smile.

"This dress," he said, breathless, his eyes roaming over her body. "is unlike any other I have seen."

Heidi flushed at the compliment and debated if she should say she designed it. In the end, she settled on the half-truth. "It is one-of-a-kind."

"No doubt. The other ladies cannot compare to the way you shine."

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. "I don't know," she said. "Miss de Bourgh looked lovely."

He gave her a knowing smile. "It is correct of you to flatter your friends, but you..."

Heidi looked up expectantly when he trailed off. "I?"

In his lap, his fingers flexed. "Forgive me. I have a habit of being overly forward, but I admit that your freeness of speech, your manner, is...liberating to me as well."

She wanted to fiddle with her dress, but Heidi instead offered him a crescent smile. "Is that all, baronet? I do not find that terribly offensive."

"No, there is more."

He looked deeply into her eyes. Even in the flickering light, there was no goading in them. She waited with bated breath, trying not to be lulled into the sincerity in his gaze as his lips parted.

"In every sense, Miss Meldrum, you are a gem among pebbles."

Her skin felt as though sparklers had been lit beneath it. It had been a long time since anyone tried so hard for her attention. She knew she didn’t have the perfect figure, Peter had not exactly been kind about how odd her body was; but Brigham didn’t seem to mind it at all.

"Miss Meldrum."

Her eyes shot up toward Baron Fitzwilliam standing before them, her heart racing.

"We were beginning to grow anxious."

She swallowed back the lump in her throat and looked at Brigham, embarrassment bringing her back to Earth.

"Yes, I apologize. I needed some air. And... the baronet offered to escort me outside."

Percival squinted with something between hurt and disbelief.

"I will escort the lady to your table presently," Brigham said in tones that might have been clipped. There was a standoff between the two men, one that stretched unusually long for men of the world
accustomed to their flirtations. It wasn’t as if the future earl were interested in her in the way that Brigham was, he wanted her to help find him a wife, for goodness sake, and was a little flirtation all that harmful? The colonel was who knows where and he’d made in incredibly clear how little he’d felt for her at their last encounter.

She stood, snapping the fan shut. “I should return to Miss de Bourgh.” Ignoring whatever macho-thing was going on between them, Heidi slipped past the baron and baronet and through the doorway back to the table.

Her body buzzed from the wine and the close contact she’d had with Brigham. Heidi couldn’t believe how close she’d actually been to considering his unspoken invitation. Given all of the upheaval, she hadn’t even considered sex in months. But if they hadn’t been interrupted, she couldn’t be sure what she’d done.

She’d lost herself entirely in a little flirtation.

God, she was pathetic.

Spotting the table, where the Bingleys and Darcys had joined her companions, Heidi took a deep breath to cool that specific, extra annoying type of heat that had again become new to her. She wrung her hands, trying to shake it off, and then continued to the table.

 Luckily, there was an empty seat beside Doctor Watson. Anne and Lizzy had gone for a turn about the assembly room which left Anne’s old seat free.

“I have heard it from Miss de Bourgh that your uncle is a physician?” Watson asked as Heidi eased into her chair.

“Yes, it was fortuitous that I came upon Hunsford,” she said.

He nodded. “She says you saved her life.”

“I cannot imagine what brought on such praise, but I hardly saved her life.” Heidi hemmed and hawed, fluttering her hands over her mask.

“She has told me of the work you have been doing with your uncle. You are something of a revolutionary?”

Heidi looked at her gloved hands on the table.

“I would not say that, doctor. Merely that I am conscientious about sanitation.”

With the furrow of his brow, Heidi averted her eyes, the irritation of having to explain herself overtaking the last of her previous discomfort. “The practice of keeping things clean.”

He leaned back a little in his chair, looking proud. “I can see how that would be beneficial.”

“Huh? I mean, beg your pardon?”

“If you are interested, perhaps we could speak one day of the alterations you have added to your uncle’s practice.”

“If you are interested, doctor, I would be happy to share what I know.”

Inwardly, she hoped she’d get the chance to tell Anne to back off a little in her effusive praise. She didn’t blame the woman for wanting to share admiration for a friend, but too much acclaim would
raise questions.

Thankfully, Bingley asked if she wished to dance and Heidi took the opportunity to get away from the inquisitive Doctor.

If he was indeed who she thought, any prying would indeed be dangerous.
The Carters’ doorbell chimed a few days after Halloween and Heidi was surprised when the maid Hannah escorted the baronet into the courtyard.

He greeted Anne and Heidi with a bow.

“Since the weather was so fine this afternoon, perhaps you would both wish to accompany me to the Chiswick House and its gardens. I have my phaeton just outside and have sent my groom away.”

Heidi looked at Anne, unsure what to say to this.

“The invitation is appreciated, Sir Brigham,” Anne started.

“Please, do not say no,” he said, flattering her with a large, friendly smile. “I vow that I merely hope to spend a few hours in the company of the two most beautiful women in London. As I will be driving, there is no scandal to be had.”

Heidi looked at Anne, not bothering to veil her skepticism.

“You believe me to be jesting,” the baronet said with great amusement.

“Your attentions are flattering, but unexpected.”

“Are they, truly?”

“I daresay it would be a lark to go riding today,” Anne said, lightly brushing Heidi’s arm.

Heidi tried and failed to keep herself from gawking as Anne nudged her away.

“If you will allow us to prepare for the excursion, we would be delighted to join you.”

He grinned, much in the way he had in the gardens. Something fluttered within Heidi, right around her navel. Quickly, she tamped it down.

“I will await your return with pleasure, Miss de Bourgh.”

Heidi left the courtyard a few steps behind Anne and they grabbed their fans and bonnets and Heidi again made sure the stiletto was in place.

Anne gave her a look. Heidi braced herself for a lecture on acting like a silly girl in front of the baronet.

“You favor those hair sticks over much.”

“I do,” Heidi replied, relieved that Anne’s curiosity was confined to her hair. She had debated whether or not to tell Anne the truth, that Wickham’s attack had Heidi vowing not to go unarmed in the city. In the end, it was better to let Anne live in ignorance.

Heidi climbed into the phaeton with the baronet’s help. They rode out of the city, taking the Great...
They’d been traveling just about fifteen minutes or so when Brigham pulled on the reins and Heidi looked around his form to see a sharpish curve in the road.

“Whoa,” he called out and Heidi reached over to brace herself when the vehicle stopped.

“What is it?” Anne asked.

“There seems to be a fallen tree in our path.”

Heidi’s throat closed as déjà vu drowned her senses.

“I beg you to stay in the phaeton while I clear it.”

Oh God, not again.

Just as she stood to get a better look, four or five figures jumped out of the shadows.

Anne screamed and Heidi turned to see someone grabbing her friend’s arm. The bracelet around Anne’s wrist snapped, sending pearls into the air.

Brigham shouted. “Get back, fiends!”

The snap of leather startled Heidi into a shriek, but the baronet was brandishing his whip against the attackers.

“Give us your jewels,” one of the brigands said, behind a kerchief he was using as a face mask.

“I don’t think so,” Heidi yelled, her stubbornness and bravery becoming one.

She wasn’t about to let some assholes get the better of her again.

The one who’d spoken, stalked forward, a knife glinting in a shaft of sunlight. “Better do as I say, Missus,” he said.

Heidi reached under her skirt, knowing she’d be doing something indecent but didn’t care when she unclipped the stiletto from the sheath as the man grabbed hold of the handrail and pulled himself up.

In a practiced move, Heidi brandished the stiletto and slashed it across the man’s face.

He let go of the rail with a scream, gripping his cheek.

“Don’t do it, I swear to God,” she shouted, turning to the next attacker.

“Heidi!” Anne shouted.

She turned to see Brigham grappling with one of the highwaymen. The attacker’s mask was ripped from his face and Heidi faltered, her stomach lurching.

The jawline caught her eye and Heidi knew this was the same man from the alleyway.

Her eyes darted toward Brigham and she blinked, something wasn’t right.

Before she could react, the familiar man, Wickham’s accomplice, reached for Anne, this time grabbing the locket around her neck and ripped the chain, pocketing the small piece of jewelry.
Anne shrieked and swooned, collapsing into a heap. Heidi knelt down, forgetting about the attackers. She made sure Anne was still breathing before turning to face shouts of someone coming at them.

Another of the men came rushing toward her and Heidi bunched her skirts to free her leg. She kicked out when he came into range and hit him square in the chest. He lost his grip and stumbled backward, not expecting some fine lady to fight back, apparently.

A shout echoed in the clearing, and Heidi turned to see two figures on horseback racing toward them.

She could tell even with the hundred or so yards between them that it was Lord Fitzwilliam, his familiar dirt blond hair bright in the sun, and maybe John Watson, and she knelt down to tend to Anne.

“Anne, wake up,” she said, shaking her shoulders. “Come on, Anne,” she pleaded.

A gunshot rang out and Heidi jolted up to see his lordship, already dismounted from his horse, standing in the clearing.

“Do not move,” he shouted.

The highwaymen scattered and Heidi looked over to see Brigham on the ground, his whip laying some ten feet out of reach.

Conveniently far away.

“Get back here, you brigands,” Brigham said, scrabbling to his feet.

The doctor appeared at her side, concern written on his face. “Are you hurt?” Heidi shook her head.

“I’m fine, but Anne’s unconscious,” she said, pointing down at her buckled friend. “I think she might have swooned.”

Heidi looked over the back of the vehicle watching the baronet chase after their attackers on foot, but the men were gone.

She collapsed onto the seat of the carriage and took a few deep breaths as the doctor managed to coax Anne awake with a small tube of vinegar. Her heart beat so fast that her body vibrated.

Anne blinked slowly, fighting to bring the world into focus. “What happened?” she asked, mumbling.

The doctor explained what he knew and Heidi, glancing around, found her dagger glinting in the sunlight and reached under the seat to pull it free.

“I managed to cut one across the face,” she said, remembering the man that had stumbled back. Heidi’s eyes locked on Percival as he walked toward her, tucking his pistol into a holster at his hip. His face was pale and Heidi detected a shake in his hands as he closed the distance between them.

“Where did the knife come from?” Doctor Watson asked, with his eyes trained on the dagger in her hand.

“Your hairstick was a weapon?”
Heidi looked over at the baronet, who sounded astonished, making his way back to them.

Percival barked with laughter. “You are full of surprises.”

She grinned at her friend, who reached out and took her free hand in his, pressing a kiss to her knuckle playfully.

Heidi rolled her eyes and caught the baronet clenching his fist.

Doctor Watson broke the tension that had risen. “Baronet, would you be so kind as to escort Miss de Bourgh and myself back to London? She has had a shock and needs care.”

The baronet looked at Heidi for a split second. “Of course, doctor. But what of Miss Meldrum? I dare not think I can fit three on the back of the phaeton.”

“His lordship and I will walk,” she said, eyeing the horses and preventing either of the rescuers from speaking. There was no way she’d be able to ride on the saddle, but they weren’t far from London. It might take an hour or two to get back to Henrietta Street on foot, but she felt well enough. And… the fresh air would help her clear her mind.

“I would not think to force a lady such as yourself to-“

Heidi stopped his protestations. “I have no false modesty, sir. I can walk the couple miles to London, but Miss de Bourgh would appreciate the conveyance.”

The baronet looked between the two other men and then nodded. “We will leave presently.”

It took the men a few minutes to get the horses calmed enough, but soon enough the baronet, the doctor, and Anne were on the road.

Once the phaeton shrank into the distance, Heidi came to a stop and looked up at the horse.

“So,” she said, being deliberately vague. “Were you and the doctor following us? Or was it coincidence that you came upon us?”

“You would not believe it to be coincidence?” Percival asked, rubbing his neck.

Heidi shook her head, surprised at the change in her friend’s demeanor these last couple of days. He’d been… different, since he’d reintroduced Anne to the doctor.

“I know you far too well to think it was that easy for you to find us.”

“A trusted friend overheard some things,” he admitted.

“What sort of things?”

“Things that it would not be polite to say in mixed company.”

She rolled her eyes.

Heidi pursed her lips, remembering with clarity the spectre of that lookout.

“Your Lordship,” she said, loosening the reins in her hand. “I think the baronet had something to do with the attack. He may have orchestrated it.”

Percival stopped in his tracks. “Why would you say such a thing?”
She looked up at him, searching his face and trying to figure out exactly how she wanted to say this.

“I believe his fighting was staged. I mean that, perhaps he is in league with the bandits.”

He shook his head, chuckling with incredulity. “That is a shocking supposition, Miss Meldrum.”

“Normally I would think so too, but nothing seems to shock me now.”

She swallowed, remembering her other attacks. How quickly men in this world could shift from charm to fury.

“I recognized one of the men, one of our attackers.”

“Did you?” he asked, sounding shocked.

Heidi braced herself. “I do not know what you might have heard about my first visit to London in June.”

“I—“ He shrugged.

“I was attacked by George Wickham,” she said, scratching her head and hating to drag up those memories. “I—Your brother and my cousin found me after I fought him off and… I told them to let him go.”

Percival’s jaw clenched, his eyes blazing and Heidi averted her eyes.

“I was bruised, perhaps, but relatively unharmed.” She swallowed, gathering her courage. “What I did not tell your brother and my cousin, was that I believe Mr. Wickham had accomplices.”

“What?”

The horse’s reins snapped and he whickered as Percival glared at her.

“One of the men today,” she said, fidgeting with the fan that had been replaced on her wrist, “played lookout for Wickham that day in the alley.”

Anger flared in his eyes.

“Brigham was angry, just now, when the doctor asked for a ride to the city. But now that I think on it, we came to a stop just before the highwaymen came upon us. He said a tree lay across the path, but I saw no such thing.”

“I took no notice of it,” replied Percival, too blithely. “An oversight, Miss Meldrum, I’m sure.”

She sighed with exasperation. She had never actually looked for the tree, but the entire thing smelled like a plot out of a romance novel. The bad guy setting up a scheme to fight off bandits to make him look good.

“Though he fought,” she mused aloud. “He was calm about it, as if knowing he wouldn’t be harmed.”

For whatever reason, that was what got Percival’s attention. “These are heavy words indeed, Miss Meldrum.”

“I cannot be positive, naturally, but ten-to-one he’s wrapped up in this somehow. The appearance
of the same man during two attacks, I cannot ignore it.”

He considered her for a breath or two and then sighed.

“I know that people make mistakes and learn from them, but both you and Anne expressed concern for my knowing Brigham. I will not ask what sort of person, what sort of influence he might have had on the colonel, but this incident…” Heidi trailed off, unsure what she wanted to say.

Percival gave her a sad smile, perhaps understanding what she was trying to say. “Come along then, Miss Meldrum. It will not be long before we arrive at Henrietta Street.”

They walked for a mile or two in silence, Heidi replaying the scene in her head. No good would come of it until there was proof, necessitating a change of topic.

She rubbed the back of her neck, remembering the task he’d wished her to take on. “Now is perhaps not an appropriate time, but I believe you wished to speak to me about match-making?” she asked.

“On the contrary, I suppose now would be as good as any given what little we have to do to pass the time.”

“You wish to find a bride.” Thankful for the distraction from her current thoughts, Heidi rubbed at her arm. “What are you looking for?”

“A woman of good breeding,” he said, ticking off a mental list. “Someone with a sizeable income, or likely to have a large dowry or inheritance.”


“I cannot say I have thought much on such things.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, peering around the horse’s head. “No?” she asked. “You haven’t considered looks for your future wife though I found you sharing relations with a dark haired mystery woman in the library?”

Percival sputtered. “Good Lord, Miss Meldrum!”

“What?” she asked, snorting, unable to feign innocence.

He eyed her, as if taking stock and cleared his throat. “You are one of a kind.”

When Hyde Park came into view half an hour later, Heidi was relieved. Her feet were aching in her shoes, these unsupportive pieces of crap, and she was hungry and tired.

“I think perhaps we will stop on George Street first,” Percival said. “It would hardly do to return you to your aunt in such a disheveled state.”

Heidi nodded.

“I have been thinking on your words, Miss Meldrum. I think it would be wise to distance ourselves from the baronet.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide.

“Until we know the truth, we should be wary.”
“I agree, your lordship.”

Chapter End Notes

I promise, there will be a resolution soon for this particular subplot
"Champagne, Miss?"

Heidi grinned at Mattison and took the flute of sparkling wine from the tray.

The Carters’ parlor sparkled and shone after the hours of work the staff had taken in preparing the house for the party. Though the servants had done most of the work themselves, Heidi had helped her aunt in ‘signing off’ on the work and had learned a fair bit about the social strata that affected the house. She’d wanted to help clean, but it was absolutely not tolerated in this London home.

Despite the fact that she was someone who belonged upstairs, or maybe because of it, her aunt refused to let her to any housework, which had put her out. Heidi liked cleaning; it calmed her, especially when her tendencies were running high. But the woman would not hear of her helping the servants.

“You will break the line,” she said. “between master and servant.”

“But I don’t care about—“

The doña had cut her off with a look. “In this house we abide by rules. The upstairs provides the duties and salaries and the downstairs provides the work.”

Heidi had held her tongue and agreed. Maybe her aunt had a point, but she managed to have the woman concede to allowing her the cleaning of her own room.

Her room was spotless.

Already most of the guests had arrived; but Rose was still tucked away upstairs, nervous about attending.

The doctor, Edward, and Rose had arrived late last night and Heidi had spent what free time she’d had this morning with Rose. She wanted to know everything that had been happening in the village since she’d left. Rose was beginning to come to terms with her mother’s death, though Heidi inferred that the doctor was still having a rough time. In addition, Rose was worryingly close-mouthed about her brother.

In the corner sat the young girl they’d hired to play the piano. She was playing brilliantly, though Heidi had no idea which composition it was, and really, as long as it kept the room filled with music, it didn’t matter. Heidi had asked about hiring a quartet, but the Carters had said that there was not enough room in the parlor to fit such a group.

It was Guy Fawkes’ Night and the Carter’s had an intimate dinner party every year, when it could be managed.

*Remember, remember, the fifth of November.*

Heidi couldn’t help that catchphrase from repeating in her head all day. The only reason she knew about this holiday was the movie, *V for Vendetta*, that Peter had loved and watched countless times. It was a solid movie; she just didn’t need to watch it fifty times in two years.

Anne and John sat together on a couch near the window, chatting with their heads tilted inwardly. It was intimate, but the protection of the crowd was an ideal cover. Percival stood with Mr. Darcy
and Earl Fitzwilliam near the hearth. His father had come to town on business yesterday and Heidi had managed to get Doña Carter to extend an invitation to the Earl. Not that it had been a particularly hard sell, having two earls in attendance was a great feat.

Countess Temple and her husband, as well as Lady Heathcote and her niece, had been invited to the dinner party as well. Secretly Heidi wondered if she should speak with the countess, considering their last meeting, but left it up to fate. If the woman spoke to her, she would be gracious and answer her questions, though as yet there’d been nothing but pleasantries between them.

Both Heathcote women sat in chairs on the opposite side of the room from the piano. Rounding out the rest of the guests in the parlor was Lady Jessop, her husband, and their daughter.

“IT is a great relief to see that you are in good health, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi smiled politely at Baronet Brigham and returned the greeting. He’d been invited to the party and there was no way to remove him from the list without society thinking some impropriety had occurred. But after the attack and only her instinct as evidence, Heidi couldn’t trust him, no matter how deliciously hot he was.

From across the room, she spotted Anne reaching for John’s comforting hand.

“I meant to thank you for returning the doctor and Miss de Bourgh to Henrietta Street so quickly a few days past. I am sure your haste did much to ensure her recovery.”

Knowing well how much she needed to feign innocence, Heidi only hoped she could play her role.

Spotting Florentia Heathcote talking with Lizzy, Heidi made her excuses and crossed the room, glass in hand. She wasn’t sure how well acquainted Lizzy was with the young lady; in fact Heidi wasn’t much either, but better to play a well-meaning hostess than to let two people flounder. At least, that’s what Doña Carter had instructed. And it was a good excuse to leave Brigham without seeming completely rude.

She greeted them, proud of her ability now to at least play the role of Regency lady. Allowing the conversation to return to how it was, Heidi let the women talk. There was something comfortable about the inane chatter about weather and ribbons and things.

A hand touched her elbow, and Heidi flicked open her fan, getting ready to politely scold whomever had touched her.

“Lady Catherine has arrived,” Doña Carter whispered into Heidi’s ear.

She blanched, knowing the woman was supposed to be in Hunsford this week. She immediately sought out Anne. The entirety of the family knew that though Anne was of her majority, it was likely that Lady Catherine would not approve of the match, even if her older brother didn’t seem to mind.

“What do you require of me?”

“Separate the pair for now,” she said. “I will have to remove Rose from the dinner party and put Lady Catherine in her place.”

Heidi winced, knowing how much Rose was looking forward to taking part in an adult meal. She felt bad for the girl and cursed Lady Catherine’s rude appearance. She nodded and then turned to Lizzy and Miss Heathcote, excusing herself with a tilt of her head. She walked to the couch and
held her arm out for Anne to take, knowing the sooner that Anne was prepared for the intrusion, the better.

“Come take a turn with me, Miss de Bourgh. Now, please.” She tried for a pleasant smile, but knew it had failed if Anne’s frown was any indication.

Anne took the arm and the doctor stood, in deference, as Heidi whisked Anne away.

“What has occurred?” Anne hissed, just as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Your mother just arrived.”

Anne stopped so suddenly Heidi’s arm yanked backwards.

Heidi patted Anne’s hand. “Don’t worry. Doña Carter is will be removing Rose so there is place.”

Anne flushed. “This is a disaster.”

“Don’t worry, we have it handled,” Heidi smiled. “Your secret is safe with the family.”

Before she could say anything else, Lady Catherine appeared in the doorway and Doña Carter rushed up to greet her, like a family friend. Heidi was grateful, more than ever, that the Carter’s had the chance to meet Lady Catherine during one of their visits to Hunsford earlier in the year.

The older woman’s cold brown eyes fell on Heidi, still holding Anne’s hand. It took all of Heidi’s control not to drop her arm and fold her hands together like a guilty child.

“Good evening, mother,” Anne said curtseying and leaving Heidi’s side, she was grateful for the reprieve from starting the conversation.

“Daughter.” Her eyes swept over her with a look somewhere between affection and appraisal. “I apologize for my tardy arrival.”

Anne closed the distance to her mother. There was a rift growing between mother and daughter, but Anne had told her not to worry. As Heidi understood it, Lady Catherine was peeved simply because Heidi had upset Anne, though the daughter had steadfastly refused to give her mother details of the fight they had had.

Heidi knew she’d need to apologize properly to her ladyship at some point, but tonight, at a party with witnesses, was not the right time.

Letting out a breath, Heidi looked around, trying to find someone else to talk to.

“That was done masterfully,” Percival said from just behind her. “We shall make proper lady of you yet.”

“It was close, for certain.” Heidi kept her eyes on Edward, who was taking a glass of wine from the maid Hannah. “I am sorry to lose Rose as a supper companion though. Such a thing is quite the political affair and still beyond me, I’m afraid.”

Percival laughed, good naturedly. “You will no longer be escorted to table by your cousin, at least. My aunt’s arrival puts the secretive dinner escort planning to sixes and sevens.” He looked around the room. “It appears I will now be escorting Miss Jessop to table.”

Her eyes darted over to the viscount’s daughter.
“Would you care for something to quench your thirst?”

Heidi blinked up at him. “Oh, no, thank you.”

He inclined his head and walked off.

She spotted Lizzy across the room and Heidi could see the beginnings of tension on her friend’s face. Mrs. Darcy did not have to worry about a mother-in-law, with Lady Anne in the grave, but an imposing aunt-in-law could be worse.

Within minutes the dinnerbell, or gong rather, rang, and the party slowly made their way to the dining room.

The dinner went off without a hitch, Heidi was escorted to supper by Doctor Watson with Doctor Carter sitting on her left tending to Mrs. Darcy’s needs. With twenty people around the large table, Heidi was certain there would be elbows in plates; but everyone behaved perfectly during the meal.

Percival had been right, the shifting of escorts, thanks to the arrival of a highly ranked lady had not flustered the gentlemen in the least.

The ladies withdrew to the drawing room around 10:30, when the supper had completed and Heidi sat with Anne and Miss Jessop. She had spent most of her time at dinner watching the young heiress sitting beside Percival near the head of the table, wondering if the woman had potential to marry the Baron. She was the daughter of a viscount, surely that counted for something; but Heidi struggled to keep up with the conversation.

An hour later, the husbands and brothers and potential love interests rejoined the women in the drawing room and Heidi wasn’t surprised to see that Doctor Carter had disappeared. It made her heart break, thinking how much pain he suffered in the wake of Mrs. Carter’s death.

Miss Heathcote appeared at her elbow as Heidi took a glass of wine from the offered tray. “I wish to thank you for inviting my aunt and I to the gathering. It has been a magical night.”

“We are delighted,” Heidi said, secretly hoping she’d have a chance to say the words. “I believe you are acquainted with most of the attendees, but was there anyone you had not had the pleasure of speaking to before?”

“I know many of the guests thanks to my aunt’s connections. I believe the only guests I was not acquainted with were your uncle and cousin.”

Heidi looked for Edward and sighed. His eyes were glazed over as he leaned heavily on the wall, sloshing brandy in his glass.

“I’m afraid my cousin is not on his best behavior tonight,” she said. “Please excuse me.”

Florentia nodded and Heidi crossed the room.

“Edward.”

He kept his eyes on his glass and muttered. “Go away.”

“Maybe you should switch to something not so strong,” she said, tipping her head in the direction of Earl Fitzwilliam, who was watching her.

“I will do as I damn well please.”
His words were too loud, but she made eye contact with the Countess Cowper and smiled, leaning against the wall just a smidge. She wanted to look… if not dignified, at least at ease.

Heidi cleared her throat, trying to emulate her mother’s angry tone. “Edward,” she said, grinding the name out, trying to keep quiet. “Perhaps you should go get some rest.”

“You are not my mother.”


“Oh, rattle off.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, though she didn’t understand the phrase, the intent was clear enough and she was sure in the future he’d use piss or sod or something worse.

Edward threw the glass to the carpet and Miss Jessop gasped, as liquid amber splashed all over their clothes.

“Cousin!” she cried, trying to block everyone’s view by stepping out.

“You’ve no right!” Edward exclaimed, dismissing her with a wide flick of his hand. Heidi stepped back, narrowly escaping being hit. When she reached out again, he slapped her hand away.

She couldn’t breathe. Even when he’d been drunk before, she would never have thought him violent. Not toward her.

“Why do you not crawl back into the hole from whence you came?”

She looked at him, unable to speak. Only he knew how much those words could wound.

“Come, Edward,” Percival said jovially, appearing at her side. “How would you feel about a bit of air?”

Edward groused, his eyes rolling as he allowed Percival to take his arm and pull him to his feet. She was just beginning to feel some relief, her friend taking care of the obviously still mourning man, when Edward turned back to her, a blurry hate in his eyes.

“She is not my cousin, you know! It is all bloody lies.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” Percival said.

“But she is not,” he said, taking hold of the doorframe. “Ask her, Napoleon loses. She knows! Tell them.”

It was not until Edward rounded the corner that the world dropped out from under her feet. She reached out, clutching a nearby arm, just before she could collapse.

Words and thoughts fled as she gaped at the empty doorway, her ears ringing. Looking around, the entirety of the party was staring back at her.

“Miss Meldrum?”

She looked first at Brigham, who’d also apparently come to her side, as she was gripping his arm like a vice, and then to Earl Fitzwilliam and Lady Catherine, who’d been talking at a table nearby.

“I—“ she started.
“Please, ignore my nephew,” Doña Carter said, coming to the rescue. “I daresay he has been too
deep into his cups. Losing his mother had given him a shock.”

Brigham escorted Heidi to Edward’s now vacated chair and before she could thank him, someone
handed her a cup of brandy.
Breakfast the next morning came too quickly but Heidi pulled herself out of bed and managed to get dressed with Hannah’s help. Her head throbbed, though she hadn’t over-indulged last night. Still, she wanted nothing more than to crawl back under the covers, knowing she had to face the family.

Finally making her way downstairs, Heidi found the entire family gathered at the table, including Anne. Though, she had to admit, Edward looked worse for wear.

And good, she thought vengefully.

She took the empty seat next to Rose and allowed the footman to serve her a plate of eggs and sausages, ignoring the looks of the others in the room.

“Heidi, I wish to apologize for my outburst last night.”

Her fork stilled on her plate with a scratch when Edward spoke.

The doctor cleared his throat in warning. Likely to keep him from saying too much in front of Rose.

“It was rude of me and I apologize for betraying your trust.”

Heidi nodded, her throat closing around her words.

“What happened?” Rose asked, looking between them.

“I imbibed too much whisky last night,” Edward said, taking ownership. “I said things to our cousin, in front of our guests, that I regret saying.”

“What did you say?” Rose was flabbergasted.

“Things that bear no repeating,” Mr. Carter said, crossing both knife and fork over his plate in warning. Their host rarely spoke, but when he did, he was to be heeded.

Heidi flashed her eyes up at him, and the man, whom she had thought little about in the past few weeks, always coming and going with his business dealings, looked seriously back at her. It surprised her that their host had spoken up and not Edward’s father.

She clenched her jaw, flushing with embarrassment. There was a knowing look in his eyes that she couldn’t ignore.

“Apology accepted,” she said, turning back to Edward. “But if you haven’t already, you should be apologizing to our aunt and uncle as you nearly ruined the party last night.”
He blanched. “I have, accordingly.”

Heidi nodded, taking a sip of her chocolate. She hmm’ed and continued eating. She did not say much else during breakfast and was glad when Edward excused himself sometime later.

“Heidi, would you care to join me this morning on a walk through Hyde Park?” Anne asked, having finished her breakfast. “I find myself in great need to see some greenery.”

“I am surprised at the invitation. I expected you to desire to spend some time with Lady Catherine, since she is in town.” Their unexpected guest last night had slept at the Fitzwilliam home on George Street and Heidi was grateful she didn’t have to share breakfast with her.

“As she intended to return to Rosings as soon as possible, I do not think I will see her this morning.”

“Already?”

Anne nodded, giving her a pointed look that said they’d talk about it later. At least Lady Catherine’s arrival and departure meant it would delay her confrontation. The woman certainly had an opinion and what had occurred would not remain a secret for long.

Heidi pushed her plate away, no longer having an appetite.

Before they left the townhouse, Heidi spotted Edward in the courtyard at the back of the house and slipped down the stairs to join him.

He winced when he faced her.

“I am sorry,” he said, eyes bloodshot. She wasn’t sure if he’d been crying but he looked worse than he had at the family breakfast.

“I know you are. I know you are in pain, but you cannot say things like that.”

He averted his gaze down to his feet. “I will be forever disappointed with myself, that I let such a thing slip.”

“It will all be set to rights soon enough,” she said, with more bravado than she felt. “Perhaps your period of mourning should——”

“My missing my mother is no excuse.”

Heidi raised an eyebrow.

His lip curled. “Do not judge me,” he said. “You look just like her when you do that.”

She softened her features. “I am sorry, too. I do not know how to help you through this.”

Edward scoffed. “Father has forbidden me from all save small beer and wine at dinner for the foreseeable future. That will be punishment enough.”

“I hope you find some solace in the fact that your mother does not linger in pain, and I am certain she watches over you.”

“Yes,” he said, clearing his throat.

“You have a little sister who adores you, you must find yourself again so that she has your
protection.”

Edward nodded.

“I do not wish to interrupt,” Anne said.

Heidi turned from Edward to see Anne waiting in the doorway. “I’m coming,” she said, resting her hand on Edward’s shoulder gently. “Will you be well?”

With another nod from the young man, Heidi left the courtyard.

After Heidi and Anne paid their entrance fee and were walking through the crowds at Hyde Park, she began to relax. At least, knowing that Mattison was playing guardian a dozen steps behind them, was reassuring.

“I am sorry we did not get the chance to speak last night,” Anne said. “But mother…”

“No need to apologize, Anne. I am well aware of your mother’s tactics.”

Anne gave a quiet chuckle.

“You conducted yourself commendably,” she said. “I daresay I would have blubbered should such truths about me be made public.”

Heidi sidestepped a root that cut through the path, and looked up to see two ladies nearby, whispering to one another.

“I probably could have handled it better,” she replied, “but thank heavens for Perci—Lord Fitzwilliam’s quick thinking.”

“Does he know the truth? My cousin?”

“No,” Heidi admitted.

Anne winced. “And now Edward has practically told the world.”

They turned a corner and Heidi brushed past a couple, her elbow knocking into the man’s.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, waving a hand toward them.

The man and woman stared but said nothing. Heidi brushed off the momentary uneasiness as she continued on with Anne.

“Did your mother say anything? I am aware that you spoke after Edward was escorted out.”

Anne folded her hands tellingly. “She thought it was odd what Edward had said. I will not give you the details.”

“That’s probably for the best,” murmured Heidi, averting her eyes. “Your mother does not like me much.”

“Heidi, my mother is...particular to whom she grants her favor.”

Heidi shook her head, her lips twitching. “I’d never have guessed.”

Anne let out a quiet huff, forestalling a giggle. “One would be required to actively ignore my
mother to not understand such about her.”

“That’s quite the judgement from a daughter.”

“You must understand that I would never say such words to her face.”

“Though it would make for an interesting scene,” Heidi said with a playful smirk.

Heidi spotted a bench in the shade that was empty and waved her hand over to it, where the two sat for some time, enjoying the warm air, now that the weather was growing cold.

“I have been thinking,” Heidi said, before Anne could speak, “perhaps I should return to Hunsford with my uncle and the children.”

“No, please,” Anne said, reaching out for her. “You promised to stay with me for the season.”

“But we’ve accomplished much and enjoyed ourselves, have we not?”

“Of course, but Heidi,” Anne protested, tugging the wisps of hair that slipped from her bonnet. “But I insist you stay. I will not be able to function without your help.”

“You’ve done alright thus far, Anne.” She patted Anne’s knee, grateful that they overlooked a pond rather than the Rotten Path. “You do not need me.”

A male voice interrupted. “I beg to differ.”

Heidi jumped up, turning toward their familiar intruders.

“Your lordship...Doctor Watson.”

The doctor grinned. “We called on Henrietta Street. Doña Carter intimated that you would be at the Park. I hope we do not interrupt a private conversation.”

Heidi shook her head. “No, apart from your quiet approach, we are undisturbed,” she said, smiling. “We were just enjoying the view and a friendly tête-à-tête.”

“And you were not considering seriously returning to Hunsford?” Percival asked, looking at her curiously.

She narrowed her eyes. “Just how long have you been spying on us, your lordship?”

“Long enough.”

Anne invited the men to sit with them on the bench. Heidi’s heart fluttered at the look on both her and Doctor Watson’s faces as they sat together.

“It would be insupportable of you to leave. Why, the Season has not even started!” Percival said, clearly of no mind to let the previous thread of conversation fizzle out. “What sort of patron would I be if I did not introduce you properly to society?”

“Maybe it would be better to return home. I’ve had a lot of adventure these last months and I would not wish to scandalize your family any more than I already have.”

His eyes sparked with something that made her stomach lurch. “Your sudden departure plans would not have anything to do with your cousin’s outburst last night?”
Heidi wrung her hands. “Perhaps it has a little to do with it.”

“Such a bold statement,” the doctor said. “Though, I gather, his prediction has a fifty percent chance of being correct.”

She tilted her head, trying to remember what exactly he’d said. She’d been so worried about the implication Heidi hadn’t paid attention.

“Oh, about Napoleon.” She shuddered, remembering that the colonel’s life hung in the balance. She only hoped he was safe, doing some spying or something, and nowhere near the frontlines.

“Either he wins the war, or he loses it. I see few other options.”

“We did not follow you merely to reassure Miss Meldrum would stay in town,” said Percival, as though he sensed Heidi’s discomfort. “We also wish to extend Lady Heathcote’s invitation to a small gathering tomorrow.”

Her stomach lurched, surprise warring with nervous energy. “I suppose the guest list will be similar to what it was last night.”

The baron nodded. “It likely will be, though the social circle of the Heathcote family is not a perfect replica of the Carter’s.”

Heidi frowned, watching the water lick at the pond’s shoreline. She couldn’t face those same people again.

_Rip the bandage off, kid_, Heidi heard in her father’s voice. It wasn’t often at all that something her dad said resonated. She took a breath.

If that’s how they want to play it, she thought bracing herself. “As long as we have no prior engagements, I imagine we will be able to attend.”

Percival grinned. “I was hoping you would accept. You have a duty to perform, do not forget.”

“I can always back out of it,” she said, remembering her role as match-maker. “You are not paying me for this service. I have signed no contract.” Heidi straightened up on the bench, looking up at the man.

“I can arrange to pay you a fee, if you deliver,” he teased, with a raised eyebrow.

Beside her, Anne giggled.

“I am no attorney, but I recommend you have that contract drawn up,” Doctor Watson agreed, a smile on his lips.
Dinner Saturday night at the Heathcote soiree went well enough. Sandwiched between Doctor Watson and Mr. Carter, she’d been able to avoid talking to lots of people; but Heidi had noticed that there was a lot of whispering going on around her.

“It seems word has spread about your cousin’s outburst at the dinner party,” the doctor whispered. He pulled away then to let the footman refill Heidi’s glass at the table.

“That’s just awful,” she said closing her eyes. “The scandal my cousin caused.”

“Forgive me, but it is your name I hear whispered, Miss Meldrum.”

This time she held her fork steady, but the hand on her lap fisted.

Centering herself, Heidi took a breath. “And what, may I ask, are they saying about me?”

“I believe I am considered too close of an acquaintance to be told the particulars.”

She felt her eyes burning but fought the urge to show this table any emotion. “So, my presence is scandalizing yourself and,” she looked down the table at Percival, who sat near his father and a couple of attractive women. Miss Jessop included. “The Earl’s family.”

“It does not signify, Miss Meldrum. Do not trouble yourself.”

Heidi ate another bite of her braised rabbit, but her stomach turned and she placed her fork on the table.

“I should have returned to Hunsford, as I’d first said.” Her uncle, Edward, and Rose had left yesterday afternoon; but in the conversation between Anne, Doctor Watson, and Percival, they’d pointed out that it was better to pretend the outburst hadn’t happened, than to run away. It will only prove the rumors true, whether or not they are, Anne said, in a surprisingly astute manner.

“You may be new to society, but it will not be long before they find some other scandal to focus on.”

Heidi knew this, instinctively, but it didn’t help now.

“Would you create a scandal for me, Doctor Watson?” she asked. Not entirely hopefully, but more than she would have admitted.

He gave a small snort of laughter, muffling it at the dinner table. “I could certainly make an attempt.”

“Oh, please do. I’ve already been embarrassed enough for a lifetime.”

The doctor shook his head, covering his laughter at her ridiculous statement, and Heidi was hit with the strangest feeling of regret. She wanted to be sharing a moment like this with the colonel. She wanted him to be the one attempting to comfort her.

Some of the guests looked over, Caroline Bingley among them, and she put her fork down, all appetite gone.

Heidi focused on her plate for the rest of the meal, moving the food around and arranging the bits.
and pieces by size or color, depending on how much of the food remained at the end of each course. She suffered through four more, grateful that her napkin had been made of linen, or something similar, so she didn’t turn it into confetti.

She wasn’t sure what brought it on, but during the dessert course Heidi found herself musing about Lord Melbourne and his own scandal as dinner continued on. He might have walked out of the assembly hall, but he’d weathered the gossip as well as one could, in such circumstances.

The countess had mentioned at supper the other night that her brother and his wife and son had gone to Ireland for the winter, but not before the talk had died down and the gossipmongers found someone else to focus on.

Despite Anne’s words, she wondered if the advice had been sound. She caught Percival’s gaze from down the table and he smirked at her. Heidi’s stomach twisted, his lips curving the same way his brother’s had when he’d tease her.

The party had enough guests that the brandy and cigar hour was nixed in the promise of card tables and a little bit of dancing. Heidi moved as far from the gaming as possible and planned to sit in a corner for the rest of the night.

It was too late to disappear into another room when she spotted Caroline Bingley coming toward her.

“Miss Meldrum, how lovely to see you again.”

She forced a smile in reply.

“I do hope you have recovered from the ordeal the other night.”

Heidi tried not to roll her eyes, the woman hadn’t even been at the meal and here she was inserting herself into the situation. “You are so good to be concerned, but there is nothing to recover from, I assure you. My cousin still mourns his mother, and I daresay he fell too far into his cups the other night. It is forgotten.”

“But, to call you a witch, in such company, must surely be terrible.”

Witch?!

Heidi clenched her fist but hung on to her smile for dear life. She should have been ready for an accusation that asinine. It had admittedly been a while since she’d needed to remind herself that her thinking was more...evolved.

Her retort spilled from her mouth before she could stop it. “Does the Ton arrange a trial by water for all foreigners, Miss Bingley?”

Oops.

Caroline gaped as Heidi looked for an escape route. Damn, she thought, spotting the baronet nearby. But he would have to do.

“Excuse me, but I believe I promised the baronet the next dance.”

Caroline cast a glance over her shoulder.

“That is impossible, dear Miss Meldrum,” she said, reaching out and touching Heidi’s gloved hand.
Heidi pulled back, despite herself. “Why is that?”

“Because he has promised the next dance to me.”

Heidi balked, looking at the baronet and then back at Caroline. “Forgive me, I must have been mistaken,” she said, reaching for her fan. “By all means, enjoy your dance.”

Caroline looked down her nose at Heidi, as much as someone a few inches shorter could. She curtsied and walked toward the baronet, leaving Heidi snarling at her back.

*Idiotic.*

Another couple walked by as Heidi returned to her chair, both muttering under their breath. This time, she actually did roll her eyes.

What a colossal mistake, coming here tonight.

“Do you have a moment, Miss Meldrum?”

Jane Bingley stood before her with an older gentleman, maybe mid-forties, at her side.

“I hoped to make an introduction, if you are not otherwise engaged.”

Dread rolled in her stomach.

Jane introduced Mr. David Bingley, an older cousin of Charles, and Heidi remained polite, glad to have met him and whatnot and had entirely expected that to be the end of it, until David had asked her to dance.

Heidi bit her lip, not sure she wanted to subject herself to the scrutiny of others; but in the end, she had no excuse and should be polite to this older gentleman. Who knew what sort of influence he might have and if she upset him, what it could mean for her companions.

She felt ill, joining the others on the dance floor a few minutes later. It wasn’t the tune, she knew the country dance well enough by now, but it was the looks that the other guests gave her. The side eyes and whispers behind fans were dreadful, even if she didn’t HAVE to acknowledge them.

Anne had disappeared and so had the doctor and Percival.

*So much for them staying by her side all night.*

“You are intimate with my cousin and his sisters, I take it?”

Heidi stepped forward to hear his words and agreed.

“As intimate as one can be, I suppose. Charles and Jane visited the cottage on their Bridal tour just a few months ago.”

They parted and twirled and stepped with their neighbors and came back again.

“It is good that my cousin has found such happiness in life.”

She dipped and box-stepped-ish and circled back around.

“I admit to being closer to Mrs. Bingley’s sister, Mrs. Darcy.”
His eyes went wide. “You know the Darcys well then.”

“I don’t know if I would say well,” she said, moving back away.

As they danced, Heidi reviewed topics in her head. God, she sucked at small talk.

The moments when she wasn’t being forced into polite conversation had her thoughts drifting to that first dance at Almacks. Things had been much easier when she danced with the colonel. He’d been affable and kind and his leading her through the dance had felt… different. She couldn’t explain it properly, but she never expected to miss someone as much as she missed him at that moment.
“You will not believe what news we have heard.”

Heidi sat up straighter in her chair at Doctor Watson’s announcement when he strode into the drawing room.

The man had come over to have dinner with the Carters, well, Anne, mostly, Heidi was sure. But at least it was someone different to talk to. She loved Anne, but conversation had begun to grow stale, she didn’t want to talk about the future anymore, and Anne had few stories of her own to regale Heidi with.

In fact, Mr. Carter had gone to the club for dinner and Doña Carter had been invited over to Condesa Esterhazy’s home for dinner. The doctor had called earlier and Heidi had taken it upon herself to invite him to return for the meal, as it was only Anne and herself in the house tonight.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The Bow Street Runners have arrested a slew of society men in the wake of the highwaymen robberies.”

She leaned forward, eyes wide. “Have they, really?”

“How do you know this?” Anne asked.

He nodded, eyes dancing between the two of them.

“One of the men’s clubs had apparently been housing these men, The Ravens, they called themselves. They would set up locations for robberies and lure their victims out of London to rob them.”

Heidi frowned, Anne scooting forward beside her.

“You cannot be serious, John.”

“I am. I saw the arrests myself this afternoon. Dreadful scene. There were so many gawkers I was afraid of a riot.”

Anne clasped her hands together in a panic.

“Who all were arrested? Anyone we know?” Heidi asked.

The doctor grinned, like a cat who caught a canary, and leaned forward. “Baronet Brigham was among them.”

Anne gasped, fanning herself.

“You are certain?”

“Like I said, I saw it myself.”
“Oh, John,” Anne gasped.

Heidi frowned into her lap. “To be honest, Lord Fitzwilliam and I thought that might be the case,” she said. “The incident with the highwaymen was too coincidental to not be planned.” She pursed her lips. “I had hoped I was wrong, though.”

“To think,” Anne said. “I had begun considering him as a match for you.”

Anne was looking directly at her. “Me?” she guffawed. “Oh no.”

“Why ever not, Miss Meldrum?” the doctor said. “He is rich, titled, young.”

“He was a flirt, a good one,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “And I admit to being fascinated at first, he was quite the charmer; but I knew well before that day that I couldn’t possibly count him as a potential suitor.”

She could see that John and Anne were curious, though Heidi hoped Anne would understand by now, the full truth. That she was in love with the colonel was fact, no matter how much she’d fought it and no matter what he might think of her now.

Thankfully, she was saved. The door from the corridor opened and the butler announced dinner. Heidi led the way, having grown more accustomed to the social structure thing over the past weeks.

A simple three course meal followed, with soup, an entrée with a few different vegetables, and dessert. Heidi had managed to teach the cook downstairs to make sponge cake, and she’d been looking forward to it for ages. At least this time, it hadn’t failed spectacularly like her attempt at the cottage.

“That was lovely,” Anne said, just over an hour later, as she folded her napkin back onto the table.

“Shall we all adjourn to the drawing room?” she asked. “Unless Doctor Watson wishes to take brandy and cigars alone.”

The doctor smiled at her. “I will refrain from smoking tonight. It would not do to leave my lovely hostess and her companion to keep themselves company.”

Anne gave him a sideways glare, but they made their way to the room, where a fire had already been lit. After the footman poured drinks, she dismissed the help from needing to wait on them.

“Should we require anything, I will ring for Mattison; but you can consider yourselves mostly free for the night. Though I imagine my aunt and uncle will have need of Hannah and Cornel when they return.”

The butler bowed his head and left the room.

“There,” she said, taking a long slow breath, “now we have some freedom. If only it were proper to take one’s shoes off in mixed company,” she said, wiggling her feet.

“Oh, but Miss Mel—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be good, Miss de Bourgh,” Heidi said teasingly at Anne’s expression of horror. John was wearing a slightly amused smile.

“In fact, I’ll do you one even better.” Heidi stood. “I’m going go to read, in that corner over there,”
she said, pointing. “You two enjoy your little tête-à-tête.”

She tilted her head in a mock-bow and traipsed over to the corner where she’d been reading *The Scottish Chiefs* by Jane Porter.

Heidi closed the book, sometime later.

The couple had been quiet, talking in hushed whispers for most of the last two hours, when movement caught her eye.

Her eyes went wide when she saw the doctor’s hand resting on Anne’s, who happily nodded. Even from this distance, Heidi could see tears glistening in her friend’s eye.

He leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss on her cheek and Anne flushed, her eyes blinking rapidly.

The novelization of William Wallace dropped onto the floor, seeing the doctor’s display of affection.

“Oops,” she said, leaning over for the book, but by the time she’d come back up. The couple had pulled apart. “I’m so sorry.”

Anne giggled, losing control and relaxing.

“Now that I’ve properly interrupted…” Heidi crossed the room, leaving the book behind and sat down across from the couple. “Did what I think I just witnessed really happen?”

Anne’s head bobbed quickly up and down. “Yes.”

A large grin broke out on Heidi’s face. “Congratulations,” she said, and moved to hug Anne.

They squeezed each other and then Heidi looked over to the doctor.

“It’s about time,” she grinned.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I wished to procure permission, properly,” he said. “Lady Catherine was not pleased.”

“I daresay she wasn’t,” Anne piped up. “But I’m twenty-eight, I no longer need her permission.”

“No, neither of us do; but I did seek permission from your, the earl. He was happy to grant permission, whether or not it was legally required.”

Heidi looked aghast. “When did you speak to his lordship?”

“On Guy Fawkes’ day.”

“I don’t recall an audience,” Heidi said, an appraising eye on the man.

“You were indisposed at the time,” he replied, the faintest of blushes colored his cheeks.

“Ah,” Heidi replied, knowing what distracted her that night. “Shall I ring for some madeira, or maybe port?”

She hoped the chance for a toast would prevent them from delving further into that particular conversation.
After ringing for the celebratory drink, Heidi returned to her seat, book in hand. She couldn’t help but feel a little awkward.

*And jealous,* she thought, eyes flicking across the room at the happy couple.

The doctor left a couple hours later, sometime before the Carters were due to return but late enough in the night that Heidi could barely keep her eyes open.

To be honest, she’d been glad to get rid of him. She felt guilty at the green-eyed monster that had settled into her chest, in those quiet moments after the announcement had been made. She wanted her own love and her own family and all the things that most people wanted. Heidi knew that not everyone considered marriage the ultimate goal, but Heidi did, and the longer she stayed in the 19th century, the less she’d felt it would happen to her.

With a candlestick in her hand, after they locked the front door with the doctor’s departure, Heidi climbed the stairs to her bedroom on the second floor.

“Do you have a moment, Heidi?” Anne asked, a few steps behind her.

“Sure, what is it?”

Anne looked around the stairwell. “Perhaps it would be better if we adjourned to my room.”

Heidi nodded and led the way down the corridor before letting Anne open her own door. She hadn’t been invited into Anne’s room for weeks, and though they usually spent hours in the garden or one of the public rooms on the lower floors, this felt…. intimate.

She took one of the seats by the hearth at the end of the room and watched Anne as her demeanor changed.

“Anne?” she asked, growing concerned.

“There is something that I wish to tell you, something that under normal circumstances should remain a secret, but after everything you have said and done for me, I thought it only fair to tell you. “

Her heart skipped a beat, wondering what horrible thing Anne could possibly confess.

Heidi patted the chair next to her. “Come sit, and tell me.”

Anne shuffled her feet but remained standing.

“You trusted me with the truth or your origins. And I admit that it was shocking; but I had my own secret to keep.” She wrung her hands together. “If I am to be married soon, I wish for my only other friend in the world to know the truth., I am sorry it took me this long to bring you into my confidence.”

The fact that Anne was rambling, worried Heidi. “Anne, surely it cannot be so—“

“Please,” she said, holding out her hand, silencing Heidi. “Let me say this. My mother and Uncle Fitzwilliam are the only ones that know the truth.”

Heidi blinked. If only two people knew about it, this was serious. She wondered if something was physically wrong with Anne that Heidi hadn’t seen yet?
She immediately crossed that off her mental list; she’d spoken with Doctor Carter at length. He would have said something if Anne had any other ailments.

Heidi caught Anne staring at the ceiling, trying to clear her thoughts. Her stomach twisted.

“I am not my mother’s daughter.”

Heidi’s stomach dropped. “What do you mean?” she leaned forward in the seat.

Anne closed her eyes, unwilling to face her friend. “My mother was unable to have children.”

Heidi cocked her head, trying to make sense of this and determined to let Anne tell her the whole of it before she interrupted and helped Anne lose her nerve.

“It is part of why my mother was so adamant that I marry Darcy. To keep the money in the family.”

Her mouth went dry. What?!

Anne sat down on the chair nearby.

“When my parents learned of my mother’s inadequacies, they found a woman who was similar in appearance to my mother and arranged for my birth.”

Heidi furrowed her brows. There was no in-vitro in these days, no surrogate mothers.

She sucked in a breath. Sir Lewis had been forced, or made in any case, to sleep with someone NOT his wife, to sire an heir.

Thoughts and scenarios raced in Heidi’s mind.

Anne motioned in a desperate manner. “I only discovered this recently. When I –“ She closed her eyes. “came into my majority. My father’s will was read aloud, and his conditions of my inheritance and trust all hinged on me knowing the truth.”

Heidi released her breath and sank into the back of the chair.

“I suppose,” Anne said, a sardonic laugh cutting through her words. “It is a good thing I had been so sickly. Keeping me from society prevented too much attention on my looks.”

“Oh, Anne.” Heidi began to reach out, but Anne recoiled.

“Do not pity me, please.”

She pursed her lips and nodded, pulling back.

“Mother wished me to come out in society to prove my worthiness, but otherwise, she wished to keep her source of income hidden away.”

Heidi’s heart fell at that admission. Lady Catherine could be cold but didn’t think she’d be so callous as to lock her meal ticket away.

Anne shrugged a moment later. “That is the whole of it, as far as I am aware. I am a de Bourgh, but no Fitzwilliam. Not by blood in any case.” She looked down at her hands in her lap. “Once I am married, I will be a Watson, and it will not matter in the least.”
“Do you know who your mother was?” Heidi asked, unable to help herself.

“She was low born and did not survive my birth. I cannot imagine what it might have been like to
know she was alive.”

Heidi nodded.

“Perhaps, with your pragmatism, you would still wish to be my friend.”

Heidi leaned forward and took Anne’s hand in hers. “Even if it made a difference, I would not
abandon you due to an accident of birth, Anne.”

The woman worried her bottom lip. “I could not be sure, but the secret weighed on me.”

Heidi nodded in agreement. “I can well understand that.”

She gave her a shy smile. “Yes.”

“You need not worry on my account, Anne. I can promise you that I will not tell a soul. It is not my
secret to tell.”

Anne relaxed, her shoulders slumping. “You cannot imagine how grateful I am for your
understanding.”

Heidi sat quietly, glad that she had told Anne the whole truth about Lizzy and Darcy.

Rolling her shoulders, she made the decision to forget what she knew about the Austen story. This
was all new territory.

That past did not matter.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of little subplotty things happened in this chapter, if you have questions, ask :)
Sunday, November 22nd, 1812

Heidi leaned over the table, resting her forehead on her gloved knuckles and took a long breath. The past couple of weeks had been busier than she’d expected. Regency weddings took place within weeks of the engagement, unlike weddings in the twenty-first century, and she’d been a witness at the trial of the Ravens.

The trial was unlike anything she’d expected. She’d never been a juror back in her day; but the process of conviction was nothing like the crime shows she’d watched.

The members of peerage had not been charged with dastardly crimes, merely breaking the peace; but those men who’d been roped into acting as muscle, poor men who’d been given a handful of pounds to play watchman or incite violence were charged and imprisoned.

The man who’d been present at both of Heidi’s attacks was charged with robbery for his part in the violent assault of Miss Anne de Bough and stealing her necklace, which had not yet been recovered.

Doctor Watson had convinced Anne that she should come forward with her accusation, as one of the men had stolen her locket, and thievery was a felony.

The three of them, Percival included, had stood at Anne’s side when she’d given her testimony before the jury and the crowd and the rows of criminals, including Brigham and the other members of the Ravens.

Moaning as her thoughts came back to the present, Heidi looked around the room, dreading the word that still needed to be completed. She had been working with Anne to prepare ribboned arrangements for the tables at the breakfast after the wedding and could no longer focus.

Grousing at her big, stupid mouth, Heidi wished she could take back all the details she’d given Anne about traditional 21st century weddings. Granted, most people were moving away from the white dress and formal table settings and religious services; but apparently weddings were still simple affairs in 1812. Anne had been aghast at all the details Heidi had spoken of.

Now, thanks to her blabbering, Anne would be ahead of the curve, with a wedding replete with all the things Heidi remembered from attending weddings throughout her life.

The banns had been read, invitations sent, and flowers had been arriving for days.

It surprised Heidi that Anne hadn’t wanted to return to Hunsford to be married on the property or in the parsonage she’d grown up in. Instead, Anne was opting for the wedding to take place in London with a breakfast at the Fitzwilliam townhome afterward.

It was easier, Anne had said, to have the wedding here, while most of society was already in town. The doctor had many friends, which helped fill a room, and though it wasn’t probably the biggest wedding of the Season, which was the aspiration of every young lady, the guest list was large enough that Heidi’s fingers were cut to pieces from all the work they’d been doing.

Hearing someone enter the dining room, Heidi was surprised to see Anne. She hadn’t seen much of the woman in the last couple of days but, with her list of things to accomplish, had found a modicum of relaxation in having a purpose.

“You’re back,” Heidi said, pushing out of her chair. “Did you have luck in finding a
Anne held out a small bag. “I have retrieved the blue.”

Heidi grinned, but shook her head. She hadn’t expected Anne to be so adamant about finding the something old, new, borrowed, and blue. But the treasure hunt, as it was, managed to keep Anne distracted.

She could see her friend beginning to fray at the edges. No matter what time period, apparently no bride was immune from the stress of wedding planning.

“I heard that your mother will be arriving later this afternoon. Just in time for the gathering tonight.”

Anne nodded cautiously. “Yes, I hope the meeting goes well.”

“It will be fine. The families are already acquainted.”

Anne shrugged, and rubbed her arm. “Heidi, I have something to ask you, and I… hope you do not find it inappropriate of me.”

Heidi turned fully, hearing the seriousness of Anne’s tone and remembering the secret she’d come clean about just over two weeks ago.

“I find myself nervous about tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Heidi said, waving her hand. “That’s normal. Pre-wedding jitters happen to everyone.”

Anne shook her head. “There is something more.” Anne took a seat. “While no one else is around.”

“You can tell me anything, Anne.”

“I wish to ask you about something. I do not dare ask mother.”

A tendril of dread curled around Heidi’s spine at Anne’s wording and she reached out to twist the edge of the lace doily on the table. “Sure.” She hoped her voice hadn’t come out in a squeak.

“It is highly improper to speak about this, but I am sick with worry.”

Her stomach dropped in Heidi’s gut, knowing exactly where this conversation was going.

She took a deep breath, preparing herself.

“You say women are enlightened in your day, that they have freedoms I could not imagine. Perhaps you could talk to me about what happens on the Wedding Night?”

Heidi’s hands shook in her lap and pursed her lips. A great sense of responsibility she hadn’t expected washed over her as she looked at her nervous friend. This was never something she expected Anne to ask her. This was that talk and she had more knowledge than perhaps anyone else in the country.

For that reason, it would have to be delicately handled.

It couldn’t be the purpose to her appearance in 1812, sexual education for the masses. But even if she didn’t have a lot of experience, due to her fears and problems, at least she had done plenty of research.
That last thought relaxed her. Whatever Anne asked, she would answer.

“Yes,” Heidi said, gathering her nerve, leaving the edge of the doily alone. “I can tell you about relations between a man and woman. We are typically introduced to the basics in school between ten and twelve years of age, if one is lucky.”

Anne’s eyes flicked up to hers.

“Do you know anything about it?” Heidi prompted, raising an eyebrow. “You did say you knew about your mother’s inability to conceive,” she said, being as vague as she could be, referencing the life-long secret. “It’s nothing to be ashamed about. Such things are considered more than unspeakable in this day and age. And it’s a shame really.”

“I have seen the horses coupling,” Anne said reluctantly. “I understand the purpose.”

Heidi sucked air through her teeth, trying to figure out the best way to go about the conversation.

They talked for well over an hour, thankfully uninterrupted, as Heidi went over the basics. She used the horses as an example and gave the full birds and the bees talk, but when it seemed Anne had more anxieties than just what was to happen, Heidi elaborated beyond mechanics. She told Anne that it could be pleasurable for the woman, at least eventually, and brushed over the things she could do in circumstances when she wished to be intimate without any consideration of procreation.

At that, Anne had turned beet red and waved her hands frantically in the air, begging off the conversation.

“Please, please no more,” she said, flabbergasted. “I need only get through one night.”

Heidi chuckled softly.

“I will not ask how you know such things, I think.”

“Better to remain ignorant on that account.” Heidi’s faint smile faded at Anne’s consternation. She was determined not to end the conversation until Anne’s anxiety had abated, at least a bit.

“The idea of purity is all well and good if that is what you wish, but we must decide individually, I think. Though it will not always be accepted in all circles, there are plenty of women in my time that do as they wish and are not judged for it.”

Though she nodded slowly, the curl of Anne’s lips was a relief. “I believe I understand.”

“If you ever need more advice or information, do not hesitate, Anne.” Heidi reached out and took the young woman’s hand in her own. “I certainly do not know everything, but common knowledge has greatly increased in the last couple hundred years. We, as a species, know a LOT more than people of this time do.”
Monday, November 23rd, 1812

Heidi dabbed at her eyes once more, as the newly married couple walked toward the carriage hand in hand. A day such as this had Heidi melancholy over her own fate, but she did her best not to dwell on the memory of the wedding dress she’d had her own eye on just a year ago.

Anne’s wedding ceremony had been awe-inspiringly beautiful. With bouquets of chrysanthemums decorating the church, the chamber was breathtaking in its simplicity. Anne, in her ivory gown, fairly glowed as she said her vows. Heidi was certain that many of society’s brides would wed in white this winter.

The doctor had married Anne in his regimentals with a small squad of soldiers lining the steps down to the street, bayonets acting as an archway.

Heidi had given adults bird seed, rather than the traditional rice, and had mixed up a batch, with the housekeeper’s help, of soap bubbles for the younger guests to blow. There weren’t many children in attendance, but they’d been ecstatic to learn they’d get to play with soap bubbles. Thankfully, bubbles existed as a child’s pastime already and she hadn’t had to figure out the chemistry of that on her own.

“Would you care to use my handkerchief, Miss Meldrum?”

Heidi spun around and leapt forward at the appearance of Ambrose de Bourgh; but caught herself, when the gossip-bird of a wife appeared at the attorney’s side.

“Mr. de Bourgh,” she said, noting how the olive toned skin of the Spanish cousin had been warmed in the sunlight. “How lovely to see you again.” She bobbed a curtsey. “Mrs. de Bourgh, I was uncertain whether your schedule would allow for the journey to London. It is a pleasure.”

The woman patted her stomach. “The ride was not as comfortable as I would have liked, but Mr. de Bourgh insisted we venture to town for his cousin’s wedding.”

Heidi nodded, once again remembering the fact that Mary de Bourgh did not care for her.

“I am sure Miss – Mrs. Watson will be elated to see you.”

Ambrose pulled his wife along, presumably to greet Lady Catherine and the other family members. Heidi allowed her eyes to follow them. She hoped she’d get the chance to talk with Ambrose while he was in town. She’d forgotten how much she’d enjoyed the man’s company. If nothing else, she had to prove to him that she knew more about English country music than she did before.

The carriage with the newlyweds departed in the direction of the Fitzwilliam townhome and another carriage took its place. The family would gather at the house on George Street for the wedding breakfast and time was of the essence if they wished to keep to the schedule.

Heidi glanced up at the sky, grateful that it was a clear day, and considered walking to the Carters’ home. It wouldn’t be a long trek, and it would keep her from having to talk to a bunch of people. She had expected Lady Catherine to sink her claws in, and Heidi wanted to be far away for as long as possible.

Strangely, the mother of the bride had been the picture of happiness, even if she didn’t exactly agree with the wedding that was taking place. It unsettled Heidi enough to make her want to steer clear altogether.
Doctor Carter, Rose and Edward stepped out of the crowd.

“Heidi, that was so much fun!” Rose was grinning broadly, her bubble stick still dripping onto the stone.

“I thought it would be a great entertainment.”

Rose frowned up at her, “why not use rice?”

Heidi explained the reasoning to the girl and patted her shoulder.

“You will all be going back to Henrietta Street to prepare for the breakfast?” she asked, glad to see that her cousins no longer wore black.

“We will be,” the doctor said, with a nod.

Heidi wet her lips and nodded in response. She had promised Anne that she would remain with the wedding party for the entirety of the day, so she would stay in her current attire for the rest of the afternoon at least. Anne had danced around the topic the other day, but Heidi knew that it was possible that some of the guests would insist upon the traditional watching of the consummation of the wedding. She’d told Anne and Watson that they could refuse such a tradition. There was such a thing as personal pride and Heidi would remain at their side, like a guard dog, if she must.

Heidi had also warned Anne that it was entirely possible that she would find out there would be no signs of her virginity and had gone into some depth about the inner workings of the female form. It had been as awkward as anything, but she was sure that Anne now had a better idea what to expect, though she figured the woman would be terrified at the prospect, no matter how prepared she was.

Since Anne hadn’t ‘tried’ the doctor out, they couldn’t be sure how he’d lead the proceedings; but he loved Anne and would hopefully treat her well.

The colonel flashed in her mind, thinking of how her skin had tingled when he’d whispered to her after their dance. She couldn’t help but want to try him out, even if he had been decidedly absent since his departure that summer.

Heidi blinked away her thoughts. Maybe not the best idea to think about such things, not when she was trying to avoid being melancholy.

In the end, Heidi walked back to the Carters’ townhouse with Rose and Edward, enjoying the fair weather and company and deciding that Anne and John were safe enough for the moment.

There was an awkward air between herself and Edward still, though she’d forgiven him his drunken ramblings and no one in society dwelled on it, save perhaps Caroline Bingley.

She glanced at Rose, taking in the changes that had occurred in the time since she’d left Hunsford. Rose had blossomed into a young woman, and it wouldn’t be long before the girl was preparing for her debut.

“Heidi,” Rose asked, when they were just a few blocks down from Henrietta Street. “Did your thoughts wander to your betrothed today?”

“Rose,” Edward hissed.

“It’s alright,” Heidi said, waving away the older brother’s concern. “I have been far too busy to wallow in my own sadness. Though I would have been married by now, I am glad I am not.”
“You are?”

Heidi nodded. “If I would have gotten married, I would have never met you,” she said, wrapping her arm around Rose’s shoulder.

“You do not regret meeting us?” Edward asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Not a bit,” she said.

“You have been decidedly absent these past months.”

Heidi squeezed Rose’s shoulder at the sadness in the girl’s voice.

“I daresay it won’t be long before I return home. After all, I came to London to help Anne find a husband and enjoy the Season. And now that the duty has been tended to, who knows what will happen?”
“He mocks me,” Percival growled out, tossing the letter across the table in disgust.

“Who?” Ambrose asked, reaching across the table for the parchment.

“My little brother.”

“The letter is from Ewan?” he asked, looking up in surprise.

“Oh, that is not the worst of it, cousin.”

He pushed back his chair, the legs scraping on the floor. “Leave us,” he ordered, waving his hand in the direction of the door.

Though their positions in the Fitzwilliam employ meant the servants could be trusted not to gossip, the news he was about to discuss with his cousin would be all over London if he did not receive privacy.

Simmons, Shawcross, and the two maids serving at table left the room quickly, though they made not a single sound.

He watched, leg bouncing under the table, as Ambrose read the note.

“He’s alive.”

“Yes, yes, keep reading,” Percival said, waving his hand.

Reaching for his snuff box, Percival took a large dose, despite Heidi’s warnings against the leaf. She said it caused diseases, but he didn’t care. Not at this moment.

“Ewan has fallen in love?” Ambrose asked, eyebrows nearly touching his hairline.

Percival scoffed, slamming his hand down on the table. “See, see what vexations he brings down upon me?”

“There is nothing wrong with your little brother falling in love before you do.” Ambrose held the letter loosely between his fingers.

“This has nothing to do with falling in love.”

Ambrose put the letter down. “What is it about then?”

“I have spent weeks, months even, grooming Miss Meldrum to be the perfect bride for my little brother. She is his perfect match, and then he,” he said, spitting out the pronoun, “has the audacity to dally with some Spaniard.” He quickly corrected himself. “No offense to the woman in question, of course.”

Ambrose shook his head. “Naturally. But what does this have to do with you?”

“That fool came to me,” he said, an angry finger pointing at the parchment. “Apparently besotted
with Miss Meldrum. I took it upon myself to discover more about the woman, and when she arrived at Wych Elm, I thought him mad.”

Across the table, Ambrose frowned. “What, you do not care for Miss Meldrum?”

“At first, no,” he started, thinking about how she’d walked in on his dalliance with Lucy Carmichael. “But I have grown fond of her.”

“Please, Percival. Do not tell me you have fallen in love with the young woman?”

“Heavens forfend, father would have me murdered,” he said, flabbergasted. “No, I do not love her, save perhaps as a brother might love his sister.”

“You have already accepted her into your family,” Ambrose said, commenting in passing more than calling him out. His cousin shifted, resting against the back of his seat.

Percival leaned onto his elbow, covering his eyes. “And now Fitzwilliam changes his mind.”

He felt utterly lost.

His cousin picked up the letter again, re-reading it.

“War is a difficult thing, Percival,” Ambrose said, breaking the silence. “Women, of ill-repute, are being thrust in men’s faces in the war camps. It is no surprise that Ewan found some solace in another woman’s arms.”

“She’s an heiress. He says she has the equivalent of 25,000 pounds at her disposal. Or did you miss that?”

“No, but--“

He narrowed his eyes at Ambrose. “And how do you know about the women at camp?” Percival leaned forward, taking in his cousin’s mein.

Ambrose shrugged. “I have some knowledge of the world.”

Percival rolled his eyes, suspicion averted. “What am I going to do?”

“Did it ever occur to you that this could be a good thing for your brother? This woman has money, she cares about the soldiers, from what his letter says.” The parchment fluttered in his hand.

“That does not help me, Ambrose.” He pushed his plate out of the way.

“Have you spoken to Miss Meldrum of your intentions? Does she know you wish to partner your brother with her? Does she even care about Ewan in such a manner?”

“She brings him up in conversation now and then,” Percival said. “It is clear her thoughts tend in his direction.”

“Thinking of a friend does not equate to thinking of marriage with that friend.”

“She has considered marriage before.”

“Yes, with a man who did not remain faithful, which, from what I know of Miss Meldrum, is important to her. What other woman in English society would even mention such a scandal?”
“She is not in society.”

Ambrose pinned him with a look. “Indeed?”

He stumbled on his words, stomach lurching. “And, what do you mean by that?”

“She may not have been presented at court, but she spends most of her time with a future earl, lives with an uncle whose wife was a companion to the Patronesses, and had the Baronet hanging on her skirts.”

Anger flared within Percy. “We will not speak about that rat,” he said.

Ambrose sighed. “Perhaps we should.”

“I would rather not.” His lip curled at the thought of the scoundrel.

“Fine, what is it you wish to speak of then?”

Percival pinched the bridge of his nose. On the one hand, his cousin made perfect sense, on the other… he did not wish to think of what Miss Meldrum would think of the situation. “I think I should call on the Carters this afternoon.”

Ambrose leaned back. “And what do you intend on doing?”

“We can talk to Miss Meldrum,” he said, despite himself. His mind churned and the words were off his tongue before he could think better of it.

“We?”

Percival nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “You are going to help me discover Miss Meldrum’s true feelings, cousin. If you do not believe her to have feelings for my brother, we shall leave it. Perhaps withdraw for some time altogether.”

“You will cut contact with Miss Meldrum? Did you not just, a few moments ago, admit to me that she is the closest female of your acquaintance?”

“She is helping me find a bride,” Percival replied, wearily assessing Ambrose’s flummoxed expression. “I cannot cut ties so easily.”

Ambrose pushed way from the table. “That is the sum of her value to you then? A matchmaker?”

Percival frowned, ignoring the ache in his chest. “Perhaps.”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t hate me!!!! I toyed with the idea of sharing this or keeping it separate, maybe even posting on the side, but I want you readers to see what’s cooking. There’s foreshadowing, and there’s KNOWing. Just a little angst.

Plus, next two days get a chapter a day. so... bribery?? :)

Also to help with keeping characters straight, I made a character tree on the tumblr: https://heidimeldrum.tumblr.com/post/18930017650
“Shit, shit, shit,” Heidi said, eyes tearing up despite herself.

The tube had been on its last legs for weeks, maybe even months. She’d been doing her best to make it last, but with one final swipe on the deconstructed plastic, Heidi could no longer deny that it was gone.

She stared up at the ceiling, willing herself not to cry.

She was out of toothpaste.

Heidi kicked the wall and cried out with pain, the one sensation distracting her from the other.

Feeling sick with herself for not finding a chemist to make the cursed stuff sooner, Heidi collapsed onto the floor, holding her foot and trying to ignore the throbbing that ricocheted through her injured knee.

“Are you well?”

Heidi snapped her head toward the door, her uncle and physician speaking on the other side. A light knock echoed through the room.

“Everything’s fine,” she called out, trying not to let her voice break.

“Heidi?”

She swallowed nervously at the incredibly parental tone the doctor’s voice had taken on.

“Well, fuck,” she muttered. If she didn’t tell him what she’d done and she ended up with a broken toe or something, her uncle would be livid.

“Fine,” she said, turning up her lip. “Come on in.”

He walked in to see Heidi sitting on the floor in her dressing gown, and she pulled the string at her neck tight.

“What happened?” he asked, kneeling down in front of her.

Heidi averted her eyes. “I kicked the wall.”

“And what would persuade you into doing such?” he asked, as if speaking to a petulant child.

She whipped her hand up toward the basin, where the empty tubing lay.

He looked at it, and then back down at her.

“Your teeth cleaning paste?”

“ Toothpaste,” she said, wiping her sleeve across her eyes and immediately regretting it. Heidi searched for her handkerchief.
Reading her mind, the doctor reached up and fetched it for her. Heidi couldn’t help but notice that he’d caught on to her idiosyncrasies. Any other person would have handed her their own to use.

“It is not the end of the world,” he said.

“It is to me. Don’t you see?” she asked. “It’s just one more thing that I’ve run out of since I arrived. One more thing that I may never again have. I miss my life, I miss modern conveniences. I miss my family.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, making Heidi instantly feel guilty. In her mind and heart, the Carters had become her second family long ago.

“I’m sorry. I—do miss them, but not to mean that I am not happy here. I don’t mean to take my anger out on you.”

“We can look into finding a chemist, if you wish. Perhaps they can recreate your toothpaste,” he said gently.

Heidi shook her head. “It could be years, or decades before the ingredients are discovered.”

He frowned. “Let me see your foot, Heidi. I should examine it.”

She nodded, though the pain was beginning to dissipate, and held her foot out.

“What happened?” Rose appeared in the doorway.

“Your cousin had an accident,” the doctor said, his fingers massaging her foot. “Nothing appears to be broken, but I would not do much walking on it today or tomorrow. It is beginning to swell. Best to keep it elevated as much as possible.”

Heidi curled in on herself.

Rose stepped deeper into the room. “Do you require help?”

Heidi shook her head at the younger girl. “Just a hole to hide myself in.”

Rose giggled and then disappeared around the corner.

Doctor Carter stood up, dusting off his knees. “Shall I ring for Hannah? Breakfast will be served soon.”

“I’ll manage,” she said, taking his offered hand and pulling herself up. “I won’t be long.”

He nodded and then left the room.

Heidi limped her way through the rest of the morning, trying not to think about the situation with the toothpaste, and eventually settled into a couch in the front parlor, where she could read, undisturbed. It had been a couple of days since the wedding and Anne and Watson would probably be getting ready to go on their own Bridal Tour.

With her duty to Anne disposed of, she made a mental note to find a job. It wasn’t every day that she ruminated on her lack of funds, but with no prospects on the horizon, she couldn’t help it.

Besides, the Carters’ generosity would not last forever.

She examined her mother’s ring. If she sold it to the jeweler in Gariton, she’d replenish what
money she’d spent over the last few months and more.

It made her stomach turn, and she clasped her hand to her chest.

*Not ready to give that up yet.*

She did still have her earrings. But she’d need to entrust Percival with getting them to the jeweler and getting the banknotes back. Not exactly an easy task.

*When was… what was it called… Union something opened?*

What she wouldn’t give to have money orders be a thing.

Leaning her head back on the chair frame, Heidi wallowed in her self-pity. Even being fully aware that she was indulging herself like a child, she couldn’t stop it.

Her foot was resting on the nearby ottoman, a pillow propping it up when a knock interrupted her thoughts. Heidi pulled herself up to a seated position before calling out for the maid to enter.

When Percival and Ambrose appeared in the doorway instead, Heidi gasped, trying to cover her fumbling and ignoring the pain of her foot.

“Good afternoon,” she said, trying to remember if they’d said they’d stop by. “I had no notion that you had come to call. In fact, I did not even hear the doorbell.”

“Indeed, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi flushed when she followed Percival’s line of sight. Her ankle was, relatively speaking, exposed. Ambrose merely smiled and bowed.

After exchanging pleasantries and offering them a seat, Percival explained that they’d been with the doctor, Mr. Carter, and the doña on the terrace.

He walked over and took a seat nearby, patting his breast pocket.

“I had, in fact, been thinking of calling on George Street in a day or two,” she said, smoothing her skirts as she returned to her seat.

“Were you indeed?” Ambrose asked.

“I wished to speak to his lordship, about a monetary matter.”

Both men raised their eyebrows.

“We can speak now, if you wish,” Percival said. “If you do not mind the audience.”

“I have a set of earrings I may like to sell to your jeweler friend.” She reached up as if to touch the earrings, but she wasn’t wearing them. “I find myself in need of…more economic stability.”

Percival furrowed his brow. “You have expended the funds you procured this summer?”

“Not all of it, but I would like to sell the earrings all the same. To be somewhat independent would be much more desirable than my present state.”

Ambrose tilted his head. “I was not aware you were so desperate for funds.”
“I have no dowry, no inheritance, and am forced to live off the generosity of my aunts and uncles. These past few months have shown me how little that sum of money would get me. This inflation rate is killing me.”

Ambrose’s brow furrowed at the phrase, but Percival was nonplussed. “Your mother’s ring?”

Heidi covered it with her hand. “I’m not ready to sell that yet.”

“Cousin,” Ambrose said, weighing in. “Why not aid Miss Meldrum in investing some of her capital?”

“I’m afraid I’m not willing to do that, Mr. de Bourgh,” she said, shifting in her seat before Percival could interject. “I know well the perils of speculation and what nothing to do with it.”

The 90s dot com bubble had ruined a lot of people. And the recent housing crash had done major damage to her parents’ retirement funds. Heidi was not ready for that kind of investing.

Then again if there were any companies out there that still existed in 2019, maybe she’d be willing to part with some of it.

Percival folded his arms. “She would be required to put up more funds than I believe she has.”

“She need not speculate wildly,” Ambrose defended, “but surely you have your own investments. Why not add some of Miss Meldrum’s capital to them?”

“No,” she said, more firmly than her last refusal. “I have little enough money as it is. I’d be happy to gain interest, but not at the risk of losing it all to a bad crop or something.”

Ambrose was taken aback at that. “You know about investing?”

“Bits and pieces. Maybe just enough to get me in trouble if I wished to dabble.”

He nodded, considering.

“I need to find an occupation, I think,” Heidi supplied after a lengthy pause. “It can’t be that hard.”

“To be quite frank,” Percival said. “I am aware I know little of tradition in Germany, but there are few opportunities for females to find occupations in England. What do you know of being a milliner?”

Heidi shrugged, knowing he had a point.

“You were, I think, stepping in as Miss Carter’s governess this summer, were you not?” Ambrose asked.

Heidi nodded, surprised once again to find Ambrose on her side. “I don’t have teaching credentials, but yes. I suppose I could pursue that, though I never saw myself as a teacher.”

“Did you have plans before you came to London, originally I mean to say?”

She frowned at Percival. His blue gaze softened considerably.

“You tend to avoid the subject of your time on the continent; but if I understand you correctly, you had a life there before your mother passed on.”

Heidi pursed her lips. The future earl had been listening to her blatherings after all. She certainly
could not mention a word about being on stage. Actresses weren’t exactly accepted as equals in society and she would lose what support she had.

“I worked in an office,” she said, settling on a vague version of the truth. “As something of a secretary, taking notes, ushering in clients, filing papers, that sort of thing.”

Ambrose perked up. “How industrious!”

“I like to think that I was good at it. But from what I gather, women are not allowed to take on such professions in England.”

“It is not considered to be a feminine profession.”

Heidi nodded at Percival’s irksome but frank assessment. “I gathered that much, though my schooling would probably cover most of the topics. It is why Anne’s passing comment some months ago that she might need a steward was so promising.”

“But,” Percival said, his gaze shifting to the floor, “you would not consider working for my cousin any longer?”

“I know better now. Besides, Mrs. Watson,” she said, correcting her previous mistake of addressing Anne by her first name. “Has her husband now, and I’m sure they will make the decision on who to hire for such a position when the time comes.”

“It is an intriguing idea, a woman as a steward,” Ambrose said, tapping his chin in contemplation.

“I have no experience in things such as housekeeping, so I do not believe a career in service would be wise,” Heidi said, continuing on without addressing his comment. “And I’m too old to start as a chamber maid.”

Percival smiled softly.

“Mock me if you must,” she said, waving her hand dismissively.

“You are looking to your future, then?” Ambrose asked, turning his attention to Percival rather than herself.

“Yes, I am.” Heidi cocked her head, registering the back-and-forth of their conversation. “Why did you call on Henrietta Street?”

“No reason,” Percival said, disarmingly.

She narrowed her eyes at them. She’d known him too long now to know when something was happening. That his eyes had again flitted to the carpet was the only tell she needed.

“Alright?” she said with a sigh. “What is going on?”

Percival scratched at his chest, looking uncomfortable.

“Do you have an itch?”

Ambrose barked a laugh and Percival rolled his eyes.

“Now you’re just being obtuse.”

The door opened before she could keep asking questions and Doña Carter appeared.
“Heidi, we were departing for Grosvenor Square at 2.”

She balked, looking at the clock against the far wall. It was ten minutes ‘til and she hadn’t changed. The two of them were going to pick up St. Nicholas gifts for Rose and Edward, and, if she was lucky, she’d find something to gift Anne, Watson, and Percival as well.

St. Nicholas day was just under two weeks away and Heidi had missed the German tradition, so she’d spoken to the doña about possibly getting a few trinkets.

“I am sorry, aunt,” she said. “I will be ready presently.”

The woman nodded, and the door shut.

“Don’t think this is over,” she said, narrowing her eyes at Percival. “Please excuse me.” This time she looked at Ambrose. “As you can see, I have other matters to attend to. I’m sorry, I did not expect your call and lost track of time.”

The two men stood. Heidi curtseyed and bid them farewell at the door of the study.

She thought on the strange visit for the rest of the day. At the end of it, she still had no clue what they could be up to.

Chapter End Notes

Added a chart for the staff, to also help with names. It's basically a generic tree so you can see the breakdown of a basic household, and then lists of who works where. Just in case it helps :) https://heidimeldrum.tumblr.com/post/189319700360

Thank you so much for the love!!!
Percival

“I told you, she is concerned about her future,” Percival said, waving his hand toward the door where Heidi had parted ways with them.

“Like we all are,” Ambrose said, rolling his eyes. “Really, Percival. I cannot condone what you are doing.”

“Bloody hell!” Percival said, snapping his fingers and clapping his fist into his hand. “I never had the chance to ask about Ewan.”

“That is your own fault.”

“She distracted me.”

“Ah, yes,” Ambrose said, guffawing. He looked up at the clock then. “Perhaps we should go. Give up on this—“

“Her uncles should still be on the terrace,” he said. “If they have not yet left for the club. We could speak to them.”

“He’s not even listening,” Ambrose said, waving his hands about and talking to the air.

“The gentlemen will surely know what Miss Meldrum intends. We can go to them.”

“Very well.”

They walked back through the corridor and to the terrace and Percival was relieved to see that the ladies had all disappeared. Even Edward had gone, which was a good thing. He didn’t know how he’d handle such a discussion with the boy around.

“I pray we do not disturb you, doctor, Mr. Carter, but I hoped to have something of a conversation with you both, in private.”

Deference and maybe a touch of a conciliatory tone would aid in his endeavor.

Percival took the offered seat, feeling nervous.

The doctor leaned forward. “This has something to do with my niece?”

“Yes.”

Doctor Carter grinned, addressing his brother. “I told you he had intentions—“

Panic gripped Percival’s chest. “I do not mean to make the impression that—“

Doctor Carter frowned, leaning back.

“Miss Meldrum is a fine woman,” he said, back-tracking. “But I do not intend to make an offer.”
“No?” Mr. Carter glared at him and Percival took a breath.

“No. I admit I never considered Miss Meldrum as a choice in my search for a bride.”

Mr. Carter scowled. “You have been free in your friendship with the young woman.”

“I had my reasons,” he said, feeling as if he were being scolded.

The doctor held up placating hands. “I have no doubt you did—“

“Please listen,” he said, cutting the man off.

Mr. Carter settled back into his seat, but the anger didn’t dissipate off his features.

“The last news I’ve had from my brother said he was taken with Miss Meldrum. I hoped to take her under my wing, see if she were worthy to marry my little brother. He is not always--“ Percival cut himself off, it would do no good to bad mouth his brother at this juncture. “I received a letter this morning from him, telling me, in no uncertain terms, that his attentions…”

Percival cleared his throat. “Have been drawn in other directions, among other things.”

He averted his eyes but caught the look that passed between the two older gentlemen.

“I do not know how to proceed,” he said, honestly. “I had spoken to Miss Meldrum before, wanting to use what I thought was her position as a sister to help me find a partner. But now, I am uncertain.”

Silence filled the terrace and shame crept up his neck.

“My lord father would likely have me flogged for my interference, and I daresay it would be within your rights as guardians for Miss Meldrum to wish the same.”

“You wish to cut ties with our niece now that your brother’s affections no longer lean toward her?” the doctor asked, looking back at Percival gravely.

The implications of his words cut Percival to the quick, to never see the girl again nearly knocked him back.

He may have joked with Ambrose about doing that very thing; however, the prospect of cutting ties... He refused to do so.

Biting back his own feelings of loss, Percival responded. “If that is what you desire, I will honor your wishes; but I wish to remain friends with the young lady. I will not abandon Miss Meldrum. She has few enough friends.”

“Despite that, she rises to the occasion. My niece has grown much this past year.”

“The journey from Germany could not have been easy.” He couldn’t help but smile. “She is a singular woman.”

A look Percival could not read crossed the doctor’s face.

The conversation moved then to other topics. Though he’d spoken at length with the two men before, Percival couldn’t help but think that words flowed less easily between them. He couldn’t point out the difference, but it was as if they’d grown just a touch more reserved.
By the time he stood on the steps, the front door closing behind him, Percival had the notion that his friendship with Miss Meldrum had been irreparably damaged.

*Well done,* he thought drily.

Chapter End Notes

[1] If you look at the ngram viewer, there’s a perfect little spike of that profanity right around 1812.

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?
color=bloody+hell&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url
Friday, December 11th, 1812

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the love via views, kudos, comments. They fuel me.

Enjoy!

St. Nick’s day came and went, and Heidi hadn’t seen hide nor tail of Anne, Doc Watson, Ambrose, or Percival. The It came much to her surprise when then invitation arrived to join the Fitzwilliam family for a birthday dinner in honor of Lord Fitzwilliam on December 11th.

Her uncle and his children had gone back to Hunsford just after breakfast on the 6th and Heidi had waited patiently, at first, for Anne or Percy to call, since she hadn’t wanted to interrupt the newlyweds and it wasn’t appropriate for her to call on the Fitzwilliam house without an escort.

Morning calls were not the time to bestow gifts.

It wasn’t as if she’d locked herself away either. She and the doña and Mr. Carter had gone to the opera once and had attended a large party at the Jessop’s estate just outside London, and she’d even made an appearance at Lady Heathcote’s gathering. Though Percival hadn’t called on her, she intended to keep her promise to find a suitable match for him.

At 22 or 23, her current prospects for Percival’s match were closer to Jane and Lizzy’s age than her own, but Florentia had a spark of wit that stood out against the other competition for Percival’s bride. Not that Heidi had spent a lot of time with the other women before. But now she was trying to make an effort and did not want to fail.

Wearing the same dress she’d worn to Almack’s all those months ago, Heidi was escorted into the Fitzwilliam ground floor parlor, just off the foyer. The doña and Mr. Carter had gone in ahead of her and were already speaking with Countess Temple and Earl Fitzwilliam, who was rubbing his upper arm.

Heidi looked to see if Lord M was also around, but there was no sight of him. Belatedly, she remembered that his sister had mentioned that he’d returned to Ireland when last they’d spoken.

Deciding to steer clear of much of society, Heidi took a glass of wine from a maid and found her favorite corner in the parlor, slipping into a vacant seat.

A good ten minutes passed before Anne called out to her. She took a breath, stood, and greeted her friend, unable to stop her despair at Anne’s grin. It was clear at first sight how much married life agreed with her, and how little she would need Heidi from now on.

“I am dreadfully sorry we have not come to call in recent weeks,” Anne said, pulling Heidi’s hands down so they sat together on a couch. “We have been residing at John’s uncle’s place in Croyden. The weather will be far too cold soon enough to consider a full bridal tour, but the privacy has been spectacular.”

Heidi couldn’t help it when a smile crossed her face. Despite her own pitiable state, Anne’s
cheerful demeanor lightened Heidi’s spirits.

“I have missed you, something dreadful, but I am happy to hear that your first weeks as a married woman have treated you well.”

A sly, slow smile parted Anne’s lips. “The word ‘well’ is...perhaps an underestimation.”

Heidi almost sputtered. Surprised that Anne was capable of such an innocent devil guise.

“He is treating you well?” Heidi leaned forward, so much innuendo dripping from the words that she should’ve burst into flames.

“My worries were for naught.”

“So glad to hear it,” she said, daring a wink as she settled back into her seat.

Anne asked about life in town then and Heidi did her best to appear as chipper as possible. There was no sense in upsetting Anne as the newly minted Mrs. Watson couldn’t help her anyway.

She’d regrettably not seen much of Percival in the last few weeks, but inferred that it was due to his responsibilities in preparing for the party that had kept him away.

The dinner bell rang not long afterward, and Heidi found herself seated at the middle of the table, as far from either side as she could get. She wished the Bingleys or the Darcys were around, but neither couple seemed to be in attendance. Considering it was Darcy’s uncle’s birthday, she found it odd.

A utensil clattering on a plate broke through the chatter. Heidi looked past her conversation partner and over at the earl. A footman was at his side, handing him a clean fork.

“You were saying, Miss Meldrum,” the lord at her right continued. “You spent much of your youth on the continent.”

“Yes,” she continued, picking at the boiled potato on her plate. “I spent a fair amount of my youth in the small village in Germany where my mother was born.”

“I too have German relatives.”

“Do you indeed?” she asked, smiling at him. “From where do they hail?”

“A city in the north, by the name of Meppen.”

“Meppen?” Heidi squeaked the name out, banging her knee on the underside of the table.

“You know of it?”

She nodded her head, her voice having fled. *Oh she knew it, alright.*

“I journeyed from there recently,” he said. “Perhaps it is imprudent of me, but did you have any misfortunes traveling to England with the French Occupation?”

“I—“ she started.

*Shit.*

“I try not to think about it,” she said.
He inspected her closely. Heidi averted her eyes.

“I do not mean to upset you, Miss Meldrum.”

She let out a breath and relaxed.

“How is it that you know Meppen?”

“My mother’s family is from the area. I must admit I never expected to meet anyone that lived near the Ems,” she said, feeling better that he’d dropped the questioning about current events.

Heidi talked to the man, steering clear of details, but she’d learned that he’d traveled north from the town and through her mother’s village just a few months back.

Though she was desperate to learn if he had actually met her relatives, Heidi couldn’t very well ask. Her relatives had no idea she existed, and while she might know of her family tree, she couldn’t be sure who was alive in this year.

A lump formed in her throat. Maybe this man was some distant cousin. She still had a distant relative or two living within walking distance of the city. Well, biking distance perhaps.

Glass shattering echoed through the room and Heidi’s heart jumped at the sight of Lord Fitzwilliam lying face down on his plate.

“John,” Percival called out, even as shouts of surprise echoed.

Heidi looked at Anne, whose face had grown pale, and already John was pushing out of his chair, heading for the earl.

Within moments, Percival and John, with the help of a lord whose name she couldn’t remember, had pulled his lordship from his chair, and were in the process of moving him carefully to the floor.

Everyone stared.

“Please,” Heidi said, clearing her throat. She didn’t have a clue what had happened, but knowing the earl would need air, or at the least give the family privacy, she quickly made an announcement. “If everyone will follow me to the drawing room, I will have Mr. Simmons bring out some brandy.”

The men all turned to her, a couple of the women looked ready to swoon.

One of the footmen opened the door as she made eye contact and began ushering the guests across the corridor.

“Send for his lordship’s primary physician,” she said, to the butler who stared at the corner. “There must be someone he prefers.”

The man ignored her and Heidi stepped in front of him, taking charge, as those who should be were otherwise engaged. “Go now,” she said, breaking his line of sight and pressing her hand to his chest.

He stumbled back, though she barely touched him.

“His lordship may not have long for this world.”

The butler nodded and then turned, rushing out of the room.
By the time she knelt at Anne’s side, her hands shaking, Earl Fitzwilliam had woken up.

“Your Lordship?” Watson asked. “Can you see me?

He nodded, blinking quickly.

“How many fingers do you see?”

His lordship slurred out an answer, as if his tongue had grown too large and Heidi’s mouth went dry.

“Can he move? Stand?” Heidi asked, unable to stop the questions from spilling from her lips.

The earl lifted his arm a few inches but it fell limp against the floor.

“I’ve sent for his physician. He will know the earl’s history.”

“Quick thinking, Miss Meldrum,” the doctor said, then instructed Percival and Ambrose to lift the earl into a chair.

Her eyes darted around the room.

“Maybe I should go,” she said, feeling incredibly awkward.

“Perhaps you should,” the doctor said, but not in an unkind way. “Mrs. Watson, would you leave with Miss Meldrum?”

Anne nodded, stepping out from behind her husband. “We will attend to your guests, cousin,” she said to Percival, and then took Heidi’s arm, leading them to the door.

When the earl’s doctor arrived an hour later, many of the guests had already departed. Once it was known that the earl had had some sort of apoplexy, many agreed that maybe it would be best that the house quietened while he recovered. Anne thanked the party goers and apologized for the disturbance though even the highest ranked of the guest list agreed that it was better to reconvene at a different date.

It was well after midnight when Anne finally broached the subject with Heidi.

“Do you know what has occurred?”

Heidi shook her head, giving Anne a shrug. “I don’t know. It could be a lot of things, and I don’t have the medical training to be able to give an educated guess.”

She looked at Mr. Carter and then at the doña, both watching her intently.

The two doctors and Percival came downstairs moments later and joined the family in the parlor.

Heidi immediately rang the bell for the maid, having told the girl earlier to have a few drinks ready for the men when they came down.

She was surprised at the ease with which the staff listened to her, since she hadn’t been around much the last couple of weeks, but it was comforting, despite the situation, that they listened to her.

“How does his lordship fare?” Heidi asked.

The summoned doctor looked to Percival, who nodded, and Heidi couldn’t help the frisson of
annoyance that shot through her chest.

“We believe his lordship has had an apoplexy of the brain.”

“His symptoms?”

Again, the man looked to Baron Fitzwilliam before answering her question and Heidi narrowed her eyes.

“Trouble speaking, head pains, dizziness, some issues seeing clearly, pain on his left side.”

“Sounds like a stroke,” she said, to herself.

“What was that?” Doctor Watson asked.

“Nothing,” she said, waving dismissively. She knew nothing about strokes, except didn’t people take aspirin to prevent them?

Or was that heart attacks?

“He is sleeping for now, but I would recommend that Watson keep watch overnight. If he has another episode, send someone to fetch me.”

Percival nodded. “Thank you for coming so quickly, Arthur.” The two men shook hands and Percival escorted the doctor out of the room.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Watson, but I will be occupied this eve’. Perhaps Mr. Carter would be willing to escort you to Croyden?” Watson asked, resting his hand on Anne’s arm.

“Mrs. Watson is welcome at Henrietta Street if she desires to stay within the city tonight,” the doña offered.

Anne turned her gaze at Heidi, blinked and then answered. “That would be lovely. Thank you for the offer.”
Tuesday, December 15th, 1812

Heidi walked into the earl’s bedroom a few days later, at Percival’s request.

The room was dark, the drapes pulled and a fire in the hearth, and Percival sat in a chair at his father’s bedside, spooning the broth into his mouth.

Heidi paused, whispering her words. “I did not mean to interrupt, your lordship.”

“Come in. I had you sent for, did I not?” His voice flat, her heart ached for him.

She nodded, walking deeper into the room. There was an oppressive tension that weighted the air. The longer she stood there, the more it pressed itself upon her too.

“Is there something I can help with?”

“Let me finish attending my father, and we can talk.”

Heidi took the offered chair by the fireplace and waited for the son to finish attending his father.

“Doctor Watson informed me that my father is not recovering from his apoplexy as well as he would like,” he said, talking in hushed tones when he sat beside her a few minutes later.

The curtain was closed around the bed.

“Is he sleeping?”

“My Lord Father spends much of his time asleep. I fear for his life.”

Heidi winced. “I am sorry.”

She reached out a hand, but pulled it back, afraid to console Percival in a way he would not wish.

“I hoped you could help me with something.”

“Anything,” she said.

“I need you to write to Ewan for me.”

Her heart lurched.

“You wish me to write to your brother?” she asked, trying to make sense of his words.

“I cannot,” he said, averting his eyes. “I have attempted a dozen times to apprise him of the situation; but—” Percival cut himself off with a shrug.

Pity washed through her and Heidi rested her hand over his, despite her earlier misgivings.

“If that is what you need, of course I will.”

She ignored the welling up of tears in his eyes, looking darker than they had ever been before.

“I find myself unable to write the words. He has other priorities,” he said, a dead chuckle in his voice. “And yet, he should be told of what occurred.”
Percival’s voice cracked and Heidi squeezed his hand.

“I heard from my brother a few weeks past,” he said, averting his eyes and breaking the silence.

Her hold slackened, but Heidi kept her hand on top of his. “You did?” She tried to keep her voice steady.

Percival gave her a single nod.

“Is he well? Where is his battalion located?”

“He is in Spain, and well enough, from what I could decipher. They have been in the middle of the battlefield for some time; but I have no other information.”

He turned away again, and Heidi felt there was more to it. But she also had seen those documentaries from World War 1 and 2. Correspondence was redacted considerably. It was possible his brother’s letter had been as well.

“At least he is alive,” she said, squeezing his hand again.

“There’s something I should—“

The door to the bedroom opened, interrupting Percival, and Heidi snatched her hand back, turning to face the intrusion.

“Doctor Watson, Anne,” she said, seeing the couple come into the room. The couple had been staying at the townhouse for the last few days, Anne only coming to Henrietta street that first night.

Heidi dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, trying to hide her tears from Percival.

Anne crossed the room and pulled Heidi away while the doctor appeared ready to have a serious talk with Percival.

“Have you remembered anything from your experience that might help?” she asked, looping her hand through Heidi’s arm and leading her to the window.

Heidi shook her head. “Just that they give medicine to thin the blood of people who have had the same symptoms. Everything else is far too advanced to make any sense to your husband. I do not even know how they diagnose a stroke. Just that it’s usually caused by a blockage of some sort in his brain. This likely won’t be the last of them, and it probably wasn’t the first, either.”

Anne glanced over at the bed.

Heidi continued, making her best guess at what the modern doctors might do for a stroke patient. “I think surgeons cut into the veins and remove the blockages, but they have tiny tools and advanced technologies that we could never replicate. It would be far too dangerous.”

“Even with the resources we might afford?”

“Even then.”

Heidi followed Anne’s disappointed gaze. “At least he awakes from time to time, long enough to get some liquids into his system. Without them, he’d be dead in three days,” she finished.

“Three days?”
Heidi nodded. “Some say it takes three days to die of dehydration and three weeks to die of starvation.”

“It is such a dreadful way to die.” Anne sighed. “What would they do in your time?”

“Give them nutrients through their veins, a feeding tube. There’s a few options, but Anne, I don’t know anything about that stuff. If we attempted it, and it killed him—“

“Best not to test it then,” she said, defeated.

“As awful as it is, I could end up making things worse for your uncle.”

“Watson says only time will tell if he recovers.”

Heidi nodded. “His lordship hasn’t spoken in the past few days, has he?”

Anne shook her head, biting the corner of her lip.

Thinking that Anne would be the best person to advise her, Heidi cleared her throat to catch her attention. “Your cousin wishes for me to write to the colonel.”

Anne quirked an eyebrow, but only nodded. Heidi gazed listlessly again at the curtains, almost shroud-like in the low light. This was going to feel like the letters she’d written to doña and Mr. Carter when Mrs. Carter passed and it had been a heavy duty.

Feeling the chill, she rubbed her arms. “He says he’s tried to write and failed. Anne, I don’t think I’m the one to take on this task.”

“I think, perhaps, you are the only one of us that could.”

“This is a mess,” Heidi protested, wanting to pinch the bridge of her nose. With no gloves on, she wasn’t going to touch her face.

“Be there for the both of them, Heidi. That is all we can do.”

Taking that advice to heart, Heidi watched Percival with Watson. “I was beginning to think he’d changed his mind about being my friend,” she said, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?”

“Before the party, I hadn’t seen him since just after the wedding.”

“A fortnight?” Anne asked, quickly calculating the dates.

“One minute he wants me to help him chose a bride, the next…” Heidi shrugged. “They call it ghosting. Dropping all contact and disappearing, like a ghost.”

Anne smirked at the modernism but nodded. “I had no notion. I am sorry you felt abandoned.”

“You had other priorities,” Heidi said, with a smile. “Besides, I can take care of myself.”

“You should not be required to do such.”

“I’m making the best of it.”

“As you should.”
“This mindless, society, life is not all it’s cracked up to be, Anne. I need to find a purpose, and playing matchmaker is not it.”

Doctor Watson and Percival came toward them then, prompting Heidi to step back, allowing the gentlemen into their conversation.

“His lordship must make the decision to recover,” he said, in hushed tones. “Without that will to live, he will not survive. I am sorry to say it, but you should be aware of the truth.”

“You must be funning me.” There was a growled tone in his voice that had a shiver rolling down her spine.

“I am not. I would ensure his documents are in order. You will inherit Wych Elm, I presume.”

Percival nodded. “Now is not the time.”

“Do not postpone such discussions for long, my friend.”

The conversation dropped.

“His lordship has some function, right?” Heidi asked, an idea sparking in her mind.

The doctor nodded. “Some.”

“What about a therapy program? Giving him tasks to re-learn.”

“What do you mean?”

“Instead of letting him wallow about, become depressed, and take himself to an early grave, if you can’t do it, find someone to teach him how to hold a fork and spoon again, how to walk again.”

Percival furrowed his brow.

“That is an excellent idea, Heidi,” Anne said, stepping forward a touch.

“Whoever teaches him, will need to be patient, but such actions, giving your father some of his independence back, it could help. Perhaps that motivation would be enough for him to find the will to live. I cannot say it would be enough, but you must try.”

“Where did you learn such a thing?”

Heidi shrugged. “Back home,” she said, like it wasn’t a big deal and hoped she wasn’t about to be forced to tell the two men the truth. She liked that they thought her normal. “They do therapy for everything. I even used it to get mobility back in my knee after my accident.”

“Perhaps you and I should talk sometime, Miss Meldrum,” the doctor said. “Sooner rather than later.”

“Certainly. I would be happy to let you know what I know.”

Well…some of it.
Colonel Fitzwilliam,

I regret to inform you I apologize if the very act of writing to you has, or will in some way, upset you; however your brother has asked me to pen this letter to you as he cannot find the words to tell you what has occurred. I fear he is aggrieved despondent in his grief.

I am sorry to During your father’s birthday celebration on the 11th of December, the earl suffered an apoplexy of the brain. He is alive, but struggles to recover. I will not hide from you that it has taken its toll on Baron Fitzwilliam; however, I wish for you to know that your father is a strong man. Doctor Watson has every hope that he will turn the corner soon, though the journey will be long and not without its own struggles.

I know you Please know that your family and friends think about you often and worry for your safety.

I hope this letter finds you well, hale, and whole.

 Regards,

Heidi
Heidi grinned at the sight before her. She wasn’t sure how Anne had managed it, but the woman had delivered the top of a spruce tree to the Carters’ townhouse on Christmas Eve.

“What do you do with a Christmas Tree?” Anne asked, as the butler and the footman fashioned a tree stand out of a bucket and dirt.

The tree top was only about four feet tall, but after thinking they wouldn’t have anything available to make Christmas something she recognized, it was perfect.

“You decorate it,” she grinned.

“With what?” Anne asked, putting a hand on her hip.

“Candles, tinsel, ornaments, lights, strings of popcorn, angels, straw stars.”

“What is popcorn?”

Heidi chuckled. “Dried corn kernels that are cooked. With a bit of oil or butter in there.”

“I do not believe I understand.”

“Far as I know, the oil super heats the kernels and they pop open. Very good hot and fresh with a little butter and salt. And sometimes chocolate.”

“It sounds delicious, but…”

“We won’t get any here, I think,” she said, with a half shrug, keeping her eyes on the tree. “Lean it a little to the right please, Mr. Cornel.”

The tree top moved about an inch or two.

“Perfect.”

Heidi and Anne spent the next few hours figuring out how to get the candles to stay on the tree without the clips she’d used in the future. Heidi couldn’t help but wish that Rose was with them, the lighthearted afternoon would surely boost some spirits.

They didn’t have glass balls or handmade straw stars, but she did show Anne how to make paper snowflakes and a garland or two of dried fruits from the Carter’s pantry. Heidi promised that as long as they weren’t covered in sap, they could eat them later, but it added a little something special.

She’d kept the servants and the Carters out of the room, wanting to celebrate the reveal properly, after supper. Since she hadn’t shared the St. Nick gifts, Heidi still had a few things to put under the tree when the family would be enjoying supper.

Though he wasn’t fully recovered, the earl was due to arrive at 8 p.m. with Percival and Watson. Ambrose had returned to Gariton shortly after it was certain that the earl’s health was stable last week.

“It is breathtaking,” Anne said, stepping back from the table. “I can easily imagine why this became a tradition.”
Heidi nodded.

“And the King and Queen start this tradition?”

“It’s brought over from Germany, and Poland I think, but yes. I have a vague memory of the Christmas portrait being of this, and the tradition is born. Though I don’t know what year that is.”

“You do not worry about changing the future with this?”

Heidi pursed her lips, the smells from the kitchen including proper gingerbread, and she shook her head. “What could one tree do?” she asked. “Everything I’ve done, that might have been seen as contrary to what I know is truth, has all looped back around.”

“That is one way to look at it,” Anne said, unsure.

“I cannot help but meddle in some affairs,” she said, quietly. “But I appear to have no effect on the future. At least, not immediately.” The more Anne broached the topic, the less sure Heidi became.

They blew out the candles, despite knowing that a wet tree would likely not catch so soon after cutting and burn down the house.

Making their way through the corridor, the chambermaid came up to her.

“A letter for you, Miss,” she said, handing it forward and bobbing.

Heidi took the letter, immediately recognizing Rose’s handwriting.

“We are still on for the 9:50 reveal, are we not?”

Hannah grinned. “Yes, Miss.”

“Good. I will ring the bell from the study and hurry back to my seat. Can’t have our dinner guests thinking it is I who lit the candles.”

“No, Miss.”

“Be careful.”

“I will, Miss,” she said, and then dashed down the corridor toward the kitchen, where they were no doubt slammed with work.

Heidi broke open the seal and read the beautiful script quickly.

“She wishes us a Happy Christmas,” she said, reading aloud to Anne. “And wishes that she’d been able to make the journey, but the doctor is busy with patients and Edward refused to come to town without his father.”

Heidi frowned. She needed to go home soon and spend some time with the girl, who was likely lonelier than ever.

“She says that the mare at Rosings had her foal, though she is as surprised as we are that the horse had been mated. And that,” she said turning the small parchment over. “Edward has been talking to Miss Emilia Ashford in recent days.”

“Oh, do continue!”
Heidi grinned at Anne’s thirst for gossip, learning closer. “I daresay she thinks herself suited for the task of matching her brother with someone in Hunsford. Do you know Miss Ashford?”

“I believe the Ashford’s hale from Beckenshire.”

Heidi’s heart skipped a beat as she read the next paragraph.

“Charlotte,” she said, eyes snapping up to Anne. “It appears as if the Collins’ family will be growing at the beginning of spring.”

Anne’s eyes sparkled at the news and they shared an embrace, happy for their friend.

“We must find a gift to present to Charlotte when we return,” Anne said.

“I think that is a brilliant idea,” Heidi replied, grinning and tucking the letter under her arm to take up to her room when she changed for supper.

Once gathered with the Carters in the drawing room, she was exceptionally careful to give nothing away. It was funny, the youthful mein of exuberance on Mr. Carter’s face, at the idea of the surprise. Doña Carter only rolled her eyes dramatically at her husband while he tried to needle information out of Anne and Heidi.

Watson and Percival escorted the earl into the drawing room at a quarter ‘til 8, using one of the Bath chairs, the nurse they hired trailing behind. The woman was burly and strong, like a Brienne of Tarth character rather than Florence Nightingale, but her bedside manner, when sent up from the agency had been perfect.

She could be tough with the earl, keeping him to the physical therapy sessions that Heidi and Watson had planned out, but was gentle when it had been a frustrating day.

Heidi’s heart went out to the man, as she tried not to stare.

The left side of his face drooped considerably, and though he didn’t wear a bib, there was a shimmer of a line of drool down his chin.

The nurse noticed it and quickly wiped it away, not even acknowledging it and Heidi felt a little better. The earl was a proud man, if misogynistic, and Heidi wondered how well he was dealing with the inability to do anything for himself.

Heidi’s thoughts drifted to the letter she’d written on Percival’s behalf almost a week ago. She’d tried to remain impersonal, not telling the colonel how much she missed him; but now that the letter was out of her hands, Heidi wondered if she shouldn’t have rewritten the letter on clean parchment.

She tugged at her bottom lip with her teeth.

“Happy Christmas,” Percival said, interrupting her thoughts and positioning himself to take a seat beside Heidi on the couch when they would eventually sit.

“Happy Christmas,” she said, allowing him to take her hand. She’d already gone through the formal greetings with the rest of the room, and the earl now had a place beside Mr. Carter.

“How does he fare?” she asked, making sure not to look at the earl. It wouldn’t do to let the man know they were talking about him.
“He has never had particular fondness for this time of year. The former earl, my grandfather, passed on Boxing Day, a few years before my birth. From what I gather, Christmastide was a joyous occasion at Wych Elm before the event.”

Heidi nodded. Her mother had been devastated when Opa Karls died almost twenty years ago. She could well understand how long it took a loved one to move past the death of their own parent.

Knowing Percival needed to get out of the house, Heidi was determined to do whatever necessary to get some life back into him.

“I heard there is to be a celebration on Boxing Day,” she said. “At the Cowper estate. Do you anticipate making an appearance?”

“No, I think not. I do not wish to leave the earl too long.”

“A couple hours out of the house is not going to change things,” Heidi said. “His lordship grows stronger. Even I can see it.”

He still frowned, though his brow had softened. “You seem to be wise about such things, Miss Meldrum. I will consider it.”

She smiled and from the dining room, she could hear the dinner bell ring. “If it would help, I would be happy to either accompany yourself, or, stay at the house on George Street and help with anything Mrs. O’Connell might require.”

He shifted in his seat, and Heidi was certain that he was going to say something, but the doors to the drawing room opened and the moment was lost.

When they settled into the dining room to sup, Heidi tried not to watch the clock too carefully.

Every now and then she’d catch Anne’s knowing eye before averting her gaze back to her plate. Sitting at her uncle’s side, she was also across from Anne, who was the most important female guest, and furthest away from Percival.

He glanced at her now and again, but his attention was on his father for most of the meal.

When the appropriate time came, Heidi spilled her water glass onto her lap, crying out in shock.

“Oh, please excuse me,” she said, taking pains not to soak the fabric with anything other than her napkin. “I will return presently.”

The gentlemen made to stand, but she waved away their concern and scurried out of the room, unable to make eye contact with either the doña or Anne. She dashed down the corridor to the study and rang the bell as ordered and did her best to dry up the water with the towel she’d preemptively placed near the bell.

She’d been seated for about five minutes, after lighting the candles on the tree with strict instructions to Mattison to keep a careful eye on the surprise, when the chimes rang from the neighboring room, and the doña looked to Heidi, who gave a grin.

“I believe,” she said. “That we have been visited.”

There were confused looks all around, but Heidi directed her uncle to please open the door that lead to the adjoining chamber, where the Christmas tree had been set up.
The older man’s eyes lit up and he quickly crossed the room and opened the double doors.

“What is this?” the doña asked, warm candlelight flooding the chamber.

“A little slice of a German Christmas,” she said, grinning and taking up a position at the rear of the group.

By the time the rest of the family had gathered, Heidi was grinning. The scent of cinnamon and gingerbread filled the air as the fireplace cracked.

“You have outdone yourself,” Mr. Carter said, wrapping his hands over hers. Heidi suppressed the flinch but thankfully Mr. Carter pulled away quickly.

“Sp-spectacular,”

Heidi turned at the earl’s praise, and grinned, kneeling in front of him to meet his gaze, eyes sparkling with awe.

“Thank you, your lordship.”

He waved his hand and she stepped back. Mrs. O’Connell, who’d spent her supper time feeding both herself and her charge, pushed him toward the tree so he could get a better look as Heidi watched, beaming. It was the first multisyllabic word the invalid Earl had spoken in weeks. Perhaps he wasn’t as cold-hearted as she’d originally thought.

Near her side, Watson wrapped an arm around Anne’s waist and pulled her in close, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“I have gifts for everyone,” Heidi announced brightly, spotting the small wrapped presents under the tree, glad that Hannah had fetched them from the other room. Since she hadn’t given the St. Nick’s gifts to her friends nearly three weeks ago, Heidi had been a little ahead of the curve. The gifts were modest, but they were from the heart and she hoped they liked them.

When the gifts had been exchanged, Heidi settled into a seat with a cup of chocolate. The cook had even managed a passable marshmallow, which was currently melting into the steaming liquid.

“Miss Meldrum,” Watson said when the chatting about gifts had died down. “Mrs. Watson has been telling stories that you know some Christmas songs.”

Heidi flushed. “I have been… tinkering… with some traditional songs that I knew, but I’m afraid I am a less than passable pianist. My renderings of Adeste Fideles and the like would never match a true aficionado’s abilities.”

“Did Mrs. Watson not tell you?”

Heidi raised an eyebrow at the doctor, unaware that there would be any surprises for her.

“I can play the piano.”

Before she could stop it, she giggled with delight. Across the room, Heidi saw Percival’s head snap in her direction. For the briefest of moments, his cares melted from his features and he smiled at her, as if her joy had brought some to him.

“A few Christmas Carols would be a joy,” she said, and put her cup down, walking over to the piano where doctor Watson placed the sheet music to Hark, the Herald Angels Sing on the music
rack.
“Miss Meldrum, what a surprise.”

Heidi pasted her fake smile on and turned to face Caroline Bingley.

She curtseyed and greeted the woman and was introduced to Mr. Hurst’s cousin’s friend, Miss Henley. Playing her part beautifully, if she did say so herself, Heidi asked all the right questions and made small talk with the women.

Unfortunately, Anne and Watson were on their Bridal Tour, leaving her alone to face the wolves. Since the weather was holding out well enough, and with the earl relatively stable, they’d decided to leave as promptly as possible. They were due to return in about a month, and Heidi was missing her friend terribly.

“This is the lady I spoke to you about,” Caroline said, to her companion.

“His lordship’s companion?”

“The same.”

Heidi nodded her head, biting her tongue to keep some choice words from spilling out. Oh, she heard the insinuation, the judgement, in the woman’s voice, but she would not be baited.

“It is a lovely day, is it not?” she asked, forcing herself to sound pleasant as she glanced up at the sky. It was, after all, a clear day and unseasonably warm for early January. She only needed a light spencer and a shawl rather than the long cloak that the doña had let her borrow for most of the cold days so far.

“Indeed,” Miss Henley said, flipping open her fan. “I am surprised Lady Hamilton opted to hold the gathering in the gardens rather than the conservatory though.”

Heidi tipped her head in agreement.

These people and their mindless chatter.

She suppressed an eye roll, knowing she needed to remain polite.

Stupid Percival and his stupid matchmaking favor.

“You know the family well?”

The question surprised Heidi out of her thoughts. ”The Hamilton’s?”

“No,” the young miss said, with a grin. “The Fitzwilliam family. Miss Bingley inferred that you were well acquainted with the entire family.”

Heidi pursed her lips. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“How long have you held the ear of the baron?”

“I wouldn’t say that I am a close confidant of his lordship,” she said, mentally cursing the way the sentence had come out. “I mean to say, that I have been a close companion of Mrs. Watson nee de Bourgh almost since the day I returned to Hunsford this past February. I am only recently
acquainted with her cousins.”

The girl lifted her head a bit. “Indeed?”

“Yes,” she said, with some hesitation. Better to tell the truth than not, she reasoned. “I never expected to find such a good friend in Mrs. Watson, but it has been the blessing.”

Miss Henley’s eyes narrowed, enough that Heidi could guess at the woman’s thoughts. Miss Henley most certainly wondered if she could get in on that action.

Not a contender for Percy’s heart then.

A few minutes later, Miss Bingley returned with a small glass of cordial for her friend. Heidi took notice of the snub and merely raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, Miss Meldrum, were you in want of some refreshment? I can certainly have another cup fetched for you.”

Heidi’s reply was polite but begged off the cup, if only as an excuse to escape Caroline.

Thankfully, Heidi spotted Miss Heathcote speaking with another young woman nearby. Heidi had seen them together before, and while not properly introduced, it was the perfect out from conversing with the odious Miss Bingley and her friend.

She slipped graciously away and came up alongside the other ladies.

“Miss Meldrum,” a fourth voice called out. Heidi masked her surprise at seeing Emily Temple once again.

“Countess,” she said, giving the woman a curtsey.

“It has been far too long since we last had the pleasure of conversation.”

“My thoughts precisely, your ladyship.”

Heidi introduced the Countess to Florentia and Miss Shreve and the ladies fell into chatter that was much more comfortable than her previous conversation with Caroline and Miss Henley.

The next hour passed quickly as she got to know the sister of Lord Melbourne and the other two society women.

Miss Shreve and Miss Heathcote had grown up together, their mothers being cousins, and Heidi was glad to put them in contact with the countess. She felt a certain sort of pride that she was the one making introductions. A thought that had at one time terrified her.

Saying goodbye that afternoon to the countess as the gathering wound down, Heidi was surprised to once again see Caroline at her side.

A shiver raced down her spine.

The hidden stiletto, though she hadn’t used it since the attack, was ever present in case someone else ever tried to attack her.

“Miss Meldrum, we have not had much of an opportunity to converse with one another this afternoon.”
Before she could stop the woman, Caroline had wrapped her arm around Heidi’s elbow and was dragging her away from the street where the carriages were stopping to pick up their charges.

“Ah, no, Miss Bingley. I am afraid we have not.”

“Now would be a perfect time to do so, I think. You walked here from Henrietta Street, did you not?”

Heidi tried not to look surprised at that admission. “Yes, I did.”

There was no way for her to pull her arm away politely, so she stopped walking, hoping Caroline would take the hint.

Instead, Caroline pulled her along. “Come now, Miss Meldrum, we cannot have a proper private conversation out here, on the street.”

Fear began to trickle down from the nape of her neck.

“You had something in particular you wished to speak of?”

Caroline guffawed for the briefest of moments before schooling her features. “I did, in fact.”

Heidi wet her lips, waiting impatiently.

When Caroline didn’t immediately respond, Heidi raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“I--- wished to inquire about his lordship’s health.”

Dread curled in Heidi’s stomach. “He is much improved,” she said, keeping her response vague.

“Is he indeed? Mr. Hurst said only yesterday that he had not seen the earl at the club in weeks.”

“Well,” Heidi said, reaching. “He is not well enough to socialize yet. But I daresay he is recovering by leaps and bounds.”

Caroline nodded her head vigorously. “It is as I expected. Such a strong family line could not be for nothing.”

Heidi did not respond.

“Tell me, how fares his lordship?”

Heidi, confused, blinked.

“Baron Fitzwilliam.”

Ahh, there it was.

An intrusive thought kept her from responding immediately. The image of brandishing her stiletto at Caroline and telling her to back off made her smile.

“He does his best to step into his father’s shoes as the earl convalesces,” she said, trying to be friendly. “He is knowledgeable about every detail of the affairs of his father, so it is not difficult for him.”

She couldn’t tell the woman, nor would she want to, about how Percival struggled to find strength
in this setback.

“That is good to hear.” Caroline grinned, her hand squeezing Heidi’s arm. “Good indeed.”

Heidi gave Caroline a nod, uncomfortable as all hell.

“We are great friends, Miss Meldrum. Perhaps you could tell me, do you think he will come back out into society soon?”

That was a blatant lie.

“I do not know. There is sometimes a period of withdrawal when one takes on new responsibilities.”

Caroline’s face fell.

“But, I can assure you that his lordship will return to society when he is ready.”

Heidi cursed at the bright smile that now adorned Caroline’s face.

Stupid stupid. Shouldn’t give her hope.

She turned her head to see Florentia standing nearby.

“I should be on my way, the doña wished for my early return.” Heidi pulled her arm out of Caroline’s grasp.

“Of course.” Caroline curtseyed. “I will delay you no longer, Miss Meldrum.”

Heidi returned the gesture and headed toward Henrietta Street, but not before smiling secretly at Florentia.
Thursday, January 14th, 1813

Chapter Notes

A big thank you to all my readers, commenters and lurkers and bookmarks alike!

Four days and four chapters! Buckle up!

It was mid-January before Heidi received any word from the newlyweds. In a way she wished it were 2019 where honeymoons lasted a week or two rather than a month and half or more.

The letter that Anne had sent from Derbyshire had been filled with praise over Georgiana: The girl was blossoming into a young woman and looked forward to next year. Anne admitted that Georgiana had shown her the ruins of the ancient estate and they had come across a small group of Roma who had told stories about a woman traveler they’d seen. Heidi had flushed at that, surprised they were still around the county, but warmed that they had remembered her so many months later. In her letter, Anne had promised that Miss Darcy had no inclination that Heidi and the traveler were one and the same.

Donning her spencer, Heidi prepared herself for a quick outing. Her excursion today was two-fold, the first order of business something she’d been meaning to take care of for months, the other, depended entirely on if Mr Darcy was available. If he was home, she wanted to talk to him about selling her earrings. It was an expensive business, this season thing. And she had little money left.

Percival had been far too distracted lately and Heidi did not want to bring up her petty needs in the light of his struggles with his father.

Truth was, the earl wasn’t getting any better. In fact, he’d struggled so much with the nurse’s physical therapy that Heidi wondered if he was giving up, or perhaps the aging man was growing tired.

That pain on his face was part of why she hadn’t visited in recent weeks. It hurt too much to watch, even if she wasn’t exactly a fan of the earl’s.

Double-checking that the earrings were in the small pouch she’d made, Heidi rang for Mattison, the footman who normally accompanied her on her outings.

It took ten minutes to cross Berkley Square and make her way through the streets to the Darcy house on Charles Street. The newlyweds lived in a younger neighborhood, but no less prestigious. In fact, Heidi figured that the Bingleys had a house on the street as well or at least the Hursts did. She had yet to be invited to either home.

Once she’d given her card to the butler at the Darcys’ residence, recalling that Anne was the one who’d bid her get the damn things, Heidi had Mattison put the trunk he’d carried on a chair to keep the table from being scratched, then promptly dismissed him.

When Lizzy entered the room, she greeted Heidi with a smile and offered her a seat.

“I have returned your gowns,” Heidi said, waving toward the box. “All nice and clean and returned to their original sizing.”
Lizzy grinned. “I had almost forgotten. You need not have gone through such effort.”

“I had not forgotten,” she said. “I learned a great deal about alterations thanks to those gowns. And now that my wardrobe is replenished, it is time to return what you so graciously allowed me to borrow.”

Lizzy smiled warmly. “Thank you, Heidi. I will have them sent to Hunsford when next I have the chance.”

“Is Mr Darcy available?” Heidi asked after a beat, worrying her bottom lip.

“He was preparing to go to the club this afternoon, but I believe him to still be in residence.”

“Would it be a terrible imposition to speak with him?”

“Not at all, is something the matter?”

“No. I merely require a recommendation and I hoped to receive one from your husband.”

Though obviously curious, Lizzy rang the bell and requested her husband’s presence. When he arrived, Heidi flew into her speech about needing a jeweler who would be willing to give her a fair price on some earrings she had. Sidelong glances at Lizzy’s widening eyes confirmed her curiosity as Heidi spoke of wanting to repay the Carters for their generosity.

It seemed Percival had spoken to Darcy about her situation before, because Mr Darcy had nodded solemnly but without question as he wrote down the jeweler’s name that he preferred.

“Do you think it would be wiser to go with my uncle as an intermediary?” she asked, twisting the paper in her still-gloved hand. “Or would he give a fair price to me, whether or not I was a woman?”

“Best to bring someone along, I daresay,” he said, then cocked his head. “In fact, if you wish, I would be happy to accompany you this afternoon, if you have no other engagements.”

Heidi relaxed. “That would be appreciated.”

An hour later, Heidi had a wallet with the note for three hundred and thirty-seven pounds in her purse as she and Mr Darcy walked out of the shop.

“Thank you, ever so much.”

He bowed his head toward her, putting his hat back on with the sun peeking through the clouds. “I am happy to be of service, Miss Meldrum.”

“Darcy?”

Heidi stopped short at the voice behind them, reaching for the stiletto she still sheathed on her calf every day.

“Wickham,” Mr Darcy said, taking a step closer to Heidi, shielding her from the other man’s view. “What brings you to town?” His shoulders straightened even more, adding another inch or two to his height. “I remember distinctly our final conversation in September.”

Wickham cleared his throat, but said nothing.

“What purpose could you possibly have in seeking me out?”
“Business.”

Heidi peered around Darcy’s shoulder. Wickham stared back at her, a singular eyebrow raised. Her voice stolen from her at the sight of her attacker.

“Miss Meldrum,” he continued, tipping his hat at her.

Heidi’s heart picked up its pace. Her feet were rooted to the ground and her stomach turned.

“How fortuitous it is to come upon you. I had hoped to call on you while I was in town.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“I have no idea why you should seek out Miss Meldrum, Mr Wickham.” Darcy’s eyes flashed, his anger already in danger of igniting. “I believe your business with her was concluded back in June.”

“On my honor,” the blackguard protested, holding up his hands. “I wished only to exchange a few words with the young lady.” He turned earnestly toward Heidi. His puppy dog eyes could never again earn her sympathy.

“I am armed,” she said through pursed lips.

His eyes grew wide. “I do not seek to harm you.”

“No?” she said, finding her voice. “I’m sure your Raven friends would beg to differ.”

Wickham looked at Darcy, shock evident on his features, before turning his gaze back to her.

“Oh, I know well you were in league with those gentlemen,” she said. “Once I recognized your look-out as one of the men who’d attacked myself and Mrs Watson on the road while we drove out with Brigham, I knew of your connections.”

“Miss Meldrum,” he said, with a laugh. “You are wise beyond compare.”

“It was sloppy, really,” she said, scoffing.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” Mr Darcy asked, undoubtedly knowing the details from his cousin of the trials at the Old Bailey and redirecting the conversation.

“Perhaps you would allow me to treat you to a drink at the coffee shop?” he pressed, holding out his hand, palm up, in the direction of the store across the street. “It is rather gauche to hold a private conversation on the street like beggars.”

“I—”

“I come to you in good faith, I swear it.”

Heidi, despite her misgivings, found herself nodding at Mr Wickham. Immediately she hated herself for this; but with Mr Darcy at her side, at least she had back-up.

“I will not allow the lady to go unescorted,” Mr Darcy said, interrupting her train of thought.

“Of course, you are welcome to join us, Darcy,” Wickham said. “I have nothing to hide from you.”

Thankfully he didn’t make a move to offer his arm to her and Heidi relaxed when Mr Darcy made the offer instead.
She ordered a coffee, with extra sweetener since she wasn’t a big fan of the bitter drink, and Mr Wickham plopped the coins down on the counter to pay for her drink.

Heidi’s main objective was to keep Mr Darcy between herself and the other man as they found a seat far away from the gossiping dandies, newspapers fluttered about haphazardly on the tables.

Wickham placed his hands before him on the stained wood, making a triangle with his thumbs and pointer fingers when they settled into their seats.

“I wished to apologize for my actions last summer,” he said, staring at his hands. “I made an error in judgement, in a fit of passion, and I am sorry.”

She swallowed back her emotions, floored at the apology.

“It was wrong of me to think that scaring you would make up for the truth of your words to Miss Elizabeth, I mean, Mrs Darcy, and Doctor Carter.”

Heidi frowned over at Darcy before turning to Wickham.

“I succumbed to a fit of temper and I am more grateful than I can say that you did not seek to ruin me after what I did.” He looked up at her then, his eyes the color of the coffee he’d just purchased. “The lure of the Ravens… it was not something I expected, but when I mentioned my suspicions, they—” Wickham sniffed, his eyes sincere as he stared at her. “It is no excuse. I should not have allowed myself to be swayed by the mix of drink, an invitation to the club, and boredom.”

Her throat was dry as she attempted to comprehend what had just happened.

His expression was expectant, his eyes searching hers and Heidi knew she should say something.

“I do not know if you are a bad man at your core,” she said. “And I can never explain why I did what I did. I can only pity you in taking such drastic measures to silence a woman, who is nothing to you.”

Wickham flushed, averting his eyes.

He started to stay something, but she held out a hand to stop him.

“Perhaps I should have come to you with my suspicions from the first; perhaps we have been making bad decisions for the entirety of our acquaintance; but you proved yourself to be villainous that day in the park.”

She waited, but Wickham didn’t try to correct her.

“I—” she started, wanting to explain her own motivations, that she wished to prevent his elopement with Lydia; but dredging up that part of the story would only invite more questions.

“I had not anticipated that you would hear my apology, if I attempted to make it,” Wickham said. “I cannot say exactly what prompted me to enlist Denny into my scheme with the Ravens, but the entire thing was, and still is, one of the worst decisions I have ever made.”

He looked up at Darcy then, “barring my plot against your sister, naturally.”

Beside her, Darcy stiffened.

“I have made a mockery of my life and I apologize for the ills I have caused.”
“You have needs of funds?” Darcy guessed.

“No,” Wickham said, laughing to himself. “I found I thrive in my married life, though perhaps I should have made a better choice in wife.”

Mr Darcy coughed.

“I have you to thank for that, Darcy.”

“You have only yourself to blame,” he said.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said, rubbing his chin. After a moment, he continued. “I hope you will both forgive me one day for the wrongs I have made. I would not dare ask for the forgiveness at this juncture.”

Silence settled over the table and Heidi took stock of the man before her. He looked weary, eyes sunken in, maybe skinnier than he had been when they first met.

She wondered if he had been reassigned like she remembered, but now was not the time to ask.

“And, Mrs Wickham, is she being treated fairly?”

He started at that. “I would not – Yes, she is being treated fairly.”

Warming her fingers on the coffee mug, Heidi continued her perusal. “She wants for nothing?”

Wickham snorted. “She wants for plenty, but is learning to live with what we have been generously given. I strive to attend to her needs.”

Happy wife, happy life, she thought with derision.

Licking her bottom lip, Heidi shifted in her seat, deciding that it was time to put him out of his misery, for now. “You are forgiven,” she said, feeling lighter after saying such.

Wickham grinned and turned to Mr Darcy. “I owe you much more than apologies, Darcy.”

Darcy nodded once but said nothing.

“I will find some way to repay you.”

“You can do that by staying away from Georgiana.”

Wickham looked more pained than Heidi had ever seen him. “If that is your wish.”

“It is.”

Wickham nodded. “There is little chance of me seeing her again anyway.”

“Like it or not, you are family now,” he said. “There will be times when Lydia and her sister wish to reconnect, perhaps it is wise if you do not join these excursions for some time.”

Wickham nodded again. “Understood.”

“When you have proven yourself, in the time I see fit, perhaps the subject can be revisited.”

Heidi gaped, impressed with the growth of some of the most infamous characters in history. When they looked at her, she managed too late to avert her eyes.
“Forgive me,” she said, looking at the clock so they’d not see the hint of a smile on her face.
The next afternoon Heidi found herself in a daze, riding in the gig to George Street, grateful that the rain had petered off since this morning. She felt… different… now that she’d found some closure with Wickham.

It was about three weeks until the anniversary of her arrival to 1812.

She hadn’t thought about it in some time, her days full of activity, but the looming anniversary had her considering the portal. Perhaps now that she’d gotten an apology from Wickham and things were looking up on that plot-front, the way home would be open to her. A return to Hunsford was the only way to find out for certain.

How fitting, she thought, if such thing would open for her on the anniversary. Maybe the moon and stars had to be aligned properly for the passage to occur.

She wasn’t sure that she wanted to go home, but if this was the only chance she had to return to toilet paper and good conditioner, Heidi wasn’t sure she should deliberately avoid it. She’d already made a muck of things with the colonel, and Anne was happily married.

Heidi made the vow then and there that if she got through, she would stay the hell home on February 8th, of every year she might ever see. No more time traveling.

The door opened as she mounted the steps to the house.

“Miss Meldrum,” Percival said, catching himself at the landing. “I was unware you intended to call this morning.”

Her stomach twisted. “Did I not say I’d be coming by to help with the earl?” she asked, brows knitted together.

Percival slumped his shoulders. “It is possible you did. However, I have a pressing engagement.”

“It’s alright, Percy,” she said. “I’ll see that your father is well cared for.”

He stopped on the steps and turned back to her.

Heidi, realizing her informal address, clapped her hands over her mouth dramatically.

“I do not recall anyone, save my mother, addressing me as Percy.” A distant look passed over his features, distracting him from his quick escape.

Heidi rolled her eyes to the sky, wishing a hole would open under her feet. “My apologies,” she said, behind closed lids. “I did not mean to—“
“It does not signify...Heidi,” he said, her name soft on his lips. “I daresay we are as close now as I have ever been with my brother.” His smile, thin with fatigue, was surely meant to be kindly. “You are welcome to address me by my given name, though perhaps not in the company of society, lest they arrive at the incorrect conclusion.”

Heidi winced at the mention of the colonel.

“Yes,” she said, realizing he was waiting for her to react. “I daresay you are the annoying older brother I never wished to have.”

Percival snorted with laughter, pulling his pocket watch out into his palm. He frowned down at the clock face.

“I must go,” he said, going down a few more steps.

She waved, though he didn’t turn back, and then entered the townhouse with Mattison on her heels.

When Heidi arrived at the breakfast table, Mrs O’Connell was seated at the earl’s side. She greeted them both and, though Heidi dismissed any idea of eating a second meal, she offered to read to the earl in the drawing room to give the nurse a break for an hour or two.

“How do you feel about Plato or Aristotle today, your lordship?” she asked, sitting at an empty seat.

“I p-prefer Plato,” he said, struggling to find his words.

Heidi smiled, hoping that the pity she felt didn’t show up on her face.

When he finished breakfast and Mr Simmons steered him into the conservatory, to see the sun, Heidi picked up the book and settled into the couch near the door.

Opening the book, Heidi found a folded piece of parchment being used as a bookmark about half way through.

“Did Mrs O’Connell already start reading the Plato?”

“My son,” the earl said.

Heidi flipped the parchment over to see that it was a letter addressed to Percival and placed it on the nearby table.

She read three chapters to the earl before he fell asleep. All the while, she kept stealing glances at the letter.

It was wrong to read the letter. Very wrong.

Swallowing her nerves, Heidi picked it up and unfolded it anyway.

Her heart leapt to her throat at the greeting: Dearest Brother. She fumbled, folding the letter and clasping it to the book.

Heidi stared down at the parchment, seeing that it had been folded and unfolded many times, the creases worn.

It couldn’t hurt to read the letter, could it?
Heidi remembered well the short, impersonal letter she’d sent to the colonel in Percival’s place, telling the colonel of his father’s illness but Percy never told her if he’d received a reply.

She clenched her fist, the nerves in her fingers dancing under her skin.

A quick glance at the earl told her that he was still sleeping.

Unable to stop herself, curiosity unsated, Heidi flipped the letter open again and caught the date in the corner.

November 15th, 1812.

This was the letter he’d sent before his father had his stroke.

In the weeks since the stroke, she’d forgotten to ask Percival about it, but Heidi had known of its existence.

One last glance at the earl and Heidi delved into the contents of the letter.

He was well, thank god. Fighting but keeping his spirits up.

Heidi slumped back into the couch cushion, hearing the colonel’s voice in her mind as she read his words. They sounded just like him.

I have good tidings to send you, brother, from across the sea. I find myself unable to bear the weight of keeping such news to myself until my return, but I have fallen in love.

Nausea swept over Heidi, but she couldn’t stop reading.

I have met a woman, Doña Carina Obando. She is unlike any other. A woman of impeccable breeding, minor nobility is still nobility after all, good fortune, and the most generous heart that I have known. If I should survive this time in Spain, I hope to return to Gariton with her as my bride. She is singular in every way that is important, and I hope you come to love her as a sister as much as I love her as a woman.

Her hands were shaking as Heidi put the letter on her lap. She blinked, surprised when a tear splashed onto her hand.

Taking a shuddering breath, Heidi steeled herself to read the rest.

She has quite a large fortune, her father having died some years past. I gather, though you know I have never been accomplished with numbers, that she has the equivalent of some 25,000 pounds at her disposal. To think I would be able to bring such a sum to our family, if she would but have me.

Heidi folded the letter, another tear rolling down her cheek. She could not read another word.

It was a stupid infatuation. That’s all it was, she told herself.

She shoved the letter into the book and snapped it shut.

The earl snorted awake.

“My apologies,” she said, turning her head away so he would not see her tears. “I did not mean to wake you.”

The earl said something, incomprehensible.
“Let me fetch Mrs O’Connell,” she said quickly, and ran out of the room.

Controlling her unruly emotions as much as possible, Heidi wiped at her eyes and found the nurse in the kitchens with the other servants.

“His lordship requires your help,” she said, walking quickly back to avoid anyone seeing her tear-stained face.

Again, she thought of the upcoming anniversary.

If the colonel did not have feelings for her, then why would she stay? In London, in 1813, neither mattered now.

Some moments later, Heidi found herself scribbling out a letter to Percival at the earl’s desk.

In it she told him that she was sorry, but she had to leave for Hunsford.

_Urgent business called her home._

She suggested that he take Miss Florentia Heathcote as a wife, if he wished for the most suitable bride.

_Steer clear of Miss Henley, she is a fortune hunter. Oh, and Miss Caroline Bingley, her brother may be the most pleasant of gentlemen, but she is dangerous._

Heidi continued the letter, saying that she had enjoyed her time in London, and she wished him all happiness. She asked him to give the Darcys and the Bingleys and even the Watsons her fondest wishes. To her regret, she wasn’t sure she would be able to give them herself.

Heidi ignored the tightness in her throat as she penned a quick farewell to the colonel in the letter, wishing him a great life. She couldn’t bring it upon herself to mention the woman.

Besides, if she did that, Percival would know she’d seen the correspondence.

When the letter was finished Heidi signed it with her full name, feeling the need to sign it as her true self, Adelheid Maria Favreau.

She melted a wax wafer, ignoring the tears on her cheeks and the churning in her stomach, and then sealed the letter.

Taking a breath, hoping she didn’t appear too obvious, Heidi closed the tabletop desk and put out the flame on the candle. Putting the sealed letter on the mantle, leaning it against a small clock, she sighed, saying goodbye to the Fitzwilliams’ townhouse.

She rang for Mattison so she could go back to Henrietta Street, her leg bouncing as she took a seat at the chair, waiting for her escort.

It wasn’t until they were crossing Oxford Street that Heidi realized that she couldn’t wait to go to Hunsford.

She couldn’t afford to sit around and have the doña organize a carriage to the village south of London. If she waited, Percival would surely come to her and ask what happened.

She could not face him.
Plus, if urgent business had sent her south, she couldn’t just sit around twiddling her thumbs.

“Mattison,” she asked, stopping on the sidewalk. “When does the stage leave for Hunsford?”

“Miss?”

“The stage coach, post, anything that I could use to get to Hunsford, the sooner the better.”

The man looked at his own watch then. “The next stage to Brighton leaves in the morning, Miss Meldrum, but certainly you—“

“That’s not soon enough,” she said. “Come, take me to the posting house or whatever it’s called. I’ll book passage on whatever I can get.”

She looped her hand through his arm and half-dragged him down the street. She had a purse full of loose change and promissory note she’d gotten from Mr Darcy’s jeweler. She could write to the Carters to send her things and what remained of her money at the Henrietta Street townhouse.

If she had to get to Sussex to catch a coach to Hunsford, she would do so. She could not stay in London one more night.

Chapter End Notes

Heidi just can't help herself!
Friday, January 15th, 1813

Paying the footman off with a pound note, knowing it was like bribing the man with a hundred-dollar bill, she hoped that he would keep his mouth shut until after she’d left.

She waited until he’d walked away to purchase her ticket, so he wouldn’t know her exact route. He was the Carters’ man after all and would likely tell her story to them, no matter what she’d paid him. It had been a mistake to talk too much about her sudden change of heart.

Heidi managed to book passage on the stage coach that left for Canterbury at five o’clock that evening. Of course her passage couldn’t be simple, but the clerk had helped her find the correct path, like a subway map. Once the stage stopped at Dartford, she would disembark and wait for the coach to Westerham, where the London stage would stay the night. From there, Heidi wasn’t sure if she would be made to walk the five miles or so to Hunsford, but she was willing to go the distance, as she didn’t even have a small trunk with her. Just her money, her hairsticks, and the few items she’d packed in the small purse.

With the time she had to wait before the coach would arrive, Heidi crossed over to the Bank of London location on the opposite corner of the square and cashed out the banknote for three hundred pounds. It was a hefty sum, but she wasn’t sure if there would be a way to get it cashed back in Hunsford. The money wouldn’t help her, if she managed to get home, she certainly couldn’t get the earrings back, but at least the coin could go to the Carter’s in payment for everything she’d cost them.

It was well past dark once the stage left the posting house and Heidi was crammed in the carriage with eight other passengers. She kept her handkerchief to her nose for most of the first four hours as they bounced awkwardly down the highway.

There was a layover in Dartford as she and a couple of others waited for the coach to Westerham, which would arrive in the early morning hours, with almost nine hours of travel time between her stops. Though there was nothing she could do about the fact that she was a woman traveling alone, in fine clothing Heidi wished, for possibly the first time, that she could walk into the tavern scrounge up a tavern maid and ask to purchase a cloak to hide herself in.

The mere thought of doing such caused a wave of itching to wash over her. There was no way a place such as this wasn’t riddled with bedbugs and lice.

If she could be assured that the portal would be open, then maybe she would risk it for the chance for some lice-killing shampoo. But, without that assurance, Heidi was just fine sitting on a bench, huddled up near a street light, and waiting for the coach.

Heidi was more than grateful that the rain had held off, though the wind picked up now and again. She shivered.

Men and women stared at her as they walked through the gloom toward the tavern or back home, stumbling drunk. For the first time since Wickham, Heidi felt truly afraid, not even the foolhardy Ravens had rattled her this much.

She’d been riding high on the adrenaline of needing to leave London, but now the reality of her situation smacked her in the face.

She was an idiot.
This was dangerous.

Like a fool, she’d run from a perfectly safe situation where she could have had proper escorts back to Hunsford. The Carters would have understood and probably even lied for her, either refusing Percival’s entrance into the house or keeping her hidden.

A stinking drunk collapsed onto the bench with her, slurring his words.

“And where are you going, m’Lady?” he asked, leaning into her shoulder.

Heidi looked him down. She knew better than to indulge someone in this state. She stood up and walked away.

“Hey!” he called out after her.

She rolled her eyes.

“A thousand apologies, Miss,” another man said, coming to her side. He tipped his hat to her and flashed her a dazzling grin. “But I could not help noticing that you are alone this eve.”

Heidi’s jaw set with determination. She had her hair stick, and it should scare off any potential attack. Her eyes narrowed as she stared him down.

He smiled, as though he did not see her anger. “Perhaps you could tell me when the stage to Westerham is due?”

Apparently, he’d picked up on enough that he was changing his tact.

“Quarter past ten,” she said, without looking at the clock tower across the way.

He appeared taken aback at her bluntness, and she wouldn’t have been surprised if he was.

“I do not mean to intrude—“

“Actually,” she said, “you did. Excuse me.” Heidi brushed past him, thinking about reaching for the hairstick anyway, but she stilled the instinct to grab for it.

Couldn’t show her hand too early.

Thankfully, the man stayed away. If he had any sort of modern parlance, he likely considered her to be a frigid bitch.

And good, she thought, allowing herself a momentary smirk as she walked away. Just a year ago, the thought might have had her melting in tears. Still, she wished she had her pepper spray.

Being a girl alone, in any age, sucked.

When the coach arrived, Heidi finagled her way into the corner next to a dirt-covered farmhand. Better to be dirty than to have that creepy guy breathing on her all night.

Settling into the cushion, Heidi knew it would be a mistake to fall asleep. Rather than using multiplication tables to help herself drift off, she did her best to commit to memory everything that had happened to her over the past year. No one would believe her, but she intended on writing it all down so she never forgot the incredible journey she’d been on.

When the coach arrived at past one in the morning in Westerham, a good number of the passengers
disembarked.

Since she'd been here once or twice, Heidi knew the layout of the town at least, and headed down the road leading away from the highway that would lead west. If the lech wanted to follow her, she would damned well lead him on a wild goose chase.

After all the searching she and the doctor had done for the embankment, Heidi had gotten to know the area well enough. It wasn’t a sixth sense for direction out in the boonies, but it was helpful enough to know right vs wrong direction.

She walked down the lane, making enough crisscrossing movements that the gentleman would either grow bored, or get lost himself. Once sure the coast was clear, she trekked back through the village and headed south toward Hunsford.

Skirting the large square and the grassy knoll in the middle, Heidi spotted her tail standing on the opposite street corner calm and cool, flipping a coin in the air.

Heidi almost laughed at the stereotypical sight before ducking into an alleyway. She steered clear of the streets near the square until she came upon the highway.

Pursing her lips, Heidi glanced up at the sky. It would be daylight soon, she’d wasted two hours backtracking, and just like her first visit on foot, she was going to end up limping her way into Hunsford if she wasn’t careful.

She certainly couldn’t stay at the inn for a few hours: too much of a chance for the man to ask around. And if she fell asleep now, she’d never wake up in time to get to Hunsford first thing. If the London-based Carters sent an express about her absence, Heidi didn’t want to worry them.

Steel ing herself, Heidi took her first steps toward Hunsford, knowing better than to walk the street at this time of the night, and headed for the Cottage.

It took Heidi another two hours to get to the outskirts of Rosings Park and she was exhausted, her leg aching in a way it hadn’t in months. She’d seen neither hide nor tail of the man and thanked her lucky stars that she’d slipped him.

A couple of times when she’d heard a late-night rider on the road, she’d walked deeper into the woods, unsure if he had the sort of funds to purchase or rent the use of a horse. Better to be safe than dead in a ditch somewhere.

By the time she’d crossed the Canterbury highway and made it onto the lane to the cottage, Heidi relaxed. The night was long and she was almost home. She hoped that the doctor would be okay with her unexpected arrival. After all, she hadn’t sent a message ahead.

The idea that they might not want her to return crossed her mind more than once on the walk. If that were the case, they needed only to deal with her for a few weeks at most.

And if the portal didn’t open and they were angry… Well, she’d think of something.

The Cottage came into sight and Heidi was surprised to see a light burning in the living room, and one up in the window on the stairwell.

She unlocked the gate and crossed the small path. If someone was awake, they could let her in without much fuss if she knocked.

Rapping lightly on the door, Heidi waited. She’d give them a couple minutes and if no one showed
up, maybe she could catch Mrs Newton at the back of the house. The woman woke early most days, and it wouldn’t be much longer before the sun started rising over the horizon.

Rubbing her hands together, Heidi blew into them to stave off the chill.

The door swung open, revealing doctor Carter and his brother in the doorway.

“Mr. Carter?”

Fury flashed in the men’s eyes as they stepped back and the doctor ordered her in the house.

“Where in heaven’s name have you been?”

Heidi swallowed, seeing the fire in the hearth roaring. “How did you get here so fast?”

“How did—“ Mr Carter stormed away from her, arms flailing as words failed him.

She pursed her lips. Damn, she’d screwed up this time.

“Mattison came to my study this afternoon, telling me the wildest tale. That you had departed from the house on George Street and ordered him to take you to the posting house.”

Heidi looked at her feet when he turned to face her.

“You even bribed him with a pound note,” he bellowed, pulling a crumpled note from his jacket. He stopped short of throwing it at her, but she could tell he wanted to. “Naturally, I raced straight over to find out what madness had overtaken you, only to find that you hadn’t used your name to book the ticket.”

Heidi shrank back. It had sounded clever…at the time and maybe not the wisest thing. He could have easily pursued them to Dartford or Westerham and prevented her from spending two hours trying to lose the creep.

“Then I had to return home and tell my wife that you had run off, having entered some altered state of being. Stress on Doña Carter, at a time like this, is not to be supported.”

The most Heidi could manage was looking toward Mr Carter, still unable to raise her eyes to his.

“She thought for certain that you had run off with his lordship, but I knew two things to be true: you would have never done something as ridiculous as eloping to Gretna Green, and Baron Fitzwilliam had no such designs on you.”

“How—“

“Do not interrupt me, girl.”

Heidi gasped. With his boiling complexion, Mr Carter was more terrifying than the drunken scoundrel from the coach.

“I borrowed Viscount Jessop’s best mount, you know how much I hate riding, and came at once to Hunsford, for if you did not appear presently, I thought surely we must send out a search party.”

Her eyes stung with tears, a little unexpectedly.

“I did not intend—“ she started. But at the glare from the older man, Heidi snapped her mouth shut.
“I do not wish to hear your undoubtedly pitiful excuse for causing such a panic, Miss Meldrum,” he said.

A tear dropped traitoriously onto her cheek and Heidi did her damnedest NOT to wipe it away.

“Have you no notion how dangerous such a journey can be? A young woman in the stage in the middle of the night, with no one for protection.”

“I can take care of myself,” she said, unable to stop the snappish tone in her voice.

“That little dagger you have would not save you should a band of highwaymen set their cap at you. After everything--” Mr Carter stopped speaking, his anger palpable.

Heidi furrowed her brow, thinking of telling him about the man who’d tried to follow her from Westerham. Better to err on the side of caution, her conscience said.

“I made it back fine, unmolested, and mostly healthy despite desperately needing sleep,” she said. “I am a modern woman.”

“In a land full of those who would not hesitate to take your life.” These words came in softer and Heidi struggled to keep herself in check, utterly chastened. “I thought you to be smarter than this.”

“I could no longer stay in London,” she said, her voice quiet.

“What occurred that was so dreadful that you ran away?” the doctor asked, cutting off his brother’s undoubtedly harsh comment.

“It does not signify,” she said. Heidi corrected herself at the anger that flared in Mr Carter’s eyes. “Not anymore. I have determined that it would be best to return home, if we can manage it.”

Her knee buckled and Heidi hobbled over to a chair at the table, collapsing into it. Looking up at the two men, she continued.

“It is almost a year since my arrival. If anything would allow me to return, it would be the same alignment of stars or something. I have corrected any mistakes that might have been made on my behalf, found closure with Mr Wickham, and if that is what prevented my leaving, maybe now is my chance to go home.”

The two men considered at each other, expressions unreadable.

“You did not need to leave in such a hurry, if you wished only to return home,” Mr Carter said, his words more polite now.

“Perhaps not, but at the time, I thought it imperative.”

Mr Carter let out a long sigh and shook his head.

“Go up to your room, Heidi,” the doctor said.

Heidi breathed deeply, reaching into her purse.

“I sold my earrings,” she said, pulling out the bundle of money and placing it on the table. “To repay some of the expenses you incurred on my behalf.”

“Heidi,” the doctor started frowning at her.
“Take it,” she said. “If I get through, you can use it to repay any debts or to hire a proper governess, or help pay for her debut or something. I will certainly not have any need for it.”

Then she turned to Mr Carter. “The rest of my coin is in the trunk in my rooms on Henrietta Street. I hope the sum is enough to help repay the kindness your family has shown me.”

“You will not have need for coin when you return?”

“Money is different in my time, and I had some five grand in savings, if my account is still open. Besides I wouldn’t be able to do anything with the old bills, except perhaps sell it for its antiquarian value.” Heidi shook her head. “No, it would not help, besides, I need to find a job and reunite with my parents, and all the other things I need to do as an adult. I think perhaps it’s time to grow up.”

Heidi stood and bid the two gentlemen goodnight, more than ready to go to sleep.

Tomorrow was going to be Hell.
Heidi walked arm-in-arm with the doctor down the streets of Hunsford the next morning. Rose had been surprised to see her, jumping about and giddy to share all the local gossip she'd gathered since the wedding. Heidi knew the girl wished to reconnect, but the doctor had insisted on talking with Heidi alone first.

The air smelled of oncoming rain.

“Now that my brother is returning to London, why not tell me the truth of your flight?” he said, patting her hand.

“I did tell you the truth,” she said.

He gave her a sideways glance. “Perhaps, but I daresay you had other reasons you did not disclose.”

“I would rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.”

“I will not force you, but Heidi, you cannot run from your problems. And, I would prefer the truth in this.”

“It’s not a problem, per se,” she said, avoiding the topic. “But...”

They walked for some ten or twenty feet, Heidi not saying another word.

Hearing the clattering of horses on the cobbles, Doctor Carter led them back to the sidewalk and Heidi watched the post stagecoach hurry past. Looking at the clock on the constabulary, it was the coach from Brighton.

She smiled, proud of herself for still remembering the timing of the mail carriers.

“I have been thinking,” she said, watching the traffic to see if any other carriages were going to cut them off from the road. “Perhaps it is time to tell Rose the truth of who I am.”

“Why would you suggest such a thing now?”

“She deserves to know,” she shrugged. “If I do disappear into the mists, would it not be better for Rose to know the truth, that I am going back home? I would not want her to expect me to come return.”

“You do not think you would find another portal in the future?”

“Who’s to say, but I’ve corrected the story, put everyone on the correct paths, from what I can tell, and found closure in those things I changed, accidental or not. If ever there was a reason why I
came to Hunsford, I feel I have achieved my purpose. Hopefully the portal and powers that be would agree and I would think it would reopen for me to go back to my life.”

“Forgive me for saying this, but you have often said you did not enjoy your life back in New York.”

“It might not have been easy, but living now,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck, her bonnet in the way. “It is not easy either. At least in New York I could return to my mother and father, return to a life I had, and rebuild what I lost. I miss indoor plumbing and having the right to vote and the chance to do anything I wish.”

Her lip threatened to tremble, but she stopped it just in time. “The modern world, at least where I am from, has a great many advantages for a woman. My journey last night only affirmed that.”

She turned to her uncle, still rendered speechless. “I am grateful to your family, more than I can ever say. You have sheltered, fed, and cared for me, helped me recover from my losses and given me some of the best memories. I will cherish it for all of my days, this little adventure; but do you not think I have been here for too long?”

“You are a part of the Carter family now, Heidi, no matter your blood.” His eyes, much to Heidi’s sorrow, were already shining. “You are as much a child to me as my own two children.”

Heidi silently tried to compose herself as he cleared his throat.

“If you wish to impart the truth to Rose, to share with her your modern wisdom, I am happy to let you do so.”

“That is quite the offer, uncle.”

He smiled warmly at her, the sad twinkle in his eyes dimming.

“Rose is much altered since your arrival. She is growing into a young woman. With her mother gone, I find myself lost as to her care. She will soon join the marriage market, if that is what she chooses, but you are her only female role model. I would wish to take advantage of what time we had left for you to impart your knowledge to her. I would not see her hurt.”

“What of Anne or Charlotte?”

“Ladies do not speak of certain things with those beyond their relations.”

Heidi nodded, thinking of her blunt chat with Anne just before the wedding.

“Girls need their mothers.”

She averted her eyes, feeling guilt that all she’d cared about was her own situation. There was always a chance that Heidi could see her mother again; but Rose had truly lost hers. There were no time wrinkles that would allow her to see her mother again, ever.

Taking a breath, Heidi made her decision. “I will tell Rose everything and anything she wishes to know. There are some three weeks until the anniversary; I will do what I can to prepare her for life. I would be lost without my mother’s help, and if Rose feels the same way, I would be happy to pass along my knowledge to her.”

“I am happy to hear that, Heidi.”
They turned near the apothecary and started down the path toward Rosings. Heidi couldn’t stop the fluttering of nerves in her chest. Afraid that Lady Catherine would sense her approach, Heidi almost asked the doctor if they could cut through the graveyard.

Doctor Carter broke through her thoughts. “I must call on Mrs Collins this morning. Would you care to join me?”

Heidi’s eyes went wide, having completely forgotten about her friend’s pregnancy. “How is she?” she asked.

“Progressing nicely,” he said, giving her a smile as they turned the corner. “I think you will be surprised to see how well she fares.”

When Heidi and the doctor were escorted into the small breakfast room near the back of the house, Mr Collins jumped up immediately. Heidi glanced at Charlotte, with a grin on her face. She wasn’t surprised to see that typical pregnancy glow on her friend’s face. It was clear that this child would be positively adored by its mother.

“Good morning, doctor,” Mr Collins said, coming over and shaking the man’s hand, completely overwhelming all salutations. “We have been awaiting your call quite anxiously.”

“There are no problems, I hope?”

“Oh no, but I am eager to hear your news after you tend to my dearest Mrs Collins’ needs.” He turned then and eyed Heidi. “Miss Meldrum, how wonderful to see you again.”

Heidi curtseyed. “It is a grand thing to be home again,” she said. “Mrs Collins, you are looking radiant.”

“Thank you,” she said, a shy smile on her lips.

“Come, my dear, let me help you to stand,” Mr Collins walked over to his wife and held out his arm for her to take. Charlotte struggled, balancing her weight in Mr Collins’ care but it was clearly hard to move around.

She couldn’t see how large Charlotte had grown, but it could not be easy to be pregnant and still be required to wear those abominable stays.

The doctor and Mrs Collins soon left the room, Mr Collins’ hand trailing along the small of her back for the briefest of moments.

His obvious care for his pregnant wife was heartwarming as the doctor and his patient walked out of the room.

Heidi walked to the window, to see if it had begun to rain yet. Heidi was, for possibly the first time, completely alone with Mr Collins. It was something she’d done her best avoid in her first few months here, but it seemed like she couldn’t prevent it from happening.

“I imagine you enjoyed an agreeable Winter in London?” Mr Collins asked, taking a seat near the fire.

“Yes, I had a pleasant time.” She clapped her hands together in her lap when she sat down. “I never imagined town could be so… enlightening.”

The man grinned, though he slurped a little air through his teeth.
An awkward silence fell over them as Heidi stared at the fire, trying to come up with something to talk to him about.

“Mrs Collins looks well,” she said, mentally shaking her head at the inane chatter.

“We are both excessively happy about the situation,” he said.

“I do not mean to overstep, Mr Collins; but I daresay it will mean a great many changes, having to care for a child. However, I think parenting will suit both you and Mrs Collins.”

“You think so?” he asked, eyes alight with promise.

Heidi nodded. “Yes, of course.” she refolded her hands in her lap. “Mrs Collins grew up in a large household of children, and though she, I am sure, has enjoyed the quiet life of a clergyman’s wife, the presence of a little one will make the parsonage more of a home than I guarantee you’d ever guess.”

“You have some experience with this?”

Heidi shook her head. “Not personally, of course,” she grinned. “But I have known cousins and friends, back when I lived on the continent, who had children. The first time they beheld their little one, everything changed. I am certain you and Mrs Collins will be the most attentive of parents.”

There was a wistful smile on Mr Collins’ face. “I daresay you may be right, Miss Meldrum.”

He cleared his throat, as though having decided something. “Can I have some tea brought up for you?”

“Thank you,” she said, thinking maybe Mr Collins was more tolerable than she’d first known.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter in a few days; in the meantime, Heidi tries to make amends!
Saturday, January 22nd, 1813

Chapter Notes

I love all my readers!

It was Saturday, January 22nd, when Heidi received a most unexpected visitor. Doctor Carter was once again out on house calls. She had forgotten how quiet the house got on most days. In London, though the house itself was quiet, the street was always noisy even well past midnight, thanks to the extravagant hours in which the Bon Ton enjoyed their revelries.

She’d been sitting in the surgery with Rose, finally having “The Talk.” Heidi had insisted that the girl know the truth of sex and though he’d been initially reluctant, her uncle agreed that the more one knew, the less likely they were to be frightened or curious about such matters. Mrs Newton was working in the kitchen and Edward had gone to the smithy for the morning to help the apprentice get a few things taken care of.

In light of Edward’s drunken ravings in November, it was a surprising development that he was helping Mr Dowding. The doctor had straightened his son’s drinking habits out and Heidi had been relieved that the young man was beginning to take responsibilities seriously. He might have been a Corinthian wannabe, but he had potential and Heidi hated to see it wasted on drink.

She’d spent the last couple of days with Rose, explaining to her the truth of her appearance in Hunsford, and that she was going to try to go home when the anniversary arrived. Rose had cried all night and Heidi had bunked with her, wrapping the girl in her arms for most of the night, trying to console her.

The morning after she’d told her the truth, Rose demanded that Heidi take her to the spot where time had crossed, and they’d made the trek out there with Edward, who remembered better where the grove had been. She’d have found it eventually, but Edward had grown up in these woods.

Heidi arrived at the grove with knots in her stomach, wondering if it was close enough to the time that she would get sucked through. For each time she’d tried, the portal had remained closed.

Clearing her head of the memory of their excursion, Heidi folded another of the bleached linens. She was just about to answer yet another of Rose’s questions about periods when Mrs Newton appeared in the doorway.

“A thousand pardons, Miss Heidi, but Lady Catherine is in the parlor.”

“Lady Catherine? Does she need the doctor?”

“No,” she said, her country accent coming through thickly. “She has called on you specifically.”

Heidi grunted, cringing at Rose. “That can’t be good.”

“I will join her presently,” Heidi said to Mrs Newton. “Please prepare some refreshments.”

Within a few moments, Heidi entered the parlor and greeted Lady Catherine, offering her a seat and asking what she could do for the woman. There could be a hundred reasons why the local
magistrate came to the Cottage, but only a couple of reasons could account for why she’d demanded Heidi’s audience.

Mrs Newton brought a tray of tea things and Heidi thanked the woman before dismissing her, sitting awkwardly on the other side of the small table.

“I wish to make something clear to you, Miss Meldrum,” Lady Catherine said.

Heidi bristled and sat up straighter.

Lady Catherine made eye contact from across the table and Heidi fought not to turn away. “I do not like that your influence has brought about the marriage of my daughter to someone of such inferior birth.”

“I never meant to upset you, Lady Catherine. In fact, I never meant to do any of this. I am sorry if my friendship with your daughter has caused a rift between yourselves.”

Lady Catherine narrowed her eyes at Heidi.

“But I do not apologize for any influence I might have had with Anne deciding to marry Doctor Watson. I think it was the best thing that could have happened to her.”

“On that point, we disagree,” Lady Catherine interjected.

Heidi picked nervously at one of her nails but kept her eyes on the woman before her. “I understand,” she said, certain that Lady Catherine would reiterate her ban from Rosings. Not that she had any intention of going up to that house before she left anyway.

“In light of that, however, I do not believe I have ever seen my daughter happier than she was when she came to Rosings last week.”

Heidi’s eyes went wide. “You have seen Mrs Watson so recently?”

“I had the pleasure of spending a few days with my daughter when she stopped in Hunsford on her Bridal Tour.”

Heidi smiled.

“Married life suits my daughter. I had not expected to see that.”

“On that, we can agree, Lady Catherine.”

Lady Catherine leaned forward, taking Heidi’s measure. “You are a strange creature, Miss Meldrum.”

Not knowing what to say to that, Heidi remained quiet.

She stirred the tea in the cup on the table.

Lady Catherine cleared her throat. “I wish to apologize to you, for the impertinence of my own upbringing.”

The spoon she held clattered against the china.
“I’m sorry,” Heidi said, looking at the imposing woman. “Did you just apologize, to me?”

Lady Catherine almost rolled her eyes but caught herself. “I will not repeat myself, Miss Meldrum.”

“Of course,” Heidi said, cracking a smile. “I can honestly say that I never imagined such a thing would occur in my lifetime.”

“It is not too late to retract my apology, Miss Meldrum.”

She clasped her hands in her lap. “I meant no offense, of course. It is a great thing to have such a loyal friend in Anne Watson. I am thankful every day that I met her.”

“Perhaps there is something to be said for a little mixing of the social ranks, as long as proper etiquette is observed,” she said, drawling out the last words. “The doctor may be lower ranked than my Anne, but she is the daughter of a Gentleman, which puts them nearly equal.”

Heidi was taken aback, remembering well the fact that Lady Catherine had thought Lizzy too low ranked for her nephew. This was character growth if she ever saw it.

“I am glad to see you coming around to a more modern way of thought, Lady Catherine. The crossing of social barriers is not always a bad thing.”

When Lady Catherine didn’t immediately interject, Heidi continued, taking her chance. “It is important to keep to traditions, but just because it is something that’s always been done, doesn’t mean life cannot be improved upon by adding a little spice to it.”

The woman’s eyes went wide.

“I mean metaphorically, of course.”

Lady Catherine watched her.

“Diseases can be passed down from the parents to the child,” she said, unable to stop herself. “Just like a brown eyes can be given from the mother to the son, so too can sicknesses. If families intermarry with each other it can bring forth diseases that were previously unknown.”

As if she had heard enough, Lady Catherine held up her hand. “How do you know this?”

“I read a lot of the doctor’s journals,” Heidi replied, waving her hand toward the surgery. “It is a new idea, but one that is logical, when considered.” She might have fudged the truth on that one.

“I will admit to knowing little about medicine.”

“And I know little of society,” Heidi said, “save for what I have learned under your daughter’s tutelage. And I am grateful for it.”

“You have always had an unchecked tongue, Miss Meldrum. But I begin to see the wisdom in some of these outrageous claims you make.”

“I am not a part of the aristocracy,” Heidi said. “Perhaps I have a crude way of saying things.”

“Crude indeed,” Lady Catherine said, a smirk on her face. “But honest.”

“I hope it is not a bad thing.”
“Perhaps not.”

“I—” Heidi faltered. “The ban you imposed on Rosings, is it lifted? I would dearly love to call upon Mrs Watson when next she is in Hunsford. I promise not to call on Rosings in order to vex you.”

Lady Catherine’s eyes twinkled. “My ban is rescinded.”

Later that evening, Edward returned from the smithy, sweaty and stinking from the fires and the hauling he’d been doing.

“A letter arrived for you,” Heidi said, pointing at the nearby table. She had been reading by the firelight waiting for Edward and her uncle to return.

He went straight for it and broke the seal. Heidi watched from her place as his eyes searched the paper.

“Has father returned?” he asked, a hint of excitement in his voice.

“He’s in the surgery.”

“Fetch him for me?”

Heidi raised an eyebrow at the man.

“Please, Heidi, I have some news.” Edward grinned.

“Very well.”

Heidi gathered both the doctor and Rose for whatever news it was that Edward had to share with them.

“I did not say anything prior to this, because I was unsure that my luck would last; but,” he said, scanning over the room. “I have shared a dialogue with Uncle Carter since he returned to London. He writes to tell me that he arranged a meeting for myself with one of his associates in Westerham.”

Heidi looked over at the Doctor, an idea of what he was going to say beginning to form in her mind.

Edward grinned, like a cat that got the canary.

“If I meet with him and our interview goes as I hope it might, he will offer me a job as a clerk in his offices in London.”

“That’s fantastic!” Heidi cried, reaching across the table and gripping his hand, despite the dirt.

“I’m proud of you, Edward,” the doctor said, a grin in his face. The father clapped his son on his shoulder.

Rose ran up the stairs, blubbering.

“I’ll go after her,” she said, pushing out of the chair and heading for the stairs. Heidi spoke to Edward, before disappearing to the first floor. “I can’t wait to hear all about this job.”

When Heidi found Rose, it was under her mother’s side of the bed.
“Rose,” she said, prostrating herself across the rug. “What’s wrong?”

Rose flipped her head to point in the other direction, a curtain of hair spilling out of the bun she’d come to favor.

“Please, sweetheart,” Heidi said, reaching under the bed for the girl.

“Go away,” she blubbered.

Heidi scooted under the edge of the bedframe. She didn’t quite fit under it, but she could squeeze in enough of her body to get in close.

“Rose.”

“Go away, you are going to do it anyway.”

Heidi’s heart broke at those words, unsure what she should say.

“You will be leaving soon, and so is Edward, and mother has gone as well.” Rose sniffed.

Heidi pulled her handkerchief from its pocket in her skirt and reached out to give it to Rose. She could wash it later.

“I am sorry,” Heidi said, not knowing how to make it better.

“Then don’t go,” she sniffled. The handkerchief was tugged from Heidi’s fingers.

Though Rose couldn’t see it, Heidi gave her a wan smile. “I must try,” she said. “This may be my only chance to see my own mother again. You would do the same, would you not?”

“But, you will be leaving us behind. Just like you did when you went with Mrs Watson to London.”

“Rose—”

“Go away.”

Heidi swallowed, her throat tight with emotion. She reached out and rested her hand on Rose’s shoulder, but the girl pulled away.

“I want you to know something, Rose. There is no guarantee that I will be able to return home now or ever, but should I return to my time, to where I belong, rest assured that I will never forget you.”

Rose sniffled but slowly looked up at Heidi.

“You promise?”

She nodded her head. “You are the little sister I always wanted. You have always been so free-willed and happy. You’ve grown so much in the year that I’ve known you. I will miss you so much, perhaps more than anyone else. You are my family.”

“Then why must you go?”

“I had a life back home, would you have me abandon it?”

“Yes,” Rose said, with a hint of shame and sadness. “If it means you do not abandon me.”
Heidi wriggled under the bed frame more and managed to wrap one arm around Rose, pulling her tight up against her.

She rested her cheek on the crown of Rose’s head and let her cry a little into her shoulder.

When the tears died down, Heidi looked up at the frame just an inch from her head.

“We may need your brother’s help getting out from under this bed,” she said.

Rose sniffed but giggled and Heidi ran her fingers through Rose’s hair.

“We will get through this, Rose. And you will be stronger for it.”

“I will miss you, if you go.”

“And I will miss you. And your brother, if he gets this job, this profession, he will only be in London. An easy ride by post.”

Resting her chin on Rose’s head, Heidi sighed. For the first time since she’d made this decision in London, she was beginning to regret it.

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