A Change of Legacies

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Summary

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Notes

You can keep up with my writing progress on future works via Twitter (sophturner1805) and my blog (http://sophie-turner-acl.blogspot.com/).

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Previously: As we ended "A Constant Love," Georgiana's wedding to Captain Sir Matthew Stanton was days away; Jane Bingley was soon to give birth, Elizabeth Darcy was also expecting a child, and had just successfully hosted Pemberley's first ball in many years. Mary Bennet had quite surprisingly danced two sets with Captain Stanton's clergymen brother, and Catherine Bennet was awaiting the return of her fiancé, Captain
Andrew Ramsey, from sea, following Napoleon's Hundred Day war. After a desperate search by his parents, Lord and Lady Brandon, following the Battle of Waterloo, Colonel Edward Fitzwilliam had been found, although his arm had been amputated. Lydia Wickham's husband remained missing following the battle, but Lydia had chosen to go into mourning, certain he was dead. As ACL was shifted forward a year from canon, when we begin this story it is late summer, in 1815.

Warnings: I really really recommend you skip these if you do not want to be spoiled, but do understand that some want to be aware more precisely of what you're getting into, and if so, please do check out the spoiler tagged content. I promise that the HEA is true for all of the major characters, both canon and original, but I do not pull any punches in dream state. Things are perhaps a twinge more in the mature direction than ACL, but fade to black is still very much the MO here.

* SPOILERS *

"Real" world: Minor character death, minor violence, miscarriage (not Elizabeth's), stillbirth (not Elizabeth's), reference to a gruesome surgical operation.

"Dream" world: Major character death, uncomfortable sexual situation (stops well short of rape), forced confinement, gruesome surgical operation.

* END SPOILERS *
"My dearest, I love you too much to wait another day," he said, caressing her cheek. "Let us leave for Gretna Green tonight."

"I cannot – I do not – I do not think I am ready to leave so soon. This is all so sudden. I wish to be married to you as well, but I do not think I am ready for such a step."

"I own it may seem sudden for you, but I have been in love with you for so long. So very long, my dearest." His thumb brushed against her lips, and Georgiana could hardly bear the sensation, so wonderful and yet so overwhelming it was to her. "I cannot wait; I cannot brook any sort of delay. There is nothing I wish more than to be married to you."

"I would like to at least speak with Fitzwilliam, first – "

"Oh, my precious Georgiana, I understand, but it may be some time before he visits. Come with me tonight."

"I think it might be better to at least wait until Monday, as we had planned originally."

"It pains me that you think so, my darling," he said. "Speak to Mrs. Younge; I am sure she will agree."

"But – my brother – "

"I am sure your brother will be exceedingly happy to find we have wed. After all, he and I are nearly brothers ourselves, so close were we as children. And think of how much easier it shall be on him, to not have to support your coming out into society. All those London seasons – they cannot be something a single gentleman with an estate to run wishes to devote his energy to."

"Fitzwilliam says I am too young to have a season for several years more."

"Of course, he would be too kind to tell you that supporting you through a season will be a great burden to him, and it might be that you go several seasons before you find a match, when he is entering a time of life where an established gentleman should be considering his own marriage. Think of how much easier it will be on him when we return from Scotland, and you are a married woman."

"Do you think I am a burden to him?"

"My love, of course you are, but I promise you shall never be a burden to me."

"Let us go tonight, then," she said, feeling a strange wave of dizziness at having made the decision. But he loved her so, and he was right – she would only be a burden to her brother so long as she was unmarried. Fitzwilliam had not sought her guardianship, but it could hardly be avoided after the death of their beloved father. She might marry the man she loved, and relieve her brother of such a burden, all as soon as they could reach Gretna Green.
"I knew you would see things as I do," he said, taking up her hands and kissing them. "Go to Mrs. Younge – she will help you see your things packed. I will go and hire a coach."

"But we already have a carriage here in Ramsgate – may we not just take that?"

"Mrs. Younge will need to return to London – after all, once you are a married woman you will not have need of a companion. Your brother's carriage may set her down there at his house so that she may pack up her things. After all, it should be returned to your brother's home – when we are married, we shall set up our own carriage."

"Oh, may we get a landau? I have always loved our landau at Pemberley."

"We may purchase whatever sort of carriage you choose, but I adore the idea of riding through the country in a landau, so that all England may see my beautiful bride. Now let me go and see about a coach, and you pack your things. I will return later for you, my love, and then you may make me the happiest of men."

Mr. Wickham smiled deeply at her, and Georgiana skipped off, calling out for Mrs. Younge to help her. There was so much to do!

Georgiana had not understood how long it would take them to reach Gretna Green, when she had committed to going, and she began to wonder if they should not have stayed in Ramsgate, where she might have written to her brother of the happy news, and then they could have been married in London. She knew it took longer, to put on a wedding in London, but still, this had been a most gruelling drive.

Even with her dear Mr. Wickham taking a shift on the ribbons, so that the coach might continue through the night, and a change of horses at every inn, they had still been driving for three days. Even she, who had been required to do nothing but sit and sleep in the carriage, felt exhausted, and she felt terrible when poor Mr. Wickham came into the coach, after handing the ribbons off to the driver. He always looked terribly spent, but when she suggested they stop for the night, he would always tell her that he would rather marry his darling Georgiana sooner – it was certainly something worth being a little tired for.

When he said it, it always gave her a little heady rush of happiness. George Wickham, who had always been so kind to her as a girl – secretly in love with her all these years! She could never have thought it, and yet she had felt such pleasing emotions when he admitted it to her.

When they were in the carriage together, sometimes they would speak of how things would be when they were married. She would bring fortune enough to the match that they could set up quite nicely somewhere, and he wished for her to have horses, and a fine new pianoforte, and every nice thing that could be provided, for he intended to see her happy always. When he came in from his shift, though, he slept, and when she could not fall back asleep herself, Georgiana wished she had brought a book with her in the coach. It was not the sort of thing one thought to carry when eloping, but although she had a few packed away in her trunk, for the journey she must resort to looking out the coach's window at the spectacularly wild scenery of the north, glad at least this was new and delightful.

When they finally entered Gretna Green, it was late afternoon. Mr. Wickham eschewed the blacksmith – it was not nearly good enough for his Georgiana – and so they found an inn where the innkeeper promised the marriage might be done, and then a room provided for as long as they needed to rest after their journey.
This sounded well to the both of them, and Wickham ordered their trunks unloaded. The ceremony itself shocked Georgiana in its brevity. Two of the inn's servants were gathered in the common room with them, and the innkeeper looked to Mr. Wickham, and said:

"Do ye, sir, declare yerself inna desire ta be married to thee lass?"

"I do."

"And do ye, lass, declare yerself inna desire ta be married to this man?"

Georgiana hesitated. This all seemed so wrong, to be here without her brother, to be so much farther from home than she had ever been before. But Mr. Wickham looked at her pleadingly, and she finally whispered: "I do."

"Then by the laws of Scotland, I pronounce ye man and wife," the innkeeper said. "Ye may kiss the bride."

Mr. Wickham – Georgiana realised she must call him George, now, for they were married! – had always teased her with the idea of kissing, always caressing her face or touching her lips with his fingers, but had never actually followed through. He did so now, and it was a wet, slovenly experience that left her thoroughly disgusted. Why she had been warned against doing such a thing before she was married she did not know; she did not understand why anyone would want to do so after.

"Ye must needs sign this paper, as a way of documentin' the marriage 'tis done," the innkeeper said. "Then Brenda may show ye to yer room."

They were surely far from the only couple who had driven on through the night from points south to reach this inn; they found a tray of cold meat and bread on the table in the little room they had been provided. George ate hungrily, with no time for the sorts of endearments he was always giving her, and she realised just how wearying the travelling must have been for him.

When he was finished, he looked up at her with a strange smile, and said, "So are you ready for your wedding night, my Georgiana?"

"Yes?" she said, although she was not entirely sure what he meant by it.

"I shall go downstairs for another drink, then, and you may change into your nightclothes."

She did as he instructed, struggling to free herself from the dress she had been wearing since they left Ramsgate, and untie her own stays. She missed the help of Miss Hughes, who had been nominally acting as her lady's maid for years, even though Georgiana was not a married lady. She recognised, strangely, that now that she was actually married, Hughes was not here, for George had said her presence would merely slow them down.

She was wearing her nightgown and sitting on the edge of the bed when he returned, smelling strongly of drink. He closed and locked the door behind him, and smiled that strange smile again at her, taking the few steps in the little room that were required to get to the bed, and kneeling in front of her. Then he gave her another of those slovenly kisses, and pushed her back on the bed, so that his full weight was on top of her.

It was only now that Georgiana felt herself to be suffocating, under the weight of him, under the strange firmness between her thighs, and his hands slipping into places below her nightgown that left her feeling highly uncomfortable, and then, rather quickly, afraid. She wanted Mrs. Younge – nay, she wanted her brother – she wanted her father – if her mother was more than a distant memory, certainly, she would have wanted her mother – she wanted to be anywhere but in this
place. She whimpered, then cried out in fear, and pushed against his shoulder, feeling the tears streaming down her face.

*What are you doing, George? What are you doing to me? Stop. I don't like this. Please, stop.* She might have said it aloud; she might only have thought it, but suddenly, mercifully, the weight was gone.

"You know, I would be well within my rights as a husband, *dear* Georgiana," George said, rearranging his breeches. "You're quite lucky I only go for willing girls. The damage is done, so far as your brother is concerned, whether or not the marriage is consummated. Indeed, now that I think on it, this might be quite useful as leverage. Although I shall have to find a more pleasant bedfellow, for the evening."

"I do not understand. George, what are you talking of?"

"Oh you poor, innocent child. Do you not understand what this is all about? No, if you had, you would not be here, and I would not be awaiting my thirty thousand pounds. I suppose if your good father had survived, he would have warned you against those who would use you for your inheritance. Your worthless brother, on the other hand, clearly has not."

Georgiana was young, she was not well-versed in the ways of the world, but enough of what he said began to sink in for her, and with an encroaching feeling of the most horrible dread, she began to understand why he spoke of her inheritance. She continued crying, the frightened tears of a young girl far from home and with no hope of any comfort, and when she looked up at George – nay, Mr. Wickham, for there was no reason to address him so familiarly – she did not find anything to reassure herself.

"Thirty thousand pounds! There is no way he will get out of it now," Mr. Wickham said, triumphantly. "He will hand over the money, and then our business together shall be done, Georgiana. I only hope for your sake it shall happen quickly. For now, though, we must see you secured for the night."

He produced a long strip of fabric – perhaps such as a gentleman used for his cravat, although she could no longer think of him as a gentleman – and she eyed it with suspicion and fear, finding she was correct in both concerns when he pulled her jaw open and yanked the fabric back against both corners of her mouth, tying it behind her head. She was unable to speak, now, unable to make any noise of substance, and she might have been frightened, if she had not just recently passed a far more frightening moment.

Georgiana felt him pulling her arms behind her back, trying her wrists and then her ankles together. When she was left, thus trussed, lying on the bed, as George Wickham went out in search of his more pleasant bedfellow; when she was left, breathing heavily in her fear, and unable to do anything to alleviate it, Georgiana began to consider how rapidly things had gone wrong.

This was not right, this could not be! George had *loved* her! He would not leave her in this way; he would not tie her up like a chicken to be cooked for dinner! He would not use her for her fortune! And yet he had. There was no denying that he had. She tried to scream against the fabric tied close against her mouth, but the sound she made was barely a whimper, and she knew a fear far beyond that which she had ever considered possible.

Georgiana woke painfully, it seemed, up through the deep, deep layers of sleep, fleeing the dream. Her heart was pounding, her breathing panicked, and she took some time to reorient herself, to ensure that it had not been real.
It had not. There was the presence of her husband – her real husband, the one she truly loved and had married little more than a month ago – in the bed beside her. His arm, with the horrid pink scar that had shocked her so when she first saw it, was draped over her stomach, and they were both in a state of undress that would have completely appalled her to even think about before her wedding. It might even have continued to do so, had they remained in England, but they were in Paris, a city that even now, in defeat, had its own standards and morals, and although Georgiana had thought before they came here that none of her own standards should be undermined, she liked the warm, firm nakedness of the man who shared her bed, although the thought of this still made her blush.

She slipped out from his embrace, and pulled on a dressing gown, making her way to the window and looking out across the rooftops that comprised the view from their room, in the low haze of the city’s remaining light at the present hour. It still seemed strange to her to be here, in the country England had been at war with for most of her life, with peace not yet formally declared. Yet it would be, that much was clear even to someone so loosely connected with the negotiations as she.

Georgiana opened the window, and was reminded that the air was no less foul than that of London, although it still calmed her. She knew full well what had prompted the dream. There they had been yesterday, walking along, enjoying this unexpected honeymoon, discussing their engagement for the opera that evening, when she had been certain she had glimpsed George Wickham. It was an impossibility, of course – Mr. Wickham had gone missing after the battle in Waterloo, and was most likely dead. Yet whomever this gentleman was who bore such a resemblance to him, he had been enough to prompt a most horrible dream.

The church bell down the street rang, a fine, pure tone through the window, and Georgiana watched as her husband stirred slightly, ran his hand languidly across the space in the bed where she should have been, and then woke, immediately, looking troubled at her absence. She felt a surge of fondness for him, before he spotted her by the window, and said, "Whatever are you doing over there, Georgiana? Will you not come back to bed?"

"Nothing, just thinking on a bad dream," she said, making her way back to the bed, and slipping out of her dressing gown.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" he asked, looking at her with some concern.

"No, it was one of those absurd dreams that would never truly happen," she said. "I was only a little disturbed when I woke."

It could have happened, but it would not, now. She had been the innocent girl of her dreams, back then, but she was older, and, more significantly, a married woman, now; she understood fully what Wickham had been about in her dream, and was most thankful to be married to a man who had gone about things much more delicately their first night together, and most nights thereafter, a man who loved her most earnestly, and whose love she fully returned. She blushed again, to think of their activities in this bed, and those before it, and relaxed back into his embrace, pulling his arm very tight against her chest.

It could have happened, though. If George Wickham had convinced her to elope before her brother arrived in Ramsgate, her fate might very well have been that of her dream. She shuddered at the thought of it, she could not help herself, and once again was asked if she wished to speak about her dream.

"No, I don't think so," she whispered, turning around to face him. "Will you help me forget about it?"

Georgiana had always been shy, and she suspected the rest of her acquaintance would still
describe her as such. Over the brief course of her marriage, however, she had gained enough confidence to be able to say such a thing to her husband. How her mind had even conjured those sloppy, terrible kisses of her dream she did not understand, for every one she had ever experienced had been so very pleasing, like the one she gave him now and found returned most tenderly.

Her request was met with the degree of surprise and enthusiasm a gentleman who loves his wife must feel, upon being invited to an unexpected round of marital relations in the midst of the night. And Georgiana did finally find herself able to push thoughts of George Wickham from her mind, in the comfort of Matthew Stanton's attentions.
Chapter 2

Elizabeth Darcy had desired a large summer house party, and she had brought it about, along with a ball, and a wedding, and as much as she had gained enjoyment from having all of these things, she now experienced equal enjoyment that these events were complete. The last of the guests – her own family, the Bennets – had departed two days ago for Longbourn, and now she could stroll Pemberley's gardens in the knowledge that her demands as hostess were significantly lessened.

Of course, there were still Pemberley's more permanent guests – Jane and Charles Bingley, and now their daughter, little Elizabeth Bingley, who, for a child with such amiable parents, did a remarkable amount of screaming. Such crying must have been loudest for the child's nurse, in Pemberley's freshly scrubbed and painted nursery, but could be heard through much of the house. Elizabeth found herself taking refuge in the garden frequently, and hoping that her own child would be more quiet. Not that this would be entirely helpful, as the Bingleys would be staying at Pemberley for some time, while they built a new house at nearby Clareborne Manor, and so long as little Elizabeth remained, the house was likely to be much less peaceful than usual.

Elizabeth smiled; she could not help but think tenderly of her own namesake, although she thought her husband, who looked rather disturbed by the sounds emanating from the nursery, was not quite so sentimental. They both suspected it of having driven the newly married Stantons from Pemberley sooner than expected, although it could not be denied that the opportunity to spend a honeymoon in Paris, and with more privacy than could be had, even in a house so large as Pemberley, held independent appeal.

Jane's birth, at least, had been as quick and painless as such a thing could be; Dr. Alderman had hardly arrived before it was time, and Elizabeth hoped this bade well for her own birth, as Jane's sister. Jane had been certain through her entire pregnancy that she was carrying a girl, and seemed quite content upon learning she was correct. Mrs. Bennet had been unexpectedly helpful and calm, in the time leading up to the birth, although this perhaps should not have been so unexpected, she having borne five daughters of her own. Upon learning the sex of the child, however, she had reverted to her usual self, pronouncing: "Well, I suppose we should not take it as a surprise. I only hope you do not have four more."

Charles, thankfully, upon being admitted to see his wife and daughter, had seemed ready to faint regardless of the sex, but had held himself upright as a look of happiness several times that of his usual happy countenance overtook him, and said she was an angel, and he had no doubt she should grow up to be as pretty as her mother. She might still grow up to be as pretty as her mother, but no one could call the child an angel at her present age, and the Darcys continued to receive profuse apologies from the Bingleys as to the disruption of their peace. They assured the couple they were still welcome; Elizabeth made frequent use of the gardens and the most distant sitting rooms of the house, and Darcy occupied himself with riding the estate grounds, or shooting, which the other gentleman of the neighbourhood were always quite enthusiastic about joining him in, often including Charles, although the latter generally went out with a guilty expression on his face.

"And how do you find the gardens today, Mrs. Darcy?" asked her husband, entering on one of the paths that led from the kennels, and still dressed in his sporting clothes.

"I find them very peaceful," she said, winking at him.
"At least no one need accuse that child of not having a healthy pair of lungs," he said, drily, settling in to walk beside her.

"Jane already wishes her to learn the pianoforte. Perhaps she shall have to engage a singing master, as well. We may well have the next opera diva here, under our roof."

"Indeed. Should we be quite certain there is nothing wrong with the child?"

Elizabeth took up his arm. "Dr. Alderman says she is perfectly healthy, and my mother claims we all were rather vocal, in our infancy."

"So you mean to tell me we will soon have two babies, making such noise?"

"You will feel differently, when it is our own child. Surely you must remember when Georgiana was born – did she not cry?"

"You are likely right, about it being our own child. But I do not remember Georgiana being loud, like this. I expect she was shy, even as a baby."

Elizabeth could not help but notice he sounded a little wistful, at the mention of his sister, to whom he had been more like a father to, than a brother, for so many years. Darcy had quite happily embraced Matthew as a brother – Elizabeth still struggled to call him that, for they had known him as Captain Stanton before, and he should by rights have at least been Sir Matthew, having earned a baronetcy, but he insisted on plain Matthew, for those that were now his family.

Yet Elizabeth could not forget the shocked expression on Darcy's face, when the Stantons had spoken of their invitation to Paris over dinner, and said they would be going. By Darcy's countenance, it had been clear he still expected to be asked permission, and he had realised quite suddenly that permission was no longer his to give.

"Georgiana and Matthew have arrived safely, and I expect we will have another letter from her soon," Elizabeth said, soothingly.

"I know," he said. "I just cannot help but think of all the other times, when we thought there was peace with France, and war broke out, and there were many of our countrymen trapped there."

"They are there with the official delegation, Darcy. You know that there are ships waiting to carry them off if such a thing happens. Failing those, I expect he would steal a boat and sail it across the channel himself, if that were required to get Georgiana to safety."

Darcy did not respond, but Elizabeth knew that he was aware she was right; in consenting to her marriage, Darcy could not have given Georgiana over to anyone more concerned for her wellbeing, nor so capable for seeing to it. And she could not help but smile; she was quite certain by his behaviour toward his sister, for whom he had been a guardian, that he would be a wonderful father.

They walked on for some time, enjoying the very many pleasures that a well-tended garden in early September could bring, before Elizabeth found herself overcome by the strangest sensation.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, halting and clutching her belly.

"Is something the matter, with the baby?" Darcy asked her, immediately concerned.

"No, it is very strange, like a little tickling inside," Elizabeth said, overcome by a feeling of the deepest happiness. "I believe it is the baby quickening."
Her pronouncement caused some confusion of actions by her husband; he made as though he was going to embrace her, seemed to think better of it, and finally gave her a very deep kiss, through which she could sense that he was every bit as happy about the event as she. Elizabeth had seen an accoucher in town, and he had warned her that the quickening might come later, in her pregnancy, this being her first child. This warning had soothed her, as had the continued thickening of her belly, but it was still a relief to have it happen; nay, something beyond relief, she realised, for there was a certain wonderment in this feeling of life, stirring inside her.

"I do not think the baby will mind, if you embrace me," Elizabeth said, for she could not resist teasing her husband.

"I did not want to make it stop. Has it stopped?"

"No, not yet. I wish I knew better how to describe it to you."

"I would imagine it to be rather indescribable," he said. "Still, I am glad I was here when you experienced it. The look on your face as you realised it was quite beautiful."

"I cannot say the look on yours was so. Will you ever cease worrying?"

"I believe I will, when the child comes of age."

Elizabeth chuckled and took up his arm again, and as they walked on, she thought that they could not possibly be happier than they were now, but then realised that they very likely would be, in just a few months.
Chapter 3

Like many young women, Lady Georgiana Stanton had married her husband after a very short acquaintance. Thankfully, she had married for love, to a man whose fortune and family had been quite compatible to her own, but she was still learning that he was not quite so perfect as she had thought, before their wedding.

She had, of course, known that he was a naval captain, who had been at sea for five years on the HMS Caroline, then returned to England only long enough to fall in love with her, and go back to sea during Napoleon's Hundred Day War. Georgiana preferred not to think of the grave wounds that had sent him home, although her title was a constant reminder of the baronetcy he had earned in a nearly impossible victory, capturing a seventy-four gun ship with the fifty-gun HMS Jupiter.

What she had only realised after they were married was that he had generally only encountered women in drawing rooms, and even then only infrequently for most of his life, that he was used to much rougher conditions than she, and that he had been at sea for most of the time after he had earned his fortune. He had spent the beginning of their marriage perpetually shocked at how long it took a lady to prepare in the morning, and only of late had they settled on a solution, that he should go down to the lobby of their hotel and read the latest English papers until she was ready, rather than pacing around the apartment, making both her and Miss Hughes nervous.

His absent-minded frugality they had still not solved, for Georgiana had not yet raised it as something that required solving; here, she thought more subtle measures might be required. Matthew had a high regard for cleanliness, but it seemed he would otherwise willingly sleep anywhere with enough walls for a hammock to be slung. Fortunately, he was observant enough to note the expression of concern on her countenance, upon seeing the apartment at their first hotel in Paris, for although it was indeed clean, it was very small and shabby, and not remotely what she was accustomed to. He had been most agreeable when she asked if they could perhaps try somewhere else, and they had taken on a much finer and larger apartment in this hotel, which was still less than they could afford, but sufficient for them to present themselves respectably when people from the delegation called on them.

It was not as though he was not generous, either; he had been exceedingly so with her pin money, when drawing up the marriage articles with her brother, and more often than not he had paid for her purchases here anyway. No, it seemed to Georgiana that he simply did not consider how one could live on land, with nearly five thousand pounds a year. It would be her part to continue to recall him to it; for some time, she had been giving little hints of their setting up a carriage once back in England, as yet to no avail, and so perhaps she would have to be more direct about it.

Still, she loved him very much, and could not deny that she was quite happy in her marriage; after all, it was not as though she had married a man of little fortune, merely one she needed to remind to spend a little more of it.
Hughes finished her hair, and asked: "More shopping, today, my lady?"

"Yes, I expect so. Have I reached the point where I shall need another trunk, to bring it all home?"

"You are coming very close, if you don't mind my saying so, ma'am." Hughes said so with a smile, for she knew a great many of Georgiana's purchases were gifts, and those dresses Georgiana had ordered for herself, Hughes thought to be well-deserved, for the young lady had foregone most of her wedding trousseau, having been married so soon after coming out into society that she could hardly justify a whole new set of dresses.

"I shall ask the hotel if they may arrange it, then. I hardly know where to purchase such a thing," Georgiana said. If they were in London, she would have expected Hughes to see to it, but the poor maid had spoken nary a word of French when they arrived, and had learned only a few thus far.

Georgiana made her way down the stairs to find her husband sitting not with a newspaper, but rather a small piece of paper in his hand.

"What is that you have there?" asked she.

"It is Marguerite Durand's address. They have located her, finally."

"Oh – do you wish to call on her this morning?"

Georgiana was not looking forward to calling on Marguerite Durand, and she expected her husband was not, either, although she found it honourable that he wished to. Charles Durand had been the captain of the Polonais, the French ship Matthew had captured, and Captain Durand had not survived the engagement. Matthew had brought the captain's personal effects with them, in the hopes of finding his widow and returning them to her, but her current address had proved elusive.

"Would you mind terribly? I know we have the dinner this evening, and I hate to make you spend an entire day where much of our time is not our own."

"I do not mind at all. I would not wish to make her wait a day longer than is necessary, and I know we would not be here, were it not for the dinners."

Their invitation to be here had come through Matthew's uncle, the Earl of Anglesey, who had spoken to someone in the peace delegation and suggested his nephew's presence might be useful, although Lord Anglesey's aim had been more for an intriguing honeymoon, for the couple. They were, as such, nominally part of the delegation, but primarily there to attend dinners and remind the French of British naval superiority; everyone at the dinner table knew who Matthew was, and what he had done, although the French were unfailingly polite. Georgiana, as she had indicated, did not mind the dinners; although shy in new company, she liked having some manner of society, and the food was so good she felt certain she had become a little heavier since they had arrived here.

"That is very good of you," Matthew smiled, and handed her the paper. "Will you see whether we need a carriage, to get there, and have them send someone up for the chest? Hawke will help point out the correct one. And the sword."

"I will. It is such an annoyance, to have to hire a carriage instead of being able to come and go as one pleases, but I suppose it cannot be helped, since we are here for such short duration," Georgiana said, to which he only nodded in agreement.

Georgiana approached the maître d'hôtel, who by now knew her to be the more fluent in French
of the couple; Matthew readily admitted his education had tended more towards mathematics and navigation than foreign languages, although he seemed to get by with his few phrases and hand gestures, when Georgiana saw him communicating from afar. The need for a carriage was confirmed, and she asked that one be hired for them for the day, and someone be sent up for a particular chest in their room, and a sword, which her husband's valet would indicate. Then she returned to the settee where her husband was seated, to wait.

Georgiana did not know Paris so well yet to anticipate the quality of the neighbourhood they travelled to, but it became readily apparent to her that it was a poorer part of the city, and she was glad it was a fine, bright morning, for it was not the sort of place one would want to be at night. The carriage pulled to a halt in front of a building no more or less dark and decrepit than the rest on the street, and as he handed her down from the carriage, Matthew said, "Stay close to me, please," although he needn't have – Georgiana would have done so, anyway.

They made their way into the building, followed by a footman, who carried the battered old sea chest that had been sitting in a far corner of their apartment all this time. The entrance-hall was dim, and this may have caused it to seem slightly nicer on the whole than Georgiana had expected. They made their way up to the third floor, to the sound of a couple arguing elsewhere in the building, speaking so quickly that Georgiana could not understand much of what they said, although it was clear they said it angrily. With some relief, she watched the door to number six open in response to Matthew's knock, and found herself facing a harried-looking maid.

"Bonjour – Sir Matthew et Lady Stanton pour Madame Durand, s'il vous plaît," Georgiana said, wondering too late if she should have introduced her husband as a naval captain instead.

It did not seem to affect their entry, however, for the maid stood aside, motioning they should enter, and called out, "Deux anglais!"

A woman came in, then, looking tired but otherwise quite beautiful, a full head shorter than Georgiana, but of far more voluptuous figure, accentuated by a dress that was at least three or four years out of fashion, even to Georgiana's *anglais* eye, and dyed black. She was followed by a boy of perhaps three years of age, also dressed in mourning.

"Good morning," she said. "I am Madame Durand, but I do not know to expect English callers. Please have seats. This is my son, Jean-Charles."

Like Matthew's first choice of hotels, the room was clean, but undeniably shabby. It appeared there were only two rooms to the apartment, and that Madame Durand and the boy had come from the only bedroom; perhaps the maid slept on a pallet on the floor. They sat, however, as the maid ushered the boy back into the bedroom, and the footman deposited the chest in the middle of the floor and was dismissed.

Madame Durand might not have known to expect English callers, but she knew full well what had just been placed in the middle of her little room; the worn sea chest had "C. Durand" painted in the centre of it, and down one side, a long list of ships' names, ending with the Polonais. She looked up at them with an expression of grim sadness, before kneeling in front of it, laying her hands down on the worn wood. Georgiana was not certain whether she reached for her husband's hand first, or he hers, but for some time they sat clasping hands on Madame Durand's worn sofa, watching her wipe a tear from her face.

"Lillette did not say your names," Madame Durand finally said. "I should think, why else would two English call on me, but to return this. I thank you very much for not sending only servants."

"Madame Durand, my name is Captain Matthew Stanton, and this is my wife, Lady Georgiana
Stanton. I was – I commanded – I was captain of the Jupiter, the ship which captured the Polonais. I am very sorry for your loss. I have also your husband's sword."

Matthew made to hand her the sword, but Madame Durand looked up at him with an expression of fierce anger, saying, "I do not want his sword. I have no desire for pieces of war. I hold no anger for you, for you do your duty, as do Charles, but I do not wish to have that in what home I have left."

Matthew nodded, and pulled the sword back towards him, and he and Georgiana watched as Madame Durand pulled the top off of the chest and began removing its contents – simple, mundane things like shirts and books and writing things. Then a packet of letters, a fob watch, and a miniature, of her. Madame Durand looked up at them with a startled expression as she pulled out her late husband's purse, which sagged with coin.

"You do not take his money?"

"Of course not, madam, it belonged to him. We only take that which belonged to Napoleon."

Madame Durand opened the purse and placed her hand inside, seeming to count the coins with her fingers, and then whispering, "Dieu soit loué."

"Madame Durand, I hope I do not offend when I ask if your situation is such that you do not have enough money to live on, and if there is anything I may do to assist?" Matthew said.

"I have enough money to live on, for now, although before revolution I would not call this living," Madame Durand said motioning to the room around her and then holding up the purse. "This is welcome all the same. I use care with what is left of my husband's money, and with help of God it will last, until I am gave my father's land."

"You have lands that are owed to you?"

"It is my hope. My father was killed in revolution, and I have no brothers. I am hopeful with King restored and peace near, I may claim some of my father's land, but no attorney has time for a poor widow."

"We are here with the British delegation for peace, and are acquainted with several attorneys on the delegation. Will you allow me to speak to them on your behalf?"

"You do this for me?"

"Of course. You must let us know if there is anything else we may do, to assist you."

"Thank you," Madame Durand said, looking a little embarrassed. "You must know Charles did not like you English at all. I think where he is, he must feel a little poor now, at how kind you treat me."

They sat in silence for a few minutes following this, Madame Durand occasionally glancing down at the trunk. Georgiana looked at her sadly, and could not help but think of how she herself would react, in such a situation. Could she be kind, and polite, to the man who had brought about her husband's death?

"Madame Durand, I expect you have been wishing for our absence, so you may better acquaint yourself with the contents of Captain Durand's trunk," Georgiana said, finally. "Perhaps we may call again in a few days, when Captain Stanton has had a chance to speak with the attorneys?"

"I would have pleasure to receive you," Madame Durand said.
It was only when they had both sat back down inside the carriage that Matthew took Georgiana's hand back up and said, quite intensely: "Your brother did show you my will when you went over the marriage papers, did he not? You know you shall never be in a situation where you are that relieved over a small purse of coins. You will always have security in life, if anything should happen to me."

"He did, and I am very grateful for how concerned you both were for my welfare, although I do not like to think of the event which would cause need of it."

Georgiana knew that if that which she most feared did ever happen, she would never be reduced to Madame Durand's circumstances; even if Matthew had no fortune, as it seemed was the case with Captain Durand, she had brought her own fortune to their marriage, and would always have a home at Pemberley, if she needed it. Yet Matthew did have a fortune, and he had been exceedingly generous in his will; if anything should ever happen to him, she would not have a thought for one purse of coins, for she would be a terribly rich heiress, with most of what remained of their combined fortunes. And yet not as happy as she would be on this day, to be in the carriage with her very kind and handsome husband, now en route to sample all that which the French perfume houses had to offer.

"I am sorry. I know this visit must have made you think of it, but I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you came with me."

Georgiana squeezed his hand, to acknowledge what he had said, and they were silent for some time after that.

"Madame Durand is very beautiful, do you not think?" Georgiana asked, eventually.

"Hmm?" Matthew said, for he had been staring out the carriage window.

"I said Madame Durand is very beautiful. At least she has that in her favour – when her mourning period is completed, I do not think it will take her long to find another husband."

"I suppose she is, for the sort of man who prefers petite women," he said, slipping his arm around her waist and pulling her close to him. "I happen to prefer women of very different proportions. She is not your match in beauty, so far as I am concerned."

"Now you go too far. I am hardly beautiful."

"You are very beautiful to me," he said, kissing her, and then noticing her look of scepticism. "When you play the pianoforte, you have this look of both immense concentration and joyfulness on your countenance. I assure you, it is very beautiful, particularly when the sound is also so beautiful."

This soothed Georgiana, for although she was not at all the prideful sort, and barely counted herself as pretty, she was capable of any manner of jealousy, and found his statements precisely what she needed, for reassurance. Following them, she was very much inclined to find more ways in which they might assist Madame Durand.
Chapter 4

With only two couples remaining at Pemberley, dinners had settled into quite casual affairs. Elizabeth planned soon enough to begin inviting a family or two from the neighbourhood to join them every evening, but for now she was enjoying having only herself, her husband, and the Bingleys gathered in the small dining room to eat whatever abundant results of the day's shooting had not been sent home with the other gentlemen.

After each meal, they would all retreat to the blue drawing room, there to sit in private occupation, unless someone – usually Charles – might grow so bored as to suggest cards. Elizabeth and Darcy read, and Jane preferred needlework, although she went about it slowly, with an exhausted countenance that showed how much she attempted to spell the nurse, poor Mrs. Padgett, from young Elizabeth's squalling.

On the few nights when the baby was quiet, such as this one, she was brought down by Mrs. Padgett, so they all could spend some manner of peaceful time with her. Elizabeth held little Bess – they had settled upon this as a nickname, when it became clear that having two Elizabeths in the household should prove confusing – and was tempted to ruffle the baby's little fluff of blonde hair, but would not. Bess was sleeping, and they all spoke softly, when at all they spoke, for fear of waking her.

It was not to be, however. With no apparent cause, the baby woke, scrunched up her face, and emitted a shriek seemingly loud enough to be heard in Lambton, if not Derby. The only fortunate thing about the situation for Elizabeth was that no one looked at her, with her own rounded belly, and made any judgements about what she must have done wrong to anger the baby, and whether it indicated anything about her own fitness to be a mother. This was simply what Bess did, and Jane rushed over to pick her up, saying, "Oh, I am so sorry!" as she always did, and checking to see whether the baby was wet, which she was not.

Poor Mrs. Padgett was about to return her to the nursery to see if perhaps she was hungry, but Jane did not hand the baby over immediately. Instead, she waited for a break in the crying, and said: "Lizzy, will you humour me, just for a few minutes, and play the pianoforte?"

Elizabeth gave her sister a look she hoped indicated just how very much she felt this was the oddest thing that had ever been said, by Jane, and saw that her sister was very much in earnest in her request. Nor could Elizabeth make much in the line of argument, for she would be required to compete with her namesake in being heard, and Darcy and Charles were both looking at her in desperation. Any argument would only prolong things for all of them.

Before Elizabeth had married, she would have been the first to name herself but a mediocre player of the pianoforte. It was a useful skill, in her Hertfordshire neighbourhood, to be able to assist in providing the entertainment for an evening, and so she had kept with it, but never had the passion for it that might have seen her put in the hours of practise her sisters, Georgiana and Mary, did every day. If given the choice, she would always much prefer to be out for a country walk, than practising her music.

After she had married, with two such fervent piano players as as her sisters in their household, Elizabeth had rather assumed she should become one of those ladies who gave up the instrument upon marriage. Now, with some degree of horror, she was required to open up the cabinet beside the pianoforte – the old one that had been moved from the music room in favour of Georgiana's – and sort through the thick leather folders filled with music, to find something she had at least once
been able to play.

With only the thought that she was about to add even more to the cacophony, Elizabeth seated herself at the bench and launched into the song. Her fingers were stiff, and she felt she stumbled rather more than she got right, and yet after a minute or so, Elizabeth realised that all she could hear was the sound of her own poor playing. She risked a glance at Jane, and found her sister still holding Bess, with a triumphant smile on her face.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Jane. "When I was still carrying her, and she would take to her kicking, she always stopped when I sat in the music room with Georgiana or Mary. And do you recall that day, when she was quiet?"

"Of course!" Charles said. "Our sister Mary said she had been neglecting her practise, and sat down for several hours. Do you think Bess could hear it all the way from the nursery?"

"It appears she did," Darcy said. "I congratulate you, Jane, on finding the solution, although I am rather afraid of what my wife thinks of it."

"I must admit right now I am wishing you had withheld your consent for Georgiana's marriage, so she might be here to perform this duty far better than I am able to," Elizabeth said, slurring her way to the end of the song and frantically flipping back to the beginning to play it again. "We must send for Mary tomorrow. Perhaps in a year or so she may be allowed to leave."

They all laughed, Mrs. Padgett included, but it was the exhausted, relieved laugh of five people who had not got nearly so much sleep as they should have for several fortnights.

It seemed that Elizabeth's hour of playing had some manner of lasting effect on little Bess, for even when she went upstairs to be changed, it was to the sound of a goodly silent house, Pemberley as it should be.

"If you don't mind my asking, ma'am, I have a great curiosity as to what it was that finally quieted the bairn," said Sarah, Elizabeth's lady's maid, as she finished removing the pins from Elizabeth's hair.

Some ladies might have minded their lady's maid asking any questions at all, but Elizabeth had a far closer relationship with Sarah, who had been the first to recognise Elizabeth's own pregnancy, and a steadfast servant since the beginning of Elizabeth's marriage. Elizabeth was very fond of Sarah, and would have forgiven any manner of transgressions far beyond what Sarah herself was actually capable of committing.

"I do not mind at all, Sarah," Elizabeth said. "Jane asked me to play the pianoforte – it seems she had a theory that it would quiet Bess, and that she was correct."

"I did not even realise you played, ma'am."

"You might not have, were it not for this. With my sisters in the household I had no need for it, and had thought I might give it up permanently."

"But you have the ability to create music, ma'am – that seems a rather powerful ability to give up."

It would be, Elizabeth realised, for Sarah, who had grown up on a small farm outside of Galway, and certainly would have had no opportunity to learn a musical instrument.

"Should you like to learn the pianoforte, Sarah? I expect we will be enlisting anyone who has interest in learning, so long as it continues to appease the baby."
"I would like that very much, ma'am," Sarah said, her voice indicating she was attempting to contain a degree of enthusiasm even beyond what her words indicated. She finished brushing Elizabeth's hair with a particular happiness, and they said their good nights.

Although she was nearly three months away from having her own child, Elizabeth still made her way to her husband's bedchamber, for she did not sleep well without him. She knew this was the largest factor in their inability to give up marital relations, even this far along in her pregnancy; it was far too easy, when they slept in the same bed, for a kiss and a caress to stoke her ardour, or his, and from there things would progress much as they had before Elizabeth had been with child.

When Elizabeth had come in, and kissed her husband, and felt his hands on her belly, and then her back, pulling her into another kiss, she could not help but speak, once the kiss had wound to its lovely, lingering end.

"Do you think we should stop, now that I have had the quickening?"

Darcy groaned. "I suppose we should. We have been intending to stop for some time now. Did we not say we were going to stop in September?"

"I believe we did. What is the date, today?"

"September twelfth," Darcy said.

Elizabeth laughed heartily, at this, and found herself joined by her husband. The truth was, although she knew at some point it should be uncomfortable for her, when her belly was grown too large, she was not yet at that point, and until she was, they would continue to struggle to find some last day.

"This Saturday is the sixteenth," Darcy said. "Given the Sabbath is the next day, perhaps we should make the sixteenth our last?"

"It is a nice date to aim for. I cannot say I have any degree of confidence that we shall succeed."

"Perhaps I shall have to lock you out of my bedchamber."

"You would not."

"You are correct, and that is why we find ourselves in this predicament."

"Well, perhaps we should move this predicament along, given we only have until Saturday," Elizabeth said, laying her hand upon his thigh, and then touching him in more sensitive places. "I am rather tired, after so much unexpected playing."

"I could not agree more, Elizabeth. And I must admit I am glad to hear you play again. I quite missed it."

Darcy, wisely, kissed his wife before she could make any manner of retort.
I feel good enough about where I am in the editing to attempt twice-a-week posting now. Fingers crossed that I can stay at this pace!

Chapter 5

For the Stantons, life in Paris had begun to take on some semblance of normalcy and habit. Evenings were spent either in long, lavish dinners with the rest of the delegation, or, if they were not required for the evening, in quick dinners at one of the Parisian restaurants, followed by the opera or a concert, for both Georgiana and Matthew were terribly fond of music, and indulged this fondness as much as possible, now that they were married.

During the day, if the weather was poor, they would take callers or call themselves, for many of the delegation stayed in their own hotel or one of those nearby, and so no more than a short walk with an umbrella was required of them. On fine days like this one, however, they would most often walk out and wander, exploring the city, and only occasionally going so far or becoming so lost amidst the narrow, winding streets that they were required to seek out a fiacre to return them to the hotel.

Georgiana enjoyed Paris, although she did not think she should ever like to live here; currently everything was novel to her – the fine gardens and the architecture, so very different from what she had known all her life, and therefore interesting. Even as the city intrigued her, however, she had a sense that as she came to know it better, the novelty would wear thin, and she would wish to return home – although home was a somewhat ambiguous word for her, presently.

As well, there was a grim sadness to Paris that made it difficult to love; it was a city in defeat, and one whose citizens must have seen Georgiana and Matthew as reminders of this defeat every bit as much as the English soldiers in the streets. Everyone was polite to them, but then, everyone they had met with – aside from Madame Durand – was either involved with the peace negotiations, or had some want of the Stantons's money.

Their strolls through the city often took them into the more commercial areas, a riot of signs competing for attention, and they preferred the bright, glass-covered passages filled with more refined shops. Matthew had waited patiently through any number of modistes and perfume houses, while they were both capable of becoming hopelessly distracted anywhere sheet music could be found to purchase, and thus often required to rush home to change for dinner when they noticed how late it had grown. Georgiana had by now purchased far more than she had expected to. She had never been enthusiastic about shopping, but when presented with the opportunity to readily acquire things which had before been nearly impossible to procure for most of her life, she had discovered a degree of enthusiasm which would likely dissipate immediately upon her return to England.

Today her mission was not to shop for herself, or even her close family and friends, but instead for Madame Durand, for Georgiana had suggested to Matthew that some little gifts might be procured before their next call on the widow. Fine things, but useful things, such that Madame Durand would not think them to be overreaching themselves, but pleased that they eased her burdens a
little. Thus added to the rosewater Georgiana had already purchased alongside her own perfume were bolts of black muslin and silk crepe, soaps, candles, and some fine claret, of which they could not resist ordering more for themselves, and family. These items were all to be sent back to the hotel, so that they could continue to walk unencumbered, and as they approached one of the many tailor's shops lining the street, Matthew said:

"I suppose I should purchase some new shirts – a few of mine are grown quite worn. Hawke has been threatening to sew me new ones if I do not, and there are few things Hawke likes so well as a foppish shirt."

"You wish to purchase shirts?" Georgiana asked, incredulously, so strange the concept was to her. But then, she realised, he had no mother or sisters living to sew his shirts for him, and so his shirts must be procured in some manner.

"I did not think it quite so outlandish. I have been purchasing shirts since I was a commander, and it was no longer appropriate to sew my own."

She stared at him, even more incredulous. "You can sew? But you are a man!"

"Dearest, when we men are at sea for months at a time, do you think we let our clothes fall to pieces for want of a woman on board?" he asked, his countenance quite amused.

"No, I suppose not, but I had assumed Hawke does all of your mending for you, as he would do on land."

"Indeed he does, but I had no servant to do so until I achieved sufficient rank, and so I learned for myself."

"Yet you would purchase your shirts now?"

"Do you know of any other gentlemen who sew their own shirts?"

"No, of course not. I sewed all of Fitzwilliam's, until he married Elizabeth."

"It is appropriate for a lady to make shirts, then?"

"Yes, and I shall make yours, if you would like. Let us purchase some fine cambric and linen, instead of whole shirts."

"If you do not mind doing so, I rather like the idea of wearing shirts that have been made by your hands."

"I do not mind at all. If you like the fit of one of the worn ones, I shall take it apart and use it as a pattern."

"I do have one that I prefer."

They purchased the fabric, and then walked on down the passage, until they reached the modiste where Georgiana had ordered several dresses. Matthew paused, and asked if she would like to go in and see if her dresses were ready.

Georgiana readily agreed. She was eager to see how they had come out, for she liked the fabric very much – it had taken some degree of convincing to make Mademoiselle Barteau believe she would never wear any of the more diaphanous options presented to her at first, and then finally some silk of appropriate weight, but still very fine, had appeared.
Georgiana was quite pleasantly greeted by Mademoiselle Barteau, inquired after the dresses, and learned that one was indeed ready for her to try and see if it required additional alterations. She was sent into a room in the back of the shop with an assistant, who tightened her stays severely, and then assisted her into the dress. She came out with some degree of embarrassment; even in this fabric, she felt too much on display. Mademoiselle Barteau inspected the fit of the dress, and pronounced Georgiana to be a little bigger than when she had come in for her fitting, although nothing that could not be compensated for, to which Georgiana blushed, and was thankful that if her husband could overhear what had been said, he could not understand it.

She vowed to be more cautious about her selections at dinner, and to attempt to spend more time walking and less time shopping, and made her way to the front of the shop. There she spun so that he could see the full gown, which was very finely done, even if it did leave exposed far more of Georgiana's bosom than she was comfortable with.

"What do you think of it?" she asked Matthew.

"I think you look very well in it, although I cannot say I like the idea of any other gentleman seeing you in it."

"I know precisely what you mean," she replied, then leaned close, and whispered, "I think I shall trim it with some lace, when we return to England."

With her stays still uncomfortably tight, but back in her original dress, Georgiana took up Matthew's arm, and they exited the shop. They were not but two paces down the passage when she halted completely, and breathlessly exclaimed: "Mr. Wickham!"

For there, approaching them in the passage, was not a man who looked like George Wickham from a brief, faraway glimpse, but instead a man who was, unmistakably and undoubtedly, George Wickham. He heard her, and recognised her, and made, with a panicked look on his face, as though he meant to evade them, but there was nowhere he could go in the passage, except into one of the shops, and those convenient to him were not ones which a gentleman would visit, without being accompanied by a lady. He must either greet them, or turn and walk the other way, and Georgiana watched as his face settled into an attempt at an amiable, charming smile, and he closed the distance to them. She tightened her grip on Matthew's arm, and felt him grow tense beside her.

"Miss Darcy! How very good – and most surprising – to see you. And how have you been?" Mr. Wickham asked.

"I am well, although I am Miss Darcy no longer. I am Lady Stanton, now."

"Ah, so you have married – my congratulations," he said, in a tone which completely belied that he had once attempted to make her his own wife, and just enough of a drawl to indicate he was at least a little drunk. "This must be your husband."

"Yes, Captain Sir Matthew Stanton." Georgiana and Matthew both agreed his full title was rather long, and awkward, but even though Matthew had not requested an introduction, she took a great deal of enjoyment in saying the whole of it, now, slowly and deliberately. "This is Mr. George Wickham."

"Mrs. Lydia Wickham's husband?" Matthew asked.

Wickham blanched at the question, looked briefly as though he wished to escape their company again, and then said, "Yes, Lydia's husband."
"I met Mrs. Wickham at Pemberley, in the summer," Matthew said. "However, it seems she was quite mistakenly in mourning."

"Yes, well, I had been trying to determine whether I should send word to her. I will not be returning to England, I do not think."

"You will not return, or you cannot return?" Matthew asked. "You seem to have come out of Waterloo rather unscathed for an ensign. I am less familiar with the workings of the army, but I had understood your role to be carrying the colours into battle."

"Yes, well – " here, something in Wickham's countenance seemed to give way, as though he was acquiescing to whatever amount of drink he had consumed. "As you say, I was a rather large target. People around me were falling, so I opted to fall, as well."

"You played dead, while your countrymen fought."

"It does sound rather poor, when you put it that way, but what do they really need an ensign for? If I had been able to wield my own gun, perhaps things would have been different."

"Somehow I doubt it, given you decided to desert, after the battle," Matthew said. "That is why you cannot return to England, is it not?"

"Perhaps."

"Paris is a rather good place to hide oneself, right now, although it may not be for long, as the occupation army settles in. And here you are with a nice suit of new clothes, and fine French brandy on your breath. Where did you get the money, for these things?"

"How I came into funds is not your business."

"You robbed your fallen comrades, did you not?" Matthew's voice was angry; far angrier than she had ever heard from him. "All those dead men on the battlefield, it must have been very easy to lift their purses."

Wickham paled again, and said nothing to deny that he had done so.

"You bloody coward. Men like you disgust me," Matthew said, and now it was Georgiana's turn to grow tense, for such an insult would certainly be grounds for Mr. Wickham to call him out.

Matthew was right, however, in calling Mr. Wickham a coward. His face turned furious at the insult, and he even seemed to contemplate his gloves for a moment, but then he shrugged, and said, "Think as you will, for your opinion makes no difference to me. Lady Stanton, it was good to see you. You look very well – marriage must suit you."

Mr. Wickham stepped around them, and made his way rapidly down the passage, leaving Georgiana and Matthew to stand there and eventually turn and face each other, Georgiana's countenance shocked, Matthew's most furious. He knew the whole of Georgiana's history with Mr. Wickham, and that the man's last comment had been a subtle reference to Georgiana's very nearly having eloped with him.

"I do not think it is possible for any one man to come up with any more ways in which he might infuriate me," Matthew said.

Georgiana had seen her sister, Elizabeth, diffuse any number of difficult situations with her humour; she should never have thought it required now, that she should be the one less affected out of an encounter with Mr. Wickham, her first since Ramsgate. Yet it seemed the best thing to
attempt, and she replied, "It might have been worse. He did not insult the King, or kick a puppy."

He stared at her for a moment, before smiling, taking up her hands, and saying, "Oh, my dearest Georgiana, if you can be so complacent after seeing him, I must endeavour to follow your lead."

"I cannot say I am fully complacent, but I do not wish to allow him to ruin our day," she said, soothingly. "Let us go and have a nice dinner, and listen to Vivaldi tonight, and not think about someone who is not worth our thoughts."

"We must think of him a little more, though. Surely one of us must write to your brother and sister, and inform them that he lives."

Georgiana sighed. "You are right, although I wonder if it would be better for Lydia if he was still thought dead, particularly if he shall never return to England. She would go through a year of mourning, but then she would be free of him."

"If she remarried, though, she would be a bigamist. If her first marriage were ever found out, her second would be dissolved, and any children from that union declared bastards. It is unfortunate, that she shall have nothing to live on while he flounces around Paris spending dead men's money, but I do not see any way around it that is not fraught with risk."

Georgiana fell silent, for now she could not help but think that it had very nearly been her, in Lydia's situation.

"I will write to them of it," Matthew said. "You need not be faced with any more reminders of that man."

"No," Georgiana shook her head. "They will worry if they read we have met with Mr. Wickham, and the news does not come from my own hand. I will write to them; it will be no trouble."

"Are you quite certain?"

"I am," she said, taking up his arm and indicating they should begin the walk back to their hotel.

"I am impressed you are able to remain so calm after meeting with him. Is this the first time you have seen him, since that summer?"

"It is," Georgiana said. "I would not say that I am calm, but I find I am mostly relieved, that I did not make the mistake I might have, and very happy that I married a far better man."

"I suppose I shall take that as a compliment," he said, reaching over with his free hand and squeezing hers as it lay on his arm.

"Yes, I will own it is not the compliment you deserve, to be compared with such a man. You are all that is kind and handsome and brave, and I feel my good fortune quite independent of relief, I assure you."

Thankfully, perhaps, Mr. Wickham had recognised that he could not continue to leave his new wife tied up in the little room at the Gretna Green inn for an extended period of time, nor could he remain in Scotland and expect to receive any resolution on the matter of Georgiana's dowry. He had, therefore, after a few days, ordered her into a hired carriage. Among the clothes Georgiana had packed hurriedly before their departure had been a simple cloak, and this he had made her wear, so that he could hold a knife next to her side, and tell her before they left the little room: "I will not kill you, Georgiana, for you know you are worth far more to me alive than dead. If you do not make this easy for me, however, do not doubt that I will hurt you."
They had thus walked out of the inn looking like a newly married couple, Mr. Wickham acting the part of tender husband, all the while holding a knife's blade against his wife's ribcage. They entered the carriage, and Georgiana stared at him, wanting very badly to cry at her situation, at the hard look on his face, as she had so many times since his first betrayal of her. She willed herself to be strong; she certainly would cry again, but she would not allow him to see it.

For some indeterminate period of time they travelled, marked by three sunrises, but no stops of the carriage except to change horses. Georgiana had then, under threat of the knife, been ushered into a room at some nondescript and run-down inn, and tied around her mouth, wrists, and ankles again with the fabric. So very much she had wanted to shout, despite the knife at her side, to cry out that she was here against her will, that word should be sent to her brother, Fitzwilliam Darcy, of her location, and yet she had not. Even without the knife, Mr. Wickham had made clear to her that she was now his wife – in essence his property – and that it would be in her best interests not to anger him, so that he would feel a need to take all his claims on his property.

Thus she remained trussed in the inn for what seemed nearly a fortnight, although the days and nights seemed to run together into a continual stream of despair, broken only when Mr. Wickham would untie her so that she could consume a little bread and watered-down wine. "This will not be forever, Georgiana, I promise," he said to her once, almost kindly, as he tied her arms again, but generally, she came to understand that she as a person meant far less to him than she as thirty thousand pounds, and if he had any regrets about what he was doing, it was not at all apparent to her.

After this fortnight, or something like it, she again found herself being removed with the knife under her cloak, to another hired carriage, and a drive of less than a drive gave up no secrets as to their location; as they finally slowed and then stopped, she got the sense that there must be a village, somewhere nearby, but not so much as to get an idea of in what direction the village laid. They left the carriage and entered a tiny little cottage, of only two rooms; one quite large, an L-shaped room which comprised the hearth, dining table, and a bed, and a second, smaller room, with another bed, a battered old wooden chair, and little else.

Georgiana was pushed into this room by her husband, who bolted what appeared to be a new lock on the door, so that she was thoroughly locked in from the outside. She was at least no longer gagged, and she took this opportunity to plead with him again, calling out behind the door:

"George – George, please! Just let me go home, please, and I am sure Fitzwilliam will give you my dowry," Georgiana called out, desperate, and very much hoping that it was true.

"I hope that your brother will be most forthcoming with your dowry, Georgiana," Mr. Wickham said. "As soon as he releases it, I shall release you, and I hope you know how I wish to. I have no desire to keep you here, while you long to be home. But we shall have to wait for your brother's response to my query. You might assist a resolution in the matter, were you to write to him a letter indicating you are unharmed, and untouched, insofar as the marriage bed is concerned, and awaiting his release of the funds which I am owed."

Georgiana did not see any way out of the situation; she said that if she should be given pen and ink, she would write that which he had requested. Pen, ink and paper were given to her, and, lacking any sort of secretary for the chair, she knelt on the floor of her little room and wrote a most desperate and sorrowful letter to her brother, apologising for her folly, but begging him that she be allowed to come home, even if he was required to release her dowry.

She was not informed as to whether or not her letter received a response.
This time, Georgiana woke softly, although chased by a lingering sense of dread, that her dream had been true, that her real life was lying in sad wretchedness on the tattered bed of that little cottage room, praying that she should be released and returned to the safety of Pemberley.

No, no, no, no. She had married Captain Sir Matthew Stanton; she had delighted in every note of the Vivaldi concert with him earlier that evening. They had separated at some point during the night, and she did not have his scarred arm draped over her side as proof, but she turned around to face him, and was reassured.

No doubt seeing Mr. Wickham that day had prompted a return of her nightmare, for that was what she must call it now; it had long since surpassed a bad dream. Matthew had called her calm, after the encounter, but clearly it had affected her, and she did not at all like that it had, that he could still have such power over her, even after she had assured Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth that he did not, in her letter to them.

Georgiana cannot help but wonder if her dream was how it would have been, if she had eloped with Mr. Wickham. Would he truly make no attempt to live as man and wife, and simply act as he must to collect her dowry? He did seem – at least for a time – to attempt married life with Lydia, and yet here he was in Paris, alive, and no attempt made to inform Lydia of his fate.

Georgiana frowned; she had told Matthew she did not want Wickham to ruin their day, and they had endeavoured not to allow him to do so, and yet here she was allowing him to ruin her night. She should not allow him any more of her thoughts – her waking thoughts, at least. Her dreams she could not control, and she found herself in no rush to attempt sleep again. Instead she laid there, watching Matthew’s sleeping face, so much calmer than it had been earlier that day, hoping this calmness would infuse itself into her, that when she did drop into sleep eventually, it would be without any dreams.
Chapter 6

Elizabeth had said it in a jesting tone, but she had been entirely serious that they should send for Mary, after their discovery that little Bess was placated by the sound of the pianoforte. When several sessions in the music room successfully halted the baby's crying, she raised the topic again, and everyone was in agreement with her that it should be done; the difficulty was in arranging the matter.

Mary, the lone Bennet sister not engaged, married, or possibly widowed, could not travel without a suitable companion. If the distance were shorter, a male servant might be sufficient, but everyone was in agreement that she should not stay overnight at a coaching inn with so little protection. Mr. Bennet's accompanying her back north was quickly discounted; Elizabeth's father was not of an age to bear another round trip to Pemberley, when it would be followed again by a trip when Elizabeth's child was born.

This left Darcy or Charles to journey down and accompany her, and given Charles had a child already in being, Darcy was clearly the logical choice. Elizabeth was not particularly happy about this, although she saw it was really the only option which made sense; she had vowed not to be parted from him after a frightening experience during the Corn Bill Riots, when he had been away from home, but felt herself too far along in her pregnancy to accompany him.

She shared these misgivings at the idea of his leaving as they made their usual – now quite short – walk along Pemberley's grounds that afternoon.

"I know, my dear, I hate to leave you, particularly when you are so far along," he said. "Yet perhaps it is for the best to be required to do so now. I believe I will go all the way down to London, and stay a day or so. I can ensure that all of our finances are in a settled place, for I expect we shall not be back to town for a half-year, at least, once the baby is born. As well, it will be easier to find good candidates for a wet nurse in town, than here."

"We have no need of a wet nurse," Elizabeth said. "Certainly someone to help care for the child, if it should prove so difficult as little Bess, but I wish to nurse the baby myself. I know it is not commonly done, but we are far enough away from town that no one shall know."

"If that is what you would choose, I have no objections to it; as you say, we are far enough away from town that it would not be public knowledge," Darcy said. "However, I should still prefer to hire a wet nurse from London."

Elizabeth shook her head. "There is no need, Darcy. We may find someone closer who is able to help mind the child."

"Of course, if you would prefer to interview the candidates, perhaps we should post advertisements in Matlock, and even Derby, after I am back."

"Yes, I believe I would prefer that. It is not that I do not trust your judgement, but this woman will look after our child – I would rather we interview her together."

"I understand completely, Elizabeth. But I do wish to point out that she must be a wet nurse. I understand your choice, and I respect it, but I must insist on this. She need not nurse frequently; just enough to maintain her livelihood."
"I do not understand – if you respected my choice, you would believe that she should not need to nurse at all. The greatest importance is that she be skilled in caring for the child, not that she be able to serve as a source of food."

"I agree that the care she provides is of the greatest importance, but she should also be able to nurse the child."

"I do not know that we shall be able to find someone so capable of both in Matlock, or Derby."

"That is why I wished to find someone in town, Elizabeth."

"If you were not so insistent on her being a wet nurse, I do not think it would be difficult at all."

"I cannot yield on this, Elizabeth. I wish that I could, but I cannot."

Darcy exhaled sharply; Elizabeth could sense that he was growing frustrated, and yet she felt her own ire raised, which was exacerbated by the moods she found came with her present state.

"I do not understand why you cannot. I shall nurse the child, and we will find someone who has been acting as a nurse for older children to look after her, or him. The right candidate might see all of our children raised to the appropriate age."

"That would be a fine plan, but I must insist on this."

"You cannot insist on this without giving me a reason!"

"I would prefer not to."

"What sort of answer is that? You would prefer not to. This child is growing in my own belly right now. Do not my own preferences matter?"

"They do, Elizabeth. They are of the utmost importance."

"If they are of the utmost importance, you might respect them more! You might give me some reason, rather than pretending to listen, and then continuing on your own path."

"Is that what you think I am doing?"

"Did you think you were doing something else? For I cannot think of any other reason why you should insist we must hire a wet nurse!" Elizabeth stopped walking, upon exclaiming this, and turned to face him, defiantly.

"I insist, because if you die, the baby must have some means of nursing!" Darcy spoke in the agitation they both were feeling, he said it with an angry countenance that all but crumpled as soon as the words were out, and then he looked nothing but devastated.

Elizabeth caught the full force of his words, and of his devastation. Of course her planning for the baby had been simpler; she had assumed she should live. All of her thoughts had centred around a relatively simple notion: she would have a child, and she would live. Any alternative outcomes were possible, surely, but she had not brought herself to plan for them, or even to think of them, for after all, in such a scenario, she would be gone. Darcy, clearly, had not allowed himself the luxury of ignoring this possibility.

"I am sorry, Elizabeth," Darcy said, hoarsely. "You know how much I hate to bring about this topic, and I certainly did not mean to do so in such a way."
"It is I who should be sorry," she said, laying her hand against his cheek, and then kissing him gently. "I did not have that possibility in mind. Of course we should hire a wet nurse, to be prepared, if – "

"You need not say it. I do not want you to have to think about it. It pains me deeply to think about it myself, but I would gladly bear the burden of it, rather than have it be on your mind. You should think of your mother, and your sister, and that they have had six healthy children between them, and both live still."

"Six healthy girls."

"If I find myself spending this Christmas with a healthy wife and a healthy daughter, I can tell you with certainty it would be the happiest Christmas of my life."

"Mine as well," Elizabeth said, taking up his arm as they resumed their slow pace along the stream. "Although if her lungs were not quite so healthy as little Bess's, I would make no complaints, there."

He chuckled softly, and said: "Thank God your sister has come up with the solution for that particular problem."

Darcy's preference would have been to leave for London at dawn the next morning, for he liked the earliest possible start for travel. However, in deference to his wife's needing to sleep later as her pregnancy progressed, and her wish to see him off, his actual departure was a full six hours after he had broken his fast. The Bingleys bade him farewell in the entrance-hall, leaving him and Elizabeth to some privacy out in the drive, as they stood next to the carriage and made their own good-bye.

"You will remember the sheet music, will you not? Simple pieces, that Jane and Sarah may learn with."

"You have reminded me of the sheet music at least thrice already, Elizabeth, and even if you had not, I would have remembered for the sake of preserving the peace of our household, not to mention my own sanity." He smiled, to indicate he was teasing her, although he was right; Elizabeth feared she was beginning to sound as fretful as her mother.

"I do feel badly that we have sent you on so many errands, in addition to so much travelling. I do not know how you shall bear it. The mere thought of it exhausts me."

"I cannot say that I am eager about it, but it must be done," he said, then, murmuring: "Perhaps this shall solve our dilemma as to when to cease marital relations, if you are notably farther along when I return."

"Perhaps you should delay your departure for another night, then. I was not thinking properly that last night would be our last time, until after the baby is born."

"Do not tempt me, madam."

Elizabeth smiled. "Perhaps it is for the best."

"Perhaps. Now kiss me goodbye, or it shall be time for dinner before I set off."

Elizabeth did as she was bade, trying not to think that it was to be her last kiss for at least eight days, and perhaps as many as ten. They embraced as best they could, given her belly, and she whispered, "Be safe, please."
"I will do my utmost. I love you, my darling Elizabeth."

"I love you, too."

With that, he climbed into the carriage, and ordered the driver to drive on, watching her out the window until the carriage made its turn. Elizabeth watched it roll down the drive with tears in her eyes, and only when it was out of sight did she sniffle, blame her excessive sentimentality on her pregnancy, and make her way back into the house.
Chapter 7

Georgiana woke from what had thankfully been a shallow slumber, and found her husband still sound asleep beside her. She had not been sleeping well these last few nights, and found herself excessively tired during the days; last night, dinner with the delegation had seemed to wear on interminably, and she had feared she might fall asleep over the vol-au-vent. Fitful sleep, at least, was not deep enough for dreams, and she had not experienced any return of her dreams about having eloped with Mr. Wickham.

Mr. Wickham. They also had not seen him again, thankfully, although occasionally her thoughts could not help but flit towards him. On this morning, she was struck with the vision of him on the battlefield at Waterloo, making his way among the corpses of the other soldiers, stealing their purses. How long had he been about this task, picking his way through broken, bloodied bodies and severed limbs, reaching into the jackets of the dead to take their purses? The thought made bile rise in her throat, and she was startled to realise it had no intention of returning to her stomach; she only barely made it to the vomit before she was sick.

Her rush from the bed had been neither graceful nor quiet, and she was still heaving when she felt Matthew beside her, holding her braid back away from her face, as she was sick, again.

"You are unwell," he said. "Should we call for a physician?"

Georgiana felt the lingering embarrassment of having done such a thing in front of a man, even if he was her husband. Leaning back against his arm, she assessed herself. "No, I believe I am fine. I simply made myself ill. I was thinking about Mr. Wickham, robbing those corpses of their purses."

"Ah. The thought of that makes me a little ill, as well, but I wish he would not trouble your mind, Georgiana. You encouraged me not to allow him to ruin our day when we first encountered him, and he has surely ruined your morning."

"It is still early. Perhaps the morning may be recovered."

"I admire your spirit, dearest. Let us have a fine morning," he said, kissing her forehead and then helping her to rise.

They broke their fast as they usually did, at the little table in their sitting room, still wearing nightclothes and dressing gowns. They had planned on this day to call on Madame Durand, now that the basket of gifts they had prepared was quite full, and Matthew asked her if she still wished to do this. She replied that she did; she was feeling well, aside from still being a little unsettled in her stomach.

Matthew was dressed in what seemed a few minutes. His valet, Hawke, was a seaman who had been with Matthew from his first command, the eighteen-gun sloop HMS Victor, and had eventually taken on the role of steward by sea, which, for a gentleman who owned no estate, had somehow translated into valet by land. He dressed his employer with brisk, seamanlike efficiency, and Hughes was still lacing Georgiana's stays when Matthew called out over her dressing screen that he would take the basket downstairs and meet her there.

Hughes finished dressing Georgiana at a more reasonable pace, and by the time Georgiana emerged from the screen, both her husband and Hawke had left the room. Bidding Hughes a good day, she made her way into the hallway, idly thinking of how much nicer this space was than the
dim, narrow corridor of their first hotel. She turned the corner toward the stairs, and there found herself pushed against the wall, a hand clapped tight over her mouth.

Mr. Wickham! So startled was Georgiana, she surely would have screamed if she had been able to, but it died deep in her throat as the slightest little yelp. She trembled and felt her pulse quicken; it seemed her dreams come to life, and she willed herself not to allow him to see how frightened she was.

"A few minutes of your time, please, Georgiana," he said. "Or, I am sorry, Lady Stanton. I am going to remove my hand. Do not scream, or you will regret it."

He removed his hand. Georgiana screamed, anyway, although she had not enough breath to make it very loud. She found herself slapped hard across the face for it. Shocked, she brought her hand up to her stinging cheek, and saw that he had produced a knife from somewhere, not so very different from the one in her dreams, and was pointing it at her throat.

"I would not try that again," he said, his voice hard, like it had been in her dreams.

"Whatever it is you want from me, I suspect you will not get it if I am dead."

"You are much feistier than you were when we courted, Georgiana. Perhaps I would have enjoyed being married to you. Certainly your figure has matured into that which is quite fine. There is not a dolly at Mademoiselle Laffitte's who can best you."

Georgiana glared at him as best she could, supported as she was by violently shaking knees. He was not holding the knife so very close to her that she felt it an immediate threat, but she remembered him from her dream, saying that he would not kill her, but he would hurt her, and thought it best not to attempt another scream, or to try to run away.

"So let us get about our business," Mr. Wickham said. "I find I've had a poor few nights at the gaming tables, and I am rather short of funds now. So here is what we are going to do. You are going to get me five hundred pounds, and in exchange I shall not tell your husband of the more intimate details of our past."

"How do you think I should be able to get five hundred pounds, without my husband knowing about it?"

"I think if you had such sufficient motivation as I am providing you, you should be able to find a way."

"Even if I could, and cared to, he is already aware of my history as it regards you."

"So he is aware, then, that we anticipated our wedding vows, is he? That we laid together as man and wife several times?"

"That is a lie, and you know it!" Georgiana protested hotly.

"Perhaps it is, but will your husband believe it? I will tell him in very great detail of all of our escapades as we anticipated the marital bed."

"He will not believe you. He knows me, and he knows I would never do such a thing!"

"I would not be so sure, Georgiana. That fine little bosom of yours, I shall certainly speak of that, although now that I look again, I see they have grown larger. And of course, those long, lovely legs. How very nice it was to be between such a pair."
"Step back away from her, or I will relieve you of your hand," said a low voice, one that most certainly was not Georgiana's or Mr. Wickham's.

Georgiana realised with an overwhelming rush of relief that it was Matthew's, that there now was a sword blade between her throat and Mr. Wickham's wrist, such that there was no way he could cut her with the knife. Matthew had come upon them so quietly she had not even noticed the sword until it was there, a few inches away from her throat, but its proximity did not frighten her; the blade did not waver at all, and when she moved her eyes to look at Matthew's countenance, she saw a determination there that matched the steadiness of his grip.

Slowly, Mr. Wickham stepped away from her, followed by the sword's blade, and Georgiana felt her knees finally give way; they could no longer support her, and she sank heavily to the floor. When she looked up, she saw that Mr. Wickham's back was now against the wall opposite her, and Matthew had the point of the sword – Captain Durand's sword – pressed against Mr. Wickham's throat.

"Drop the knife," Matthew said, and Mr. Wickham did as he was bade, now looking very much to be the one who was frightened.

Matthew continued, in a calm, cold voice that startled Georgiana: "Allow me to make this very clear to you – if you slander my wife again, or lay so much as another finger on her, I will have you on the next naval ship bound for England, so that you may hang as a deserter."

"I doubt the French government will simply allow you to take a lawful inhabitant home to be hanged."

"The French government knows not that you are here, and it will know not that you are gone, bundled up and smuggled into the hold, where you may contemmate how days you have left before the gallows, down there with the rest of the rats."

Mr. Wickham made no response to this; he gaped stupidly for a little while, and then Matthew said, "Leave this place, and give us a wide berth, if you are to stay in Paris."

Thus dismissed, Wickham slunk away from Matthew, who continued to point the sword towards him. Only when Georgiana could hear the pounding of Mr. Wickham's boots down the stairs did Matthew turn to her, and with a rapid return of tenderness to his countenance, kneel down beside her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, taking up her hand.

"No, just a little overwhelmed."

He reached out to caress her cheek, and had the misfortune of choosing the one Mr. Wickham had slapped. Georgiana started, and found his hand instead on her chin, tilting her head so that he could see her cheek, which must have held at least some degree of redness, more clearly.

"Georgiana, did he hit you?"

"He slapped me," she whispered.

All of the anger returned to his face, instantly, his eyes hardening. "I will have to call him out; it must be done, although he is even lower than I thought, to have done that. I will cut his cheek to the bone for it, if ever I can, and every time he looks in the mirror he may be reminded why he is the worst of men, to hit a woman."

Georgiana had, until now, been too stunned for tears, but she found herself crying as she pleaded:
"Please do not! He will know you shall beat him if he chooses swords, so he will choose pistols, and anything may happen with pistols. He is too low a man for you to die over. Please, Matthew, do not fight him – "

She might have continued to plead, but she found herself taken up in a tight embrace, so that she sobbed against his shoulder, as he said, "If you wish it, I will not, my dearest, but I will make good on my promise to him, if he so much as touches you again."

Georgiana felt soothed, but she continued to cry for some time, overcome by all that had happened, and her relief that it was over. When finally she stopped, Matthew said, "Why do we not return to our apartment? You should rest; you have had quite the ordeal this morning."

He laid the sword down against the wall, and then assisted her to standing. Georgiana found, however, that she could not remain so. It was no longer that her knees could not support her, but instead that she found blackness encroaching rapidly on the edges of her vision, and she was overcome by dizziness; she would have sunk back to the floor if he had not caught her.

"You are unwell," he said, simply, and then supporting her heavily, helped her back into the apartment, and over to the chaise in their sitting room. Georgiana laid down there, still feeling exceedingly light-headed. She was not the sort to faint, and realised this was the closest she had ever come to doing so, which troubled her greatly.

She found now Hughes, in addition to Matthew, leaning over her with an expression of concern. Hughes, however, had smelling salts, and was holding them under Georgiana's nose, a sharp tang that made Georgiana nauseous again. She waved Hughes off, weakly, feeling once again overcome.

"Thank you, Hughes, but I do not believe I have need of those. I am a little better now."

"You should be seen by a doctor," Matthew said. "I will go down and ask that one be sent here. What is the word for physician, in French?"

A thought came to Georgiana as she recollected how she had felt over the last few days, and the symptoms that she must impart to a physician, if she was to be seen by one.

"Not just yet," she said. "Will you bring me my letters?"

Matthew looked at her as though she were not right in the head, in addition to being ill, but did oblige her, bringing the little bundle of letters Georgiana had received since she was in Paris, tied up with ribbon. Georgiana undid the ribbon and sorted through the letters until she found the one from her sister Elizabeth she sought; she scanned Elizabeth's slightly wild, but still elegant hand, until she found the passage she had recalled:

"My dear sister, it has occurred to me that there is more about the married state that I should have shared with you before your departure, and did not. No one shared it with me in detail, and I was only fortunate that Miss Kelly recognised my pregnancy, or it would have been some time before I recognised it myself. So please do allow me to share the symptoms you might encounter, if you are to become with child.

"You may find yourself ill in the mornings, perhaps even so much as to need to evacuate your stomach. Fortunately, this does not last the entire course of the pregnancy, but it may be rather severe in the beginning. This was the case for both Jane and I. Jane complained a great deal of dizziness, and I have felt it occasionally myself. I feel even more a great pervading tiredness, regardless of how much I sleep. You will also likely grow fuller in the bosom; that is how Sarah noticed it, at first, for me. She said my stays did not lace up as tight as they had before. You may
already know this, but the surest sign is that you miss your courses, although you may experience these other symptoms even before you have that confirmation of your state."

Georgiana rested the letter on her lap and exhaled, deeply. "How long have we been in Paris?" she asked.

"Nearly three fortnights, I believe," Matthew said.

"I am at least a week late on my courses, then – I had lost track of time," Georgiana said. "Elizabeth wrote to me of the symptoms I should expect, if I was to become with child. I am not ill; I am pregnant."

Matthew's face showed every bit of the shock such a revelation must cause, and he asked, "So soon?"

"I suppose so. I thought it would take much longer, as was the case for my sister." Georgiana was still stunned by the thought that she should have a child, and she wondered if she should be worried, that the news did not make her so happy and serene as it had Jane and Elizabeth. Matthew, as well, looked more stunned than anything.

Georgiana was vaguely aware of Hughes slipping from the room, and leaving them to privacy, and then Matthew asked, quietly, "Does this please you, being with child?"

"I find myself more overwhelmed, than anything," Georgiana admitted. "I had always thought we should have children, and I would be a mother, but later, when I was older. I am not even nineteen, yet."

"I know what you mean," he said, clasping her hand. "And between us, we have only one living parent, who stands as a most terrible example."

He referred to his father, The Honourable Richard Stanton, a rector who believed in a strict and – so far as Georgiana saw it – cruel interpretation of the Bible. She had witnessed firsthand the father's heartless treatment of his son, and had only then begun to understand what had caused Matthew to leave home at eight and a half years of age, to join the navy.

"You will certainly be a much better father than him," Georgiana assured him. "Anyone who may lead men as you do can certainly lead a child on the right path."

"And you, who are all that is kind and gentle, will certainly be a wonderful mother," he said, leaning over to kiss her temple. "But right now you should rest, my dearest."

"Will you stay here, in the apartment?"

"Yes, of course. I assure you, Georgiana, so long as we might be in the same city as that miscreant, you shall never again be left unattended. I regret that I did not anticipate such a thing could have happened, after we first met with him, so that I might have saved you this distress."

"I do not see how you could have," Georgiana said. "And he might not have done what he did, if he had not gambled away his ill-gotten fortune."

"Is that what prompted this? I had wondered what caused him to persecute you."

"Yes. He wished to blackmail me."

"That much I gathered, from what I heard of your exchange. How he thought I should believe such a thing, I do not know. Beyond what I know of you, and your honesty, did he not think I
was a participant in my own wedding night?"

Georgiana thought back to that night and could not help but blush as she thought of how oversensitive she had been to each and every one of his caresses, and how nervously she had come to the marriage bed, given the differing accounts she had received from the women of her family.

Elizabeth and her aunt Ellen had seen it their duty to prepare her, but had been vague about what was to happen, and given their accounts with a goodly degree of embarrassment, although indicating the act would be pleasurable in the long-term, with a husband who loved her so. Her aunt Catherine had been far more explicit about what was to happen, but had also indicated that she would not like it at all, although she was to lie there and allow her husband to do whatever he pleased. Thankfully, the better parts of each account had been correct, for Matthew was not pleased unless his wife was, as well.

Georgiana had become lost in her recollection, but Matthew did not seem to expect a response. Finally, she said, "How did you know that I was trapped in the hallway?"

"Hughes heard you scream. She ran down the back staircase and found me."

"How did you come by the sword so quickly?"

"I took it down with the basket. I handled things poorly with Madame Durand, when we met with her. I understand her sentiments regarding the sword, but her son will have little to remember his father by, as he grows up, and should certainly have his father's sword. That is what I should have told her, and I thought to make another attempt. I shall, when we do call on her, but we must save that for another day. For now, you should rest."

Georgiana herself felt the need to rest, even beyond the events of the morning. Her exhaustion seemed even greater, now that she had a true cause to attribute to it, and after Matthew kissed her temple again, and then moved away, she closed her eyes and very quickly drifted off to sleep.

If Georgiana had planned for such an extended captivity, she would have created some way of more accurately counting the days she spent, from the very beginning of when she was locked in the little room of the cottage. After what she thought was a month, during which Mr. Wickham only told her that her stubborn brother refused to release her dowry, she began her count at thirty, and took special care to increase it every morning.

Her count was now at three hundred and twenty. Her days were simple – her time passed, usually, by reading one of the books she had packed in her trunk, unless she was feeling too depressed to read. She had two meals a day of bread and a jug of watered wine, and occasionally a little meat or fruit, if Mr. Wickham was feeling generous. Once a week she was allowed to do their laundry in a great pot in the main room, and once a day she was allowed a walk outside, although the main purpose of this was to save Mr. Wickham's needing to empty and wash her chamber pot himself. It was during this daily walk that she felt the greatest temptation to attempt an escape, to throw the chamber pot at him and run away, as fast as she could. Yet she doubted she could outrun him for very long, and she feared what he would do to her if she failed in the attempt. Once, as she had been doing the washing, he had leant over her and violently pulled a section of her hair out of its braid, then sliced through it cleanly with his knife, cutting it from her head. When she asked him fearfully why he had done it, he responded mockingly that as a loving husband, he wished for a lock of his wife's hair, but Georgiana thought his true purpose had been to frighten and intimidate her, and he had been successful.

It was not that Mr. Wickham was not earning money, for he had lied his way into a position as a
steward for an elderly estate owner, Mr. Thornfield, and must have known enough of his father’s role to keep the position for so long. But Mr. Wickham lost his money as easily as he came by it, and she suspected he was in debt, although he would not speak of it to her. He spoke very little to her at all, merely opened the door to give her food and drink, and wordlessly escorted her outside on the occasions she was allowed to leave, always holding the knife. If he spoke at all, it was to indicate he was getting very impatient for his thirty thousand pounds, although he did not allow her to write to Fitzwilliam again; Georgiana suspected he withheld word from her in the hopes it would wear her brother down. She had long since begun to hope that it would; she cared not for her dowry, anymore, and simply longed to go home, to Pemberley, where she might have the luxuries she had never considered luxuries: a hot meal, a bath, a warm room to sleep in.

Mr. Wickham had only one sort of visitor, the girls he brought home from one of the local inns. Georgiana might have pleaded her case with them, to get word out that she was being held captive, but if they heard her stirring in the other room, Mr. Wickham spun a story of how he was required to care for his wife, who had gone insane after their marriage, and then when they left, came into her room and threatened her with all the means he held, to be more quiet next time. Georgiana saw things, though, through the keyhole in the door, things which made her better understand what he had wanted to do on their wedding night. These girls seemed to enjoy it, and they seemed to care not that they participated in such an act without being married, but Georgiana still lived in fear that George would some day decide to claim his right as husband. She did not want him to touch her in that way, in those places.

On this three hundred and twentieth day, she was lying on the bed and reading. She supposed she should be thankful that Mr. Wickham had allowed her to keep the books she had packed, rather than claiming them for himself, but he seemed to have little interest in books, and perhaps his debts had not yet reached the point where he would think to sell them. If that time came, Georgiana thought she might well become his insane wife, with nothing remaining to occupy her mind.

The cottage door slammed closed, and Georgiana pretended to continue to be interested in her book; she did not like him to think she was eager for his presence, or any news he might bring. So she waited, lying there, until the door lock clunked open and he appeared, holding a jug of water mixed with a little wine, and the plate with her bread. It was becoming the season for blackberries, and he had been including a handful of those on the plate, as well, for the last few weeks. Georgiana could not call it a kindness, not from the man who would do this to her, but neither could she deny how much she had hoped for them on this day, as well, even if they were the tart early fruits of the season. Instead of just laying her meal down, and picking up her old plate and jug like he usually did, Mr. Wickham looked down at her, and said:

"Mr. Thornfield thinks to send me to Jamaica, to look after his plantation there, and that means you shall have to go, as well, given your brother remains so obstinate. I look forward to it, actually. A man might make a fortune in the West Indies, I think, and the fortune I had coming to me does not seem likely to appear."

"Mr. Wickham, I beg you, please, do not make me go with you. Will you keep me in captivity forever? Your object is achieved, but your aim is not met. Fitzwilliam can be very stubborn; he will not move on this. You will only have to bear the additional expense of my passage, and board, once we arrive."

"You are right that your brother is very stubborn, but so am I. So long as he is alive, you shall not see him, unless he gives me my due. As for the cost of your passage, Mr. Thornfield has provided for yours as well, knowing as he does how I care for my poor, crazy wife."

Georgiana knew she would cry – she could hardly avoid it, at the thought of being forced to leave.
England, and taken farther away from her brother – but she willed herself not to in his presence.

"Is there anything I might do to change your mind? May I write to Fitzwilliam again, to persuade him?"

"No, you may not. He shall have no word from you until he is serious about handing over your dowry. You may begin packing your trunk, however. We shall leave in three days."

With that, Mr. Wickham closed the door and locked it. Although hungry – Georgiana was perpetually hungry, for the bread never seemed quite enough – she could not bring herself to eat. If she left England, Georgiana felt certain she would never come home. The journey, however, might present some opportunity, if not to escape, then to at least get a letter to her brother, so that Fitzwilliam might know of her removal to Jamaica. If there was to be a letter sent, however, there must first be a letter written, and she had been allowed no ink or paper since that original letter she had been allowed to write. She would need something to make an ink out of, and glancing down at her plate, she realised she had it already.

Such an operation was too dangerous to conduct while Mr. Wickham was still at home, so she hid the blackberries in a corner of her trunk, and dutifully handed over her empty plate and jug in the morning, to be replaced with those which were full, before her morning walk with him. She ate her breakfast silently, and only when she had heard the cottage door slam shut did she remove the blackberries from the trunk, and set about to mashing them into an ink. She dared not use her hands, for fear they would be stained, and so she used the lip of the jug, which took quite a long while, but eventually did produce something she thought could be used as ink. Paper was not such a difficulty, for several of her books had empty pages. She tore one out, and determined that a hair pin was her best choice to substitute for a pen. It took a painful amount of time to write even "Dear Fitzwilliam," with such a small implement and the poor, watery ink, but she did manage it, and then continued:

"I can think not of how to begin this letter, other than to say I am very, very sorry for what I have done. I have paid the price for my mistake, and will continue to. I know that I have let you down terribly, and how poorly you must think of me, but if I am able to get this letter to you, I must beg of your brotherly love and assistance.

"I have been locked in a room in a little cottage since shortly after my marriage. I know not where the cottage is, but Mr. Wickham has been working as a steward for a man he calls Mr. Thornfield, although that may not be his real name. But Mr. Thornfield now intends to send Mr. Wickham to Jamaica, and I am to pack my trunk to leave in two days' time.

"Dear brother, if ever there is a way for you to intercept us, I beg of you please to do so. I care not for my dowry anymore. I want only to come home to Pemberley and to see you again, if you can still be brought to have any affection for me, after what I have done.

Your devoted and regretful sister,

GEORGIANA"

It took the blackberry ink a long time to finish its drying, and it had bled through the paper. When it finished, therefore, Georgiana wrapped it in another page torn from her book, which she had addressed to her brother at Pemberley, and folded them together. She had no wax to seal the letter, and so stitched it up carefully with a needle and thread – for these she was allowed, so that she could mend Mr. Wickham's clothes, and her own – then hid it within the pages of the book, which she wrapped up in a dress, along with her other books. When it came time to travel to whatever port they would take passage from, she would tuck it into her stays, along with the few coins she had managed to keep hidden from Mr. Wickham, and hope for some opportunity to convince
someone along the journey to post it for her.

For now, she occupied herself by once again searching the room for any means of escape, as she had done so many times before, to no avail. The windows had originally come down to a normal height, but they had been boarded up, leaving only an opening far too small for Georgiana to fit through. She stood on the chair and pulled at the top plank with all her strength, but as before, it was far too thoroughly boarded up for escape. When she had once again exhausted this and all other options she could think of, she laid down on the bed with her book, and waited, for it was all she could do until they were to leave.

Mr. Wickham returned home at his usual hour, and once again unlocked her door and stood there with her evening meal. Instead of exchanging the plate and jug, though, he placed them on the floor and locked the door closed behind him. Georgiana sat rigidly on the bed, afraid of what he would do next, but he did not touch her. Instead – and she quickly came to see that this was far worse, he went to her trunk and opened it, then began rifling through it. He had done this before only once, when he had first deposited it in her room and searched it for anything of great value, confiscating – and she assumed selling – her jewellry.

"You don't seem to have packed very thoroughly, Georgiana," he said, his tone mocking. "But I suspect you have something new packed away here."

"I do not know what you mean," she said, her heart pounding.

"I believe you do. You had sufficient means, and motivation." He reached the dress her books were wrapped in, and slid them out, opening one, rifling through the pages, and then another, doing the same. It was the third in which she had hidden the letter, and when he picked it up, she could not help but jump up and grab his arm, crying out: "No, please!"

He threw her down with remarkable force, such that she had difficulty breathing when she first hit the floor, but she heard well enough his triumph as he extracted the letter. Georgiana waited for him to tear it into pieces, but he did not.

"And here it is, in your own sad little hand."

Georgiana sat up on the floor and stared at him, feeling the tears streaming down her face. The letter had been her only chance, and she had not hidden it well enough. She should have thought that he would search her room, and now she would not have another chance; he would not be so foolish as to provide her with the blackberries again.

"What do you wait for?" she asked. "I know you will not deny yourself the pleasure of destroying it in front of me."

"Destroy it? Why should I destroy it, Georgiana, when I have worked so hard for its creation? Oh, no, I shall certainly post it, although I will wait a few days, so the date I am sure you have included gives it additional urgency."

"I do not understand. Why should you post it?" she asked, fearfully.

"We are not going to Jamaica, Georgiana. But since your brother will not release your inheritance, I have set my sights on a larger prize – Pemberley."

Georgiana trembled at the way he said it, and waited for him to continue, which it seemed he could not resist, in his triumph.

"I have an acquaintance, in the militia," Mr. Wickham said. "He thought to join the regulars once, but do you know what he said they toast, there? 'To a bloody war, or a sickly season,' he said, and
he rightly wanted no part of that. And do you know where some of the sickliest seasons are to be had? In the West Indies. So when your brother finally receives a clue as to your whereabouts, and it is in Jamaica, he shall hardly be able to resist going after you there. It is likely a man like him, never exposed to the common diseases of those parts, will have no resistance. He takes sick and dies, and you, my dear wife, shall inherit Pemberley. Which means that I, as your husband, shall control it."

Georgiana stared at him in shock and horror. She could never have suspected that this was his plan, in telling her they were going to Jamaica, nor that he must have been giving her the blackberries for dinner for weeks in advance so that she would not suspect he wanted her to write the letter.

"Please do not," she whispered. "Please."

These were all the words she could manage, before she collapsed, sobbing, on the floor.

"Georgiana! Georgiana!"

This time, she was pulled violently from the dream, waking so disoriented that at first she did not know how she had come to be in a rather nice room, and she did not know who was shaking her shoulder so.

In a few moments, she recollected herself. Of course it was Matthew shaking her shoulder, and they were in Paris, and he loved her, and George Wickham had merely accosted her earlier that day. She emitted an actual sob of relief, and sat up rapidly, so that she could pull him into the tightest of embraces.

"Thank God it was not real," she murmured.

"You were becoming ever more agitated in your sleep," he said. "I did not know if it was right to wake you, but I could not bear to watch it any longer."

"It was very much right to wake me. It was a most horrible dream."

"This is not the first nightmare you have had," he said, pulling away from the embrace so he could look at her, concerned. "Would you like to talk about it?"

The thought of sharing even the subject of her dreams made Georgiana's stomach sink in shame. Yet while she could brush off his invitation to speak of her dreams in the middle of the night, she knew she should not do so now. They were not so long married, and she expected it would be quite hurtful to him, if she was not willing to share.

Georgiana sighed, and moved her legs so that he would have more space to sit beside her, and then said, "I have this recurring dream, which began with Mr. Wickham convincing me to elope before my brother arrived in Ramsgate. We go to Gretna Green, and are wed, and all that happens after is simply awful."

"My God," he said, taking up her hand and clasping it tightly. "He does not – "

"He does not force me to share the marriage bed, if that is what you were thinking. There is no sharing of the marriage bed at all, thankfully."

"It is what I feared, yes. It would have explained the degree of distress I saw, and it made me wish I had woke you at the first sign of it."
"If you have opportunity to do so in the future, please do," Georgiana said. "But my distress was of a different sort."

She proceeded to tell him of the nature of her captivity, of being deprived of nearly every physical and emotional comfort, culminating in Mr. Wickham's manipulating her into writing the letter.

"It seemed so real," she said. "It felt as though I had been living in that room for more than a year, and that all hope was truly lost."

"It must have been beyond horrible for you, particularly to follow what happened this morning. I did not think it possible, but I believe I hate that man even more, now."

"You cannot hate a man for what he does in dreams."

"In his case I believe I can, for I can see it in his character to do all that you described, and I believe you can, as well, which must make the dreams all the more real."

"But they are not real," Georgiana said, firmly, as much for herself as for him.

"No, of course not. And I promise I shall wake you at the first sign of any distress, if it happens again, although I dearly hope it does not."

"Yes," she said. "Please do wake me. Please bring me back to you."
Chapter 8

Elizabeth sighed over her book, and wished yet again that the saloon was not so near to the music room that the sounds from within could still be heard. She supposed herself ungrateful for thinking such a thing, for the sound emanating from that room was the reason for Pemberley's no longer being exposed to the screams of Bess Bingley, and that the sound was produced by others was the only reason Elizabeth herself could even be in this room instead.

The sound was the melody to "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," which had been hummed by poor Mrs. Padgett as one of the few things that seemed to calm Bess, and then painfully transcribed to pianoforte by Elizabeth. Hummed, it offered the baby some comfort, but on the pianoforte, it utterly captivated her, even when played quite poorly.

It was played quite poorly with great frequency, for Elizabeth had – recognising its simplicity – made it the first piece that Jane, Charles, Sarah, and Mrs. Padgett were to learn on the pianoforte. This freed her from the need to be called urgently into the music room every time Bess fussed, so that she could play and calm the baby. Yet it meant she was subjected instead to that same song on an ongoing basis.

Based on the current style, Elizabeth assumed it to be Sarah doing the playing, for it spoke of some attempt at refinement and proficiency, rather than the plodding, hesitant searching of notes that characterised both of the Bingleys. Elizabeth knew that it would be at least several more days more before her husband returned to Pemberley with Mary, but she hoped they would arrive as soon as possible. Sarah, at the least, would soon require new music and more instruction, and although Elizabeth had initially instructed her own sister, she suspected Mary would take some measure of enjoyment in being applied to as a teacher, and thus have more patience for it than Elizabeth did.

As well, Mary's arrival would also mean the return of Darcy, and Elizabeth missed him deeply. She had written him – a tender letter that contained little in the way of news, aside from the fact that the pianoforte continued to placate the baby, and that she had been instructing the new music pupils. His contained more, although much of it mundane. He had concluded his business at both Hoares and Drummonds, and thoroughly reviewed all of the accounts at their London house. Some of their acquaintances had by now returned to town for the little season, and he had called on Lord Anglesey, Lady Tonbridge, and the Gardiners. With all of these things completed, he was ready to depart for Longbourn, and although Elizabeth appreciated all of the news contained within, it was the sentiments that followed which filled her with both love and longing.

Sarah's rendition of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" had ceased, and Elizabeth decided to take her book to the music room, which was now the most popular room in the house. In that space, Jane was sitting quietly, with little Bess sleeping in her arms, and Sarah had already left the room. Elizabeth realised there must be some degree of awkwardness for Sarah, to be playing an instrument in a room where she was not invited to spend her leisure hours, and that if Sarah continued to be as dedicated a pupil as she was now, some accommodation should be made for her in the staff rooms.

As though Mrs. Reynolds had been reading her thoughts, Pemberley's housekeeper appeared in the door to the music room, curtseying, and, upon noting the sleeping infant, making her way over to where Elizabeth sat with very soft steps, and handing over a letter.

"There's a letter come from Miss – Lady Stanton," she whispered. "I thought you should like it at
"Indeed, thank you, Mrs. Reynolds."

Mrs. Reynolds looked as though she wished to wait for the opening of the letter, to learn whatever news it might contain – Georgiana was well-loved among Pemberley's staff, particularly its housekeeper, and Mrs. Reynolds had not been very enthusiastic about the idea of the young lady's leaving home and eventually setting up a household of her own. Recollecting herself, however, Mrs. Reynolds made her curtsey to leave, but Elizabeth stopped her.

"Wait, Mrs. Reynolds – I had wanted to ask. Is there a pianoforte, down in the staff rooms?"

"There was, ma'am. My predecessor, Mrs. Woburn, liked to play very much. But none of us plays now – excepting Sarah, I suppose, now that she is learning. It's been moved into storage, these ten years or so."

"Do you think it might be brought out, and tuned and repaired, if repairs are needed? I should like for Sarah to have an instrument more convenient for her to practise on, in addition to her assisting us with Bess, up here."

"Of course, ma'am. I shall have it brought out, and send for the tuner in Derby. Should you like me to have the pianoforte in the state rooms tuned as well? The music room and blue drawing room were just done."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Thank you for thinking of it, Mrs. Reynolds," Elizabeth said, by way of covering that she had entirely forgotten there was a pianoforte in the state rooms.

The state rooms were not something Elizabeth – or anyone else in the house, excepting the maids who cleaned them once a week – gave much thought to. They had been converted over from other spaces by Darcy's great-grandfather when the house was completed, under the hopes by that man of someday hosting the royal family. Such a visit had never occurred, nor was there any likelihood of it, unless there was some falling-out of significance between that family and the Cavendishes, which would preclude their staying at Chatsworth, and so the state rooms sat generally empty but for two purposes. The first was to provide those who applied to see the house with spaces which could be viewed when the family was in residence, and the second was to house any nobility who came to stay with them. Thankfully, the apartments had two bedrooms which could be entered entirely separately, otherwise Elizabeth was not certain what she would have done for her last house party, with two earls in residence; even determining precedence for dinner had required a quick look at Debrett's.

Once Mrs. Reynolds had left, Elizabeth turned to Jane and gave her a silent smile, for she had hardly greeted her sister upon entering the room. Jane now finally wore the smile that should be expected of her, that of a most kind-hearted mother to a baby who was not constantly terrorising the whole house. Jane was also as understanding as ever, and encouraged Elizabeth to read her letter, and share whatever news Georgiana should have.

Elizabeth thought it odd, upon looking at the letter, that it was addressed to both her and Darcy, for Georgiana usually wrote them independently, as they each preferred observations on different aspects of Georgiana's travels, although certainly knowing that all the news of her letters should be shared between them. It was also rather thin for a letter from Georgiana. With curiosity and a little concern, she read:

"My Dear Brother and Sister,

"I hope I do not alarm you by writing to both of you together, but I have news which should not
be delayed. Mr. Wickham is alive – Matthew and I encountered him while shopping today."

Elizabeth gasped, thankfully not waking Bess, but it was a sound which could not go without some manner of explanation to Jane.

"She writes that Wickham is alive – they have apparently seen him."

"Oh my – what does she say? Was he badly injured, in the battle?"

Elizabeth was hesitant to read the letter aloud before she had read it herself, for anything Georgiana should write to her about George Wickham would by its nature be sensitive. Jane knew already the full history of Wickham's wrongdoings, but anything that dealt with Georgiana's feelings upon seeing him again, and was addressed only to her and Darcy, must be kept private. Therefore, Elizabeth paused briefly to summarise for Jane, as she continued to read:

"He was very surprised to see us, and I believe if he could have avoided us, he would have. Matthew was not shy about pointing out to him that Lydia was in mourning, and he said that he had been trying to decide whether to send word to her that he lived or not, but I do not think he ever had serious intent of doing so.

"He did not receive any injuries in the Battle at Waterloo. It seems instead that he decided to fall as his comrades were falling, and pretend at being dead for the course of the battle. When it was over – I hate to think of this, but I shall tell you of it – Matthew indicated that he had robbed the dead of their purses, and Mr. Wickham did not deny that he had done so, which I can only take as an admission that he did, for he was dressed very fine, and gave no evidence of having any other source of income. Even if he did not do this, there can be no doubt that he is a deserter, having left the army following the battle and then making no attempt to reestablish contact.

"I hate to be the bearer of this news, although it will release your sister from her period of mourning. I suspect that you would agree with me in thinking it might have been better for her had he been truly dead, and you must know that it weighs heavily on my mind that I narrowly escaped the fate which she now faces.

"Aside from that, however, seeing him again has not injured me in any way. I am merely glad once again at my brother's intervention, and that I find myself in a far happier marriage. Matthew and I are both well, and I expect we shall not see Mr. Wickham again.

"I hope this letter also finds you well, and that little Elizabeth is by now doing better. Please give the Bingleys my best wishes.

"Your loving sister,

"GEORGIANA"

Jane did not seem to mind that Elizabeth read the last few lines of the letter silently, so shocked was she by that which had come before.

"I can hardly believe it," Jane said. "There must be some misunderstanding. Perhaps they did not fully comprehend him, and he has been trying to make his way to Lydia, and is not truly a deserter."

"Oh, Jane, I wish for Lydia's sake that you were right, but I do not think so. Lydia and the Fitzwilliams spent a great deal of time searching for Mr. Wickham, after the battle. If he had wished to be found, he might have been found then, and if not, he has had ample time to make his situation known to her. Georgiana indicated he was well-dressed – certainly he could have spared a little money out of what he devoted to his wardrobe to send word to her. Georgiana has no
difficulty in getting letters to us."

"But Georgiana is with the official delegation."

"Indeed, she is. And perhaps I would feel more lenient towards Wickham if he had asked for her assistance in sending a letter to Lydia. But he did not, and I assume he will not. Jane, we must face that our sister shall – for as long as he lives – remain trapped in a marriage with a man who has no intention of supporting her, or even living in the same country as her."

"Poor Lydia! Will you write to papa with this news?"

"No. Lydia is a married woman, and perhaps if we treat her as an adult, she shall act more like one," Elizabeth said, hoping this was true, although not entirely sure that it was. Certainly Lydia had been quieter, since going into mourning. "I shall write to her directly with it."

"But what if she decides to go join him in Paris?"

Elizabeth could not imagine doing so; if she had been in Lydia's place, she would have been furious. Yet Jane did have a point – Lydia might very well give Wickham the benefit of the doubt, as Jane had initially, and decide to go to him in Paris, just as she had followed him to the Netherlands when war had once again broken out.

"She might do so. At least if she does, Georgiana and Matthew are there. Perhaps her presence would convince Wickham to act more honourably, although it would mean we might not see much of her again, if Georgiana is correct that he cannot return to England."

"Oh Lizzy, I cannot imagine having to make such a choice."

"And you will not have to, because you did not elope with such a man," Elizabeth said.

Jane had not even once held a tendre for him, as Elizabeth had, she could not help but think, with a rush of shame. She had been taken in every bit as much as Georgiana by his lies, although the lies he told her were of a different nature, and had, for a time, helped to poison her mind against the man she now loved with all her heart.

"I hope you will be more sympathetic in your letter than that, Lizzy, or you should let me write it."

It was very tempting, to allow Jane to bear the burden of giving the news. Jane would likely be more kind in doing so, but also much less firm in indicating that Wickham had done wrong, and with Lydia receiving the letter, that firmness would be of utmost importance. Still, Jane's admonishment was a goodly reminder to be sympathetic, while also being firm.

"I will, I promise, Jane. I had better do so now."

Elizabeth considered writing Darcy, as well, whom she knew would want to know as soon as possible. In addition to his longstanding enmity with Wickham, that Georgiana had been the one to discover him alive would be quite troubling to him. Elizabeth was glad that Georgiana had given her reassurances at not being injured by seeing him, and that she had written so in her own careful hand.

Perhaps it was better, though, that Darcy be able to see this for himself, and given he and Mary had likely already departed for Pemberley, or would well before even an express reached Longbourn, she would have to wait to inform him in person. For now, however, she had a most unfortunate letter to write.
The letter was written, and even given over to Jane for review, before it was sent into Lambton with a servant the day following, so that it could be posted. That servant returned with not one but two letters from Lady Harrison, formerly Caroline Bingley, one addressed to Jane, and the other to Charles.

There was not time for these letters to be read before dinner, but they were brought out following it, while Elizabeth was taking her turn on the pianoforte.

"Caroline writes that all is wonderful at Hilcote, and she is quite settled in as mistress of the house," Jane said. "She is planning to redecorate the drawing room first, in the style of Mr. Hope, and then the mistress's chambers. The rest of the house will follow."

"That is strange," Charles said. "She writes that her decorating budget will not cover a quarter of what needs to be done, and she is quite unhappy that Sir Sedgewick intends to put so much of her dowry into improvements on the estate, rather than the house. Oh – I suppose I was not meant to share all of that," he finished, his face falling.

"I do not know how Caroline would think you would not discuss it, at least with me," Jane said. "Will do you anything to intervene?"

"I do not think there is anything I can do," Charles said. "Sir Sedgewick is her husband now, and the marriage articles were fairly generous, as regarded her pin money. I expect Caroline wishes to make more changes to the house immediately than they can afford. She would have done the same at Netherfield, if she had continued on as mistress of the house. And I can hardly argue with his putting more of the money into improvements on the estate. If they improve its returns, it would ultimately be better for them both in the long-term."

"Still, I feel badly for her," Jane said. "She was so happy about moving there and setting up her household."

Elizabeth felt Caroline had been rather more happy about bragging to her acquaintances about how happy she was, instead of being truly happy. Still, like Jane, she could not help but feel a little sympathy towards Caroline, who had, perhaps concerned she was running out of opportunities as she grew older and neared the age where she would begin to lose her looks, married an ill-looking man without even seeing his estate.

Not too much sympathy, however. This was Caroline, after all, and Elizabeth suspected that the rooms at Hilcote were more than sufficient, and Caroline simply wished to show away by redecorating them all, instead of seeing the money spent more wisely. Caroline would favour furniture such as that in Elizabeth's overdone bedchamber, a final remnant of Lady Anne Darcy's more grandiose taste, although at least Lady Anne had been able to afford her own taste. Elizabeth thought again idly that she should begin her own redecoration of those rooms; perhaps she would make her start after the baby was born, for she was not in such a rush as Caroline seemed to be, perhaps because she spent more of her time in the master's bedchamber, anyway.

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