

Prologue

A young lady who faints, must be recovered; questions must be answered, and surprises explained.

—Emma

*T*he woman appeared in the road ahead, seemingly out of nowhere. In the twilight and the distance, her features were indistinct, save for the pale hair that tumbled about her shoulders. Were it not for the white dress that caught the light of the rising moon, the coachman might not have seen her at all. As it was, the crescent struggling for dominance against temperamental autumn clouds barely illuminated the figure, lending her such an ethereal cast that she might have been mistaken for an apparition, one left wandering the woods two nights after All Souls' Day had released her fellow spirits from their suffering.

Her cry, however, was unmistakably human.

It pierced the darkness, overpowered the rattle of harnesses and thud of horses' hooves, penetrated the carriage walls to startle Elizabeth Darcy from the slumber into which she had just drifted.

She opened her eyes and instinctively looked toward her husband. So little light reached the inside of the coach that she could barely distinguish his silhouette. Disoriented from having wakened so abruptly in an unfamiliar place, her next thoughts went to their

infant daughter. Her anxiety eased momentarily when she recalled that Lily-Anne was safe in their London townhouse with Darcy's sister, but her heart raced as the coachman, Jeffrey, brought the horses to a stop.

"There's a woman ahead, sir," said Jeffrey. Though the coachman remained seated, the body of the carriage rocked slightly as the groom disembarked to take hold of the lead pair of horses. "Coming towards us," Jeffrey continued. "Looks like she's limping."

"Is she alone?" Mr. Darcy asked.

"Yes, sir."

Darcy pressed his wife's hand. "Remain here."

He quit the carriage. The light that had illuminated their path gradually receded, indicating that Darcy had removed the lantern from the front of the vehicle and carried it with him. The rear lantern remained, so the carriage was not left in total darkness.

"Oh, a gentleman!" Elizabeth heard the stranger exclaim. "Thank goodness! Can you help me, sir?"

"What is the trouble?"

The light diminished further. In the increased darkness, still disoriented by sleep, Elizabeth tried to gain her bearings.

They were traveling to Sussex, she reminded herself, to visit Darcy's cousins Colonel and Anne Fitzwilliam. The newlyweds had recently taken possession of Brierwood, a property Anne's mother had settled upon her following her marriage, and the Darcys were to be the couple's first guests. The letter of invitation from Anne had included a confidential admission that had delighted Elizabeth and inspired them to bring a family heirloom: a set of christening clothes. The priceless garments had been passed down through generations of Darcy's maternal line, and all looked forward to the newest member of the family wearing them within the year. They also brought another gift for Anne, a gold signet ring worn by Darcy's late mother, the beloved aunt for whom Anne had been named.

Elizabeth was starting to doubt, however, whether they would ever arrive to present the gifts. The journey south from Derbyshire to London had been plagued by so many delays that they had left Lily-Anne behind with Darcy's sister, Georgiana, to rest from the rigors of

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travel before continuing on. It had been a fortuitous decision, as a loose wheel had slowed their progress still more after leaving town. Now, instead of reaching Brierwood today as planned, they found themselves only as far as Surrey. They intended to stop for the night in the next village, Highbury, where they understood a decent inn could be found. When they realized they would be further delayed, the Darcys had sent their personal servants and the heaviest luggage ahead by public coach to meet them at the inn. They traveled with only the small chest containing the ring and baptismal gown.

Elizabeth looked forward to reaching the inn, where she knew her maid would have made their room as comfortable as possible. At present, however, she was decidedly uncomfortable. Though she pulled her mantle about her more tightly, it was not the chill that distressed her, but the darkness. They had thought to be in Highbury well before sunset. It was risky to travel at night—not only could roads hold obstacles difficult for horses and drivers to see, but all manner of disreputable individuals might roam them. Now that she was more awake, this unexpected stop filled her with uneasiness.

She drew aside the curtain covering the window of the carriage door. The rear lantern offered some side illumination but cast the forward part of the vehicle in shadow, and the lantern Darcy carried was now too far distant to provide light to those left behind. Even were it brighter, from this vantage point she could not observe the scene transpiring ahead. Nor could she any longer make out the woman's words, only her distraught tone, as a cold wind stirred dead leaves yet clinging to their branches. One of the horses snorted and tossed its head.

Elizabeth shared the animal's impatience. Anxious to see for herself what was happening, she set aside her lap blanket and muff. Her reticule she wrapped by its drawstring round her wrist, and she called the footman from the rear of the vehicle to help her out of the carriage.

Just as he took her hand to assist her, a dark blur streaked past his head. It so startled them both that she nearly fell, but he caught her. Had his reflexes been the least bit slower, she would certainly have suffered injury, for the flying shape swooped towards the horses, agitating them tremendously. The carriage shifted as the groom struggled to control his team.

After circling thrice, the creature flew toward Jeffrey. He dropped the reins to protect his face, but the defensive instinct proved unnecessary. The great black bird landed on the seat beside him and emitted a throaty *kaugh*.

It was a raven, the most enormous Elizabeth had ever seen. It perched on the seat as if it, not Jeffrey, were in command of the carriage, and cawed at the coachman for presuming to usurp its rightful place.

“Shoo.” The unnerved coachman’s voice would not have intimidated even Lily-Anne.

The raven cawed again, each cry deeper and louder than the one previous. Poor Jeffrey, who in all his fifty years had never received such abuse, looked almost willing to concede his place if only the sinister bird would leave him be. But then he remembered himself, and seemed about to assert his authority over the mouthy upstart, when the creature took flight once more.

It rose up, then dived and circled the horses again. The animals snorted and shied, jostling the carriage as the bird swept past them and round the back of the jerking vehicle. A moment later, they heard the sound of breaking glass.

And were suddenly enveloped by darkness.

“Devil take that bird—it must have broken the lamp,” Ben, the footman, said. “I will try to get it working again.”

The raven had flown into the trees. Though it no longer molested them, it continued to heckle their party from above. The groom had all he could do to soothe the horses as Jeffrey escorted Elizabeth to Darcy.

The stranger, all the while, had not ceased her laments, and had carried them on loudly enough that Darcy was unaware of the avian vandal harassing the coach. Just as Elizabeth approached, the young woman swayed. Darcy caught her in one arm, the other still holding the heavy lantern. He looked towards the carriage to signal for assistance, and was clearly surprised to find Elizabeth and his coachman so close. Jeffrey relieved him of the lantern.

“I thought I told you to remain in the coach,” Darcy said.

“I thought I could be of more use here,” Elizabeth replied. “And a

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disagreeable bird has just extinguished the other lamp, so I would as soon be with you while Ben repairs it.”

“Very well. Allow me to present Miss Jones.” His tone was as dry as the leaves.

Miss Jones had not lost consciousness, but had quieted during her swoon. She was quite young—a slip of a thing, barely more than a girl, perhaps sixteen—with delicate features and large blue eyes. Her thin muslin dress had seen better days, but looked to have at one time been fine. It was trimmed with beadwork and pink ribbon. A matching ribbon tied back her long, thick hair.

“Whatever is she doing wandering about the woods alone at night?” Elizabeth asked.

Darcy tried to help Miss Jones stand upright, but the girl continued to lean on him rather more than Elizabeth thought necessary. Darcy himself appeared displeased by the prolonged contact. “She is injured and hysterical. I have been unable to obtain any particulars beyond her name.”

Elizabeth started to address Miss Jones but was cut off before she could utter a syllable.

“Oh, what a relief to have another woman present! Not that you, sir, have been anything but a gentleman, but it is so much more in a woman’s nature to attend injuries. And I am injured, ma’am—my ankle—how it pains me!” Miss Jones attempted to stand but her leg buckled, requiring Darcy to continue supporting her. “Is there anyone else in your party? A surgeon, perhaps?”

“Only the two of us, I am afraid,” Elizabeth said.

“Oh, do not say *only* the two of you—how fortunate I am that you should be traveling this road just when I am in need of assistance. Will you—might I ask you to examine my ankle, ma’am—Mrs.—Mrs.—?”

“Darcy.”

“Mrs. Darcy? I would not impose on your kindness, but I am in such extraordinary pain! Perhaps Mr. Darcy could help settle me on the ground, and then, being a gentleman, gaze off into those trees behind me while you look at my ankle?”

“For both modesty’s and comfort’s sake, would you not rather be examined in the carriage?” Darcy asked.

“Oh, I am sure I cannot walk another step! It would not surprise me at all if the ankle were broken. In fact, it is certainly broken—indeed, I cannot stand here a minute more.”

“All the more reason to—”

“No, I must sit down.” She began to lower herself. “If you will just help me—yes, just so—there—I shall be fine right here. I am sure I shall be much better able to reach the carriage after relieving my ankle of weight for a few minutes while Mrs. Darcy examines it.”

When she was settled, the coachman held the lantern while Elizabeth knelt to examine Miss Jones’s ankle. Both Jeffrey and Darcy averted their gazes as Elizabeth lifted the soiled hem of the woman’s dress. Pea-sized white beads threatened to slip off several frayed threads. Miss Jones’s shoes were worn; bits of damp earth from the road clung to them.

As Elizabeth reached for the injured foot, Jeffrey dutifully scanned the trees behind Miss Jones to preserve her delicacy. Darcy aimed his gaze toward the carriage, of which they could see little. The vehicle was still dark, and beyond the reach of their own light. The horses, from the sound of them, remained excited, though the raven either watched them in silence or had at last flown away, for its ominous *kaugh* had ceased.

Elizabeth palpated the ankle. Miss Jones cried out, momentarily drawing Darcy’s attention before he remembered himself and joined Jeffrey in admiring the trees.

“I wonder how Ben is getting on with that lamp,” Jeffrey said.

Miss Jones’s ankle did not look broken—indeed, it was not even bruised or swollen. Miss Jones, however, exclaimed at each gentle prod as if Elizabeth were branding her. The girl had a low tolerance for pain.

“How did you injure yourself?” Elizabeth asked.

“I tripped over a tree root.”

“Was no one with you? You must live very close, then.”

“Not at all. I do not even live in this part of the country—I am visiting my cousins. They live on a nearby farm—at least, it was nearby—I was out walking, and lost my way. I was wandering for hours, and the darker it became, the more I feared I would never find my way back to them. In my panic I did not see the tree root.”

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Darcy could not help but turn his attention on her. “Your cousins allowed you to walk about unescorted in strange country?”

“They were visiting a friend. I had a slight headache and stayed behind. But then it improved, so I decided to meet them coming home. I thought I knew the way. Oh!—That hurts!”

Elizabeth released her foot. “You must have merely turned the ankle, for I detect no break or sprain. Let us get you to the carriage and transport you to your cousins. What are their names?”

“Their names?” She winced. “Jones. Jones—just like mine.”

Miss Jones found she could stand unsupported, but still moaned and complained. Elizabeth was sympathetic to her discomfort, but wished the girl were not quite so vocal about it. To hear her grievances, one would think her entire leg had been amputated.

Darcy drew Elizabeth aside. “We have no notion of where to find these relations of hers, and Miss Jones herself will be of no help. We will take her with us to the inn at Highbury. Surely someone there knows the cousins.”

Elizabeth had begun to believe they would never reach the inn. She peered towards the carriage. Darkness yet shrouded it; she could barely discern the vehicle and could not make out their servants at all. “Ben must yet be repairing the lantern, but I see no sign of our groom, either.”

Darcy frowned. “Perhaps he is assisting Ben behind the carriage.” He called the men’s names, but received no response. The silence was more disturbing than the raven’s cry. Only the horses’ snorts penetrated the stillness.

He glanced meaningfully at her reticule. “Have you—”

“Yes. Do you want it?”

He shook his head. “Keep it at hand and stay here with Jeffrey and Miss Jones.” From the folds of his greatcoat he produced the small pistol he carried with him when they traveled, and walked towards the carriage.

He left the light with Jeffrey and the women, making it more difficult for Elizabeth to see his figure. Her nerves were taut as she and the coachman watched her husband retreat into the darkness surrounding the vehicle. Miss Jones’s continual complaints did not help.

“Oh! Where is he going? Can we not leave this place at once? I have heard there are highwaymen about—”

“Highwaymen!” Elizabeth said. “Why did you not say so before now?”

“Heavens, I did not want to speak of such people!”

With now even greater anxiety, Elizabeth turned her attention back to the carriage. She could just distinguish Darcy moving round its side. “Then kindly hold your tongue so as not to draw them to us.”

Behind her, Miss Jones mercifully lapsed into silence. The horses, however, were restless, and created quite enough noise themselves as they hoofed the ground and shook their harnesses. Elizabeth held her breath, unable to release it until she saw her husband safe again.

In a moment, Darcy came back into sight, running towards them. He bore grim news. Their servants lay unconscious.

Their chest was gone.

Elizabeth whirled round. So was Miss Jones.