

*The*  
*Suspicion at Sanditon*

OR, THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LADY DENHAM



*A Mr. & Mrs. Darcy Mystery*

Carrie Bebris



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE SUSPICION AT SANDITON

Copyright © 2015 by Carrie Bebris

All rights reserved.

A Tor Book  
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10010

[www.tor-forge.com](http://www.tor-forge.com)

Tor® is a registered trademark of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

ISBN 978-0-7653-2799-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4299-4307-9 (e-book)

CIP DATA—TK

Tor books may be purchased for educational, business, or promotional use. For information on bulk purchases, please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or write to [specialmarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:specialmarkets@macmillan.com).

First Edition: July 2015

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Uncle Mike,  
one of my favorite storytellers*

*“Those who tell their own Story you know must be listened to  
with Caution.”*

*—Mr. Thomas Parker, Jane Austen’s original  
unfinished manuscript of Sanditon*

## *Prologue*

*“My early hours are not to put my Neighbours to inconvenience.”*

*—Lady Denham, Sanditon*

A Gentleman and Lady, being induced by business to travel towards that part of the Sussex Coast which lies between Hastings and Eastbourne, entered the village of Sanditon little anticipating that the small but developing watering-place would become a scene of intrigue shortly upon their arrival.

They should have known better.

The Gentleman and Lady were, you see, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and his wife, the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Four years of marriage had brought them much happiness, including two dear children and an ever-increasing circle of friends. Yet it seemed that wheresoever Mr. and Mrs. Darcy went, some unexpected event was bound to occur. On a good journey, it was something vexing but tolerable. To this category, Darcy consigned ordinary travel inconveniences, less than ideal weather, and anything involving his mother-in-law. There had, however, occasionally arisen disturbances of a more serious nature, and Darcy fervently hoped that the present confusion would not number among them.

A haughty sigh from the young lady near his side commanded his attention. For the third time in as many minutes, Miss Esther

Denham's gaze drifted to the sitting room doors. "Whatever can be keeping her?"

The "her" in question was the dowager Lady Denham, mistress of Sanditon House, wherein was assembled a party of thirteen neighbors and visitors to the village—fourteen, if one included her ladyship, which unfortunately one could not, as their hostess had thus far remained absent from her own gathering.

At first, the neglected dinner guests had been content to wait patiently in the main sitting room, with its view of the park in full summer and large portrait of the late Sir Harry Denham observing them all from above the fireplace. They were clustered in several small groups. Darcy stood near the hearth with Miss Denham, her brother, and Mr. Thomas Parker, the person in the room (other than Elizabeth) with whom Darcy was best—if not particularly well—acquainted.

Across the room, Elizabeth and her friend Charlotte Heywood were immersed in a lively discussion with most of the other guests. Their conversation seemed of far greater interest to Miss Denham than the one in which she herself was engaged. Darcy suspected the fact that the participants included the party's two most eligible single gentlemen had something to do with her diverted attention.

Mr. Parker's sisters sat with another young lady on a sofa in the middle of the room, where they carried on a discussion of their own. The thirteenth guest, a gentleman of advancing years, sat apart from the others, occupying a chair nearest Darcy's party.

Many of the guests had known each other all their lives, so conversation flowed easily, although attempts to engage the lone gentleman met with indifference. Nobody seemed to know him, and other than being introduced as one Mr. Josiah Hollis, he appeared inclined to keep it that way. As Lady Denham's first husband had been a Hollis, all assumed Josiah was a relation, although he did not bear much resemblance to the dignified miniature depiction of the late Mr. Archibald Hollis displayed in a corner of the room. Perhaps in his late fifties, Josiah was a thin man whose small eyes, long teeth, and grey hair lent him the appearance of a rat. Darcy might have pitied him this unfortunate rodential resemblance were it not for his equally unpleasant demeanor. He spoke little, studying the room and its occupants with the eye of a scavenger and an air of resentment.

## Suspicion at Sanditon

Although Miss Denham's impatient query had been expressed in a voice loud enough to be heard by half the company, it was her brother, standing on her other side, who answered.

"We all know that Lady Denham conducts herself on her own schedule," Sir Edward Denham said, "Assoiled from all encumbrance of our time.'" The current baronet, Sir Edward had inherited his title upon the death of his uncle, Sir Harry, several years earlier. He had also inherited the family estate, Denham Park, where he resided with his sister.

"Then she ought to have consulted her schedule and considered *our* time before designating four o'clock as the hour at which we were all to arrive," declared Mr. Hollis.

"While it is true that Lady Denham keeps her own hours, they are country hours," Mr. Parker said. "She prefers her dinner and tea early, and planned this party accordingly. She must be insensible of the time." He lowered his voice. "She seldom hosts events this large," he reminded Darcy, whose invitation to the affair had derived primarily from the Darcys' connection with Mr. Parker, as they had met Lady Denham only two days previous. "And she is seventy, after all. Perhaps she withdrew to her chamber to rest before the demands of the evening, and slept longer than she intended."

In the limited time Darcy had spent in Lady Denham's company, she had not impressed him as a woman who, seventy or not, slowed down long enough for afternoon naps. Darcy, however, would not question Thomas Parker's excuse. Josiah Hollis was less generous.

"Insensible? Inconsiderate, more like it. How long have we been waiting?"

Sir Edward's hand moved to his fob pocket, only to find it smooth and flat. "I seem to have forgotten my watch."

Mr. Hollis released a sound of exasperation and looked pointedly at the chain hanging from Darcy's waistcoat.

Darcy withdrew his watch and opened its lid. "Most of us have been here nearly an hour." Mr. Hollis, for all his complaints, had been one of the last to arrive, but comported himself so disagreeably that Darcy felt as if the gentleman had been there longest of all.

Mr. Hollis scowled. "This delay is deliberate, no doubt. An attempt to remind us that she still has control of this house, after all these

years. Well, I have no patience for such manipulation.” He turned to the young lady on the sofa—Miss Clara Brereton, the only other resident of Sanditon House. “Are you not supposed to be her ladyship’s companion? Why is she not with you, or you with her?”

So startled was the young woman by his accusatory tone, that she could not immediately reply. A flush spread across her cheeks.

“Here, now, sir!” said Sir Edward. “That is no way to address a lady. Will you apologize, or must you and I—”

“Thank you, Sir Edward,” Miss Brereton gently interjected, then turned to Mr. Hollis. “Lady Denham said she had no need of me this afternoon. I was simply to make sure I appeared here in the portrait room by four o’clock.”

“Like the rest of us. Hmph!” He looked about until he spotted the footman, who, like any well-trained servant, had been doing his best to ignore the developing quarrel and fade into the wallpaper. “You—inform Lady Denham that Josiah Hollis has done with her waiting game.”

Miss Brereton rose from the sofa. “I shall look in on Lady Denham myself.” The mildness of her voice and manner admonished his rudeness more effectively than any barbed retort could. “I did not realize so much time had passed.”

She quit the room, leaving behind an awkward silence that Thomas Parker intrepidly attempted to fill. “I am sure all is well,” he assured Darcy, “and I am equally certain that her ladyship’s delay in personally receiving us is not motivated by an attempt to manipulate anybody.”

Darcy nodded politely, but his gaze traveled beyond Thomas Parker until it came to rest on Elizabeth. Her returning gaze reflected his own misgivings.

He pushed them from his thoughts and attended Mr. Parker’s discourse once more. Were there trouble, they would know soon enough, and in the meantime he would not dwell upon it. For the next quarter hour, Mr. Parker and Sir Edward enumerated the attractions Not To Be Missed during the Darcys’ two-week stay in the village, while Miss Denham huffed, Mr. Hollis glowered, and the other guests resumed their own conversations.



On the other side of the room, Miss Brereton's departure created a momentary pause in the otherwise diverting banter of Elizabeth's party. Upon their arrival, she and Charlotte Heywood had fallen into conversation with Thomas Parker's brother Sidney, and Sidney's friend Mr. Granville. The two gentlemen were handsome in both countenance and manners, and Elizabeth could not help but notice the pleasure Charlotte took in their unexpected attention.

"Miss Heywood, I leave to you our next subject of conversation," Sidney Parker said. "What shall we speak of while we all pretend we are not wondering whether our delayed dinner will be served stone cold or overcooked?"

"I believe the weather is always a safe topic of discourse," Charlotte offered.

"Oh, it is, indeed! One can never say too much about the weather; it is society's greatest equalizer. Everybody from a ploughman to a prince may hold an opinion, and confidently state it with little risk of giving offense. There is usually general agreement as to whether conditions are fair or foul, too hot, too wet, too sunny, too grey; and where opinions differ, nobody has much need to prove himself right, for the weather will do what it will, and tomorrow the same conversation can be had all over again. In fact, I daresay we are negligent in not having already dispatched our social obligation to discuss it. How fortunate that we are standing so near a window." He glanced outside. "The sky has grown overcast since we arrived. Mrs. Darcy, do you think it will rain?"

"My husband and I are on a seaside holiday," Elizabeth said. "Of course it will rain."

He laughed. "I can say the same for myself—Sanditon is never so wet as when I return for a visit. But will it rain *today*? What do you think, Miss Heywood? Mr. Granville and I have more than a passing interest in the matter, as we walked here from the hotel."

A low rumble spared anyone the necessity of a prediction. It was not a welcome noise, as Elizabeth and Darcy also had walked to Sanditon House. "It sounds distant," Charlotte said. "Perhaps the

rain will hold off until we are all safely returned to our respective lodgings.”

“Are you always an optimist, Miss Heywood?”

“Only after considering all the possibilities, and talking myself out of the worst ones.”

As Charlotte spoke, Elizabeth saw Miss Brereton reenter the portrait room. From the anxious expression of the younger woman’s countenance, she did not think the news they were about to hear would prove at all optimistic.

Miss Brereton scanned the room as if in deliberation, then headed toward Darcy’s group. She had just reached Thomas Parker’s side when Josiah Hollis caught sight of her.

“Well, does Lady Denham intend to join us at all this evening?” Mr. Hollis’s volume drew the attention of all the guests, and conversation ceased.

Miss Brereton flinched at his querulous demand. “I do not know.”

Mr. Parker was more sympathetic. “As you have returned without her, I can only suppose something significant prevents her from joining us. Is Lady Denham indisposed?”

Her composure suddenly breaking to reveal her distress, her gaze swept all the guests before returning to Mr. Parker.

“Lady Denham is missing.”