

Elizabeth had finally fallen asleep with her head resting on her folded arms on the small escritoire in her chambers. In Darcy's absence, she had removed Samuel Darcy's journals from the hiding place among her most intimate wear to return to the coded passages. With Darcy searching for Mr. Barriton, it became more vital for her to solve the mystery of his cousin's words. Steadfastly, she had manipulated the possible dates for Perdita Sanderson's birthday, for Elizabeth was certain, after learning something of Samuel Darcy's history with the child's grandmother, that it seemed only natural for Darcy's cousin to hold a heightened interest in the girl named for Samuel's great love. It had taken Elizabeth thirteen attempts before she had come across the correct combination. "14 September 1808," she had announced to the empty room. "Fitzwilliam shall be surprised to learn that Perdita Sanderson is a year older than my dear husband recalled."

Diligently, she had translated several related passages. She found with gratitude that Samuel had used the same coded pattern for the entries. In his own words, Samuel Darcy had spoken of contacting a gentleman in a newly minted state in what was once known as the Northwest Territory in America. According to the late Mr. Darcy, Ohio had become a state in 1803. Surprisingly, Samuel spoke of having explored several sections of the land beyond the mountains of Virginia some fifteen years prior, and having made the acquaintance of a Giles O'Grady. The gentleman of Samuel's acquaintance had passed some ten years prior, but Samuel had encouraged the acquaintance of Mr. O'Grady's son, Peter.

Three years ago, the younger O'Grady had contacted Samuel Darcy with news of an invention, which Peter thought would awaken Samuel's scientific hunger. Samuel and the younger O'Grady had corresponded regularly, and Darcy's cousin Samuel had offered financial support for the man's efforts.

Samuel Darcy had traveled to America twice in the past eight years. The earlier of the journeys had served as a duty call on the O'Gradys, for Cousin Samuel had held a great affection for the elder. Samuel had written, "Giles O'Grady saved my life when I foolishly stumbled into a bear trap. Giles nursed me to health over a six-week period. In gratitude, I made O'Grady a loan so Giles could purchase his homestead. A proud one, Giles refused my thanks, but I finally convinced O'Grady to accept the money. I held no doubts of Giles' success. As expected, my friend repaid me every penny."

Elizabeth had enjoyed reading of the O'Grady family, but when Samuel Darcy began to speak of the likelihood of the young O'Grady's creation exploding if not handled properly, she had ceased her translation and had studied the sketches Samuel had made in the margins. "Fitzwilliam referred to this device as some sort of torpedo." Elizabeth turned the sketch on its side, and upside down. "I have not the right of it," she grumbled as she compared one sketch to another. Each drawing displayed more details than the previous one. "It is as if Cousin Samuel meant to construct his own explosive. I can give no account of what I have read," Elizabeth said in frustration. "Perhaps Fitzwilliam or the colonel will understand these notations."

She had left the pages resting on the small desk to stand and stare out the window. Heavily, she leaned against the frame. Elizabeth's cheek rested against the cool pane. "Protect him, God," she whispered to the night sky. She said no more. God would know her sentiments regarding the probability of Darcy's demise.

There she had stood from three to five of the clock, staring out the window, gazing at the road, but seeing nothing. She had kept an anxious vigil awaiting Darcy's return. As dawn's fingers broke through the blackness, her anxiety increased. "Where is he?" she whispered as she searched the outline of trees and shrubbery on the horizon. Elizabeth reasoned, "If he were injured, Mr.

Holbrook would have brought word.” For a brief moment, she felt the satisfaction of Darcy’s continued health, but the dread Elizabeth had forcibly placed aside returned. “But if Fitzwilliam were dead...” She stared intently at the narrow path leading to the main road, the same road her husband would ride upon his return. Hot tears pricked her eyes, and Elizabeth could not catch her breath. “Would they not inform me?” she sobbed. “Would they not permit me to comfort my husband in his last hours? His last minutes?”

A figure appeared at the far end of the path, and for the pause of three heartbeats, hope swelled in Elizabeth’s chest. She clung to the sash and watched as the figure moved closer. Her heart lurched. “Not Darcy,” she whispered. The figure belonged to a woman. “Too spry for Mrs. Jacobs,” she speculated.

Whoever it was, Woodvine was the female’s destination. Elizabeth turned from the window. She quickly gathered Samuel’s journals and shoved them from view between the mattresses of her bed. She would hide them more carefully upon her return. Elizabeth shed the satin robe she had worn over a simple chocolate-brown day dress to ward off the night’s chill. She had chosen the brown dress for its warmth when she had hoped to accompany Darcy to the field. When her husband had refused, Elizabeth had remained dressed for an impending emergency.

Now, she caught up a heavy wool shawl before rushing toward the servants’ stairs. Elizabeth meant to meet their visitor and learn news of her husband. Surely, a woman would not be on the road at this hour without words of pressing importance.

Elizabeth burst into the kitchen just as the door opened quietly upon the room. Few servants were about at this hour, and other than a scullery maid filling a kettle with water at the well, no one stirred. The familiarity of the visitor’s countenance subtracted from the surprise Elizabeth might have felt otherwise.

“Mrs. Ridgeway?” Elizabeth hissed. “What has brought you to Woodvine at this hour?”

The woman glanced to where the door to Mrs. Holbrook’s small room was propped open with a broom. She stilled, her features, initially, going flat. With a grimace, the housekeeper caught Elizabeth’s arm and tugged her in the direction of an alcove, which served as a stillroom. “I came to fetch you, Mrs. Darcy,” she whispered.

“Why all the secrecy?” Elizabeth asked.

“Mr. Stowbridge did not want the others to know what happened in Mr. Rupp’s field.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught in her throat. She let out a long exhale. It was her impatience showing, but Mrs. Ridgeway appeared to ignore Elizabeth’s exigency. “You have word of my husband.” The housekeeper nodded curtly. “Is Mr. Darcy in health?” Elizabeth asked through trembling lips.

Mrs. Ridgeway tugged Elizabeth along a passage to a side entrance. “I cannot say for certain,” she said seriously. “For I have not seen Mr. Darcy personally. Mr. Stowbridge thinks such matters are not in the realm of a lady’s disposition.”

Elizabeth could hear the strained words, a sound of contention between the housekeeper and the woman’s new employer, but she had more pressing concerns. “Speak to me of Mr. Darcy.” She rushed to keep pace with the housekeeper. They had exited Woodvine and had set off across the well-tended lawns.

Mrs. Ridgeway spoke over her shoulder at the trailing Elizabeth. "I possess only the knowledge of second tongue in what I overheard Mr. Holbrook tell Mr. Stowbridge."

Elizabeth caught the housekeeper's arm and dragged the woman to a halt. For a discomfiting moment, neither of them moved. "I understand," she said with more calm than she possessed, "that Mr. Stowbridge did not confide in you. Yet, if you possess any knowledge of Mr. Darcy, I demand you speak of it immediately."

Mrs. Ridgeway's eyes appeared distant, and Elizabeth could not read the woman's true intentions; yet, she would let nothing stand between her and her husband. The lady paused for what seemed forever, but was likely only a handful of seconds. Finally, Mrs. Ridgeway said, "If you will accompany me, I shall explain what I have learned. I think it best if we speak while we walk. It will save time, and, as I am certain you will wish to reach Mr. Darcy's side as soon as possible, we should hurry our steps."

Elizabeth offered, "Should I have someone saddle horses or bring around a gig?"

Mrs. Ridgeway tutted her disapproval. "In the time it would take to rouse one of Captain Tregonwell's men to assist us, and then have the gentleman find us appropriate transportation, you could be reunited with your husband. That is assuming you do not mind a walk across a country lane."

Elizabeth despised the challenging tone in the woman's voice, but she hesitated only a moment to glance toward the house before making her decision. "Lead on, Mrs. Ridgeway," she said with determination.

The housekeeper strode toward the line of trees, and Elizabeth quickened her step to keep abreast of the woman. They entered the shadowy overhang before the woman spoke again. "This is what I overheard when Mr. Holbrook came to Stowe Hall in the early hours." Their pace slowed when they reached the rough terrain of the wooded area. "Mr. Samuel's groom called at the squire's house at a little past four of the clock. He told Mr. Stowbridge a most astounding tale."

They climbed a stile and descended the other side. Mrs. Ridgeway set a diagonal path across the field. "Mr. Holbrook spoke of discovering a coven celebrating Beltane under the stars where the old monoliths are found. Do you know the field, Mrs. Darcy?"

Elizabeth wished the woman would speak of Darcy's condition, but she understood the housekeeper's perverseness. Mrs. Ridgeway held all the high cards, and Elizabeth was a mere player. She said encouragingly, "I am familiar with Mr. Rupp's land."

The housekeeper continued her tale and the punishing exercise. When they exited the field over a like stile, Elizabeth realized this was a part of the Darcy estate with which she was unfamiliar, but she brushed the thought aside as she hiked her skirt to maintain her gait. If Mrs. Ridgeway thought her a pampered lady of the *ton*, the housekeeper was in for a surprise. Elizabeth was not afraid of a long walk or a steady stride.

"Apparently, Mr. Barriton had taken Mrs. Jacobs prisoner and threatened to kill the woman."

Elizabeth heard the derision in Mrs. Ridgeway's voice. She supposed the housekeeper thought Mrs. Jacobs deserved part of her punishment. Elizabeth said cautiously, "Mr. Darcy and Mr.

McKye journeyed to Mr. Rupp's field to stop Mr. Barriton."

"Well, they certainly managed to accomplish their task," the housekeeper declared. "One of Mr. Tregonwell's men shot Mr. Barriton after the man shoved Mrs. Jacobs into the fire the coven had built in Mr. Rupp's field."

Fear skated along Elizabeth's spine. She offered up a silent prayer that it had not been Darcy who had dispatched Mr. Barriton. She thought such an act would lie heavily on her husband's conscience. "Was Mrs. Jacobs injured badly?"

The housekeeper led Elizabeth deeper into the woods. Elizabeth supposed this was the shortcut to Stowe Hall, which Samuel Darcy had traversed the night he died. The thought of how easily someone had overcome the trusting archaeologist sent a shiver of dread down Elizabeth's spine. She glanced around to learn her bearings.

"According to Mr. Holbrook, he was to seek the services of the junior surgeon Mr. Glover had once trained," Mrs. Ridgeway shared.

"Mr. Newby," Elizabeth provided the name.

Mrs. Ridgeway confided. "If Geoffrey Glover trained the man, Mr. Newby will serve this community well. Mr. Glover was a man of science."

Elizabeth's patience had worn thin. She had thought to permit Mrs. Ridgeway her moment. In some ways, she supposed she owed the housekeeper that much, for Mrs. Ridgeway's forced exit from Woodvine had placed the woman in an untenable position. In truth, Elizabeth harbored a bit of guilt for having dismissed the woman, but she could no longer tolerate the lack of news of her husband. "Please," she said as she came to a halt. "I beg of you; speak to me of Mr. Darcy. I cannot bear not knowing."

The housekeeper came to an abrupt standstill. She turned to Elizabeth, and with a smile of what appeared to be satisfaction, she said, "Mr. Holbrook was to fetch the surgeon to tend your husband. It appears Mr. Darcy fought with the butler. Your husband was stabbed with some sort of ceremonial knife. Mr. Holbrook says Mr. Darcy has lost a sizeable quantity of blood."

Elizabeth felt her legs buckle, and she could do little to prevent herself from sinking to her knees. Darcy had been seriously injured. While she slept at her small desk, her husband had lain in a field, possibly bleeding to death. "Dear God," her trembling lips offered in supplication. "Do not take him from me." She swayed in place as the darkness rushed in.

"Mrs. Darcy," the housekeeper said brusquely. "We have no time for histrionics."

Despite wishing to rock herself for comfort, Elizabeth gave herself a sound mental shake. She bit her lip to prevent the cry of anguish on the tip of her tongue. She looked up into the disapproving countenance of the housekeeper. However, Elizabeth did not apologize; instead she managed to stagger to her feet. "What else should I know?" Elizabeth asked fearfully.

"Mr. Stowbridge sent word of his late return to Stowe Hall. In the message, he indicated that the surgeon had seen to your husband and had advised Mr. Darcy to permit Mrs. Rupp to nurse him until a coach could be sent from Woodvine. However, Mr. Darcy insisted on returning to your side."

Elizabeth thought how like Darcy it was to recognize her concern and, therefore, place himself in danger in order to relieve Elizabeth's anxiety. "Where is my husband now? At Stowe Hall?"

"They found him on the road after he could not sit his horse. Mr. Newby is treating Mr. Darcy in a small tenants' cottage while Mr. Holbrook escorts Mrs. Jacobs to Woodvine and returns with a wagon. Tregonwell's men assist Mr. Stowbridge with the investigation and the prisoners." The woman turned back to the path, and Elizabeth fell in step beside her. "It was thought that Mr. Darcy would prove a better patient with you in attendance."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, a smile shaped Elizabeth's lips. She could easily imagine an aristocratic Darcy barking orders to the young surgeon. That is if he were able, Elizabeth cautioned the knot lodged firmly in her chest. "Where is this cottage?" she asked in concern.

"One more field to cross," Mrs. Ridgeway said confidently. "See." The woman pointed to where a thatched roof could be seen behind an overgrown hedgerow.

Elizabeth quickened her stride. "Why in the world would they have taken shelter in such a deserted area?"

The housekeeper shrugged her shoulders. "It is the way of men to make women's lives complicated."

Elizabeth rushed across the field, which now stood fallow. Her heart pounded in her ears from the speed of their journey and from the all-encompassing fear that surrounded her. Would she be in time? Mr. Holbrook had said Mr. Darcy had lost a sizeable quantity of blood. Men did not normally worry so unless danger existed. Was Mr. Newby skilled enough to stop the bleeding? What of infection? She lifted her skirts higher and quickened her pace. Soon she was running, needing to reach Darcy before it was too late.

Gasping for air, Elizabeth burst into the small cottage, nothing more than a one-room sanctuary from the cold, to discover a profound silence. Nothing moved within. Her chest heaved from her run and from the heart-stopping realization Mrs. Ridgeway had erred somehow. She caught at the stitch of pain in her side. "Where is he? Where is my husband?" she croaked.

An arm caught her across the neck while another hand placed a large damp handkerchief over her mouth and nose. From behind her, a harsh voice stung her ear. "Dead. Mr. Darcy is dead."