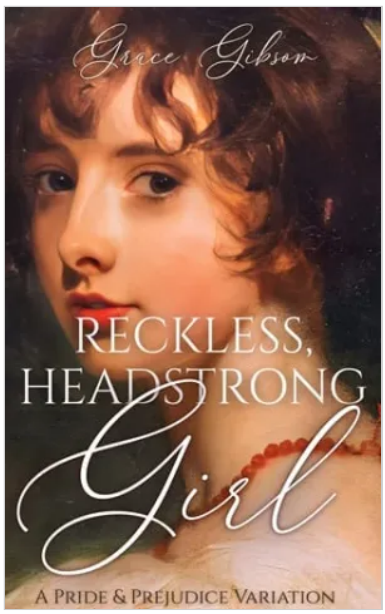

Reckless, Headstrong Girl (Pride and Prejudice Variations #5)

Author: *Grace Gibson*

Category: Historical

Description: A scandalous elopement, a sister lost, and a love found in the most unexpected places.

Lydia Bennets impetuous nature leads her down a dangerous path with the charming but unreliable George Wickham. When the elopement crumbles, Lydia finds herself alone and lost, her reputation shattered, and her future uncertain.

Elizabeth Bennet is devastated by her sisters folly and the disgrace it brings upon her family. Amidst the chaos, a glimmer of hope emerges as Mr Darcy steps forward, his actions revealing a depth of character Elizabeth had never suspected. As Mr Darcy embarks on a relentless search for Lydia, Elizabeth grapples with her changing feelings towards him. Can she reconcile her past prejudices with the man who is proving to be her familys savior?

Journey through a world of societal expectations and personal desires, as Lydia discovers her resilience, Elizabeth confronts her misconceptions, and Darcy redefines what love and honor truly mean. Will their paths converge towards redemption and happiness, or will the shadows of scandal forever haunt their lives?

Reckless, Headstrong Girl is a Pride and Prejudice novella length variation with moderate angst and closed door content.

Total Pages (Source): 27

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THE LONDON ROAD NORTH OF brIGHTON

T he coach had just passed the track that led to the hamlet of Hickstead when the trouble began.

Lydia Bennet had been chirping like an ecstatic bird, having run away from Brighton with George Wickham, lately of the ---militia.

He had some business in town, he said, and teased that he would be lonely.

They were at an assembly when he told her he must go, having just come out of the card room.

And Lydia, neither shy nor prone to think deeply, had giggled and flashed her eyes at him. “But why should you be lonely, Wicky?”

On a lark, she had packed her bag made of Turkish carpet and slipped out of Colonel Forster’s house just past dusk when the servants were all busy with lighting the lamps and her friend Mrs Forster was dressing for an evening out with her husband’s stodgy old friends.

Lydia had never been so happy in her life.

To elope! With Wickham! And what would her dear mama say when she heard that her youngest—the favourite of all her five girls—had married first?

“Can we not go any faster, Wicky?”

“It is dark, my dear.”

“And where shall we stop for the night? Oh, how much fun it will be to hear you tell the innkeeper that I am Mrs George Wickham!”

“I doubt I shall say so.”

“Not say so? But why will you not? I may as well be Mrs Wickham, you know. Mrs Wickham! How well that sounds! And how jealous my sisters will be. Lizzy will turn green, fly up to her room, lie down and weep, and demand a cold cloth for her head. But what will I wear? Mama always says the wedding clothes are the most important thing. Wicky, I must have wedding clothes.”

He took a swig from his flask and lit a cheroot.

“And where should we marry? I suppose we shall have to go to Gretna Green. I doubt the blacksmith will have seen a prettier girl than me this whole year. La! Is there anything more romantic? Scotland must be very cold even in summer. Oh dear. I wish I had brought my pelisse. But you can buy me one in London, can you not? Will it take very long, do you think? I mean, I have never heard how long it takes to elope…”

Lydia Bennet was a voluble girl and she unleashed her bouncing high spirits in a torrent of words.

George Wickham, who had taken her on a whim, began to wonder what the devil he had been thinking.

He had lost heavily at cards—so heavily in fact that he was compelled to ditch his lieutenancy in the militia in haste.

He had been plagued by Lydia Bennet since he first made her acquaintance in Hertfordshire.

She had followed him to Brighton and flirted with him outrageously, and he doubted he could shake her off if he tried.

He knew—because he had asked her—she had nearly five pounds to spend on holiday; so here he was, trapped in a coach with her for that paltry sum alone.

But the noise! Thinking only to silence her, he crushed his cheroot under his boot on the floor of the coach and reached for her.

Lydia Bennet was a girl with fixed ideas about what marriage, elopement, and such things were like.

She would be kissed, complimented, cosseted, and spoiled with presents.

Naturally, she would go out dancing as often as possible and decide on what was for dinner.

She would boss the servants, tease her husband's friends, and generally do whatever she wanted to do.

So, when Wickham reached for her and began to kiss her, she was only slightly annoyed to have been interrupted in her conversation.

"You are very impatient," she said, averting her face to catch her breath. "My goodness, but you are positively carried away! You should sit over there until I am called Mrs Wickham."

Little could she know that this was just the irritant required to make Mr Wickham

decide to be rid of her shortly after he ruined her.

He drank the last of the brandy from his flask, untied his cravat, threw it aside, and set upon her in earnest, determined to shut her up for once and punish her for thinking he would ever give his name to a penniless, jabbering nitwit with a large bosom.

When Wickham's lovemaking became more assertive, Lydia began to protest. She did not prefer to be handled this way.

He answered her with a roughness she had never experienced in her life, much less expected of her dear Wickham.

Her temper flared even as he wrestled with the bodice on her dress, and she slapped him resoundingly on the cheek.

George Wickham had a temper of his own, and he slapped her resoundingly in return and, grabbing handfuls of her skirt, began to show her who was to be her master.

Lydia was not as terrified as she should have been.

She hardly understood what he meant to do to her, only perhaps vaguely realising that he meant no good by ripping her shift, and she was livid at this unexpectedly horrible treatment.

With her hands being uselessly pinned behind her back by his left arm, she fought the only way she knew how: she bit Wickham savagely on his exposed neck.

He roared in pain, grasped his bleeding neck with one hand, and flung her viciously away from him with the other.

Her back slammed against the forward wall with a thud, and the coachman, hearing

the ruckus, pulled to a stop.

Before she knew what was up or down—for she was well and truly stunned—Lydia Bennet found herself on her bottom in the road .

“You…you!” she stammered, struggling unsuccessfully to stand.

She could see Wickham in the faint lamplight.

Still clutching his neck with one hand, he ripped open her reticule, crumpled her money into his pocket, turned her purse upside down to shower coins on the floor, tossed it and the valise out the door, and was gone.

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S hock, having taken hold, suspended even the silliest thoughts that were prone to arise in the mind of Miss Lydia Bennet of Longbourn, Hertfordshire.

She was acutely aware of the rumble of the wheels of the retreating coach, the low chuckle of the outrider, the subsequent chirping of crickets in the ditch, a few stars shining through the humid haze, and the throbbing in her rear from being thrown onto the hardened clay of the ruts in the road.

How long she sat slumped and uncomprehending in this state she could not guess, but eventually, outrage replaced shock, and she staggered upright and screamed at the top of her lungs.

After venting the worst of her rage in roars and unholy howls of indignation, she devolved into sobs, hiccups, and moans.

Lydia stood—alone—upon the London Road in the dark.

Surely, Wickham would come back for her, she began to reason, although reasoning was not her strong suit.

He could not be so lost to honour and duty that he would abandon a gentleman’s daughter in the wilds of West Sussex in the middle of the night.

Roughly two hours later, Lydia began to think that perhaps Mr Wickham was not a gentleman after all.

When he finally returned for her, she would tell him off at the top of her lungs!

This seemed a paltry punishment for what he had done to her, and yet, as she would be dependent upon him to restore her to Colonel Forster's home, she could hardly tear out his liver with her bare hands.

The image of doing so, however, was quite sustaining.

Consequently, Lydia—thinking darkly of throwing George Wickham's beloved Hessians into the fire, cutting his pomaded curls off his head as he lay in a drunken stupor, seeing him bound, pale and weeping, in a tumbrel headed for the guillotine, or paying a thoroughly disreputable sea captain to press him into the lower decks of a second-rate ship headed for Java—finally looked around her.

She could hardly remain standing in the road.

If the night mail were to pass, she would be ploughed down by a team of six at the gallop.

Perhaps the night mail would pass, she thought.

She would flag it down, and the passengers and coachman would all gather around her, and after hearing what had been done to her, they would support her as she limped aboard, make room for her to lie down on the forward-facing seat, ply her with biscuits and tisanes and the like, and drive her straight to the magistrate's house in Brighton. Yes. This became her fixed plan .

And indeed, the night mail coach did come.

But it roared past her in a flash. She yelled and waved her handkerchief for nothing.

She may as well have been a cricket in the ditch!

She coughed for a quarter hour on the dust left behind and began to limp down the road.

By the time she reached the cross post marking the intersection of the London Road with the track to Cowfold, she had walked more than two miles.

She arrived at the marker—which she could only dimly make out on account of the gibbous moon making its way across the sky—with two blisters, a stone bruise, and the sole come halfway off her right slipper.

Sinking gratefully to the ground with the cross post supporting her back, Lydia felt around in her valise for an extra pair of shoes.

She knew she had not packed any, thinking her favourite and prettiest slippers were all she would need to be married in, but she looked anyway.

The night was mild, and she did not carry a shawl, but she had suffered a shock and naturally began shivering the moment she stopped walking.

There was nothing for it, she thought, but to put her second dress over the one she wore and to throw her nightgown around her shoulders for warmth; thus, dressed like the rag seller at the Hertford fair, she fell into a state between sleep and a swoon.

The sound of wheels and horse hooves on the road startled Lydia awake.

She saw by the lightening of the gloom that dawn was near breaking, and she stood up, anxious to hail the means of her rescue.

Oh, how her papa and her uncles would make Wickham pay for his infamy, she reflected with grim satisfaction.

Indeed, the morning had broken upon Lydia Bennet in an unprecedented state of flinty-eyed determination.

But these self-same eyes began to make out an approaching dray.

The driver and a man who sat next to him also began to perceive her, and something in the way they both came to attention alerted some instinct of self-preservation in Lydia.

She was already standing, but now she reached down for her nearly empty bag and bolted away into the adjoining field of half-grown barley.

Hampered by her nightgown flapping behind, she threw it off.

“Oy!” cried the carter. “Come back ’ere, partridge!” She heard both men calling after her with some appalling descriptions of what they would like to do when they caught her, and she stumbled pell-mell away until she was certain they no longer followed.

Defeated, she fell into the barley, thinking—like a girl of fifteen who had never had the slightest challenge in all her life—that she would be found dead in this pitiful field in a couple of hours.

The valise had been a casualty of her flight, as had her nightgown.

And so, after catching her breath, she arranged her dresses just so and tried to tuck up her hair in her poke bonnet.

Unfortunately, the wretched hat would not cooperate and, indeed, it was most uncomfortable for a lie down.

And so, she placed it on her chest, crossed her arms, and hoped her face was pretty in

spite of all she had suffered, so that when she was found dead, someone would remark on her looks at least.

“Cor! ’Tis a twirl, John.”

Lydia awoke to see two men silhouetted against the morning light as they leant over and examined her.

“How’d she git in yer barley then?”

They seemed to puzzle over this and then jumped back as Lydia struggled to her feet and braced herself, fists forward, for a struggle. “I will scream,” she said through clenched teeth.

The older of the two shook his head bemusedly. “Daft is she, John?”

The younger man propped himself on his hoe and looked at her as if considering this question.

“I am Lydia Bennet,” she huffed. “A man I took to be a gentleman tried to—he pushed me out onto the road! And I wish to see the magistrate!” Lydia’s voice was defiant, but the shaking of her knees betrayed her.

“Daft,” the younger man concluded. “What do we do with ’er, Scoot?”

“Clear off!” commanded the elder man to Lydia. “Shoo!”

The two farmers, deaf to her screeches of protest, alternated between making herding noises and chasing her with their hoes until Lydia was routed back towards the menace of the crossroads.

She scuttled along in the ditch, wary of carts and drays, and hoped for a respectable looking coach to hail.

Ahead of her, she saw a scraggly hedge and thought to shelter in it while she waited for deliverance.

The day turned warm. Her second dress, now as filthy as her primary garment, had been pulled off and rolled into a ball.

Lydia regretted her valise, of course, and her bonnet.

Both possessions, along with her nightgown, were somewhere deep in that horrid Scoot's barley field.

She was also, she noticed, as she felt around her head, missing some pins.

They must have come loose as she ran. She did what she could, which was not much, to straighten her hair and appear respectable for the respectable coach or curricle that would soon come down the road.

How grateful she would be to drink a pitcher of lemonade!

She was parched, she realised. Dying of thirst in the dirt, in fact, on the side of the London Road north of Brighton.

The mail passed, as did the Brighton stage, followed by the coach-for-hire posting down from London with private passengers.

After the first encounter, Lydia suffered no urges to hail them.

She had learnt that coaches with teams of four passed at speed and would as soon run

over her as stop.

A single rider also flew past, an express most likely, but to him she would have been a blur.

Eventually, she saw on the horizon a promising vehicle, a perch phaeton driven by a smartly dressed man with a stable boy standing behind. She jumped to her feet from the shade of the hedge and ran to the middle of the road where she flailed her arms.

But, the man in the phaeton snapped his whip and neatly drove right round her where she stood in the road, while the hideous child on the back thumbed his nose and stuck out his tongue.

“Well!” she cried out at the retreating man.

Lydia, enamoured of soldiers, was often enough in their company that she could search around in her head for an epithet befitting the callous wretch who was now out of earshot.

“You hog-grubber!” she roared, cursing aloud for the first time in her young life.

Swearing at the top of her lungs offered no relief, however, and only made her throat drier than it had been.

And when her eyes swept downwards over her filthy dress and broken shoe, she realised that her hair was bedraggled, she had no bonnet, and she had slept in the dirt.

She wondered whether, perhaps, she had better not curse lest she convince passers-by that she was not really a gentleman’s daughter.

Considerably cowed by repeated signs of the heartlessness of mankind, Lydia

retreated to her shelter in the straggly hedge and searched the sky for a cloud that would drop a little rain and quench her thirst. But the day was fair and dry.

She wondered, in a fatalistic and impartial way, whether she would be found shrivelled up—a bag of bones in a crisp casing of skin—all possibility of remarks on the prettiness of her face, gone.

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L ydia had been jolted, thrown, frightened, and tested by the elements, and by late afternoon she was once again in a half swooning sleep.

A donkey braying directly in front of her roused her with a heart-pounding start, and only after blinking hard to clear her vision, did she become aware of a cart passing by her hedge.

The driver was bent, solitary, and smallish.

If he were to try something with her skirts, she thought she could knock him to the ground, and so she staggered out to the road just in time for him to see her from the corner of his eye.

“Whoa, hey,” he said to his beast. When the slowly moving cart came to a stop, both man and donkey swivelled their heads and blinked at her with slightly rheumy eyes.

“Pray, stop,” she squawked. “Might you have some water or anything to drink? I need you to take me up in your cart.”

The man shrugged his rounded shoulders and pointed his long crop at the back of his cart. “They’s a pump at the Red Lion,” he growled.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr?—?

“Parch.”

Lydia scrambled into the cart, loaded with sacks of what might be potatoes. Did he

say Perch or Parch? She could not tell. She would call him Parch because she was so thirsty. “Thank you Mr Parch,” she said.

He ignored her and drove on.

“I am a gentleman’s daughter,” she croaked from the cart.

“I was—a man I took to be a gentleman—” Pointless!

Parch was not listening, and her tongue was too thick and sticky to use properly.

She adjusted herself upon the multiple lumps beneath her, pulled her knees up to her chest, and put her face down to shade it from the late afternoon sun.

Eventually, Parch’s donkey pulled them to a stop. “Where are we?” she asked faintly.

“Cowfold. Red Lion.” He pointed his whip, and Lydia looked around at the yard. A few boys bustled about with random shouts. Barrels, horses, and the splash of buckets in the trough meant civilisation to Lydia. I am saved , she thought.

“Thank you,” she said, scrambling from the cart.

She gathered her dignity, straightened her dress, and limped around to the front door.

Unfortunately, her plan—of presenting herself to the notice of the innkeeper, asking for pen and paper and for a note to be sent, requiring a room, a bath, and a meal to be arranged on the expectation of her uncle’s arrival from London to pay for, in effect, her rescue and restoration to genteel comforts—was thwarted by a stout man at the door.

He spun her around before she said a word and pointed towards the kitchen, and then

he sent her that way with a tap to the head and a half-hearted shove.

Lydia was sorely tempted to shriek and fly at this horrid person with her fingernails unsheathed.

However, she was terribly thirsty, and she had grown a little fearful of rough men.

Thus, she stumbled towards the back door to which she had been so rudely directed.

A child was plying the pump, and when he had filled his bucket, Lydia cautiously approached and asked whether she might have a drink.

He pumped the handle twice, and she drank from the cup of her hands.

When he teetered away with his bucket, she pumped for herself until her thirst was relieved.

She then washed her heated, dirty face, dried her hands on her skirt, and then went resolutely to the door of the Red Lion's kitchen.

Lydia was met by a short, solid woman with iron grey hair who looked her up and down and said, "Well?"

The smells nearly overset poor Lydia. Her stomach clenched and rumbled, and her mouth watered even as she spoke. "I have fallen on very hard circumstances, Mrs?—"

"Cook."

"Mrs Cook, I am a gentleman's daughter?— "

Mrs Cook, or whatever her name might have been, snorted and said, “Not hiring scullery.” She abruptly turned towards an enormous pot to poke at something inside it with a large wooden spoon.

“I am not looking for employment, Mrs Cook,” Lydia said, now on her dignity. “I only ask whether I might beg a piece of paper and ink and for a note to be sent.”

“Don’t cater to beggars. Now git.” The woman looked up from her pot and examined Lydia head to toe once again. Not appearing to like what she saw, she flapped her apron and bellowed, “Tom! Put down that bucket and fetch Ned.”

The suspicion that ‘Ned’ was the same man who had so recently shoved her caused Lydia to retreat swiftly back to the yard. The only security to be had was Parch’s potato cart, and there she went, scrambling up and crouching with the potatoes in a protective curl.

When Parch returned to the cart, he hoisted out a second bag of potatoes, scowled at his parasitic passenger, shrugged, and then ambled across to the kitchen.

At the door, he engaged in a transaction with the stonyhearted Cook.

She took his potatoes, handed him a few coins from her apron, and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Parch leant against the wall and waited until the boy, Tom, appeared from within and handed him a small parcel wrapped in a scrap of brown paper.

Lydia sat up and stared as Parch wandered over to a bench near his resting donkey, opened his parcel, and began to eat what appeared to be an end of bread with cheese and cold meat. She scrambled down and hungrily approached the bench. “I have not eaten since yesterday,” she said pre-emptively.

“Nor I,” he said thickly as he chewed.

“But I am very hungry,” she whined.

Parch shrugged. This seemed to be his universal response to everything, but to this gesture he added a terse observation.

“Who ain’t?” he said, before turning back to his meal.

Lydia watched in agonised fascination as he neatly disposed of first the meat, then the cheese, and finally the bread.

When he got to the last bite, he begrudgingly threw the crust at Lydia and stood up.

This mouthful was insufficient to fill Lydia with everlasting gratitude, but she managed to refrain from complaint lest she alienate the one person in the whole world with whom she could ally herself.

“Goin’ fer ale,” he said. “Keep yer eye on Bill.”

“The donkey? What am I to do with your donkey?”

“Don’t let ’em tease ’im.” He gestured at the stable boys, and with that, he went into the inn, presumably to the taproom, leaving poor Lydia to guard Bill.

She took up her post on the bench and armed herself with half a dozen pieces of broken cobble because she was in the mood to hurl missiles if only someone would give her a ready excuse.

As dusk fell, however, Lydia began to search around her for some place of shelter, and she was on the verge of abandoning Bill to huddle under the bench up against the

trough when Parch returned.

He ignored her, went to his little donkey, patted the animal's neck, stepped into the stable, and brought back a handful of hay.

Parch was thoughtfully doling out the hay for his beast, and hoping the man was in a benign mood, Lydia decided to impose herself and seek his protection.

"Parch," she asked, "where do you sleep?"

"The cart."

"You sleep in the cart? Surely not."

"Deliverin' I do."

Lydia puzzled out that Parch's cart still carried a dozen sacks of potatoes, and perhaps he was making deliveries to preordained customers.

He would sleep with his goods for economy and to protect what he owned.

This scenario—that there were people in the world who did not sleep in a bed under a roof at night—struck her momentarily dumb.

But she recovered herself and said in her most wheedling tone, "I have nowhere to go. Might I, too, sleep in your cart?"

She could barely make him out in the fading light, but she thought he shrugged.

Emboldened by her exhaustion, she wandered over to the cart, climbed wearily on board and curled into a ball.

And so it passed that Lydia Bennet, lately of Longbourn in Hertfordshire, spent the second night of her perilous adventure in a potato cart.

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LONGBOURN

“ M r Bennet! Mr Bennet! Are we to be burned in our beds?” shrieked Mrs Bennet when the pounding on the door woke her suddenly in the night.

Mr Bennet put on his dressing gown, grabbed a candle, and went below to see who would be demanding entrance at this time of night.

His light shone on Mr Hill who was peering out at an express rider.

Above Mr Bennet, lining the staircase, were his daughters Jane, Mary, and Kitty.

His wife stood on the landing, gripping her nightgown to her chest. “Oh, Mr Bennet! Do not toy with me! I shall die of the suspense! What is it? What catastrophe is upon us?” she cried.

Mr Bennet scanned the letter he had been handed while he absently reached for a coin in his pocket. Not finding any, he said abstractedly, “Jane?”

His eldest daughter slipped down the stairs and into his study, returning with his purse. Mr Bennet folded the note, paid the express rider, and as Mr Hill locked the door once again, looked up at his family.

“Papa,” Jane gasped, seeing the bewildered look on her father’s face, “what is it?”

And thus, the day broke on the Bennets of Longbourn at one o’clock in the morning. Lydia had eloped with Lieutenant Wickham the night before last.

The scene could hardly be described even by those present.

There were cries and gasps, and everyone spoke at once.

Mrs Bennet could not be made to understand what had happened to her favourite.

She had to be told over and over, and when at last some glimmer of understanding began to show itself in the density of her anxious mind, her wails were added to the general family din.

Needless to say, no one slept again that night.

Jane, seeking to return to her natural state of complacency, went to the kitchen and helped Mrs Hill make tea.

Mary searched through her books for some kind of homily she could read to her family, some manner of explanation for Lydia's fall into sin, and a means whereby the sisters remaining could cling to Christian respectability.

Kitty hung her head and fiddled with the sash on her robe, and she looked nervously about her until finally her father took note and demanded to be told what she knew of it.

Lydia, it seemed, had something like this in her mind when she went away to Brighton. "She was set on bringing home a husband," Kitty whimpered as if she were accused of a crime. "She was determined to please Mama!" she ended defiantly .

"And you never once thought," asked her father grimly, his voice rising with each word, "that perhaps Lydia's plan was not a good one?

That perhaps you might all, by association, be ruined as she has now ruined herself?

That your youngest sister, were you not to alert me of her impending ruination, would be lost to decency and may never return home to see you again? ” Mr Bennet roared.

Kitty escaped to the corner, ill-used and weeping out her heart. Mrs Bennet had to be helped by both Mary and Jane to her bed. She needed laudanum, her vinaigrette, and a cold cloth with lavender water.

Even with these, it was many hours before her moans and lamentations ceased.

Mr Bennet closed himself in his study and snapped at Jane through the door when she tried to speak to him.

Eventually, as dawn broke, Jane thought perhaps she should decide something at least, and so she sent Kitty and Mary up to their rooms before she went to the escritoire in the parlour and wrote out a letter to the next eldest sister, Elizabeth, who was on holiday in Derbyshire with their aunt and uncle Gardiner.

Ten o’clock found the house of Longbourn as still as a tomb. No one came down to breakfast, and no one asked for a tray. Mr and Mrs Hill sat huddled in the kitchen with the upstairs maid and the backhouse boy. Jane dozed fitfully in the chair by the cold hearth.

At last, Mr Bennet came out of his library.

He went upstairs for three quarters of an hour, came back down dressed, and said, “I expect Colonel Forster any time from this afternoon to the end of the week, Jane. He has, of course, gone after them. I suppose the delay of a day in notifying me was justified, for he must have thought he could find them quickly and spare himself the mortification of telling me he did not keep my daughter out of harm’s way. ”

He paused and looked over his spectacles at the tray in the hallway.

“I see you have put a letter to Lizzy and my brother Gardiner in the hall for the post. I wish you would wait and see whether we have any further news. Perhaps the colonel has, even now, recovered her.” He then locked himself once again in his study.

Jane eyed her letter. She longed for her sister Elizabeth’s support as she sat alone in the parlour.

Lizzy would know what to do—how to proceed.

Lizzy would not have let everyone sink into such forlorn, pitiful despair.

But Jane Bennet was not a young lady who could ignore her father’s direction, and she reasoned that it would be a shame to cut up Lizzy’s happiness with news of an elopement about which she could do nothing.

It would be selfish to recall the travellers so they, too, could sit in the parlour and fret, and so she retrieved her letter from the tray.

When Colonel Forster recovered Lydia, she would send the joyful news by express and spare Lizzy any distress at all.

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LAMBTON

E lizabeth Bennet, unaware of the disaster that had befallen her family, nevertheless suffered a restlessness of spirit from the moment her uncle Gardiner’s coach crossed into the county of Derbyshire.

Derbyshire was the home county of Pemberley, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy’s estate.

And Mr Darcy had completely overturned Elizabeth’s life.

He began as an antagonist, arriving in Meryton with his friend Charles Bingley, determined to despise everything and everyone he saw.

He was a wealthy man, and he acted accordingly.

He brooded in the corner, spoke in dismissive bursts meant to depress the pretensions of anyone who approached him, and affected a kind of sneering perseverance during social calls.

He had hardened Elizabeth’s opinion into an immoveable dislike when, within her hearing, he bluntly told his friend she was not handsome enough to dance with him and that he had no desire to lend her his consequence.

As no other man had complimented her with an invitation to stand up with him, why should he, Mr Darcy, stoop to do so?

As if he had sensed in Elizabeth someone who despised Mr Darcy, Lieutenant George

Wickham of the —shire militia, recently arrived in Hertfordshire, had poured salt on the wound.

As the son of Pemberley's land steward, he had grown up with Darcy.

A favourite of old Mr Darcy, Mr Wickham had been sent to school with Darcy and had been promised a lucrative living in the church.

Instead of honouring his father's wishes, however, the proud and arrogant young Mr Darcy had denied poor, young George the living and had sent him off to fend for himself.

While Mr Darcy had stayed at Netherfield Park, an estate close to Longbourn that was leased by his amiable young friend, that same friend, Charles Bingley, reputed to have five thousand pounds a year, had begun to actively court Elizabeth's sister Jane.

Every expectation of the future happiness of her beloved sister had arisen in Elizabeth.

These expectations had arisen in everyone else as well.

The entire neighbourhood had looked upon the match with benign good will.

Netherfield Park would be the home of a most agreeable young gentle man, and one of Meryton's most beloved young ladies would be well settled there.

Not only would the good society thereabouts improve, but there would be employment and commerce aplenty in consequence.

These expectations, however, had not pleased everybody.

Mr Bingley’s snobbish sisters had deplored the match and done so quite obviously.

They had not been alone. More than once did Elizabeth notice Mr Darcy bending his gimlet eye upon Jane and Bingley as they stood in blushing conversation.

And then, the very day after a ball at Netherfield, in which everyone had observed Mr Bingley to be clearly in love with Jane Bennet, the young gentleman and his party abruptly left.

The general dismay was nothing to the crushing pain that poor Jane felt or the simmering outrage that troubled Elizabeth day and night.

She blamed the horrible sisters, of course, but she also blamed Mr Darcy for his generally discouraging view of the matter.

Thus, some months later, when she visited her friend Charlotte Collins in Kent and discovered Mr Darcy visiting his aunt at the adjacent estate of Rosings, Elizabeth was necessarily unimpressed.

Her dislike of the man turned to downright enmity, however, when she learnt quite casually that Mr Darcy had actively intervened to separate his friend from her sister.

She still was simmering with rage from having realised his perfidy when he burst in upon her at the parsonage in Hunsford where she visited.

He paced and spoke in a lecturing tone. He stated, with a visible degree of affront, that he loved her in spite of her station in life, her family members, and her lack of title and fortune.

He then ended his rant by suggesting he would have her as his wife against his better judgment, and he clearly expected her to be grateful for his monumental offer.

His shock at being sent to the rightabout can only be guessed at, but sent he was.

He would not have Elizabeth Bennet as wife.

She would never marry the man who had ruined her favourite sister's chance at happiness, destroyed the prospects of his childhood friend, and looked down his nose at everybody!

The final wrinkle in this awful passage in Elizabeth's life had been a letter—written by Mr Darcy in the extremis of his rejection—that set her straight on the matter of his childhood companion at least. George Wickham was a perfidious lout, and she had believed him!

Retrospect was all that was left to Elizabeth, and upon recollection of their multiple conversations, she could clearly see how well Mr Wickham had insinuated himself into the comfortable pocket of her prejudicial feelings against Mr Darcy.

He had, with a clinical sort of precision, manipulated her feelings to align themselves with his specious tale of woe.

Mr Darcy went further in his letter. He crisply explained his decision to remove Mr Bingley from Meryton by suggesting that Jane, in attaching him, was being pushed to perform her duty.

Mr Darcy perceived no particular affection in Jane's manners, but he could hardly escape noticing Mrs Bennet's marital aspirations for her eldest daughter.

With a tinge of resentment, he explained bluntly that the behaviour of Elizabeth's mother, her three youngest sisters, and even her father, had besmirched his opinion of her general suitability.

This opinion, though a formidable obstacle, had somehow been overcome by his feelings for her.

Reflection upon this bitter observation could only force Elizabeth to concede that he had a point with regards to her family. Jane's future happiness had been blighted to be sure, but the blame for this must honestly be shared with the faulty manners of the Bennets of Longbourn.

Outright enmity against Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy was necessarily tempered with embarrassment, chagrin, and a litany of regrets.

He must hate her thoroughly and unreservedly, Elizabeth mused, and she did not like it at all.

Mr Darcy had proven that he was not quite as awful as she thought he was, and Elizabeth was too fair-minded not to be ashamed of the most unreasonable of her assertions against him.

She travelled into his home county not disposed to like him—he had separated Bingley from Jane without apology, after all—but there was something else.

She wished for his good opinion and dreaded an unexpected encounter in which he would show her the depth of his resentment.

These thoughts took up Elizabeth's attention during the monotonous miles to Lambton.

Once comfortably settled at the best inn in the middle of the village, however, she relaxed into the belief that she had a better chance of being struck by lightning than coming face to face with Mr Darcy.

Besides, her favourite aunt and uncle were excellent company, and they did not deserve her sulks.

Her aunt Gardiner was eager to be in her home village after many years in London.

Her enthusiasm for the visit was infectious, and Elizabeth soon entered willingly into all her plans.

They went out for three days together to visit Mrs Gardiner's friends and relations, to take tea here and there, to browse the quaint shops that lined the principal street of Lambton, and to drive off to see ruins, churches, and great, beautiful hills.

Thus, Elizabeth was lulled into a state of complacency, only to be brought up short when Uncle Gardiner, on the fourth day, suggested they tour Pemberley.

He said it was only five miles away! Elizabeth gasped.

The blood ran from her face only to return in a full flush half a second later.

She looked up to see her aunt and uncle looking at her in bewildered concern.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Well…I do not…that is to say, it would not do for us to appear so encroaching, do you think, Aunt?"

"Encroaching?" her uncle exclaimed. "But Pemberley is a great estate. They are used to visitors there any day of the week in summer, and we would hardly stand out. It would be much like our visit to Chatsworth. You did not object then."

Elizabeth took a breath and tried to compose herself.

"I know you are right, Uncle, only I am acquainted with the owner. I, um, very lately

met Mr Darcy again in Kent and was several times in his company. How would it look were I to be following him around the country as if trying to be noticed by him? He is a very rich man of marriageable age. I myself saw Miss Bingley turn herself inside out to catch him, and I also saw how her machinations disgusted him. How many young ladies of his acquaintance must resort to similar antics to ensnare him? I do not want to be seen as that sort of lady."

Aunt and Uncle Gardiner exchanged a glance, and Elizabeth had great hope the subject would die. But as fate would have it, the innkeeper's daughter came into the room to clear away the breakfast dishes, and so Elizabeth's uncle asked her whether the family was currently in residence at Pemberley.

"Oh no, sir. The family is in London, so I am told."

"Does the estate welcome visitors, Susan?"

"Constantly, sir, and no wonder. Beautiful as Windsor Castle, I hear."

"Come, Lizzy," Mrs Gardiner said in a cajoling spirit, "let us go. I have been there several times, and I would be very sad not to see it again."

With great reluctance, Elizabeth acquiesced and resigned herself to a visit to Mr Darcy's estate.

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ST HUGH'S CHARTERHOUSE, COWFOLD, WEST SUSSEX

L ydia Bennet was pushed forwards to stand before a pinch-faced monk. He looked her up and down suspiciously before turning to lift his eyebrows at Parch.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" the monk asked. His accent was heavily French, and he tucked his hands into his sleeves as if to protect himself from accidental contamination by a woman.

Parch shrugged, and Lydia—irritable, hungry, dirty, tired, sore, and exasperated—said, "Do about it! I am a gentleman's daughter.

You will bring me a piece of paper and a pen and I shall write to my father to collect me here just as soon as may be.

That is what you will do about it!" Then, seeing the monk's face pinch into a look of cold disgust, she changed tack.

"But first I need a hot meal and some hot water too. I am very hungry and—and I have been brutally used…" Before she knew it, she was snivelling and feeling exceedingly sorry for herself .

"Can't keep her me'self," Parch said. "Can't get 'er off the cart neither."

"We are Carthusians here," the monk replied coldly as if that explained all. "You might be better to take her to Horsham."

“The ’ouse you mean?” Parch asked with a frown.

The monk nodded, handed Parch a few coins, and hoisted up a bag of potatoes. Parch sighed the sigh of the longsuffering pilgrim as he counted out his payment.

“Horsham, Mr Parch?” Lydia sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

She decided that calling him “mister” would inspire Parch’s better instincts.

He was, after all, her only friend, though he wished to be rid of her.

“That is a good-sized place, is it not? I have heard of Horsham, though I cannot recall where.” She spoke animatedly.

“Perhaps Sir William mentioned it. He was forever prating about places he had visited once upon a time. There must be a magistrate in Horsham. You can take me there, and I shall tell him what Wickham did. Certainly, they will send someone at a gallop for Papa, and when he comes, I shall have Papa give you a purse of money.”

Parch shrugged and went to his cart. He untethered Bill from the post in the shade and hitched the poor beast up to the wagon. “Can we buy something to eat, Mr Parch?” Lydia asked.

“I ain’t stoppin’ you,” he said balefully as they lurched forward. “You and yer purse of money. ’Spose I can go to Horsham, but I ain’t wantin’ to. ”

“No, of course you do not want to go so far. How far is it, Mr Parch?”

“Two days a’ least.”

“Two days!” Lydia sank back on the potatoes.

They had five sacks left. Having spent two days and nights on the potato cart, she had come to understand that Parch had not had a lucrative run from his plot of ground three miles east of the cross post. He was a cottager, she had learnt.

He had a hut and a few hills of potatoes.

When he was not selling his potatoes, he carted vegetables from an adjacent farm to the market.

He lived alone, he had told her darkly, and he was not looking to ‘git hitched’.

Lydia thought of all this and supposed that a detour to Horsham was truly a burden on the man. “Maybe, Mr Parch,” she said trying to mollify him, “you will find a place to sell the last of your potatoes for a good price.”

Parch grunted. They bumped along in silence for a few hours, stopped for an hour’s rest by a stream so Bill could eat grass, and then they continued on to the Worthing Road.

The signpost directed them northward to Horsham, but by this time, the sun was low, and Bill had decided that, if he were to walk at all, he would do so at the pace of a wounded snail.

Parch pulled the wagon off the road by a stand of scrub willow.

“Will we be safe here?” Lydia asked in a small voice.

She dreaded another night in the elements—and on the road no less!

Parch shrugged and suggested she find a stick to sleep with, before he ploddingly went about starting a meagre fire with a few twigs and a single branch he dragged up

out of the ditch.

He put two potatoes into the coals and when they were half cooked, he gave Lydia one for her supper.

After burning her fingers, brushing off a thick coating of ash, and then greedily consuming her potato, Lydia looked around her.

“Where do you sleep when it rains, Mr Parch?” she asked.

She did not like the look of the sky to the south of them.

He shrugged. “I’ve sat under a time or two.”

“No, surely not. We shall not have to do so, shall we? Surely you could find a farm or some such where we could go?” Lydia did not think it possible that she would survive a night huddled underneath a potato wagon in a downpour.

She had a strong idea that human beings were fragile and that ladies in particular were snuffed out as easily as candle flames when deprived of shelter from the rain.

Her mother had often said so, and did not Jane almost die of a cold after riding to Netherfield in the rain?

She shuddered and looked at the sky before climbing into the potato cart and curling into a miserable lump.

The first drops came as fat, plopping packets of water.

She curled into a tighter ball, determined to ignore them.

A few drops of rain did not always mean more would come, she told herself.

Three minutes later, she was drenched and struggling to see as she scrambled down and crawled under the cart.

Parch was already there, and though every instinct of comportment railed against it, she crept to sit directly next to him.

She shivered, her teeth chattered, and boldly huddling up against Parch's back, she burst into wracking sobs .

"Bollocks," she heard him say over the thundering rain. "How's a body to sleep?"

"We will die here," she wailed. "Oh…oh! The ground is soaked! We are sitting in mud!"

She felt him shrug and subsided into shivering moans.

Her second dress, crumpled into a soggy bundle and tied by a sash, was above her in the cart, and to hunger, desperation, and bewilderment was now added a drenching, boneshaking cold.

Dying, the idea of which had lately occupied centre stage in Lydia's mind, became a more friendly prospect when compared to such misery.

She would be missed by her family, she thought, though she was numb with fatigue.

They would have a funeral service for her at the church in Meryton, and the vicar, Mr Rogers, would say that her young life was cruelly snatched away, yet they would always remember the brightness of her eyes, the youthfulness of her spirit…

Her mind turned yet again. This time, she went from a sentimental scene in church to a vision of her family eating dinner and then gathering in the parlour.

Mary would be playing some plunking, dour hymn, Kitty would be adding a yellow ribbon to a bonnet with her ugly stitches, and Jane would be staring out the window and thinking of Mr Bingley who was long gone.

Lizzy was off on a pleasure trip to the north, but Mama would be jabbering in her chair about what she would tell Mrs Philips when she saw her in the morning, and Papa would have his nose in a book about Roman history.

All of this would be going on with Lydia starved and frozen under a potato cart on the Worthing Road!

They did not miss her, she thought darkly.

They did not even really love her! If they loved her, they would have found her by now!

Feelings of injustice were fortifying enough to Lydia that she spent the night tending the flames of her indignation.

She recounted her catastrophe in the theatre of her imagination.

She had disappeared on Friday night. Saturday morning, she would have been discovered missing, and Colonel Forster would have ridden out to find her.

Surely he did. How had she missed him passing?

Perhaps she was lying in Scoot’s barley field.

At any rate, Colonel Forster would follow the trail to London, discover Wickham, and kill him on Sunday morning in a duel.

Hmm. Perhaps men did not duel on Sunday.

Well, then Monday morning would see Wickham in a pool of blood in the grass.

Meanwhile, Papa would have had an express, thrown on his coat, and he would have posted down to Brighton at a thundering pace.

He would begin methodically to look for her.

He would talk to the awful porter at the Red Lion and the sniffy monk.

He would stop at the parsonage where the housekeeper bought potatoes, and at that other farm, where everyone stared at Lydia as if she were a leper while Parch sold seed potatoes.

And then Papa would find her on the Worthing Road. First thing Tuesday morning.

Yesterday was Tuesday. If she lived through the night, it would be Wednesday.

She would have been lost five whole days!

Papa was probably still shut up in his study with the unopened express on his desk.

Lydia could well imagine Cora Forster, who was barely eighteen years old and stupid as a swan, speaking to her husband, the militia colonel, late on Saturday afternoon.

“La, Harold,” Cora would say, “what do you think has happened? That Lydia has gone off to marry Wickham. Ha! I suppose you had better write to her family. No

doubt Mrs Bennet will be glad to have at least one of those five girls off her hands."

This scenario smacked of too much reality to be discounted.

The reason no one looked for Lydia was because everyone believed she was married to Wickham by now, and they had crossed her off the list of their present concerns.

Had she been standing, Lydia would have staggered with the realisation that her disappearance was as nothing to anyone in the world!

She felt, for the first time since her disastrous decision to throw her lot in with Wickham, well and truly lost.

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LONGBOURN

I n some ways, Lydia’s imaginings were correct.

By Wednesday morning, not one member of her family suspected she had been abandoned by George Wickham.

All, even cynical Mr Bennet, expected that, if the man had taken the trouble to sneak away with her, he would marry her and come sauntering into Hertfordshire looking for an advance on her thousand-pound expectation, which was one fifth of Mrs Bennet’s legacy.

If he were a real cad, he would send a letter threatening not to marry Lydia without some financial incentive.

Either way, Lydia would have to marry the man.

And when Colonel Forster was seen riding up the drive, the family—less Mrs Bennet, who could not get out of bed for the grief of not seeing her daughter married—gathered in the parlour to hear news of the elopement.

Colonel Forster rushed into the room, his expression and bearing a mixture of urgency, embarrassment, and imposition.

He had been in charge of the girl, and the fault was his, but he could hardly bear it given that Lydia Bennet was such a hoyden she would run away with a scapegrace.

“Let us speak in private, sir,” Colonel Forster said grimly.

Thus, the sisters sat in trembling expectation of news—of relief from the worst of their feelings of uncertainty.

Half an hour later, the colonel left without taking refreshments, and Mr Bennet remained in his room.

After another interminable quarter hour, Jane went to her father.

What she heard was this: it had taken days, but Colonel Forster had traced Wickham’s movements all the way to the edge of London where he stepped, alone, off the coach and went into a tavern.

When the coachman, impatient for having his horses standing, sent the postillon in to collect his passenger, he discovered that Wickham had stepped out the back door and dodged his obligation to pay his way.

There was no girl with him—of that, everyone was certain, and each would swear to it.

Upon closer questioning, the coachman and postillon had said they began with a young lady but could not say when or where she decided that the gentleman was not to her liking and stepped off.

It was dark, and it was all they could do not to run the team into a ditch.

By necessity, they had been plodding along, and they could not be expected to keep track of the doings inside the coach.

Why, at any stop along the road, the girl could have gone off, and why would they

take note?

The horses must be changed and looked after.

A person could not keep an eye out in all directions.

Besides, they had not even been paid and could not be held accountable for some chit who did not have the sense to stay at home where she belonged.

“She is lost?” Jane whispered.

“Utterly and completely,” her father sighed. “I only wonder how I shall tell Mrs Bennet.”

Jane paced in front of her father’s desk, tears coursing down her cheeks. “Oh, poor Lydia! Where can she be? Surely, she will find her way back to Brighton!”

“You are free to think so, Jane, if it gives you comfort. But it has been five days now. I do not expect her to magically reappear.”

“But what will you do, Papa?”

“I am going to Brighton, I suppose, to see what I can find out. No, no, Jane, do not get your hopes high. I expect I shall hear very little if anything to the purpose, but I must do something.”

“We must ask Uncle Gardiner to help. Will you not send him a letter?”

“I see no reason to do so. What can he do about it? But if you wish to have Lizzy home, I shall not object. Write the letter, my dear. I shall go upstairs and pack.” He pulled a small purse from his desk.

“Here is some means, daughter, for you to conduct our affairs while I am gone. It is scurrilous of me to do so, but I leave the matter of your mother in your hands. I cannot spare the time or the energy to explain to her what has befallen our youngest daughter.”

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PEMBERLEY

E lizabeth did not like agreeing with Caroline Bingley about anything, but she could not help but concede that Pemberley was the most beautiful place she had ever beheld, and the estate was perhaps deserving of even more gushing praise than Caroline had given it.

The sight of the house, standing at the far edge of a magnificent park framed by wooded hills that retreated into the distance and mirrored in a stream-fed lake, caused a gasp of surprise from Elizabeth.

With a mixture of wonder and trepidation, she followed the housekeeper on a tour with her aunt and uncle, conscious that everywhere she stepped, Mr Darcy had stepped, that everything she looked at was deeply familiar to, and of use to, him.

When they had taken in all the elegance, refinement, and artistry of the interior, the housekeeper directed them to enjoy the gardens and public paths, and it was just this side of a formal rose garden that Elizabeth stepped around a giant elm and abruptly came face to face with Mr Darcy.

“Mr Darcy!”

“Miss Bennet!”

Elizabeth’s embarrassment nearly overcame her. She stammered and stuttered incoherently. “We were assured, Mr Darcy—I would never have dreamt of imposing! You must not think I came here to-to?—”

Mr Darcy seemed equally discomposed, and he stammered and stuttered incoherently at the same time.

“I am very glad to—you are very, that is, of course you are welcome… What-what brings you here, Miss Bennet?” He excused himself abruptly before hearing her answer, leaving Elizabeth panting with shame and distress.

“Oh, Aunt!” cried Elizabeth. “The worst has happened! Uncle, we must go at once! I cannot stay here another minute!”

Mr and Mrs Gardiner exchanged a look of dawning understanding and obligingly turned back to where their coach stood on the north side of the house.

While a groom went to fetch the horses, Elizabeth paced, wild to be gone, and her aunt and uncle politely pretended not to notice her agitation.

As if to solidify and thoroughly underscore Elizabeth’s extreme mortification, who should then burst out of a French door and run down the stairs towards them but Mr Darcy?

Elizabeth braced herself for the most horrid moment of her life. He was about to tell her, in front of her family, that she was not welcome at Pemberley.

“Miss Bennet,” he said, struggling to catch his breath. “Forgive me for being in such haste before. I have just come from the road, and I wished to change my coat.” He looked around. “But surely you are not leaving?”

“I believe we should, sir,” she replied with cold dignity.

But in the end, they did not leave Pemberley for another hour at least. Mr Darcy, with warmth and enthusiasm, made them welcome.

He asked to be introduced to her relations in trade, spoke to them as equals, readily made conversation, and offered to show them his trout stream after waving off a gardener who was poised to do so.

Mr Darcy's manners astonished her, but he surprised her even more when he humbly asked for permission to introduce his sister to Elizabeth, explaining that she would arrive on the morrow with a party consisting of Mr Bingley and his sisters.

Upon the whole, Elizabeth left Pemberley in a state that was close to one of her mother's famous nervous collapses.

She could not grasp the how or why of it, but Mr Darcy did not appear to hate her as much as he should.

That evening, Mrs Gardiner had the temerity to bring up the subject of Mr Darcy.

"Mr Darcy did not impress me as being so awfully proud or disagreeable, Elizabeth."

"No, Aunt," Elizabeth snapped before standing abruptly and going to her room. She could hardly bear her own reflections in this vein, much less endure the remarks of her family suggesting that she might have misjudged the man.

Just after eleven the following morning, the earliest a polite morning call could be paid, Mr Darcy arrived at the Lambton Inn with his sister.

This mark of attention impressed upon Elizabeth the gentleman's determination to be civil, and much of her agitation of the previous day was eclipsed by her equal determination to be pleasant and civil in return.

She instantly comprehended that she could do Mr Darcy no greater kindness than to be kind to his sister.

He clearly doted on her, and the girl, contrary to Mr Wickham's unflattering characterisation of her arrogance, was cripplingly shy.

Elizabeth's heart swelled as she went forward, took the young lady's hands in hers, and began to overwhelm her with warmth and friendly conversation.

The strategy worked. Miss Darcy finally looked up, encountered Elizabeth's twinkling dark eyes, and relaxed.

By the end of the visit Elizabeth, knew without question they would get on famously, given half a chance, and she was cautiously pleased that her aunt and uncle accepted the Darcys' invitation to dinner.

Even the arrival of Charles Bingley, all amiable enthusiasm and pointed inquiries after Jane, could not rob Elizabeth of her twinges of breathless excitement.

She greeted Mr Bingley warmly, and her resentment against him for abandoning her sister did not thrive.

How could any feeling but heart flutterings survive the frankly tender look on Mr Darcy's face as he stood watching her?

She had never blushed so much in all her life.

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HORSHAM, WEST SUSSEX

A fter two nights on the Worthing Road, Bill heroically pulled his cart containing Lydia all the way to Horsham.

Parch had stopped twice as they neared the bustle of the town to step down and ask directions.

Lydia was too dazed to do anything but limply hold the reins of their donkey.

She was starving, having subsisted for days on rations of a single potato a day, pump water, and one tiny leg of a half-grown rabbit that Parch had clubbed as it scrambled out of its hole in a fallow field.

Parch had eaten the rest of the rabbit and said she was lucky to get what he gave her since she was too stupid to be useful.

He had shaken his head in disgust when he finally realised she did not know how to skin the poor thing, and he grumbled, in his nearly incoherent way, something to the effect that he did not deserve the punishment of tending to her.

Still, he had tended to her, protected her, and had been in the act of delivering her to safety, so Lydia sat benumbed by exhaustion as they wove through the busy streets and came to a stop before a plain brick building with a black door.

She followed Parch to the door, and they, in turn, followed a porter to a small, sparsely furnished room.

Expecting to be greeted by a kind and interested representative of the magistrate responsible for Horsham and its environs, it took Lydia a quarter of an hour to finally understand that she was being signed in as a tenant in a workhouse.

“When is the magistrate coming, Mr Parch?” she asked in a fading voice.

“Ain’t comin’. This be a ’ouse.”

“Well, it might be a house, but I have never seen one like it. If the magistrate is not coming to see me, who is to come to me?”

“’Spose the keeper’ll be ’ere in a bit.”

“The keeper? What do you mean: a keeper?”

“Warden. The gov’nor.”

“The governor? The governor of what Mr Parch? Really, I do not have any idea where you have brought me!” she concluded irritably.

He sighed and said, “A ‘ouse. A work’ouse, you daft girl.”

“A—a workhouse Mr Parch?” she asked in a most pitiful voice. “You did not say a workhouse. You could not have said so. ”

When he shrugged, her heart began to pound. “A workhouse?! But, how could you?”

He shrugged again and looked at the ground. “Can’t keep ’at fed, girl. This be the Methody ’ouse. Thems not so bad as the parish, so’s I here.”

Momentarily overcome by terror, Lydia felt her knees crumple, and she stumbled

towards a wooden chair.

A man in a black coat and a woman in a black dress appeared and looked down at her.

She did not have the strength to rise and only vaguely heard Parch speaking to them in a mumble before he left her for good.

“I am Mr Perkins,” said the darkly clothed man. “I am in charge of this house. This is Mrs Hart. She is the matron of the women’s wing. Now,” he said, seating himself at the table and pulling forwards a sheaf of paper and an ink stand, “what is your name?”

“Lydia Bennet,” she whispered, shrinking into her chair.

“You must speak up, girl, and say ‘sir’ when you talk to the parson,” Mrs Hart said crisply. “Otherwise, the door is there, and you may fend for yourself.”

Lydia looked around for some means of escape, but of course, none presented itself.

For half a moment, she thought she might start to scream and be hauled away to a mad house, but her stomach growled for the hundredth time that day to remind her of the simple expedient of survival.

And so, with a degree of humility she had never shown in all her life, Lydia Bennet began to answer the warden’s questions .

“I am Lydia Bennet, sir.”

“Where were you born then?”

“Longbourn in Hertfordshire, sir.”

“And who were your parents?”

“Mr Thomas Bennet and Mrs Frances Bennet of Longbourn, sir.”

“And how old do you think you might be?”

“I am fifteen years old, sir. I will be sixteen come September fifth.”

He paused. “How came you to be so well spoken? Have you been sent to school?”

“I never went to school, but my father is a gentleman, and I was taught at home. At Longbourn, sir, an estate near Meryton in Hertfordshire.”

Mr Perkins solemnly put down his pen and looked at Mrs Hart with a crooked eyebrow before saying, “You had better tell us how you came to be here, Lydia Bennet.”

Lydia, who had repeatedly relived in her mind just about every moment of her shocking journey, was suddenly at a loss for words.

She had not thought to rehearse any kind of altered version of her story, thinking—stupidly, she admitted to herself—that the unvarnished truth would be wholly believed by anybody.

Yet so far, no one believed even a word of it, and she had tried with everyone she encountered, even shouting at a decently dressed man sitting on a horse, “I am a gentleman’s daughter!

I need your assistance!” from the back of Parch’s wagon .

After a pause of half a minute, Mrs Hart felt moved to encourage her. “The plain truth, if you please, and no delay about it.”

And so, in a faltering, disjointed manner, laced with the tones of a grossly misused girl who, by rights, was owed a degree of respect, she explained her arrival at the Methodist House.

“You are a fallen woman, then,” Mr Perkins concluded. He sat forwards and began to write on his paper.

This was too much for Lydia. “I am not fallen! I was deceived and betrayed by a man who promised marriage! He tried, but he did not—he did not touch me!”

“You were alone in his company in the night after leaving the protection of a respectable house. That is your tale, Lydia Bennet,” Mrs Hart said grimly. “You turned your back on respectability and are now enjoying the wages of sin.”

“Amen, Mrs Hart,” Reverend Perkins said gravely.

“We do not always taken women of your kind, but as you claim to read and write, we shall make an exception. You may do the Bible reading before the meal, and after your table work is done, you shall teach the girls their letters. Put her in the ward with the women, Mrs Hart, when you have made her presentable.”

“But will you not write a letter to my papa, sir? Please?” she begged.

“Surely, you do not expect a gentleman who raised you to recognise you now,” he sniffed. “But you may write to him, I suppose.”

“I may? Oh, sir! I thank you. Might I use your ink and paper?”

“You are given five pennies a day for piecework, Lydia Bennet,” he said primly.

“Four pennies a day go towards the cost of your ration of meat. You are given a penny alms on Sunday, you will keep a penny every week as your wage, and if you are thrifty, you shall buy the paper you need and eventually amass enough to send your letter by the post.”

“But how cruel!” she cried, bursting into tears. “I cannot wait weeks to write to my family!”

Mrs Hart looked on the verge of a hard scold, but Mr Perkins raised his hand placatingly.

“I am not a cruel man, Lydia Bennet. You will soon know this to be true. I shall give you a piece of paper in exchange for a single penny when you have been here for one week entire, provided you comport yourself like a Christian. You may write your letter then, here at this very table, and if you continue well for the following week, I shall see your letter put in the penny post myself.”

“That is very generous of you, sir,” exclaimed Mrs Hart.

Lydia did not agree. She was weak and lost and vulnerable, and she saw her tormentors through a thick veil of tears.

“You are not required to wear a yellow dress at this house,” he added, as if this were a tremendous boon .

“A—a yellow dress, sir?” she asked with a sniffle.

“You will explain it to her, Mrs Hart,” he said with a sigh. He rose from his chair and directed Lydia to follow the matron up a dim stairwell.

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THE LONDON ROAD FROM brIGHTON

M r Bennet rode a horse lent to him by Colonel Forster.

He scanned the road as he went, half his mind looking for some clue as to the whereabouts of his daughter and half mulling over his failure as a parent.

Never a man to favour industry, he was a self-indulgent scholar who had not married wisely, and after failing to father an heir, he had relinquished his authority in the management of his estate.

Master of Longbourn in name only, his chief tenants managed the land, his wife managed the house, and his girls fended for themselves.

Little did he care until suddenly he was forced to exert himself and to feel, for once, that a little endeavour to improve his youngest daughter might have spared him this miserable trek.

Hindsight made for a dismal companion over the next couple of days.

He wearily plodded along the road, changing horses twice before the outskirts of London came into view.

After looking into the tavern that was the last place George Wickham was seen, Mr Bennet relinquished his hired hack at a posting house and hailed a hackney to take him to Gracechurch Street in Cheapside.

His brother Gardiner was still away of course, but the housekeeper offered him hospitality, and Mr Bennet roused himself the following morning and wrote to his eldest daughter.

My dear Jane,

I have been from Brighton to London and have heard the very same story as told to me by Colonel Forster.

Lydia embarked in the evening of Friday last but did not emerge from the coach upon reaching London on the following afternoon.

Wickham stopped to rest at a place I would not describe to you for the world.

Even there, no one claimed to have seen him with a woman.

I can only conclude then, that Lydia is as a needle in a haystack.

She could be anywhere in the space of fifty miles, and if she is in London, we have no chance whatsoever of finding her.

I know you must be wondering what to do to salvage your sister’s reputation.

I have no answer and suggest you defer all inquiries as best you can.

Everyone will know the truth sooner or later.

At some point, claiming she is dead may be the most practical approach, but I am not so resigned as to instruct you to wear black just yet.

When my brother Gardiner returns, he will help me to look again, and that is all I can

say.

As to finding Wickham and demanding some clue as to where to look, you must give up all hope, Jane.

His trail is cold from the back door of a tavern, and the warren of streets and low lodgings that spreads out from there is never-ending.

He concluded this forlorn news with a flatly worded apology for failing her.

His poor daughter, who had a tender heart and mildness of spirit, nearly collapsed upon reading such a dreadful letter. “I need Lizzy,” Jane said to the empty room. “Why has she not come?”

Her sisters Kitty and Mary had taken to languishing long in bed for lack of liveliness and something to do, while her mother dozed fretfully all day long, convinced Mr Bennet had already been killed in a duel with Wickham.

No sense could be gotten into Mrs Bennet, and Jane had not drummed up the courage to tell her mother anything other than the simple fact that Lydia and Wickham had not reappeared.

Jane ran the house and sent trays to her mother, but she knew they could not carry on this way indefinitely.

The day her father had left home, she had sent a letter to Lizzy in Limpton, Derbyshire, and had hoped to see her sister, aunt, and uncle come back by now.

At the very least, she should have received a reply, should she not?

Thinking she had misunderstood the travel plans of her relations, she dug out her

aunt’s letter containing the particulars of their holiday.

“Lambton!” Jane exclaimed. No wonder her letter had not brought Lizzy flying home!

She pulled out a piece of paper, copied out her father’s letter in a fair hand and scribbled a desperate note of explanation.

She then went downstairs with her father’s purse and asked Mr Hill to have her letter sent express.

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LAMBTON

E lizabeth had visited Pemberley three times and Darcy’s head was spinning.

Her miraculous arrival, her even more miraculous willingness to be in his company, and her perfect kindness to Georgiana swelled his heart to bursting.

He had arrived home benumbed and blighted, turned the corner by the rose garden, and there she stood—the woman he still loved and probably always would love, the woman who had rejected his offer of marriage.

Not willing to waste this unexpected opportunity, Darcy exerted himself to the height of his capacity.

Determined to show her a better side of himself, he also meant to show her that he harboured no ill will.

His early success in pleasing Elizabeth, satisfying though it was, soon felt like a paltry achievement.

He craved her presence, and even though he knew a renewal of his addresses was grossly premature, in spite of all he told himself of patience and biding his time, he found himself galloping off on the fourth day to call on her.

Darcy had nothing in mind other than presenting himself.

He vaguely hoped to be able to walk her down to the shops, or to talk lightly about

anything over tea.

His ambition was purely to look at her, and he was thrilled to hear she was in the Gardiners' private parlour alone.

Darcy expected to see Elizabeth Bennet's eyes twinkle at him with mischief, as if to tease him for his eager attendance on her.

What he saw instead, however, knocked the breath out of him.

She was bent over a letter, openly weeping!

"Miss Bennet!" he exclaimed as he rushed forward. "What is the matter?"

"Oh, oh…" She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. "Where is my uncle? Sir, can you find my uncle?"

"Of course I shall, but let me send someone. I cannot leave you in such distress."

He stepped out in the hall and called the innkeeper.

When he was assured that Mr and Mrs Gardiner would be found and brought back to the inn as quickly as possible, he stepped back into the room and went to Elizabeth.

He pulled a chair close to her, took her hands in his, and begged to know what had distressed her so.

"My sister Lydia," she said with a sob, "has gone. She has left her friends in Brighton and gone with Mr Wickham." Fresh tears overtook her while Darcy struggled to contain his rage .

“When?” he asked sharply.

“More than a week has gone by,” she said.

“Nearly ten days, I think! Time has been spent looking for her, and Jane’s letter was poorly directed.

I have only now learnt of it—” Tears again coursed down her cheeks, but she straightened up a moment later and said in a small, grave voice, “But that is not the worst of it, sir.” She pushed two letters into his hands and looked up with such helpless despair he did not demur at the task of reading her private correspondence.

A few moments later, he comprehended the matter in its entirety, and such was his disgust that he was forced to quell a strong wave of nausea.

Eventually, he found his voice. “This is terrible, terrible news. Is there anything I can get for you while you wait for your uncle? A glass of wine or?—”

“There is nothing that could ease my distress, but I thank you. You will convey my regrets to your sister?”

He nodded and rose. In his mind, he was halfway to London. He knew exactly where to find George Wickham, and his hands itched to wring the man’s neck. “You have long been wishing for my absence, Miss Bennet. I shall leave you now.”

“Of course, Mr Darcy,” she said with a hitch in her voice. “You will not wish to know us now for the sake of your sister.”

His preoccupied mind whipped back from whence it had wandered. “Not know you! Of what are you talking? I am off this moment to London to see what can be done to find your sister.”

“You will help us?”

“I shall look for her until she is found, Elizabeth. I bear the blame for Wickham’s importunities upon your family. I swear to you: I will recover her.”

Elizabeth’s hands fluttered up to him. She slipped out of her chair onto her knees, took up his hand and caressed his fingers against her damp cheek. “God bless you, Mr Darcy,” she whispered tearfully.

“Oh, my darling girl,” he said, lifting her up to her chair and sinking into a crouch in front of her.

She looked so fragile and diminished, a twisting, searing pain shot through his heart.

He blinked as he took both her hands in his and kissed her knuckles.

“Do you not know that I love you, Elizabeth?”

“How can you still?” she murmured.

“How can I not?” he replied gently. “I have tried, my love. But I cannot give you up.”

They were staring into each other’s eyes, on the precipice of a moment of great import, when Mr and Mrs Gardiner burst into the room. Darcy knew better than to scramble upright. He stood up calmly, and only when he turned to face Elizabeth’s relations did he relinquish her hands.

“What is this?” demanded Mr Gardiner. “Lizzy?”

“May I speak with your uncle, Miss Bennet?” Darcy asked.

She nodded and went with her aunt into the adjacent bedroom. Before Mr Gardiner could say anything about the gross impropriety he had just witnessed, Darcy handed him Elizabeth’s letters.

“You will want to have read these before we decide what to do,” he said grimly.

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METHODIST HOUSE, HORSHAM

T he girl in the cracked mirror of the dingy closet referred to as the women’s bathing room was a stranger to Lydia Bennet.

Her eyes, once dancing with mischief, were red-rimmed, sunken, and glittering.

Streaks of dirt and patches of grime disfigured her once pretty, heart-shaped face, and her hair hung in tangled hanks.

“What has happened to me?” she whispered.

“You have gone with the devil, Bennet,” Mrs Hart replied matter-of-factly. “Here.”

She handed Lydia a strange, close-toothed comb. Lydia turned it over and over in her hand and puzzled over it until the matron threw up her hands and said, “For the nits, girl.”

“Nits?”

“Crawlers. Surely you itch.”

Now that she mentioned it, Lydia did itch.

She had itched for days but she had also ached, shivered, and suffered severe pangs of hunger.

The worst of her miseries had simply prevailed over small inconveniences such as cracked lips and an itching head.

“Oh my lord!” she cried, clawing at her scalp as if a spider crawled in her hair. “Get them off, Mrs Hart! Get them off!”

“What nonsense is this? Be quiet, you dratted girl. There is a basin of water and a lump of soap. Wash yourself, and then I shall get someone to come and help with your hair washing.”

Lydia could hardly move. She felt as if legions of bugs marched across her skull, down her back, under her arms, and between her toes.

In desperation, she took a linen towel and wound it around her head to keep any creatures from migrating elsewhere, and then she took the rough cloth and the hard soap and scrubbed herself raw.

Mrs Hart returned with a bundle and a woman of indeterminate age, neither young nor old.

“This is Carver, Bennet. She will help with your hair and settle you in your ward. Carver, here are the scissors if it comes to that.” With that ominous statement, the matron left the room.

Lydia stared at the woman who looked back at her indifferently. “Right,” she shrugged, “I ain’t got all night. If we don’t cut it off, we will miss our supper.”

“Cut it off,” Lydia said with a whimper. “There are things in it!”

“You ain’t lying. Bend over the dry bucket then.”

The procedure was hasty and rough, but Lydia could hardly argue with the result.

Her head was relieved of its heavy burden of infested tangles and she felt clean—truly scrubbed—deliciously, stingingly clean.

The clothes she was given were also clean, and though her shift was made of fustian and coarse to the touch, she was glad of it.

After tying a grey linen scarf into a kind of pauper's turban around Lydia's shorn head, Carver helped her pull on a simple grey dress and handed her a white apron.

"Good luck keeping it white," she grumbled. "Least ways, you ain't got to wear the yellow here."

"I look well in yellow," Lydia said wistfully. "What is all this talk of a yellow dress?"

"In the parish 'ouse, whores wear the yellow. Heaps the shame on 'em, it does."

"But I am not a—I am not that!" Really! All this talk of her being fallen, consorting with the devil, and lucky not to be put in yellow was more than Lydia could stand.

"No, countess. Ain't none of us ever been whores," snorted Carver. "Matron said to try these 'ere shoes."

"Are there any socks?"

"Those as has socks 'ere make their own."

"Oh," Lydia said, eyeing the leather shoes that could be worn by any farm boy.

Well, she sighed, bending down to tie them, they were a sight better than ruined

slippers, and they were only slightly overlarge.

Lydia’s accommodations were appalling, but she refrained from open complaint.

She had spent the night under Parch’s potato wagon in the mud, after all, and a straw pallet on the floor with a wool blanket and a roof overhead represented a step up.

It was, however, daunting to be stared at by half a dozen women as she came in the room.

They were all in various stages of undress, washing their faces and hands with water from a single bucket.

In the corner was another bucket, which Lydia eyed with suspicion.

The smell of the place was none too pleasant either, but her straw bed began to call to her, and she sank onto it in a heap of debilitated fatigue.

“N’other duchess, looks like,” said one of the women with a sneer.

“A countess to be sure,” replied Carver. “Not in the trade for long, I’d wager.”

“Long enough to get herself throwed in the trash heap.”

“So much for airs and graces. Thought she’d die of the louse, she did,” Carver snickered.

“I may yet die of the louse,” murmured Lydia in the hollow voice of those resigned to the hangman.

This observation struck everyone in the room as hilarious. They cackled and roared

with laughter.

“Come along, countess,” Carver said with a chuckle. “You’ll want yer supper now.”

Lydia was so dazed that the hush that fell over the room where she was taken for supper—and the evaluating stares as she followed her ward mates to the queue—did not cow her.

Her awareness seemed to be hovering above the scene.

Some girl quite incidental to Lydia was being instructed on the manner in which she was to hold her bowl and spoon.

This girl was sat down with broth and a piece of rubbery cheese.

A hot, weak tea, with milk and a luxurious spoonful of sugar stirred into it, was put before her, and Lydia abstractedly drank down this nectar while someone read something from the Bible about Esau being horrid to his brother Jacob.

How she got to her bed that night she did not know.

She woke once in the night with a start, but she throbbed with fatigue, and after recollecting where she was and that she was not in immediate danger on the London Road, she fell back into unconscious sleep.

The following days were hazy parades through a simple routine.

She numbly went for a breakfast of porridge, was sat down at a long table to make gloves, and after a wearing six hours, sat down to a dinner of cabbage with bits of bacon and oat bread.

The women took turns relieving themselves in the communal bucket and then Lydia, being the newest inmate, was handed the bucket and shown the pit behind the house.

“Do we take turns?” she asked in bewilderment.

Carver, who had taken possession of Lydia as if she were a novelty, guffawed. “If you like, Bennie,” she said. “Beings as yer new, it’s yer turn.”

“I am to empty the bucket until someone new comes to the ward?” Lydia cried. “How often do you get a new person?”

Carver shrugged. “Sooner or later. What’s the fuss? A little slop bucket never kilt nobody. What did you think happened at yer palace of gold when the chamberpot was full? Some poor soul had to haul it away. ”

“But—”

“Hush. Matron don’t take kind to whiners. You could have your penny took fer it.”

After the ordeal of the muck pit, Carver led her back to the workroom where they made gloves for another four hours.

The women were ‘at liberty’ until supper, which was the unvarying broth and cheese, and then they were sent to bed.

If by ten o’clock a pin dropping could not be heard in the hall, the wards were collectively docked, and similarly, failure to send two bodies down to the pump for wash water at six in the morning was costly.

Never in Lydia Bennet’s whole life had she cared a fig for rules.

But the Methodist Workhouse rules were such that infractions cost the residents their wages, and Lydia began to pay close attention.

One penny was held back for minor violations, such as complaining, swearing within hearing of the matron, and jostling in the supper line.

Both pennies were held back for indecency, stealing food from another person's plate, and for shoving fights.

Worse behaviour was rewarded with a push out the door.

And while the routine was simple, the rules were complicated, arbitrary, and numerous.

A woman could be docked for sewing mistakes, some comment that was misconstrued, a sour look, or forgetting to duck into a curtsey upon encountering the matron or master.

Speaking to any of the male lodgers housed in the opposite wing of the building was strictly forbidden, as was missing Sunday's sermon and stepping out of the building without permission.

Anything constituting a variation in humble obedience could be deemed wrong.

Even petting a crying child in the hall, Lydia soon found out, was a costly error.

"Bennet, what are you doing?" Matron asked. She was a stiff-backed woman of fifty with a plain face and lips that never curled into a smile.

"This little monkey is very sad," Lydia replied. She was in the corridor at the end of the work day, crouched down near a little boy of about three years old and playfully

tapped his nose.

“And he is not yours to attend to. He should be in his ward where his minder can see to him.”

“But the poor little boy?—”

“You have just relinquished a penny, Bennet. You have stepped out of your place. Return to your ward.”

“A penny! But I was only comforting a child! I was being a good Christian, was I not? How is kindness a punishable offence here?” she demanded.

“Two pennies, then. You should soon learn not to argue with me.”

Lydia stood with her fists clenched and was strongly inclined to go into a rant, as she used to do when anyone at Longbourn crossed her.

But Mrs Hart’s steely stare seemed to wish Lydia would give them half a reason to evict her, and by the thinnest thread of self-control, she forced her eyes to the floor and curtseyed before fleeing to her ward.

Her letter home would have to wait another week.

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SOUTHWARD ON THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

D arcy sat across from Mr Gardiner as the coach thundered down the road. They had left Derbyshire in a furious hurry after deciding several things.

First, they would travel in Darcy’s coach.

He kept horses along the route, his people knew the road like the backs of their hands, and they could crack on as no hired team could.

The full three-day journey could be pared down to just about a day and a half, the coachman claimed, if the gentlemen were willing to suffer a few inconveniences. They were.

Secondly, they decided to impose on Charles Bingley to accompany Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner back to Hertfordshire in Mr Gardiner’s coach.

Elizabeth was wild to be home. Darcy was reluctant to leave Georgiana alone with Bingley’s sisters, but needs must. And so, after a terse consultation with Mr Gardiner at the Lambton Inn, Darcy had galloped home, spoke to his coachman, and flew into the house to look for Bingley.

“Charles, a word,” he said, not bothering with courtesies.

Once they stood face to face in the library, Darcy paused. He had not really thought of what to say to his friend.

“What is it, Darcy? You look as if you have had terrible news.”

“I have exactly that—terrible news. George Wickham, do you remember him?”

“The fellow in Hertfordshire you did not like?”

“Yes. I do not like him for a reason, and there is now more. He had gone to Brighton with the militia. Miss Lydia Bennet was there visiting with Colonel Forster’s wife, and he convinced her to elope with him.”

“Good lord! The scoundrel!”

“He left Brighton with her in the coach, and arrived in London without her. She is lost.”

“What?”

“Mr Gardiner and I are for London. I know where to smoke out Wickham. I need you to take Miss Bennet and Mrs Gardiner to Longbourn.”

“Of course! I shall go this instant!”

“Bingley?”

“Yes?”

“I do not want your sisters to know anything about this. ”

“Oh.” Bingley thought for a moment. “I can manage it, Darcy. We should say we are going together.”

“I shall speak to my sister then.”

Now, as they clattered south towards London, Darcy and Mr Gardiner each were lost in his own thoughts. No doubt Mr Gardiner was consumed with worry for his niece, while Darcy thought of Georgiana. He had found her in the salon, being badgered by Caroline Bingley to play ‘something divine’.

“Georgiana,” he had said after a compulsory bow to Miss Bingley, “I am sorry to tell you I have some urgent business in town.”

“Is all well?” she had asked anxiously.

“Of course, dearest. I have convinced Bingley to go with me, and if the Hursts and Miss Bingley are willing, I must leave you in their company.”

“Willing!” Miss Bingley had cried. “We consider it our duty, do we not, Louisa?”

Darcy had disregarded her words and looked directly at his sister.

“I would speak to you about something Mrs Reynolds mentioned before I go.” He held out his hand.

Clasping it, she had followed him to the alcove overlooking the cutting gardens, where they spoke in low tones so as to not be overheard.

“Miss Elizabeth’s youngest sister has run away with George Wickham, Georgie.”

She had gasped.

“I hate to tell you such shocking news so abruptly, but I am needed to set things right. You understand, I hope? ”

“Oh, the poor, poor girl! And poor Miss Bennet—Elizabeth—I mean! She must be out of her mind with worry.”

“She is. You know…surely you do know I have feelings for her?”

“I thought you might.”

“Does it please you to think I might somehow win her? Even if her sister?—”

“How can you ask me that? After what I have done?”

“Then you know why I must leave you with those two,” he had said, flicking his head towards the parlour.

“You had better go straight away.” As he kissed her forehead, she had murmured, “You had better marry Elizabeth to make up for what I am about to endure with Caroline Bingley. She will be inspecting the mistress suite tomorrow morning.”

“What is your history with this Wickham fellow, Mr Darcy?”

Mr Gardiner’s question startled Darcy from his recollections of his sister. He sighed and looked down at his hands. He hated the whole sordid story, and he hated recounting any version of it.

“I am sure you understand that I find your involvement with my family’s difficulty curious?” pressed Mr Gardiner.

“I owe you the full story, sir, and you shall have it. Only you will forgive my reticence since it is, in every way, unpleasant for me to speak of it.”

But he did speak of it in blunt detail, after which they hashed out their plans, and

eventually, out of the need to think of something less devastating than Lydia's situation, they spoke in a general way about business.

By the time they reached London, exhausted and none too fragrant, they were solid friends.

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METHODIST WORKHOUSE, HORSHAM

L ydia was still partly a child, and she was, as a result of not having fully hardened into adulthood, more resilient than she knew. She had begun to fit in without really thinking about it.

Several advantages began to show themselves to her as she adjusted to her new life. First, she had been taught to sew and had worked much more complicated, fiddly things than half shilling gloves worn by shop girls and governesses.

The work was not challenging. Sitting still, however, and bending over in poor light for the whole of a day was a trial.

More than once did Lydia think of jumping up from her bench and running out the door.

Only the remembrance of the terrors of the road, the weather, and unrelenting hunger kept her pinned to her place.

The aching in her back and boredom in her mind could only be countered by thinking, and for once in her life, Lydia began to think deeply.

She did not think about home in these silent hours lest she weep and stain the linen over which she huddled.

Instead, she contemplated her advantages.

Besides being able to sew, she had a second advantage she could clearly discern: that of being something like Carver's personal token, and Carver was one of the half a dozen prevailing females in the place.

Sure, everyone teased Lydia and called her a countess because they thought she had been someone's mistress.

And certainly, she was ridiculed for being used to much better than she was getting and for being naively stupid about poverty.

But no one ever dared mistreat her because Carver was squat, solid, and patently vicious when pushed.

Thankfully, Lydia found Carver rather more likeable than not.

She was blunt and honest, and she had a strict, understandable moral code that derived from having whored for money when she was young and deciding she would rather starve to death.

Carver's backbone seemed unbreakable, and Lydia unconsciously emulated her mentor by trying to be a bit more stoic than she was brought up to be.

When she was not contemplating her luck in having snagged Carver as her particular sponsor, Lydia reflected that her upbringing as a gentleman's daughter, while vastly impractical most times in a workhouse, also graced her with multiple advantages.

For one thing, she was educated—not extremely well but sufficient to be a veritable sage in comparison with her ward companions.

Her wisdom showed itself accidentally at first. Dora Jameson had been bemoaning her husband's death in the war. "Stabbed, he was, by a Spaniard, so's I'm told."

“But we’s fightin’ the French,” Margaret Ferguson said with a snort of derision. “He weren’t in no Spain.”

“Napoleon invaded Spain and made it part of the French empire,” Lydia remarked offhand. “Portugal too. Half the army is in the Peninsula—that is Spain and Portugal.”

“Oh? And you would know, would ya?”

“Well, I did not really want to hear about it at all, if I am honest. But Papa would read to us from his newspaper at the breakfast table for ten whole minutes. He said he would be able to hold up his head in the neighbourhood if we were only half stupid.”

The members of the second wardroom fell silent and looked over at Lydia, who was trying to pare her toenails with the one pair of sewing scissors allotted to the house for grooming. Carver spoke first. “So’s the war’s more than agin the French?”

“Oh, the French are the enemy, of course. But they took Switzerland, trounced the Russians and the Austrians, and captured Portugal and Spain, and if we are not careful, Napoleon will have us too.”

“Lordy!” cried Dora. “I ’spose Bill died of a purpose!”

“He most certainly did, Dora,” Lydia said as she put on her newly constructed linen socks. “I suppose he killed a dozen Frenchmen and Spaniards before he was taken down. Sir William says one of our boys is worth twenty of theirs.”

Shortly after this, she was approached regularly by those who were not embarrassed to appear ignorant. Even Carver had asked her a question yesterday morning over porridge. “What’s the ’change, Bennie?” Lydia was ‘Bennie’ when Carver was feeling affectionate.

“Oh, do you mean the Exchange?”

“What I said, ain’t it?”

“Well, I do not really know very much about it except that is where a gentleman puts his money. Like a pool. Suppose we all put our week’s wages together in a box. Like that.”

“Why’d we do that?” Carver scoffed.

“I think it has to do with what the town men do with it. They grow the money and send the gentlemen the extra.”

“Huh?”

“Suppose we put our week’s wages in a box. And then we went out and bought eggs and butter and flour and made cakes with it. And suppose our cakes were really good and that the mayor’s wife had to have them, then we could charge a pretty penny for them. We would get back our wages and then some.”

“I ’spose…”

“And then we put back our week’s wages into the box and keep the extra to spend on ourselves. We then take what is in the box and go out the next week and make our cakes. The money in the box is our Exchange.”

“Well, I’ll be. T’would ne’er work though. We ain’t got no oven, nor do we know the mayor’s wife.”

“No, that was only an example. Suppose our Exchange was used to buy a bit of linen, and we made gloves in our spare time and sold them on the side.”

Carver shrugged. “With wat light girl? Spend all our pennies on tallow.”

“Yes, but the town men are very smart, and they think up schemes that do work.”

“Like wat?”

“I have no idea, Carver. Something to do with ships, I think, and the East India Company.”

Lydia sat thinking over her unlikely reputation as an expert as she hemmed the last seam on the first glove of the afternoon.

She wished she had paid much more attention to—well, to everything.

She wished she had read more books like Lizzy and flirted less.

Men, who had once been as irresistible as spun sugar comfits, were classed with the lice that always threatened to invade Lydia’s scalp again.

But, if she were not careful, her murderous thoughts of George Wickham would cause her to stab her finger.

Consequently, she thought of her other advantages, a curiously satisfying way to survive the tedium of her work.

In regards to her person, Lydia knew that her gentle upbringing gave her a much different idea of general hygiene than everyone else around her.

By comparison, she was fastidious, and she took her grooming seriously.

At Longbourn, she had been casual about these things.

She was pretty and she knew it, and what could rub the bloom off the rose anyway?

Having seen herself looking like a mole just dug out of the dirt, Lydia knew now that her genteel looks were easily lost and akin to currency, and if she did not want to end up a workhouse lodger for the rest of her life, she had better preserve what she had.

Lydia Bennet, of all the people in the world to work a flat iron, learnt to press her dress and her apron, and she did so with determined precision.

If she must wear a pauper's dress, she would look well in it.

She went meekly to Mrs Hart and begged for scraps of linen for socks, and these she made carefully so the seams would not cut into her feet and make corns.

She combed for nits twice a day, fought with determination for first use of the water, and washed vigorously.

She had a sliver of wood from underneath the work table that she used every day without fail to scrape her teeth, and she was the only person in her ward to use the foul-tasting tooth powder provided by the house.

With the remaining linen scraps, Lydia fashioned her own gloves, which she used to empty the foul bucket.

She was careful to tuck up her dress and to wash the soles of her boots in the gravel by the pump after she had been out to the offal dump.

She rinsed the bucket until it no longer reeked, and after seeing wild mint growing at the edge of the muck pond, she brought sprigs of it back to the ward and crushed it into a small pouch made from floor sweepings and wore it around her neck.

Soon enough she had set a fashion. Everyone wore scrap gloves and carried mint sachets around their necks.

When Lydia once took a tiny bit of butter from her allotment at dinner and rubbed it on her hands before bed, everyone else took to applying this homely emollient to relieve their chapped skin.

Swiftly, Lydia began to think beyond these beauty rituals and to consider the state of her hair.

Had Carver sheared her with a dull sabre she could not have done a worse job.

Lydia's hair was anywhere from half an inch to a spike of three inches long, all helter-skelter, and she began to look around her for a solution to this travesty of style.

Sally Watkins, a quiet lady of thirty or so, had decent-looking hair, and Lydia found herself increasingly jealous.

One day, after the first ward had passed on the communal scissors to the second ward, Lydia asked Sally whether she would give her head a little trim.

"Wat'll you give 'er for it, countess? She ain't yer slave," challenged Carver, miffed that her handiwork was deemed insufficient.

"I shall tell her a story," Lydia said unthinkingly.

Everyone in the room came to attention. A story seemed just the thing.

The day had been dreary, the light in the workroom dismal, the dinner mostly turnips and a meagre quantity of pickled pork, and no one's spirits were high.

And so, as Sally Watkins carefully coiffed Lydia’s poor head, she told them how she had come to the Methodist Workhouse in Horsham.

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Lydia was not a careful person. Her history proved her to be heedless at the very least. But some instinct of intuition told her that, while she could tell true stories all day long, she really should not disclose anyone's real name.

Bad enough they all knew who she was, Lydia did not feel she had the right to tell anyone her oldest sister was Jane Bennet or that Charlotte Lucas had married Mr Collins.

Her friends and loved ones did not deserve to be dragged into the workhouse alongside her.

With this in mind, she began her first story, deciding that George Wickham would be 'John Wickstead' and that Longbourn was to be 'Longbridge', Jane would be 'Julie', Lizzy would be 'Ellen', and so on.

Other names would be adjusted as she went along.

Her imagination, after all, was not an insufficient instrument, nor was she ever at a loss for words.

The description of evil Mr Wickstead pushing her bum-first from the coach and stealing her fortune of five whole pounds proved to be absolutely riveting.

For the first time since her travails began, Lydia felt that every single word she uttered was wholly believed.

When they blew out the candle, she felt her head and thought she must look much

better, and she felt a surprising burst of warmth—of security.

Her ward mates believed her! She was surrounded by seven people who deplored what Wickham had done and did not scorn her openly for being ruined .

The following morning during the washing up and dressing ritual in the grey light of morning, Carver said to Lydia, “Did ye really not know, Bennie, what that man ’ad in his mind?”

Lydia shook her head. “He tried something rough with my skirts I did not like. I have no idea why.”

“Relations he were after.”

“What are ‘relations’?” Lydia asked. The occupants of the room howled for some time, but that evening, they collectively explained in gross, embellished detail, everything she could possibly wish to know about relations, and a great deal she would rather not have known.

“Do you mean kissing is like the aperitif?” she asked in horror.

“The wat?”

“Like the soup course, before the fish comes out?”

This was not language much understood, and Carver impatiently said, “’Tis the door, countess. If you let a man have a kiss, may’s well ’ave open’t the door.” She looked suggestively towards Lydia’s upper thighs. “To yer skirts.”

“Good lord. No wonder there is so much talk of kissing being sinful, and why Li—Ellen and Julie scolded me so.”

“Bit him for it, didn’t you,” Dora said with dark amusement.

“I did that,” Lydia chuckled. “I drew blood like a vampire.”

“A wat? ”

Lydia was grateful to turn the conversation away from lurid descriptions of coupling, and she spent the evening regaling her friends with a bone-chilling story her father had read from a book of German lore.

Scaring the livers out of her audience rendered Lydia a great favourite, but she became a high celebrity at the Methodist Workhouse when she began to tell stories that included descriptions of the meals served in the various estates and genteel houses.

Lydia recounted Sir William ‘Jones’ worn-out stories of going to Saint James’s Palace, and her audience became giddy as she described what he had likely been served. “Oh, I am sure there was a heavenly syllabub,” she said, “and maybe a floating island or a blancmange of fresh raspberries.”

Everyone begged to know: How did such a syllabub taste, and what was a floating island and ‘that blayman’?

Ne’er heard of it. Lydia took pleasure in describing her mother’s fit of nerves at the Sunday table when Charles ‘Bunting’ had up and left ‘Norrington’, leaving poor Julie to be laughed at for disappointed hopes.

This was a strangely benign memory, happy even.

Such a trifling it all seemed compared to what could really happen to a person.

Dora’s husband had been killed, and she had been tossed out of her lodgings without even her shoes.

Gentle Sally had been beaten nearly to death by a man for her meagre purse, and Maggie had a four-year-old boy in the children’s ward that she could not see more than ten minutes a day.

Carver had been used pretty unsparingly for a few years in a room above a tavern on the edge of Horsham, and Meg’s whole family died of cholera in the year six.

She looked around her at faces that had become a bit dear to her, and thinking to please them, she said, “If I recall, we had a goose that day. Mrs ‘Hillbury’ could roast a bird to make your mouth water for days. And as it turned on the spit, the goose fat dripped into the pan with the potatoes and made them turn golden. Being winter, there was no salad of course, but we had pickled peas with French sauce, and of course, a soup of creamed parsnips—the little ones, not the old ones thick as your arm.” Anyway, in the end, with her mama “waving her handkerchief and moaning about being forced into the hedgerows by the entail, we had an apple compote.”

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LONGBOURN

U pon arriving home from Derbyshire, Elizabeth could not have known that Lydia was making a go of it in Horsham. She and Jane fell together into a sobbing, clutching heap when she arrived home. “Any news?” she asked in a mumble against Jane’s shawl.

“Nothing. Papa writes, in his few letters from London, that he goes out every day to no purpose. But our uncle is there now, Lizzy. He will find Lydia.”

Elizabeth thought the honour of finding Lydia face down in a ditch somewhere would more likely fall to poor Mr Darcy, but she could not say so to Jane.

“Mr Bingley,” Elizabeth said at last, turning to see the poor man fussing anxiously with his gloves, “you remember my sister Jane?”

“I could hardly forget her,” he said. “Miss Bennet. How anxious these days must have been for you.” He had a strong hold on her hands and did not seem aware of it. “ But you will not want to be bothered with me just now. Might I stop in the morning and see how you all fare?”

Jane hesitated long enough to cause Mr Bingley to blanch.

“Of course, Mr Bingley,” she said in a distant voice.

“My aunt and sisters would be happy to receive you.” She turned away and took her aunt Gardiner and Elizabeth inside.

They greeted Mary and Kitty with subdued embraces, and over tea, as the sun went down, Elizabeth heard about the situation at Longbourn.

“I did not want our aunt Philips here,” Jane said apologetically. “I am sure you did not. She would have the whole county know that Lydia is as good as nameless now.”

Jane nodded. “I sent her, Mrs Long, and Lady Lucas notes that Mama was down with an infectious fever and we should not see visitors or leave the house.”

Mary and Kitty sat in silence on the settee.

“That was clever,” said Elizabeth.

“But it did not satisfy. Aunt Philips demands to know why the apothecary has not come to us. I sent a note that it was not as bad as that, but more like a serious cold, and that soon enough she should visit us and bring her bone jelly. I do not know what to do, Lizzy. I can hardly keep her away another day. Yesterday, Lady Lucas came with a basket, intent on forcing her way in, and it was all Hill could do to turn her away.”

“And the servants?” Mrs Gardiner asked gently. “They will not stay silent, my dears.”

Jane shook her head. “No, of course we cannot expect it. Only Mrs Hill has some notion that whatever shame falls on our heads will fall on theirs too, and she has put the fear of God into Molly and Joe.”

“And Mama?”

Jane shook her head again. “Terrible, as you would guess.”

“Have you told her?”

“That Lydia is lost? No.” Jane wiped her eyes. “She only thinks that they have eloped and that our father has gone to fight a duel with Wickham.”

“Is that all?” Elizabeth cried. “My goodness Jane, she must be prostrate with anxiety.”

“Scold all you like, but I could not think what to tell her,” Jane replied testily. “Papa left it all to me, and I did what I thought best.”

“I am sorry, Jane. You have had a very hard time. I should not have said it, but really, our mother should be told, should she not? Lydia is her daughter, and soon we may have to hear the worst of it.”

Kitty put her face into her handkerchief, and Mary bent over her to comfort her.

Mrs Gardiner looked around her and said, “My dearest girls. This is a catastrophe to be sure. But to fall into despair is not the way. Until we hear otherwise, Lydia is only lost, and I think you—each of you—should entertain some notion of where she might safely be.”

“To what purpose, Aunt?” Elizabeth asked.

She was weary to the bone, irritable and quite resentful that Lydia’s situation had both impelled Mr Darcy to speak of love and interrupted him in the midst of what looked to be a renewal of his addresses.

Where was he? He must be enduring the worst places in all of London looking for her sister, paying tramps and thieves for information, and searching out morgues and brothels!

These thoughts caused her to burst into noisy sobs.

“Oh, Lizzy,” Aunt Gardiner said, putting her arm around her shoulders. “You must think of Lydia sheltering with a good farm family somewhere out of the way or with a kindly old vicar’s wife somewhere.”

“But why did she not write?” cried Mary.

“My dears, I am just as prone to think the worst as you. But your mother will be so brought down by this news, you must formulate these little stories to tell her, to spark some hope in her for a few days at least or until we hear otherwise. You must decide that the kindly widow has no funds till quarter day to send Lydia’s letter or that the farmer’s family will send their eldest boy with a message just as soon as he has cut the hay.

Something—anything! You do not want to see your mama fall ill in earnest, do you? ”

In the morning, Mrs Gardiner went up to Mrs Bennet to break the hard news, and she was there for more than two full hours.

The sisters sat in the parlour, quietly dreading the cries from above, which were plainly heard every few minutes or so.

Mary pulled out a shirt she was hemming for the poor box while Kitty sat at the table and began writing .

“What are you writing?” Elizabeth asked, her book of sonnets seeming impossible to read.

“I am writing out little stories of where Lydia is safely kept until we find her. I shall read them to Mama this afternoon.”

“Why, Kitty,” Elizabeth said, “that is the most thoughtful thing anyone could do just now.” Kitty looked far from gratified. In fact, she looked exceedingly sad.

Elizabeth glanced at Jane. “Kitty feels she is to blame, Lizzy. She thought Lydia was in love with Wickham when she went away.”

“Oh, Kitty. You must absolve yourself, my love,” Elizabeth said feelingly.

“I knew in Kent, having spoken to Mr Darcy about the man, that Mr Wickham was a dissipated rake. I should have come directly to Papa and told him what I knew. But I thought I should not meddle with a man’s reputation, and I have suffered such regrets!

You must know you are not to blame, dearest.”

“If that is so, why did Mr Darcy not speak to Papa when he was here?” Mary asked.

This was a reasonable question, and it deserved a much more reasonable response than it earned. Elizabeth rose and paced to the window. “Mr Darcy is not to carry the blame for what George Wickham has done,” she said crisply. “He is in London looking for Wickham as we speak.”

“Mr Darcy knows of our troubles?” Jane asked in a shocked half whisper.

“He came to visit me minutes after I had read your letter. I was weeping too hard to think of anything to tell him, and so I told him the truth. He felt himself liable for the whole of it and swore to me he would find our sister. But really, Jane, Lydia was determined to ruin herself, and we—all of us—indulged her. Not one of us took the trouble to restrain her. If Lydia had been possessed of better principles, this could not have happened, and in that light, I do not see Mr Darcy is at fault for anything!”

This hotly worded speech was interrupted by the arrival of Mr Bingley.

He seemed insensible to the tension in the room—beset by his own tension as he was—and he went directly to Jane with his hat in hand.

Jane was disinclined for once to put the man at ease.

He had hurt her, and in consequence, she looked upon him coolly as he spoke.

“Miss Bennet, tell me whether there is anything—anything in the world—that I can do for you just now. I beg you.”

Jane glanced out the window and saw her aunt Philips coming down the drive with two baskets, one in each hand.

“I hardly know how you could do it, but if you could ensure our privacy for a few more days at least, I would be very grateful.”

He, too, turned to the window and saw to what she referred, and with a crisp bow, he left the room.

The sisters watched as he walked purposefully down the drive and met their aunt.

He spoke to her for some moments, and at last she turned and walked with him back in the direction of Meryton.

Mr Bingley returned a little under an hour later.

He again ignored everyone in the room except Jane, and he again stood before her, refusing a chair.

“I told your aunt that I am sending to London for a doctor, that Mrs Gardiner is with Mrs Bennet, and that she has advised against visitors. Mrs Bennet is finally resting after a very poor night, and she must conserve her strength until the doctor arrives to consult with her. When she asked why Mr Bennet was away, I said he had finally taken advice about the entail with a town solicitor. He is expected to be away for another week at least.”

“But what will she say when no doctor arrives, sir?”

“I have sent for my personal physician. He was sponsored by my father many years ago, and I expect he will post down immediately from town to look at your mother and prescribe for her. She has taken to her bed, has she not? After that, he will return to London. There is no call for him to speak to anyone about his patient, and he is far too professional to do so. I thoroughly trust him, and if you feel he should know the real circumstance that has affected your mother so adversely, you may be assured of his confidence.”

Jane Bennet thawed somewhat, and she looked benevolently at Mr Bingley. “You have been very kind to think of that. How can we thank you?”

“You are all very quiet here, and it is a pleasant day. Shall we not go for a walk? I know you cannot be seen to be enjoying yourselves, but we could stroll to that little wilderness area and look into the spinney, perhaps. The goldfinches must be about in the grasses, and the nuthatches will be tapping at the bark. Surely, we should not sit here if we could be elsewhere.”

Jane melted entirely and took his arm, and off they went together, not really attending to whether anyone was following or not. Elizabeth sent Mary and Kitty after them, and then she went upstairs to her mother’s room.

“Mama,” she said in the gentlest of voices, “Mr Bingley has come.”

“Mr Bingley?” her mother asked in a pitiful whine.

“Charles Bingley. He has sent to London for a doctor for you. And he has taken Jane outside for a walk.”

“We are saved,” she whispered. “He will marry Jane, and Lydia cannot stay away from her sister’s wedding.”

Elizabeth put a cloth of lavender water on her mother’s head.

“You must rest now, Mama. This endless fretting will do you no good. When the doctor comes, I will help you put on that pretty robe with the ruffle and your best lace cap. But first you need to sleep. Later, would you like some cream biscuits with your tea?”

“Yes, Lizzy.” Her mother closed her eyes and patted her hand. “You are a good girl in spite of everything.”

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EAST OF ST GILES ROOKERY, LONDON

G eorge Wickham lay in bed—pale and sweating—with a red streak spreading from his neck to his ear.

Darcy spoke calmly in an almost disinterested way. “Well, George. Here you are.”

“As you see, Darcy. To what do I owe the honour? Does Georgie miss me?”

“Your swagger does you credit. I am told you are very ill.”

“It is the knackers for me, Darcy. As you see.” He gestured weakly at his suppurating wound.

Mr Gardiner and Mr Bennet stood gravely in the shadow at the edge of the room. Darcy could feel their impatience with his casual interview, but he knew Wickham far too well to even think of goading him just yet. Darcy pulled up a chair and sat down.

“Did someone stab you?” he asked, feigning interest .

“The witch bit me,” Wickham said with a chuckle that devolved into a painful cough.

Darcy brought the water glass from the bedside table and put it to Wickham’s lips.

“It was kind of Mrs Younge to take you in. Has she brought a doctor to see you?”

“A quack she knows. Says I am done for.”

“I am sorry. Can I get you anything then?”

Wickham’s fevered eyes focused on Darcy for the first time. “What brings you to my bedside all charity for once? Are we to be old friends again, Darcy?”

“I want to know where you set Lydia Bennet down.”

“Ah.” Wickham closed his eyes and seemed to go to sleep. A minute later he opened his eyes and said, “What is it worth to you?”

“A very great deal, George. Do you want a better doctor? To be moved to an infirmary? A pretty pair of nurses?”

“Nurses,” he said with a faint grin, “and a bottle of good brandy.”

“Is that wise?”

“Surgeon says I would only hasten the end with drink. I am not inclined to linger, Darcy.”

“Where did you set Lydia Bennet down?”

For a full minute, Wickham lay silent, and Darcy wondered whether he would have to throttle him to get an answer. At last he roused and said, almost abstractedly, “I cannot remember…we left Brighton and had not been gone even an hour up the road. ”

“What happened?”

“Brandy, Darcy.”

Darcy looked once at the doorway where his footman stood. The man nodded and left. “On its way, George.”

“She was jibber-jabbering about being Mrs Wickham. I was annoyed. I only wanted to stop her talking.”

“And? Are you telling me you imposed yourself on her?”

“Well, I would have, only she did not like it. She bit me. I lost my temper, stopped the coach, and pushed her off. That is the truth of it, I swear. She may as well have murdered me for it.”

“You did not think you should tend to your wound?”

“Never occurred to me. Quack says a bite wound may as well be a poisoned arrow. I should have gotten a tumble at least for the revenge she dealt out.”

Darcy could hear a shuffling at the back of the room and saw Mr Gardiner restrain Lydia’s father. He turned calmly back to Wickham. “Well, you did leave her on the road in the middle of the night, and she has not been seen since. Perhaps, you might call it even.”

Wickham smiled wanly and subsided into unconsciousness. More than a quarter hour later, the footman returned with two bottles of brandy and a charwoman, who waited in the hall for the gentlemen to leave.

Darcy roused Wickham and poured out a glass. “Do you have any recollection at all of where you might have left Miss Lydia on the road, George?”

“Hickstead,” he said. “There was a cross post some few miles north of there. I have caused you a bit of trouble, have I not?”

“Trouble, money and worse. Let me sit you up now so you can sip your brandy like a gentleman.”

“Cheers, old man. Happy I could oblige you by dying.”

“I will not say I am glad of it, George. You could have been something more. If you need anything, have Mrs Younge send a note.”

“I will need a nice send off, Darcy.” For the first time, the swagger slipped and Wickham’s eyes shone with something akin to fear. “Do not let them put me somewhere unmarked, will you?”

“I will see to it. I promise.”

Later that evening, Darcy, Mr Gardiner and Mr Bennet convened in Darcy’s library to commiserate. “You were very kind to that man,” Mr Bennet said with a tinge of bitterness.

“I cannot account for it, sir. I have itched to kill him for a year at least, but when we were boys, we were very good friends. I suppose I saw that boy lying there facing his end. If I have offended you, I am sorry for it.”

“Well, I have no place to say anything. It was my daughter who ran off with him. He did not take her by force.”

“But she is young, and he is a very charming man. Lydia Bennet cannot be held to blame.”

“No, I suppose not. But I can. Lizzy warned me not to let her go to Brighton. ”

“And hindsight is two dozen to the penny!” Mr Gardiner interjected. He looked tired and on the verge of becoming overtly irritable. “The point is we must find her.”

“I will offer up my thoughts if I may?” Darcy said. They looked at him expectantly.

“Mr Bennet had better go home. Your family will need you. And if by some chance Lydia finds her way to Longbourn, you should be there.”

“You give me the easy job, do you Mr Darcy?”

Mr Gardiner answered for Darcy. “My sister is at Longbourn, and she in no fit state, Thomas. Your daughters are trying to stem the flow of gossip and to deter my other sister from visiting. I would not call that the ‘easy’ job. You should go home and do what you can to stop any rumours for the sake of your remaining girls.”

Mr Bennet was also weary and irritable. “Just what do you suggest?” he barked. “How am I to keep my daughter’s disappearance from being talked of?”

“Go out visiting as if nothing untoward has happened. Write to Colonel Forster and make sure he has not let the gossip in Brighton swell. And for heaven’s sake, keep Fanny from talking to anyone! Take her on a medical trip—I do not know, but do something! My nieces are frantic and alone.”

After a heavy pause, Darcy spoke again. “Mr Gardiner, I think, since you are a London man, you should hire some men to begin a methodical inquiry here. Do you know the sort I mean? ”

“I do. I shall need a sketch of Lydia. I believe my wife has pencil portraits of all her nieces at home.”

“I shall go to Hickstead and fan out either side, down the tracks and lanes, speaking to anyone I find. We should meet here again one week from today, gentlemen,” Darcy said gravely, and with that, their meeting concluded.

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SECOND WARD, METHODIST HOUSE, HORSHAM

L ydia had mastered survival for the present.

She had shelter, food, a protector, friends, and well-wishers.

She was more popular in the workhouse than she ever was in Meryton, and she liked the feeling quite well.

She liked being knowledgeable and in possession of superior habits.

She liked singing after dinner for the inmates, as she cheekily referred to them, and reading from the Bible at breakfast even if it was about who begat whom.

She understood what she was reading, which was more than could be said of the other girl who had been given the job.

She had convinced her ward mates to rotate the horrible business with the bucket, to clean it out more than once a day, and to air their blankets when the weather was fine.

She had even gone to Mrs Hart and suggested that, on Sunday afternoons, the mothers with children in the wards could have the whole of their leisure time with their little ones.

When the woman looked up at her sceptically, she promised her dinner, her Sunday alms, and anything else Mrs Hart wanted in return for this boon.

“The thing is, ma’am, I cannot stand to see poor Maggie so heartbroken that she cannot see little Wyn.

Is there nothing that can be done, Mrs Hart? ”

Lydia did not know that a girl who cared about everyone around her was twice as pretty as one who cared only about her own comfort.

Her face was shining, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears; her uniform was crisp, her speech refined and precise, and her tone was respectful—gentle even—for once.

She had made a comely sort of grey cap of linen for her short hair, and her fingernails were pink, clean, and carefully pared.

In short, she made a lovely, modest picture as well as a compelling argument, and she won the point.

“I suppose you are right, Lydia Bennet. I shall speak with Mr Perkins. He is not an unkind man, and I expect he will agree. You are not to say anything before Sunday. If he agrees, he will announce the new rule after church.”

“God bless you Mrs Hart,” Lydia said with feeling. “You have made some of us so very happy by your kindness.”

She was entering into her third week at the workhouse, and she had made a place for herself.

Naturally, she could not keep memories of her family at bay forever, particularly after she had solved her more pressing physical problems. At night, she regaled her friends with quaint stories of the neighbourhood of ‘Merrydale’, but once they settled for the

night, she would think of her family, and tears would fall silently down her cheeks.

Why did they not come for her?

Her recollections of herself at home were difficult to bear.

She remembered ripping a pretty scarf from Kitty's shoulders before leaving for Brighton, saying, "I shall need this, Kitty. It suits me twice as well as it does you anyway. Oh, stop your bleating! Mama will make you give it to me and you know it."

Was that the last thing she had said to her sister? Surely not! No, she remembered now. "You had better write to me, Kitty, but I shall be having too much fun in Brighton to write to you." That was the last thing she said to Kitty, and Lydia shrank in her straw bed.

Remorse came, a hollow and haunting companion in the night.

She saw herself parading through Meryton as if she owned the place, saying outrageous things and making herself look the fool in a farce.

The stares she had gotten from her neighbours she had mistaken for flattering attention.

She knew better now through the experience of being sincerely liked and even a little respected.

Her neighbours looked at her as she exhibited her horrible manners because they were appalled.

The young militia officers crowded around her because she was fast and reckless, and she blushed in the dark to realise they were frequently laughing at her.

George Wickham, she realised too late, despised her from the start.

She recalled the flirtatious, teasing manner in which he taunted her to increasingly unbecoming behaviour, and a hot flush of shame rolled over and crushed her.

A well-fed cat toying with a field mouse would have had more respect for its victim than Wickham had for Lydia.

He took her with him in the coach to take her little bit of money, she now knew, and to ruin her as a mark of his disgust.

What must Mary think of her now? She probably thought nothing Mr Perkins did not think.

Mary would lament the state of Lydia's soul and deplore her life condemned as a fallen woman.

And why should Lydia expect a charitable thought from her middle sister?

When had Lydia ever said or done one kind thing to Mary?

She had made sport of her, had called her plain, and jeered at her efforts to improve herself.

Jane, too, had tried to shush Lydia when she was at her worst, but Jane was such a lady she would never roll up her sleeves and issue a proper scold.

Her oldest sister's natural delicacy could hardly stand up to Lydia's loud, obnoxious rebellion, and she would retreat as if she hoped the worst of it would pass in time.

In the middle of the night, Lydia's mind wound itself around and around, and she

began to wonder, vaguely, whether she had disgusted Mr Bingley too and scared him away from Jane.

She likely had done just that when she ran giggling and hooting about with Denny's ceremonial sabre.

The looks she earned from Mr Bingley's sisters were badges of proof that she was wildly misbehaving, and Lydia had somehow, in those now distant days, mistaken wildness for charm.

Only Lizzy saw her as she was: a spoiled tyrant who trampled over everything she should have loved!

Lizzy must be grim with satisfaction. She had begged Papa not to let Lydia go to Brighton, and had warned her mother to stop letting her youngest make a vulgar show of herself.

How many days in the week had Lizzy tried to check Lydia's worst impulses?

Lizzy was the smartest of them all. She knew to a penny how much her youngest sister's wildness would cost them in the end, and now she was right.

Lydia Bennet had ruined the family name, and who would marry any of them now?

Her family had not come for her because they did not want her back, and why would they?

Lydia cried herself to sleep most nights, having come to this shattering conclusion again and again.

And in the morning, when she woke feeling small and awful, Dora would ask her for

help tying a pretty bow on her apron sash, Sally would comb through her cropped head for nits, Maggie would ask her whether King George was really mad or just simple, and Carver would say, “Whatcha’ singing for us today, Bennie? I liked that foreign one.”

“The Italian song?”

“What’s it mean?”

“To be honest, Carver, I do not really know. I think it is about love because it has the word amore in every other line. Maybe I never learnt it correctly and I am just singing gibberish.”

“Pretty gibberish though, Bennie. Your turn with the bucket, Queenie. Here, let me put on yer crown, eh?” Carver would tie up Lydia’s linen cap so it looked more like an elegant calash than a pauper’s head scarf, and with a gleam her eye as she took in the elegance of her protégé, send her down to the muck pit.

And Lydia’s aching heart would ease a bit because here, at least, she was someone worth finding.

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LONGBOURN

P apa was home. He looked bent and beaten down, and Elizabeth rushed towards him.

“Well, Lizzy?” he sighed, handing his hat to Hill.

“I know, Papa. You must be very tired. Let me send a tray to your library.”

“If you would, daughter. Does your mother still keep to her bed?” He went to his library, and Elizabeth followed.

“She truly is not well, Papa.”

“Truly?”

“Mr Hawkins came from London to see her. Mr Bingley asked him to come, thinking his presence could help us continue our little farce about Mama being too ill for visitors.”

“And what is this learned man’s opinion of my wife?”

“Do not be caustic, Papa. He is, in fact, very kind to her. She has worked herself into a state, and no one could wonder at it, but now she really does have a sore throat.”

“She must be delighted to be really ill for once.”

“Papa!”

“Forgive me, Lizzy. I am in a foul temper. If I am lucky, I, too, shall be struck ill and put to bed. Is Mrs Gardiner still here at least? She is occasionally sensible.”

“My aunt left this morning to return to her children. Mr Hawkins said she had better go before she catches what Mama has and takes it home to the nursery.”

“I suppose the neighbourhood now knows that Lydia is lost to us.”

“I would have thought so, but Mr Bingley has been the hero in that regard. He visits the Philips, the Longs, and Sir William and Lady Lucas so often, and with such agreeable cheer, that they are all too distracted by his attention to think of Longbourn. And he gives the ladies very detailed reports of Mama’s throat and such and says he has a licence to visit us—which he does every day without fail—only because Mr Hawkins has known him since his school days and never once seen him fall ill. ”

“Are we to be overrun by encroaching young men? Mr Darcy all but ordered me home. I have never encountered such an officious person in my life.”

Elizabeth could not help but smile just a little. “He is very officious. But he has the irritating habit of being very right about almost everything, so we must indulge him a little. ”

“How accommodating you are. I thought you did not like him at all.”

“Oh, but I like Mr Darcy very well, Papa.”

Mr Bennet looked up at his daughter and shrugged. “Well, I suppose I shall have to like him too, but I do not really want to. He found Wickham, you know.”

“Papa! Why did you not say so? Mr Darcy found Wickham?! But what did you discover?”

“He tried to meddle with Lydia, and she bit him.”

“She what?”

“She bit him. The wound festered, and Wickham is likely already dead.”

“Good God.” Elizabeth felt around behind her for a chair and sat down heavily. “Do we know nothing more?”

“The rascal set her down somewhere past a hamlet called Hickstead after she injured him. She is very lucky he did not strangle her. Well, I say she is lucky, but that may not be true at all. A swift end is sometimes a mercy. Your uncle is searching London—and what a benighted job that is—and your Mr Darcy is travelling through the turnip fields of West Sussex searching for clues.”

He stared at his bookshelf for a moment. “And I am sent home to pretend all is well. Our little house of cards will fall at any moment, Lizzy. I shall almost be glad of an end to this horrible waiting.”

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CROSS POST AT THE COWFOLD AND LONDON ROADS

D arcy discovered Hickstead to be little more than a marker on a lonely stretch of road between Brighton and Crawley.

For the third time in as many days, he rode from Hickstead northward to the cross post Wickham remembered.

He had gone west from the London Road down every single track, path and road.

He talked to farmers, cottagers, milk maids and carters, and no one had seen a girl alone.

The second time he went out, Darcy went east and found only a smattering of hovels and cow sheds, most of them deserted.

He then decided to try one last sweep westward.

His way led him down the road to Cowfold.

He stopped at the Red Lion for a second time, questioned everyone he saw, and was once again greeted with closed suspicion.

They shrugged and harrumphed, and otherwise told Darcy that, not only had they not seen whoever he was looking for, but they resented his prying inquiries.

Darcy went as far as the Worthing Road and turned back.

Deciding on the following day he would try one more time before he would need to return to London to meet with Mr Gardiner, he made up his mind to go further north from the cross post, having thoroughly canvassed the last place Lydia was known to be and come up empty.

At some terrible point in time, he would need to go the cemeteries and have the recent unmarked graves dug up.

This dreadful eventuality drove him on, and he once more crossed the London Road at the cross post and went a few miles eastward.

When he topped a gentle rise, he looked down and saw a donkey cart in the distance.

He expected nothing at all, but when he got near enough to hail the driver, he pulled up and said, “I am looking for a young lady who might have been hereabouts as much as two weeks ago or more. She would have been alone, and perhaps worn a frilly dress.”

“Took ’at to Horsham,” said the bent little man.

“What?”

“Gone to Horsham. Couldna’ keep ’er fed, and so I told ’er.”

“You saw a girl, then?” Mr Darcy cried, his heart pounding. “And you took her to Horsham?”

“Yup. To the ’ouse.”

A sick feeling came over Darcy. Had Lydia been taken to a brothel? “Which house?” he demanded.

“Work’ouse. Methody ’ouse. Wouldna’ take ’er to the parish, as ’ems no good I ’ear. ”

Darcy’s sick feeling continued unabated. The difference between a workhouse and a brothel was not significant enough to relieve his mind. “What is your name?” he demanded.

“Parch.”

Darcy wheeled his horse around and galloped back to Brighton.

He careened into the stable at the Old Ship Hotel on King’s Street and shouted for his coach.

It was late afternoon already, and he wished to be in Horsham looking for Lydia Bennet first thing in the morning.

For half a moment, Darcy considered sending an express to Mr Gardiner, but he was too conscious that this lead might prove to be false and crushingly disappointing.

Darcy arrived in Horsham well after midnight.

He tossed and turned and thought of Elizabeth in a state of horrible agony.

How could he tell her that her youngest sister had been languishing in a workhouse all this time?

He was aghast and twisting in the trap of his sheets.

If only Mr Bennet had alerted Mr Gardiner sooner.

No. Darcy never would have spent those few precious days with Elizabeth. If only…if only…

If only came down to the one thing, no matter how many times Darcy tried to reason otherwise.

If only he had done something about Wickham when he meddled with Georgiana.

If only he had not been so proud and protective of his good name—a name that had been more important than anything Wickham would do to someone else's sister.

"This," he said to the air above his head, "is surely hell I am in. "

In the morning, Darcy dressed as if he would soon face judgment, and in a state of both dread and determination, he instructed his driver to the place the innkeeper said the Methodists dispensed charity.

When they got to Clarence Lane, the coachman pulled to a stop for further instructions, but Darcy, seeing a brick building of some size at the end of the street, stepped down and said, "Walk the horses if you must, but do not go far. I may be some time, or I may be back directly."

"Very good, Mr Darcy," his coachman said.

Darcy walked along and considered the advantages of wealth as he went.

Comfort was one thing, but competent people were another benefit altogether, and he felt the enormity of his luck in having a legion of highly capable, discreet, and professional people to support him in his desperate search.

Never once had anyone raised an eyebrow or looked askance at him.

They followed him to Mrs Younge's disgusting lodging, stood to the ready to buy Wickham brandy or to roust out a sweeper or drive around and around a tavern while their master prowled London.

And now they were wandering around Horsham and waiting outside a workhouse, and Darcy never once worried that even a word of his business would be talked of.

He greeted the porter. "Is this the Methodist Workhouse?"

"Yes, sir. You'd be wantin' to see Mr Perkins?"

"If he is the master here, yes."

Darcy entered the place and followed the porter to an office.

A quarter of an hour later, after a closed-door conference, he followed Mr Perkins to a large, gloomy room filled with four long tables.

Women dressed identically hunched over their work, and when Mr Perkins entered, they all stood and curtseyed.

Darcy scanned the multiple faces to no purpose—he did not see Lydia Bennet among them.

"Bennet!" Mr Perkins called. "The rest of you may go back to your work."

The crowd all sat but for one lone figure. Darcy slowly walked forward, and he saw the girl's eyes widen as he neared her.

"Mr Darcy?" she whispered. "Have you come to visit me, sir?"

For a second Darcy's throat closed up, and he was forced to blink back the moisture in his eyes.

He cleared his throat and spoke gently. "Miss Bennet, I am very glad to see you. I have been looking for you for a while now. Your family is desperate to find you, and I would be so happy to take you home. Will you come with me?"

She looked bewildered and turned to look at the upturned faces of the women who worked at the table beside her.

"Go on, Bennie," one woman said. "I always said they'd come fer ya."

And so, Lydia took a few halting steps forwards, and as she did so, many more voices called out encouragement and even mumbled expressions of joy.

One woman reached out her hand, and Lydia clasped it before turning back to the women at the worktable and saying, with her face aglow and her eyes sparkling with tears, "Oh, I shall miss you all so much!"

"Ya daft girl, go back to yer Longbridge! Send us a note to let us know's yer well once in a while. We'll not miss yer fancy ways, though."

"Oh, Carver," Lydia cried, hugging the woman who spoke. "Thank you for being so kind to me. I will not forget you or anyone here."

She turned to Darcy, who held out his hand, and looked up wonderingly into his face.

"Is it really you, sir?"

"I am sorry I am not your father or your uncle, Miss Bennet."

“Oh, but you will do just as well,” she said.

“I intend to take you to London today if that is acceptable to you.”

“London?”

They were standing in the workroom with Mr Perkins and an audience of thirty women at least. Lydia Bennet appeared a little dazzled, and thinking to give her a little time to adjust, he said, “I shall hire a maid at my hotel to go with you, unless Mr Perkins has someone he can recommend.”

“Take Sally,” someone called from the work tables.

“Oh yes, Mr Perkins. Might I borrow Sally Watkins for a few days?” Turning to Darcy, she said, “I had to have my hair cut off—well, perhaps I should not explain it, only Sally is very gentle and she is a comfort to me. ”

“Mr Perkins, I would be very glad to engage Miss Watkins for an indeterminate period of time. Might I also have a word in your office? Miss Bennet, do you have things you need to collect?”

She looked obediently at Mr Perkins, who called up Sally and sent them to the ward for their things.

Darcy meanwhile went to Mr Perkins’s office, pulled out a handful of bills, and put them on the table.

“A donation. And I would be very glad to have any paperwork related to Miss Lydia Bennet. You understand her family will expect complete discretion on your part?”

Mr Perkins wordlessly reached into his desk, and after a moment he pulled out a sheet

of paper and handed it over. “She has been treated well here, sir,” he said primly.

“I most certainly hope so,” Darcy said with narrowed eyes. He could hardly account for the observable changes in Lydia Bennet and thought she may have been beaten into submission. “I shall certainly hear her account of things just as soon as may be.”

Lydia returned before more could be said in that vein.

She had a small bundle wrapped in her apron as did the woman who came with her.

Another woman in a white cap and black dress stood behind and said, “Miss Bennet, I am glad to see you restored to your family. They must be good Christians to have you back.”

“Thank you, Mrs Hart,” Lydia said meekly, and then with an enormous grin, she looked up and said, “I am ready to go, Mr Darcy.”

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THE LONDON ROAD

D arcy could hardly conceive of a more affecting scene.

He sat on the rear-facing seat and looked on as Lydia Bennet, dressed like the meekest Methodist maiden, held the other Methodist's hand.

Elizabeth's sister seemed not to be seeking comfort from her companion; rather, she was comforting Sally Watkins through the reassurance of touch.

Eventually Lydia saw that Mr Darcy had noticed their clasped hands. "Sally has not been to London before, sir. She is a little worried she will not know how to get back to Horsham."

"She will get back the same way she came, Miss Bennet. I shall have my driver take her personally, if you would like, and see her safely back to Mr Perkins."

"Oh, I knew you would be kind, Mr Darcy," Lydia said gently. "Do we go to my aunt Gardiner? "

"Yes, and I am delighted to restore you to her care."

Lydia looked out the window and blinked, but she did not say anything in response, and so Darcy said, "Is there anyone from home I could bring to you in London? Your mother, perhaps, or your father? Your sisters? I could bring them all to you as soon as may be."

She turned back with a startled look on her face. “I-I would like Lizzy to come to me, sir, though I do not know whether she will want to see me.”

“Of course she will want to see you. She was beside herself when she heard you were lost.”

“Beside herself? For me?”

“I was half afraid she would make herself sick.”

“Do you—?” The girl looked at her companion as if to gather reassurance. “Do you think they will want me to come home, sir?”

“What? Of course they will! I know they will. They will be celebrating very shortly if I am not mistaken. As soon as you walk through your uncle’s door, I shall write an express to your father. I should have done so in Horsham, but I was very anxious to get you to London.”

“I have been gone for some weeks, sir. I think an afternoon cannot matter so much to them.”

“A minute of not knowing what has happened to you matters a great deal to your family. Of that I can assure you.”

After half an hour of silence, Lydia spoke again. “How did you find me, sir? ”

“Your uncle and his retainers combed London for you, while I went to Hickstead and spoke to everyone I could find. I believe the man’s name was Parch? He said he had taken you to Horsham.”

To Darcy’s astonishment, Lydia’s face brightened, and she spoke joyfully.

“Mr Parch? You spoke to Mr Parch? I was so put out with him for leaving me, but I owe my life to Mr Parch, I think, though he could hardly afford to offer me anything. He gave me food, even though he was hungry, and went for two whole days off his route. Poor Bill”—she sighed—“he had the worst of it.”

“Bill?”

“His little donkey. Such a tired old thing. If I had a mint of money, I would see Bill retired in a nice pasture with a shelter and carrots and all the hay he could eat. Of course, I would see Mr Parch with a little something to keep him body and soul together too. I never saw anyone kill a rabbit before, and when we had to sleep under the potato cart, I wondered how that man had lived to such an age.”

Good lord, had she really slept under a potato cart? “He—he did not importune you then?”

“Mr Parch?” she asked incredulously. “He kept as far away from me as possible and told me half a dozen times a day he did not want a wife.”

“Were you hurt at any time you were…away?”

“Well, no, not really. I mean Mr Wickham treated me horribly, but—” She looked down at her hands.

“There are those that would say I deserved what I got from him. Leastways he threw me out of the coach before anything really terrible happened. Anyway, some carters chased me, but I ran deep into a field of barley and lay down so they did not find me. And then the farmers chased me off, and no one would take me up until Mr Parch came by. Nobody in Cowfold would help me either, though I asked everybody.”

“I found them to be a very unhelpful bunch.”

“Why, so did I, Mr Darcy! We even went to the monastery, and the monk sniffed at me and said they were Carthusians and sent me away. What is a Carthusian, sir?”

“They are literary monks. They sit in their cells and copy out manuscripts.”

“I suppose it is just as well I did not end up thrown on their mercy then, but I do not know how writing a letter to my father would have hurt anybody.”

“Nor do I. What did you make in the workhouse?”

“Gloves, sir. Linen gloves for the shop girls and such. I got better at it as I went.”

“Did you?”

“Well, I was taught as a child to sew at least, and matron had no cause to dock me for poor stitches. But she did dock me for talking back to her twice, and I learnt to bite my tongue. Mr Perkins said I could buy paper when I earned enough and he would send my letter by the penny post. But I could never get the fee because, you know, Dora needed a salve for her elbow, and that was that.” She stopped speaking abruptly and looked across at him with a look of self-consciousness.

“I am prattling on and on, Mr Darcy. I had thought I learnt not to be such a chatterbox, but after the first two hours of my freedom, I am myself again.”

“I am glad to see you are. I wonder whether I might coax you to chatter a little more. Why do you wish only for your sister Elizabeth?”

“Oh, well, I think Lizzy is the only one of my sisters who under stands me. There is something I must say to her as well, which is that she was very right and I was very wrong. Will you really fetch her?”

“I shall if your father will give me that privilege, yes.”

“Well, if you do go to Longbourn, would you tell my sisters that I long to see them too, only I think Lizzy will scold me properly as I deserve, and that I had rather get that over with before I go home. I am afraid Jane will be very sweet to me, and Mary will give me a neat little sermon to try to redeem me, and Kitty will be glad to see me, and Mama will be overcome with happiness, and I will be crushed to death by their kindness. Even Papa will likely tell me I am the stupidest girl he ever knew and leave it at that. Only Lizzy will say what is true, and that is what I most want to hear.”

Who is this girl? Darcy wondered. And more to the point, how would he explain to Mr Bennet that his youngest daughter was so altered?

At least, he had not found her in the morgue or in a brothel.

Perhaps God was occasionally in the mood to dispense a boon even to someone as undeserving as a rich man.

Darcy had left Horsham with Lydia Bennet at half past nine in the morning. They had stopped once for a meal and arrived late in the afternoon at Mr Gardiner’s house in Cheapside.

“If you do not mind, perhaps I should go in first and tell them you are with me?”

“Oh, yes, pray do so, Mr Darcy. I want a moment to compose myself. I am afraid I shall burst into some very noisy weeping, and I do not want to upset my uncle.”

“Mr Darcy!” Mr Gardiner said from the hall. “What is towards? I did not expect you until Sunday.

“I have your niece. Forgive me for not sending an express. Only I was so out of my

mind, first with worry and then with relief?—”

“You have her?”

“She appears to be whole and only a little the worse for wear.”

Mr Gardiner swept past Darcy and ran to the kerb, and Lydia opened the coach door and fell into her uncle’s arms. Despite her efforts otherwise, she broke into sobs of joy and severely discomposed the entire household who had streamed out of the house to witness the homecoming.

Everyone was sniffling and wiping their eyes, and when Mrs Gardiner ran out too, the scene was enacted all over again.

Everyone spoke all at once and finally Darcy, seeing that Sally Watkins looked to be shrinking in the background, went and stood next to her and directed her into the house.

Eventually Mrs Gardiner noticed that Lydia was not alone.

“Oh, Aunt,” Lydia said wiping her eyes, “this is Sally Watkins. Mr Darcy brought her with me for comfort, and she has been very kind to me. Might she stay the night, ma’am?”

“You are very welcome, Sally, and yes, Lydia, she may stay for as many days as you like. Are you hungry?” She took the women away and left Mr Gardiner and Mr Darcy standing in the parlour.

“Might I offer you a brandy, Mr Darcy?”

“I am tempted, sir, but I have been unforgivably remiss. I have not sent word to her

father.”

“You must have been shocked. Was she truly in a workhouse in Horsham all this time?”

“She spent some days on the road with a potato seller, of all people, who ultimately took her to Horsham.”

“And you believe she has not been?—”

“I am convinced of it, sir. The potato seller was apparently kind to her in his way, and he thought he was doing her a service by giving her to the Methodists.”

“Perhaps he was. He could have given her to an entirely different sort of people.”

“I cannot think on it now, sir, having thought of nothing else for nearly two weeks now.”

“Indeed. We have much to be grateful for. I must write a note to Thomas and send it express tonight.”

“I wonder, Mr Gardiner?—”

“Yes? ”

“I am suffering from an excess of energy, and I wonder whether you would consider letting me take your note to Hertfordshire.”

“Tonight?”

“If you would allow it, yes.”

“I would be very glad of it, Mr Darcy, but I could hardly ask it of you.”

“But suddenly, I need to be doing something.”

“Lord, yes. I have been in such a state of general frenzy that its cessation leaves me quite at a loss. I doubt I shall sleep at all tonight.”

“Then you will give me leave? Bingley is still at Netherfield, and I can easily throw myself on his hospitality after I have delivered the news to Mr Bennet. Then, perhaps, I shall feel as if I can rest.”

“You have taken on more of our troubles than you should, Mr Darcy.”

“You are too astute of a man not to know why I have done it, sir. My guilt over Wickham is one reason but not the whole of it.”

“I do not believe Lizzy is immune to you, Mr Darcy, if that helps. I have never seen her as agitated as when she thought you might accuse her of following you to Derbyshire.”

“I am not sure I am comforted by that observation. Perhaps, she would have been happier not to have seen me.”

“Pardon me for saying so, Mr Darcy, but though you know a great deal about a great many things, you appear to know nothing about a woman. ‘She doth protest too much,’ and in doing so, she says a great deal about what she does not want you to know.”

“I very much hope you are right. I shall step out for a moment and warn my driver he is in for a very long night and that we shall need fresh horses. And when you have your letter ready, I shall be off.”

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MERYTON

A t two in the morning, Darcy’s coach, with lanterns carried on long poles by the outriders to dimly light the road, rolled slowly through the sleeping village of Meryton and turned towards Longbourn.

His plan to rouse the Bennets with wonderful news struck Darcy as a poor one when he saw the house in darkness.

Mrs Bennet was ill, and everyone inside was in a constant state of anxious dread.

A sudden banging on their door in the night would instantly convince the family that they were about to hear something awful.

He called out to his coachman to proceed to Netherfield. Charles Bingley’s nerves could stand the shock of his unexpected arrival, and Darcy’s news could wait a few hours more.

Bingley stood on the landing of Netherfield’s impressive staircase in his dressing gown, looking like a startled young owl framed in candlelight. “Darcy?”

A sleepy young footman took his outerwear, and once he had stepped out of earshot, Darcy looked up and said, “Charles, forgive me for bursting in on you. We have found Lydia Bennet, and she is well.”

“Oh, thank God, Darcy. Come to my study, will you? Mrs Nicholls will make up a room for you.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Forgive me for such an inconvenient arrival,” Darcy said to the housekeeper who had just rushed up from below stairs covered in a shawl.

“Should I send up a tray, sir?”

“No, thank you. I do not need anything but a bed, Charles. I have had a very long day, as have my driver and his boys.”

“Mrs Nicholls will see to them after they have put up your horses. But you will want a brandy at least?”

Fearing he would not wake early if he drank much brandy, Darcy took a glass of claret instead, and gave Bingley an annotated version of Lydia Bennet’s retrieval. He then went up to bed and fell into a jangled heap. Thankfully, he slept.

Bingley’s man woke him at seven in the morning, and by eight o’clock, Darcy was hacking down Netherfield’s drive on a borrowed gelding.

Charles had the delicacy not to wedge himself into Darcy’s triumphant announcement.

He would ride over in an hour, he said, and hoped he would be welcome to share in everyone’s relief after their initial shock had worn off .

Darcy tried to plan what he would say to the Bennets, but he was still too tired to think, and so he put his mind where it always went when off the leash—on Elizabeth.

His thoughts, it seemed, must have conjured her in the form he could see down the road.

He blinked to clear his vision, but no! He had not imagined Elizabeth.

She was out walking down the lane from Longbourn!

His heart roared around in his chest as he stepped to the road and led his horse forwards to meet her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said with the blinding smile of an idiot. Unthinking he took her hands and kissed them, and then he kissed her cheek and beheld her face in wonder.

“Mr Darcy?”

“We have found your sister. She is well?—”

“Lydia? You have found Lydia?” she gasped, gripping his hands.

“She is at this moment with Mr and Mrs Gardiner.”

Tears filled her beautiful eyes. “Is she hurt?”

“She is well.”

“But—where was she?! Oh, but I have no right to hear anything before everyone else, Mr Darcy. As it is, you shall have to tell us what happened at least ten times in an hour. I can hardly believe it!”

“Nor can I. How should I tell them do you think? I am a little muddled just now.”

“You look very tired. I cannot imagine the trouble you have endured for us—a trouble, I will add, for which it is impossible to thank you! ”

“You will please me by not speaking of obligation, Elizabeth.” He paused, conscious he was blurting out her given name as if he had a right to.

“But I am obliged to you, Mr Darcy. Very obliged, dazzled even, and—” She turned up her face and graced him with a look of wonder before she blushed, and said, “In truth, I am filled with such admiration for you.”

“Admiration? You should know better than to encourage me with talk of admiration. I may begin to speak to you, to ask you things, without any assurance that my words—my questions—would be welcome.” What a pitiful speech!

And to hint at such a subject like a cowering dog!

Where had his dignity gone, he wondered, as he clamped his jaw closed.

“Mr Darcy,” she said, her chest rising and falling with quick little breaths. “There is nothing you could say to me that would be unwelcome, no question you could ask me just now to which I would not say yes.”

The world stilled. His mind stilled. He was aware of his breath and the beating of his heart. He stepped forward, putting his hand on her cheek, instantly certain of what to say to her for once.

“Will it rain today, Elizabeth?” he asked gently.

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Might I sit down to breakfast with your family?”

“Yes.” She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek into his palm.

“And will you marry the last man in the world? ”

“Oh yes,” she breathed almost sorrowfully. “How stupid I have been not to know

how good you are."

He kissed her lips and her forehead with all the tenderness he felt for her. "I shall hear no talk of goodness, but if you wish to call me lucky—insanely fortunate—you may do so."

They began to walk towards the house. "I feel as if I should hurry," he observed. He could not make himself walk any faster than a besotted, meandering, moonfaced man strolling along with his lover.

"By rights, you should, but I am feeling selfish just now. Tell me of Lydia."

"Of all her family, she asked for you."

"For me!"

"She was very certain she wishes to see you first, before she comes home. Will you let me take you to London?"

"You will have a very hard time not taking me to London, Mr Darcy."

"Your father may have other ideas, love."

"You had better tell him, then, that I shall be marrying you just as soon as may be, and that from now on, if I go anywhere, I shall be going with you. And we shall take Jane."

He chuckled. "For propriety's sake?"

"Indeed. One elopement ought to suffice for excitement, and I cannot say what sort of indecency I could be tempted to if I were alone with you." Her eyes sparkled with

mischief as she looked up at him .

“You know, do you not, how very much I love you?”

“I do not believe I do. Some months, perhaps years, and many such avowals may be required for you to convince me of your feelings.”

“I am at your mercy, Elizabeth, but must you torment me with your charming mischief?”

“You have always liked me better for it,” she whispered, leading him forwards into the parlour.

Elizabeth and Jane retired in the haze of relief and exhaustion that marked their remarkable day.

They had listened with tears, laughter, gasps, and moments of shocked silence, as Mr Darcy recounted Lydia’s terrifying experience.

Mary and Kitty had gathered in the parlour with their older sisters, along with their father, and when she finally heard that Lydia was not dead because of her, Kitty wept so uncontrollably that Mary took her up to her bed.

Mr Bennet had read Mr Gardiner’s note and then listened in grave, attentive silence to Mr Darcy.

He looked twice as bewildered as Elizabeth had ever seen him and perhaps a little benumbed.

After half an hour, he seemed to be more himself and invited Mr Darcy to his library to hear any details that might not be suitable for his daughters’ ears.

What he heard instead, Elizabeth could only guess at, but he was surely shaking his head in disbelief that Mr Darcy, a man he would rather politely despise, would take away one of his daughters the very minute all five of them were restored to him.

He had barely recovered from this blow when Charles Bingley came into the library for a private word, and when that was gotten through, he went out on his horse for what remained of his morning.

Elizabeth would have liked to have been vulgarly curious about this, but she was much too busy.

She and Jane spent the rest of the morning with Mrs Bennet, impressing upon her the need for her to hold her tongue, for once, on the subject of Lydia's flight from Brighton.

The degree of their success was questionable, and they were worn out from the effort.

"But is she not to marry Wickham?" Mrs Bennet asked tremulously.

"Mr Wickham left her between Brighton and London, Mama. He was not a good man."

"Pshaw, Lizzy. You are very severe. Not a good man! Not a good man you say? But he looked so very well and had all the manners of a gentleman. He will be a promoted in no time. You shall see I am right."

"He is a rake and a scoundrel with the looks and manners of a gentleman. Even Jane, who likes everybody, cannot approve of him."

"Jane does not like him?" she asked in confusion.

“No, Mama,” Jane said. “I do not like him, approve of him, or even wish to think of him ever again. What we must think of is Lydia’s reputation.

We have decided that she went from Brighton on a planned visit to Mrs Gardiner’s cousin in Winchester, and that any confusion about Lydia’s whereabouts that comes to our notice will be waved off as jumbled hearsay. ”

“But why? Why must we say she went somewhere she did not go? If Mr Wickham has not married her, he must be found and made to do so! He must!”

They were getting nowhere, and Elizabeth, greatly irritated, finally spoke with brutal candour.

“Mr Wickham is gone and will never be found, I assure you. Never! And if we do not hush up Lydia’s impropriety, none of us have the slightest chance of marrying anyone, much less marrying well.

Who would want a girl from such a family that their daughter of fifteen would be allowed to run wild in Brighton and be ruined by a rake?

Nobody! Now, if you want us to be well settled, and I believe you do, you had better practise believing what we are telling you. ”

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Their father arrived before the tea was poured, and when he asked how they got on with their mother, Jane only shook her head sadly. Mr Bennet took off his hat and put down his riding crop with a snap. “Lizzy, Jane, Kitty and Mary,” he said sternly, “you will come with me to your mother’s room.”

Once there, he stood at the foot of the bed and began to speak to their mother with a cold authority none of them had ever heard from him .

“Mrs Bennet,” he said. “You had better attend to me. You see before you four of your daughters. The last of them, by the grace of God, was not found in a brothel or a bone yard. For the sake of their continuation as ladies of consequence in this neighbourhood, you had better take hold of your tongue. You shall never speak a word of Wickham, of Brighton, or of Lydia’s connexion to either subject ever again. Do you understand me?”

“What? Why are you being so rough Mr Bennet? You know I am not well?—”

“If you do not do as I say, and if I hear one word I do not like on this subject, I shall make it widely known you are out of your head, and I will take you to the mad doctor in Yorkshire.”

Mrs Bennet was in one of her prolonged fits of nerves.

Her understanding was muddled, her hearing vague, and her grasp of facts was spotty and changeable.

Her husband’s threat, however, delivered in a severe, uncompromising accent of

foreordination, caused her to fall back on her pillow in shocked silence.

Mr Bennet then turned and addressed his daughters in much the same tone.

“I have not done well by any of you, but I have just now, I hope, taken a step towards making amends.”

After tea, Elizabeth suffered such a mixture of complicated feelings that she begged Jane to go out with her for a walk, in spite of a spitting drizzle.

They had invited Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy for dinner later and were each lost in their thoughts for half a mile until Jane finally spoke.

“Will Mama come down for dinner, do you think, Lizzy?”

“I hope not, Jane. If she were to see two rich, eligible men at her table, she would forget herself and begin to jabber about weddings, and then she would demand to know why nobody made Wickham marry Lydia, and before we could snap our fingers, Papa will have sent her to the mad doctor.”

“Oh, Lizzy. I felt so sorry for her. I have never heard our father speak so harshly.”

“I believe he had to.” Elizabeth slowed her pace until they were both standing still, under their umbrellas, facing one another.

“I also believe Papa feels very strongly that he should protect our reputations because Mr Darcy has offered for me. I do not think he wants to give him any reason to break the contract.”

“Offered for you! Mr Darcy?” gasped Jane. “And has he spoken to you? What shall you say to him? He has been very good to us with finding Lydia, but I know you do

not like him at all! Oh, poor Mr Darcy!”

Elizabeth took her sister’s hands and squeezed them.

“I like Mr Darcy very well, Jane, and have for some time. Only I did not tell you for lack of opportunity. I shall marry him, and as you have already said, ‘poor Mr Darcy,’ you may feel as sorry for him as you like. What a troublesome wife he is getting!”

For some unaccountable reason, Jane then burst into tears. “Oh, Lizzy! I have wanted to tell you, but I did not have the courage! But now, perhaps I can say it.”

“Say what? What are you talking of?”

“You will think very poorly of me. But while Lydia was lost and in danger, and I should have been properly grieving, I was falling in love with Mr Bingley. Again!” she sobbed.

“Oh, dearest,” Elizabeth said tenderly, thinking Jane’s heart was to be broken all over again.

“But that is not the worst,” she said, wiping her nose with her hand kerchief. “I entered into an understanding with him that we would marry as soon as was seemly after we had word of Lydia.”

“You will marry Mr Bingley? But how wonderful! Is that why he spoke to Papa today? But I did not suspect a thing. You have been very sly.”

“Tease me all you like. I have been so ashamed. To be feeling joy at such a time?—”

“You are overtired and a very good candidate for the mad doctor in Yorkshire just

now. What nonsense! Your feelings were proper, every one of them! I know because I shared them—in my own case, for Mr Darcy. A woman's heart is large enough to have a room in it for joy, and a room for sorrow, vexation, jealousy, and every other feeling.

A woman's heart is a mansion with at least a hundred rooms You have felt nothing improper, I assure you. "

"Do you think so, Lizzy?"

"Well, I have just made that up, but I like the sound of it. I am feeling on the edge of a nervous collapse myself if I am honest. If I hear one more shocking thing today, I believe I shall have to go to my bed to moan and weep and fail to understand the simplest fact. Listen, Jane. We had better go back and do something with our looks if we are to meet our beaus for dinner. You look a little grey and careworn, truth be told."

This pulled a smile from Jane at last, and as they turned towards the house, she said, "And you look like a bird has made a nest of your hair. Did you even brush it out this morning?"

Elizabeth's hands flew up to her head. "I am not sure I did! Oh lord, how mortifying. Mr Darcy asked me to marry him while I looked like—like what? You must tell me!"

"You look a little like our aunt Philips when she first wakes up."

"You horrid girl! How can you say so?"

In the morning when the family awoke, Jane and Elizabeth finished their packing and went below for a light breakfast. Mr Bennet came to them and said, "I have spoken to Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley, and we have decided that no good could possibly come

from telling Lydia of George Wickham’s fate.

No one is to know of it besides the Gardiners, myself, your gentlemen and the two of you.

I am afraid, my dears, you must take that secret to your graves. ”

“Yes, Papa,” they murmured, suddenly sober. He was right of course. Lydia should not be told she had accidentally murdered her seducer, for indeed, the man had likely been dead a week already.

“Bring back your sister, then,” he said gravely, “and when you do, we shall tell your mother she has two weddings to plan. Let us hope that she is soon too much consumed with lace and finery to remember our recent troubles.”

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THE HERTFORD ROAD TO LONDON

D espite Elizabeth’s teasing remarks about impropriety and her desire to avoid it, an impropriety did occur. Mr Bingley had decided he, too, must go to London with Mr Darcy.

They departed Longbourn with the eldest Bennet daughters demurely inside the coach and the gentlemen riding sedately alongside—as they should. But the necessity to stop and tend to a supposed stone in one of the horse’s shoes resulted in the young gentlemen climbing inside with the ladies.

Neither Jane nor Elizabeth protested such scandalous doings, and along they went to London.

The four of them spoke for a long time in the most intimate manner as if they were already married, and had been for years, and were, between them, the greatest of friends.

A bulk of the conversation related to Lydia.

Mr Darcy admitted he did not want to give Jane or Elizabeth any preconceived notions of the state in which they would find their sister, but in his opinion, she was much changed.

“Oh, do not tell me she is worse?” cried Jane.

“My dear Jane, our Lydia could hardly be worse than she was. I believe Mr Darcy is

trying to warn us that Lydia's behaviour has been a little chastened?"

"I would say so," he admitted. "But whether she remains so, I cannot say. We know little about what changes a person's character after a catastrophe."

For a moment, Mr Darcy looked pensive, and the coach fell silent, each occupant thinking of his or her own personal catastrophes—minor though they had been in comparison to Lydia's—and the resulting effect.

Elizabeth had been humbled by learning her opinions were not etched in gold and that she could be—had been—so wrong about a number of things.

After decamping like a scrub, Mr Bingley was feeling a little more like his own person, having stood up to the neighbourhood of Meryton to protect the Bennets from their curiosity, and then, without consulting anyone, offering for Jane.

And Jane had been reflecting a great deal on Mr Wickham, the silliness of her idea that no one was really bad, and a conviction that she had better begin to be realistic or else stay a child the rest of her life.

And Mr Darcy, having suffered the catastrophe of Elizabeth's rejection, had subsequently understood that, if he did nothing about his arrogance, he would soon be a close copy of his horrible aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Eventually, Elizabeth had her fill of such sombre musings. "Have you thought, Mr Bingley, where you and Jane may go for your wedding trip?" she asked.

Nothing had been decided. The couple could not formulate a plan for anything while there was the possibility that the family must go into mourning.

This was the perfect opening for Elizabeth to make a few specious suggestions.

She mused that Gravesend might be worth looking at, or perhaps Hull in the North Riding of Yorkshire.

“My uncle says he never saw a more pitiful place, but then Scunthorpe might be interesting, on account of its name alone.”

Mr Darcy found this topic worthwhile, adding humbly that Miss Bennet might like to see the never-ending docks and warehouses at Dover, or perhaps take in the sights of Blackpool in Lancashire.

When Mr Bingley decided to turn the tables, he asked whether Miss Elizabeth would perhaps enjoy the blighted scenery of Manchester or a gloomy village in Wales with its hauntings and suspicious locals for her wedding trip.

“No, Bingley,” Mr Darcy said mildly. “I believe I shall take Elizabeth to Rosings Park for an extended stay with Lady Catherine.”

This delighted Elizabeth. “Oh yes, pray do take me to Kent, Mr Darcy. We shall visit Mr Collins every day I think when we are not being lectured, scolded, and scorned by your aunt at Rosings. And then you can be toadied relentlessly, and I can be condemned for a Jezebel by my cousin. And you may look upon your cousin Anne with something like regret because you will be saddled with me, and I shall begin to be tiresome within a month.”

“You are tiresome already, Lizzy, if you cannot be serious. Really, where would you like to go?” asked Jane. “I have already told Mr Bingley that I should like to go to the seaside or perhaps to Bath.”

“Well, there can be no mystery at all as to where I should like to go,” Elizabeth said. “I wish to see the Peaks.”

Since this scenic wonder was located in Derbyshire, Mr Darcy smiled tenderly at her and said, “Even you might tire of walking there. I doubt we shall enjoy much society, however, and I know you like to dance.”

“Society? But what are men to rocks and mountains? You shall find in me someone who wishes to tramp from one place to another, turning brown and coarse, while my dear Jane samples the wash water they serve in the Pump Room and considers herself high indeed when Mr Bingley takes her to visit the Pavilion for a soiree.”

“Well, wherever we go, we should reconvene at Pemberley for the festive season,” Mr Darcy said. And then in afterthought, he asked, “And your sisters, Charles? Where will Miss Bingley stay when you are married?”

“I have set her up to live with the Hursts,” he replied with a wry twinkle. “Jane and I have settled that it is possible to live too close to one’s family. We have even talked of giving up the lease on Netherfield and looking a little farther afield than Hertfordshire.”

This amused Elizabeth, whose spirits were too buoyant not to tease.

“Well, Mr Darcy and I have not had a moment to think of these things, but I shall very soon tell him that I would like to spend most of the year in town going from one ball to the next. I mean to throw open the doors to his ballroom at least three times in a Season and play hostess to the worst crush conceivable. And if the bon ton wrinkle up their noses at me for being a bumptious upstart, then I shall have questionable opera singers, canal speculators, republican radicals, and the like pay court to me all day long.”

“How comfortable,” Mr Darcy remarked. “You will not forget to include a handful of French émigrés, will you?”

They laughed and laughed, arriving fairly worn out in London.

Mr Darcy looked at his companions and realised perhaps they should not drive straight to Mr Gardiner's door with the four of them, rosy with pleasure, having been sequestered in a closed coach.

He suggested that he and Mr Bingley would step out at his townhouse and allow the sisters some privacy for their reunion.

Once they were alone, a kind of gloom fell over Jane and Elizabeth. What had they been doing, laughing like hyenas for three hours together? They were soon to see Lydia, who had endured a truly shattering few weeks, and they were ashamed of themselves for their levity.

"I believe we must be very tired," Elizabeth said meekly. "I have been unforgivably giddy just now."

They put on their long faces and prepared to meet poor Lydia, thinking to find her in the care of their worried aunt, being given a posset in bed.

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GRACECHURCH STREET

G iven the multiple upsets both Elizabeth and Jane had endured in a period of twenty-four hours, and taking into account what they expected to find, they could not be blamed for being dumbstruck upon seeing their fallen sister.

Upon entering the parlour, they caught a glimpse of the table in the breakfast room.

There sat Lydia with her little cousins all around her as she entertained them with an elaborate cat’s cradle.

She wore a simple, grey, Dutch-style cap that covered her whole head, a plain dark dress, and a white linen fichu folded neatly up to her neck.

Elizabeth spoke with soft incredulity. “Lydia?”

Lydia looked up. Her face had been happy as she entertained Mrs Gardiner’s children, but now it was suffused with joy. “Lizzy? Oh, Lizzy, have you come?” She stood up and came forward. “And Jane? Oh, but how wonderful! ”

Both her older sisters, with their frayed nerves and exercised feelings, burst into tears as they took turns first embracing, then pushing Lydia away to examine her, only to embrace her once again.

“Lydia, my dearest!” said Elizabeth as she wiped her eyes. “You horrible, horrible girl! You have so disturbed us I very nearly took after Mama and had a spasm! How could you?”

“Lizzy!” Jane chided, after blowing her nose.

“Jane, you mustn’t scold Lizzy,” Lydia said. “I knew that, of anyone, she would berate me as I deserve, and so I told Mr Darcy. Oh, Lizzy, I have wanted to tell you a hundred times at least, that you were so right about Brighton. I never should have gone!”

“But you did, and I do not know what you have endured, but I know how we have been in agony for you, you wretched child! Oh, let me look at you. How very pretty you look to me!”

“And you to me, Lizzy. But you will make me weep again, and really, I have cried enough. Let me kiss your cheeks, both of you. Can you ever forgive me? Such a terrible sister I have been!”

Mrs Gardiner, who had been standing to the side and watching this reunion, intervened. “I have the tea things ready if you would send the children upstairs.”

Their aunt seemed to have made up her mind that no one would be served by a long rehashing of the events that had befallen Lydia. She managed them all so expertly in this regard that it was not until they retired for the night that Elizabeth and Jane had a chance to question their sister.

By mutual and unspoken agreement, the sisters congregated in Elizabeth’s room, and it was then that the state of Lydia’s hair became apparent, for they had always brushed out one another’s curls before bed. Jane gasped when she saw her sister’s shorn head, while Lydia blushed and looked downcast.

“Lydia, what happened to your hair? Do they cut it off as a rule in a workhouse?” Elizabeth asked gently.

“Oh no,” she said. But there was reluctance in her answer as if she wanted to say more but felt some constraint.

“You must be free to tell us anything, you know.”

“But you have so often told me not to speak of unpleasant things, Lizzy. Almost everything I want to tell you strikes me as unpleasant.”

“If I have condemned your conversation in the past, it is only because I did not like the sentiment behind it. You have sometimes expressed opinions that seemed designed to render your listeners shocked, dismayed, or convinced of your disregard for good manners. And while I do not want to encourage you to talk unthinkingly in company, there is nothing you could say to us privately that will offend us. We want to hear it! Come and sit between us in bed as you used to when you were little.”

And so, beginning with the reason for her close-cropped hair, Lydia poured forth her story.

She careened from the topic of lice, to Wickham and Scoot’s barley field, and to the man in the curricle that drove around her.

And then she was in the workhouse emptying the slops, and then standing in front of a Carthusian monk and being sent away, and then back to Wickham emptying her purse in the faint light of the postillon’s lamp.

Elizabeth and Jane heard about Bill the donkey and about the brutal killing of a rabbit that, Lydia was ashamed to say, tasted very good.

Mr Parch was lionised and the cook at the Red Lion condemned, and then they were treated to a patchwork of stories from the workhouse.

Carver, Dora, Maggie, and Sally were described in detail, as was the daily routine and the matron's arbitrary notion of rules.

Lydia, throughout, wove such a picture for her sisters that they listened in silent fascination, particularly when she spoke of the advantages of her upbringing and determination to conduct herself as a gentleman's daughter.

"I had some notion of becoming a lady's companion or of gaining employment at a girl's school," Lydia said with a yawn.

"Employment? Surely, you knew we would look for you!"

Lydia curled up, closed her eyes, and said, "Can I sleep with you, Lizzy? I am not used to sleeping alone."

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ONCE AGAIN ON THE HERTFORD ROAD

L ydia sat on the rear-facing seat of Mr Bingley’s coach and looked across at her sisters Jane and Elizabeth.

They both dozed, and she was much struck by how, even in sleep, they were still very much themselves.

Jane was so ladylike, even with her lips parted and her features slack.

She sat nearly upright with her head resting gently against the squabs.

Meanwhile, Lizzy made no bones about her sleeping.

She had thrown off her bonnet, curled up like a cat and settled her head on Jane’s lap.

Lizzy, Lydia realised with a start, was passionate about everything, even sleep.

If I were sleeping, Lydia wondered, how would I look?

Would I be sprawled out with my legs helter-skelter, snoring loudly?

Before she went to Brighton, she most certainly would have done just that, she mused.

She had often forced her four sisters to squeeze together on the opposite bench when she was young, having whined and cried that she must have a place to lie down

unencumbered.

Now she was prone to sleeping in a protective ball.

This stream of thinking led her to wonder who she really was anymore and to further admitting to herself that she suffered a little dread of returning to Longbourn.

After a little while in which her vision was turned inward, Lydia became aware that Lizzy's eyes were open and watching her. Her sister sat up and slipped to the seat next to Lydia and whispered, "What is it that troubles you?"

Lydia had no long practice expressing intangibles, and so she shrugged and replied in a whisper, "I do not know what to wear anymore, Lizzy."

Her sister took this in and seemed to comprehend the whole of it. She put her arm around Lydia, pulled her close, and said in a low murmur, "We shall contrive, dearest."

The homecoming was a trial. Lydia was overborne by the effusions of joy and lengthy descriptions of how her family worried for her.

After they settled from the tumult of her arrival, Papa seemed distant, and she had a stupid notion he was even shy of her as he solemnly said, "I am glad to see you are well, Lydia."

Kitty was also shy of her, as if she were guilty of the whole debacle and did not want to be reminded of it, and Mary cornered her for a sermon about how fortunate she was to have escaped perdition.

All of this was unsettling of course, but when her mother came down on Mrs Hill's arm and enveloped her in an embrace of perfume and lace flounces and then shrieked

at the state of her hair when she saw it, Lydia began to feel a little ungrateful to Mr Darcy for her rescue.

“My poor Lydia! I know you have recently been disappointed,” her mother eventually said with a furtive glance at Mr Bennet.

“But I daresay we shall find you someone to marry in no time at all! Why, Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy must have young gentleman friends who might do for you, and your sisters will present you in town, I am sure. But what are you wearing, Lydia? Oh, do go to your room and put on your yellow muslin. Kitty can put your hair in papers so it won’t look so very bad, and you can have a silk ribbon in your short curls. ”

“I do not want to wear yellow,” Lydia replied, retreating from the suffocation of her mother’s endless embraces.

“Not want to wear yellow! Do not be silly! You look the prettiest of my girls in yellow, and charming as a jonquil. Did not Mr Wi—Mr Denny compliment your sunny looks over and over? Oh, how I long for the militia to come back! But Mr Bennet says they will not return.”

The tea tray arrived and rescued the family from talk of the militia, and Lydia thought she might recover her equilibrium.

But by some unfortunate chance, the tea tray contained a plate of Mrs Hill’s lemon cream biscuits, and she instantly remembered regaling her ward mates with descriptions of them.

Her throat closed up to think of her friends, and yet she knew she belonged with her family.

Once again she felt lost, belonging neither in a workhouse nor at Longbourn, talking of muslin.

But Lydia had learnt a little reserve in all her travels, and she managed to pantomime a degree of complacency until, eventually, her mother's conversation turned to Jane and Elizabeth.

It struck Lydia after a while that they were speaking of trunks and silks and of—"A wedding breakfast? But who is to marry?" she blurted out, interrupting her mother.

"Oh!" Lizzy exclaimed in dismay. "Did we not say? How could we have forgotten? But I suppose we were so anxious to see you and to bring you home."

"But—oh, I see! Mr Bingley has come back. Of course. Jane, are you to marry Mr Bingley?"

Her older sister blushed prettily and confirmed it, and then Kitty said, "And Lizzy is to marry Mr Darcy. Can you imagine anything more horrible?"

"Mr Darcy! You are to marry Mr Darcy, Lizzy? But how wonderful! I think the world of him! He was very kind to Sally, and he went over all of West Sussex three times to find me. But how can this be? You do not like him!"

"I shall tell you all about how I came to like him very much, Lydia, but let us go to your room. Would you like to rest? Or perhaps you would like a walk?"

Lydia wanted a walk, and so she and Lizzy struck off down the drive to the lane and turned towards Netherfield.

They passed the first stile and climbed over the second, heading around a group of freehold farms and making their way, willy-nilly, towards a wooded ground owned

by Mr Cargill.

Along the way, they saw congregations of sparrows at the edge of the rye fields and a pair of hawks floating above the horizon.

The afternoon was neither too warm nor too cool, the breeze was glorious, and the light was turning from the harsh glare of summer to the golden and slightly hazy glow of early autumn.

Lydia half expected to see halos around the trees.

“How beautiful it all is!” she said in wonder. Except for excursions to the workhouse muck pit, she had not been out of doors for weeks.

“Why do you think I am always walking here,” Elizabeth said. “Are you feeling stout? Would you like to take in the whole valley?”

“Up to Oakham Mount, do you mean?”

“You have never wanted to walk so far.”

“I would like to see it. Am I equal to it, do you think?”

Elizabeth laughed. It was a sound that Lydia had heard all her life, one that she had taken for granted and sometimes resented. But no one laughed as charmingly as her sister Elizabeth. “After what I have heard of your adventures, I think you are equal to anything!”

“Adventures? I like that idea much better than my troubles, as everyone wants to call it.”

“Well, it was a rather incredible adventure, and since you have come through none the worse for wear, I do see no reason to think of it otherwise, do you?”

“No. Listen, Lizzy. I want to tell you about the yellow dress. ”

As they climbed a gently sloping path that wound up the mount, Lydia unburdened herself and told Elizabeth of the meaning of the yellow dress in the workhouse.

“And the girls who are unwed but carrying a child are put into red,” she explained feelingly.

“I cannot help thinking what a horrible thing to have been imposed upon, and sometimes it happens violently, Lizzy! And then to realise that you must bear a child after everything. And the final, awful thing is you must be shamed for it into the bargain!”

Elizabeth stopped cold and turned to her.

“But how dreadful! I did not know.” She stood silent for a moment before they began walking again.

“But then the world is bursting with things that are awful and unfair, and we have only to turn in any direction to see some form of cruelty. I can only be more grateful than ever that I, a woman, am not poor and alone, for without means and protection, we are like a man’s cattle and have been since ancient times.

We have only our wits to sustain us, and we must move about with circumspection lest we get caught in circumstances that are little better than slavery.

Oh, Lydia! I am so thankful you are restored to us! ”

“Well, I did not speak of it to upset you, Lizzy, only I do not feel much inclined to wear yellow.”

“No, of course you do not. But you cannot be dressed forever as a Quaker without everyone remarking on it and thinking you have disgraced yourself. Lord, I do not know why we must be plagued with neighbours! I would love nothing better than to thumb my nose and flout convention, but I cannot stand to think of what would be said of you or to see Jane sinking under the weight of their suppositions. What about your green dress?”

“The one I have always hated?”

“Yes, that one. Why did you buy that cloth, I wonder, if you never liked it?”

She sighed and said, “To be contrary, of course, because everyone said it was a depressing shade. But I shall put it on when we get home and see how it looks.”

“And you should let one of us put your hair in papers, you know. A short coiffure is all the rage in London, I am told.”

“Oh? Who told you?”

“Well, no one really. But you have set a fashion in the workhouse, and you may just as well set a fashion in Hertfordshire, so long as you do not carry yourself as if you are ashamed of anything.”

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They were forced to forego conversation as the path became steeper and they reached the summit with breathless relief.

There, lying in quiet, late afternoon repose all around them were the endless fields and scattered farmhouses of their home.

Lydia looked keenly at everything, delighting in the recognition of Ross Farms, the Bakers' piggery, and the scrubby little riparian rope where the stream flowed so casually towards the River Ver.

She was struck with how little she knew of where she lived and of the county and even of the wider world in general, and again the sense that she did not belong rose up faintly inside to plague her .

"Will Jane live at Netherfield then?" she asked, seeking to relieve herself of gloomy feelings.

"For now, until they find another estate to buy. Poor Jane." Elizabeth frowned. "Mama has not yet turned her sights on the remote management of her daughter's home, but she will just as soon as the wedding breakfast has been cleared away."

"But you will be at Pemberley, and Mama will not have the means to set your cook's menus."

"I shall be forced to muddle along, I suppose."

"Are you not worried?"

“Worried? About what, dearest?”

“About…about Mr Darcy.”

“Mr Darcy? Do you think he will beat me?” Lizzy laughed.

“No, no. Only, well?—”

“Only, well what?”

“When you are alone. At night.”

“That is a curious question,” Elizabeth said in a low, reluctant voice.

“I did not know anything about husbands, and, well…you know. And Carver and Dotty and everybody, really, felt honour bound to rectify my ignorance since I had eloped like an ignoramus, not knowing what Wickham wanted of me. And to be honest, Lizzy, I was pretty put off by the whole notion!”

Elizabeth was certainly reluctant, but she was not a lady to run away from such a conversation like a prude.

They were in complete privacy, after all, on their hill deep in the Hertford countryside.

“I do not know what to expect, Lydia, and I do not know what you were told. I have heard such differing accounts of the business from Mama and Aunt Gardiner and, I shudder to say, even our aunt Philips. Charlotte hinted to me that it was something to be gotten through, and yet when I am with Mr Darcy, I cannot believe it will be at all unpleasant. So, to be honest, Lydia, perhaps you should withhold judgment until you fall in love in earnest with a man who kisses you, an experience the very opposite of unpleasant.”

“Well,” Lydia said, putting her chin on her knees, “I doubt very much I shall ever marry, but if I do, I shall not agree to any proposals without first having kissed the man. Wickham kissed me, and I did not find it anything but an irritant.”

“That is a dilemma, I am afraid. You can hardly go around kissing various men to see whether you will let one of them court you. But if it helps, I will say that, for some time, I secretly wished Mr Darcy would kiss me, and when he did, I was quite swept away. Really, Lydia, you are just fifteen years old. Perhaps you should wait until you are one and twenty before you think of marrying anyone.”

This was a comfortable thought. But there was a catch. “Mama will push me at every man in breeches,” she said disconsolately.

After a brief silence her sister chuckled and said, “And when in your life, Lydia Bennet, have you bent to anyone’s will, save your own?

You have slept in a potato cart, emptied the slops for a dozen women, and run through a barley field to escape a pair of ruffians—not because you were made to but because you have a will to prevail!

Can you picture Kitty doing half of anything you have done?

I cannot imagine you shall now be meek and say, ‘Yes, Mama,’ to everything she demands of you. ”

“I had been thinking how horridly wilful and selfish I am, but you have made me sound pretty stout-hearted just now.”

“Because all your childish fits were setting you up to learn to be stout-hearted! You can still be wilful, you know, but you can decide to serve something better than your vanity and a craving for beaus. When you are very old, you will be a veritable dragon, and no one will dare to cross you. And if you put your mind to it now, you

can begin to use your headstrong nature to do some good in the world and thereby earn your future reputation as a formidable lady."

"And I shall have had an adventure, Lizzy."

"Yes! You have had a marvellous adventure, and what a lioness you have proven yourself to be." She stood and helped Lydia to her feet.

While they brushed the dirt from their skirts, she asked, "So, what would you like to do with your time between now and the day some poor man falls hopelessly in love with you?"

"You will laugh at me."

"I doubt it. What would you like to do?"

"I would like an education, Lizzy."

"Would you? How marvellous! I imagine Mr Darcy would be delighted to provide such a thing for you. But I sense that is not all you want, is it?"

"I would like to do something for Mr Parch."

"Certainly. But you see, you are not the only one to wish to do something for him. Papa and Uncle Gardiner have sent him a little something."

"A purse of money?" Lydia exclaimed with a laugh.

"I would imagine so, dearest."

They walked down the hill in silence, and Elizabeth suspected the list of Lydia's wishes was not yet fully disclosed. "You may as well tell me what it is you truly

want," she said gently, "for I shall have it out of you sooner than later."

"I wish to do something for my friends at the Methodist House."

"That is the most natural wish in the world. Might we not make up shawls and knit slippers and the like?"

"Yes! That would make me very happy. Only…"

"Yes?"

"I would like to somehow get Sally Watkins out of that dismal place. Of all my friends, she is the least equipped for such a life."

"She sounds a gentle soul." Then, after a moment's reflection, she said, "If you would come to Pemberley where we can properly provide for your education, you will need a lady's maid, will you not?"

After stifling a sob, Lydia asked in a small, bewildered voice, "You would have me, Lizzy? You would do that for me? "

"You will have a very hard time getting away from me, now that we have found you. But perhaps you would rather go with Jane?"

"No no. I would like Pemberley very much. And if I had Sally with me, I would feel more comfortable. Mr Darcy's house is very grand, is it not?"

"A little…" Elizabeth said vaguely. "But you will be comfortable there in no time, I promise. Besides, we shall have you slumped over your studies day and night in poor light, and you will soon feel as ill-used as you were in Horsham."

This caused Lydia to wipe her eyes, break into laughter, and clasp her sister's hand as

they proceeded gaily down the path towards Longbourn.

And Elizabeth, who had never felt more tenderly towards her youngest sister, said, “When we get home, we shall find some dresses that make you feel neither the harlot nor the pauper. What about my blue dress? We should make it over for you…”