

REPUTATION

AN EASY THING TO LOSE

A Pride and Prejudice Variation Novel

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Back Cover Description

What if Mr. Bennet died in a duel with Wickham after Lydia eloped, just as Mrs. Bennet feared? Would Elizabeth and Darcy still find their happily-ever-after if the Bennet women lost their reputation and their home? If you like Austenesque retellings, such as *Death Comes to Pemberley* and *Unleashing Mr. Darcy*, then **Reputation, An Easy Thing to Lose** will be your cup of tea.

Nearly four months ago, Elizabeth Bennet hotly rejected Fitzwilliam Darcy's marriage proposal. Now she wonders if that was the biggest mistake of her life. Orphaned and living with her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in London, Elizabeth is determined to take a position as a governess or companion; Darcy could never renew his attentions to her after her family's disgrace. Which is a shame because she just may be in love with him.

Fitzwilliam Darcy would do anything for Elizabeth. As soon as he learned of Lydia Bennet's elopement, he rushed to London to try to put everything to rights. But his journey was fruitless: Mr. Bennet died of his wounds before Darcy could bring a doctor. Now, he must convince Elizabeth to forgive and marry him before she is beyond his reach forever.

When an illegitimate child makes Lydia's shame complete, Elizabeth and Darcy are left to try to salvage what is left of their reputations and relationship. Follow our favourite Austen lovers through sacrifice, misunderstandings, disrespect, a secret marriage, and a whole lot of shenanigans from the marriage-minded ladies of London.

Dedication

For Charlie.

You can be whatever your heart can dream.

Prologue: Mr. Bennet's Discovery

Bedford Court, Covent Garden, London

6 August 1812; 11:00pm

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Lydia Bennet jolted awake in her temporary lodgings. The clock on the mantel showed it was very late indeed, but the candle by the bed was still burning. Looking around, she was dismayed to find that George Wickham had not yet returned from his evening entertainment.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Whoever was at her door seemed like a mad man and Lydia had no desire to open the door by herself. There were several other boarders at the house, plus the elderly couple who owned the establishment. One of them would surely take care of the ruffian in the hallway without her interference.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

“Wickham, I know you are in there! Open this door at once or I shall break it!”

“Papa?” At the sound of her father’s voice, Lydia jumped out of bed and opened the door without pausing to don her dressing gown. “What are you doing here?”

Mr. Thomas Bennet shoved open the door with so much force Lydia lost her footing and ended up on the floor.

“What am I doing here? Surely you cannot be serious! I have come to retrieve you and put an end to this shameful behaviour. Where is Wickham? I demand that you bring him to me this instant!”

Lydia picked herself up off the floor and shut the door, while Mr. Bennet opened the water closet and looked behind the privy screen. “What do you mean, *‘this shameful behaviour?’* What have I done that is so bad? I am sure Lizzy and Jane would scold me for an elopement, but they are so dreary and dull. They do not know how to have fun. Besides, they are both old spinsters now and clearly do not know how to catch a handsome husband.” Lydia clapped her hands and laughed. “Is it not the best of jokes? I shall be married first, of all my sisters! When I come home with my dear Wickham, I shall make Jane sit down one place, as I shall be a married woman and must take precedence now! La, will not Kitty be positively green with envy?” Lydia grasped her father’s arm. “But, you shall have to send her to me when we re-join the regiment in Brighton. I am sure I can get her a husband in no time.”

Mr. Bennet struggled not to violently shake his youngest daughter. He would save all his strength for her faithless lover. “Where are your marriage lines then? Have you and Wickham been to church?”

“Well, no. Not yet.” Lydia recoiled, but regained her composure quickly. “He has some business here in London that requires his time and attention, but it does not signify when we will marry. I am sure my dear Wickham and I shall be married from his parish here in London. I did hope to surprise you all, returning as a married woman, but perhaps it is good you are here now, for I have no money for the wedding clothes, and I certainly need at least ten new gowns and a spencer before we can return to the regiment.” She spun around and inspected several items on the dresser. “Oh! And new gloves! Long satin ones for all the parties we shall attend! Oh, la, Father! How lovely I shall be in my new things. And I shall also need a finely fitted mobcap for when I receive the officers. Like Harriet Forster wears. Not one of those old-fashioned draped things. It must be light muslin with some small lace trim. And the small clothes...”

“ENOUGH!” Mr. Bennet had reached his limit. “There shall be no wedding clothes, there shall be no finery. And there shall be no opportunity to insult your sisters further by making them all sit one place down at dinner, for you shall not be allowed to ever again step foot into Longbourn. As soon as you are officially Mrs. Wickham, I shall wash my hands of you. All of your problems and the silly turn of your mind shall be Lt. Wickham’s problem the second the register is signed.”

“But, Father!”

“No more. You shall be silent now, except to tell me where your worthless young man has gone.”

Before Lydia could work herself up to the tears and hysterics that usually produced the result she desired from her father, the door to the room opened once more. Wickham stumbled across the threshold holding a nearly empty bottle of some spirit.

“Lydia, my dear, come here and help me out of this restrictive neck cloth. I have had a poor night at the tables, but... *hic*... maybe tomor-*hic*-row.”

Wickham looked up from the floor, where his attention had been singularly focused since coming up the stairs in an effort not to fall onto it. He blinked twice then looked between Lydia and Mr. Bennet.

“Ah, I see we have company. Mr. Ben-i-dict. Ben-ten,” Wickham cleared his throat. “Mr. Bennet. How lovely to see you.”

Wickham attempted a gentlemanly bow but required the assistance of the dresser by the door to keep upright. As soon as he straightened, Wickham turned on his heels, dropped his bottle and attempted to get back out of the door with great haste. It was the work of a moment for Mr. Bennet to grab the back of Wickham’s coat and throw him onto the bed.

Lydia screamed and Wickham made a high-pitched noise that was not at all expected from a grown man.

“Wickham,” Mr. Bennet snarled, “so good of you to finally join us. I trust you have concluded your... business... for the night and are now at leisure to discuss the arrangements for tomorrow’s wedding.”

“I cannot take your meaning, sir. Whose wedding shall we be attending on the morrow?”

“Yours, of course. To my daughter. I am sure that the bishop of St. Paul’s will grant me a common license as soon as it is made clear you have been living as a married couple these last six days. We will go there directly at nine a.m., and you shall be married before the first services. I shall sit here, in your chair, all night, to ensure you do not flee the fate which I am sure will bring you no pleasure.”

“Papa! How dare you!” Lydia stomped her foot, trying to gain the attention of the two men, both of whom ignored her completely.

Wickham cleared his throat again and shook his head. He tried to put on that charm which had always served him well in tight spots. “Of course, sir. I am perfectly ready to proceed directly to the church, but perhaps we should move back the time of the wedding until ten a.m. so that we might visit your solicitor at nine a.m.”

“And why would we need to visit my solicitor before the wedding?”

Wickham smiled and spread his hands in a placating manner. “To draw up Lydia’s settlement and dowry, of course. You would not want her to live below her status as a gentleman’s daughter. I believe that ten thousand pounds immediately, an annual annuity of one hundred pounds, plus her share of your wife’s settlement upon Mrs. Bennet’s death shall be exactly what she should have.”

Lydia squealed in delight. “Oh, Papa! Am I really to have ten thousand for my dowry? That is marvellous!”

“I TOLD YOU TO BE SILENT, LYDIA! Wickham, you have been amongst our friends and relations for many months, you must know that I do not have ten thousand to dower on Lydia. I cannot even begin to think where such a sum is to be had. You will take her as she is. I shall send her fifty pounds per year, which is already part of the Longbourn entail, and perhaps my wife will see fit to send her enough quality muslin for one or two new dresses a year. But that shall be all! One fifth share of her mother’s settlement shall be yours upon my wife’s death, and I shall write you a note here, in my own hand, promising such a clause shall be added to my will at my earliest convenience, AFTER you are safely married in the church.”

Wickham sighed. “I am afraid that will not signify. I mean to make my fortune from marriage, and if you cannot provide Lydia with a valuable dowry, I will not have her.”

“WHAT?” Lydia screeched. Beside her sat an open valise holding certain items, including Wickham’s riding boots. Lydia seized upon the heel of his right boot and hurled it directly at Wickham’s head. Wickham was normally a man of good reflexes,

having had much practice at dodging objects thrown by enraged ladies, but in his inebriated state, he was not able to move in time. The toe of the boot hit him squarely in his eye socket.

“You, crazy, vulgar chit! I shall give you a matching black eye!” Wickham moved to hit Lydia with her own weapon but was once again seized upon by Mr. Bennet.

Using Wickham’s momentum against him, Mr. Bennet threw the wastrel into the wall, headfirst, then delivered a strong blow to his nose. “You are as worthless a fighter as you are a gentleman. I shall either see you married before ten a.m., or dead at first light. Which shall it be?”

Wickham spat out the blood from his broken nose onto the floor, splashing Mr. Bennet’s breeches. “I believe, *sir*, that I have a better chance of making her an orphan than a husband. I have my pistol here, the finest available to officers in his majesty’s army.”

“So be it. I shall see you at Chalk Farm Tavern at dawn.”