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This story got away from me; I could not stop writing until I had rounded it out completely, and I could not bring myself to cut it short. If you are short on time, pages fifteen through twenty-five are my favorite.

The tragic tale of the second Eliza intrigued me from the first time I read *Sense and Sensibility*; Colonel Brandon’s short anecdote about her life, only spanning three pages of the novel, held so much potential for a full story. Who was this Eliza? What was she like? Jane Austen laid the narrative arc out but did not fill in any of the details.

The 1995 and 2008 *Sense and Sensibility* movie adaptations inspired this story the most. The 2008 adaptation provided a glimpse into Eliza’s life and character, but the Willoughby and Brandon present here are most definitely Alan Rickman and Greg Wise. I was also inspired by how Jo Baker’s *Longbourn* took the story of *Pride and Prejudice* and changed into something new, while still retaining the spirit of the original novel. All of Austen’s novels have, in some way, played a part in this story; all of my (admittedly weak) knowledge about carriages, courtships, British landmarks, and running away to London come from them.

Eliza

*A few minutes of peace*. Eliza stood and half-mindedly stared into the mirror, watching sunlight stream over her features. She tried to find pieces of her mother peering back at her, something she had done since she was a little girl. What parts of herself had the first Eliza given to her daughter? Was her mother in her long, dark hair? Her wide eyes? Her crooked smile that only became more lop-sided the bigger she grinned? Brandon always told her how much she resembled her mother, but he never told her how. Anytime she asked, he only smiled sadly and said, “You do.”

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Colonel Brandon did not like to talk about the first Eliza; it made him sad. She had been his first love, and he bitterly regretted how her life had ended. When the second Eliza first came to live with him as a child of three, it was easy to brush off her questions concerning her parentage. *She was too young to understand, too young to be burdened with her mother’s story* he told himself. However, as Eliza grew from a questioning toddler to an introspective child, she became more and more desperate to feel some sort of connection to the mother she had no memory of. She began to ask more questions, to pressure him more and more for answers. Though talking about the first Eliza pained him, he, after a time, felt obligated to acquiesce to her requests. She did have the right to know her mother. Eliza still remembered him calling her to him when she was seven and asking her to sit down with a face so grave she thought she must have done something bad and was about to be chastised.

“Your mother,” he told her, too agitated to make any sort of introduction, “had such a warmth of heart and eagerness of fancy and spirits. She was one of my nearest relations, orphaned in her infancy and under the guardianship of my father. We grew up together, and from our earliest days were playfellows and friends. I cannot remember a time when I did not love her.” Here, his voice became soft, and he looked at the Eliza sitting before him, captivated by the tales of the mother she resembled so strongly. She stared back at him expectantly. Finally! The mystery of her mother was about to be revealed!

He began again, “I believe her affections for me were the same. However, at seventeen, she was lost to me forever. She was married—against her inclination, against her will—to my brother. Her fortune was large, my family estate was encumbered, and my father cared only about business. My brother did not deserve her.” Brandon’s voice was dark, angry. Eliza was still; she barely dared to breathe for fear of turning his wrath upon herself.

“She was ill-used by my brother. I had hoped that her regard for me would be able to sustain her under such circumstances, but eventually the miseries of her situation overcame all resolution. The effect of such an unhappy union upon so young, so lively, so inexperienced a mind was…severe. She resigned herself to her situation, grew more and more agonized until she could take it no longer. But can we wonder why, with such a husband to provoke inconstancy, with no friend to advise her…she quickly fell from grace.” He stopped his story there and looked horrorstruck at the little Eliza sitting before him. She was trembling, clutching the edge of her chair with white knuckles, silent tears sliding down her face. She had wanted to know about her mother, yes, but had never imagined the story would be so horrible. Colonel Brandon was furious with himself for thinking Eliza old enough to understand anything. He sent her away gently and berated himself for being so foolish.

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The story stopped there that day, but as Eliza grew up, she heard the rest of the wretched tale. Ill-used indeed by a man who had no regard for her, desperate for a taste of the affection she had once known, her mother allowed herself to be taken in by a man who lived nearby. His seduction led to Eliza’s conception, and also to her mother’s divorce. Destitute and traumatized, Eliza’s mother fell victim again and again to any man who gave her more than a passing glance. Her mother soon fell ill with a disease intent on taking her life; she and her young daughter were taken to a sponging-house to await death.

Eliza did remember bits about the sponging-house. It was crowded, and the air was thick and smelled bad, and the man in the cubby next to theirs screamed out in his sleep. She remembered that she had known, somehow, that her mother was dying and that she had been so, so scared about what was going to happen to her. And then Colonel Brandon came. He came to the sponging-house to visit a former servant also imprisoned there and recognized his beloved Eliza lying there among the debtors. His heart plummeted as he watched a guttural cough wrack her frail body—consumption, he knew. He then noticed a small, wide-eyed girl gazing at him with an expression of such desperate longing that his heart plummeted even lower. *Eliza had a daughter.*

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The matter of the daughter was quickly settled. The little Eliza was placed in the care of Colonel Brandon, who accepted his charge as something most precious. She was taken from the sponging-house and the Colonel secured temporary lodging for the two of them until he could figure out what was to be done.

Eliza was so deeply grateful to the Colonel for saving her that it did not take her long to grow attached to him. She loved him as her savior, and as her friend. She affectionately called him Brandon; ‘sir’ seemed too formal, and ‘papa’ seemed unnatural. For his part, he viewed her as a sort of surrogate daughter; she was everything that might have been had his and her mother’s lives taken a different path.

Eliza was a charming child, lively and engaging as her mother had been, with a quick sense of humor and a smile that could light up any room. Colonel Brandon was as attached to her as any father could have been and kept her with him as long as he could, but a temporary house was no place to educate a daughter and he had no relations or resources to help him. He knew he had to send her away.

“No,” she said emphatically when he first told her about the boarding school she was to attend. “I do not want to leave you.”

“I will come and visit as often as a can. This is no place for you to grow up.”

“No. I want to stay with you.”

“Eliza,” he said as firmly as he could, although he could never be as firm with her as he wished, “You will go away to school. This is not a debate.”

She was silent, her mouth pinched together. She stared at him as intensely as she had the first day they met. Finally, she spoke.

“What will the other girls say about mama? Or my father?” She was afraid, and rightly so the Colonel hated to admit, of the social ostracization that would come with her parentage. To be somebody’s natural daughter was to be nobody.

“We do not have to tell anyone. We can tell them that your parents are both gone. You never knew either of them. You live with your guardian. That is close enough to the truth, and it should satisfy any questions your schoolmates might have.”

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Eliza, at age eleven, left her home and her guardian and everything she had known and ventured off to a boarding school. She was nervous the entire carriage ride there, and although Brandon tried to comfort her by telling her about all the fun she was going to have, his words were just an irritating buzz in her ears. She wished he would stop talking.

It was not that she did not want to go to school; she did. She was eager to be educated and to read important books and to have important conversations with her schoolmates. And she was excited to be around other women and girls her age. She loved Brandon, but there were some things that an eleven-year-old girl could only talk about with another eleven-year-old girl. A part of her was excited. But another part of her, growing louder by the minute, worried that people would think her too plain to be worth anything. Or that somebody would somehow find out about her mother. Or that she would be too dull to understand anything she was taught. These what-ifs floated around inside her head and, try as she might, she could not quell them. She worked herself into such a state that, by the time they arrived at the school, she felt as though she was going to vomit. Brandon nearly had to carry her out of the carriage.

White-faced, she stared at the matron of the school, a kindly Mrs. Hill, a former governess who found that she so loved caring for young women she decided to make a career out of educating them. Mrs. Hill’s mouth was moving, but Eliza could not make out what she was saying. She felt dizzy.

“She is just a bit nervous, that is all,” she heard Brandon say. *A bit!* She was more nervous than she could ever remember being.

“They all are when they first arrive. Do not worry yourself. She will be right at home in no time at all. I will make sure of it.” She turned to Eliza, “Come along, dear. Let us get you settled in.”

Brandon knelt down and pulled her to him. He looked at her and tried to say something, but words would not come. Instead, he hugged her tighter. The two of them stood there for a moment, clinging to one another, each one aware, in some way, of what they would lose when they parted. Finally, he let go, kissed Eliza on the head, and stepped back into the carriage. Eliza turned away and followed Mrs. Hill into the school. She did not want to watch Brandon drive off.

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Eliza did truly enjoy school. Her magnetic personality and youthful exuberance allowed her to make friends easily; her penchant for seeing the best in people allowed her to keep them. She learned to play the piano and to sing and to draw; she read Radcliffe and Edgeworth and Pope and Swift and other authors whose names she did not care to remember. Mrs. Hill mothered each of her girls, but Eliza was special. Partly because she felt bad for the poor orphan child whose guardian left her at the school’s doorstep, but partly because Eliza excelled at everything she put her mind to and Mrs. Hill was amazed by her.

Brandon visited her as often as he could and, when his brother died and he moved back to Delaford, she came to visit him there. She chatted his ear off about school and the friends she had made and the compliments Mrs. Hill always gave to her. She could tell Brandon was proud of her and proud of himself for making the right decision. Proud and relieved. Raising a daughter was a big responsibility. He was thankful nothing had gone wrong yet.

At Mrs. Hill’s school, Eliza grew from a girl of eleven into a young woman of fourteen. Mrs. Hill could do no more for her and so Brandon took her out of the school, much to the chagrin of its matron.

“Eliza,” said Mrs. Hill, taking her hand, “Do not hesitate to call upon me if you should ever be in need of anything. No matter how long it has been. I will always be in your service, should you need me.” Touched by Mrs. Hill’s words, and sorry that she had to leave, Eliza said she would.

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Brandon put her under the care of a Mrs. Smith living in Dorsetshire. Mrs. Smith had charge over four other girls around Eliza’s age, each very agreeable and eager to make her acquaintance. Anne, Caroline, Maria, and Alice welcomed Eliza easily into their circle. The five of them spent their days together in Dorsetshire. It was uncommon not to see the group of them, strolling arm in arm through the streets, giggling at everything and nothing at all.

Eliza loved her friends; she thought of each of them as sisters, but she was closest to Caroline. The two of them were so alike in temperament that Caroline became Eliza’s most trusted confidante; she advised her on what dresses to wear and how to fix her hair. They talked about the balls they would attend when they finally came into real society, the husbands they would find, the children they would have. Eliza felt guilty for dreaming these dreams because she knew in her heart that she had no right to them. Caroline’s father was a baronet and her elder sister had married a clergyman, so Caroline could afford to dream of such things. Eliza could not, but Caroline encouraged her to dream anyway.

In her new friend, Eliza finally found a mother and a sister, and she was perfectly, exquisitely happy. She missed Brandon, of course, but the two of them had grown apart over the years. She had grown up without him. He still visited her, and she still came to Delaford for the holidays and they still had plenty to talk about, but there was now a distinct separateness between them. It was sad, she thought, but necessary. She was becoming a woman and it seemed to make him nervous. She knew he saw her mother growing in her every day and he was worried that something would happen and ruin all of the effort he had put into raising her. His worry annoyed her because it reminded her of her past, which she tried hard to forget. She did not want to forget her mother; in fact, she developed a habit of studying her face in any mirror or window she passed, looking for her mother in every reflection. She did want to bury the ugly parts, however; she wanted to be a normal girl, not an illegitimate daughter, but Brandon would not let her forget who she was. Caroline, who did not know the truth about her parents, would. In Caroline’s eyes, she was just an orphan; in Brandon’s eyes, she was the daughter of a disgraced woman. She loved him, but it was best that they spend time apart.

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At the end of Eliza’s second year under Mrs. Smith’s care, Caroline’s father became afflicted with gout and retired to Bath for the summer, and Caroline was going there to spend her summer with him. Since she had received the letter from her father requesting her company, she had been chattering about all that she was to do in Bath without end.

“Just think, Eliza, about all the shops that I will visit! And all the people that I will see. And, of course, I will visit the Pump-room every day. And the Lower Rooms, to dance. And the theatre. And the Upper Rooms. And the concert hall!” She prattled away about what new dresses and hats she needed to purchase, and the fashionable people she was just certain she should meet when she arrived.

Eliza, although she knew Caroline was babbling because she was too excited about this new adventure to speak sensibly, found herself growing irritated. Eliza was excited for her friend, but she was also jealous. She wanted to go to Bath too, but Brandon did not like crowds, so the chances of him taking her there were slim. She was mad at Caroline’s good fortune and ashamed of such feelings and on the verge of having a fit. She interrupted Caroline’s monologue to excuse herself for some fresh air.

As she stood up to leave, Caroline turned to say, “Oh, by the by, Eliza, Papa said I could bring a friend if I wished. He will, of course, be spending most of his time in the baths and he does not appreciate the theatre, nor does he like to dance, and my sister is too busy with her new baby to visit and I just know that I shall be so lonely if I do not have another lady with me. Would you like to come?”

Eliza stopped in her tracks and felt herself grin. “Yes! Yes! I shall have to ask Brandon, but yes!” She twirled and headed toward the door again, not to find fresh air, but to find paper. She needed to write to Brandon this moment; a request like this was too important to wait.

After the letter had been writ, received, permission obtained, and funding sent, Eliza and Caroline spent their last weeks with Mrs. Smith in an excited stupor. The days flew by and the weeks dragged on, but finally the day Caroline’s father was to collect them arrived. The carriage came, the girls said their goodbyes to Mrs. Smith and their friends, promising to return with presents and stories. Their luggage secured, Eliza and Caroline were seated in the carriage, waving through the windows at the other girls until they could see them no longer. The two girls turned to grin at one another. At long last, they were off!

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It was three weeks since Eliza had first arrived in Bath, and her letters to Brandon, frequent at first, had tapered off by necessity. She and Caroline were always engaged with something, whether it was visiting the Pump-room, or attending a dance, or visiting the shops with other young ladies whose acquaintances they had made. She sometimes remembered to write a short note, just to assure him that she was well and that she missed him, but often she was too busy to think about it. She was now sixteen and becoming somebody. Being in Bath allowed her to grow into society; she loved the busyness of it all, the flow of people, how each day held something new. She loved the dances in the assembly rooms best; she was a lively dancer and she had no shortage of partners.

Shortly after their arrival, Caroline had fallen in with a Mr. Jones, a clergyman, newly in orders, who was stopping in Bath on the way to his parish. The two met in the assembly rooms during a dance, and he had engaged her for every dance since. Not only that, but Mr. Jones began to manifest more and more places that Caroline and Eliza frequented. He bumped into them at the milliner’s, and at the theatre, and in the Pump-room. Though he was cordial to Eliza, he only really ever wanted to speak with Caroline. From what Eliza could overhear, their conversations did not have much substance. They consisted mostly of small talk about the lovely weather, or how very large the crowds in the assembly rooms were, or how the number of couples seemed to increase by the day. How was Miss Williams enjoying Bath, Mr. Jones inquired almost every day. Miss Williams was enjoying it very well, very well indeed, thank you.

Eliza did not think much of Mr. Jones, who appeared to her to be a painfully stodgy man, but Caroline always wanted to talk about him.

“Did you see how much care Mr. Jones took to help me choose a new handkerchief today?” Caroline asked, running her fingers over the embroidery on the one they both had settled on as she and Eliza walked back toward their apartments.

Eliza murmured a reply, trying to keep her own handkerchiefs from flying away. She had purchased a few as gifts for Brandon, and she did not want to lose any of them to the wind. She was, frankly, sick of watching Mr. Jones and Caroline flirt with one another and sick of listening to Caroline analyze every interaction they had. She, though she did not want to admit it, felt as though she was falling behind Caroline somehow. Certainly, young gentlemen seemed to find her a pleasing partner to dance with, and they always said hello when they saw her on the street, but not one had taken an interest in her like Mr. Jones had in Caroline. Why was this? She was certainly as pretty as Caroline, and perhaps even smarter, and definitely wittier, yet *she* did not have a suitor. Could they somehow sense that she was, innately, inferior to them?

Eliza was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she did not notice one of her handkerchiefs flying away in the wind. Indeed, she would not have noticed had something not tapped her on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, madam. I believe this is yours.”

Standing before her, holding one of her handkerchiefs, was a man. He grinned, a wide smile, as she gingerly reached out to reclaim the rogue kerchief. *He was beautiful*.

“Thank you, sir.” She dipped into a curtsy and then tried not to sprint away from him. He bowed back, then turned and walked away.

“Eliza!” Caroline breathed, her eyes wide with both wonder and excitement.

“I know!” Who was this mysterious stranger?

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The stranger’s name, Eliza learned when he sought her out later that evening at the assembly rooms, was John Willoughby; however, that was all she was able to ascertain. He was much more eager to learn about her than he was to tell her about himself, and nobody else there knew anything about him; John Willoughby was an enigma.

Eliza Brandon was not. She found herself pulled to answer all his questions, to be open and engaging so that he would like her. She needed him to like her. Did he like her? He kept speaking to her, so she did not think she was boring him. Was she boring him? No, no, the way he looked at her told her she was not. He did not once look away from her face, he clung to her every word. She felt as though they were the only two people in the room; everyone else melted away until it was just the two of them, sitting together and talking. He asked her about her home and her education and her friends. He asked her which color was her favorite, which authors she preferred to read, if she painted, if she played, if she sang. He seemed determined to find out everything about her. What did she like to do in her spare time? What did she not like to do? Was she enjoying her time in Bath? Had she ever visited before? No! Well, then, he must act as her guide! Tomorrow, he decided, they would go to visit Blaise Castle.

Eliza had never been so flattered in her life. Willoughby was beautiful and charming, and his only goal seemed to be learning all about her. She did not hear herself answering his questions, did not hear herself agreeing to go to the castle with him, did not realize she had not danced a single dance that entire evening; she was captivated. It was only when he excused himself and offered to walk her home that she came out of her trance and realized that she must have been talking to him for near three hours.

Shocked though she was that he was offering to walk her home alone, she was tempted to accept. She was not ready to leave him. She politely declined.

“Well,” he took her hand, “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.” She watched him walk out of the room, her heart already in his hands.

Caroline tried to ask her about Willoughby when they retired to their room later that evening, but Eliza could not find the words to describe him. Nor did she want to. Willoughby belonged to her, just like Mr. Jones belonged to Caroline. If Caroline chose to offer up every bit of information about Mr. Jones, that was her choice, but Eliza wanted to keep Willoughby private. She brushed off Caroline’s questions by saying she was exhausted and tried to fall asleep.

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Caroline accompanied Eliza and Willoughby to Blaise Castle the next morning and pronounced, after he dropped them back off at home in the afternoon, that he was, without a doubt, deeply attached to Eliza.

“Caroline, I have not even known him two days,” Eliza protested, though she secretly treasured Caroline’s declaration. She wanted to believe Willoughby was deeply attached to her. He *had* been very attentive to her all morning, had he not? He had whispered jokes only to her. She had caught him looking at her when he thought she would not notice, a soft smile on his lips. Was this what a man acted like when he was attached to a woman? Eliza did not know.

Caroline did. “Of course, he is not in *love* with you, yet. He will be in a month or two, though. I can see it. He is very fond of you right now, and he will only grow fonder. You must encourage him in every way possible. Do not make him feel like you are disinterested.”

That was not hard for Eliza to do, because she was very, very interested in Willoughby. The two of them spent increasing amounts of time together. At first, Caroline, usually with Mr. Jones in tow, was present with them wherever they went. Eventually, however, Caroline grew bored with always having to play chaperone, and she told Eliza that she was sure it would be acceptable for her to spend a little time alone with Willoughby. He was such a gentleman; Eliza would be in good hands.

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“John! Stop!” Eliza laughed as he whipped his carriage around a bend in the road at breakneck speed. “You will throw us both out!”

“I will not!” He grinned back at her, his beautiful smile, as he slowed the horses to a stop.

It was two months since John Willoughby rescued Eliza’s handkerchief from the wind, and now the two of them were rarely apart. He drove her out in his carriage, and he walked around town with her, and he visited her in her apartments and brought her to his.

Improprietous behavior, absolutely, but she could not bring herself to care. She loved every second he spent with her; she drank them in. He made her feel beautiful, yes, but, above all, he made her feel important. He made her feel reckless. He made her feel in control of her own life. And, when she accidentally confessed everything about her mother to him, he made her feel like everything was going to be okay.

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She didn’t know what had made her do it. It was a bright afternoon and the two of them were coming back from a carriage ride out to the country. They were in high-spirits, both laughing at a joke he made at the expense of Mr. Jones, when he asked if she would be willing to give her opinion on a new barouche he had recently purchased.

“I will, but I do not know the first thing about carriages.” She smiled at him.

“Perhaps not, but you will be able to tell me if it looks pretty, and if it is comfortable to sit in. Please?”

Eliza did not answer him. She was grateful that he trusted her opinion so much and did very much want to see where he was staying. She felt as though John, by inviting her to his home, was giving her a piece of himself; this she was not willing to reject. However, it was imprudent, scandalous even, to agree to such a request. She had only known him a little over a month and people, if they saw her leaving his residence, would talk. *They were not courting, they were not engaged, there was no sort of understanding between them.* But, perhaps, she told herself, perhaps this was his way of opening that door. She sat, conflicted, beside him as the carriage drove on.

He noticed her uncertain silence. His fingertips lightly brushed her face. “Please?” he implored.

Eliza, her face flushed, nodded, but did not speak. Laughing at the look of awe on her face, he touched her cheek again.

A short time later, Eliza stood in the center of his drawing room, staring in wonder at the space before her. She felt that, although this was not his true home, he had filled the rental with so much of himself. She saw the desk where he wrote, the couch where he sat, the shelf crowded with books that he read. She wanted to explore everything, to see every piece of him that lived in this place.

“Would you like a tour?” he asked, as if he could read her mind. When she nodded expectantly, he offered her his arm and off they went. He had not even shown her his new carriage.

As he took her through the house, Eliza imagined herself in every one of the rooms. There she stood in the kitchen, there she sat in the study, there she walked down the hall. She was embarrassed at herself for having such audacious thoughts; she had no right to think these things, but she thought them anyway.

Finally, he led her up a set of stairs to the final stop on their tour. *His room*. Eliza did not dare to breathe. John’s room. With John’s bed. She found herself moving, John’s hand gently pushing the small of her back, into the room. She perched on the edge of his bed.

“Do you like the house?” he inquired conversationally, but his dark eyes never left her face.

“It is beautiful,” she replied in a strained voice. It was beautiful. It was perfect. And she realized that she wanted it to be hers, she wanted *him* to be hers so fiercely. But the house was not, and he was not, and it was not her place to want him. She did. She did want him. She wanted him, and she wanted him to want her. This desire, finally and fully realized and accepted by Eliza, was as powerful an emotion as she had ever felt. She did not realize she was crying until John was on the bed next to her, holding her face in his hands.

“What is it?” he whispered. His face was so close to hers that she could count the freckles on his nose. He was beautiful. She opened her mouth to say something, to explain everything about her mother, to apologize for crying, but words would not come. She stared at him a second longer; he did not break her gaze. She felt herself leaning closer. She closed her eyes. Her breath stilled. And she kissed him.

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After the kiss, Eliza told John everything. The story bubbled forth; she could not have stopped it if she wanted to. But she did not want to. It felt so good to free herself from the burden she had carried for sixteen years; she wanted John to understand her, to know every piece of her. She wanted to be laid bare before him so that he could see her for who she was. The words fell out of her mouth faster than she could think of them. John listened to her without speaking. She looked at him when she was finally finished, waiting for him to say something. He silently stood and walked to the window on the far wall of his room. His back was toward her.

Regret suddenly filled her; her stomach twisted. What had she been thinking? Why had she confessed everything to a man she barely knew? Why had she *kissed* a man she barely knew? What if she had misjudged his character; what if he did not care for her at all? He held the power to ruin her now; he held all her secrets. Furious with herself for being so thoughtless, and mortified at what she had just told him, she sat frozen.

“This does not change anything.” John’s deep voice sounded across the bedroom.

Eliza started. “What?” She was so caught up in herself that she almost forgot he was still there.

“This does not change anything,” he said again, walking back toward her. He sat down again and ran his fingers through her hair. “Eliza, you are not your mother.”

*You are not your mother*. She had longed to hear that her entire life. She was not her mother, no matter what Brandon might think. She was not worthless because of her mother. She was not broken because of her mother. She was not going to make her mother’s mistakes.

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That day, the day they first kissed, an unseen barrier between Eliza and John Willoughby broke down. In the three weeks since, Eliza barely saw Caroline, who was caught up in mourning the loss of Mr. Jones; he left her for his parish with a promise to write that, at present, he seemed to have forgotten. This was just as well because Mr. Jones’ absence made Caroline bitter; she resented Eliza’s happiness with Willoughby and could not keep herself from taking it out on her friend. Eliza could scarcely blink without drawing Caroline’s ire; consequently, she learned to ignore her. She and Caroline, once so close, were enemies stuck together in Bath, each waiting for the day the vacation, which had held so much promise, would end.

Eliza, for her part, did not want to leave Bath; she only wanted to be free of Caroline. John was in Bath, and she did not know if she would see him again once she left. Although she spent all her time with him, although she saw him as her guardian and advisor, although he appeared to be quite attached to her, he had not done so much as hint at the prospect of their being engaged. At least, she did not think that he had. He had taken her to his home, again and again, she supposed; once, when Caroline was being particularly insufferable, he let her spend the night there. He kissed her many, many times. But there was no verbal commitment between the two of them, and this frustrated her. She loved John, she knew. She would marry him without hesitation should he ask. But she needed to know with certainty if he loved her.

She finally worked up the courage to ask him. He took her out on a walk to a pretty, secluded spot in the woods with a small stream trickling through it. They sat there together on the bank, John stretched out with his head in Eliza’s lap. Her fingers trailed across his face, tracing his features; his eyes were closed, but he was smiling softly up at her. Except for the sound of the water and his gentle breathing, everything was silent. *She should ask him now*. Eliza opened her mouth to speak, when he unexpectedly sat up. He turned to look at her.

“What is it?” she asked, taken aback.

He stared at her with an odd look on his face, half a smile, half an expression she had never seen before. “Come away with me.” He sounded almost breathless.

“What?” Her heart pounded. Was this his way of proposing?

“Come away with me. We can go to London. You have not yet been to London, have you?” Eliza had not.

“We will go. Tonight.” He leaned in and kissed her, hard. She did not know what to think. “Please?”

He looked so earnest, and she loved him so much. She wanted to say yes very badly, but in the back of her mind, she knew that running off to London with a man who had no obligation to her was a decidedly bad idea; she could not bring herself to care.

John kissed her again. “Please?”

She told him she would think about it. On the way back to town, he talked about all the things that they would do in London. Together.

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“What are you doing?” Caroline’s furious whisper pierced the dark of the room.

Eliza froze, hand resting on her luggage trunk. She cursed the lock on the trunk for clicking so loudly.

Eliza made up her mind to go to London with John; he would not have invited her, she decided, if he did not have plans to marry her eventually. She could wait. She also decided to keep their trip a secret. Hiding it from Brandon would be no problem at all; she could not recall the last time she had written to him, nor the last letter he had sent to her. Caroline, she knew, would be a bigger threat; however, she thought that if she worked quickly and quietly after Caroline fell asleep, she would be able to make a clean getaway. The lock on her trunk had other plans.

“Are you leaving?” Caroline squinted in the darkness at Eliza, kneeling before her luggage.

Eliza hesitated; should she tell Caroline the truth, or should she lie? She could not tell her nothing. Would Caroline dare to ruin her plans?

“Mr. Willoughby has asked me to come to London with him.” She hoped that the truth would set her free.

Caroline did not say anything, but she did not immediately run to go tell her father, either. She thought about it. A good friend would have stopped Eliza, but Caroline resented Eliza too much to be a good friend to her anymore. She saw a chance to salvage her last few weeks in Bath.

“Go,” she said. Eliza breathed a sigh of relief. “I will help you carry your things.”

The pair of them cautiously tiptoed down the stairs and out the front door. Caroline stopped at the threshold; she thrust the trunk into Eliza’s hands. There were no sorrowful goodbyes to be said; they were not the friends they once had been. All Caroline said in parting was “I told you he would come to love you.” She shut the door before Eliza could respond.

*He had come to love her!* Eliza skipped away from the house down the street to the corner where John was waiting for her.

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John wanted something, Eliza could tell. She watched him with lowered eyes, sitting opposite her in the drawing room of the house they were letting; he was pretending to be engrossed in a novel, but he had yet to turn a page. *What could he want?*

Her first weeks in London had been wonderful. The house they were staying in, a friend’s winter home, he told her, was stunning. She was astounded by everything the city had to offer; her joy was his. He laughed at her wide-eyed amazement. He took her to his favorite places and bought her flowers and wine. She was incandescently happy. But, as those weeks drew to a close, John’s mood shifted. She often caught him looking at her with mild irritation, which he denied when she asked about it; he began to drink more heavily. She had never seen him drink before. His responses to her attempts at conversation were forced, and he rarely smiled at her anymore.

“Eliza.” His voice interrupted her musings. “I am going to bed.” He stood up and walked toward the door.

“Oh,” she responded, “Goodnight…Perhaps we can go for a walk around the gardens tomorrow.”

Without turning around, he murmured, “Perhaps,” and exited the room.

She did not want to sit up by herself, so she quitted the room soon after he did. She walked up the stairs to her bedroom, her mind still churning. His displeasure had to be the result of something she had done or was doing, she was certain. But what? She was not any less agreeable than she had been in Bath, and he was perfectly happy with her there. If anything, she tried harder to be acceptable to him now, to make up for his mood. She passed his bedroom; the door was cracked, and she could see there was a fire burning in the fireplace. He was still awake.

She stopped; something occurred to her, but it could not be. It was a terribly presumptuous thought to have, but one that would explain why he was acting so strangely. She almost did not want to acknowledge it, but the more she thought about it, the more she recognized its truth.

John was waiting for her. He wanted to be with her. Her heart hammered in her chest at the idea. She could not deny that there was an unmistakable longing inside her to push open his bedroom door and run to him, to be fully and completely realized by him. But also inside her, fighting just as fiercely for her attention, was the knowledge that if she did that, there would be no turning back. She would be sacrificing everything, every piece of herself for his sake.

“Eliza?”

Before she could think about what she was doing, she was inside his bedroom, staring at him with a mixture of anticipation and fear. *Did she want this?* She did not know.

He looked aghast for a moment before he smiled that beautiful, beautiful smile. *He loved her. He loved her. He loved her.*

He reached out to her, and she slowly and mechanically moved toward him, her hands balled into tiny, white-knuckled fists. He pulled her close. She was shaking like a leaf. He did not notice.

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John Willoughby sat and stared at the small figure sleeping beside him. Her back was toward him, and he watched her form rise and fall as she breathed. She looked so peaceful. She looked so small.

Carefully, he eased himself out of the bed and padded toward the dresser. He needed to leave.

He should not have slept with Eliza; really, he should not have brought her to London at all. He had meant to come by himself, to forget about her, actually. But she was so, so sweet, and, staring up at her on the stream bank that day, he realized it would be more fun if she came along. He was right, he thought as he began to dress.

Her beauty was what first attracted his attention the day he saw her walking down the streets of Bath; the handkerchief flying away from her had been purely fortuitous. It was the excuse he needed to talk to her; she intrigued him.

He had not been disappointed. Her personality was just as pleasing as her physical features; she possessed all the buoyancy and fervor that youth had to offer, and a quick wit to boot. Her undeniable admiration of him flattered his vanity; he was grateful that she cared for him so deeply.

It was not as if he did *not* care for her, he thought. She was such a sweet girl, and sweet girls had to be treated delicately. He tried to be delicate with her, to hold her at a polite distance, and succeeded at first, but the more time they spent together, the more open he became. And then she kissed him, *she kissed him*, and that kiss awakened something within him. He could no longer force himself to be careful.

*He should have been more careful*. He could not marry her. She was pretty and sweet, but she had little else to offer him. He had to leave.

He heard her stir, and turned around to see her sitting up, looking at him; her face was expressionless.

“Are you leaving?” her words were toneless and hollow.

It was hard to look into her eyes and lie to her, but it would be harder to tell her the truth and hurt her more than was necessary. He pulled on his shirt and tried to smile. “I have to go out on business. I am sorry to cut our time together short.” That part was true, at least. He was sorry. Eliza simply stared him, her face blank. He continued, “The house is let for another month; you should stay. I will come back, if I can.” That was the lie.

Eliza watched him pack his things; she did not move from the bed. She did not move at all. She just gazed at him with big, unreadable eyes. He walked in and out of the room, taking things to the carriage, and she did not shift once. She did not even turn her face to him when he walked over to kiss her goodbye; he had to lean over her.

She did not get up to walk him out, which was for the best; he did not want to wait for her to get dressed. As he drove away, a sense of relief flooded him. The worst was over.

John Willoughby liked Eliza Brandon, yes, but he could not be expected to hold himself back for her sake; it was selfish of her to wish he would do so.

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For a scorned woman, Eliza Brandon was remarkably calm. She did not cry once after he left; she doubted that she could have, even if she tried. She knew, as she watched him sleep that night, that he was going to leave her; she felt it. She cried all her tears then, silently so she did not wake him. Now, she only felt empty; in her heart, she knew that Willoughby would not return. *Was this how her mother had felt*? Furious with herself and with the man who had left her, heartbroken that she had given herself away to someone who would treat her so poorly, lost and alone. It was a crushing blow to realize that, despite her best efforts, she was her mother after all.

She floated listlessly through the rooms of the house that had once thrilled her, trying to decide what she should do. She could not stay in this house forever; the lease was almost up. She could not return to Caroline, nor did she want to; any affection Eliza had for her previously was gone now. She still had some of the money that Brandon had given her to spend in Bath, but it was not enough to rent anything.

Brandon. He would take her back, but she was too embarrassed by her actions to consider it. Her head was clear for the first time in months, and she was ashamed of the way she had acted. Brandon must be worried sick about her, but the thought of going back to him and explaining herself, of seeing the look on his face when his worst fears were confirmed, was too much to bear. She would not go back to him.

But where would she go? She had no other family or friends to take her in. She was truly abandoned. *Unless*…Mrs. Hill. Mrs. Hill, so many years ago, had said Eliza could call upon her if she needed anything. Eliza needed something now. She was not sure if Mrs. Hill still ran the school, nor if Mrs. Hill had any recollection of her, but she had to try. It was her last hope. She hoped she had enough for the carriage fare.

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Mrs. Hill could not believe that the Eliza Brandon that appeared on her doorstep one afternoon was the same girl that she had taught all those years ago. Her vigor was gone, her smile was gone, her beauty diminished; the Eliza standing in front of her was pallid and frail with red-rimmed eyes that had deep, sunken shadows underneath them. She looked like a dead girl.

Mrs. Hill wondered what had happened, but she did not ask. Clearly, it was something terrible, something Eliza was still processing; Mrs. Hill feared if she pushed too much, Eliza would break. She wondered if it had something to do with her guardian, Colonel…something or the other.

She had an extra room that Eliza could stay in; once she was feeling better, she could help take care of the younger girls and earn her keep. But for now, she needed to rest.

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Eliza did not realize something was wrong until one morning, about a month and a half after she arrived at Mrs. Hill’s. She was eating breakfast in her room, like she always did, when a horrible wave of nausea rolled over her. She barely made it to her chamber bowl before she vomited everything she had eaten back up; retches wracked her body. When she was sure her stomach was empty, she stood up shakily. *What was happening to her?*

The same thing happened again the next morning, and again the morning after that. She could not keep anything down; she was afraid she was ill with a terrible disease. She decided to tell Mrs. Hill about her symptoms when something struck her. *Had she skipped her monthly cycle?* She did not remember getting it. Surely, she had gotten it. Oh, but she did not think she had.

She made sure her door was locked, then slipped out of her dress and ran to the mirror. She stared at her reflection in horror. There, imperceptible if one was not looking for it, was the tiniest hint of a bump.

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Eliza kept her pregnancy a secret for as long as she could, which proved to be extraordinarily difficult because by the second month of it, she was throwing up everything she ate. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, it did not matter; nothing would stay down. She was sick with nausea and sick with worry; what was she going to do? She could not be a mother; she did not know how to be a mother. She did not have a choice.

Thankfully, the bump was still unnoticeable to everyone but her; she stared at it every night, waiting for it to grow, thinking about the little person inside of her. She also thought about Willoughby; she tried not to, but she could not think about her child, *their* child, without thinking about him too. She wondered where he was, what he was doing, if he had found a new girl to drive around in his carriage. Was he going to marry *her*? She wondered if he knew that she was carrying his child, would he care? Would he come back to her? She doubted it. If he felt no obligation to her after sleeping with her, he would feel no obligation to her now.

As her pregnancy progressed, Eliza only became sicker. Mrs. Hill found her one day on her hands and knees retching over her chamber bowl, her face covered with beads of sweat; she was trembling.

“Eliza! What is the matter?” As she rushed toward her, she saw the girl’s hands move to her stomach. She knelt down beside her, an inquisitive look in her eye.

And then the whole terrible truth tumbled out of Eliza’s mouth. She was too tired to keep secrets anymore; she needed someone to tell her what to do. So, she told Mrs. Hill about her mother and about Bath and about Willoughby and about London. She told Mrs. Hill why she had chosen to come to her instead of Brandon. She told Mrs. Hill that she was pregnant. Mrs. Hill held her hands and listened to it all; when she was finally finished, all Mrs. Hill said was, “Well. You have had quite the adventure since I last saw you. Let us get you into bed.”

“Do you think less of me, now that you know about everything?” Eliza asked as Mrs. Hill fluffed pillows around her head.

“My dear,” she replied, “There are few things you could do to make me think less of you. None of the things you have done are among them.”

Eliza laughed for the first time since Willoughby left. It was a small laugh, but it was something. “Mrs. Hill, I could kiss you.”

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It was not fair, Eliza thought, that she alone was being punished for a sin that belonged to Willoughby just as much as it belonged to her. She had been stuck in bed since she first told Mrs. Hill about the baby, and she felt terrible. Everything hurt; her swollen belly hurt, her back hurt, her joints hurt, her head hurt. She felt sick all the time. She could not eat, she could not sleep, she could not get up and move around. All she could do was lay there and suffer.

She tried to distract herself by reading, but it was of no avail; she quickly grew sick of the great, smart male writers who had not thought to warn her about what happened when a girl trusted a boy a little too much. No one wrote about being pregnant; they *all* seemed to write about being chaste, however, but it was a little late for that.

She tried to distract herself by thinking of what she might call her baby. She hoped it was a girl; an illegitimate son had no place in society, but a daughter could grow up to marry a farmer, or a sailor. A daughter might be able to make a life for herself. Wryly, she thought about naming her daughter Eliza; she envisioned a long line of disgraced Elizas, stretching as far into the future as she could imagine. She would not do that to her child. She did not want to entertain the thought that the baby might be a boy, and she could not get the Elizas out of her head; she would not know what to name the baby until she saw it, she decided.

Mrs. Hill wanted her to write to Colonel Brandon to explain everything and invite him to come see her; she was concerned Eliza would not survive giving birth. Her concern was not misplaced; as the months wore on, Eliza’s condition grew worse. She started vomiting blood; she had trouble drawing breaths. It took so much strength for her to even open her eyes. Her belly protruded from her slender frame like a giant, alien mass; it did not look like it belonged to her.

Eliza could not write to Brandon; she knew that he would see in her every piece of her mother that he had sought to keep her from. She brushed off Mrs. Hill’s unease; she would be fine as soon as she had her child.

Eventually, however, Eliza became so ill that even she was afraid she might die. She could no longer ignore Brandon; her pride was not worth protecting anymore. She wrote to him, explaining the entirety of what had happened in the past year and asking for his forgiveness. She left out Willoughby’s name, though; she did not want Brandon tracking him down.

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Colonel Brandon left for Mrs. Hill’s the second he read Eliza’s letter. He felt such relief at finally hearing from her, at finally knowing what had become of her, that he could not bring himself to be angry with her. His prodigal daughter, come home at last! He was mad at himself for allowing her to go off to Bath by herself, naturally, but he was absolutely livid with the man who had manipulated her and left her in a situation of utmost distress.

His only regret in quitting Devonshire was leaving a Miss Marianne Dashwood behind in the company of John Willoughby. He did not like Willoughby; there was something about him Colonel Brandon did not trust.

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Eliza heard the door to her room open and turned slowly to greet her visitor.

“Brandon,” she whispered, holding out her hand to him. Her body convulsed as she coughed.

The Colonel could not move to her bedside fast enough; tenderly, he took her hand in his and smoothed her hair back.

There was so much that each one wanted to say to the other, but words were not enough to convey what either of them was feeling, so they simply sat there, hand in hand.

As Eliza drifted in and out of sleep, Brandon sang lullabies to her; she smiled faintly and murmured along. He was so afraid she would die; he did not think he could bear it if she did. He prayed that she would not.

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A week after Brandon’s arrival, Eliza went into labor. She awoke in the middle of the night when a sharp pain shot through her body, but it was gone as quickly as it came. Brandon was asleep in a chair next to her bed; he had not left her side once. A few minutes later, the pain came again, and then again. The fourth time, it was so intense that she cried out; Brandon woke up.

“What is the matter?” He sounded worried.

“Nothing. My stomach hurts. That is all.”

“What kind of hurt?”

She did not know how to explain what it felt like, but, luckily, she did not have to, for, at that moment, another wave came. She clenched her teeth involuntarily.

Brandon was up in a moment; he sprinted out of the room to fetch Mrs. Hill and to send for a doctor.

After he left, everything happened at once. Something wet ran down her legs, and the worst pain yet shot through her. And then another, even worse than the one before it. It was all she could do to breathe through them. The pains kept coming; she could not think straight. She had never been in this much agony in her life. She was vaguely aware of Brandon and Mrs. Hill running back in the room, but she could not focus on anything. Someone was yelling, it might have been her; she did not know. At its peak, the pain was so bad Eliza thought she was dying; she was almost glad. She felt her lower body contract and contract again, and then everything stopped. Nothing hurt anymore; she breathed a sigh of relief.

A piercing shriek rang out through the air, and Mrs. Hill placed a tiny, writhing bundle in her arms. Eliza looked at her.

“A girl,” she said.

*A girl*.

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After the birth of her daughter, Eliza regained her strength. She was enamored of the child; she was so tiny, but so perfectly formed. She marveled at her little eyelashes and little fingernails; she even had little freckles dotting her nose. Like her father. Eliza had never wanted Willoughby back so badly as she did then; she wanted him to be as in love with their daughter as she was. It was no use wishing, she knew, because he would never come back to her, but she wished anyway.

The baby remained unnamed for a few days after her birth; Eliza could not think of what to call her. Nothing seemed to fit until Brandon, one afternoon, suggested Jane. She liked the name Jane; it was simple but elegant. Jane she was.

After Eliza recovered from her lying-in, Brandon removed her and Jane to a house he owned in the country. Before they left, Mrs. Hill made Eliza promise to visit with the baby often; she fancied herself the child’s grandmother.

Brandon stayed with Eliza a little more than a week to make sure she adjusted to her new home. It was peaceful but would be lonely with just her and Jane and an occasional servant scattered about. He asked her, gently but firmly, to tell him who her lover was; at first, she refused. She knew Brandon would go after him, and she did not want either of them to get hurt. But he asked repeatedly, and she was so tired of hiding things from him; she eventually gave in and told him.

“His name is John Willoughby.”

Brandon’s face darkened. “John Willoughby,” he repeated.

“Do you know him?” He did not answer her. He knew him.

“Brandon, please do not do anything rash. You are not a young man anymore, you know.”

“I will not.” Eliza did not believe him.

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Willoughby waited for Colonel Brandon, lolling against a tree. He could not believe a man would go to so much effort just to avenge his ward’s honor; really, she had not even relinquished her honor. She did not have to disclose to anyone what had happened between them; he certainly was not going to. He did care for her; he did not want to ruin her.

But Brandon demanded they meet, and Willoughby was bored, so he agreed. Brandon was so stodgy; he laughed at the idea of dueling him.

He regretted his laughter soon after Brandon arrived; the Colonel moved almost faster than he could and came after him again and again. He looked murderous. Was this about more than Eliza?

He received an answer when Colonel Brandon said, mid parry, “You have a daughter.”

Willoughby did not understand what he meant at first, but the realization hit him hard; he dropped his sword. *Eliza had a baby*. *His baby.*  He was almost too shocked to register Brandon’s sword at his throat.

Brandon had intended to kill Willoughby, but, looking into the young man’s startled face, he knew he could not do it. He let his sword fall to his side and walked away.

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Eliza could not bring herself to regret Willoughby; had she not gotten pregnant, she might have congratulated herself on getting away with the whole thing. But, of course, she *had* gotten pregnant; she had not gotten away with anything. Still, he had given her a daughter whom she adored, and she would not have chosen to go back and give little Jane up. Despite her situation, she was happy. She was not her mother, though her mother would always be a part of her, and that was nothing to be ashamed of.

Willoughby often thought of returning to Eliza: Colonel Brandon would never allow it, but he still thought about it. He wondered what his daughter was like; did she look like her mother, or did she look like him? He wondered how Eliza was. He could never return to her, he knew; he liked women too much and he liked money too much. He cared about her, but he was not willing to give up his pleasures for her sake. It was better that he stay away.

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A baby’s cry shattered Eliza’s reverie. She stared at herself a few seconds longer before turning away from the mirror and toward a small bassinet in the corner of the room. Kneeling down, she smiled at the little face looking back up at her. Her daughter, now one year old, was awake.