A man in a green coat and top hat stands with his back to the camera, looking towards a large, ornate building in a snowy courtyard. The scene is decorated with holly and snow. The man is wearing a dark green, knee-length coat with a fur collar and a black top hat with a white band. He is holding a black cane. The building in the background is a grand, multi-story structure with a central dome and many windows, some of which are decorated with holly. The courtyard is covered in snow, and there are snow-covered bushes and trees. The overall atmosphere is festive and wintry.

A TALES FROM IVY HILL NOVELLA

# JULIE KLASSEN

AN IVY HILL  
CHRISTMAS

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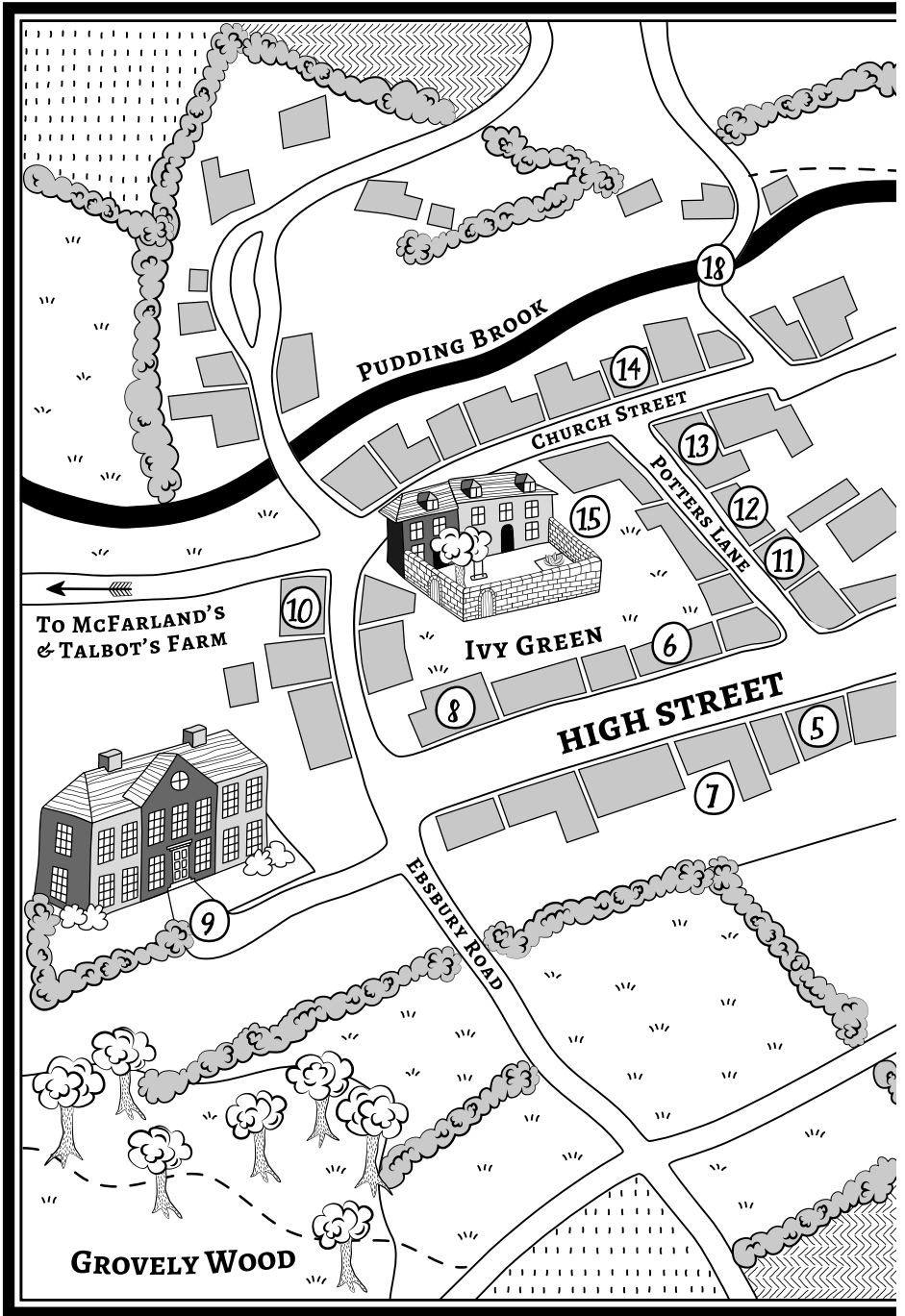
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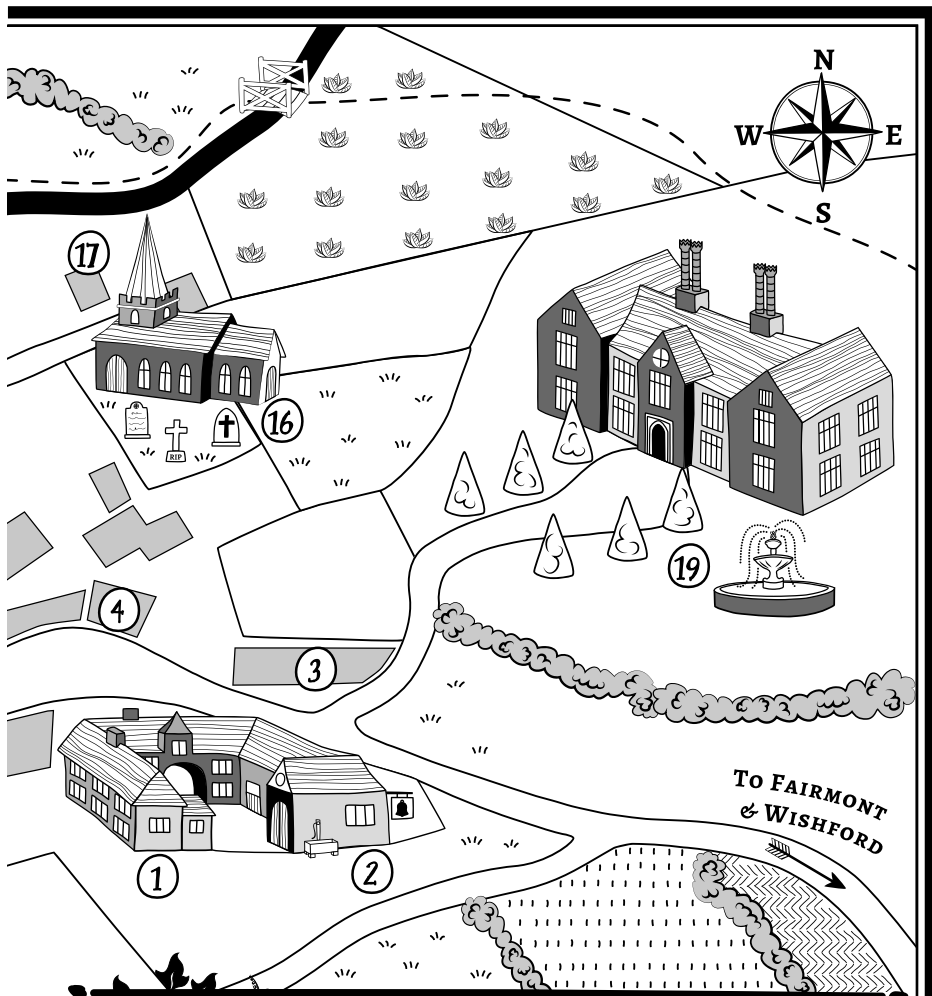
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To Michelle Griep,  
talented writer of novels, novellas,  
and spot-on critiques,  
with love and gratitude.





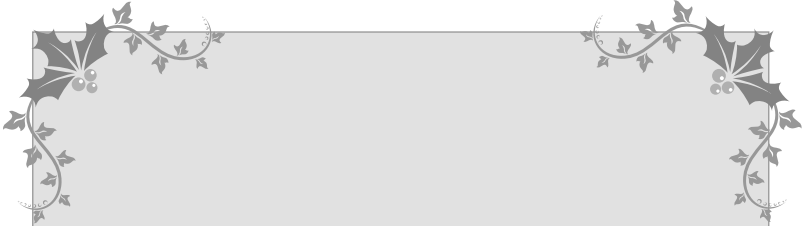


# IVY HILL

- 1 - The Bell Inn
- 2 - Bell Stables & Lodge
- 3 - Wheelwright
- 4 - Blacksmith
- 5 - Prater's Store

- 6 - Dressmaker's Shop
- 7 - Apothecary
- 8 - Bank
- 9 - Thornvale
- 10 - Almshouse

- 11 - Lock-up
- 12 - Village Hall
- 13 - Public House
- 14 - Bakery
- 15 - Ivy Cottage
- 16 - Church
- 17 - Vicarage
- 18 - Packhorse Bridge
- 19 - Brockwell Court



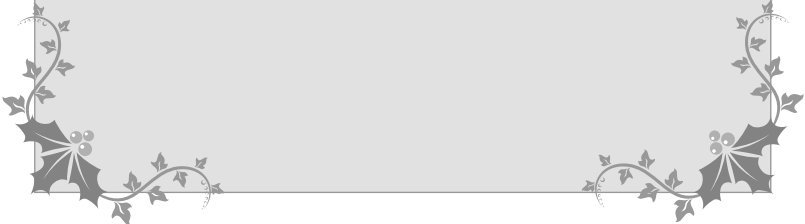
Have a cheerful, and at times  
even a merry, Christmas.

—Jane Austen, letter to her sister, 1808

.....

Now to him that hath redeem'd us,  
By his precious death and passion;  
And us sinners so esteem'd us,  
To buy dearly this salvation.  
Yield lasting fame, that still the name  
Of Jesus may be honour'd here;  
And let us say that Christmas Day,  
Is still the best day in the year.

—“God’s Dear Son without  
Beginning,” carol, 1822





CHAPTER

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ONE



**December 1822**  
**London**

Walking past a linen draper's, Richard Brockwell surveyed his reflection in the shop windows with approval. He cut a fine figure, although he said it himself. Inside, he glimpsed a pretty debutante he had been introduced to at some ball or other. She had flirted with him, and they had danced once, but he had not asked her again nor called on her afterward. Nor did he stop to renew their acquaintance now. She was too young and too . . . eligible.

He walked on. A stern-looking older woman stood outside the humble chapel on the corner. In hopes of avoiding her, he crossed the cobbled street. Too late. Her voice gripped his neck like a mother cat grasping the scruff of her wayward offspring.

"You, sir! Will you make a donation to our most worthy charity?" Dodging a passing hackney coach, she strode across the street to accost him.

Richard turned and pasted on a smile. His upbringing, while not without its faults, had taught him to feign politeness with ease.

Reaching him, she went on with her appeal, "I am Miss Arbutnot, directress of the St. George Orphan Refuge. We rescue orphans from the retreats of villainy and teach them skills like



printing, bookbinding, and twine spinning to enable them to obtain an honest living.” She held out a basket. “Our institution is supported by voluntary contributions.”

*Voluntary or coerced?* Richard wondered. He warmly replied, “My dear madam, how I look forward to you or one of your comrades addressing me almost every time I pass this way. Your . . . stamina is breathtaking. You rival an athlete in a Greek pentathlon.”

Her eyes narrowed, but he persisted with his most charming smile. “I applaud your philanthropic spirit. Truly. And like you, I give all I can spare to my charity of choice. My favorite coffeehouse and bookshop have first claim on my heart—and my purse.”

With a pert bow, he turned and walked on, leaving her sputtering and him quite satisfied with himself.

Richard was, he knew, a selfish creature. A person could not change his nature, his very heart, could he? He thought not.

Reaching the coffeehouse, he tipped his hat to the beggar outside and entered the beloved establishment, the aromas of coffee, pipe tobacco, newsprint, and books rushing up to greet him. Seeing his bespectacled editor bent over a newspaper at their usual table, Richard walked over to join him.

“Murray. Good to see you, old boy.”

David Murray raised his dark curly head and stood to shake Richard’s hand. “How are you, Brockwell?”

“According to the papers, I am a handsome rake bent on seducing all the widows of Mayfair.” He smirked at the exaggeration and sat down. At one time, he probably deserved his roguish reputation, but no longer.

“Better than my lot,” Murray grumbled. “According to this morning’s edition, I am about to be taken to court on charges of libel again and am on the verge of bankruptcy.”

Richard grinned at his friend, only two years his senior. “Ah well, we each have our crosses to bear. Perhaps this will help.” He extracted several sheets of paper from his leather portfolio. “Here is the article you asked for. I shall have to mail you the next piece from Wiltshire.”

The man's bushy eyebrows rose over his spectacles. "Thought you planned to stay in Town and work through Christmas."

"I did, but my mother is insisting I come home this year. I dread it, but she is not taking no for an answer."

"Christmas surrounded by doting loved ones?" Murray said dryly. "Horrors."

His editor had no family, Richard knew. An idea struck him. The distraction of an unexpected houseguest might come in handy. "Why don't you come with me? That is, if you can bear the thought of Christmas in the country?"

"When do you leave?"

"On the nineteenth."

The man hesitated. "You go on, but I trust you will submit a new piece of scathing satire by the tenth of next month, as usual? Or will the comforts of Christmas in the country addle your brains and make you soft?"

"Never. But perhaps you had better come along to make sure I keep my wits about me."

He did not tell his friend that he was also working on a second novel. The first had already been rejected by two publishers. In fact, Thomas Cadell, of the eminent London publishing firm Cadell & Davies, sent only a curt, *Declined by Return of Post*. Richard was still awaiting a reply from a third and fourth firm. Unfortunately Murray did not publish books, preferring to focus on his magazine.

"Would your family not mind a houseguest?" Murray asked.

"Not at all. They always invite guests at Christmas."

"May I have a day or two to think about it?"

"Of course. Just let me know when you decide."

Richard himself spent as little time at Brockwell Court as possible, preferring to live in the family's London townhouse, away from his mother's matchmaking schemes and the guilt of knowing he had disappointed her yet again. For all intents and purposes, he was the master of the fine London residence with its small, efficient staff.

He gladly left the responsibilities of the country estate to his older brother, dutiful Sir Timothy. And why not? He was heir after all, and not him.

Richard had no desire to travel to rural Wiltshire, attend church services and parties, politely greet people he barely remembered, and listen to his widowed mother's doleful sighs. The dowager Lady Brockwell had always been somber and reserved, though perhaps now that Timothy and his pretty wife had their first child, she would cheer up and leave off pressuring him to marry.

And Richard *would* enjoy spending time with his younger sister, Justina. Hosting her for a London season had been a real pleasure. In Justina's eyes, he could do no wrong, and he had relished her youthful adoration and easy laughter at his jokes. Shepherding her through the season had also funneled more money into their London accounts, which he had not minded at all. Money that was sadly long gone.

Thankfully, his mother had always been persuadable where money was concerned and would write to the bankers to advance more funds whenever he asked.

Until now.

Now she was taking a hard line, insisting there would be no more bank drafts, at least until he came home for Christmas.



That evening, Richard sat down to a dinner of roast beef and potatoes. He eyed his half glass of claret with displeasure, then raised it toward Pickering.

"That's the last of it, sir," replied his aging valet who also waited at table. "And there's no money for more."

Richard sighed and shifted his focus outside.

The evening had turned dark, and a storm descended, matching his mood. Rain pelted the French doors while branches of a nearby shrub, propelled by the wind, lashed its panes.

Lightning flashed, illuminating a pair of eyes beyond the glass. Curious, Richard rose and looked closer. A bedraggled dog sat outside the door. Noticing Richard, the pathetic creature rose on

short hind legs and placed its paws on the glass. Eyes large and pleading, he looked longingly at Richard's snug room and warm fire—or perhaps simply at his plate of roast beef.

Another flash of lightning. And in that flash, Richard saw himself as a boy, standing all alone at a cottage window, staring at a scene of comfort—an outsider looking in, wanting to belong. To be loved and accepted.

“Ignore it, sir,” Pickering said dully, “and it will go away.”

Richard rose and went to the door. “Let's feed it something at least.”

The elderly man shook his head. “I am not going out in that. Besides, if you feed a stray, you'll never get rid of it.”

Well Richard knew. But rare pity stirred in his heart. He unlatched and opened the door, then cajoled the skittish dog inside with a soothing voice and piece of beef.

Pickering shook his head. “Mrs. Tompkins won't like it. She's struggling to make do with a sparse larder as it is.”

He knew Pickering was right, but he did it anyway.



A week later, Richard prepared for the dreaded journey to Ivy Hill. At least Christmastide in the country would be more festive than in Town, he consoled himself, with good meals and access to Brockwell Court's well-stocked wine cellar. It was only a few weeks. He would make the most of it.

But when the festivities were over and the Twelfth Night cake eaten, he would be back on a coach bound for London and his unencumbered bachelor life.

He viewed his reflection in the mirror and then slipped a small waistcoat around his dog. His dour valet refused to do so.

“Bad enough dressing one young dandy,” Pickering said. “Dressing that rascal is beneath even my dignity.”

“Very well, you old curmudgeon. I shall do it myself.” And he proceeded to button the waistcoat and tie a miniature cravat around the dog's neck, all reluctantly made by his own tailor.

Richard already liked the dog a vast deal more than he liked Pickering. More than most people, actually.

Although the dog's pedigree was doubtful, he reminded Richard of the terriers in *Guy Mannering*. In the novel, a Scottish farmer named Dandie Dinmont owned six "pepper and mustard" terriers as tough and friendly as he. Richard had thought of naming the stray Scotty, but that had seemed too obvious. He called him Wally instead, in begrudging honor of Sir Walter Scott. Most in the publishing world believed him to be the novel's author, though the printed attribution read only *By the author of Waverley*. *Guy Mannering* had sold out in its first twenty-four hours. Oh, to have even a tiny morsel of that author's success.

Instead, he had Wally. Already the dog was earning his keep. First, he'd cleared the cellar of mice, which won over Richard's cook-housekeeper. Second, attired in miniature clothes that matched his own, the dapper canine drew admiration wherever they went.

Today, Richard, Pickering, and Wally were bound for Wiltshire. Murray had decided to go along and would meet them at the coaching inn.

Wally looked dashing in his green coat, his fluffy fawn-and-ginger hair freshly bathed for the journey. The housemaid had ended up soaked afterward. He'd thought of giving her an extra crown for her trouble but had too few coins in his purse as it was.

Since Wally was small enough to sit on his lap, Richard had not even had to purchase a second seat for him inside the coach. Mr. Murray had bought his own. And to Richard's surprise, his old valet had bought himself an inside seat instead of a less expensive one outside.

"The wages you give me are poor indeed, but *I* am not," Pickering said, nose in the air. "Unlike you, Master Richard, I don't spend every farthing I receive while still warm from its giver."

"Well, bravo for you."

Pickering had been valet to Richard's father and, after Sir Justin's death, had joined him in London. He was likely the only man

willing to serve at the outdated wages Richard's limited budget allowed. "Serve" might be an overstatement. At least Pickering enjoyed the free room and board, even if the wages were substandard. Probably stayed out of loyalty to his old sainted master. Richard felt his lip curl at the thought. Saint Sir Justin. What a laugh. He alone knew better.

Little relishing the old man's crusty comments, and knowing his mother would assign a footman to attend him, Richard had not asked Pickering to travel to Brockwell Court with them. But the annoying man had invited himself along anyway.

He'd said, "I have not been home for Christmas in years. I shan't miss my chance now. Who knows when my inconsiderate master will go again?"

Richard had smirked at the derisive comment but let it pass. Sincerely curious, he asked, "Do you still consider Ivy Hill home, Pickering? You have been in London with me for the better part of ten years."

"You need not remind me," the man said dryly. "As it happens, I grew up there and still have two nieces there, so yes, I will always consider it my home."

Richard shook his head. "London is my home."

He had also been a little surprised at Mrs. Tompkins's pleasure when he announced his upcoming departure. The cook-housekeeper had pressed him to give their small clutch of servants time off at Christmas to spend with their families. He had reluctantly agreed.

If he had not, he might have left Wally in the townhouse under the care of the housemaid or Billy, the general odd-job boy. Instead, he was taking the dog with him to Brockwell Court. Oh well. Wally's company would be worth the minor inconvenience of having to walk him every time they stopped to change horses. Besides, his mother's pampered pug was due for a setdown.

When the coach arrived at the London inn, they took their seats. As they waited for the baggage to be stowed and the coachman to make his final preparations, Richard looked out the window and

noticed an elderly father in the courtyard bidding his grown son a fond farewell with an affectionate embrace.

Beside him, Murray mumbled, “What would that be like?”

*No idea*, Richard thought. Instead, he quipped, “Families exist to embarrass you. Be glad you’re on your own.”

Murray sent him a sidelong glance. “You don’t fool me.”

Surprise flashed through Richard. “I don’t? Then I had better improve my game.”

The coach was heavy-laden with Christmas travelers, parcels, geese, and several bluecoat schoolboys on the rooftop seats, on their way home for the holidays. An elderly matron took the final inside seat, a basket on her lap. Pickering tipped his hat to her, and Wally sniffed her basket with interest.

Soon they were rattling along cobbled streets and leaving the city behind. As the coach rumbled down the open road, Richard opened his leather portfolio and, with a pencil, began revising a chapter of his second novel. But his eyelids soon grew heavy. He gazed drowsily at the passing countryside and was about to nod off when a small body fell past his window. One of the rooftop passengers went tumbling to the ground. Wally barked an alarm.

Before he could react, Mr. Murray grabbed Richard’s walking stick and pounded on the roof. “Stop! Stop the coach!”

“Careful—that’s ivory,” Richard gently chastised.

The coachman halted the horses, cursing the delay, and Murray stepped over the legs of the woman and Richard to see if he could help. He returned with a boy of about twelve who had a goose egg on his head but was otherwise remarkably unscathed.

Murray helped the lad inside. “Here, you take my seat and rest. I’ll sit on the roof.”

“Th-thank you, sir,” the boy mumbled, looking a little dazed.

Richard secretly admired his friend’s gesture . . . and his flannel-lined greatcoat. He would not give up his seat for a stranger. Not in such chilly, damp weather. With an apologetic glance at his shivery little dog, he justified, “Wally here would catch cold.”

Pickering rolled his eyes. “Right.”

The woman spoke in soothing tones to the boy and shared an apple and cheese with him from her basket. Richard was impressed by her selfless act as well. He might have shared his provisions, but neither the lad nor Wally would appreciate an offer to share the dog's food, which was all he had.

He studied the injured youth seated across from him—not one of the bluecoat boys, he realized, but rather a lad dressed in dark coat and trousers, grass-stained and dirty from his fall, with a flat wool cap on his head.

Out of sheer boredom, Richard struck up a conversation with him.

“Traveling alone?”

The lad shot him an uneasy glance. Such a wary, world-wise look for one so young.

Richard changed tack, turning his attention to the dog. “Wally and I are headed home for Christmas. How about you?”

The boy shook his head.

“No? You're a wiser man than I.”

Wally strained in Richard's grasp, leaning eagerly toward the boy.

“He wants to come over and greet you. Do you mind?”

“No, sir. I like dogs.”

Richard released him. Wally jumped up on the boy's lap and licked his cheek. Too bad he didn't lick the kid's runny nose while he was at it. With a regretful look at his pristine handkerchief, Richard handed it to the boy with a significant tap to his own nose.

The lad wiped with gusto, then handed it back.

Richard waved the offer away. “Keep it. An early Christmas present.”

He'd said it in jest, but the boy beamed. “Thank you, sir!”

“What is your name?” Richard asked.

“Jamie Fleming.”

“And where are you off to today?”

The lad told him he was on his way to begin an apprenticeship to a printer in Wiltshire—a commitment of seven years.



Richard raised his chin. “So you’re to be a printer’s devil, ey?”

“Yes, sir. Or so I’ve been told.”

“Don’t worry. I am often called a devil myself. You’ll get used to it. Where is this printer?”

“Wishford, near Salisbury.”

“Ah. I know it. Very near where my family lives.”

Hope shone on the young face. “Then perhaps I shall see you sometime.”

Richard hesitated. “It is possible. Now, no more falling off coaches, and I wish you every success in your future.”

The boy’s eyes dimmed. “Yes, sir.”

The old woman leaned forward, brow furrowed. “Your parents must have been sorry to see you go, especially so near Christmas.”

Jamie shook his head. “No, ma’am.” He looked away. Petting the dog, he murmured, “My parents are both gone.”

“I am sorry to hear it.”

After a respectful moment of silence, Richard asked, “I’m curious. What does an apprenticeship cost these days?”

“Twenty pounds.”

“Good night. How did you manage it?”

“The St. George Orphan Refuge paid the fee and my coach fare too. Have you heard of them?”

Richard answered dryly, “I am somewhat familiar with that institution, yes. They often ask me for money.”

Earnestly, the boy said, “Then, I have you to thank as well.”

“Heavens no. Don’t thank me,” Richard hurried to reply.

Pickering’s wiry eyebrows rose. “You, sir? I didn’t take you for a philanthropist.”

“I am not. I said they asked. Never said I agreed.”

After that, Richard lapsed into silence, provoked by this turn of events. That an orphan from that woman’s charity would be seated across from him? Was some ironic fate at work here . . . or God? A shiver passed over him. *Only the cold*, he told himself and forced his attention back to his book.